Here There Be Dragons

by Kael_Vercorian

Summary

The ground trembles as the dragon lands, black wings creating a gust of wind that nearly knocks him off his feet. There’s no fear within him as he locks eyes with crimson orbs. He recognizes the man’s energy, even though his current form is unfamiliar.

“Madara,” he says softly. Then with faint bewilderment and a rising feeling of anger, “Since when are you a dragon?”

Madara snorts, smoke billowing from his nose. “Since I was born. Dragons aren’t like those mutt werewolves that can be turned.”

Notes

This is set in a medieval time period without electricity, but they have magic and supernatural creatures instead.

Ages of the characters:
Madara: 35
Tobirama: 32
Hashirama: 34
Mito: 36
Kushina: 28
Minato: 27
Kagami: 19
Koharu: 20
Misaki: 47

In this story, Misaki is Kushina's mother and Mito's older sister. She's not in this chapter, but I thought I'd clarify how Mito and Kushina are related in this verse.
“You’re putting too much energy into the spell, Koharu.”

Standing out in the courtyard, Tobirama focuses his senses on the flow of his student’s magic. Although unable to perform the same type of magic that she can, he’s seen enough sorcerers performing these spells to know how the energy should look.

“Right.” Koharu adjusts her magic accordingly, smiling when the spell finally works. Her target, a pile of rocks a few meters in front of them, slowly shatters into a thousand, tiny pieces. Before, she was simply causing the rocks to vibrate. “Thanks, sensei.”

Brief clapping heralds the arrival of Kushina. “That was good, Koharu. Your attack magic is getting better every day.”

Koharu flushes with pride. “Thank you, Lady Kushina.”

Tobirama can see Kushina holding back a sigh. The fiery redhead was not one for formalities, but it wouldn’t do for a junior knight to address the King’s granddaughter too informally. At least not in public. In private, her friends could address her however she wished. Around others, they had to set a good example.

By now, Kushina knows better than to try and convince them to address her just by name. Instead, she gets to the point of why she sought them out.

“Well, Tobirama, Grandfather requests your presence as soon as possible. I think it has something to do with a dragon.”

“A dragon?” asks Koharu, surprised. “We haven’t spotted one of them in this country in quite a while.”

Kushina gives her an amused, slightly enigmatic smile. It’s as though she’s silently laughing at them, privy to a joke they don’t know. “Not for ten years, at least. They tend to cause their mischief in one of the surrounding countries.”

“Kagami’s going to be jealous. He’s always wanted to go on some dangerous quest,” comments Koharu.

Tobirama shoots her a warning look. “Then it’s a good thing none of us are going to tell him about it, isn’t it? I don’t want him trying to follow me, or worrying about my safety the entire time I’m gone.”

Kushina laughs. “Has Kagami forgotten that you’re one of the strongest knights in the kingdom, second only to Hashirama?”

“He remembers when he’s bragging to the other junior knights about how awesome sensei is,” replies Koharu dryly. “He’s spread his hero worship to some of the younger recruits now.”

Tobirama represses a sigh. “We are in agreement then to keep this from Kagami until I get back?”

“Yes, sensei.”
“Sure.”

“Thank you. While I’m gone, make sure you have one of the other instructors supervise you while practicing new spells.”

After getting his student’s agreement, he briskly walks to the King’s office. Even if he couldn’t sense where the royal is from his energy signature, this is the first place he’d check. The King prefers to give out missions in his office, rather than in the throne room where someone could easily overhear. It was better for the knights’ safety if their enemies couldn’t easily find out their location.

He knocks on the door, stepping inside at the King’s call of “Enter.” Bowing at the waist for a count of five, he straightens up and approaches the desk.

“You called for me, your majesty?” prompts Tobirama.

“Yes, I did. I’m glad you came so quickly. There is a…..well, I wouldn’t quite say it’s an urgent matter. No one has died and the dragon appears uninterested in attacking people,” says King Noboru.

Tobirama tilts his head, puzzled. “Then what is the dragon doing?”

“Stealing cows,” replies Noboru, a hint of exasperation in his tone. “It began a few days ago when a black dragon landed in one of our border towns and took off with one of the larger bovines. And then this morning, the dragon appeared at a different village, about twenty miles from the first. That’s two cows gone, and the citizens are worried the dragon is going to eat them out of house and home.”

Tobirama frowns as he studies the King’s expression. For some reason, he didn’t look all that concerned about the dragon’s actions. Did the King have some insight into the dragon’s behavior that he didn’t?

“You wish me to scare the dragon off?” he asks.

Noboru hesitates. “It would make the citizens happy. However, I would prefer we not antagonize the dragon if possible. He has yet to show any hostility towards humans. If you can, try to persuade the dragon to stop stealing from the townsfolk.”

“Persuade….the dragon?” asks Tobirama, a note of puzzlement in his voice.

Noboru blinks at him. “Ah, that’s right. You’ve never met a dragon before, have you? They’re as intelligent as humans are and capable of speaking our language. You’ll have no trouble communicating with him.”

“They’re unlike griffins in that respect,” remarks Tobirama.

The King gives him an exasperated look. “You’re still irritated you couldn’t go with Hashirama, aren’t you?”

Tobirama crosses his arms. “If both of us had gone, we’d be done by now and he could be the one dealing with the dragon. He’s better at diplomacy.”

Noboru doesn’t look swayed. “If I had sent you, the griffins would be dead. Hashirama is better at subduing creatures because of his Mokuton. And as it’s going to take him a month to relocate the creatures to the Griffin Sanctuary in our neighboring country, it’s up to you to deal with the dragon.”

Tobirama looks away at the King’s disappointed frown. It wasn’t as if he didn’t understand why the
griffins had killed those humans. They had been poachers attempting to kidnap the creatures’ children, but now he worried that they might have a taste for human flesh. While normally friendly to humans, would these griffins now be prejudiced against them and attack without provocation?

“Yes, sir. Will I be going alone?”

The King’s expression softens at his acceptance. “That would probably be for the best. Most of the knights currently available to help you don’t have the large scale abilities necessary for fighting off a dragon. If the negotiations don’t go well, they’ll just get in your way.”

Tobirama nods, feeling only a flicker of pride from the other’s assessment of his abilities. It wasn’t meant to be a compliment, just an acknowledgement of what he was capable of.

“Very well. If there’s nothing else, then I’ll set off right away.”

“No, that’s everything. Good luck, Tobirama.”

He gives another quick bow before leaving the office, stopping by his room to gather his supplies. A sword, his armor, and a bag of food. He doesn’t need anything else.

There’s a stream not too far from the castle, about a fifteen minute journey by foot. Once there, it’s simple for him to connect his energy to the stream, becoming one with the flowing water. His perception shifts, struggling to hold onto his sense of self as he literally becomes water. He doesn’t know how much times passes before he emerges, several miles from where he started.

This is the method he uses to reach the last town the dragon had been spotted in. It’s much faster than traveling by horse and is a method that can’t easily be tracked by others. Someone would have to have water nymph blood in them, like he does, to follow him. No purely human elemental he’s ever met has been able to turn themselves into water.

It only takes him about an hour to find out the information he needs: the direction the dragon had come from. Like he had suspected, the dragon appeared to be hanging out in the mountains. It was the perfect place for a creature that size to remain hidden.

The sun was setting by the time he reached the mountains, forcing him to camp out in the nearby woods. There was absolutely no tactical advantage to fighting a dragon at night; none whatsoever. He wanted to be able to see any large claws bearing down on him.

Although Hashirama and Kawarama had a stronger connection to the earth than he and Itama, he was still able to sense out the best place to sleep. A patch of soft, dry moss with tall trees around to block him from an aerial view. He doesn’t have to worry about being attacked by wild animals in his sleep. Nymphs never had to worry about such things. To them, he was simply a part of the forest.

It was why he could never bring himself to hunt. He wasn’t strictly a vegetarian, but he couldn’t kill an animal that looked at him so trustingly. Who could shoot a deer that came up to them to be petted? The only time he ever ate meat was if it was caught by someone else; and even then, he preferred fish. He rarely had a fish swim up to him, looking for affection.

He wakes to the feel of something fuzzy against his nose, blinking open his eyes to find a rabbit staring him in the face. His muscles tense in surprise, but this has happened often enough when he camps outside that he doesn’t startle back. At least it wasn’t a spider this time.

It was truly a blessing that he had been alone during that incident. His reputation wouldn’t have survived the way he had yelped and flailed to get the large, furry spider off of him. Stupid arachnids. If they didn’t kill other, more annoying insects, he’d find a way to eliminate them all.
After gently shooing the rabbit away, he eats a breakfast consisting of trail mix and dandelion greens, then goes looking for the dragon. He barely makes it to the edge of the forest before a massive shadow blocks out the sun, his heart racing at the sheer force of the dragon’s energy, like a raging forest fire. The familiarity of the magic nearly freezes him in place before instinct kicks in and he retreats farther back into the woods, not wanting to risk being stepped on.

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Madara snorts, smoke billowing from his nose. “Since I was born. Dragons aren’t like those mutt werewolves that can be turned.”

Tobirama scowls, confusion making him irritable. He didn’t like feeling ignorant or like he was being kept out of the loop. Why keep something like this from him? Was it because he was only three-fourths nymph? Normally, supernatural creatures didn’t try to hide from each other, not unless one of them was prey to the other. And Madara was certainly no one’s prey.

“How many people do I know that are dragons?” he demands. “Do full-blooded nymphs know that dragons have a human form?”

Madara sighs, the gesture looking odd on such a large reptile. “Most species don’t know that about dragons. We prefer it to remain a secret so they can’t hunt us in our more vulnerable form.”

Tobirama pauses, realizing the level of trust Madara must have for him to reveal such a secret. It doesn’t make up for the Uchiha being gone for the last ten years, but it does cool his anger somewhat.

“You finally come back,” he says quietly, “and the first thing you do is steal cows?”

Madara’s wings twitch: a sign of guilt or irritation? He squints as a bright light engulfs the dragon and shrinks, disappearing to reveal Madara in his human form.

The Uchiha crosses his arms and frowns at him. “The cow stealing was an instinctual way for me to mark this area as my territory. In return for the cows, my magic will ensure that all of the animals the farmer tries to breed this year will have healthy children. In ancient times, humans would give offerings to dragons to receive such a blessing.”

Tobirama tries not to look puzzled. “And this is an instinct for you?”

Madara shrugs. “Dragons have a strong connection to the earth’s magic. Hundreds of dragons performed this blessing. That affects the rest of us.”

That he could understand. A long time ago, nymphs had decided on the best way to choose a mate. So many had gone along with it that it became a part of their instincts. Being connected to the earth’s magic also meant being connected to each other.

“Do you still need to keep taking cows or has your territory been sufficiently marked?” Tobirama asks.

Madara pauses, examining what his instincts are telling him. “It’s good enough for now,” he decides. “Those two villages were the closest to my mountain. From those villages to my mountain is a big
enough territory.”

Tobirama shakes his head in bemusement. “Why do you even need a mountain? You used to live in the city next to the castle with the rest of the Uchiha.”

Madara gives him an unreadable look. “The others didn’t need as large of a hoard to attract their mate.”

The words feel like ice water poured down his spine. He remembers the promise Madara made to him ten years ago, that when the Uchiha got back he would finally claim him as a mate. As the years went by, he had lost hope that Madara would come back for him.

His mind had come up with several theories for what could have happened. Although Madara had been almost as strong as Hashirama, there was no telling what kind of fearsome creatures could be living in distant lands. Worse, he feared that Madara had met someone else, someone he liked better who didn’t argue with him as much.

“Who….?” he asks, dreading the answer.

Madara’s lips pull up into a small smile. “You always did like to assume the worst, didn’t you? I haven’t moved on, Tobirama. If you accept, I’d like to start the Chase. Today, if you’re in good health.”

His breath quickens as adrenaline floods through him. He manages to give an abrupt nod before instinct kicks in and he takes off into the forest. Madara lets out a pleased growl and gives chase.

Tobirama doesn’t know why his ancestors had decided the best way to pick a life partner was to choose someone who could capture them, but perhaps they had simply wanted someone who could keep up with them. Nymphs tended to be incredibly fast when they were in their element. If they had been in the ocean, Madara never would have been able to catch him.

Still, he could draw some strength from the earth, just not as much as Hashirama and Kawarama. Itama was like him, having inherited more of their mother’s genetics. By connecting his magic to the plants around him, he created a direct link from his core to the natural magic around him, allowing him to draw the energy in.

Nature was generous, giving him enough magic to greatly enhance his natural speed. It allowed him to lead Madara around the forest for the next three hours, both of them receiving scratches from tree branches and covered in dirt by the end of it. Just because he wanted Madara to catch him didn’t mean he would make it easy for the dragon. Madara wouldn’t have appreciated it anyway. There was no pride in being able to catch a nymph if they let you win.

His future mate eventually realizes that he isn’t going to best him in a contest of speed and exits the forest to transform back into a dragon. He then flies up and forward, staying low so that his paws just barely touch the top of the trees. When he’s right in front of Tobirama’s path, he transforms back, leaping from tree branch to tree branch until he’s right in front of the Senju, tackling him to the ground before he can escape again.

Tobirama laughs breathlessly, wrapping his arms around Madara’s back. The dragon had proven himself to be fast and strong enough to be his mate, his instincts not protesting when he pulls Madara into a kiss. Opening his mouth, he moans softly at the first touch of Madara’s tongue against his own. Why had Madara disappeared for the last ten years when they could have been doing this instead?

A protesting noise escapes him when Madara pulls back, frowning as the other begins to stand up.
Reluctantly, he accepts Madara’s offered hand and allows himself to be pulled to his feet.

“No here,” explains Madara. “The ground isn’t appropriate for our first time. And there’s something I want to show you first. I still have to prove that I can provide for you.”

Tobirama blinks in surprise as he realizes Madara intends to follow every step of the nymph courting process. First was managing to catch him; second was being able to provide either shelter or food; and third was presenting a gift to him that showed Madara understood his interests.

“Is that why you were gone for ten years? To find the perfect courting gift?” he asks.

“Gifts,” corrects Madara. “I was gone longer than I thought I would be, but I kept hearing of things that would be perfect additions. Dragons have a tendency of collecting things.”

“Hoarding, you mean,” he says, amused. “After ten years, you must have quite a collection.”

Madara shakes his head. “We have quite a collection. Dragons can be territorial of their hoards but not with their mate. What’s mine is yours.”

Tobirama doesn’t know what to say to that. Men have died trying to sneak glimpses of a dragon’s hoard. He’s seen different members of the Uchiha clan snapping at each other because someone touched their stuff. It means a lot to him that Madara isn’t putting up barriers between what’s ‘yours’ and ‘mine.’

He gives a short nod and follows Madara out of the forest. His agreeability ends when he learns how the dragon intends for them to get to his mountain home.

“What.” he asks flatly.

“I said, it’ll be faster if we fly there,” repeats Madara, sounding remarkably patient considering his normal temperament. Perhaps time has mellowed him out, if only a little.

Tobirama glances up at the sky skeptically. He wouldn’t quite say that he was afraid of heights; he just had a healthy caution. If he was meant to fly, he would have been born with wings. Still, he didn’t want his new mate to think he was a coward.

“Fine,” he says stiffly.

The light returns as Madara transforms, causing him to blink rapidly to clear the spots from his vision. He tries not to flinch as Madara’s large, clawed hand wraps around his torso. His stomach seems to sink to the soles of his feet as they abruptly takes off. Terror makes his heart race, and it feels like he doesn’t even have enough air to scream. Not that he would allow himself to even if he could.

One moment, his feet are dangling in the air; the next, he’s sitting cross-legged on Madara’s other hand. His heart rate almost immediately slows, and he can suddenly breathe again. He hadn’t realized what a difference it would make to have support for his legs, but it no longer felt as though he would fall at any moment. And with his face pressed against Madara’s chest, he can’t even see how far away the ground is.

This is probably the safest he could ever feel this high up. Madara’s grip on him is strong and steady, and he knows without a doubt that the man would never drop him on purpose. Even after ten years away, he still trusts Madara. He waited for him, refusing many potential lovers because none of them were who he truly wanted.
However, his legs were still a bit shaky when they finally landed, causing him to almost stumble as he climbs off of the dragon’s hand. Madara quickly transforms back and stands close to him, looking as though he’s prepared to catch him if he falls down.

“You don’t like heights,” observes Madara.

“No,” he agrees. “I really don’t.”

“There’s a stream that goes through one of the caves in here. In the future, you could use that to get in and out of the mountain,” suggests Madara.

Tobirama’s shoulders relax, tension he didn’t even know he still had leaving him. He didn’t want to be in the air on a regular basis. The stress of it would shorten his life span, he was sure.

“That sounds much better,” he replies.

Madara smiles in amusement and leads him into the first of many caves. The dragon holds up his hand and creates a ball of fire above it, giving them just enough light not to trip over anything. After the fifth barren cave, they reach one that’s clearly inhabited. Lanterns hang from the wall, which Madara lights with his magic, and fur rugs are scattered around the floor. Two entrances branch out from here, both doorways covered in a thick blanket.

“This is the entrance room,” Madara explains. “The blankets are to keep the heat in. It can get cold in here. The left doorway leads to the kitchen, garden area, and guest room while the one on the right leads to the master bedroom and storage rooms.”

“Guest room? You built a guest room?” asks Tobirama.

Madara raises his eyebrow. “Are you trying to insinuate I don’t have friends? I’m sure one of our brothers, at least, will want to visit at some point.”

“True,” he concedes. “And Hashirama will be visiting you as much as he is me. He’s missed having his best friend around.”

Madara looks away, a troubled frown briefly appearing on his face. “Nymphs and dragons live longer than the average human. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up.”

“Show me around?” he half asks, half orders. He didn’t like seeing that expression on Madara’s face and sought to distract him.

Madara looks as though he knows exactly what he’s doing but is happy to play along. They enter the left cave, the dragon lighting the lanterns as soon as they’re inside. There’s a large table in the middle of the room. He suspects it’s also meant to act as counter space as there’s nowhere else to set something down.

Pots and pans along with several baskets hang from the walls at waist height. There’s a fire place carved into the wall with a tunnel above to let the smoke out. He can see a hook on the wall above the pile of wood to hang pots of water and stew. There are a couple of metal trays that look like they’d fit above the fire to rest pans on. Madara seems to have thought of everything they need.

Dish cloths, silverware, plates, and bowls can all be found in the various baskets. There’s even a sink, run on magic, to easily get water from the afore mentioned stream.

All the doorways are covered by that same heavy blanket. Including the way they just came from, there are four ‘doors’ in the kitchen.
“Where do these lead to?” Tobirama asks, gesturing at the entranceways.

Madara straightens from his casual slouch against the wall, a bit of excitement entering his eyes as he heads to the left door. Pulling the curtain back, he reveals a large platform on the outside of the mountain.

“This is the garden area,” declares Madara. “One of them, anyway. I had to make three of them to fit everything. The last door on the right is just storage for food.”

Tobirama looks around curiously, walking between the rows of plants while being careful not to get too close to the edge. He wonders how long it took Madara to haul the dirt up here to grow this many plants. A ripe blueberry bush catches his attention, and he reaches for the berries before noticing the dirt on his hands.

Madara sees his dilemma and chuckles. “The guest bedroom has a shower. You can get cleaned up there, and I’ll bring you a change of clothes. Then we can eat.”

“Alright.” He gives one last longing glance at the blueberries before following Madara back into the kitchen and through the middle door, travelling through what appears to be some kind of hallway. When it ends, they’re in another cave room that contains only a bed, a dresser, and a connecting bathroom.

Madara leaves him to it as he figures out how to work the shower. Water flows out from the nozzle as soon as he sends a tendril of magic into a rune on the wall. He adjusts the temperature with the knobs and undresses, sighing softly at the feel of hot water against his back.

There’s a bottle of soap on the shelf, smelling faintly of hazelnut. He cleans up quickly and wraps the softest towel he’s ever felt around his waist. After drying off, he steps back into the bedroom to find a new outfit waiting for him on the bed.

Black pants and a short blue yukata that reaches down just past his hips. It’s more practical for fighting than one that covers his legs. Picking it up, he marvels at how soft the thick fabric was. What were these things made of? Bringing it closer to his nose, he inhales the scent of rabbit fur, Angora rabbit. Madara had remembered his aversion to killing animals and brought him clothes made from an animal that was shaved instead of skinned. How thoughtful of him.

‘Did he even pay that much attention to me a decade ago?’ he wonders. ‘He never seemed to; but then, neither did I.’

To outsiders, it would have seemed as though they were barely friends. They argued frequently and made sarcastic remarks. Knights made bets on who would win their weekly sparring matches.

However, those outsiders didn’t get to see how they acted in private. Their families caught glimpses here and there, and so understood them better. They saw the moments where he and Madara would calmly discuss some new scientific theory that Tobirama had heard or thought up himself, saw how peaceful the two of them were after coming back from a long stroll through the woods, and noticed the concealed lust in their eyes when Madara won their spars by pinning him to the ground.

Tobirama had tried to keep his interest in Madara subtle, just in case the Uchiha had only seen him as a friend. At first, he had even thought Madara to be in love with Hashirama. It wasn’t until his brother became smitten with Mito and Madara didn’t care that he realized his assumption was incorrect.

Hearing footsteps approach, he quickly dresses. Turning around, his breath catches at the sight of
Madara freshly showered. His new mate looked beautiful in red. He leaves his towel on the bed and steps closer, lips twitching when Madara offers him his hand. Accepting it, he lets the other lead him back to the kitchen, finding a spread of food already laid out on the table.

“You’re really going all out to pamper me today,” he says, voice warm with affection.

Madara flushes at the appreciative stare and looks away. “Yes, well, I have been gone for quite a while. I figured I’d make up for lost time.”

“Sounds reasonable,” he says teasingly. Picking up a green fruit from the table, he holds it up to Madara. “What is this?”

“It’s a kiwi. We don’t grow them in this country, so I brought some fruit and seeds back with me,” explains Madara. “Go ahead and try one.”

Tobirama takes a bite of the unfamiliar fruit, chewing slowly as he contemplates this new taste. It’s not unpleasant, but it isn’t going on his favorites list either.

“What do you think?” Madara asks.

He shrugs. “It’s alright. Something different to eat every once in a while.”

Madara nods in understanding and sits at the table. “Most of what’s here should be familiar to you. Help yourself.”

They eat in silence for a little while, Tobirama uncertain what to say. After all this time, where do they even begin to discuss what’s been going on in their lives? Everything he’s thought about saying to Madara over the years has suddenly fled his mind now that the man is actually here.

“It’s awkward, isn’t it?” Madara asks ruefully. “We’re going to have to learn how to interact with each other again.”

“Yes, we are.” Tobirama plops a grape into his mouth, glancing between the wall and Madara as he tries to think of something to say. “What else did you find in other countries beside food?”

Madara relaxes at the simple topic. “Several things. Books, clothing, spices, some weapons. I went to some of their plays. That taught me a bit about their culture, the different stories and music that they have.”

Tobirama eyes him curiously. “Did you meet other dragons in those countries? What about other supernatural creatures?”

His mate grins. “I don’t know about meet, but I did get into several fights with various creatures, especially the dragons. There were a few things in their hoards that I had to challenge them for.”

That catches him off guard. “Is that common? Dragons fighting for each other’s possessions?”

Madara hums thoughtfully. “Depends on the size of the hoard, I suppose, and on what it contains. Dragons that collect a lot of valuable objects are more likely to be challenged. Mostly what I fought them for was their rare books. My kind are able to preserve objects with our magic, so none of them show signs of aging.”

His eyes light up. “Rare books? What subjects are they in?”

Madara stands up from the table and heads for the entrance room. He hurriedly follows after him, the
blanket almost smacking him in the face due to his haste. They keep going into what he realizes must be Madara’s bedroom. His curiosity almost causes him to stop and look around, but the promise of books has him following Madara further into the mountain.

The first cave beyond the bedroom contains various knickknacks: weapons, decorations, a calligraphy set, and a few puzzle games. The next room is lined with tables, piled high with gems and gold coins. He nearly freezes in shock, forcing himself to move past the small fortunate into the last room: the library.

Rows of bookcases fill the large room, all completely filled with both ancient and modern tomes. His eyes flicker between them, overwhelmed by the need to read all of them. There must be hundreds of books in here. Slowly, it dawns on him how much work it must have taken Madara to find all of them.

Tobirama looks at his mate with slightly wide eyes. “You collected all of these…for me?”

Madara’s lips quirk up into a faint smile. “Yes. It’s a fitting courting gift for a bibliophile, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s perfect,” he says, still feeling a bit shocked. “It’s also a very grand gesture. Why go through ten years of searching for a courting gift?”

Madara hesitates, expression uncertain for a brief moment. The emotion is quickly wiped away as the Uchiha adopts a neutral mask. “It was pointed out to me by one of your nymph acquaintances that you had many potential suitors, some of whom had noble blood like you. She insinuated that as a commoner, I didn’t have as much to offer.”

Tobirama bites his tongue as things suddenly click into place, a hot wave of fury rushing through him. He knows exactly which nymph Madara is referring to, as she was the first ‘potential suitor’ to make herself known after Madara left. More had quickly followed, all of them rejected.

His mother had been royalty among the water nymphs, one of the king’s five children. Her match with his father had received mixed reactions. Butsuma was the son of a human noble and a wood nymph of above average ability. In their world, it was strength that determined how high on the food chain you were. It was the reason he was fifth in line to the throne, despite the fact that some of his cousins were both older than him and full blooded nymphs.

Hashirama and Kawarama weren’t even in the running as their grandmother’s wood genetics were too strong in them. Itama was next in line after him, being almost as talented at manipulating water as he was. And even if you overlooked their nymph heritage, the Senjus were a noble clan and close friends to the human’s king.

The Uchiha clan were of average rank, not peasants, but nowhere near royalty. Personally, Tobirama has never understood the concept of marrying within your own social caste. Madara was his equal in every way that mattered.

“They wanted me to breed with another water nymph, so that I’d have strong children. It didn’t matter to them who I wanted, so they tried to scare you off. I guess it didn’t occur to them how stubborn the two of us could be,” says Tobirama.

Madara’s lips thin with suppressed anger. “The next time I see her, I’m going to set her hair on fire. Hmph. They can’t claim I have nothing to offer you now.”

Tobirama smiles grimly. “They should burn for their insult. They thought I would have to let you
“What?” Madara demands sharply. “I’m stronger than you are!”

“Yes,” he agrees easily, “you are. But our speed is matched under normal circumstances; the earth gives magic to a nymph during a mating chase to make them faster. No human has ever caught a nymph due to their own abilities.”

“And they didn’t know I was a dragon,” replies Madara. “So it wasn’t the fact that I wasn’t a noble or had a lot of stuff that they objected to?”

“Yes and no.” Tobirama smirks at Madara’s frustrated huff. “Nymphs choose royalty based on power. If you couldn’t catch me on your own, then you wouldn’t be considered a worthy mate to one of the water nymph king’s potential successors. Basically, they didn’t want to risk that a human could be the co-ruler of the water nymphs if I did end up as king someday.”

“Hmph. That’s stupid. I’d make an excellent king.”

Tobirama chokes back laughter. “Not unless you gained some diplomatic skills in the last ten years. I think you’d be an excellent knight, defending the kingdom from threats. But a king has to be able to negotiate peace with neighboring countries, or else there would be the constant risk of war.”

Madara crosses his arms and scowls. Amused, he moves closer and wraps his arms around the other’s back, pressing a kiss against the corner of his mouth. The scowl slowly falls away, Madara turning his head to fully press their lips together.

Tobirama closes his eyes, heat flushing through him as Madara’s tongue slowly explores his mouth. His fingers grip the back of Madara’s shirt, their kiss becoming more urgent the longer it goes on. He jumps in surprise, a soft moan escaping him as Madara’s hands slide down to grip his backside.

“This alright?” asks Madara.

“Yes,” confirms Tobirama, “though we should move things to the bedroom.”

Although the stacks of book are very tempting, he manages to leave the library with Madara, the heat between his legs a more pressing need right now. The stone floor is cold beneath his bare feet, his mate going to light the fire place when he notices him shivering.

Arranging himself across the bed, he lets his yukata hang open to reveal toned muscles and nipples hardening from the cold. His head is tilted to the side, subtly encouraging Madara to come over and suck marks into the delicate skin. The tip of his cock juts out from the top of his pants, glistening with precum.

He tries to give Madara a seductive look, but knows he’s probably just broadcasting what he’s feeling: love and lust and longing. Apparently, it’s a very effective look. With a barely audible growl, the dragon hurries over and climbs onto the bed. His hips are grabbed, Madara bending down to seal his mouth around the head of his cock. A surprised cry escapes him, pleasure shooting through him as he claws at the bedsheets.

“Mmm. You taste good,” purrs Madara. “I want to trace my tongue over every inch of you.”

“Ah…is that a….dragon thing….or personal preference?” pants Tobirama, hips squirming as Madara repeatedly sucks on the head of his cock.

Madara reluctantly pulls his mouth away. “A bit of both. Dragon instinct has me wanting to get to
Tobirama suppresses a whine as wet heat leaves his cock, squirming when a tongue dips down into his belly button. His lips twitch as he tries not to laugh, surprised to realize that area is so ticklish. He’s relieved when Madara moves on, moaning softly as the other’s mouth latches onto his nipple.

His back arches as his nipples are pinched, licked, and sucked on until they begin to ache. The hint of pain has him flinching away even as his cock throbs at the sensation. He can’t bring himself to ask Madara to stop, a part of him enjoying the mix of pain and pleasure. And so it’s a mix of relief and disappointment that he feels when Madara notices his discomfort and switches his attention to his neck.

Teeth scrape against his skin, earning the other man a breathless sigh. His hips jerk up when Madara begins to suck marks into his neck, groaning low in his throat as their clothed erections brush against each other.

A confused frown crosses his face when Madara gets up, the expression clearing away as his lover begins to undress. He removes his pants, but leaves the yukata, blushing underneath Madara’s curious stare. “I like the way it feels.”

His mate smirks proudly that his gift has been well received and retrieves a bottle of lube from the bedside dresser. “It looks good on you.”

Madara gets back on the bed and sets the bottle next to them. “Have you done this before?”

Tobirama eyes him warily, wondering if the other would be upset if he said yes. “A few times. I didn’t know when you would be back and I was….curious.”

Madara remains unbothered. “I didn’t expect you to remain celibate while I was gone. I just need to know how much experience you have with this. Do you have a preference for being on top or bottom?”

Tobirama shakes his head. “No. It felt good either way, but I would prefer to be on the bottom this time. Unless you would prefer otherwise?”

Madara considers it. “I haven’t tried being on the bottom yet. I didn’t feel comfortable being that vulnerable with someone else. In the future, I’d like to try that with you, but for now, I’d be more comfortable being on top.”

A faint smile crosses Tobirama’s face at the subtle implication that Madara felt safe with him. Sitting up, he winds his fingers through Madara’s hair and presses their mouths together in a slow, sweet kiss.

“How about because if I hadn’t claimed you as a mate first, the other nymphs would have seen me as your whore?” asks Madara sardonically.

Tobirama exhales sharply, fingers tightening in Madara’s hair. “They need to stop paying so much attention to my love life. It’s none of their business.”

He sees Madara beginning to wince and loosens his fingers. Rather than ruining the mood, his anger seems to have fired the dragon up. His mate practically smashes their lips together, toppling them back down onto the bed. He had always suspected that Madara liked to see him angry, and this is
A hint of copper fills his mouth as Madara’s fangs nick his lip. He spreads his legs, silently urging him to get on with it. Slick fingers enter him a moment later, gentle enough that he barely feels any discomfort from their intrusion.

“Nnn...” Tobirama shudders as Madara slowly stretches him, feeling a jolt of blissful heat inside him every time his mate’s fingers brush across that sensitive place inside him. It’s difficult not to push back against Madara’s fingers, a subtle twitch of his hips betraying his dwindling self-control.

A whine tears free from his throat as Madara mercilessly rubs his prostate, over and over again. Self-control goes out the window as he grinds his hips down, eyes nearly rolling back in his head when Madara hooks one of his legs over the dragon’s shoulder and licks him. A faint part of his mind wonders if the lube tastes weird.

“Fuck,” he gasps, toes curling as Madara continues to lick across his hole, fingers massaging his inner walls. His vision whites out, pleasure singing through his nerves like lightning. Cum splashes across his stomach and chest, some of it coming annoyingly close to landing on his yukata.

He squirms as Madara withdraws his fingers, little aftershocks of pleasure lighting up inside him as the other’s fingers drag across his prostate. Although he can’t get hard again so soon, it still feels good as Madara begins to slowly push his cock inside him, unbothered by the slight discomfort as he’s stretched out.

Winding his fingers through Madara’s hair, he pulls him closer and tilts his head to the side. His mate gets the hint, teeth latching onto his neck. He closes his eyes and relaxes against the bed as Madara gently thrusts inside him, listening to the soft sounds of pleasure his lover makes.

Heat pulses inside him as Madara finds release, the bite to his neck becoming briefly painful as the other man lets out a muffled moan. A tongue swipes across the bite mark soothingly before Madara pulls out. His mate then retrieves a wash cloth from the dresser and cleans them up before lying down next to him. Turning over onto his side, he wraps his arm around Madara’s waist, noticing that the other’s body temperature seems to naturally be higher than his.

They relax in silence for a few minutes, just enjoying the afterglow, before his earlier curiosity returns. “Didn’t the lube taste weird?”

Madara blinks at the sudden question. “No. It was one of those edible kinds. Though I find it funny you’re asking this now.”

“Well, I was kind of distracted at the time,” Tobirama replies dryly.

Madara scoffs. “True. And now those busybody nymphs can’t do anything to separate us. You’re mine now.”

If asked, Tobirama will deny feeling any sort of fondness at the familiar sight of Madara’s smug smirk. “You’re the possessive sort. Why am I not surprised?”

In response, Madara rolls over, pinning him to the bed, and begins to suck marks into his neck. He can’t even pretend to be annoyed, sighing softly at the gentle nips and licks to his neck. However, as nice as it is, his mind can’t help but begin to wander, imagining all the knowledge contained in the library just a few rooms away.

Madara pauses at the subtle difference in Tobirama’s scent, noticing the way the arousal is slowly fading away. He lifts his head up to stare into the nymph’s eyes. “You’re thinking about the books,
aren’t you?”

“….Maybe. You know how much I love to read,” he replies, trying not to sound defensive.

Madara’s lips twitch in amusement. “Yes, I do. I suppose I’m just lucky you waited until after the sex was over to start drooling over the books.”

“I’m not that bad. Now come teach me how your library is organized,” insists Tobirama, tugging on Madara’s wrist until he gets up.

He waits only long enough for them to get dressed before dragging his mate into the library. It’s interesting to hear some of the stories Madara tells about how he acquired specific books. Antique shops, travelling merchants, fighting other dragons, and having to find specific items that a person wants to trade the book for. All of it is fascinating to him, and Madara seems to enjoy telling him about his adventures.

When he finds a book about dragons, he decides to read that first. It was important for him to know as much about that species as possible now that he was mated to one. Madara chooses a book for himself and sits at the table next to him, and they spend the next few hours reading in companionable silence.

Chapter End Notes

Story notes:
The water nymphs have only one royal family, who usually lives in the ocean, because they view all water as connected. The wood nymphs have a royal family for every continent. Islands that have less than fifty nymphs are considered too small a population to need a government. Each country has its own human government, mostly monarchies but a few have elected leaders.

The Senjus are a mostly human clan that don’t mind marrying supernatural creatures. The most common interspecies marriages are with the nymphs.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Ages of the characters:
Kakashi: 15
Obito: 15
Rin: 16
Kagami, Torifune, and Danzo: 19
Koharu, Hiruzen, and Homura: 20
Tsunade, Jiraiya, and Orochimaru: 14
Shisui: 11
Itachi: 7
Sasuke and Naruto: still fetuses

For this verse, Tsunade is Hashirama and Mito's daughter instead of granddaughter.

The sound of swords clanging against shields fills the courtyard as the knights train, adding to Koharu’s growing headache. Somehow, the noise still isn’t able to drown out Kagami’s rambling. Judging by her teammates’ expressions, they’re getting just as frustrated as she is.

“A month!” exclaims Kagami. “Sensei has never been gone this long on a mission before, and yet you guys still aren’t worried? Even though he’s apparently facing off against a dragon?”

Koharu winces as she’s reminded of her failed promise to sensei. While arguing with Kagami, the truth of Tobirama’s mission had somehow slipped out. Like predicted, Kagami had flipped out. The only reason her teammate hasn’t stormed off to go ‘rescue’ Tobirama was because he had no idea where the man had gone.

“How do you even know so much about dragons?” asks Torifune, bemused.

“Do we even know what type of dragon it was?” demands Kagami.

“Type?” asks Hiruzen, confused.

“Yes! Type. You know, like fire, water, wind, lightning, and earth. Not all dragons can spout off fire. And I’ve even heard that in distant countries, there might be light and dark type dragons. I wonder how their abilities would work, though. Maybe illusions?” muses Kagami.

Curious despite herself, Koharu asks, “When you say light and dark, do you mean separately or a dragon that has both?”

Kagami’s mouth snaps closed, looking startled. “Er…I meant separate, but now I wonder if it’s possible for them to have both. Dragons of different types don’t tend to get along, so I’m not sure if it’s possible to have children with both types.”

In unison, the five of them stare at Kagami expectantly. The fire elemental sweat-drops, rubbing the back of his head nervously. “Um, well, my clan has a lot of books about dragons. I suppose one of
our ancestors studied them or something.”

Kagami suddenly waves his hands dismissively. “That’s not the point, though. Tobirama sensei is missing! What are we going to do about that?”

“What?” The startled demand has them rising to their feet, spinning around to see Hashirama staring at them in disbelief, still wearing his armor. Obviously, he just got back from his mission.


The Senior Knight musters up a faint smile for her, too worried to bother protesting her use of his title like he normally does. “Please explain what you meant. Where is my brother?”

They exchange uneasy looks before Danzo steps forward with a faint sigh. Out of all of them, he has the best way with words, even planning on becoming some sort of diplomat or advisor to the King.

“Tobirama sensei was tasked with a mission by King Noboru a month ago. A dragon had been stealing cows from local villages, though all reports show the dragon was nonviolent to the humans. There’s been no word of a large battle happening, and something like a dragon and water nymph fighting would be noticed,” explains Danzo.

“Hmm.” Hashirama’s brows furrow in thought. “That is odd. If they didn’t get into a fight, then what is keeping Tobirama from returning?”

None of them say anything for a long moment before Kagami hesitantly raises his hand. “Um, I kind of have a theory about that. A lot of the books say dragons like to collect things in a hoard, and that some of them will kidnap...certain people.”

“Certain people?” repeats Hashirama, confused.

Kagami blushes. “The book said, you know, pretty people.”

Hiruzen and Danzo exchange incredulous looks and burst out laughing. After a moment, Torifune and Homura can’t help but join in. Koharu sighs as Kagami lets out an indignant shout and tackles Hiruzen. She steps around them as they begin to playfully wrestle, sending Hashirama an apologetic look.

“Sorry about them, Lord Hashirama. Some of my teammates apparently never left their childhood behind,” says Koharu.

Hashirama laughs weakly. “Right. But, do you really think a dragon would capture my brother because of his looks?”

Kagami stops wrestling with Hiruzen and springs up from the ground. “It’s been known to happen! And if this dragon had any books in his collection, Tobirama might have lost track of time. We need to find him and drag him away from the books before the dragon convinces him to stay with him!”

Hashirama just stares at him for a minute before sighing. “That’s actually a real possibility with Tobirama. He likes books to the point of obsession. I’ll go talk to the King and find out where he was going.”

“Gah!” Obito scrambles back as the werewolf leaps at him, trips over a rock, and falls back into the swamp as the creature sails over his head. “This is so gross!”
“Quit whining,” Kakashi orders, lightning crackling between his fingertips as the wolf charges. “None of us want to be in the swamp any more than you do.”

Obito hmphs loudly and climbs out of the muck, stalking past the werewolf as it writhes in pain from Kakashi’s attack. “Why do rouge werewolves hang out in the grossest places known to man? You’d think with their enhanced sense of smell, they’d all be frolicking in field of wildflowers.”

Kakashi doesn’t dignify that with a response, but privately agrees. The longer they were here, the more nauseated he became.

Rin approaches as his lightning fades, tying the creature up with magically enhanced silver chains. The wolf wouldn’t be escaping anytime soon. She levitates it with her magic, letting the wolf float in front of them as they exit the swampy land.

“If you hadn’t accepted this mission, we wouldn’t be here,” she reminds Obito. “And it could always be worse, you know. We could be fighting ghouls.”

Obito turns green and shudders. Ghouls were human corpses animated by necromancers that fed on sorcerers and elementals. The more magic a person had, the more a ghoul would be drawn to them. They absorbed their victim’s magic and gave it directly to the necromancer who made them.

They were also ridiculously difficult to kill. Whatever injuries you gave them would knit themselves back together. You either had to use a huge burst of magic to cancel out the spells on the creature or render the necromancer unconscious. They had become less common in this country ever since King Noboru ruled it a death sentence to create them.

“I only chose this mission from the list because of where it’s at,” replies Obito. “The other missions would have taken longer, and Minato sensei has been feeling anxious at the idea of leaving his pregnant wife alone for too long.”

“How thoughtful of you,” says Kakashi.

Obito frowns at Kakashi’s tone, trying to figure out if the other is being sarcastic or not. Rin gives both of them an exasperated look.

“It is thoughtful,” she says. “We also agreed with your reasoning, which is why we didn’t protest. Though I’m becoming a bit concerned with how many werewolves have been acting up lately. I’ve heard there’s been three others this month, all at different places in the country.”

“That is odd,” agrees Kakashi. “Isn’t one or two a year the average?”

“Yes, it is.” Rin glances at the floating werewolf with a troubled expression. “I’d like us to stay long enough to hear why he’s gone rogue.”

Neither of them have any objections to that. They exist the swampy forest as quickly as they can and hike to the nearest town. Minato sensei is already waiting for them at the local jail. They had split up earlier to look for the werewolf and agreed to meet here. To their surprise, he’s also captured a werewolf, a female.

“I thought there was only one,” says Obito, staring at the two unconscious wolves, each in their own cell.

“So did I. The townsfolk must not have seen them at the same time,” replies Minato. He turns to the Chief Officer of this region. “My students have expressed an interest in being here for the interrogation. Is that alright?”
Chief Hiraku eyes them speculatively before nodding abruptly. “Yes. If they’re old enough to capture one, they should be mature enough to listen to their interrogation.”

“Thank you, Chief Hiraku,” says Minato, giving his students a ‘behave yourselves’ look.

Normally, Kakashi would have made some kind of sarcastic remark at anyone calling Obito ‘mature,’ but his teammate could be serious when needed, and he didn’t want to get them kicked out of the room. The Chief didn’t appear to be in the mood for any sort of humor.

It takes a few minutes but the runes on the cage slowly do their job, forcing the wolves back into human form. The two of them look disoriented at first, glancing around before realizing they have an audience.

“What happened? Where am I?” asks the female.

“You’re in Embersville.” Hiraku waits for their shock to subside before adding, “You were captured by Senior Knight Minato and his team. Do you understand why you’re here?”

“No, I don’t,” replies the male wolf. “The last thing I remember is going to bed and now I’m here.”

“It’s the same for me,” says the female. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Chief Hiraku shares a startled glance with Minato.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” says Hiraku. “Werewolves may get more animalistic when shifted but they’re still aware of what’s going on. And the runes around them would have lit up if they were lying.”

Minato regards the werewolves with a troubled frown. “What are your names?”

“Marissa.”

“Aiden.”

“If they don’t remember what happened, can they still be held accountable for what they did?” asks Obito.

Hiraku opens his mouth to answers but Aiden cuts in, “What did we do? Did we hurt anyone?”

The officers glares at him irritably, not appreciating being interrupted, but shakes his head. “No humans were killed or turned, but you certainly did frighten them. The two of you have been killing chickens and pigs for the past few days. The townsfolk got annoyed with you killing their livestock and asked the King to send help.”

“Speaking of the King,” says Minato, “he’ll need to know about this. Two werewolves with no memory of what they were doing. This will need to be thoroughly investigated.”

“Is it possible someone could have done this to them?” asks Kakashi. “Using dark magic?”

Minato looks stumped. “Maybe? My specialty is runic magic, so I don’t really know what dark sorcerers are capable of. Tobirama might know, though. His studies are varied, and his interest in magic increased five years ago when he was given his first team. One of the students was a sorceress.”

“Too bad Tobirama is missing,” points out Kakashi. “He can’t help us if we can’t find him.”
“Then we’ll just have to go looking for him,” replies Obito. “You’re good at tracking people, right?”

“Right.” Kakashi glances away from that bright grin, thankful that his mask hid his blush. “Dad is better at it, of course, more experience; but he’s busy tracking down a few missing people near one of the east border towns. If his suspicions are right, they’ve been kidnapped by slavers.”

“That’s awful,” says Rin, appalled. “Do you think he’ll manage to find them?”

“Of course,” replies Kakashi with absolute faith. “He’s never failed to track someone down before.”

“Guys,” interrupts Minato. “I’m glad you’re trying to think of a plan, but we have to report this to the King before we do anything else. After our report, we can ask him where Tobirama was headed. For now, let Chief Hiraku finish his interrogation. We need to know if they saw anyone suspicious recently.”

They settle down and listen for the next hour as the Chief asks the werewolves about their life for the past few months, looking for anything out of the ordinary. There’s nothing. Whoever did this to them, they’re good at going unnoticed.

“Um, are we going to be punished for what we don’t remember doing?” asks Marissa once the interrogation is over.

Chief Hiraku shakes his head. “No, it wouldn’t be fair to you if you really were being controlled. It’s the puppeteer who should be tried for these crimes. However, I am worried that they might try to control you again the next time you transform. As the three days around the full moon are the only time werewolves can shift, if we lock you up during that time, then the dark sorcerer can’t make you hurt anyone or destroy anything else.”

“That’s fine with me,” agrees Aiden.

“Me as well. It’ll be a relief not to wake up the next day wondering if I’ve hurt a person this time instead of an animal,” says Marissa.

“Okay. Now that that’s sorted out, we have to get going. Thank you for letting us be here during the interrogation, Chief,” says Minato.

“It was no problem. Have a nice day.”

“You as well. Goodbye.”

Minato ushers them out of the polite station and, soon enough, they’re back on the road and headed towards the castle. Obito wishes he had more control over his teleporting ability. Then they wouldn’t have to spend days traveling from city to city. At his current skill level, he couldn’t take more than one person with him or control where they ended up, though he at least managed to stay in the country.

He wondered if there was anyone else like him, a child of a dragon and a sorcerer. Were they able to teleport as well or did they get their own unique ability?

The only dragon clans in Whirlpool were the Uchiha and Uzumaki, and none of them had had children with a sorcerer in centuries. More often than not, their magics clashed and made pregnancy impossible. His parents had been greatly surprised to realize his mother was pregnant.

To his disappointment, it seemed to be a onetime thing. He had wanted siblings when he was younger, but he had gotten closer to Itachi and Shisui. You didn’t always have to come from the
same parents to have a sibling like bond.

“What do you say we stop at an inn tonight?” asks Minato. “I know we normally rough it in the woods to save money, but after that swamp, I think we could all use a real shower.”

“That sounds heavenly,” says Rin.

“Yes, please. There’s mud in places there shouldn’t be mud,” agrees Obito.

Even Kakashi, who normally tries to keep his emotions hidden, visibly perks up at the idea of running water. “It would be more efficient than trying to clean up in the river.”

Minato smiles at his students’ responses. “An inn it is then.”

The small town they stop at only has one inn to choose from. It’s an older building, but clean and has an onsen. Minato pays for two rooms, one for Obito and Kakashi to share, and the other for him and Rin.

The innkeeper looks between them, scrutinizing their hair colors. “The two of you aren’t related?”

“No,” confirms Minato, “but as her teacher, I act as her guardian when her parents aren’t around. You don’t have to worry about anything untoward happening. Knights are vetted very carefully for that kind of deviancy.”

Apparently appeased by his explanation, the innkeeper gives them their room keys and directions to where everything is. They take turns washing up in the bedrooms’ connecting bathrooms and head for the onsen. There’s a curtain separating the men’s and women’s bath, but they can still hear each other through it. It’s tempting to talk about what happened with the werewolves, but they can’t risk being overheard.

“I wonder how Kushina is doing,” says Minato.

“I’m sure she’s fine, sensei. It’s only the second trimester, so there’s not much chance of you missing the birth,” replies Obito, amused.

“She’s got some of the best healers in the country looking out for her,” points out Kakashi. “It’s unlikely that anything bad could happen with them there.”

“I suppose you’re right,” says Minato, smiling sheepishly. “I just can’t help but worry. Speaking of healing, though: Rin, how’s your training with Healer Yuuna going?”

“It’s going great. I’m getting really good at healing cuts and bruises. Yuuna-sensei says I should be able to start mending bones soon. Princess Tsunade is really talented. She’s already able to heal three times as much as me, despite being two years younger,” says Rin.

“She also started earlier,” informs Minato. “I think she was about ten when she expressed an interest in learning to heal.”

Knights didn’t begin their training until age fourteen, and Rin’s overprotective parents hadn’t let her start until she was fifteen. Obito was glad she hadn’t joined earlier or else she would have been put on a different team. However, it meant that Rin had only started medical training a year ago, while Tsunade had four years of experience.

“Well, that does make me feel better,” replies Rin. “Tsunade does have a natural talent for healing, though. I’ve seen how quickly she learns new techniques.”
“Not everybody can be the best at something. However, you are good at learning magic, Rin. I have no doubt that you’ll be a very skilled sorceress when you’re older,” says Minato.

“Thanks, sensei.”

Eventually, the heat from the onsen starts to make them drowsy, so they head back up to their rooms to get some sleep. They’ve got a long walk tomorrow to get back to the castle, so they need all the rest they can get.

“Goodnight, everyone,” says Minato.

“Goodnight, sensei,” they chorus back.

In the morning, they eat breakfast at the inn and then head out. Before they can reach the edge of the town, one of the civilians’ dogs dashes towards them, pulling its leash out of its owner’s hands.

“Woah! Micah, no! Bad dog. Get back here.”

The dog ignores her owner and comes to a skidding halt in front of Kakashi. She puts her paws on his shoulders, nearly knocking him over from the weight of her. The mask hides Kakashi’s smile as he pats her on the head.

Her owner stops in front of them, staring at his dog in bewilderment. “That’s really weird. She’s never been this friendly with strangers before.”

“Dogs like me,” explains Kakashi. “Practically all of them react this way.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” says Obito. “Shouldn’t it be wolves who like you, because of your dad?”

“Wolves do like me,” says Kakashi casually, as though it’s perfectly normal for wild animals to suddenly start acting like house pets. “I just have a stronger affinity with dogs. Dad is the opposite. Wolves like him best, but he still gets along with dogs. The two species are related.”

“Um, I have no idea what you guys are talking about.”

“Hmm?” Kakashi looks at the civilian with faint curiosity. “You’ve never heard of people with affinities to animals before? I had thought the Aburame with their control over insects were rather well known.”

The civilian blinks. “That’s called an animal affinity?”

“Yes. Those who have an affinity can control a certain type of animal, though the amount of control they can exert depends on how close to that specific animal they are. They also have certain characteristics of that animal. My father and I have heightened senses because of it. It’s actually the reason I started wearing this mask. The fabric lessens the scents around me.”

“Oh, that’s kind of cool. Is there a way to gain an affinity or is it just an inheritable ability?” asks Micah’s owner.

“As far as I know, it’s just inheritable,” answers Kakashi. “Though no one seems to know how our ancestors gained the ability in the first place. Was it a mutated gene via evolution or did they make a deal with a sorcerer?”

“People don’t know where magic comes from either,” adds Rin. “Though it is speculated that the
earth itself granted us these powers. Perhaps the same is true for people with affinities.”

“It seems possible,” agrees Kakashi.

The civilian listens to them with bemusement for a moment before grabbing hold of Micah’s leash.

“As interesting as this conversation is, I have to be getting home now. My wife is expecting me back soon.”

“Ah, of course,” says Minato. “It was nice meeting you…..”

“Ryou.”

“It was nice meeting you, Ryou. Have a nice day.”

“You too. Goodbye.”

They make it back to the castle around midnight. After asking one of the guards to give a message to the King when he wakes up, letting him know that they need to speak with him as soon as possible, they head to their rooms to get some shut-eye. As knights-in-training, Kakashi and Obito share a room while Rin bunks with a girl from another team. Senior Knights like Minato get their own room, but he’s been staying with Kushina for the past two years.

King Noborū summons them right after lunch the next day. To their surprise, Hashirama is in the office as well.

“Are we interrupting?” asks Minato.

“No. I need to discuss something with all of you after your report. How did you mission go?” asks Noborū.

“Everything went smoothly at first, though we found out there were actually two werewolves. After capturing them, my team observed the interrogation and discovered that the weres had no memory of what they had done. They fell asleep in their beds and then woke up in a jail cell,” explains Minato.

Noborū furrows his eyebrows in confusion. “That is most unusual. Did the weres report meeting any suspicious people before the blackout happened?”

“No, sir. Chief Hiraku quizzed them extensively. None of the people traveling in and out of their town stood out to them. Both of the werewolves are from a relatively large town, so visitors are not uncommon,” replies Minato.

“From the same town? Did they know each other?” asks Noborū.

“Only in passing. Neither of them went anywhere new or ate anything different from usual in the past few months. A werewolf’s natural aura tends to repel spells, but exceptionally powerful sorcerers have managed it in the past. Unfortunately, that same aura makes it difficult to detect if a spell has been placed on them. It confuses the senses,” says Minato.

“You think they may have been bewitched by a dark sorcerer?” asks Hashirama.

“It’s a possibility we can’t rule out,” replies Minato. “However, my team doesn’t know anything about dark magic. If Tobirama weren’t missing, I’d be asking him for advice.”

“Hmm. It’s funny you should say that. Tobirama is who I wanted to talk to you about,” says Noborū. “Hashirama wishes me to send out a rescue party for his brother. Although we do have more
experienced trackers in the Inuzuka clan, they don’t tend to be a very diplomatic sort. The fact that there was no evidence of a fight and the dragon has stopped stealing cows leads me to believe that the situation can still be salvaged.”

“If they didn’t fight, then why would Tobirama not have returned?” asks Kakashi.

“Dragon hoard,” says Obito knowingly. “Besides shiny things, dragons also covet knowledge. If Tobirama could talk the dragon into letting him read his books, then a month wouldn’t be long enough to get through the whole library.”

“That’s nearly the same theory Kagami had,” says Hashirama. “Tobirama is obsessed with his studies. When we were younger, I’d have to drag him out of the library to get some fresh air. Did you know that Madara had an easier time of getting Tobirama to go for walks with him?”

Seeing the melancholy entering Hashirama’s eyes, Obito reveals, “One of my cousins on the Border Guard recently saw Madara re-enter the country.”

Hashirama perks up. “Really? That’s great! I can’t wait to see him again.”

Noboru discreetly clears his throat, bringing their attention back to the matter at hand. “Considering the situation with the werewolves, I believe it would be best to bring Tobirama back as soon as possible. The retrieval team will leave tomorrow.”

Obito holds back a wince. They had to go out on a mission so soon after getting back? Even sensei was having trouble hiding his dismay.

“Minato, my granddaughter would never let me hear the end of it if I sent you away again so soon. You’ll be staying here,” says Noboru, unable to contain a smile at the man’s obvious relief. “Rin, I believe it best if you stay and attend more healing lessons. Tsunade has missed you this past week.”

Rin blinks in surprise, smiling shyly. In this instance, the King’s actions were viewed as him giving her a much needed break rather than an unsubtle attempt to keep her off this mission. Obito wishes they could tell her the Dragon’s Secret, but she has no dragon blood in her, nor has a member of her family married someone with dragon blood. With no family connection to dragons, his clan would never accept her learning the truth.

“I’ve already told Hashirama where his brother was headed off to. He can fill you two in on the mission details tomorrow. If there are no other matters to discuss, you’re all dismissed,” says Noboru.

Everyone bows to the King, including Rin as knights do not curtsy, before exiting the room. Hashirama lets them know what time they’ll be leaving tomorrow and then goes in search of his wife to spend the rest of the day with her.

“Want to play a game of Shogi?” asks Kakashi.

Obito keeps the reluctance he feels at the idea from crossing his face. He knew this was Kakashi’s way of being friendly as the lightning elemental actually liked that game for some reason. Personally, Obito would rather be doing something active, but they did need to rest for their mission tomorrow. And Kakashi was right that the game was good for teaching him how to think ahead.

“Yeah, okay.”

The smile he can see in Kakashi’s eyes at his answer would make up for the tedium of sitting quietly, straining his brain as he tried to out maneuver the other boy. He much prefers outdoor activities that have him running around, but he could sit still for a while to further his friendship with Kakashi.
It took them several days of walking to reach the west border town Tobirama was last seen in. Afterwards, Kakashi tracks the man’s scent through a forest and to the base of a mountain. Obito is starting to get sick of the trees. Hashirama, however, is in his element, and it clearly shows. The Senior Knight is obnoxiously cheerful and full of energy.

You’d think he’d be a bit more worried about his brother, but maybe he’s come to the same conclusion that Obito has about the identity of the dragon that ‘kidnapped’ Tobirama. It can’t be a coincidence that the water nymph went missing around the same time that Madara has returned from his decade long journey. If he’s right, then they’re about to interrupt Tobirama on his honeymoon.

The three of them walk around the base of the mountain until they find a decent spot to start climbing. Though Obito has no idea how they’re going to navigate the cave system to find where Tobirama is.

Apparently, he needn’t have worried about that. As soon as they’re inside the caves, they can hear echoes of raised voices. They follow the sound until they reach two caves covered with a blanket door. From here, they can make out what the voices are saying.

“Magic is not the answer to all of life’s mysteries. If you don’t know the why of something, just say so.”

“And what if magic is the answer? You’re a nymph, you can’t tell me you don’t believe in it.”

Obito recognizes the first voice as Tobirama’s and the second as Madara’s. He exchanges knowing looks with Hashirama, and has to hide a smirk at the barely concealed bafflement in Kakashi’s eyes.

“But that doesn’t tell me what the magic is doing. Where does all the mass from your dragon form come from? Is it stored somewhere or does magic create it out of nothing every single time?” argues Tobirama.

Before the discussion can continue any further, Hashirama steps forward and pushes the blanket aside. Madara and Tobirama are sitting at the kitchen table, lunch half-eaten. The two of them blink in surprise, having been too absorbed in their debate to sense them approaching.

Hashirama’s face lights up at seeing his friend after so many years and his brother safe. “Tobirama. Madara. It’s good to see you again. But you had us worried, brother. You’ve been missing for a month. At least when Madara left, he gave us some warning. You should have sent a letter if you were going to be away so long.”

Tobirama looks abashed at the gentle scolding, realizing the worry he must have caused his friends and family. “You’re right. I just got caught up with re-uniting with Madara…..and his library of ancient books.”

Hashirama shakes his head fondly and comes forward to give his brother a hug. Madara surreptitiously tries to scoot away from them, but they quickly grab a hold of his arms and pull him into a group embrace. It’s proof that the dragon missed them just as much that he doesn’t try very hard to get away.

The moment is broken when Kakashi pointedly clears his throat. “Could one of you explain what’s going on now? Wasn’t Tobirama supposed to be have kidnapped by a dragon?”

Madara stares at the silver haired teen for a moment. “You’re a lightning elemental, aren’t you? Have you ever wondered where elemental magic comes from?”
Not sure where this is going, Kakashi nonetheless replies, “I assumed it came from the same place that sorcerers get their magic. We just have…less of it, or something.”

“It’s a good guess, but no. While magic itself comes from the earth, elementals are descended from dragons, not sorcerers. Somewhere in your family tree is a lightning type dragon. Why your ancestors didn’t pass that secret down, I’ve no idea,” says Madara.

Skeptical, Kakashi looks to the others, but sees only seriousness in their eyes. It wasn’t a practical joke, then. “So, do dragons have a human form, cause I’m not seeing how they could have children together otherwise. Unless it was a magical conception?”

“No, dragons have children the normal way,” says Madara, amused. His eyes slowly turn red as black scales replace the skin on his face. The partial transformation lasts less than a minute before reversing.

“You didn’t tell me you could do that,” says Tobirama, a bit annoyed.

Madara shrugs. “You didn’t ask, and I didn’t think of it until now. You’ve only known about the Dragon’s Secret for a month.”

Tobirama concedes the point with a slight nod. “Alright. Can every dragon do a partial shift like that?”

“With enough practice, perhaps, but some have more natural talent for it. There are those who never master it, but they might just not be trying hard enough,” replies Madara.

“Uh, not that this isn’t fascinating,” interjects Kakashi, only half sarcastic, “but we did have an important reason for tracking you down, Sir Tobirama.”

“Oh?” asks Tobirama, curiosity piqued. “You’re not just here to ‘rescue’ me from the fearsome dragon?”

Hashirama snorts with laughter. “It would be a surreal day if you ever needed rescuing like some damsel in distress, little brother. No, the King likely knew exactly who the dragon was when you didn’t come back. We’re here because we need your advice.”

Tobirama listens to their story, frowning pensively. “What you’re saying sounds familiar. I must have read something about it before. If I had to guess, I’d say it was some type of voodoo ritual.”

“Voodoo. That’s where you need something of theirs to control them, right?” asks Madara.

“Not exactly. Using their possessions, you can put a mild curse on them. Strangers won’t be as willing to help them and they’ll lose their possession more often. The curses depicted in fictional stories are greatly exaggerated as to what can actually be done,” explains Tobirama. “They’re easily broken and often fade after a few days. The object stolen can only be used once for the ritual. However, you can use blood, hair, skin cells, nail clippings, saliva, or anything else created by the body to exert real control over another person….if your will is stronger than theirs.”

“Wait, so you’re saying that if the werewolves had stronger willpower, they would have been able to break the sorcerer’s hold over them?” asks Obito.

Tobirama pauses. “Theoretically, yes. In reality, you need to know you’re being controlled to fight back. The sorcerer obviously thought of this and brought the werewolves’ animal instincts to the forefront of their minds. The human mind was asleep, and the wolf didn’t see anything unusual with hunting other animals.”
“Is there a way to protect ourselves from being controlled?” asks Kakashi. “Some kind of talisman or protective spell?”

“I was never able to find anything in the castle’s library,” replies Tobirama, frustrated. “They barely had anything on dark magic, even on how to defend against it. The problem is that those books are so rare. No one sane wants dark sorcerers to get a hold of more evil spells, and no dark sorcerer wants books on how to thwart them to be easily available to the public.”

“We still haven’t finished sorting through all the books I have,” Madara reminds him. “I didn’t have time to read every one of them, but from skimming through, I know some of them are about dark magic.”

“Why would you get books on dark magic?” asks Kakashi suspiciously.

Madara rolls his eyes. “I know my mate. Even if he doesn’t intend to use the knowledge, he still wants to have it.”

“Oh! That reminds me, I forgot to congratulate the two of you on finally getting together. The water nymphs back home are in for a shock,” says Hashirama, laughing.

Tobirama scowls. “They can drown in their disappointment. My bond with Madara is already complete, so there’s nothing they can do about it.”

Hashirama stops smiling. “You think they would try to interfere with your bond to Madara?”

“Of course they would,” Tobirama growls. “They’re the ones who convinced him he had to prove himself before I would consider him. I’ll wring the necks of anyone who questions my choice of mate. They don’t have a leg to stand on, anyway. Madara was able to catch me during the Chase without any handicap.”

“I feel like I’m missing something. Why does it matter to the water nymphs who Tobirama chooses as mate?” asks Kakashi.

“They want me to have strong babies with some female nymph,” replies Tobirama dismissively.

Hashirama sighs. “It’s because Tobirama is related to Kaimana the water nymph King, is currently fifth in line to inherit, and many believe Kaimana will bypass all his children to choose Tobirama when he retires.”

“There is no basis to that,” insists Tobirama vehemently.

Hashirama folds his arms disapprovingly. “The King was very impressed with your power and intelligence when you visited him, and everyone knows this. You just don’t want to consider the possibility of it because of how much work being King would be.”

Tobirama makes an aggrieved noise. “I already have my hands full helping you run the Senju Estate. Being King of the entire ocean would be a nightmare. Grandfather knows how I feel about the idea. Making me fifth in line was just a way to show others he thinks I would be a good ruler without forcing the position on me.”

“So you do acknowledge that he wants you to lead,” says Hashirama triumphantly. “I knew you weren’t that oblivious, and neither is anyone else. Regardless of whether you want to lead, many think that you will. That’s the real reason they wanted you to pick a water nymph mate. No one else could live in the underwater palace with you.”
“You mean aside from the mermaids and sirens?” asks Tobirama dryly.

“….Aside from them,” agrees Hashirama, faintly embarrassed.

“So all this time, people have been trying to court Tobirama because they want to be the future Queen?” asks Obito.

“It looks that way,” says Tobirama. Exhausted by all this nonsense, he sits down at the table. “I don’t look forward to returning to the castle, but I’m not quite ready to retire from being a knight yet.”

“Your students would miss going on missions with you,” says Hashirama.

Tobirama gives him a wan smile.

“Well, it’s not like you’re having to go back right this second,” Obito adds helpfully. “We still have to find the information we need from Madara’s books.”

Madara stiffens, studying all but Tobirama with narrowed eyes. The tension slowly eases from his shoulders as he comes to a decision. “The books are the only thing of my hoard you’ll be allowed to touch. You’ll also only be allowed access to those rooms if Tobirama or I are with you.”

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“Huh. I guess those stories of dragons jealously guarding their hoards weren’t exaggerated,” remarks Kakashi.

“Not even a little bit,” confirms Obito. “Every born Uchiha has at least one item they don’t want anyone else to even see, let alone touch.”

“Is every Uchiha born a dragon?” asks Kakashi.

“Yeah, for the most part. Dragon and human relationships tend to result in dragon children,” replies Obito.

Hashirama interrupts before they can get too off topic. “We’ll leave your stuff alone, Madara. Please show us where the books are.”

Madara leads the group to the library, snapping at them when they stop to gawk at the jewels. Perhaps he should have placed them in the back room, but he had wanted the books to be in the most defensible position. As they were his main courting gift to Tobirama, he hadn’t wanted there to be any chance of them getting stolen.

“Whoa, there must be hundreds of books here,” says Hashirama, staring around in awe.

“537.” Tobirama smirks at Hashirama’s startled blink. “I counted them all, and organized them to my liking. Try to return the books to where you found them.”

“Where do we even start looking?” asks Kakashi, eyeing the shelves askance. “It would take us months just to skim through all of these.

“Luckily, we don’t have to. That bookcase is about history, and those two contain information about various supernatural creatures. Although we might check that later for texts on werewolves, right now we’re going to focus on these five. Only a few of the shelves contain books on dark magic, but we might find our solution in a more regular magical text,” answers Tobirama.

Right,” sighs Hashirama, unenthused for the hours of reading ahead. “Let’s get started.”

It took three days for them to find what they were looking for. Tobirama had spent years going
through the castle’s library trying to discover a defense against voodoo. When they were alone, Tobirama intended to show Madara just how much he appreciated the dragon collecting all these books for him.

“How clever,” Tobirama says out-loud, gaining the attention of the entire room.

“What is it?” asks Hashirama.

“This sorceress discovered a way to modify a typical voodoo talisman. Instead of taking control of someone else, you use it to control yourself. You can’t be controlled by two different people,” explains Tobirama.

“How magically draining would that be?” asks Kakashi. “And what if you don’t have the right type of magic for spells?”

“It’s not draining in the long run. You pour a lot of energy into the talisman in the beginning. If someone else tries to control you, the magic activates to protect you. The sorceress was working on a way for a talisman to be powered by someone else for non-magicals, while also making sure the one powering it couldn’t control them. Unfortunately, one of her kids wrote here that she wasn’t able to complete it before her death,” replies Tobirama.

“Would you be able to create such a talisman?” asks Madara.

“I’m not sure, but I have some ideas to try out. The magic going into the talisman would have to be purified, to be made neutral and disconnected from its original host.” Tobirama closes the book he was reading and drags a blank piece of paper closer, beginning to jot down some notes. “I’ll need to modify an already existing runic purification sequence to work with the talisman. I don’t know how long that’ll take.”

“Can it be made back at the castle? King Noboru will be expecting us back soon. And for that matter,” Hashirama gives him a considering look, “do you even want to come back? You seem happy here.”

Tobirama taps his fingers against the table in a brief show of irritation. “I said I wasn’t done being a Knight, didn’t I? My students may have graduated to Junior Knights, but that doesn’t mean I don’t still want to help them get stronger.”

Still, he can’t help but let his eyes roam the cave walls, a hint of regret in his heart. He had greatly enjoyed his time here with Madara. It was peaceful and quiet, just the two of them without the responsibilities and hassle of court life.

“It isn’t as though we’ll never be able to come back,” interjects Madara. “With how quickly dragons fly, I could have us back here in half a day.”

“You can travel half the country in less than day?” asks Kakashi, trying not to let his disbelief show.

“Yes,” Madara answers simply.

“Aren’t you worried someone will see you?” persists Kakashi.

“No,” Madara sighs at the silver haired teen’s glare and elaborates, “Dragons have an inborn magic that keeps them hidden from sight while flying from place to place. The magic is, unfortunately, purely defensive and can’t be used to sneak up on enemies. The Earth gave us the ability to protect ourselves, not to make war.”
“I guess it doesn’t help you hide when stealing cows either,” Tobirama says wryly.

“No. No, it doesn’t.”

“Why were you—“begins Kakashi.

“You claimed a territory!” exclaims Obito, cutting his teammate’s question short.

Madara shoots his nephew a bemused look. “Couldn’t you tell that from the Land’s magic? My energy is all over the mountain.”

Obito blinks and glances around the room. “Huh. I’m not that great at passive sensing. Unless I’m specifically trying to sense magic, I don’t.”

“Wait, how does stealing cows equate to claiming a territory?” asks Kakashi, confused.

“It’s a dragon thing. I’ll explain more later,” promises Obito.

Hashirama comes up to Tobirama and claps a hand on his shoulder. “Why do you look so down? With Madara’s convenient invisibility, the two of you will be able to come back here often.”


His brother’s face twists in confusion before understanding dawns. “Ah, the height thing,” says Hashirama awkwardly.

“The height thing,” he agrees with a sigh.

Kakashi glances at Obito, but his teammate seems just as clueless as he is this time. “What are we talking about now?”

Looking uncomfortable, Tobirama reveals, “I don’t like heights. Obviously, if I was meant to fly, I would have been born with wings.”

“Ah,” replies Kakashi, looking sympathetic. It was an unexpected fear from the Senior Knight, but everyone had something they were afraid of.

“I guess we should start packing then,” says Madara. “We’ll need to decide what we’re going to take with us and what to leave here. I can put a preservation spell on the food so it won’t rot while we’re gone.”

Tobirama reluctantly agrees and they begin sorting through their stuff. They take enough money with them to last a year, though they don’t actually intend to be gone that long. At the very least, Madara’s wards around the mountain will need to be strengthened every month to keep people away from his hoard. And more importantly, Tobirama doesn’t want to go that long without getting a break from court life.

Once they’ve packed everything they think they’ll need, the group heads outside for Madara and Obito to transform. After the bags have been secured, Kakashi climbs onto Obito’s back and Hashirama onto Madara. Tobirama, however, rests on Madara’s paw, held firmly against the dragon’s chest. It was the only way he didn’t feel like he was going to fall at any minute.

With that taken care of, the dragons activate their invisibility, the spell encompassing their passengers as well. It was a long journey back to the castle. Somehow, Tobirama was able to fall asleep halfway there, listening to the sound of Madara’s heartbeat. Perhaps with his mate’s help, he would
eventually overcome his height phobia.

They arrive in the city after the sun’s gone down and decide to wait until morning to announce their presence to the King. Their news wasn’t urgent enough to wake him up.

Madara follows him back to his room and they begin looking for a place to put their stuff. He was thankful that a Senior Knight’s quarters came with a king-sized bed, rather than the smaller one the Junior Knights received. It was assumed that at this point in their lives, they would be looking for someone to settle down with and would at least be dating, if they were the sort who were interested in romantic relationships anyway.

Despite sleeping on the way here, he was still tired, and Madara was exhausted from flying them here. With nothing important vying for their attention, they decide to call it a night and curl up together on the bed. Tomorrow is sure to be a stressful day as he deals with the reactions of the water nymphs, so he enjoys the peace of this moment while it lasts.

Chapter End Notes

The wards around Madara's caves react to intent and whether he knows them or not. Although he didn't specifically invite Hashirama, Obito, and Kakashi into the mountain, the wards recognized that they would be welcome and let them in. Any stranger or thief that tried to enter would be rebuffed. And now that Tobirama and Madara aren't there, no one will be able to enter, friend or foe.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Chapter three is finally done! Sorry it took so long....

Please let me know what you think in the comments. :)

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Madara wakes as sunlight filters in through the window, opening his eyes to see his mate’s peacefully slumbering face. It was still a sight that filled him with pride. Tobirama had chosen him out of all his many suitors. Dragon he may be, but he was still considered a commoner in both the human and supernatural societies.

Although his species didn’t exactly have their own royalty, the oldest dragons were the ones who garnered the most respect. At 35, many of his own kind still considered him to be extremely young.

He pushes the covers down, still amused that Tobirama likes to sleep with his blue yukata resting on top of the sheets. His mate had become rather attached to the first outfit he had gifted him with. The level of attachment had been confusing at first, but Tobirama had explained that it was because the yukata was his first official courting gift after completing the Chase. That apparently had special significance to nymphs.

Madara kisses his mate awake, pleased by how easily Tobirama’s lips part for him. It was humbling how responsive the nymph was to him, and how much Tobirama clearly trusted him even after all these years. His mate was a trained warrior, but could sleep beside him and not startle at his touch.

Tobirama’s eyes flutter open, crimson orbs regarding him tiredly. His mate’s expression slowly becomes more alert, slender hands coming up to tangle in his hair, pulling him closer. They kiss for several minutes, languid and affectionate. The mood might have turned more heated if a knock hadn’t sounded from the door.

They part reluctantly and quickly get dressed. Hashirama is waiting for them out in the hall, delivering a message that the King is ready to speak with them. He has apples and boiled eggs in hand, a quick breakfast for them to eat on the go.

Everyone they pass on the way to Noboru’s office stops and stares, whispering to each other. It was dark when they arrived last night, so word of Madara’s arrival hasn’t spread yet. He wouldn’t be surprised if after their meeting, the nymphs all flock around them to demand an explanation.

“Ah, Tobirama, it’s good to see you again,” greets Noboru. “Come in, all of you. Have you managed to find any answers to the werewolf problem?”

Tobirama closes the door behind him and approaches the desk. “At this point, it’s mostly speculation. Voodoo is the most likely cause of the werewolves’ behavior. I’ll need to do a bit more research, but we may have found a defense against voodoo mind control.”

Noboru’s eyes widen in surprised delight. “That’s amazing. I know there aren’t many dark sorcerers who can successfully practice voodoo, but it was still worrisome that we’re all vulnerable to such a
thing. Do you require anyone to assist you with your research?”

“Minato’s help would be welcome. He has the necessary runic knowledge to check my work,” replies Tobirama.

The King nods. “Very well then. I’ll avoid assigning him missions for a while so that he’s available to help you. Do let me know if there’s anything else you need. This is a serious issue that needs to be solved as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir. I don’t need anything else at the moment, but I’ll let you know if that changes.”

“Good. If there’s nothing else, I won’t keep you. I’m sure a lot of people will be wanting to talk with you today. Oh, and Madara, welcome back into the country.”

Madara pauses, not having expected the level of sincerity in Noboru’s voice. Most dragons of different elements didn’t get along, but the Uzumaki were an unusual bunch. Noboru’s ancestor had invited the Uchiha clan to live in Whirlpool after he had become the monarch, to essentially act as guards in exchange for a place to live. It was why there was always at least four Uchiha on the Border Guard, one for each cardinal direction.

“Thank you, your majesty. It’s good to be back.”

They’re barely a few steps outside the office when a female nymph approaches them. He can tell she’s full-blooded by the tint of blue in her skin. All full-blooded nymphs, water or wood, can have shades of unusual colors in their skin. The most common being blue, green, and purple.

Their hair came in a large variety of colors as well. This nymph had teal locks, pulled up into a tight bun on the top of her head. She looked very disapproving staring at the two of them.

“Prince Tobirama,” she says stiffly.

“Stasha,” Tobirama replies neutrally.

“I need to speak with you, Prince Tobirama.” Stasha glances at Madara with distaste. “In private.”

From the way Tobirama’s expression closes off, he expects her to deny him. Instead, he gives an abrupt nod. He turns towards Madara and places a hand on his shoulder, speaking quietly, “It won’t help either of us if I ignore them. I’ll meet up with you later.”

Ignoring their audience, Madara gives his mate a brief kiss, wordlessly staking his claim. He sees Stasha’s expression go tight with anger, but she doesn’t intimidate him. Her magic is weaker than his.

“If you’re not back in time for dinner, I’ll come looking for you,” says Madara. “Don’t let them distract you from eating.”

“I won’t,” promises Tobirama, eyes fond for a brief moment before he looks at Stasha. Then his expression turns blank as he follows the nymph to somewhere private.

Madara watches them go with a frown, unhappy with letting his mate out of his sight. Who knows what those nymphs are going to say in an effort to convince Tobirama to leave him?

“You don’t have to worry,” says Hashirama, as always perceptive when his friends are troubled. “I can tell my brother loves you. He won’t break your bond no matter what they say.”
“...Right. Of course he won’t,” says Madara with false bravado.

Hashirama shakes his head and decides a distraction is in order. “Since you’ve been gone for ten years, why don’t you let me show you around the castle? You can see what has and hasn’t changed. Maybe the medical classrooms first, and you can see how grown up Tsunade is now.”

Madara considers it a moment and nods. “Yes, I suppose that would be good. Since I essentially married her Uncle, it wouldn’t do for us to be strangers to each other.”

Hashirama smiles brightly at his acceptance and leads the way. The classroom they enter has five students, one teacher, and a dozen animals with varying injuries. As he watches, the Healing Instructor moves across the room, giving advice to the children as they attempt to mend the animals’ wounds.

“Lord Hashirama,” greets Yuuna. “To what do we owe this visit?”

Tsunade looks up from the cat she’s healing and smiles brightly. “Dad. Look, I’m able to heal bones on my own now. See?”

“That’s wonderful, Tsuna. I’m very proud of you,” praises Hashirama. He gestures to Madara. “Do you remember my friend, Madara? He hasn’t been in the country since you were four years old, but he’s come back now.”

Tsunade tilts her head at him. “He does seem familiar, but I don’t remember him. You’ve talked a lot about him since he was gone, though. He’s the reason Uncle Tobirama hasn’t accepted anyone’s attempt to court him, right? He was waiting for Madara?”

“Yes, exactly. They’re mates now, but haven’t had an official marriage ceremony yet.”

“Marriage ceremony?” asks Madara.

Hashirama looks at him, startled. “Yes, of course. Don’t you want to celebrate your marriage with friends and family?”

Madara shrugs, but appears considering. “I’ve heard marriages can be a hassle to plan, but I’ll talk to Tobirama about it. If he wants a ceremony, then we’ll have one.”

Yuuna sighs as she realizes her students have been thoroughly distracted. She approaches Tsunade and quietly suggests, “Why don’t you take the rest of the day off to get reacquainted with your new family member? You won’t get anything done with them here anyway.”

“Yes, sensei. Sorry about them.”

Yuuna shakes her head with a smile. “It’s not your fault, dear. And really, we can hardly blame your father for being excited about his friend finally coming back....and becoming his brother-in-law, no less. Go have fun with your family reunion. I’ll finish healing your patient.”

“Thank you, sensei.”

Tsunade ushers Madara and Hashirama out of the room and outside to the flower gardens. It’s a peaceful place with plenty of benches for them to sit down and talk. Madara’s eyes flicker from flower to flower, a nostalgic expression on his face.

“Tobirama and I used to take walks through this garden,” reveals Madara.
“I remember that. Out of everyone, you had the easiest time getting Tobirama out of the house. It actually made me jealous a few times, but also relieved that at least someone could get him to put the books down and get some sunlight,” says Hashirama.

“How did you and Uncle Tobirama meet?” asks Tsunade.

“I was running errands for my Aunt. She’s a sorceress who married into the clan, one whose specialty is potions rather than spells,” explains Madara. “I was about thirteen years old, collecting potions ingredients in the woods, and came across a young nymph by the river. Tobirama was making the water float in long streams, circling around his head like clear ribbons.”

Tsunade smiles at the imagery. “I’ve seen him do things like that before. When I was younger, he would make water art for me on my birthday. What happened after you saw him?”

“Hmm. I suppose we got into something of a competition. We were each interested in the other’s elemental skills and ended up showing off. The contest ended when I accidently set a tree on fire and Tobirama had to put it out,” replies Madara.

“Huh. You guys never told me that,” says Hashirama. He looks to Tsunade. “Madara just came home with Tobirama one day, both of them bickering back and forth. They actually seem to like arguing with each other.”

“Debate,” corrects Madara. “We like to debate different topics.”

“What’s the difference?” asks Tsunade.

“Arguing implies hostility and a serious disagreement. Sometimes Tobirama will come up with different scientific or magical theories and I help him flesh the idea out by coming up with ways he could be wrong. It forces him to think about the issue from multiple viewpoints.”

“That’s a more mature type of arguing than what my teammates do,” says Tsunade.

Madara cocks his head at her. “You’re studying to be a Knight?”

“Mm-hmm. I’m going to be a front-line medic. Uncle Kawarama has started giving me tips on how he uses his connection to the Earth to strengthen his punches. So far, I seem to have inherited more of my Dad’s magic than my Mom’s. I’ve got an Earth affinity and I can cast healing magic, but no other spells,” explains Tsunade.

“That’s the way most nymphs are,” says Hashirama. “We have a connection to either earth or water, and some of us can learn to heal. We aren’t made for other types of magic.”

Madara nods at the other’s explanation. He already knew that about nymphs, but after so long apart, Hashirama may have forgotten that. “Yes, I remember that. It was why Tobirama’s ability to use runes was considered so unusual. He has such a deep connection to his energy that he’s able to manipulate it enough to power runes. Has he managed to cast any actual spells yet?”

“No, though that hasn’t stopped him from trying,” says Hashirama. “He just doesn’t seem to be able to alter his magic to such an extent. There’s something fundamentally different between runic magic and actual spells, though the explanation he gave went over my head.”

“Why am I not surprised?” asks Madara teasingly.

Hashirama pouts at him, causing Tsunade to laugh quietly. “So mean, Madara. I understand some of the theory stuff, but Tobirama gets too technical.”
“So he does. Tsunade, why don’t you tell me about your teammates?” asks Madara. The way she described people could give him a glimpse at her personality.

“Jiraiya is immature,” she says promptly. “He doesn’t like studying, which is something he often bickers about with Orochimaru. Jiraiya only seems interested in learning how to fight and wants to rescue damsels. He’s also started to become a bit of a pervert now that he’s going through puberty. Orochimaru is easier to get along with. He’s quiet and driven, and apparently wants to learn everything.”

“Everything, hmm?” asks Madara. “Is Orochimaru a sorcerer?”

“Yes. His father had magic, and his mother has a snake affinity which Orochimaru inherited. That’s another thing my teammates argue about. Jiraiya thinks snakes are creepy but Orochimaru is absolutely enamored with the creatures,” says Tsunade.

“There’s nothing wrong with snakes. Reptiles are often misunderstood, and I include dragons in that category,” says Madara. “It used to be well known that our kind have a human form, thousands of years ago. A group of bigots realized we were weaker in that form and tried to kill us. After that, all the living dragons got together and performed a ritual to wipe that knowledge from the minds’ of any who didn’t have dragon blood.”

“They erased the memories of all the non-dragons in the world? How is that possible?” asks Tsunade, startled.

“There were a few different factors,” answers Madara. “Every dragon that was magically mature agreed to participate in the ritual. At the time, there were a few million of them. Normally, it would be incredibly difficult to erase someone’s memories, and it would be very dark magic. However, this ritual was done with pure intentions, to keep the entire dragon species safe. Are you aware that magic is alive?”

Tsunade frowns thoughtfully. “Dad and my uncles have told me that. There have been times when I’ve meditated, trying to tap into the Earth’s magic, that I’ve felt something….aware is the best way I can describe it.”

Madara nods. “Yes, that’s a good way to put. Magic doesn’t think the way we do, but she is aware of us. And something like all the adult dragons performing a ritual together is enough to catch her attention. She judged them and found their purpose to be justified. The wild magic from the Earth joined the ritual and made sure it succeeded. Afterwards, dragons were even given the ability to turn invisible while flying, to further hide ourselves from the humans.”

“And from the nymphs,” adds Hashirama. “And everything else.”

Madara shrugs. “The group that formed to kill us wasn’t solely made up of humans.”

“How do you know all this?” asks Tsunade. “Also, should we be talking about this in the open?”

Madara glances around unconcerned. “There’s no one else in the garden right now. We would sense them if there were.”

“There are a lot of privacy spells around and in the garden,” says Hashirama. “No one outside the garden can hear anyone inside, and even those within can only hear someone less than three feet from them.”

Tsunade looks around the garden with new understanding. There was always so much magic lingering in the air from practicing sorcerers that it was difficult for her to detect spells tied to a
specific structure. How many other places in the castle had privacy wards carved in?

“As to how I know this,” continues Madara, “the knowledge is passed down from parent to child. Only the Ancient Dragons know the exact details of what happened back then, as the Dragon’s Secret has been forbidden from being written down. Anyone caught with such a book would be severely punished.”

“There are dragons that were alive thousands of years ago? How long are their lifespans?” asks Tsunade. At Madara’s curious look, she adds, “Mom doesn’t talk much about this with me. I think she’s worried that it’ll make me disappointed not to have inherited more of her genetics.”

Madara hums thoughtfully. “You still might develop a dragon form, actually. The latest anyone’s ever unlocked their form was 27. And dragons don’t really have a known limit on how old they can get. I’ve never heard of one dying of old age, though there are plenty of other things that can kill them. I think about a third of the fatalities are a result of their bonded mate being killed. Humans and other species may get an extended life-span from a bond, but they don’t get any stronger.”

“….I don’t know if I want a dragon form,” admits Tsunade. “Others might have dreams of flying, but I prefer to have my feet firmly on the ground.”

‘Just like Tobirama,’ thinks Madara, amused. Hopefully, though, she didn’t have his same fear of flying.

“Mito actually uses her form for swimming more than flying,” says Hashirama. “Water dragons are able to breathe underwater, just like water nymphs. Tobirama and Itama inherited that ability from our mother, but Kawarama and I weren’t so lucky.”

“That would be fun,” says Tsunade, “but I won’t get my hopes up in case it doesn’t happen. Being a wood nymph has its own advantages, so I won’t feel deprived if I never develop scales.”

Hashirama gives her a bright grin. “I’m happy to hear that, Tsuna. Our heritage is nothing to be disappointed by. We have long lives, heal quickly, and share a connection to nature that few non-nymphs have a hope of understanding.”

“Dragons and kitsune are the exceptions to that,” says Madara. “Although there are multiple species that can harness wild magic, very few of them can feel the sentience of magic.”

Tsunade seems suitably impressed by that before her gaze catches sight of the time on her wristwatch. “Oh. It’s almost time for team training with Izumi-sensei and Sarutobi-sensei. I don’t want to miss that.”

“You have two teachers?” asks Madara.

“Yes. Sarutobi-sensei is Izumi-sensei’s teaching assistant. He’s learning from Izumi-sensei on how to instruct a team. He’ll practice giving us lessons, and Izumi-sensei will fill in the blanks on anything he may have forgotten or not known to tell us,” answers Tsunade.

“Saru is one of Tobirama’s former students. He’s a Junior Knight now,” says Hashirama.

Madara makes a noise of understanding and Tsunade stands up from the bench.

“Well, it was nice catching up with you, Uncle Madara, but I have to leave now. I’ll see you guys later.”

Madara nods. “You’re less of a drama queen than your father.” He ignores Hashirama slumping in
fake depression. “I’ll talk to you more later.”

Tsunade gives a final wave goodbye and walks out of sight. Madara looks to Hashirama and wonders what they should do next. What activities did they do together ten years ago?

Hashirama stares back for a moment before standing up. “Let’s go take a walk in the city. There are a few businesses that have opened up since you left, and new houses that have been built. Jiro and Takeo aren’t in town right now, but Izuna and Keitaro are. We should visit them.”

Madara follows him to the city, curious about where his brothers are living now. “Where have Jiro and Takeo run off to?”

“There was a tournament a few cities over that Jiro wanted to participate in. Takeo went with him to make sure he stayed out of trouble,” replies Hashirama.

Madara snorts. “That sounds like them. Have either of my brothers found someone to settle down with yet?”

Hashirama laughs, sounding a bit nervous.

Madara eyes him suspiciously. “What?”

“Well… it seems you’re not the only Uchiha brother to have a thing for Senjus.”

Madara stops walking. “He married the harpy, didn’t he?”

Hashirama sighs. “Don’t call Touka that. And yes, Izuna did marry her. A few years after you left. They have a daughter now. Five years old.”

“She started the name calling,” says Madara, trying not to sound defensive.

“To be fair, the first time she met you, you were arguing with Tobirama. She didn’t know that was just how the two of you communicated. Perhaps now that you’re both older, you can learn to get along,” says Hashirama hopefully.

Madara hums skeptically. “I doubt it, not unless she stops giving ‘subtle’ hints that I’m not good enough for her cousin.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that, actually. A few years after you left, she and Tobirama got into a fight about it. Tobirama said he got enough of people trying to dictate his life choices from the water nymphs. Touka then realized she was genuinely upsetting him with her comments and stopped. At the very least, you won’t hear any of that from her while he’s around,” says Hashirama.

“Hmm. That’s not so bad then. I’ve never had much reason to be around her unless she’s talking to Tobirama. As long as she doesn’t insult me, I won’t call her harpy,” says Madara.

Hashirama smiles in relief. “Thank you, Madara. You know, before you left, you had some of the younger Senju children thinking that Touka was an actual harpy. We had to find paintings of real harpies to prove that she wasn’t.”

Madara smirks, laughter in his eyes, and continues walking. They head to the edge of the city, where the newer houses have been built, and Hashirama shows him where his brothers now live. Three houses, side by side. Obviously, Izuna shares his with Touka, and Jiro and Takeo have yet to marry and so are roommates, but Hashirama seems reluctant to tell him who Keitaro is dating.
“It can’t be any worse than Touka, so who is it?” he asks.

“He’s...dating Itama,” reveals Hashirama.

“Itama. Your brother, Itama?”

Hashirama nods.

“Huh.” Madara gives the house a surprised frown. “I was not expecting that. They’re happy together?”

“Very happy,” confirms Hashirama.

“I guess that’s alright then. At least Itama is polite,” says Madara. Unlike Touka, was the unspoken insult. Truthfully, she wasn’t that bad, but they had started bickering as children and never learned a different way of interacting with each other.

They step closer to Izuna’s house, the door opening before they have a chance to knock. Izuna stares at him for a moment before pulling him into a tight hug.

“Ten years,” mutters Izuna, his tone a mix of irritation and relief. “I can’t believe you were gone for so long. We seriously need a better mailing system set up between our neighboring countries.”

“We probably do, but I’m not planning on leaving again anytime soon,” says Madara. “Tobirama takes his duties as a Knight very seriously, and I’m not going anywhere without my mate.”

Izuna leans back, with that particular squinty look that means he’s focusing on someone’s magic. “Huh. I guess we’re both married now. I’m still kind of annoyed that you weren’t here for the ceremony, but you don’t really like formal events anyways.”

Madara gives him the exasperated glare that comment deserves. “I would have made an exception for your wedding! What kind of brother do you think I am?”

Izuna laughs and steps back, gesturing for the two of them to come inside. “I think you’re a good brother, which is why we’ve been so understanding of your absence. You wouldn’t have left if you didn’t think it necessary.”

He follows Izuna to the living room, sitting down on the couch with Hashirama while his brother sits across from them in a plush chair. The sound of tiny footsteps can be heard before a young girl enters the room. She hesitates in the doorway when she sees him, but musters up her courage to venture farther into the room.

“Hello. I’m Ayame. Who are you?” she asks.

“Ayame. This is your Uncle Madara. Do you remember me telling you about him?” asks Izuna.

She tilts her head with a quiet hum. “He’s the one who went in search of treasure to give to Uncle Tobirama?”

“That’s right. He went and found a bunch of treasure, and Tobirama was so impressed he agreed to marry Madara,” says Izuna.

Ayame gives him a bland look, apparently uncaring of her Uncles’ love lives. “Uh-huh. That’s nice. When is mom coming home?”

“She should be back soon,” replies Izuna. “Touka went up to the castle to talk to Tobirama. There
are some business proposals that he needs to see.”

Hashirama sighs. “I don’t know why they kept sending their requests to us when they know Tobirama was on vacation. It’s not like they don’t know by now that Tobirama is the one to review their plan and interview them.”

Madara shoots him an exasperated glare. “Are you still unable to tell when people are trying to con you out of money?”

Hashirama winces, looking sheepish. “It’s not as easy as you make it sound. I didn’t even know people could cry on demand until that that one woman did. Tobirama says they’re so convincing because they make a career out of tricking people. He’s better at asking the right questions to uncover lies.”

Madara stares at him flatly, unimpressed.

Hashirama’s lips turn down in a pout. “…It’s not like I don’t help out in other ways. Being the head of a Noble Clan comes with a lot of political responsibility. Tobirama would much rather run the business side of things than represent the clan during social functions. I also recommend various Senju businesses to those at said parties, increasing the number of customers they get that month.”

“He’s recommended some people to the Uchiha shops as well,” says Izuna. That didn’t surprise him at all. Hashirama was a compassionate man, which made his more childish behaviors easier to deal with.

“Whether you help with the finances or not, you still need to learn how to tell when someone is trying to con you,” says Madara. “You’re too optimistic about people’s good intentions.”

Ayame giggles quietly. “It’s really easy to convince Uncle Hashirama to give me candy. He can’t resist the puppy eyes.”

“Don’t let your mother hear you say that. She worries about you eating too much sugar,” warns Izuna.

Ayame grins, revealing clean white teeth. Despite the child’s love of sugar, she didn’t look in danger of getting cavities. Her parents apparently made sure she was brushing, maybe even flossing.

“Mama worries too much. I eat my vegetables and brush three times a day,” says Ayame. She looks at Hashirama hopefully. “Did you bring any candy today, Uncle Hashi?”

Hashirama pulls a few sweets from his pocket, giving Izuna a slightly guilty smile as he gives them to Ayame. Izuna sighs but doesn’t protest. Ayame thanks him cheerfully and heads back to her room to enjoy her treat.

“Izuna, besides marriage, has anything else major happened in your life while I was away?” asks Madara.

“Well, I finally settled on a career path. About six years ago, a spell was created to make copying books easier. The bookstore ended up needing more editors, and I applied for the job. Turns out, I’m good at catching typos and grammatical errors. Now I’m one of the major editors,” says Izuna.

“Huh. That doesn’t seem very…exciting,” replies Madara.

Izuna shrugs. “Maybe not, but I get to read the books for free. With our long lives, it’s not something
I anticipate doing forever. Years later, there might be a more exciting career that doesn’t even exist now. Who knows? Maybe I’ll even write a book of my own.”

“It gives a consistent income,” explains Hashirama when Madara still looks skeptical.

“Yes, there is that. I don’t have the talent Takeo does to make glass, and those fire shows that Jiro performs with other fire-elements and that Keitaro helps design choreography for don’t always bring in a large enough audience,” says Izuna. “Living in the capital city does help with bringing in tourists, but I don’t want an uncertain income while raising Ayame.”

“And what about Touka? She used to be a blacksmith’s apprentice, didn’t she?” asks Madara.

Izuna’s eyes take on that all-too-familiar smitten look. “Touka can not only make weapons on her own now, but she also owns her own shop. Her work is very high quality. The castle commissions her to forge weapons for the Knights. All over the country, people are defending the innocent and slaying monsters with her hand-made swords and spears.”

“It doesn’t sound like money is something you really need to worry about then,” says Madara.

“No, I suppose it isn’t. Still, I’m not interested in sitting around all day, even to play house husband. Touka and I split our time between being with Ayame and working. We both take weekends off when we can, and spend the day together as a family. Editing may not be as thrilling as some of the jobs I had when I was younger, but it’s fulfilling in its own way,” says Izuna.

Seeing the truth of that statement in his brother’s eyes, Madara lets the subject go. The idea of editing books may have sounded utterly tedious to him, but Izuna obviously saw something worthwhile in it.

“Tell me about Ayame. What is her personality like?” asks Madara. He had discovered during his travels that if he didn’t know what to say, then he should ask the other person about something they were passionate about. That way, he barely had to say anything.

Izuna grins brightly. “Ayame is a really wonderful child. A bit shy at first with strangers, but outgoing once she trusts you. She has the cutest smile I’ve ever seen, a beauty only eclipsed by her mother. And I think she’s already starting to hoard things. She loves to collect pink ribbons and lace and hair ties…”

Madara leans back against the couch as Izuna rambles on, a smile tugging at the edge of lips at seeing his brother so animated. As exciting as his travels were, he had missed this, just hanging out with his brothers and the familiar sights of the city.

It was good to be back home.

Tobirama follows Stasha through the castle, unsurprised when her idea of ‘in private’ actually means ‘a room full of nymphs.’ She had lead him to one of the castle’s conference rooms, where ten water nymphs from the Noble clans were waiting for them. As Stasha was of a lower status, it wouldn’t have served her well to tell them no when they asked her to bring him here.

When his mother had left the ocean to marry his father, someone from each of the ten noble clans had gone with her. After his father had been killed by a manticore and she had returned home, those ten nymphs had left and been replaced by someone younger from each of the families. All of them females. It wasn’t until he had begun to express interest in Madara that males from the Noble class had begun to visit in the hopes of tempting him. None of them had.

As soon as he’s fully inside the conference room, the doors slam shut, and the scorn begins.
“I can’t believe you let a human Chase you,” says Matira in disgust.

“And a commoner at that!” exclaims Lavira.

“Not to mention a fire elemental. At least if he could control water, he might have been able to visit the palace,” adds Yovina.

“He’s a riff-raff, no courtly manners at all,” says Keiva.

“No diplomatic skills either,” says Trina.

“He’s not a good mate for a Prince, let alone a future king,” says Sina.

“Gone for ten years, and what to show for it? We’ve been here all this time, and yet he’s the one who gets favored?” demands Reita.

“It isn’t fair,” agrees Jolna. “We’re the ones who’ve been giving him courting gifts, all unfairly rejected. What has this human given him that we haven’t?”

“Not only a human, but a male. With power like yours, you should be passing it down to children for the good of the kingdom,” says Aiya.

“Humans don’t live as long as nymphs. Will you finally choose someone worthy of your title and power when he dies?” asks Xita.

Tobirama listens to their tirade in stony silence, knowing from experience not to interrupt before they’ve each had a chance to speak. The ones who didn’t get to say anything are always twice as unreasonable.

“Let’s address his species first, shall we?” he asks dryly. “Since that’s such a concern of yours.”

Matira huffs in annoyance.

He shoots her a quelling look. “I don’t care that he’s human. Many of the relatives on my father’s side are humans. If that was a problem for the royal family, Grandfather wouldn’t have given his blessing for mother to marry him.”

Yovina hums thoughtfully. “I suppose we can’t really argue with that. If the King has declared that marrying humans isn’t beneath the royal family, it would be presumptuous of us to declare otherwise.”

Lavira frowns. “He’s still not of a high enough rank. The King allowed his daughter to marry a Noble man with human relatives, not a commoner.”

“I have a counter argument for that as well,” replies Tobirama calmly. “Nobility is determined by how long your family has lived in that country and by their wealth. The Uchiha clan has lived in Whirlpool since the Uzumaki clan become its monarch. They would have been granted Nobility status if they’d had the wealth at the time.”

“And you believe they will eventually gain the necessary wealth?” asks Lavira.

“Madara already has.” He smirks at the shock that flits across their faces. “During his travels, he’s accumulated a lot of gold and gemstones. He merely needs to petition Noboru for Nobility status. The rank will elevate his own family’s prestige, bringing in more customers for their businesses. Soon enough, the clan will have plenty of riches.”
“Well, that does make him more worthy of you,” says Lavira reluctantly.

Reita scowls. “It doesn’t change the fact that he’s been gone for all these years.”

Tobirama clenches his teeth, realizing the rage must have shown on his face when they all take a step back. “He was only gone for so long because you lot convinced him he had to earn my affections. Madara has spent the last decade accumulating wealth and acquiring courting gifts. He gave me a library of ancient books and built a house with a garden big enough for us to live off of. All of the furred clothing he gifted me with were made from shaved animal fur because he knows I don’t like to kill them. He proved how much he understood me with every gift.”

“Well, that’s…” Aiya stutters. “He still can’t give you children!”

Tobirama raises an unimpressed eyebrow. “Grandfather had five children and all of them have procreated. I have plenty of powerful cousins to protect the kingdom. If Madara and I decide we want kids, we’ll adopt. It isn’t a crime to not make babies.”

Aiya tsks. “Just a waste of your power, is all.”

That was so ridiculous he could do nothing but stare at her for several minutes. She shifts uncomfortably, looking to the others in bewilderment.

Finally she snaps out, “What?”

“You think I’m wasting my power. In case it’s escaped your notice, I’m a Senior Knight. My job is to use my abilities to protect the kingdom. You can’t think that raising a child is more important than that. I’m not the type who would leave child rearing entirely to the mother. The first few years I would want to spend at home, and after that I’d only go on one mission a month. Becoming a father is something I would only do after I retire.”

“Oh,” mutters Aiya.

“And what about his lifespan?” asks Xita.

Tobirama frowns at her. “After all that, you really think I have such a shallow bond with him? Our magics are deeply entwined. He’ll live as long as I do. I can feel our bond strengthen a little more every day. In just a few years, we’ll be so deeply connected that the death of one will mean the death of the other.”

Xita’s mouth drops open. “You would risk your longevity for this human? Our kind can live hundreds of years. Humans are frailer than we are, take greater damage from the same injuries, and heal slower. You court death by bonding with him.”

Tobirama exhales sharply. “I don’t care. You, all of you, cost me ten years with him. The day he left, if he had asked to mate with me instead of leaving, I would have said yes. The oceans will dry up before I even consider separating from him.”

That draws their protests to a halt. It was a little known fact among nymphs that as long as one of them was alive, so too would the sea continue to exist. It would be physically impossible for the sea to completely evaporate while Tobirama was still alive. Effectively, he had just told him that nothing could separate him from Madara.

There’s a part of him that just wants to reveal Madara’s parentage. No one could possibly argue that a dragon was an unworthy mate for him. However, it also would have vindicated their bias against humans. He had wanted Madara when he thought him human. Finding out he was a dragon had just
made flying their new means of transportation.

After a minute of them staring at him in shock, Yovina huffs out an exasperated breath. “This is exactly why we think you should be King, you know. You’re always so logical, even when pissed off. You have this way of convincing people to see things your way.”

“You would make an excellent leader,” says Trina. “King Kaimana favors you over his other grandchildren. There’s a good chance you could be his successor.”

Tobirama can feel a headache fast approaching. “Haven’t we already talked about this? I have no desire to be king. I already have responsibilities in the human world.”

“Responsibilities that won’t last forever,” counters Keiva. “Eventually Hashirama will retire and pass his Estate down to his child or grandchild. A cousin, even, if none of them want it. You won’t have to help him with that forever. You’ll tire of being a Knight at some point and leave the fighting to the younger generation. You could be King then.”

Sina frowns. “You act like being King is all work. There are many perks to being royalty as well.”

Tobirama waves his hand dismissively. “Perks that I could enjoy as a Prince. If I cared about that, I would be living in the palace. It isn’t as though I don’t have any luxuries living as a human Noble. The castle has cooks to prepare food for the royalty, nobles, and knights. You should know this as you eat in the main dining hall.”

Xita looks at him uncomprehendingly. “You would settle for being a Noble when you could be a Prince, or even better, a King? I don’t understand that.”

“Of course you don’t,” he mutters. Out of all them, Xita was the most power hungry of the Noble women trying to marry him. Her zest to become a Queen was utterly ridiculous.

Xita crosses her arms, asking indignantly, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tobirama takes a few calming breaths, knowing that replying harshly won’t get his message across. “You were born a Noble. The luxuries you have now are what you’ve always had. You crave more, even though others would be ecstatic to have even half as much as you. The type of greed that is in your heart is never satisfied. Why do you think becoming Queen would make you happy?”

Xita flounders, thrown off by his psychoanalysis of her character. “Why wouldn’t it?” she asks in genuine confusion. “A Queen can have anything she wants.”

“Except bring the dead back to life,” says Yovina dryly.

“Or make someone fall in love with you,” adds Lavira.

“Or turn back time,” says Aiya.

Tobirama’s lips curve up into an amused smile. “You see? They understand that being a Queen can’t get you everything you want. I know it’s something a lot of women dream about, marrying a Prince and becoming royalty, but it isn’t the only way to be happy. However, if you are truly set on that goal, you should go try to court one of my cousins, who are also princes. I am happily married to Madara, and that isn’t going to change.”
Before Xita can protest any further, Aiya asks cheerfully, “Are you going to have a marriage ceremony? The castle cooks could have a feast, and a lot of flowers are in bloom right now for decoration. I’m sure your mother would also love to attend her son’s wedding.”

On the verge of saying no, he hesitates at the mention of his mother. She visited a few times a year, but it wasn’t the same as having her around all the time. It might be worth the fuss of throwing a real wedding to have her around for a few weeks to help plan things.

“I’ll talk to Madara about it.” Tobirama relaxes at Aiya’s sincere smile, glad that at least one of them was happy for him. The ten of them had been with him for twelve years and had consoled him after his father’s death. He had thought they had become friends. The news that they had driven Madara away from him had felt like a slap in the face.

“In fact, I’ll go talk to him right now.” Tobirama barrels on past their protests. “Then I have to go find Minato and ask for his assistance with a project King Noboru has tasked me with.”

That shut them up. It was only by Noboru’s generosity that they were treated like Nobles in his Kingdom and allowed to stay in his castle. If they got in the way of his actual subjects doing their jobs, they would wear out their welcome and be sent packing.

Tobirama nods in farewell and leaves the room. They don’t try to stop him.

His shoulders slump in relief when the door clicks shut, blocking them from view. He hurries away before they can manufacture a reason to keep him there. The conversation has gone on so long it’s nearing lunchtime, so he makes a quick trip to the dining hall to pick up some food from the buffet table. The cooks have specific times that they begin to put out the food and will restock a certain dish if requested.

He chooses something he can take with him and heads for the library, eating along the way. After finding the books he needs, he uses his sensing abilities to track down Minato. The blonde was outside, chatting with his pregnant wife as they watched the knights allotted for the afternoon session train.

The courtyard would get overcrowded if all the knights were outside at once. A strict schedule made sure everything ran smoothly.


Kushina grins at him knowingly. “Tobirama. Finally back from your honeymoon, I see.”

He tries not to blush as Minato’s eyes widen in understanding.

“Yes. I had the fortunate luck of running into Madara at the border town, allowing us to get reacquainted before we returned to the castle,” replies Tobirama, using the cover story he and Madara had come up with in case anyone was listening in.

Minato smiles. “Congratulations, Tobirama. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you. When you have time, I must speak with you about an urgent project the King has tasked me with. Your knowledge of runes rivals my own in some areas,” says Tobirama.

“Alright. I’ll be free tomorrow morning, say about 11?” suggests Minato.

“That works for me. We can meet in one of the private study rooms next to the library.”
Minato nods his agreement, turning his attention back to the knights. When one of the matches finishes, Minato approaches the empty space, having to wait only a moment before someone joins him. They go over the rules for the spar then begin.

Tobirama watches the fight with interest, as always fascinated by just how swift his friend was. Rarely does anyone land a hit against him. It was due, in part, to the runes etched into every article of clothing Minato wore. With them, he could enhance his natural speed. The faster Minato was by his own power, the faster he was with the rune’s help.

As distracted as he was by the fight, he didn’t sense Touka approaching until she was only a few feet away. By then, it was too late to run. She stalks up to him and slams a stack of folders into his chest, glaring daggers at him.

“Cousin, so nice of you to finally return home after your unplanned vacation. I’ve received five business proposals in just the past week! Hashirama has no sense when it comes to investing, so he’s been no help whatsoever.” Touka narrows her eyes at him. “I trust you’ll be able to sort through these within the next few days.”

Tobirama wisely refrains from mentioning the research he still has to do for the anti-voodoo talisman. She would just end up telling him that he would already be done sorting through the business proposals if he hadn’t been gone for so long. Touka was not one to accept excuses.

“Of course. I’ll even start tonight,” says Tobirama.

“Good,” Touka says with satisfaction. “Now that you’re back, I won’t have to split my attention between your job and mine. Managing a weapon’s shop is actually a lot of work in a city this large, especially when it’s where all the new Knights are trained! Every year, there’s at least thirty people needing beginner swords and the Knights going out on missions come in to the shop all the time with broken weapons that need fixing. I don’t have time to deal with the family’s finances and make investments.”

“Thank you, Touka,” he says, causing her complaints to come to a halt. “You kept Hashirama from making foolish investments while I was gone, and I appreciate it. I’ll be sure to plan out any possible future vacations so you aren’t stuck with that burden.”

Touka sighs, looking like all the anger has just been drained out of her. “You’re very good at apologizing without actually saying the words. Well, I guess I can’t really blame you for not giving warning before disappearing. It’s not like you could have known that you would run into Madara on your mission.”

“It was a complete surprise,” he confirms. “And neither of us looked forward to coming back and dealing with the water nymphs’ reaction.”

It just goes to show how annoying the nymphs truly are that Touka gives him a sympathetic glance at that. She found his frustrations with them to be funny in the beginning, back when they were just a bunch of women giving him gifts and compliments instead of the manipulate group they are now.

“I don’t envy you having to deal with them,” says Touka. “Having admirers isn’t worth the hassle those women bring you.”

At that, Kushina stops pretending she wasn’t eavesdropping and speaks up, “Tobirama isn’t the only one who has admirers, though, is he? You get a lot of love confessions, even now that you’re married.”
Touka grimaces slightly. “Yes, and it makes Izuna both simultaneously smug and jealous. He’s insufferable to deal with after someone asks me out.”

“That’s what you get for being both beautiful and deadly,” says Kushina. She pauses for a moment. “That actually describes all three of us, doesn’t it? For some reason, that specific combination is really appealing to the general populace in this country. Do you think the standards for the ideal dating partner is different in other countries?”

Tobirama and Touka exchange bemused looks.

“Maybe,” says Touka. “I’ve never given it much thought before.”

“I suppose I could ask Madara about it,” says Tobirama, “though there’s no telling whether he noticed something like that, unless the beauty standards were very obviously different.”

“Perhaps we could have a group discussion sometime,” suggests Kushina. “It would be interesting to hear about his travels and the different customs found in other countries.”

“I would like that as well,” says Touka. “Specifically, if the other nations have different types of weapons, Madara could describe them to me and I could try to make them. Some Knights specialize in using a variety of weapons, and it would bring in extra business to the shop if I had something new to sell them.”

“Perhaps next week,” says Tobirama. “Before that, I’ll be busy sorting through the business proposals and doing research for the King. In fact, I should probably get started on that now. I’ll see you both later, alright?”

“Sure. See you later, Tobirama,” replies Kushina.

“Later, cousin.”

Deciding it was best to get started on the business proposals as soon as possible, Tobirama heads back to his bedroom and begins sorting through the folders. He sits at his desk and skims through each request, separating them into two piles: absolutely not and maybe.

It’s the second pile that he carefully reads, trying to assess how likely each business is to improve with a loan from the Senju clan. The more detailed the business owner is when explaining how they’d use the money, the more seriously he takes the request. He wants to lend the money to someone who knows what they’re doing, and who isn’t an impulsive buyer.

He ends up choosing three out of the stack to give further consideration. When he has time, he’ll set up an interview with the business owners to make sure everything is legitimate.

With that taken care of, he needs something else to occupy his time before Madara gets back. Leaving the files on his desk, he begins to look through the pile of books he and Madara brought back with them. He’s not really in the mood for something complex right now, so he picks out one of the few fiction books he had deemed worthy of his attention.

It was about two siblings, a young man and woman, who travelled the world together. When they encountered problems on the road, they overcame their challenges using wit and cunning rather than just brute force. It was refreshingly different from the typical adventure novel that had the main character fighting off monsters.

He gets lost in the story for a while, only snapping out of it when he senses Madara enter the room.
His mate’s energy is calm and content, showing he had a good day catching up with Hashirama and whoever else he visited.

Madara smiles at the sight of him and sits down beside him on the bed. “I spoke with Tsunade and Izuna today. Keitaro wasn’t home, but I’m sure I’ll run into him soon. Jiro and Takeo are out of the city, but should be returning within a few weeks. How was your meeting with that nymph?”

“It was an ambush,” he says dryly. “The water nymph Nobles wanted to speak with me, and knew I’d avoid them if they approached me directly. It’s irritating listening to them try to direct my life.”

“How unreasonable were they this time?” asks Madara.

“That’s the annoying part,” grumbles Tobirama. “They pretend to be reasonable and that I’ve swayed them to my side. At least half of them will continue to scheme to separate us. Aiya wasn’t as bad though.”

“In what way?”

“She doesn’t have her heart set on marrying me. In her opinion, it’s the duty of the strong to have strong offspring. That way the Kingdom always has protectors. When I explained my duties as a Knight, she backed down. After I retire, it’s likely she’ll suggest I have children with a surrogate,” explains Tobirama.

Madara stays silent for a long moment. “….Is that something you’d want? To have children?”

Tobirama considers the question seriously. “I think I might, in the future. Life is too busy right now to look after an infant. And there are ways now to impregnate a woman without actually having coitus with her, so that doesn’t even need to factor into our decision.”

“Hmm. I didn’t want kids when I was younger, but the idea has slowly been gaining appeal. I’ve travelled and had adventures for the past ten years, so it wouldn’t feel like I was giving anything up to focus my attention on raising children for a couple decades,” says Madara.

“Is that how you view rearing children? Giving things up? It’s not as though people don’t take their kids with them when they go vacationing,” says Tobirama. “Granted, they couldn’t be dangerous adventures, but we could still take them with us when we wanted to travel.”

Madara’s expression turns amused. “Are you trying to convince me? I’ve already decided I’m willing to try the ‘married with kids’ thing with you. I just know it’s going to be a lot of work.”

“The kind of work that you won’t regret?” asks Tobirama solemnly.

Madara bites back a flippant remark, noting how seriously Tobirama was taking this. It wasn’t his intention to make light of his mate’s concerns. “I won’t regret it. I remember helping my mother look after my younger brothers. It’ll be a lot of work, but I think it’ll be rewarding in the long run.”

An image forms in his head then, of the two of them standing together, each of them with a child in their arms. One of them would be a girl with Madara’s dark hair and his crimson eyes, and the other a boy with his white hair.

A smile tugs at his lips as he pictures it, and he sets his book aside to get closer to Madara. He’s met with an arm around his back and a hand cupping the back of his head, fingers tangling in his hair. Chapped lips press against his own, and he makes a mental note to find them some chapstick later.

His eyes close as Madara begins to lightly scratch at his scalp, muscles relaxing at the pleasant
sensation. Cumbersome thoughts of the future slip from his mind as Madara works to relax him. He lets himself be maneuvered down onto the bed, half sprawled onto Madara’s chest while hands stroke down his back.

“A few people have asked me today if we’re going to have a wedding ceremony,” says Tobirama. Madara sighs. “They asked the same of me. It would make our family happy if we did, but it sounds tedious. Is there a way to have a simple wedding?”

“You’re marrying royalty,” Tobirama reminds him. “The water nymphs will expect it to be extravagant, and so will the humans, to a lesser extent. Not just from a Noble family anymore, my brother is now married to the Second Princess of Whirlpool. I have ties to two royal families.”

Madara grumbles something about ‘prissy royal parties’ causing him to chuckle softly.

“Perhaps a small wedding and then a larger reception afterwards?” suggests Tobirama. “The Kingdom likes to celebrate marriages, but we don’t need more than our family to witness our vows.”

“…This means we’re going to have to talk sappy in front of your family, doesn’t it? Hashirama is going to give us that ridiculous grin of his. How much do you want to bet that he cries at the wedding?” asks Madara.

Tobirama grimaces faintly. “I don’t take sucker’s bets. Has he tried to give you the shovel talk yet?” Madara snorts. “Yes, over ten years ago. I think our brothers knew we liked each other before we did.”

“Hmm. Yours, maybe. I’m not that oblivious,” says Tobirama smugly.

“Oh? Then when did you know you liked me?” asks Madara challengingly.

“When I was 14.”

Madara blinks. “That…was only four years after we met.”

“I am aware of that,” says Tobirama dryly.

“Hmph. I didn’t start thinking of you that way until you were sixteen, though I was in denial about it for another year. We were still in that stage of our relationship where we communicated mostly through insults and sarcasm.”

“That’s because you had poor social skills.”

“You weren’t any better!”

Tobirama doesn’t dignify that with an answer.

Madara takes it as a victory and smirks at him.

It wasn’t worth the energy to try and knock that expression off his face. Actually, it wasn’t worth the energy to do much of anything right now. They had arrived at the castle rather late last night and had then woken up early. It shouldn’t hurt anything for him to rest for a few hours.

“I’m taking a nap,” he announces, closing his eyes as he relaxes against Madara’s chest.

“Ah…alright,” replies Madara, sounding bemused by the sudden topic change. “And I guess I’ll be
taking a nap with you, since you don’t seem inclined to move anytime soon.”

Tobirama hums softly, already half asleep. He senses a flare of magic from Madara before his yukata is flying out from the closet where he hung it up earlier. The fabric drapes itself across his shoulders, keeping him warm as he falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Tobirama's father, Butsuma, was walking in the woods when he came across a manticore attacking a group of children. He led it away from them, only to discover three more manticores waiting to ambush him. He was able to kill them, saving the lives of the children, but he died from injuries before a Healer could get to him.

Afterwards, Tobirama's mother went back to the ocean, needing the comforts of her childhood home to deal with the grief of losing her husband. She still visits her children every few months, but they miss having her around. The ten Nobles that had gone with her to live in Whirlpool went back to the sea as well. In their place, they each sent a female from their family to live in the castle, as it was well known by that point that Tobirama was a possible successor.

The image I have in mind for the manticores is this: http://vignette1.wikia.nocookie.net/mythology/images/e/ea/Manticore.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20160303095143

I almost changed it to chimera instead of manticore when I saw this picture: http://cm-lance.com/images/Arcana/Manticore%20Topsell.jpg
That drawing is nothing like all the other manticore pictures on google!
Chapter Notes

I introduce a new term this chapter, which is Kaiyō nymphs or Kaiyō Nobles. I got tired of calling those ten nymphs the water nymph Nobles. According to google translate, Kaiyō means ocean. Anytime someone is referred to with the title Kaiyō, it means they either live in the ocean or were born in the ocean.

The term Kaiyō Nobles applies specifically to nymphs with Noble blood as the other sea creatures don't have a royal/nobility system. Mermaids and sirens are a nomadic species with no official form of government.

I have given Tobirama's mother the name Sakiko.

Character Ages:
Sakiko: 53 (and considered young by nymph standards. Looks to be mid-20's to early 30's)
Itama: 30
Kawarama: 29
Touka: 33
Keitaro: 30
Takeo: 29
Jiro: 27
(If any of you have read Afterlife, you know these are the names I've given to Madara's three brothers that were never named in canon.)

(Chapter edited by Tiear)

Light sparks along the ground, following the curved lines painstakingly painted across the tiled floor. Magic pools in the center, slowly seeping into the round talisman, a lock of blonde hair woven through it. The light slowly fades away as the runes finish their task, imbuing the pendant with pure energy.

A pale hand reaches for the talisman, only to quickly withdraw as a miniature shield springs up. When the magic goes dormant again, a slightly tanned hand reaches for the amulet this time, meeting no resistance.

“It worked,” breathes Minato, exhilarated. He drops the talisman’s chain around his neck, too caught up in the excitement of success to flinch at cold metal touching his skin.

“That part of it did,” says Tobirama, “though I’m not sure how we’ll actually test them. Even if one of us could learn voodoo, no one with any sense would actually cast such a spell. It leaves a taint in your magic.”

Minato frowns pensively. “True. I suppose we’ll just have to hope for the best then. If we can equip all of the Knights with these, one of them is bound to run into a voodoo practitioner eventually.”
"I hate relying on luck," says Tobirama, "but I suppose we don’t have any choice."

He grabs the next amulet and cuts off a lock of his hair, ties it to the talisman, and tosses the whole thing into the center of the circle. The two of them get back into position and activate the runes again, pouring their energy into the ritual as well as drawing up magic from the earth.

Wild magic answers their call easily enough, drawn by his nymph blood and the purpose of their spell. Controlling another living creature goes against the natural order of things, and Mother Earth is pleased to help end such atrocities. He can even feel her approval that they’ve included the precaution to keep anyone else from touching someone’s personal talisman.

“Now what?” asks Minato once they’ve finished.

“Now, we get a list of all the Knights and separate them into three categories: in the city, on a mission, and on Border Guard,” says Tobirama. “Since we need to give some of our magic to activate the runes, there are only so many of these we can make in a day.”

“So we need to create talismans for the most valuable protectors first?” asks Minato. “I suppose royalty would come first as they’d be a higher target, then the Senior Knights as they’re more powerful.”

“Not quite,” disagrees Tobirama. “Royalty first, yes, but the Senior Knights will have a greater chance of shrugging off mind control than the trainees. We’ll still equip all of the Knights before the civilians just in case, but it’s the weaker Knights who need the protection more.”

“I see. Shall we go inform the King of our progress then? We need his permission to drag the Knights away from their training. With the amount of magic we just used, I think we could make twenty talismans in a day,” says Minato.

“Agreed.”

They make their way to the throne room, able to sense Noboru’s energy signature coming from that direction, as well as a few other people. Tobirama frowns at the foreign yet oddly familiar feeling of the King’s guests. He felt like he had met those water nymphs before, but they were not ones regularly visiting the city. In fact, they had that odd twist to their energy that meant they lived in the ocean more often than not. What were they doing here?

When they reach the throne room, he understands. The visiting nymphs were Kaimana’s personal messengers. He had met them briefly when he visited the palace but didn’t know much about them. Were they here to speak to Noboru or to him?

“Ah, Tobirama. I was just about to summon you,” says Noboru, attempting to sound cheerful but the worried look in his eyes ruins the attempt.

“Prince Tobirama,” greets the messengers, Darya and Itsaso.

“Darya. Itsaso. I’d say it was good to see you again, but you don’t look like you have good news,” replies Tobirama.

“Well, it’s not just bad news,” says Darya.

“Your mother and grandfather are coming to visit!” says Itsaso with over exaggerated excitement.

His eyes narrow. “And the bad news?”
“There have been some...concerns,” says Darya. “Seven of the Nobles wrote to King Kaimana about your choice of mate.”

Tobirama frowns. “What kind of concerns? Grandfather doesn’t care about species or rank when it comes to who his grandchildren marry.”

“No, no, he doesn’t,” assures Itsaso. “But the Nobles made it sound like Madara somehow tricked you into marrying him. With blackmail or black magic. They weren’t very consistent with how they claimed he did it.”

“Probably trying to cover all angles,” says Darya dryly.

“I see,” says Tobirama coldly. “And which of the seven wrote such lies?.....No, who had the decency not to try and deceive the King? That will be easier to list.”

“That would be Lavira, Yovina, and Aiya. King Kaimana plans to ask them what they believe when he arrives. As your King, it’s his duty to make sure your marriage was consensual, though at this point, I don’t think he truly believes their claims,” says Itsaso.

“The whole court knows they just want you for themselves,” says Darya.

Tobirama sighs. “When will they arrive?”

Darya glances to Noboru. “As soon as it is permitted by King Noboru. It is the will of King Kaiama that this situation be resolved as quickly as possible.”

“That is my will as well,” says Noboru. “Go back to your king and tell him he may visit as early as tomorrow. I will have the servants prepare a room for him and his daughter.”

“Thank you, your majesty. You are very kind,” says Itsaso.

Tobirama watches them go and tries not to dread the coming confrontation. At the very least, he would get to see his mother again. Perhaps she would stay for a while afterward to help plan the wedding ceremony.

If there was a ceremony.

No, he shouldn’t think like that. The nymphs had no proof Madara had done anything wrong because he hadn’t. Kaimana had no reason to try and sever their bond, and it might not work even if he tried.

“Now that they’re gone, what brought you here in the first place?” asks Noboru.

Seeing that Tobirama still looked a bit troubled, Minato speaks up, “We’ve completed the talismans, your majesty. Or at least, a working prototype. Their effectiveness can’t truly be known until they’ve been tested, which isn’t something we can do. We would like your permission to pull the Knights away from their duties long enough to have talismans made for them as well.”

“Of course.” Noboru gestures for his assistant to bring him paper and pen, then quickly jots down a few sentence and signs it. “This should be proof enough for the Knights. Do you intend to start today?”

“Yes. Furthermore, we should start with you,” says Tobirama. “The royal family would be the most obvious target.”
“Hmm. Very well. I’ll finish things up here and should be able to join you in a few hours. In the meantime, why don’t you see about having talismans made for my daughters and grandchildren?” suggests Noboru.

“Yes, sir.”

It was a busy day after that as they got talismans made for Kushina, Mito, Misaki, Tsunade, Noboru, Hashirama, Madara, Misaki’s husband, Obito, Kakashi, Rin, Jiraiya, Orochimaru, Healer Yuuna, Tsunade’s sensei, Hiruzen, Kagami, Koharu, Torifune, Danzo, and Homura. Everyone who had a close connection to someone of the royal family needed to have a talisman made for them as soon as possible. Luckily, the talisman’s recipients lent some of their own power to the ritual when they could or else they wouldn’t have had enough energy for that many talismans in one day.

Tomorrow, they would begin creating them for the Knight trainees. Then it would be the Junior and Senior Knight’s turn. After that, they would start on the general population, beginning with the Senju and Uchiha clans. Perhaps it wasn’t fair to the average citizen, but he would put his family’s safety first whenever possible.

Luckily for his peace of mind, creating that day’s talismans keeps him sufficiently distracted from thinking about Kaimana’s impending arrival; and afterward; he only has enough energy to make it to his room and fall onto the bed for a nap. He can think about this problem more when he wakes up.

The door clicking open a few hours later has him lifting his head to watch Madara enter the room. Although awake for the past few minutes, he hadn’t wanted to leave the comfort of his bed.

“How was the day?” asks Madara.

“Exhausting,” corrects Tobirama. “All I was doing was sitting on the floor, but using all your magic apparently uses all your physical energy as well.”

“You accomplished a lot in one day. Do you have the energy to visit the Dining Hall or should I bring back supper for the both of us?”

Tobirama focuses on the energy coming from the Dining Hall and frowns. “A few of the Kaiyō Nobles are there. It wouldn’t be a good idea for me to see them right now. I would probably cause a political incident.”

“Is that a polite way of saying you’d hit them?” asks Madara.

Tobirama nods.

“What did they do this time?” Worried when Tobirama hesitates to answer, Madara sits down on the bed beside him. “What’s wrong?”

“They wrote letters to Grandfather, accusing you of forcing me into a bond.” Tobirama scowls at the bed, incensed by their entitlement. “They’ve lost their minds lying to the King. Well, most of them have. Aiya, Yovina, and Lavira wisely chose not to participate in the others’ mad scheme.”

“How do you force a bond with a nymph?” asks Madara incredulously.

“Black magic?” suggests Tobirama. “Blackmail, threats. They’ve listed all sorts of theories for how you could have done it.”

“No one with any sense would believe that,” scoffs Madara.
Tobirama hums in disagreement. “You forget that they grew up surrounded by cutthroat Nobles, all trying to undermine each other to become the most favored by the King and his children. It’s practically an art form among them to make baseless accusations sound plausible.”

Madara frowns. “I still think it unlikely that your Grandfather would believe them over you, but what happens if he does? What can he actually do about this? It’s not like he could break our bond.”

“…..”

Madara’s eyes narrow. “He can’t break our bond.”

“He probably can’t break our bond,” says Tobirama. “And that’s only because you’re a dragon and not a water nymph. You understand how a collective belief of the species can affect our intrinsic magic. The way dragons need to steal farm animals to claim a territory, and nymphs need to chase or be chased to claim a mate. Kaimana has a power over water nymphs that no one else has because so many of us acknowledge him as our King.”

“You mean he can just break a mate bond between two water nymphs whenever he feels like it?” demands Madara.

Tobirama blinks, takes a look at the growing rage on Madara’s face and sits up. He wraps his arms around Madara’s shoulders and kisses him until the scowl melts away. When he thinks Madara is calm enough to be rational again, he resumes their conversation.

“Technically, he could, but no one would tolerate a King who does such a thing on a whim. Grandfather has never had to use that ability of his, and would only do so if he truly thought the bond had been forced,” says Tobirama. “I’m more irritated than worried. To dispute the lies the Kaiyō Nobles tell him, Grandfather is going to be forced to ask personal details about our relationship. It’s an invasion of our privacy.”

“What will happen to the nymphs when Kaimana finds out they were lying?” asks Madara.

“The most likely outcome is that they’ll be sent back to the ocean. The Nobles might send replacements, but they’ll be people looking to benefit from befriending a prince rather than marrying one this time,” says Tobirama.

“Hmm. At least one good thing will come out of this,” says Madara.

“Such an optimist,” he says dryly.

Madara gives him an amused glance and pulls him into another kiss. He gets lost in the sensation for a while, letting himself be soothed by the contact. Despite what he had told Madara, he was worried. It was irrational perhaps, but he doubted he would be able to fully calm down until this whole situation was resolved.

Frustration and a feeling of possessiveness has him deepening the kiss almost harshly, fingers gripping the fabric of Madara’s shirt. He couldn’t stand the idea of someone taking Madara away from him. Madara responds with passion and topples them down onto the bed, then does his best to distract him from thinking about tomorrow.

“Is this really necessary?” asks Madara, staring at himself in the mirror. Somehow, Tobirama had acquired a formal suit for him in his exact size and forced him into it.

Tobirama gives him an unimpressed stare. “Don’t whine. You’re meeting the ocean King for the first
time today, and we want to make a good first impression. He’s going to be judging you more harshly because of the Kaiyō Nobles’ accusations. Plus, my mother will be there.”

Madara’s eyes widen, turning away from the mirror to stare at Tobirama incredulously. “And you just thought to mention that?!”

Tobirama shrugs. “You’ve met my mother before. We already know she likes you.”

“That was when we were just friends! What if she disapproves of our relationship?” asks Madara.

Tobirama hums skeptically. “Unlikely. She was constantly hinting at how adorable we were together. Now stop acting so insecure. It’s unlike you.”

He kept it to himself that it was almost cute to see the normally brash and confident to the point of arrogant man fretting about meeting his mother. It was entirely unnecessary, however. His mother adored Madara and how he could pull Tobirama out of his quiet shell by inciting him into a debate (or an argument, depending on their mood).

Madara scowls at his blasé tone. “Weren’t you the one who was freaking out yesterday? It’s not strange that I don’t want to be at odds with your family. That would just guarantee some awkward family reunions.”

“So it would,” agrees Tobirama. He looks at the clock and then heads to the door. “Come on. It’s almost time for our meeting.”

They find King Kaimana in the suite of rooms Noboru had set aside for his use. There was a sitting room and two bedrooms, each with their own bathroom. It was the kind of housing that the royals and nobles living in the castle got to enjoy.

Technically, Tobirama should have been assigned such a room but had chosen the simpler housing that the Senior Knights were awarded. Now that he was married to Madara, he would need to request a change of rooms. Their possessions barely fit into the compact space.

“Tobirama,” greets Kaimana. He gestures at the couch across from him. “Go ahead and sit down, both of you. We have a lot to talk about. Your mother is currently with Hashirama. We felt it would be best for me to speak with you first.”

“That’s fine. Grandfather, I’d like you to meet my mate, Madara. Despite what the Kaiyō Nobles have said, it was entirely consensual,” says Tobirama.

“Hmm. That is what I’m here to find out.” Kaimana looks at Madara with scrutinizing eyes. “Sakiko was not surprised at all that her son had married you, but Reita did make a good point in her letter that affections could waver in ten years’ time. Some would say you rushed into things, choosing not to relearn each other first.”

Madara frowns. “We knew each other for twelve years before I left, and both of us were already adults. At our core, people don’t tend to change that much unless something drastic happens in our lives.”

“Except people do mature with age,” says Kaimana.

“Is maturity supposed to be a negative quality?” asks Madara skeptically.

Kaimana sighs. “The point is, Reita used how fast the two of you became bonded as evidence for foul play. She argued in her letter that no one would marry that soon after such a long separation.”
“I disagree,” says Tobirama calmly. “Madara indicated he wanted to marry when he got back, so I’ve had ten years to consider his proposal. It’s the least impulsive decision I’ve ever made.”

Kaimana pauses. “….Yes, when you put it that way, it’s not so strange. Did anyone witness his proposal?”

“No. It was a private moment,” says Tobirama.

“Hmm. That does complicate things. Xita wrote that the two of you fought a lot during your youth. It’s her assertion that your relationship was more antagonistic than romantic.”

Tobirama crosses his arms as he thinks. “We argued a lot in the beginning. Both of us have stubborn personalities. Over time, our disagreements became more like debates and playful banter. We started to have real conversations. There hasn’t been animosity between us in quite some time, even before he left.”

Kaimana regards them thoughtfully for a while. “From what you’ve said, and the stories your mother has told me, I find it unlikely that this bond was forced in any way. However, I still must continue the investigation. I have to listen to every side of the story before coming to a conclusion. And….I need to inspect the bond.”

Madara’s eyes narrow. “Inspect?”

“He has to touch our bond with his magic to ‘see’ it,” explains Tobirama. He attempts to sound nonchalant, but his voice is too tense.

Kaimana notices. “Tobirama, I promise you, it’s only an inspection. You know I wouldn’t break a bond without thorough consideration.”

“……”

Realizing Tobirama wasn’t going to reply, Kaimana stands up and waits patiently for Madara and Tobirama to do the same. He approaches and sets his hands on their shoulders, slowly pushing his magic down into their cores.

Kaimana’s breath stills at what he finds. Their bond was strong, like something that would develop after years, not mere months. Dark magic couldn’t have done this. Only pure emotion could strengthen a bond so quickly. There was no doubt: Tobirama had chosen Madara of his own free will.

“You have nothing to worry about, Tobirama. Nothing the others say could sway me now. The state of your bond is proof enough that it was made out of love, not force or deception,” says Kaimana.

Tobirama relaxes at his pronouncement. “Thank you, Grandfather. Madara and I were discussing having a marriage ceremony sometime this year. Shall I send you an invitation when we have a date set?”

Kaimana grins. “Of course! I wouldn’t miss my favorite grandson’s wedding for the world. Have you told your mother yet? I’m sure she’ll be just as excited.”

“Not yet. I would have sent a letter, but then this situation happened, so I can tell her in person.”

“Right. Why don’t you go do that now then? I’ll be busy the rest of the day interviewing the Kaiyō nymphs, but we can talk more tomorrow. Feel free to bring your mate along as well so that I may get to know him,” says Kaimana.
Tobirama glances to Madara who nods. “We’ll be there. Good luck dealing with the others.”

They exit the room and Tobirama searches out his mother’s energy, beginning to walk in that direction. Madara follows him silently for a while before exhaling softly.

“That was a bit anticlimactic, wasn’t it?” asks Madara. “A fifteen-minute conversation and everything is just fine?”

Tobirama shrugs. “It was foolish of the Kaiyō Nobles to think they could fool the King of the Ocean. He’s been leading a large group of people for centuries already. You don’t get to keep a leadership position for that long by being incompetent. And he’s powerful enough to sense even the slightest hint of dark energy.”

“I could sense his magic before he even reached the city,” admits Madara. “Normally, I have to focus to extend my senses that far. Was he even trying to project his magic?”

“No. He just has so much of it that his body can’t contain it all,” says Tobirama.

“Wood nymphs have multiple leaders, don’t they? Do they have the same sort of power?” asks Madara.

“Not even close,” says Tobirama dismissively. “They’re strong, certainly, but not on Kaimana’s level. Those who are king of an entire country are a little stronger than Hashirama, while those in control of an island are equal or even a bit weaker. Personally, I think Hashirama has the potential to become a nymph King, but it’s probably better if he doesn’t.”

“Do nymphs have the same concept of paperwork as humans do?” asks Madara.

“The underwater ones don’t,” he replies, lips curving up in amusement, “but that isn’t what I really meant. Paperwork aside, Hashirama would get too invested in his subject’s lives, wanting to help them solve all their problems. He has enough responsibility making sure the Senju clan prospers.”

“You would care just as much,” says Madara knowingly. “The difference is, you would be able to tell when their problems actually required royal intervention. Being a King would take up too much of your time, though. Time away from me.”

“A horrendous crime,” says Tobirama dryly.

Madara stops walking and, heedless of their location, pulls him into kiss. Tobirama ignores the curious stares of passing knights to return the affection, smiling against Madara’s mouth. They continue walking after a moment, this time with Madara’s arm around his shoulders to keep him close.

He liked these small moments that showed Madara cared. Sometimes they had trouble expressing how they felt with words, but actions spoke for them. And a ten-year search to find objects that would impress him was the loudest declaration Madara had ever made.

They have to go all the way into the city to find Hashirama and his mother. The two of them are watching one of the fire shows the Uchiha clan performs. It’s a beautiful display and one of the things that first attracted him to Madara (and he doesn’t mean that sexually). He had felt drawn to someone who could control an element so different from his own and had a personality to match.

Mother smiles when she sees them while Hashirama beckons them over. Her eyes flicker over Madara as they approach, gaze sharp and calculating. Tobirama got his intelligence mostly from her.
“Madara,” she says quietly, not wanting to disrupt the other patrons. “Ten years and you’ve barely changed. The Uchiha clan does age well.”

Madara blinks. “…Thank you?” he asks uncertainly.

Sakiko laughs, bringing a hand up to cover her mouth. “Compliments still make you shy, hmm? You’re a good kid. I’m glad you finally asked Tobirama to marry you. The mutual pining got sad after a while.”

Tobirama ignores his mother’s attempts to embarrass them, well used to it by now. “Mother, Madara and I wondered if you would help us plan our wedding ceremony. Neither of us has much of an eye for decorating such formal events.”

Sakiko’s eyes nearly sparkle with delight. “Of course I’ll help. There are a lot of things to consider when planning a wedding. I’ll prepare a list later and we can go over it together to decide what you want, such as the type of food and decoration colors.”

“Thank you.”

As they were starting to get subtly annoyed glances from the other patrons, they end the conversation there and focus on viewing the rest of the show. Fire flashes through the air in loops and swirls as the performers dance around. Sometimes, the people in the back aim up high and create the image of dragons and birds, making them soar over the audience’s heads.

This was only one type of performance they put on. Other times, they told stories, like plays with pyro kinetics. Whatever they did, it was always interesting to see. Keitaro was creative and constantly trying to find new ways to make their shows interesting.

He drops a few coins in the tip box on their way out and leads the way back to the castle. Mother begins regaling them with stories from the castle, light-hearted tales of the Noble and servant’s children getting up to mischief together.

“A few of them actually snuck out of the castle once,” recalls Sakiko. “They had nearly all of the servants looking for them, anyone whose duty wasn’t time sensitive. When they couldn’t be found inside, the guards were sent out to find them.”

“Were they ever found?” asks Hashirama, eyes wide with worry.

“How long did it take them before they tried to sneak out again?” asks Tobirama.

“A week,” she says, amused. “That time, we had to ask the mermaids for help finding them. Those five children will probably end up as explorers when they’re older. They have an adventure’s spirit.”

“Explorers of the ocean?” asks Madara.

“Or on land, sometimes both. It depends on their interests. Even if it’s something that’s already been discovered by land-dwellers, it will still fascinate someone who’s spent their entire life, up until then, under the sea,” says Sakiko.
“Is that how you ended up on land?” asks Madara.

Sakiko smiles at his perceptive question. “It is, indeed. I wanted to see how different life is up here. It was strange at first, but I made many friends along the way, many of whom seemed to delight in explaining how things worked. People are very willing to help if it makes them feel smart.”

Madara’s lips twitch in amusement. He had forgotten how funny it was to listen to her talk. One moment, she sounded as cheerful as Hashirama, and then she would say something pessimistic or insightful like Tobirama.

“Was Father one of the people who helped you learn about life above the sea?” asks Hashirama.

Sakiko blinks. “Did I never tell you about how we met? Or perhaps you were too young to remember. Hmm. Yes, Butsuma did help me. He was very patient, but he wasn’t the only one telling stories. I think he was as fascinated by the sea as I was of the earth. We would talk through all hours of the night, sharing tales of our youth and dreams of the future. He may have been the stern parent between the two of us, but he had a soft side.”

“If anyone had doubts of that, they were put to rest when he willingly went against manticores to save a group of children he didn’t even know,” says Tobirama.

“He was brave like that,” agrees Sakiko wistfully. “I can only hope that his soul will reincarnate sometime during my life and that I’m able to meet him again.”

“Would you be able to tell if you had?” asks Madara. “I had heard the theory that nymphs reincarnate, but do they remember their past lives?”

Sakiko shakes her head. “No, we all start anew. However, having had a bond with him, I would recognize his soul. It’s happened before, lovers reunited years after one died. He won’t remember me, but his soul will. At the very least, we would end up as friends again.”

“Has there ever been proof of other species reincarnating?” asks Madara.

“There’s no evidence at this time,” says Tobirama, “but that doesn’t mean it’s never happened before. Perhaps nymphs just reincarnate more consistently. Nature is a cycle, and when nymphs die, they enter that cycle to be reborn."

Madara frowns, not sure he likes the thought of that. With how closely bonded together they were, he and Tobirama would end up dying at the same time, but then his mate would be reborn and he wouldn’t. Tobirama wouldn’t even remember the life they had had before. He would move on to someone else. It made jealousy flare up in his heart.

He’s silent the rest of the journey to the castle, the others taking note of his stormy expression and not trying to re-engage him in conversation. They can tell something has upset him, but remember from their younger days that he didn’t respond well to people prying. If he felt like talking about it, then he would in his own time.

They decide to move the conversation to Hashirama’s room and situate themselves on the couches. It wasn’t yet cold enough to light the fireplace, but the sight of it was another reminder of why Tobirama should request a room change. It got cold in the winter, and the individual rooms didn’t have enough space for a fireplace.

“I think Mito is currently with Tsunade. They probably won’t be back for another hour,” says Hashirama.
“Tsunade is fourteen now, isn’t she? I swear she’s taller every time I see her,” says Sakiko. “I wonder if Mito will care to help me plan the wedding.”

“Is there really that much to think about?” asks Madara.

“It may not seem like much at first, but trust me, there are a lot of little details to consider once you start planning,” says Sakiko. “To start with, how soon are you wanting to have the ceremony?”

“This year, preferably,” says Tobirama.

“Hmm. That’s not a lot of time. The warm season will be over in a few months. All the above sea weddings I’ve seen have been outside and decorated with flowers,” says Sakiko.

“Two months should be plenty of time,” says Tobirama. “It doesn’t need to be excessively extravagant.”

Sakiko gives her son a disbelieving look. “You’re a foreign Prince, and your brother is married to the local Princess. Every Noble Lord and their heir, if they’re of age, will at least expect to attend the reception. It would damage relations between your families if you don’t invite them. Nobles expect fancy dinners and fancy decorations. You don’t want to damage the family’s reputation by doing otherwise.”

Tobirama sighs. “Fine, then. The reception can be fancy, but the wedding will be simple. And I still think two months is enough time. The castle has decorations in storage for special events. We just need to choose something we like.”

Sakiko frowns skeptically but doesn’t protest. She’ll decide when she sees the decorations whether they’re good enough for her son’s wedding. Rather than continue the topic of wedding plans, she begins to ask Madara how he’s been for the past ten years. She had missed seeing him during her yearly visits to the surface. Even before he had married Tobirama, she had begun to think of him as another son. Now, he was officially her son-in-law.

“There was one country I visited, half of it rained about five days out of the week and the other half barely saw any water. The dry half did have a more abundant source of gemstones and a few medicinal plants that prefer the drier climate, so they had plenty to trade for their neighbor’s extra water,” says Madara.

“Interesting. There’s always been this one thing I’ve been curious to see, ever since I read about it in a book. Did you find any volcanoes on your journey?” asks Sakiko.

“I did see one, and it was active too.” Madara’s nose wrinkles at the memory. “Working with fire doesn’t prepare you for that kind of heat. Luckily, what I was looking for wasn’t too close to the volcano. I’ve heard that even fire dragons will get burnt at the touch of lava, though not as severely as other creatures.”

“What were you looking for?” asks Hashirama curiously.

“I was collecting ingredients for a Potion Master. No one else was willing to go near that volcano. That was a country of sensible people. I’ve heard that in other countries, people will actually build their villages at the base of volcanoes, in denial that it could ever become active again,” says Madara.

“I assume you got something in exchange for your labor?” asks Tobirama.

“Of course. One of the books in our library came from him,” says Madara.
Madara ends up doing a lot of talking after that as Sakiko continues to ask him questions about his journey, specifically about what the landscapes looked like. He describes sand that was the color of the rainbow, trees that stretched up to the heavens, mountains so high you couldn’t breathe at the top, and a city built on flooded land so that the streets were miniature rivers.

“Wait, really? Did they have to swim everywhere?” asks Hashirama.

“No, they had little boats they paddled down the river streets,” says Madara.

“Oh, that sounds fun! I think I would like to visit some of these places in the future. Maybe Mito and I could take a vacation with Tsunade,” muses Hashirama.

Tobirama gives his brother a skeptical look. “You want to take two of Whirlpool’s princesses out of the country? Do you realize the diplomatic nightmare that could be?”

Hashirama huffs. “We could go incognito! It’s not like the everyday man has the faces of foreign royalty memorized. I just want to take my family somewhere fun…”

Tobirama sighs at his brother’s crestfallen expression. “….I’m sure we can work something out.”

Hashirama perks up. “Thank you, Tobi. We should try and plan it so you and Madara can come with us. It’ll be a nice family vacation.”

Madara shrugs when they glance at him. “Sure, why not?”

Hashirama grins and begins excitedly listing things they could do on their vacation. Tobirama checks the time and searches out Minato’s energy signature. Minato had agreed to continue making talismans while Tobirama was busy with family time, but he had promised that he would try to stop by and help sometime in the afternoon.

“Minato is starting to run out of magic,” interrupts Tobirama. “If we want to get the talismans done in a timely manner, I need to go and help him. We can catch up more later.”

Sakiko’s hand comes up to grip the necklace around her neck. “Minato is the blond man, correct? He made talismans for Father and me this morning. It’s a good work the two of you are doing. Vital work. If you’re very busy tomorrow, we can at least meet up at mealtimes, yes?”

“Yes,” confirms Tobirama.

Before he leaves, he gives Madara a chaste kiss on the lips, pleased when his mate doesn’t look uncomfortable by the display of affection. They were both becoming more at ease showing affection in front of others, though they would never act as sappy as some of the couples he had seen over the years.

He makes his way to the room Minato is in and spends the next several hours making talismans, accidently skipping dinner as he forgets to check the time. His stomach grumbles as he walks down the hall, and he considers going down to the kitchens to see if any of the cooks are still there, but it’s late. He should still have a few granola bars in his room. That’ll have to do until morning.

However, when he opens the door, he finds a tray of food resting on his desk, seeped in Madara’s magic to keep it warm. He gives his mate’s slumbering form a smile before sitting down to eat. The magic dissipates at his touch, only meant to last long enough for him to arrive.

He finishes the food before it can get cold, then climbs into bed. Madara barely stirs as he curls an arm around him, mind waking up only enough to confirm who’s in bed with him before drifting right
back to sleep.

The next morning, as they’re getting ready for the day, Tobirama remembers Madara’s odd reaction when they were discussing reincarnation.

“Something upset you yesterday,” says Tobirama. “What was it?”

Madara tenses, looking for a moment like he’s not going to answer. Finally, he gives in with a sigh and sits on the bed. “If all nymphs reincarnate but other species don’t, that means you’re going to move on without me after we die. You’re not even going to remember me.”

Tobirama frowns. He can understand why Madara would find that upsetting, but he can’t think of what to say to make things better. It’s not like he can just not reincarnate……Can he?

“If I had the choice, I would stay with you in the afterlife. I don’t know if it’s ever been done or if anyone has ever even tried. If they had succeeded, they wouldn’t have any way to tell us. Nymphs aren’t always reborn right away, and it’s mostly an intuition that every nymph has that we all reincarnate,” says Tobirama.

“But you will try?” asks Madara.

“Yes. We have the strongest type of soul bond, so maybe I can use that. Either to stay with you, or if that’s not possible, then to pull you into the reincarnation cycle with me. That last one would be the most complicated, trying to make sure we’re reborn within at least a few years of each other,” says Tobirama.

Madara blinks. “Reincarnate with you? Nymphs are all reborn as nymphs, aren’t they? Would I still be a dragon?…..Also, that doesn’t solve the problem of us not remembering each other. I don’t want to be reborn only to end up with someone else!”

Tobirama’s expression turns fond. “Neither do I. However, we stand a better chance of getting back together if we both reincarnate, even sans memories, than we do if one of us stays dead. Remember, the bond we have now may not transfer over, but it would cause our souls to recognize each other. We would feel drawn to each other.”

Madara is silent for a long moment. “….What if it did transfer over? Is that possible?”

“I don’t know,” says Tobirama, looking pensive. “I’ll research it and find out.”

He heads to the door and opens it. “For now, though, it’s time to go eat breakfast with my mother.”
Trina scowls as she looks around the bare room. The servants had just finished packing her things and were preparing them to be shipped out to the sea. They would take a boat until they were close enough to the palace, then she would bend the water around her belongings as she floated down to the palace.

Most of the rooms inside were actually full of air, so she wouldn’t have to worry about water damage. It was mostly the throne room and visiting areas that were underwater for their mermaid and siren guests.

It was with a great sense of bitterness that she left, allowing herself to look back at the castle only once. She didn’t know if she would ever be allowed to return, but she was too prideful to let the others know she would miss this place.

How had things turned out so wrong? Ten years ago, she had come here with such high hopes. Everyone always told her how beautiful she was with her coral pink hair and turquoise-tinted skin. It had seemed obvious to her that Tobirama would choose her over the other Noble ladies. The idea that he wouldn’t choose any of them hadn’t even occurred to her.

In all the stories her parents had told her as a child, the Prince always married a Princess from another country or he became enamored by a Noblewoman from his own court. Who could have predicted that someone as regal looking as Prince Tobirama would have fallen for such a ruffian?

They had all thought after that first year of Madara’s absence that surely Tobirama would begin to see them now. But then another year had passed, then five. Tobirama had only gotten more stubborn, despite the glimpses of doubt in his eyes. It had baffled them all that Tobirama could be so loyal to a man who was obviously never coming back.

Except, ten long years later, he had. Tobirama had apparently taken it as vindication for waiting, while they thought it was proof Madara could have come back at any time and chose to stay away for so long. If he truly loved Tobirama like he claimed, why had he stayed away for a decade? They had stood by Prince Tobirama!

All of them had made it a point to talk with him and learn his interests. They even researched different topics so they would be able to have intelligent conversations. While Madara was off gallivanting halfway across the continent, they had been keeping Tobirama company.

Somewhere along the way, she had fallen in love with him. Despite Tobirama’s assumption, she had acted out of heartbreak, not maliciousness. Part of her knew King Kaimana wouldn’t break his bond with Madara, but she had hoped. Such a useless emotion hope was.

And it wasn’t fair that Aiya, Lavira, and Yovina got to stay at the castle! They were just as in love with Tobirama, just better at hiding it. They even got invited to his wedding!

“What are we going to do now?” asks Sina.

Xita huffs. “We’ll find someone else. Tobirama isn’t the only man in the world; he’s not even the only Prince.”
“Perhaps this time, though, we should all try to court someone different?” suggests Reita.

Trina frowns as they all begin discussing future romantic prospects. Was she the only one who couldn’t get over Tobirama that easily or were they just trying to distract themselves from the heartache? Personally, she was going to need a few years before she set her eyes on someone else. She would spend that time getting back into the rhythm of court life and re-evaluating what she wanted. Considering how long they lived, there was no need to rush into anything.

Kakashi flattens himself against the wall, pulling Obito with him as servants rush by. It was complete chaos today as everyone put the last of the wedding decorations up. Breakfast this morning had been very simple, consisting of mostly fruits, raw vegetables, and nuts, and lunch was sure to be more of the same. No one had complained, though. Or if they had, their friends had hastily shushed them lest they be murdered by over-worked chefs who were trying to prepare the feast of the year for tonight’s dinner.

“Wow. That was close. We were almost trampled,” says Obito, eyes wide. “The castle hasn’t been this busy since Lady Kushina got married.”

“It’ll be even worse tonight when they’re carrying plates of food up to the ballroom,” says Kakashi. “I suggest we move through the castle as little as possible today.”

Obito wrinkles his nose. “I don’t want to be stuck in one room for hours. Let’s go outside.”

Kakashi shrugs indifferently and leads the way. It’s not until they’re outside that he realizes he’s still gripping Obito’s hand. He lets go, hoping his mask is hiding his blush from view.

Before they can decide where to go from here, there’s a bellowing cry of “Rival!” and Gai comes bounding into view.

“Gai,” he greets blandly.

“Kakashi. Obito. Isn’t today’s weather just perfect for a wedding?” asks Gai. “Lord Tobirama and Madara must be overjoyed that things are working out so well.”

Kakashi hums skeptically. “They looked more stress than joyful the last time I saw them. I think they’ll be happier on their honeymoon.”

Gai frowns. “That’s too bad. Perhaps the sight of all the decorations when they’re done will help cheer them up? I was on my way to help with that just now. Would the two of you like to join me?”

Kakashi and Obito exchange reluctant looks.

“Um, no thanks, Gai,” says Obito. “We’ve already made plans….elsewhere.”

“Yes. Very important plans. Goodbye,” agrees Kakashi.

The two of them quickly escape before Gai can rope them into participating in this madness. Gai watches them go with a bemused look before continuing on his way.

“Now what?” asks Kakashi once they’re out of sight.

Obito thinks about it a minute then grins. “Want to go flying?”

Kakashi blinks. “….What?”
“Come on.” Obito tugs on Kakashi’s hand and leads him to the woods that border one side of the castle and city. “There’s a large enough clearing in here for me to transform and then the invisibility will kick in as I take off. From what I’ve observed of my clan and myself, dragons can only stay on the ground for a month before the urge to fly gets overwhelming.”

“So if there hadn’t been a large enough hidden space nearby, your family would have chosen a different place to live?” asks Kakashi.

“Yeah. We wouldn’t have had much choice,” says Obito. “Dragons with wings were made to fly.”

“Wait, does that mean some don’t have wings?” asks Kakashi.

“Yeah. They’re like a different species of dragon or something. They live on a different continent. I think all the ones living on this continent have wings right now,” says Obito.

“If they’re a different species, do they have different classifications? Something different than fire, wind, water, and earth?” asks Kakashi.

“That….is a good question. I don’t know,” says Obito, eyebrows furrowed in thought. “No one’s ever mentioned it, either way. I guess we all just assumed they were the same, just wingless. We don’t tend to travel over the sea very often, so there isn’t a lot of current information about them, just stories from past travelers.”

“Is it dangerous, flying over the ocean?” asks Kakashi.

“It can be. If you lose strength before you reach the other side, you could fall into the ocean and drown,” says Obito.

They reach the clearing then, and Kakashi stands off to the side while Obito transforms. He climbs up onto his back, marveling at how large just a teenage dragon was. Madara had been even bigger. If the trees weren’t so tall in this part of the world, and Obito wasn’t crouching down, they’d easily be visible. Actually, that gave him an idea.

“Couldn’t a dragon strap a rowboat on their back and use that to rest on in their human form when they got tired?” asks Kakashi. “Or would it be difficult to get it off and onto the water?”

Obito is silent for a long time, so long that Kakashi starts to wonder if he was even heard at all.

“How did no one else think of that?” asks Obito, shocked. “That’s a brilliant idea!”

Kakashi blushes at the praise, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. “So you think it would work then?”

Obito hums in agreement, the sound almost a growl in his dragon form. “Sure. People enchant all sorts of things nowadays. They would just have to get a bunch of self-tying rope. The boat is a good idea, and they could also store water and food in it. This could revolutionize the way dragons travel.”

Kakashi holds on as Obito’s muscles shift, recognizing they’re about to take off. He gives thanks to the Creator that he was born without motion-sickness as their sudden ascent would surely make him puke otherwise. Once they’ve leveled off, he begins speaking again.

“How did no one else think of this?” asks Kakashi. “I would think, in all these years, someone would have come up with a solution.”

“Someone may have,” says Obito. “But they didn’t share the idea with the rest of us. I intend to
make sure the word gets spread throughout the dragon community.”

“Do you guys have a system for communicating with each other?” asks Kakashi.

“Well, it’s a word of mouth system. My clan can send letters to our cousins on the Border Guard. They’ll have conversations with other dragons that come to visit them, and then they spread the word to the dragons in their own country,” answers Obito.

Kakashi glances around as they speak, enjoying the view of the countryside. Everything looked smaller from up here.

“How many people will actually be interested in this? I doubt everyone wants to travel,” says Kakashi.

“No, I don’t expect everyone to care. But dragons have long lives. Eventually, some of them are going to get bored and want to find out what else life has to offer on distant shores.”

Kakashi frowns, troubled. “You’re going to outlive me, aren’t you?”

Obito is silent a moment. “Yes, you and Rin. I’ll definitely miss you both.”

“Do you…like Rin?” he asks.

“Huh? You mean romantically?” asks Obito, perplexed.

“Yeah….”

“No. She’s a good friend,” says Obito. “Where did you get the idea that I liked her that way?”

Kakashi huffs. “You blush whenever she compliments you. I’m sure I’m not the only one who thought you had a crush on her.”

“Well….I didn’t say she wasn’t pretty,” says Obito, embarrassed. “It’s normal to blush when a pretty girl compliments you, right? But I still see her as more of a friend.”

“I wouldn’t know. Girls aren’t where my interests lie,” says Kakashi.

Obito’s wings still for a moment in surprise and they drop nearly a foot before he snaps out of it. Kakashi clutches at his neck, gradually relaxing when nothing else happens.

“Be careful,” he scolds.

“Ah, sorry,” says Obito sheepishly. “I just wasn’t expecting that. You’re gay?”

“Yes. Is that something that bothers you?” asks Kakashi. Considering how kind and open-minded Obito is, he doesn’t expect an affirmative, but it’s still something that needs to be asked.

“No. No, of course not. I’m actually bi, so it would definitely be weird if it was,” says Obito.

Oh.

Well, that changes things. He had assumed Obito to be straight and had tried to bury his rising feelings down. Now he would need to reassess things.

They fly around for a while longer before Obito lands. Kakashi was deep in thought, examining their past interactions from a new angle. He didn’t want to be like those characters from a romance novel,
both secretly pining and assuming that the other could never return their feelings.

Making up his mind, he reaches up and slides his mask down. Before he can make a move, the scent of the air hits him. After an irritatingly long sneezing fit, he finds Obito trying to hold back laughter.

Kakashi glowers at him. “It’s not funny. Why do flowers have to give off so much pollen?”

Obito’s lips twitch, but he manages not to smile. “Sorry. It’s been a while since I’ve seen you without the mask. Why did you decide to take it off now?”

Subconsciously, Kakashi’s eyes flicker to Obito’s lips. Obito notices the movement, eyes widening in surprise, which quickly turns to hope. Heart pounding, Kakashi steps forward and Obito meets him halfway.

Their lips meet, tentatively at first. Kakashi has never kissed anyone before and has the suspicious Obito hasn’t either. It doesn’t matter. They could learn together.

Obito is the first to pull back, a blush staining his cheeks. “That was….good. Does this mean you like me too?”

Kakashi nods. “Yes. Perhaps we could go on a date in a few days? We don’t have anything scheduled then.”

Obito grins. “I’d like that. Did you know the ocean is only a few hours away by dragon flight? We could have a picnic on the beach.”

“Sounds fun. I haven’t been to the ocean in a while. Can dragons get sunburnt?” asks Kakashi.

“Fire-types generally don’t,” replies Obito. He grabs Kakashi’s hand and begins walking back to the castle. “The wedding will be starting soon. We should head back.”

Tobirama frowns in the full-length mirror as he adjusts his outfit. The traditional wedding garment of the Kaïyô nymphs consisted of a lot of flowing fabric, meant to represent the constant motion of the ocean. It was a hassle to put on all the layers.

“You look gorgeous, honey,” says Sakiko, standing beside him. “My little boy is all grown up.”

Tobirama would roll his eyes at the clichéd statement, but he can tell his mother is being sincere. They were currently in her room as she helped him get ready for the wedding. Madara was back in their room, being assisted by Izuna as he put on the traditional Uchiha wedding garments.

“Thank you, mother,” says Tobirama.

“Now we just have to put the pearls on and you’ll be ready to go.”

Sakiko retrieves the circlet from the bedside table and lays it carefully upon his head. It was a dark blue, the same color as the bottom half of his outfit, and inlaid with white pearls spaced evenly around the entirety of it. The top half of his outfit consisted of lighter shades of blue and sea greens.

The circlet was not something every nymph could wear. It was reserved for the royal family. However, Nobles could wear pearls on other forms of jewelry. The lower classes tended to decorate with seashells and colorful rocks woven together into necklaces and bracelets. Some of them even braided them directly into their hair.
“And we can’t forget the belt,” says Sakiko.

“And what?” asks Tobirama.

He watches in bemusement as she pulls out a string of pearls from the dresser and ties it around his waist. Loops of pearls hang from it, some hanging down just a few inches and others going down to his knees.

“Isn’t this a bit much?”

Sakiko’s expression turns surprised. “Are you kidding? This is subdued compared to what I wore at my wedding! This amount of jewelry is more like what a Noble would wear than a Prince. You would be wearing a whole lot more pearls if we went strictly by tradition.”

Tobirama grimaces. “Right. Thank you for your restraint.”

“Sure. Now get your wedding shell and wedding knife and let’s go. We need to get there before Madara does,” says Sakiko.

Tobirama places the chain with a single shell around his neck and straps the knife to his leg then hurries out the door after her. Seashells were good at holding magic and this one contained a significant amount of his. It was a nymph wedding tradition to exchange an object with your magic in it for an object that contained your mate’s magic. Water nymphs tended to use seashells while wood nymphs typically used flowers. The amount of magic poured into them kept them preserved.

He follows his mother outside to where they’ve set up the wedding arch. It was two metal arches separated by a few inches and connected by a square lattice. Flowers were woven into every square, grouped together by color so that they made a rainbow above their heads.

The wedding guests were already starting to find their seats, so Izuna, Hashirama, and Kaimana took their places under the arch. He had thought long and hard about whether to have Noboru or Kaimana officiate the wedding. As it had been water nymphs to protest his choice of mate, he thought it would send a stronger message to have the Ocean King declare them married.

Off to the side, the wedding band begins to play. It was a peaceful song, produced by the sounds of a violin and piano. His favorite instruments. They had been Madara’s favorites too before his journey where he discovered a foreign instrument he liked even better.

After everyone is in place, Madara begins his walk down the aisle. The role of who stood under the arch and who came to them was determined by who had done the chasing and who had been the chased.

There had been quite a few surprised individuals during Izuna’s wedding when Touka had been the one to walk down the aisle, but Touka hadn’t wanted to be chased. As nymphs got a speed boost during the Chase, it was easier for a prospective mate to take a winding route to get in front of them if they were chasing the nymph. It was much more difficult to get away from a nymph propelled by the magic of nature.

Touka had wanted to prove Izuna worthy of her. If he hadn’t been able to keep out of her reach for a decent amount of time, she would have stopped following him and left. It wouldn’t necessarily have ended their relationship right away, but she wouldn’t have been able to bond with him.

Tobirama focuses back on the here and now as Madara reaches the altar, taking a moment to appreciate the sight of his mate in his wedding outfit. Dark pants that clung to his legs, mostly black with orange-red at the top to represent burning coal. An orange-red and yellow top with flowing
sleeves to represent fire. His hair was pulled up into a high ponytail and a dagger was strapped to his thigh. He looked like a beautiful warrior.

“Are you ready to begin?” asks Kaimana.

“Yes, Grandfather.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Kaimana clears his throat then raises his voice for their guests to hear. “Welcome, everyone, to the wedding ceremony of Madara Uchiha and Tobirama Senju. Today, they stand before you to pledge their love and devotion to one another for as long as they both shall live. With a bond as deep as theirs, nothing but death could ever tear them apart.”

Kaimana nods for Madara to start.

Madara takes Tobirama’s hands in his and turns to face him. “The first moment I realized I was falling for you was during one of our arguments. I saw a fire in your eyes like the flames my family wields. I enjoy the way we can passionately match wits against each other and then sit in companionable silence later.”

Tobirama smiles and squeezes his hand in agreement. “Just as I remind you of fire, you remind me of the sea. The waves can be still one moment and then full of life and movement the next. I like your passion for life. I know not all of our arguments will be peaceful, but I’m willing to put in the effort to make our relationship work.”

“So am I. Whatever life throws at us, we’ll deal with it together,” agrees Madara.

Kaimana waits until he’s sure they’re done before speaking, “Madara Uchiha, do you pledge to stay loyal to Tobirama Senju? To love and respect him for as long as you draw breath? And to fight by his side?”

Madara draws his dagger. “I do. This blade represents my willingness to fight by your side, Tobirama. Your enemies are my enemies and your allies are my allies. I shall protect what is dear to you and kill all who threaten you and yours.”

Tobirama touches his fingers to the flat of the blade. “Your vow is accepted.”

“Tobirama Senju,” says Kaimana, “do you pledge to stay loyal to Madara Uchiha? To love and respect him for as long as you draw breath? And to fight by his side?”

Tobirama unsheathes his knife. “I do. I will always stand with you, Madara. Your enemies are my enemies and your allies are my allies. I shall protect what is dear to you and kill all who threaten you and yours.”

Madara presses his fingers to the knife. “Your vow is accepted.”

“The vows have been witnessed and the truth of their words reflects in their magic. As the King of the Sea, I bless this union. Let none ever try to tear them apart. Prince Tobirama, Prince Madara, you may now exchange the seashells with your magic.”

Tobirama sees a flash of surprise in Madara’s eyes and realizes that his mate hadn’t expected the change in title. He takes off the seashell necklace and waits for Madara to do the same before speaking.
“This seashell represents the idea that the magic that flows through my veins is as much yours as it is mine,” says Tobirama.

“Everything that is mine is yours and everything that is yours is mine,” says Madara.

Tobirama places his necklace around Madara’s neck then leans down for Madara to do the same for him. He wraps his arm around Madara’s back and pulls his mate into a kiss, ears going hot as he hears their guests start to clap. He was too happy to let the slight embarrassment bother him for long, though.

Noboru gets up from his seat in the front row and begins directing the guests to the ballroom. “We’ll have dancing first and then dinner will be served in about an hour,” he tells them. “Everyone will have an opportunity to give the newlyweds their congratulations then.”

Hashirama claps Tobirama on the back. “I’m really happy for you, Tobi. Marriage is a wondrous thing. And speaking of, I think Mito wants me to dance with her now. I’ll see you later.”

“We’ll give you and Madara a few minutes to yourselves,” says Sakiko.

“We’ll send out a search party if you aren’t in the ballroom in ten minutes, though,” says Izuna.

Madara rolls his eyes. “Brat. We’ll be there.”

Once they’re finally alone, Madara cups his cheek and kisses him again. They could probably spend the entire ten minutes kissing but that would lead to them looking for an empty room. It was certainly tempting, but Tobirama had no doubt that Izuna would come for looking them. Of course, the man’s horrified reaction at catching them would almost be worth the embarrassment, but Touka would likely be with him. And she would never let him forget it.

“Shall we join the others in the ballroom now, husband?” asks Madara.

Tobirama smiles. “That depends. Are you going to dance with me, husband?”

Madara offers his arm to Tobirama and they head towards the castle. “If it means none of those Noble women can get their hands on you, then yes.”

“You think they would try something at our wedding?” asks Tobirama.

“Perhaps nothing blatant, but their hands might ‘accidently’ wander too low,” says Madara.

Tobirama grimaces. “I have had one do that before. I’ve refused to dance with any of them since. At least now I have a polite reason to decline their dance requests.”

“Polite,” repeats Madara, bemused. “They’re the ones flirting with someone they know isn’t interested and you’re worried about being polite?”

Tobirama shrugs. “I had to reject them in ways that didn’t seem personal or it could have been seen as a slight against their clan. The men were actually more easily offended than the women.”

“Hmm. They’ve got larger egos,” replies Madara.

There were days Tobirama was thankful Butsuma hadn’t believed in spoiling his children. Most Noble children grew up with servants to do their bidding. By the time they were adults, they were not used to anyone not of their blood telling them no. It was a nightmare trying to get two Noble clans to compromise with each other.
Servants open the ballroom doors as they approach and the sound of music spills out into the hall. It was a lively song, leading to stepped on toes as people tried to keep up with the beat. Tobirama lets Madara lead him onto the dance floor, but he takes the lead during the dance. Between the two of them, he’s the one who’s had formal dance lessons.

At least, that had been true ten years ago.

“You’ve gotten better at this,” observes Tobirama.

“Yes,” confirms Madara. “Every time you or Hashirama talked about a party you had to attend, it had dancing. I knew if you accepted me as your mate, it would be expected of me to go with you.”

Tobirama nods. “They’ll gossip if I ever attend a social function without you. One or two a year can be excused if you fall ill. Any more than that and they’ll start to take offense.”

Madara sighs. “Politics.”

Tobirama hums in agreement. “I get through it by reminding myself that most of them are human. The ones who look the same age as us now won’t want us around once their hair starts turning grey. They’ll expect the next generation to take over then and we’ll get to go on vacation.”

“And we’ll get to travel to other countries together this time,” says Madara, pleased by the thought. “There are several places I think you’d like to see.”

“One day, you’ll get to show me all of them,” says Tobirama.

Tobirama lets Madara take the lead for the next song, casually glancing around the room to see who’s here. Like expected, all the heads of the Noble clans are milling around. The Senju clan didn’t get along with all of them, but it would have been seen as gauche not to have shown up for something as important as a wedding for one of the members of the Main Family.

Sometimes, Tobirama wishes he had been born into one of the branch families like Touka. His life would have had half as much drama as it does now. Overall, though, he was happy with where he had ended up.

On the table in the corner of the room, he sees a bunch of odds and ends and realizes it must be where the guests are leaving their wedding gifts. There were a lot of candles……a strange number of candles.

“Why did so many people bring us candles?” asks Tobirama quietly. He didn’t want anyone to overhear and think he was complaining.

“Hmm?” Madara glances over at the table. “Ah, the wedding gifts. It’s a bit of a clan tradition to give candles if the newlyweds already have all of the necessary house supplies. We already have cookware, clothing, and bedding. The only thing left to give us are decorative items.”

“True. And I suppose the candles can help us keep the cave warm,” says Tobirama.

“And scent the place up,” adds Madara.

“Positive or negative?” asks Tobirama.

“Depends on the scent.”

“Sensitive nose?”
“Unfortunately. I can smell what the cooks are making in the kitchen.”

Tobirama’s eyebrows lift in surprise. The kitchen may not have been on the other side of the castle, but it was still a fair distance away. That was impressive.

“Does it smell good?” asks Tobirama.

“Yes,” hisses Madara. “It’s making me hungry.”

Tobirama laughs quietly. ‘I’m sure they’ll be done soon.”

They dance for a while longer with Madara leading them away from anyone who looks like they were about to approach. This was their moment and they didn’t want any interruptions.

Unfortunately, the moment can’t last forever and Noboru begins directing everyone to find their seats. To make things simple, the seating arrangement was decided ahead of time with name cards marking where everyone should sit. Thanks to that, Tobirama and Madara only had to deal with members of their family while eating.

On his right sits Hashirama then Mito and Tsunade. To his left was Madara, Izuna, and Touka. Their daughter was currently too young to attend and had been left with a babysitter for the evening. Across from them was Keitaro, Jiro, Takeo, Kawarama, Itama, Sakiko, and Kaimana.

King Noboru and his eldest daughter Masaki were seated at another table with the Nobles from the human court. The Senju and Uchiha relatives that had been invited had been seated together so that their families could get to know each other better. There was also a ‘kids table’ though there wasn’t anyone younger than ten at the party.

“The decorations turned out really nice,” says Keitaro.

“Thank you. Mother helped me plan everything out,” replies Tobirama.

“The storage room had more to choose from than I was expecting. It had everything I needed to make my son’s big day special,” says Sakiko. She gives a sly glance to Keitaro. “And what about you and Itama? Are you there wedding flowers in your future?”

Itama blushes. “Mother!”

Sakiko blinks at him innocently. “What? You’ve been dating for a few years now, right? People usually start discussing marriage now.”

Keitaro smiles and takes Itama’s hand. “I’m not opposed to the idea of getting married in the future, but that’s something he and I should discuss in private.”

“Of course. As long as you discuss it, that’s all I ask,” says Sakiko.

‘Only because they’re both men,’ thinks Tobirama. ‘If one of them was female, she’d be asking for grandchildren as well.’

One of the kitchen staff, Derek if he remembered correctly, approaches their table then and begins to hand out menus. It lists five drinks, three salads, three kinds of soups, a variety of items for them to mix and match for their entrée, and four desserts.

“We’ll be serving the salads and drinks first,” says Derek. He holds a pad of paper and pen in hand. “What would you like?”
“I’ll just have a water,” says Tobirama.

“Matcha tea for me, please,” says Hashirama.

“I’d like a Hot chocolate,” says Tsunade.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had Gyokuro tea,” says Sakiko.

“And I’ll have the Tamaryokucha tea,” says Mito.

Derek puts a tally mark next to the drink names as the rest of the table orders. “Alright. And the salads?”

Mito ends up choosing the kale salad which comes with dried cranberries and dates, slivered almonds, and a sweet raspberry dressing. Madara gets the lettuce and spinach mix with cheddar cheese, onions, tomatoes, sliced cucumbers, and ranch dressing. Tobirama’s salad has the same mix of greens but comes with berries, feta cheese, pecans, and a sweet blackberry dressing.

When they’re done, Derek comes back to collect their plates.

“That was delicious,” says Kawarama. “Was that a new recipe for the raspberry sauce?”

“Yes, it was. Chef Illana will be pleased to know you liked it,” says Derek. “Are you ready for the soup now?”

The menu lists a tomato and basil, seafood, and vegetable soup. It was obvious from the flavor that everything was made fresh that day.

“They really went all out for your wedding, didn’t they?” asks Jiro. “I hope the kitchen staff is given a bonus for all their hard work.”

“They have been,” assures Hashirama. “The Senju family gave them a bonus for catering the wedding in addition to the normal salary Noboru gives them.”

Jiro smiles at that, glad that Madara was marrying someone from a kind family. Not every Noble cared to notice when the servants were putting in extra effort for them. Being willing to pay their servants a fair wage was why the Senju clan didn’t have as many vicious rumors spread about them as the other Noble clans did.

“So, are you and Tobirama going somewhere special for your honeymoon?” asks Keitaro.

“We’ll be going back to my mountain home, so we can have some privacy,” says Madara.

“Mountain home?” asks Kaimana.

“He built a house out of a series of caves inside a mountain,” explains Tobirama. “It has running water and everything. I think a few of those painting I saw on the wedding gifts table would look nice hung up on the walls there.”

Madara glances over at that table and hums thoughtfully. “They do look nice. I’ll have to put in more shelves for all those candles, though.”

“Do you have much experience building things like that?” asks Kaimana.

Madara nods. “It would have gotten expensive to stay at an inn for ten years. I helped with home repairs in return for a place to sleep. They were willing to teach me how to build things if it meant
someone to help with their project. Shelves, bookcases, birdhouses. One time, I even assisted adding another room to a house.”

Kaimana looks impressed. “That’s a handy skill to have, living up here on the surface. Underwater, we have to use magic to preserve everything or it would get water damaged. And that reminds me, I wanted to invite the two of you to visit the palace. Tobirama has a permanent room in my home, and I’ve tried to make sure he knows he’s welcome to visit or live there at any time. I would have his mate feel just as welcome.”

Madara sets down his spoon, gaze serious at the complete acceptance from Tobirama’s grandfather. “Thank you. After the honeymoon, we’ll schedule a visit to the Palace.”

“It might be a few weeks,” says Tobirama. “I’m sure I’ll have work to take care of when I get back. After that’s completed, I would love to show Madara around the palace. The rooms that have air in them, anyway.”

Kaimana chuckles. “We’ll have to find a way for him to meet some of the sirens and mermaids without going in the underwater rooms. Quite a few people in the palace are curious to see the man who caught your eye. After your last visit, all anyone would talk about for days was the number of courting proposals you turned down.”

“Was it really that many?” asks Jiro, curious.

“Unfortunately, yes,” replies Tobirama. “I think they started to see it as a challenge after the first few proposals I rejected. They were trying to one-up each other more than they were trying to date me.”

“It can get quite competitive at court,” agrees Kaimana. “It was probably a good thing you didn’t accept one of their offers. No matter who you chose at that point, the others would have been greatly offended.”

Tobirama resists the urge to sigh. “They need to find better hobbies, or at least not drag me into their games. I’m never going to feel comfortable staying at the palace for any real length of time if they keep trying to use me for their own gain.”

Kaimana looks troubled by that. It was clear he didn’t appreciate his subjects upsetting his grandson like that, but it wasn’t exactly against the law for people to try and date or befriend royalty for higher social status.

“Well, hopefully, they’ll back off a bit now that you’re officially married,” says Kaimana. “If any of them make you uncomfortable during your visit, do let me know and I’ll give them a lengthy lecture.”

Tobirama gives him a smile and nods. They finish up their soup and Derek returns for their next order. There were several things they could choose from for the entrée. He notices that none of the side dishes had meat in them as it was common for nymphs to be vegetarian or for fish to be the only type of meat they would eat. For the meat eaters, they had the option of duck, chicken, or fish.

He chooses a side of green beans, sweet potatoes, baked beans, and a dinner roll with honey butter, declining any of the meat options. It wasn’t something he was in the mood for.

Madara gets the duck, knowing the kitchen staff only makes it a few times a year. With it, he gets a side of roasted peppers, corn, and a baked potato. Mito gets the chicken, sautéed asparagus seasoned with garlic and parmesan, and a side of mixed fruit.

Then it’s time for dessert: chocolate cake, apple cobbler, blueberry pie, or angel food cake topped
with berries. Everyone was pleasantly full by the time the meal was over and it was time to mingle.

For simplicity’s sake, he and Madara stand by the table of gifts and wait for the others to approach him. The Nobles come up to them one at a time, congratulate them on their wedding, and point out which gift was theirs. Tobirama thanks them and tells them he enjoys their gift, lying if need be. Madara is mostly silent beside him, unused to the formality, but he does speak up if there something about the gift he likes. It would ring false if Madara tried to lie about appreciating the gift and he knows it.

After everyone is done, they could leave without causing offense, but then the music starts up again and Madara asks him to dance. Well, he was only going to get married once. He can put up with the crowd for a little while longer to dance with his new husband.

His feet are sore by the time they leave, and he all but collapses onto his new bed. They had moved rooms just a few weeks before the wedding and were now living in one of the Noble/Royal suites. Two bedrooms, one of which he was currently using as a study, a bathroom, and a sitting room.

“What happened to the no shoes on the bed rule?” asks Madara, amused.

Wordlessly, Tobirama shifts his feet a few inches to the left until they were no longer on the bed.

Madara snorts. “Cute.”

Tobirama senses Madara’s magic surge before his shoes are unlacing themselves and sliding off his feet. He sighs softly as the magic begins tugging at his clothes as well, lifting parts of himself up when necessary so Madara can successfully get the garments off.

Madara carefully hangs their wedding outfits up in the closet, not wanting them to get damaged. He joins Tobirama in the bed and curls around him, lips curving up into a smile when he sees that Tobirama is already falling asleep.

“Good night, Tobirama.”

“Mm. Night, Mada,” mumbles Tobirama.

In the morning, they pack their bags for a three-day trip and head out. After some discussion, Madara agrees to fly their luggage to the cave and lets Tobirama take the river instead of insisting Tobirama go with him. Perhaps someday Tobirama would get over his reluctance to fly, but that day was not today.

Flying only got Madara there a couple hours faster than his method did, anyway. Turning into water and following the river was fast but not instant, and he had to travel on foot when one river ended to get to the next one. It was a bit after mid-day when he finally arrived at the cave and the wards easily part for him to enter.

He doesn’t unzip his jacket until he reaches the bedroom where the fireplace is already lit and crackling away. Autumn was in full bloom and there was nearly a constant chill in the air now.

Tobirama hangs up his jacket then sits on the bed to rest his legs for a few minutes. The sheets were already ruffled, showing that Madara had already taken a nap. His mate’s method of travel was considerably more tiring than his own was.
As he rests, he notices the placement of a new painting hanging on the wall across from the bed. It was one of their gifts, this one depicting an ocean scene. Calm blue-green waters kissing the shore, crabs scuttling along white sand, seashells and starfish scattered around the beach. In the distance, dolphins and mermaids swam side-by-side, playfully racing.

He hadn’t even had to tell Madara that, out of the five paintings they had received, this one was his favorite. Just as he hadn’t needed to ask Madara to know that his favorite was the painting someone had done of his brothers and him. The five Uchiha siblings were sitting at a dining room table, engaged in conversation as they ate supper together.

That painting he finds hanging on the kitchen wall when he enters the room, searching for where his mate has gone. The curtains part suddenly as Madara comes in from the outside garden, arms laden with vegetation.

“It took you long enough to get here,” says Madara with a teasing smile. “Are you hungry? I’m in the middle of making us soup.”

“I am starting to get hungry. What kind of soup?” asks Tobirama.

“Tomato and lentil. I got the recipe from one of the Chefs before we left. They said you seemed to enjoy it the last time they made it,” says Madara.

Tobirama nods as he remembers which dish Madara was referring to. “It was unique, a bit spicy and with fresh tomatoes. Are you making a salad as well?”

“Yes. It’s not going in the soup, don’t worry. I know you prefer raw spinach,” says Madara. “Help me chop up the tomatoes?”

Tobirama accepts the knife from Madara and sits down at the table, dicing the tomatoes into chunks while Madara shreds carrots for their salad. As nice as it was to have the Chefs cook for him while living at the castle, he liked how domestic it felt to prepare lunch with Madara.

“I was thinking we could enjoy the Hot Springs after eating,” suggests Madara.

“I’d like that. A hot meal and a hot bath are just what I need on a cold day like this,” says Tobirama.

“Aren’t water nymphs supposed to have a greater immunity to the cold? To survive the temperatures at the bottom of the sea?” asks Madara.

“I’ve lived most of my life on the surface. My body has gotten used to the temperatures of Whirlpool. I could adjust to colder climates if I ever moved somewhere else, but it would take a few weeks. It’s only because it’s the start of Autumn that I’m feeling the cold,” answers Tobirama.

“Huh. That would explain why, in the past, I saw you wearing a coat one day but not the next. I always thought you were using magic to keep warm,” says Madara.

“I probably could by forcing the water in my cells to become warmer. It’s not as instinctive as simply manipulating the shape of the water,” says Tobirama.

He finishes chopping the tomatoes and stands to drop them into the pot. The lentils were already cooking with finely diced onion and powdered seasonings.

“There’s a block of cheddar in the small cold box in the storage room,” says Madara.

Tobirama acquiesces with the implied request and pushes the thick curtain aside as he enters the next
cave. There were three cold boxes inside. The largest was for the vegetation and fruit that became too ripe to stay on the plant until they were ready to eat it. The medium one was for meats, usually containing a few fish for him and some venison for Madara. The smallest one was for dairy, milk and a variety of cheeses.

He could feel Madara's magic in the cold boxes, keeping them running. It was easy enough to charge the runes on one of these things, and anyone who didn’t have a sorcerer in the family could easily find someone willing to do it for them for a small fee. It was how some of the weaker sorcerers earned a living. Those who had larger wells of magic tended to become knights, bodyguards, or healers.

Grabbing the block of cheddar, he heads back to the kitchen and grabs the cheese grater from one of the baskets. Madara retrieves bowls and spoons for their use while he adds cheese to the soup, letting him know when he’s added the amount the recipes calls for.

He pours the soup into bowls while Madara serves the salad, then they sit down to eat. Deliberately, he stretches his leg out to rest against Madara’s, smiling when Madara shifts his leg into the touch rather than away.

“This is good,” he says, after tasting the soup. “You’ve definitely inherited your mother’s talent at cooking.”

Madara snorts. “Someone in the family had to. Izuna and Jiro are still terrible at it. Takeo seems content to remain average at it, but Keitaro, at least, has some skill.”

“Keitaro is better at baking,” says Tobirama. “He made quite a few treats for Itama in an effort to woo him. Itama then insisted that he couldn’t eat an entire cake or batch of cookies by himself and shared with Kawarama, Hashirama, and I.”

“I bet Hashirama loved that. He has the biggest sweet tooth of anyone I’ve ever met,” says Madara.

“It did help him get over whatever reservations he had about his younger brother dating,” replies Tobirama. “He knew Keitaro was a good man, but he’s always been a bit overprotective. It might have been a different story if it was someone like Jiro who had developed at interest in him. The man’s an incorrigible flirt.”

“He hasn’t grown out of that, huh?” asks Madara.

“No, but he has gotten a bit….politer about it. Now it’s more charming than annoying,” says Tobirama.

Madara’s eyes narrow. “He hasn’t been flirting with you again, has he?”

Tobirama chuckles, shaking his head. “Not with me. Jiro at least tries to direct his attention to people he thinks he can talk into bed with him. The only times he’s ever flirted with me was when you were around, hoping to make you jealous so you’d finally make a move. At the time, the fact that it didn’t work was….discouraging.”

“Because you thought it meant the attraction wasn’t mutual,” guesses Madara.

Tobirama nods.

Madara looks down, fidgeting with his spoon and looking faintly embarrassed. “I don’t like to admit it, but the Kaiyō nymphs were rather convincing, and not just the Nobles though they were the main instigators. I knew you talked to them and that they had comforted you after your father’s death.
From the outside, they seemed like your friends, and thus they should have some knowledge of the way you think.”

Tobirama frowns. “Would that not be true of you as well? Not all of our conversations were arguments slash debates.”

Madara shakes his head. ”They used the fact that we argued at all against me. They tried to make it seem like we weren’t suited for each other and that friendship was all I could reasonably expect from you.”

It was troubling to see Madara look so uncertain. The Madara of his youth was confident and brash, though looking back on it, some of that boasting may have been an attempt to cover up the self-doubt the nymphs were trying to instill in him. The fact that Madara felt comfortable being vulnerable with him now meant more to him that he could articulate.

“They weren’t able to fully convince you of that, were they?” asks Tobirama. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have gone looking for courting gifts.”

“No,” says Madara, looking pensive. “I realized eventually that you did like me, but their words still had an impact. They didn’t just try to convince me that you weren’t interested in me romantically, but that I wasn’t worthy of you because of my rank and my lack of wealth. They went on and on about all the thing I didn’t have. So I decided to get them.”

“That simple, huh?” asks Tobirama, sardonic.

Madara gives him a wan smile. “Nothing about that journey was simple. But it was worth it.”

Tobirama’s eyes widen fractionally, looking away as his ears turn pink. What had he ever done to earn such devotion? He had heard women complain that their husbands wouldn’t even get them flowers, let alone an entire library.

Half of those books couldn’t even be found in this country. Many of them were handwritten by sorcerers and researchers hundreds of years ago, kept pristine only through dragon magic. He wasn’t sure how Madara had gotten them to part with some of these tomes. Even some of the more modern texts couldn’t be easily acquired due to the limited trading they had with the more distant countries.

“I’m not even sure how to react to that,” admits Tobirama. “…..Although, I do return the sentiment. A ten-year journey searching for courting gifts would be worth it if I meant I got to marry you.”

Madara stares at him in stunned silence. Those nymphs really had done a number on him, hadn’t they? Tobirama supposes that, however self-confident you were in the beginning, if enough people tried to chip away at your self-esteem, you would eventually begin to believe some of their lies.

“However, I would prefer to go on a ten-year journey with you. One decade apart was more than enough,” says Tobirama, trying to lighten the mood.

It works. Madara’s expression clears, giving way to a pleased smile.

“Perhaps one day we will, though I think our siblings would track us down if we stayed away that long. How does three years sound?” asks Madara.

“That sounds perfect,” replies Tobirama, a bit wistful.

It would be nice if they could go now, but he still had responsibilities to deal with for the next two to three decades. A vacation that long wasn’t feasible right now. That wasn’t to say he never did
anything fun, but the idea of getting away from court life to travel to new and exotic places was very tempting.

“Then that’s what we’ll do someday,” says Madara decisively. “In the meantime, how about we enjoy the hot springs together?”

Tobirama readily agrees and then helps Madara clean up the dishes, though for some reason, Madara doesn’t put their cups away. His curiosity is further heightened when Madara goes into the storage room and comes out with a bottle of what looks like wine.

“It’s non-alcoholic,” says Madara. “I know you don’t like to take anything that impairs your mind…..unless that’s changed in the last ten years?”

Tobirama has to laugh at how skeptical Madara sounds. “No, that hasn’t changed. Did you get that on your journey or is it more local?”

“I brought it back with me,” confirms Madara. “I thought now would be a good time to drink it, as a sort of celebration. It may not be alcoholic, but it is quite good.”

“Then let’s try it.”

Madara pours them each a glass and takes the bottle with them as they head to his bedroom. He sips the drink as he collects his towel, surprised by the taste. He wasn’t a big fan of wine, but this he would gladly drink. It tasted mostly of berries with sparkling water and a hint of citrus flavor.

After they’ve got their towels, and he’s put on a jacket, they make their way to the hot springs. They have to leave the ‘house’ area to get there, hence the jacket. Outside of the rooms insulated by the thick blankets and warmed by the fireplaces, the air was cold. He was glad when they finally reach their destination, the steam coming up from the pools of water soothing his chilled skin.

Having been here before, he knows exactly which of the three circular pools has the perfect temperature and heads straight for it. He sets his drink and towel down beside the edge and disrobes, unable to keep his eyes off Madara as his mate undresses beside him. It was no longer just the heat coming off the water making his body feel warm.

He sinks into the pool with a relaxed sigh, sitting down onto one of the ledges, the water coming up to his chest. Madara chooses a spot across from him and the desire in the man’s eyes lets him know he did it for the view.

A smirk flits across his face as an idea comes to him, standing up to get closer to Madara.

“What’s with that look?” asks Madara.

“I was thinking, as nice as the drink is, there’s something else I want to taste now,” purrs Tobirama.

Tobirama sinks to his knees, his head submerged below the water. He rests his hands on Madara’s thighs and gently pushes them wider to make room for him. The lack of scent as he takes Madara into his mouth was a bit disconcerting. His senses may not have been as enhanced as Madara’s, but they were strong enough for him to know that he found his mate’s scent pleasing.

At least he could still taste him, dragging his tongue over sensitive veins and the flushed head. The salty taste of precum bursts along his taste buds, making him hum in pleasure. Madara’s hips twitch forward, his leg coming up to wrap around Tobirama’s back, holding him in place. He doesn’t mind. Without being able to hear Madara, he likes the other signs that his mate was enjoying himself.
Like the way a hand rests on his head, fingers tightening in his hair as he takes Madara deeper, swallowing around the head of his cock. He wants to make Madara feel even better, taking a hand away from his thigh to tug lightly at his balls then moving further down, skimming along his perineum until he reaches his entrance.

If Madara wasn’t interested in this kind of play right now, he would make his objections known. When no such signal comes, he pushes one finger inside and searches, knowing he’s found that special spot when Madara bucks up into his touch. He nearly chokes, Madara’s cock shoving deeper down his throat, forcing him to pull his head back enough to breathe.

Madara pets his head in apology, and Tobirama can feel his muscles tensing as he tries to hold still. He would smirk if his mouth wasn’t full, inordinately pleased to have made Madara lose control. Precum drips out onto his tongue as he all but massages Madara’s prostate, moaning as his cock throbs at the taste.

It takes effort not to just reach down and finish himself off, but he doesn’t want to cum until Madara was touching him. Luckily, he doesn’t have long to wait as the dual stimulation soon tips Madara over the edge, filling his mouth with the taste of cum.

He licks his lips as he crawls into Madara’s lap, taking a moment to appreciate the sight of Madara breathless and eyes half-lidded with languid pleasure. The expression clears as Madara comes down from the high of orgasm, reaching up to grip the nape of Tobirama’s neck and pull him down into a kiss.

A shudder wracks through his body as Madara’s fingers wrap around his cock, holding onto Madara’s shoulders as he rocks his hips into the touch. Nails scrape lightly against his neck, driving his pleasure higher. Just as he’s getting close, Madara bites at his shoulder, that wonderful spark of pain/pleasure enough to send him over the edge.

The water swirls around them as the spells Madara has placed on the pool activate, filtering out anything that shouldn’t be there. It was actually an impressive bit of magic. Before Madara had come back and revealed himself to be a dragon, he had thought he was the one with the greater magical diversity of the two of them.

While it was true that some fire elementals could cast spells, they were usually only able to learn a few. Just as sorcerers who could cast a variety of spells generally had little or no control over an element.

Dragons had their elemental affinity and could learn a wide variety of spells, though the power behind them was determined by the size of their magical core. Nymphs either had earth, water, or some combination of the two as their affinity; and if they were lucky, they could also learn to heal. Tobirama’s secondary ability of being able to power runes was rare for nymphs. And as far as he knew, nymphs were the only ones who could control two elements.

To the public, the Uchiha were a clan of fire-users and had to keep much of their magical abilities hidden. Of course, if a sorcerer married in the clan, the children of such a union didn’t have to hide as much.

He was almost jealous of the power Madara wields, knowing that the man’s magical core would expand at a greater rate than his as they aged. Almost jealous. The fact that Madara had used his abilities for Tobirama’s sake certainly helps. Half of Madara’s hoard at the moment was books, and although Madara does enjoy reading, it was not nearly as much as Tobirama does.

Tobirama leans against Madara’s chest as the other man runs a hand down his back, enjoying this
moment of serenity. However, the heat was starting to make him a bit drowsy, and he didn’t want to make Madara carry him back to the bedroom.

“I think it’s time I get up before I fall asleep,” says Tobirama.

Madara makes an amused noise. “Worried I’ll have to carry you back again? I told you last time, I don’t mind.”

Tobirama shakes his head and picks up his drink. “I know you don’t, but it’s….undignified.”

“Hmm…..”

Tobirama frowns as a mischievous glint appears in Madara’s eyes, having only enough time to hook his arm around Madara’s back before he stands up with Tobirama in his arms. Perhaps he could have tried to move away instead, but he doesn’t dislike being carried as much as he claims. He likes the show of strength. It wasn’t something he was going to admit, however.

Instead, he rolls his eyes and lets Madara cart him off to the bedroom. He frowns over Madara’s shoulder as the bottle of not-wine and Madara’s cup lift up from the floor and begin to float behind them. Show off.

“You know,” says Madara, affecting a casual tone, “the great thing about our bond is that I don’t have to guess what you’re feeling. Wasn’t that the cause of a lot of our fights when we were younger? I could never tell when I had genuinely upset you because you kept it hidden from me.”

Tobirama tenses and tries to avoid Madara’s probing gaze. However, Madara simply sets him down on the bed, sits next to him, and gently grasps his chin to turn his head towards him.

“I’ve seen a lot of different relationships on my journey, and the ones that lasted the longest were those who had open communication. It bothers you when I cast spells, doesn’t it?” asks Madara.

Tobirama huffs, annoyed and reluctantly amused at Madara being the reasonable one. “A little bit,” he admits. “I’m not used to you being the more talented one. I’m sure I’ll get over it eventually.”

Madara blinks at him in surprise. “More talented?” he repeats. “You could do the same things I do with runes.”

Tobirama gives him the withering glare that comment deserves. “Yes, I’ll just spend the next fifteen minutes carving runes into the glass so I can make it levitate. That’s such an efficient use of my time.”

“Okay, so you can’t do the same things I do,” concedes Madara. “That doesn’t make you less talented. We just excel at different things. That’s always been the case with us.”

His ire melts away at the barely hidden bafflement in Madara’s voice. It occurs to him then that Madara has always been this powerful and yet never treated him as anything less than an equal. As a child, he had been intrigued by the boy from a commoner family who didn’t suck up to him just because he was from a Noble clan. Now he was seeing that behavior in a new light.

“That made you feel better?” asks Madara.

Tobirama nods.

“Good,” says Madara, relieved. “Would you like me to play the Guzheng for you?”
“That would be nice.”

Madara retrieves the instrument from his room of odds and ends and returns to the bed. This was the instrument he had become fond of during his journey, eventually becoming his new favorite. It was also one of the few things he had brought back solely for himself, though he was glad that Tobirama enjoyed the sound of it as well.

“You’ve picked up a lot of skills in the last ten years,” says Tobirama after a few minutes of listening to Madara play.

“Of course. There are very few things I couldn’t learn if I set my mind to it,” answers Madara.

“Oh? Then perhaps you can learn how to help me with the paperwork Hashirama refuses to do,” says Tobirama playfully.

Madara makes a face. “I would rather not. Filling out forms is tedious. I prefer actually doing things, building, carving, cooking, playing an instrument, things like that.”

“You still have more patience for paperwork than Hashirama,” says Tobirama. “And you may end up needing to fill out forms eventually. King Noboru has been considering granting your clan Nobility status. Someone has to be head of the family and Tajima isn’t in the country at the moment.”

Madara grimaces. “People were starting to notice he wasn’t aging. Human sorcerers and fire elementals may age a little bit slower, but that only gives them about an extra fifty years. I have a lot of relatives living in other countries right now. Eventually, they may come back, claiming to be their own descendants. But aside from that, I may have originally been my Father’s heir, but Izuna took over those duties while I was away.”

“And now he has a young daughter and is working to support his family. You’re already going to have to attend the social functions as my husband, so why not as the Head of Noble clan as well?” asks Tobirama.

“I suppose,” says Madara skeptically. “It will mostly depend on what the clan wants, who they vote as Clan Head and whether the majority of them even want us to become a Noble clan.”

“It would be odd if they didn’t,” says Tobirama. “Even if they don’t care about status, the boost in rank will increase their sales. The general public seems to like shopping from businesses owned by Noble clans. Any Uchiha that owns a shop would be foolish to turn down this opportunity.”

“Which is…half of them,” says Madara. “Half of them seem to be merchants, a forth are Knights, nearly a fourth perform in the fire-shows, and the rest make money by participating in tournaments.”

“Well, the Knights are less likely to care because it won’t affect whether they get a job promotion. The only way to become a Senior Knight is through hard work, and the merits of self-discipline are drilled into their heads from day one,” says Tobirama.

“You say the others will get more customers, but is it normal for Noble clans to have businesses? Isn’t work considered for servants?” asks Madara.

Tobirama shrugs. “Depends on the clan. Obviously, the Nobles have to have some form of income, but not everyone hires outsiders to do the work. The more snobby ones will have servants do everything, but it’s more typical that the Main Family oversees the finances and any investments that happen while the branch families have their own businesses. By giving a portion of their income to the Main Family, we can invest it and give them part of the profit.”
“I suppose I’m going to have to learn more about how Nobles do things,” says Madara.

“Yes, but you’d have to do that anyway now that you’re married to me. Your brothers should learn this as well. They’ll be more in the public eye than the rest of your family,” says Tobirama.

Madara sighs but nods, then goes back to playing his instrument. By the time he looks up again, Tobirama has fallen asleep, chest slowly rising and falling with every breath. It was peaceful to watch.

He gets up quietly and puts his instrument away, then heads into the library to read. As relaxing as it would be to join Tobirama, he had already taken a nap earlier and wants to actually be able to fall asleep tonight. So until his mate woke up, he would spend the next few hours reading. Some of these books were actually interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Main Family vs branch family:

The Main Family consists of the Head of the Clan, his/her siblings, his/her children, and his/her siblings’ children. The grandchildren of the Head of the Clan are also considered part of the Main Family but the grandchildren of the Head’s siblings are not. Everyone else related enough to the Head of the Clan to share the same last name are considered part of the branch family.

Description of Madara and Tobirama’s cave house:

After entering the mountain and walking through a series of caves, you eventually find a thick blanket covering one of the doorways. Upon entering, you find a moderate sized room that has a few rugs on the floor and nothing else. This room is the entryway and exists to insulate the rest of the cave house. It has two other doorways.

The one on the right leads to the Master Bedroom. On the right is a door that leads to the bathroom. No other doors in the bathroom. On the left in the bedroom is a door that leads to the odds-and-ends room. Past that is the library. The library has no other doors.

Back to the entryway. The left door leads to the kitchen. On the right is a door that leads to the storage room. No other doors here. The door on the left of the kitchen leads outside to a patio garden. The door in the middle of the kitchen leads to the guest bedroom.

The guest bedroom has only one other door that leads to a bathroom. No other doors in the bathroom. The only way in and out of the cave house is through the entryway room or the patio garden. Every doorway has a thick insulating blanket. Both of the bedrooms and the kitchen have a fireplace.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

And now for chapter six! Sorry about the wait, but this chapter is twice as long as my previous chapters, so hopefully that makes up for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Obito snaps awake as a siren blares through the city, a noise that he knew was created by a sorcerer Knight on the town wall feeding magic into sound runes. He quickly gathers up his gear and heads into the bathroom to change while Kakashi gets dressed in the bedroom.

Kakashi’s dad had invited him over for dinner yesterday and then let him spend the night as long as they didn’t do any ‘adult activities.’ Technically, they were old enough for such things under the King’s Law, but neither of them were ready for that after just three weeks of dating. And when they were ready, Sakumo didn’t want to be in the house while they were doing said ‘adult activities.’

He finishes putting on his uniform, a shirt and pants made from imported basilisk-leather and inscribed with protective runes. (Their own country didn’t have any basilisks, thankfully, as they were tough to kill. Unfortunately, that made their hides rather pricey.)

Kakashi hands him his knife as they leave the room. Knights always brought a weapon with them wherever they went, even the magic users. A sorcerer’s magic could be blocked, though it was thankfully a rare and difficult skill for someone to learn.

They enter the living room to see Sakumo standing in the front doorway, peering outside.

“See anything?” asks Kakashi.

“No,” says Sakumo grimly. “But the sun has not yet risen and it’s a full moon.”

As if on cue, howls sound from a nearby neighborhood.

“Werewolves. Do you think they’re being controlled?” asks Obito.

“If they are, they’re from out of town,” says Kakashi. “And we’ll have to stop them either way.”

The whole town had been outfitted in those anti-mind-control talismans before Tobirama’s wedding. Minato-sensei and Tobirama had been busy a lot during those two months, but Tobirama had been adamant that he couldn’t go on his honeymoon if the town was at risk.

Well, at risk of turning on each other, anyway. They still had to deal with outside threats.

“Come on. We’d better get out there,” says Sakumo.

The air was thick with magic as they dash down the streets, the result of dozens and dozens of houses throwing up their war wards. Even families without an ounce of magic had protective runes laid in the foundations of their homes, just waiting for a storage crystal full of magic to be pressed against the activating rune.
Everyone in the city had an emergency crystal supplied by the royal family. It was the King’s decree that said crystal was only to be used to activate their wards. If they were so down on money that they couldn’t afford to hire someone to power their cold box or other household items, then they were to ask the King for aid, not use the emergency crystal.

It was a serious enough law that someone could have their children taken away if they were caught wasting the crystal’s energy. The King saw it as them not taking their children’s safety seriously.

When they round the corner into the next neighborhood, they find two werewolves lashing out at a group of Knights. With their help, it doesn’t take long to subdue them. One of the Knights stays behind to check and make sure all the citizens are inside while the rest of us move on to the next threat.

More werewolves. Yay. A sentiment that was sarcastic until the Ghouls show up, then he only wishes it was just werewolves.

“You’ve gotta’ be kidding me,” mutters Torei, one of his fellow Junior Knights. “How are we supposed to fight against those things?”

“Very carefully,” replies her mentor, Ahnna. “Don’t let them touch you or they’ll try to drain your magic.”

“We need to find whoever’s controlling them. They’ll just keep reforming if we don’t,” says Sakumo, lopping off one of the Ghoul’s heads with his sword.

“Does burning them work?” asks Obito, flames bursting into existence in his hands.

“Yes,” says Sakumo shortly, knowing Obito needs a quick response to launch or not launch his flames. He watches one of them burn with satisfaction. “That will take them out of commission for a while but they can reform even from ashes. It just takes a while.”

“So I burn them while someone else takes on their Master?” suggests Obito.

“Are the other Uchiha out fighting?” asks Kakashi. “So far fire seems to be the most effective way of dealing with them, but it needs to be a magically fueled flame or they’ll put it out.”

Sakumo and Kakashi cover him while he focuses. It was easier for family members to sense each other because they were more familiar with each other’s magic.

“A lot of them are out fighting,” confirms Obito. “Seems they’ve caught onto their effectiveness since they’re starting to spread out. How are we supposed to find who’s responsible for this? Is there a limit to how far out you can be and still control these things?”

Silence.

“I…don’t think anyone’s documented that,” says Ahnna. “Ghoul sightings are so rare. There isn’t enough data.”

“Right. What we need right now is a messenger,” says Sakumo. “Between Obito’s fire and everyone else’s swords, we’ve got this group of Ghouls and werewolves under control. I’m going to travel through the city and see if everyone else is doing alright and if anyone has mobilized a search party for the Ghoul’s Master.”

Kakashi looks like he wants to protest then reluctantly nods. “Be careful.”
“I will, son. If I can, I’ll send someone back to retrieve the werewolves and lock them up,” says Sakumo.

The next half hour after Sakumo left was very tedious. The Ghouls reformed every five minutes and while simple enough to burn again, Obito worries that he’ll run out of magic before the situation can be resolved.

The werewolves, as well, were a hassle. They were resistant to a lot of magics, including sleeping spells. Their healing abilities would kick in after they managed to knock them out and the fight would start all over again. At least Ahnna and her three students were mostly able to deal with that on their own with the occasional help from Kakashi’s lightning.

It would solve their problems if they could kill the werewolves, but they didn’t want to use such a final solution if they really were being controlled by an evil sorcerer…….And quite frankly, werewolves were too much like humans for him to be comfortable killing them, anyway. They weren’t like chimeras and manticores, who were just very clever beasts.

He hears the sound of footsteps approaching roughly thirty minutes after Sakumo left. Rin and a Senior Knight ranked sorceress named Hanako round the corner. Two werewolves float along behind them.

“Obito. Kakashi. I’m glad you two are okay,” says Rin. “We’re here to take the werewolves and lock them up in the castle’s dungeon.”

“Is that safe?” asks Kakashi. “If they manage to break out….”

“Very unlikely,” says Ahnna. “The dungeons are warded heavily, right Hanako?”

“Yes. Even someone of Tobirama’s magical strength would find it difficult to escape from the dungeons. Werewolves have a decent resistance to spells, but they don’t have that much magic of their own,” says Hanako.

Hanako levitates the werewolves, which in this case meant creating a platform of magic underneath them. Spells cast directly on them had a tendency of slipping off.

Rin approaches Kakashi and Obito and gives them a quick hug, whispering “Be safe,” before following after Hanako.

“Well, that takes care of the werewolves, but what about the Ghouls?” asks Torei.

“I don’t know,” sighs Ahnna, watching them reform with exasperation. “Whoever first created these creatures had a vicious mind.”

‘Vicious and vindictive,’ thinks Obito.

The creatures were re-animated corpses (thankfully, no one he recognized), their hearts replaced with a crystal that absorbed magic. Somehow, Obito didn’t know how, the magic was then transported to whoever created them.

What he did know was that it was dark, vile magic. Not many were willing to go down that path. Necromancy and mind-control; it was all enough to taint the mind. Going against nature had a way of turning people insane.

If there had just been one or two Ghouls, they could have combined their magic to overpower the spells keeping the things mobile, but there were five here and who knows how many else in the rest
of the city. It would be a better use of their magic to fight the dark sorcerer directly.

Unfortunately, all Obito can do is stall for time. He’ll keep the Ghouls here busy while the Senior Knights take care of the more dangerous threat. It was a bit aggravating, though. He hates waiting, and more than that, he hates feeling useless.

Madara neatly slices off the arm of the charging Ghoul and circles around it. The creature turns to follow him, which keeps it from going after Tobirama. It would be easier if he could just fry the creature to ash, but Tobirama needs at least one of them alive to track down the creature’s Master.

A few feet away, Tobirama etches precise runes into the ground, laying the trap for the Ghoul. He waits until Tobirama gives the signal then rushes over the runic circle, the Ghoul following behind him. As soon as his feet clear the circle, Tobirama pours magic into the runes.

An image flashes into Tobirama’s mind, the location of the dark sorceress, and he immediately cuts off his magic from the runes before the Ghoul can start draining him.

“It’s done,” says Tobirama.

Immediately after he finishes speaking, fire consumes the Ghoul, Madara unwilling to give it a chance to break free. Tobirama stands and looks to his team, keeping the rest of the Ghouls away from him and Madara while they work.

“Everything alright over there?” he asks.

“They keep trying to bite me,” says Koharu with a huff. “These creatures have no manners.”

“But we are unbitten,” adds Hiruzen. “It could be worse. This could be like one of those undead stories where a bite spreads the zombie disease.”

Danzo snorts. “Those stories are full of nonsense. None of the information is accurate.”

“But they’re fun to read,” says Kagami. “Full of drama and ‘will-this-character-survive?’ action scenes.”

“Personally, I find the horror genre to be boring,” says Homura. “It’s just a bunch of cynical humans writing about worst-case scenarios.”

Madara gives Tobirama an incredulous look. “Is your team seriously debating the merits of book genres in the middle of a city-wide emergency?”

Tobirama shrugs. “I tried to make them more serious in the beginning. It didn’t work, so I switched to teaching them how to multitask.”

Koharu walks around the severed hand weakly twitching towards her and stops in front of Tobirama. “All joking aside, who are you taking with you to defeat the sorcerer?”

“It’s a sorceress, actually,” says Tobirama. “And that’s a good question. She had more Ghouls with her, so taking a few more Uchiha with me would be a good idea.”

Kagami looks at him hopefully.

“Hmm. Kagami and Koharu, you’ll come with us. Your skills will be the most effective against a
sorceress. I need the rest of you to keep the Ghouls occupied until we can defeat their creator,” says Tobirama.

The pronouncement did make some of them look disappointed, though thankfully not too jealous. When he had first been assigned them as his students, he had made it a point to discuss all the pros and cons of their abilities and which foes they were best suited to fighting.

The Sarutobi and Akimichi clans have animal affinities with apes and bears, respectively. It gives them above average strength and enhanced senses. Homura and Danzo were the only full-blooded humans in his team. It was a bit rare for someone with no magic or abilities to become a Knight, but it did happen. To boost their confidence, he had introduced them to a few of the human Senior Knights, who were willing to give advice on how to fight monsters with only a weapon and your wits.

It also helps that Danzo wants to be an advisor to the King and becoming a Knight was just a means to that end. Homura, likewise, had become a Knight in the hopes of acquiring a teaching position. A retired Knight often got hired by Nobles or even the Royal family for a variety of jobs.

“Yes, sensei. Good luck,” says Homura.

“The Ghouls won’t get by us,” says Torifune.

“I don’t doubt it,” replies Tobirama. He turns to Madara. “We should recruit Hashirama, or another Earth user, to join us. We don’t know which abilities this sorceress will have the best defense against.”

“Right. Lead the way,” says Madara.

It isn’t hard to find Hashirama. His brother’s magic was active and bright to even a half-trained sensor. When he rounds the corner of another building, it’s to see Ghouls wrapped in vines, binding them to newly sprouted trees.

Mito stands beside her husband, water swirling around her that lashes out at the werewolves, knocking them off their feet then trapping them in ice.

“Ah, Tobirama,” greets Hashirama, trying to sound cheerful but his serious gaze belies how concerned he is. “You wouldn’t happen to have a plan for how to deal with this mess, would you?”

“We’re going after the mastermind behind this scheme,” says Tobirama. “It would be helpful if you and Mito joined us.”

“Of course,” agrees Mito. She pulses her magic in a specific pattern and a few of the nearby Knights come running. To them, she says, “Have someone transport the werewolves to the dungeons and station someone here to make sure the Ghouls don’t escape Hashirama’s technique. And inform the King that the six of us are going after whoever’s behind this madness.”

“Yes, Princess Mito.”

The Knights hasten to obey her orders as Mito gestures for Tobirama to lead the way. It takes roughly half an hour for them to reach the sorceress. Deep within the woods, they find her surrounded by her undead minions, a large and intricate runic circle carved into the dirt.

She regards them with disinterest, hair pale white and eyes like twin black voids. There was no color to be found anywhere in her eyes, a sure sign that she was entrenched in dark magic.
Mito steps forward to confront her. “I am Princess Mito Uzumaki, second heir to the throne. Who are you and why are you attacking our people?”

The sorceress stares at Mito with cool disdain for a moment before a haughty smirk crosses her face. “Well, I suppose it’s only fair to give you my name in exchange for your lives. I am Kaguya Ootsutsuki, and I am here to take every last drop of magic your kingdom has.”

There’s a beat of incredulous silence before Kagami’s whispered declaration of “She’s crazy.” can be heard in the back of the group. Kagami blanches when Kaguya’s head turns sharply in his direction, mouth set in a displeased line.

Hashirama steps to the side, blocking her view of him. “What grudge do you have against Whirlpool? As far as I know, none of us have even met you.”

Kaguya shakes her head. “You misunderstand. Your country is the only the first that I will drain dry. When all but one has been depleted of magic, then I will turn my sights on the one that truly has my ire.”

Hashirama all but gapes at her, but Kaguya doesn’t give him time to get over his shock. With a lazy wave of her hand, she commands the Ghouls to attack.

As Tobirama blocks the creature’s reaching arms with his sword, he can’t help but contemplate how ludicrous her statement truly was. She wants to kill everything in a dozen countries for revenge on someone else? Kagami’s offhand comment may not have off the mark.

Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Hashirama and Mito attack Kaguya while the rest of them deal with the Ghouls. Truthfully, he’s not sure how well they’re going to do in this fight. He’s never sensed anyone with this much magic before, and all of it felt perfect for casting curses and other toxic spells.

Of course, that didn’t mean they were going to give up without a fight. Keeping part of his attention on defending himself from the Ghouls, he stretches out his senses and begins to pull the nearby water towards him, thankful that there was a stream less than a mile out. So far, Mito had been using magic to fend off Kaguya, but it would be easier for the dark sorceress to deflect spells than a barrage of water.

Mito catches on as soon as the liquid starts streaming around them. They’ve practiced this before, so it’s simple enough to transfer the control of the water to her. Unfortunately, it’s not possible to use water as a surprise attack, so Kaguya already has a shield raised by the time Mito is ready to strike.

The shield is a dome of dark grey magic with the barest edges of transparency that allows them to see Kaguya inside. Mito tries to break it apart with spikes of ice, and Hashirama attempts to crack it apart by battering it with his vines. Neither works.

Tobirama skewers another Ghoul with his sword, not sure whether to feel disconcerted or thankful that the injury doesn’t produce any blood. He certainly doesn’t like how messy a bleeding opponent is, but it was a glaring reminder that these creatures aren’t alive.

He beheads the Ghoul he’s fighting then moves out of the way for Madara to set it on fire. If only these creatures hadn’t been given so much magic, he could try to shut them down for good. Unfortunately, it took about twice as much magic as the Ghoul contained to overwhelm the spell animating them. And each of the Ghouls had roughly three times as much magic as he did.

It was ridiculous to think about how long it must have taken Kaguya to animate this many of them.
However powerful she was, he refused to believe she could have done this in even half a year’s time.

By the time they manage to turn all the Ghouls to ash, thin spider-web like cracks have begun to appear in the shield. Mito directs a hail of ice spears directly into the thin openings, finally shattering the protective spell. Hashirama wastes no time in sending his vines towards Kaguya, but the plant matter rots and turns to mulch as soon as gets within a foot of her.

And Tobirama has the sudden, horrible thought of that happening to them. He’s never met anyone who could degrade organic matter so quickly. If Kaguya has the ability to do that to people, then they can’t afford to get too close.

Hashirama’s expression turns grim as his vines decay, but he doesn’t hesitate to come up with a new form of attack. He crouches down, pouring his magic into the ground, forcing spikes of earth up. The dirt beneath the runic circle resists his manipulation, but nothing beyond that point is out of his control.

Unfortunately, all it does is cause Kaguya to raise up another shield. He trades an exasperated glance with Mito. At this rate, they’re going to be here all night.

“The fight’s just begun and I can already tell this is going to be tedious,” says Mito. “She has a lot of magic stored up right now. Throwing spells at her shield will just serve to tire us out.”

“But we have to do something,” protests Hashirama. “….Maybe her shield has a weak point?”

“Maybe—“ Mito’s mouth snaps closed, leaping back as a blast of dark energy shoots between her and Hashirama. Her noise wrinkles at the rotting stench, like decaying corpses. Not even the actual Ghouls smell as bad as Kaguya’s magic.

“Your inane chatter is irksome,” states Kaguya. “Cease your buzzing so that I may swat you like the insects you are.”

Hashirama huffs, offended. “So rude. First, you try to kill us and now there’s insults? Didn’t your parents ever teach you any manners?”

Kaguya stares at him flatly. “My parents are dead.”

“And did they die before teaching you manners?” Hashirama snickers as she sends a bolt of magic at him in response, easily dodging it. She may have been more powerful, but that didn’t mean she was faster too. Nobody could do speed like a nymph.

Normally, he isn’t one to taunt his opponents like this, but the attacking head-on strategy wasn’t working. He hasn’t read as much about magical theory as Tobirama has, but he does remember that magical shields are weaker if you’re also casting spells through them. As long as she was angry and attacking them, they might have a better chance to strike back.

Of course, the downside of this plan was that now she was, you know, attacking them. They have to keep moving to avoid the bolts of energy that seem to rot the very air. And the Ghouls were starting to reform much faster. Apparently, Kaguya was willing to use up more energy to try and end this battle sooner.

Koharu sidles up to Tobirama as Hashirama and Mito keep Kaguya’s attention on them.

“That runic circle,” whispers Koharu. “She’s using that to control the Ghouls, isn’t she? Is there a way for us to counter that?”
Tobirama’s eyes flicker between Kaguya and the runes. “There might be,” he whispers back. “I’ll need to circle around while fighting the Ghouls, to see as much of the circle as I can without her noticing.”

He pretends to be wholly invested in fighting them while keeping half an eye on the circle. It was a complicated series of runes that linked Kaguya to the Ghouls. He was going to need to create a runic circle of his own and connect the two of them to disable it. Which would not be a simple task with her trying to kill them.

After a few minutes of studying the runes, Tobirama comes to the conclusion that Kaguya….is good at multitasking. If he’s reading this right, then she was able to sense the location of all her Ghouls and take control of them as needed. It was no wonder she had looked a bit distracted when they arrived if she was dealing with all the sensory input of knowing where roughly a hundred of her minions were at once, knowing when they were killed and when they were reformed.

There’s no way to be subtle about this, so Tobirama picks a piece of flat ground and begins drawing the runes into the dirt. It immediately draws Kaguya’s attention to him, but Koharu and Madara step between him and the sorceress, blocking her magic from reaching him.

“Whatever you’re trying, it won’t be enough to stop me,” says Kaguya. “All this does is serve to irritate me. If you give up now, I will have mercy and grant you a quick death.”

“If we gave up that easily, we’d be rather poor Knights,” says Kagami. “We can’t just let you kill everyone in the country.”

“It’s you who should surrender, Kaguya. The magic of the very Earth is on our side. You are an abomination of nature,” says Mito.

The Earth. Tobirama pauses sketching for a moment, analyzing this new train of thought. Yes, they should ask the earth for help. Pure nature energy would be more effective at countering the taint in Kaguya’s magic.

As he resumes drawing, he sends out tendrils of his magic into the ground, sending out a request for aid. A request that was granted amazingly fast, considering he was asking for Mother Earth’s help and not just her magic. The influx of dark magic in the area must have caught her attention.

Actually, that was a rather worrisome thought. How evil and powerful did someone have to be to draw the attention of the Spirit of Nature and Magic without trying?

And then, a piece of Mother Nature’s consciousness slides in alongside his own and he understands. He can see. Tendrils of darkness are wound around Kaguya’s body, invisible to mortal eyes, connecting the sorceress to the Spirit of Misery.

Despite what some stories depict, the Spirit of Death is not Mother Nature’s enemy, though he is her opposite. Death is indifferent to the living and only comes to collect their souls when they die. He does not go out of his way to kill them, nor does he care to see them suffer.

However, Misery was another story altogether. He loves to spread destruction and pain wherever he goes. Someone like Kaguya who was driven by a need for revenge and the willingness to do anything to achieve it was the perfect puppet for him.

Even as he was coming to this realization, the earth underneath him was shifting, not just into a completed runic circle but a more effective one than he had imagined. He doesn’t get any words from Mother Nature, but he can feel an echo of her emotions. And what she’s mostly feeling right
now is a strong desire to see an end to Misery, to see him expelled from the mortal plane altogether.

A line quickly spreads across the ground, connecting the two circles, and then Nature’s magic pours into his circle. With the power of the earth itself on his side, he has more than enough energy to overpower Kaguya’s spell. All at once, the Ghouls fall to the ground and the defeated foes stop reforming.

“How dare you!” hisses Kaguya, turning her full attention to him for the first time now that her connection with the Ghouls wasn’t there to distract her.

Faster than he can even blink, dark streams of magic shoot out from her hands to wrap around Madara and Koharu and fling them to the side. Nature feels his rising panic and sends out her own magic to cushion their fall even as she raises a shield to protect them from Misery’s attack.

Nature was calm in the face of their hostility, observing them from behind his eyes like they were children throwing a tantrum. Misery doesn’t like to be denied. Misery was going to have to learn to live with the disappointment.

Tobirama’s arm raises without his input as Nature takes control, a surge of magic shooting out from his palm to impact Kaguya’s own shield. It shatters without a sound, dissipating like black smoke. For the first time, he sees something like fear in Kaguya’s expression. Had Kaguya thought the Spirit of Nature and Magic would allow her to destroy the earth and steal the magic she had gifted to the mortals in the first place? How foolish.

His body steps forward under Nature’s control. Perhaps others would find it disconcerting to have another directing their movements, but his nymph instincts say there’s nothing to fear. Nature would not harm him. Nature was, in fact, the one who always helped him when he tried to draw up magic from the earth. It was natural to seek her protection from another Spirit, and she was not the kind of spirit who would try to keep possessing him once the danger was gone.

It was actually a bit exhilarating to have a part of her consciousness inside him. Under her power, he can see the life in everything around them. The trees, especially, look like they were glowing. He can see the air get thicker with magic as Nature readies her attack, causing his friends to step back as they sense the supernatural power around them. They didn’t want to get in between two battling Spirits.

The part of Nature and Misery that weren’t (couldn’t be) contained in a human body were grappling in the air, unseen by mortal eyes. Their magics clash, stirring up the wind. Patches of grass wither while other spots grow as high as his waist.

Tobirama doesn’t know how long the fight lasts, but he isn’t surprised by the outcome. Misery was a spirit of emotion and powered by such. Nature was the spirit of the planet itself. He couldn’t hope to actually defeat her.

So, in the end, Misery flees, disappearing back into some spiritual plane. Kaguya recovers quickly from the disorientation and still has enough energy left to create a shield behind her as runs off into the forest.

“Should we go after her?” asks Kagami.

“Yes. Hashirama, Kagami, come with me. Madara, Koharu, check on Tobirama,” orders Mito.

Tobirama watches them go, blinking slowly as Madara and Koharu approach. Everything feels… muffled now that Nature was gone. He didn’t even notice as she left, or maybe the sensation was so shocking that his mind blanked out.
Madara wraps an arm around his shoulders, possibly to catch him if he starts to fall, but his legs don’t feel weak. All of the colors look paler and the light dimmer, but he knows that’s likely just a side effect of not having Nature enhancing his senses anymore. He’ll get used to normalcy again soon enough.

“Are you alright?” asks Madara.

“Yes, just a bit disoriented. We need to clear away the rune circles. I don’t want anyone to stumble across them and get ideas,” says Tobirama.

“I’ll take care of it, sensei,” says Koharu.

“Thank you.”

Once that was done, they start heading back towards the village. From what they see on their way to the castle, the uninjured Knights were on clean up duty, removing the half-formed Ghouls to wherever their burial site had been chosen. There were also a lot of people sweeping up the ashes.

“I hope there weren’t any casualties,” says Koharu, spotting splatters of blood upon the street.

Tobirama grimaces. “I don’t think we were that lucky.”

Madara gives Tobirama a concerned glance. He knew his mate had an exceptional ability to sense those around him. Had he felt someone die? The grim look he gets in return suggests that, yes, he had.

The next few hours were a bit chaotic as everyone tries to figure out what exactly happened. King Noboru has each of the Knights recount events from their point of view, with a scribe writing down everything. With it, they ought to be able to devise a timeline of the attack.

Mito, Hashirama, and Kagami had returned after about an hour of scouring the woods. They had lost sight of Kaguya and been unable to find her again. Now, the three of them were sitting in Noboru’s office along with Tobirama, Madara, Koharu, and Noboru.

“Do you think this Kaguya woman intends to return?” asks Noboru.

“It is very likely,” says Mito. “Though she may attack another country before returning here. She indicated that she wanted to obtain the magic of everyone and everything on the continent.”

“If she was able to successfully drain one of the other countries, she would have a greater chance of defeating us,” says Tobirama. “We need to warn them as soon as possible.”

Noboru hums thoughtfully. “Sending a letter would be too slow. A dragon, on the hand, might be able to get the message out in time, depending on when Kaguya plans on attacking next.”

“Could we send a messenger to each country at once?” asks Tobirama. “Not every King or Queen is going to be convinced of the danger quickly.”

“Good point. I will see which of my cousins is willing to make the journey. Hopefully, it’ll be the ones with diplomatic skills who volunteer,” says Noboru.

“Should we share the design of the runic circle that broke Kaguya’s control of the Ghouls?” asks Koharu.

“Yes. Good thinking, Koharu. Tobirama, will you be able to make copies of that runic sequence?”
Tobirama nods. “I’ll need to get some sleep first, but I can get them finished tomorrow. Hosting part of Nature’s consciousness and magic has left me feeling rather tired.”

“Have you been seen by a Healer?” asks Noboru, looking concerned. “We don’t know what kind of side effects or injuries could result from this. No one’s been partially possessed by Nature in centuries.”

Tobirama shakes his head slowly. “The Healers were busy when I came in, helping those with visible injuries. Truthfully, I don’t think anything is going to happen, but I’ll get a check-up tomorrow, just in case.”

“Alright. Then we’ll meet in Conference Room 3 at one p.m. tomorrow, after lunch. You six were at the main site of the battle, so I’ll need you there if Shikaku has any questions. As our head strategist, hopefully he’ll be able to figure out a plan to deal with Kaguya. And by then, we should have the reports compiled of casualties and enemy movements. Dismissed,” says Noboru.

They give a bow to the King and leave the room, then head off to their own rooms. Madara all but hovers the whole way there, not voicing his concern out loud, but keeping an eye on him. Despite Madara’s worry, he doesn’t even come close to falling down. He’s tired and his eyes keep looking for colors that he can’t see without Nature’s enhancements, but he’s not injured.

He kicks his shoes off by the door and then gets dressed in his night clothes, falling into a controlled collapse facedown onto the bed. Madara sits beside him and places a hand on his back.

“When Nature was controlling you, our bond was muffled,” says Madara.

Oh.

That was what had Madara so worried. It must have felt like Nature was trying to break their bond. With all the extra sensory input, he hadn’t even noticed.

He reaches out and Madara meets him halfway, gripping his hand.

“The bond is completely stable,” reassures Tobirama.

He can’t see Madara’s expression like this but he can feel his mate’s discontent.

“She took control of you, and I could hardly feel your presence anymore. Your eyes turned completely white with the occasional bursts of pale blue moving from one end to the other like lightning. And your skin was glowing. There was no doubt that you were possessed, and I had no way of knowing at the time whether she would let you go,” says Madara.

Tobirama is silent for a moment. “I’m not sure what to say to make you feel better about what happened. I knew instinctively, as a nymph, that she wouldn’t hurt me. I don’t intend to make it a habit to let her possess me, even if such a thing were possible. But with Kaguya as an enemy, we may not have a choice. I got the feeling that Nature won’t strike directly at Misery’s host unless someone is hosting her as well. Something about balance….”

Madara grips his hand tighter. “Then why not allow another nymph to host her? Surely you’re not the only one strong enough to survive it.”

Some of his surprise must transmit through the bond, for Madara turns to face him.

“What?” asks Madara.
“You said: ‘strong enough to survive it.’ Is that something your instincts told you?” asks Tobirama.

“Yes?” says Madara, sounding confused. “I think so. It just seems obvious to me. If you don’t have enough magic, Nature’s energy will start to overwhelm your own. Her whole being is so vast that it can’t be easy for her to separate just a tiny portion to pour into someone else. And her definition of tiny would a lot different from ours.”

“So even if she was trying to be gentle, it wouldn’t be easy,” says Tobirama thoughtfully.

“Yes.”

“That will be another thing to discuss at tomorrow’s meeting then. For now, I’m going to sleep,” says Tobirama.

Madara gives him an amused glance as he scoots under the covers but joins him a minute later. Unfortunately, despite how tired he was, it was difficult to fall asleep. He feels restless and on edge, mind racing with thoughts of an enemy that wants to destroy the entire continent. Without Nature’s help, would they have found a way to defeat Kaguya?

He hears Madara sigh before a hand is petting through his hair.

“Stop thinking so much. You can’t help anyone if you’re exhausted,” says Madara.

“Right,” mutters Tobirama.

In an effort to calm down, he focuses on the sound of Madara breathing beside him. It was a consistent, comforting sound, and almost relaxing enough to let him fall asleep. Tonight, it wasn’t enough on its own. He lets his senses stretch out, finding the location of everyone important to him in the castle. His older brother, sister-in-law, and niece. His students and other comrades that he’s fought beside. Their energy was steady, some of them portraying the stillness of sleep.

It does help him to relax to realize that his loved ones feel safe enough to sleep. Slowly, his mind quiets down, his breathing steadies, and his eyes slip closed as he falls into slumber.

Sunlight.

For a moment, all Tobirama can do is stare at the window, dream blending into reality. There had been sunlight in the dream too, but it had been shining on a meadow not a bedroom. Or no, not a meadow….himself? Had he been the meadow?

“You seem confused.”

Tobirama blinks as Madara’s voice snaps him out of it. Madara was by the dresser, getting out a change of clothes. The sound of the drawer must have been what woke him up.

“I had….an odd dream,” says Tobirama.

“What was it about?” asks Madara, as he begins dressing for the day.

“My consciousness was spread throughout a meadow. I could feel every blade of grass, every flower, and the trees surrounding it. I now know what it feels like to have roots sucking up water from the dirt and leaves absorbing sunlight,” says Tobirama.
Madara’s lips turn down into a perplexed frown. “Could this dream have been caused by Mother Nature?”

Tobirama nods slowly, theories running through his mind until his instincts latch onto one. “I think it was a warning, actually. We may have actually underestimated how dangerous it could be to host Nature.”

Madara tenses as he catches on to what Tobirama is implying. “Are you saying that hosting Nature might turn someone into a tree?”

“Well, I don’t know if it would turn their physical body into a tree or just separate their consciousness from their body. And then their mind would merge with the surrounding plants,” explains Tobirama.

Madara grimaces. “That sounds horrifying.”

Tobirama hums noncommittedly. “Perhaps. It felt peaceful in the dream, but I suppose being a plant after living as a person would get boring after a while. Either way, I’m glad she warned me.”

“Why didn’t she simply tell you of the consequences while possessing you?” asks Madara.

“I don’t think she could. She never spoke to me, not in words. I could feel her emotions most strongly while she was actively controlling my movements. Perhaps to be able to hear her voice, she would have had to pour more of herself into me than was safe,” says Tobirama.

“That would explain a lot. People have been confused for centuries about the lack of communication from her,” says Madara. Then he grabs an outfit from the dresser and tosses it on the bed. “Put clothes on. It’s time to get breakfast.”

“Technically, I already have clothes on,” points out Tobirama.

“Not enough to be seen in public. Hurry up. I’m hungry,” replies Madara.

“Yes, fine. Be patient.”

Tobirama changes quickly while Madara waits by the door, trying to pretend he isn’t staring at the clock. It never fails to amuse him how much Madara hates being late to anything, getting restless even when they have plenty of time to get there.

The Dining Hall was packed at this hour. Tobirama lets his eyes roam about the room, checking on the health of everyone here. To his surprise, he finds his brothers, Touka, Ayame, and Madara’s siblings all sitting together at the same table. The two of them quickly pick up some food from the buffet table and join them.

“Tobirama,” greets Itama. “I heard you fought against the evil sorceress last night. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Itama. I didn’t get injured,” replies Tobirama.

“But you did get possessed?” asks Kawarama quietly, not wanting to be overheard. “The news hasn’t spread, but Hashirama told us about it.”

Debating with himself, Tobirama eventually decides to inform them of his dream. They’re all shocked by it, some of them as horrified as Madara was.

“Is it only nymphs that can survive hosting Mother Nature?” asks Touka. “And are they more or less
likely to become trees if they’re full nymphs or closer to human?”

Tobirama takes a bite of his breakfast as he mulls over her question. He may not have gotten any words from Mother Nature, but she did seem to have affected his instinctual knowledge of how this whole thing works.

“A kitsune could survive it, too. I think a dragon’s magic would react violently to being possessed, even by her. Someone less than half-nymph won’t have the right type of magic to handle it. Their magic would be too human,” says Tobirama.

“Which means we would be able to handle it. Itama, Hashirama, Touka, and myself,” says Kawarama. When Tobirama starts to protest, he adds, “If it’s dangerous to do that more than once, it makes sense for us to take turns.”

“Perhaps,” he says reluctantly.

“You worry too much,” says Itama. “We’ll be fine.”

“And if we’re lucky, someone from another country will take care of Kaguya before she can return here,” says Kawarama. “Then none of us will have to risk hosting Nature.”

“That would be nice,” agrees Tobirama.

“But probably unlikely with our luck,” says Touka. “They put out a report earlier today with the list of enemies. There were a hundred Ghouls and forty werewolves, the latter of which we still have in our dungeon by the way. If Kaguya has any intelligence, she’ll amass an even greater army for her next attack.”

“She let a spirit named Misery possess her, so I don’t know if I would call her smart. But it doesn’t take a genius mind to realize she’ll need more firepower to defeat us,” says Tobirama.

He glances over to Hashirama and Madara, wondering if they have anything to add, and finds them paying more attention to little Ayame chattering than to the serious discussion of a returning enemy. It was something he might have expected from Hashirama, but he had forgotten that Madara has a soft spot for children.

Well, considering that they were at the breakfast table and not a war meeting, their lighthearted conversations were probably more appropriate.

“He’s good with kids, huh? That’ll come in handy if you two ever decide to adopt,” says Touka.

“Yes, it would. And I have given serious consideration to adopting or getting a surrogate in the future. I think I might enjoy raising a child or two, just at a less busy point in my life,” replies Tobirama.

Proving that he had been at least partially paying attention to them, Madara voices his own agreement to the idea. “At least two children. I’ve heard it can be lonely to be an only child. And I would want to wait until we’ve had some kind of vacation, seeing as we’ll have to wait until they’re old enough to travel to take another one after they’re born.”

Tobirama’s lips quirk up in amusement. He wouldn’t say anything in front of their siblings, but he thought it was cute how often Madara mentioned wanting to take a vacation with him. It was certainly a romantic idea, traveling the countrysides, just the two of them.

“Sounds like you two have got the next several years planned out already,” says Jiro. “Which is
something I would have expected from Tobirama, but not from my impulsive big brother.”

Madara shrugs. “I’ve learned patience in the last ten years?”

Izuna snorts. “You’ll need it if you become a dad. Parenthood is rewarding in its own way, but it can be exhausting.”

“Do all parents read from the same book? You all say the same—are those bandages?” asks Madara, abruptly switching his attention to Jiro.

Jiro grins sheepishly and tugs his sleeve back down. “Maybe? A werewolf scratched me while I was taking down one of those Ghouls. Luckily, scratches aren’t infectious, though most of our family is immune to that anyway. Still, I’ve heard it itches like crazy fighting off that infection.”

“It does,” agrees Madara absent-mindedly, still staring at the bandages accusingly. “Did you see a Healer?”

“A clan healer, yes. The castle healers who know about our kind were busy yesterday. The scratch should be gone in a few days. If it’s not, I’ll visit Healer Yuuna,” says Jiro.

“Alright. Did anyone else get injured?” asks Madara.

“I ended up with a few bruises,” says Keitaro. “Not enough to see a healer. They’ll be gone by the end of the day.”

“And I’m fine. I found a group to fight with early on. They kept the werewolves at bay while I dealt with the Ghouls,” says Takeo.

“What are they even going to do with the werewolves now?” asks Izuna. “I’m pretty sure they were under Kaguya’s spell, so we can’t arrest them. But if we just let them go, what’s to stop her from controlling them again?”

“That’s for the King to decide, but my guess would be that Minato and I will be making talismans for them,” says Tobirama.

Izuna doesn’t look reassured. “But have we found out whether they’re effective yet?”

“Unfortunately, no. Kaguya didn’t try to control any of us, although that may have been a lack of time. We certainly would have attacked her if she started chanting over a lock of our hair,” replies Tobirama.

“Hmm. I don’t know whether they should stay in the city where we can keep an eye on them, or if they should go far, far away from here,” says Izuna.

“They’re citizens of this country too,” protests Hashirama. “We can’t just send them off to become Kaguya’s puppets again.”

Izuna sighs. “You’re right, of course, but they still pose a danger to the civilians while Kaguya is alive.”

Touka places her hand on Izuna’s shoulder, offering him silent comfort. She didn’t like to see her mate looking so troubled, especially since she knew part of his worry was for their daughter.

“It’ll be another month before the werewolves can transform again. Hopefully, by then, we’ll have come up with a solution,” says Touka.
“Like killing Kaguya. That would solve everything,” says Jiro.

Tobirama is distracted from the conversation by a tug on his shirt. He looks down to see Ayame staring up at him.

“May I have that?” she asks politely, pointing at a strawberry on his plate.

“Sure,” he says, handing it over. “Have you decided on a favorite fruit yet?”

“Thank you, Uncle Tobi. And, I think I like mangos the most. They’re very sweet,” replies Ayame. “There aren’t any right now, though.”

“Yes. It’s the wrong season for them. We’ll have more next year,” says Tobirama.

Ayame’s lips briefly turn down into a small pout before she remembers she still has a strawberry to eat. Wanting to stave off a tantrum, Tobirama gives her another one. Ayame was rather mature for her age, but even she had childish fits of temper sometimes. It just seemed to be part of the growing up process.

Tobirama finishes his breakfast while Ayame goes back to her parents to eat off her own plate. When everybody’s done eating, they take turns listing where they’re going next, in case they need to get ahold of each other later.

Hashirama and Kawarama were part of the first patrol, walking the perimeter of the city in case Kaguya came back. Itama had a class starting soon. He was a teacher for nymph children who struggled to learn in a classroom environment. They needed more activity and hands-on learning than human children.

Keitaro and Jiro would be accompanying Itama as extra security, else the parents might worry about their children being out of sight so soon after an attack. Takeo was helping his clansmen today, training the younger children to use their fire offensively. They had been lucky that Kaguya’s attack had come at night when the children were already at home. They may not be so lucky next time.

Touka is going to her weapons shop in the city while Izuna is taking Ayame with him to work. A bookstore is a lot safer for a toddler than a building full of weapons.

He can tell Madara is curious to see where his brother works and suggests he goes with him.

“You don’t mind?” asks Madara.

“No, it’s fine. Go hang out with your brother. All I’ll be doing now is writing a letter to Grandfather. He needs to know that our visit to the palace will be delayed,” replies Tobirama.

“Alright. I’ll see you later.”

Madara gives him a quick peck on the lips, though he can tell by the look in his eyes that he feels awkward doing so in such a public setting. Fortunately, their brothers can have tact when it’s important and don’t say anything about it.

“Meet up here for lunch?” he suggests.

Madara nods and follows Izuna out of the room. Tobirama wishes the rest of them a good day and makes his way to one of the study rooms near the library. He sits at one of the desks and pulls out paper and pen from the top drawer. It had been decided many years ago that the desks should be stocked with such when one of their researchers had been struck with inspiration and, with no paper
to write on, had begun to scribble on the walls.

And despite what some people thought when he told that story, it was not *him* who had been caught writing on the walls. He hadn’t even been living in the castle at the time that had occurred. Of course, that didn’t stop Hashirama from teasing him about it, saying that he would do the same thing if he ran out of paper. You write on the walls once as a teenager and nobody ever lets you forget it.

It takes him about fifteen minutes to figure out what exactly to write. As he doesn’t know whether Kaguya considers his grandfather’s kingdom to be one of the countries she intends to attack, he needs to give him as much information about Kaguya’s abilities as he can.

When he was done, he seals it in an envelope and goes into town, to the mailing company. They deliver letters all over the country and even to the border. Each country has its own mailing system and so it is possible to send letters out of Whirlpool, but it costs extra. It could also take months for a letter to reach the far distant countries. Madara had sent a few letters while he was gone, but they had sparse on the details of his journey.

To send letters to the underwater nymphs, there was a ship that traveled between one of the coastal cities and Kaimana’s palace about once a week. It was manned by nymphs who didn’t want to choose between their love of the sea and land.

Once assured that his letter would be delivered as quickly as possible, he heads back to the castle and gets the promised check-up by a healer. As he expected, they can’t find anything wrong with him. Nature hadn’t stayed inside him long enough to have any lasting effects.

And speaking of Nature, he still needs to make copies of the runic sequence she had used against Kaguya. The study rooms didn’t have large enough paper for his needs, so he has to return to his bedroom to use his own supplies. With as much practice as he has, it doesn’t take him that long to write out eleven copies. It takes more time for him to inspect the symbols, looking for errors, than it does for him to write them.

With that done, he leaves the papers by his door to be collected later and makes his way down to the dungeons to check on the werewolves. He wants to know if Kaguya is still controlling them, or if there are any lingering traces of her magic around them. If there was, it could make it trickier to attune the anti-mind control talismans to them.

When he reaches the dungeons, he finds about a dozen knights wandering down the corridors between the rows of cells. A few of them were calmly explaining the situation to the bewildered werewolves, who he was pleased to see looked fully aware of their surroundings.

Sensing a familiar energy signature, he keeps walking until he sees Minato, notebook in hand as he jots down notes. When he was close enough, he could see the runic circle beneath the werewolf Minato was closest to, apparently taking some kind of energy reading.

“Minato.”

Startled blue eyes meet his as Minato becomes aware of his presence. He gives a small frown, causing Minato to grin sheepishly. Minato should know better than to get that lost in thought in front of a potential enemy.

“Ah, sorry. I was focusing too much on the energy. I can feel traces of Kaguya’s magic around Kaien here, but it seems to be fading fast. If it continues at the same rate, it should be gone by the end of the day,” says Minato.
“That’s a good thing, right?” asks Kaien, a bit nervously.

Minato gives him a reassuring nod. “It’s a very good sign. We won’t have to deal with her magic interfering when we make the talismans.”

“How did she even cast that spell on us? I thought werewolves were resistant to spells,” says Kaien.

“She was stronger than you,” says Tobirama bluntly. He pauses a moment. “Unnaturally strong. She was working with the Spirit of Misery, a being comprised of dark magic.”

“Then what’s to stop these talismans of yours from being overwhelmed by this spirit the same way my own magic was?” asks Kaien.

“Part of the magic we put into the talismans is from the Spirit of Nature,” explains Minato. “He’ll have more trouble overwhelming her energy. The rest of the magic will come from us but purified. That makes it so we won’t be able to influence the talisman after it’s made, but there still needs to be magic from mortals for it to be compatible with mortals.”

“And now we’re starting to get into magical theory,” says Tobirama, tone faintly amused. “Your teacher status shows, Minato.”

Minato gives him a quick grin, not bothered by his teasing. “Don’t try to pretend you don’t do the same thing. You’ve been teaching longer than I have.”

“Um, not that the friendly banter isn’t nice,” interrupts Kaien, “but I’m still worried. What happens if the talismans don’t work? I don’t want this Kaguya person to use me as a puppet again! I didn’t even notice when she took control; there’s just a blank spot in my memory. Did I hurt anyone? Did the others?”

Tobirama hesitates. There wasn’t a good way to say this, and lying to spare Kaien’s feelings would just downplay the danger.

“Please, just tell us. We deserve to know what happened, as the ones who were controlled,” says Kaien.

Tobirama sighs. “Very well. Several people were injured, though not so badly they can’t be healed. There haven’t been any reports of werewolf bites, either, so you needn’t feel guilty about turning anyone. And there were….five deaths.”

Kaien flinches.

Glancing around, he realizes all the werewolves in the nearby cells were staring at him sadly. Some stories portray werewolves as more animalistic than humans, and while that was true to some extent, they were not incapable of feeling the full range of emotions. They could love and grieve and feel horrified that someone had used them to harm innocents.

Well, this wouldn’t do. He had made a vow when he became a Knight to protect all of Whirlpool’s citizens. That included the werewolves. He can’t just do nothing in the face of their despair.

“It’s only a matter of time before Kaguya is killed,” he says firmly. “She’s set herself against the entire continent. That is not a fight anyone can win, even with the help of one of the Spirits. We drove her off yesterday, and that was when we had no advance warning of her attack.”

They do look a bit cheered up by his words, but not as much as he would have liked. He doesn’t have Hashirama’s ability for grand speeches.
“If these talismans work,” says the werewolf to Kaien’s left, “that means we’ll be able to fight back against whatever army Kaguya brings with her next, right?”

“You could, but the next attack may not be on the full moon,” cautions Tobirama.

The werewolf snorts. “You think we’re defenseless on two legs? We’re still stronger than a human in this form, and it’s not like none of us know how to fight. We have to learn, just to deal with the hunters.”

“The hunters?” asks Minato, alarmed. “Hunting werewolves is illegal!”

“Doesn’t stop them from doing it,” says the female werewolf behind them. “Oh, and I’m Alena by the way. And he’s Lorenz. If we’re going to have a discussion on werewolf discrimination, you may as well know our names.”

“We’re really going to have that conversation now?” asks Lorenz. Then he sighs as Minato continues to stare him worriedly. “Yes, fine. It’s not as bad as it used to be, back before King Noboru realized simply making it illegal wasn’t enough. He made it so the schools have to use pre-approved textbooks that have accurate information on werewolves.”

“And then he sent people to schools randomly and had them discretely ask what the students thought of werewolves, and what their teachers had said about them,” says Alena.

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t help if it’s the parents that are the ones spreading the hate,” says Kaien.

“But, why do people hate werewolves in the first place?” asks Minato.

“Have you ever heard the stories of the first werewolves, the ones who were cursed by a dark sorcerer? They didn’t have control of themselves at first, running completely on instinct every time they transformed, biting and killing people until someone was able to alter the curse and give them back control,” says Alena.

Minato nods.

“We’ve both heard that story. Many people have,” says Tobirama.

“Exactly,” says Lorenz. “The hunters are the ones who think there’s a risk of us losing control every time we transform. They kill us because they’re afraid, and that fear has turned into hate.”

“They justify their cowardice killings by telling themselves we’re just beasts. Some of them actually think we’re wolves that take on human form,” says Kaien.

“How have they been hiding their actions from us?” asks Tobirama.

“Some of those reports of people defending themselves from rogue werewolves weren’t actually self-defense,” says Lorenz. “The Knights investigate, of course, but it’s not like they can prove it wasn’t self-defense without any witnesses.”

“And if there are any witnesses, they’re usually fellow hunters who corroborate their story,” says Alena. “In the past, we’ve tried to tell the Knights that that werewolf wouldn’t have attacked anyone, but they can’t do anything without proof.”

“Some of them don’t want to believe us, either,” says Kaien. “They try not to show it, but we can see their skepticism. Everybody knows that a few werewolves a year go rogue, right? That’s easier for them to believe than humans killing us for no reason. They don’t want to believe that hate crimes still
“Happen.”

“That’s…terrible,” says Minato.

“It is. We will need to find a solution to the hunter problem after we’ve killed Kaguya. The main problem seems to be that the hunters think werewolves will lose control. All the current information we have now isn’t enough to convince them otherwise, so we need to do more research,” says Tobirama.

“Fixing problems with science?” asks Minato.

“Yes. And any who refuse to be swayed by logic will be killed,” says Tobirama grimly.

“You’d have to find out who all the hunters are, though,” says Lorenz.

Tobirama shrugs. “Not every Knight is well-known. This will not be the first time one of our own has had to go undercover.”

His easy confidence seems to reassure them, some of them beginning to look cautiously hopeful. And now that their worry was abated, he remembers the original reason he came down here. He turns to Minato.

“Do you mind if I use your runic circle to assess their energy for myself?” he asks.

Minato startles at the sudden change in topic but makes room for him in the circle.

“That’s fine. Though I’ll warn you now, it takes a lot of magic to get it to work. Kaguya must have been relying on that spirit’s help when she placed the mind control spell on them. There’s no way she would have that kind of magic, otherwise,” says Minato.

Tobirama nods and steps into the circle, pouring half his magic into the runes before he senses them start to work. And then he has to keep going to keep the circle active, analyzing the werewolf’s energy as quickly as he can to avoid magical exhaustion.

He can feel the natural shield that all of them have. It was at a different frequency than most magic and was jarring to the senses, which he suspected was the point. The question was: who had designed the shield? The one who cast the original curse to make it harder to dispel or the one who fixed the curse so that their work couldn’t be undone and made worse?

Beyond the lingering traces of Kaguya’s magic, he could sense the curse itself. There was no maliciousness left in the energy that forced them to transform every month. Generations had gone by since the curse had been laid and altered, and it was no longer powered by dark magic. He would do more research later, but he already suspected what he would find out. There was no risk of werewolves losing control of themselves.

“Alright. I’m done for now. I’ll want to examine a few others before trying to create talismans for them, but that will have to wait until my magic recharges,” says Tobirama.

“Okay. I assume you’ll be at this afternoon’s meeting too?” asks Minato.

“Yes. We can discuss when to create the talismans after, once we know what the King has planned,” says Tobirama.

At Minato’s agreement, he bids goodbye to him and the werewolves, then leaves the room. Once back upstairs, he makes his way to the library. He has about an hour until lunch. That was enough
time for him to begin his research into the history of the werewolves.

Time passes quickly as he gets absorbed into his book, not looking up again until his stomach begins to ache with hunger. He doesn’t even need to look at the clock to know it’s noon. His internal clock has always been rather precise, which is perhaps the reason he doesn’t stress as much as Madara does about being late.

And speaking of Madara, he can sense his mate’s energy in the Dining Hall already. His pace increases without conscious thought, anxious to meet up with him again. A tension he hadn’t even noticed eases when he catches sight of Madara at one of the tables. He knows his reaction is ridiculous. It isn’t as though Madara is going to run off again as soon as he’s out of sight. It seems that it’s going to take his subconscious a while to understand that, however.

Madara greets him with a smile as he joins him, but he can sense a hint of concern through their bond. Apparently, he hadn’t done a very good job of hiding his unease.

“I’m fine,” he says before Madara can ask. “How was your visit with Izuna?”

“It was good. Izuna was happy to have someone entertain Ayame while he was working. The child has a lot of energy,” says Madara. “And apparently, she has a few of the regular customers trained to bring her things. Beads and ribbons, mostly. All in shades of pink and red.”

“I’ve seen her collection,” says Tobirama. “Seen it but not touched. She’s possessive of her stuff.”

Madara all but radiates smug pride that his niece is already showing signs of being a dragon. Tobirama is just glad that Ayame will have the power to protect herself when she’s older. As Touka was just half-nymph, Ayame wouldn’t have been as strong if she had only inherited nymph magic. With the recent threat reminding him of all the dangers of the world, Tobirama wants his family to have as many advantages as they can get.

He considers informing Madara about what the werewolves have told him, but that’s a conversation for later. The information shouldn’t be discussed openly, where it might reach the wrong ears. Instead, he tells Madara some of the funny things he’s seen Ayame do. Such as painting herself pink, tying ribbons in Izuna’s hair in an effort to make him look ‘pretty like mommy’, and stacking pots and pans on the floor to climb up to the top cupboard where the cookie jar was stored.

“She has a really large sweet tooth, doesn’t she? Keitaro and Jiro were always trying to get into the candy as children,” says Madara.

“They were still doing that to some extent when we met,” says Tobirama. “Didn’t your mother have a lock installed on the pantry to keep them out?”

Madara laughs. “I had almost forgotten that. She had it put in when Keitaro was five as that when he really started climbing over everything.”

“We had to keep the art supplies locked up while Kawarama was young. He kept wanting to paint on everything. And my dad had to stop growing plants indoors when Hashirama was born. He kept trying to eat them,” says Tobirama.

They discuss a few more childhood memories before the lunch hour is over, and then it’s time for the meeting. Madara goes with him to collect his papers and helps him carry them to the conference room. There was a large, circular table in the middle of the room, which was meant to give a sense of equality so that no one would feel shy about speaking up. They take a seat by Hashirama and Mito, then wait for everyone else to arrive.
Noboru knocks on the table once all the seats have been taken, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Alright. Let’s start with you, Inoichi. Read out the battle summary for us,” says Noboru.

“Yes, sir.” Inoichi gives a quick rundown on where the enemies breached the city and where they went from there. “So far, it appears that the Ghouls and werewolves just went after whoever they saw first. None of them ignored people in an effort to reach the castle. Presumably, that means she wasn’t specifically after the royal family or that she assumed an army that size could take out our Knights.”

“She didn’t try to sneak in,” says Shikaku. “We would have had a lot more casualties if she had. This Kaguya woman seems to be quite arrogant. The six of you who fought her, what would you say her personality was like?”

“Dismissive. She looked at us like were children,” says Tobirama.

“She was cold and distant,” says Hashirama.

“Over-confident and arrogant,” replies Madara.

“Cruel and vengeful,” says Kagami.

“Desperate,” says Koharu. When people look at her in surprise, she shrugs. “Would someone let a spirit named Misery possess them if they were not desperate? She wants revenge for something and is willing to do anything to achieve it.”

“So also irrational,” says Tobirama.

“But none of that rules out intelligence,” says Shikaku. “We have to assume she can learn from failure and that her next attack will be more effective. Otherwise, we’ll be unprepared.”

“Most of the werewolves are willing to fight with us the next time Kaguya attacks,” says Minato.

Shikaku nods thoughtfully. “That will be helpful if the talismans prove effective. We’ll still need to have a plan for dealing with them if that proves not to be the case.”

“How soon will you able to make the talismans?” asks Noboru.

“On our own, it would take weeks,” says Minato. “I doubt we would be able to make more than a few a day. I know the Knights need to be on guard, but perhaps some of the civilian sorcerers would be willing to donate some of their magic?”

“Or at least at a discount price,” says Tobirama. “They make a living out of using their magic. If they have none left for other jobs, they won’t be able to afford groceries.”

“I will set up a fund for them. They will be compensated for their contribution. Now, I see you have the copies of the runic circle, Tobirama? Excellent. I will send out Misaki with these copies to contact the other Uzumaki. As some of you may know, they prefer to live closer to the coast. She will explain the situation to them, and they will contact the other Monarchs.” says Noboru.

“Will they make it time? They’ll have to cross the entire country to reach the border,” says Shikaku.

“The Uzumaki have ways of traveling fast. It is a clan secret, so unfortunately, I may not reveal it to you,” says Noboru. “They can get there faster than the messenger birds, and this is the kind of news best delivered in person. They may even be able to find out which country Kaguya originated from,
and why she’s seeking revenge.”

Shikaku nods and then begins discussing battle plans. He lists all the known magical creatures Kaguya could enslave to attack them and what their weaknesses are. Then he goes about setting up a new patrol route.

“We were lucky the first time. She didn’t try to sneak in. If she had, the casualty rate would be higher. We must be prepared for her to use stealth next time,” says Shikaku.

Then Shikaku asks the six of them to describe the fight, wanting as many details about Kaguya’s magic as they could give. Tobirama also describes his strange dream, earning a troubled frown from Shikaku.

“That should also be information shared with the other Monarchs, so that they may find nymph volunteers. Such a strange time we live in, that we have to worry about dark spirits and nymphs turning into trees,” says Shikaku.

Noboru makes a note of it, then gives them their assignments for the next few days before allowing them to leave. There were going to be more training sessions for the Knights as those who had fought certain creatures demonstrated to the others how to defeat them.

Hashirama would be one of them as he had fought a family of Griffins just this year. Personally, Tobirama thought Kaguya would have to be stupid to try and manipulate the Griffins. They were such gentle creatures normally. Abusing them was sure to get Nature’s attention.

The only good thing about being attacked by a Griffin is that there were worse creatures to fight. Manticores had poison tipped tails. Basilisks could grow up to sixty feet long with teeth the length of his forearm. Their venom was also more potent than a manticore’s. Both creatures had a tough hide that was difficult to cut through, especially the Basilisk’s. At least those stories of the snake’s eyes causing instant death were false. That would be a nightmare to deal with.

Shikaku had also suggested that any Knight with magical abilities not already enrolled in healing classes should be required to take some first-aid classes. Normally, such classes were left as optional, though anyone with an affinity for healing were strongly encouraged by their teacher to take them. But with the possibility of Kaguya bringing in an even larger army next time, they would need as many healers as they could get.

After the meeting is over, Mito invites the two of them back to her and Hashirama’s room to hang out. With nothing more pressing to do, they accept. There’s a little kitchenette to the side of the lounge room where Hashirama prepares them each a cup of tea.

While he’s doing that, Mito gets a board game out of the closet and sets it down on the table between the two couches. Tobirama and Madara both give her incredulous looks when they see which game it is.


“Yes, but not everybody is as competitive as we are. The last time Madara and I played this game together, we ended up throwing the pieces at each other and Hashirama sulked for days,” says Tobirama.

“I did not sulk!” protests Hashirama. “I was giving you two the silent treatment. One of those pieces nearly hit me in the eye!”

“Can this game even be played with just four people? Two people doesn’t make much of a team,”
says Madara.

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” says Mito, just as the door opens and Tsunade steps into the lounge with her teammates. “Tsunade. Jiraiya. Orochimaru. Hiruzen. Would you care to join us for a game?”

“Adventurers, huh? Sure, sounds fun,” says Tsunade.

“I love that game,” agrees Jiraiya.

Orochimaru looks at the board game skeptically but decides to join them. Hiruzen hesitates but eventually agrees when both Mito and Tsunade smile at him. Likely, he had only been planning on dropping them off at Tsunade’s rooms before leaving, unwilling to allow the young Princess to wander around the castle without an adult after yesterday’s attack.

“Good. Now we have four people for each team,” says Mito.

She sets up the game, the board large enough that it takes up the whole table. Their teams end up being Tobirama, Madara, Orochimaru, and Hiruzen vs Hashirama, Mito, Tsunade, and Jiraiya. There were six game pieces that could each represent a team, though the game was really only designed for two teams. The game manufacturers had included more than two for variety’s sake.

Madara and Mito end up bickering over who gets the dragon icon, his eyes narrowed and her face set in a chilling smile. And suddenly, Tobirama understood why they always fought over that piece in the past. Of course, the dragons would want the dragon statuette. It must be a point of pride for the both of them.

Eventually, they flip a coin for which team gets it. Madara nearly starts sulking when Mito wins, but that means their team gets the Knight figure, which was Tobirama’s favorite. They also had the option of a werewolf, a sorcerer with a pointed ‘wizard hat’, a little dryad figure with blue hair, a kitsune with nine tails, a centaur, and a Griffin.

That was just what came with the base game. There were extra figures and more cards that could be bought in addition. Right now, they were looking through all the attack and trap cards, choosing their strategy. Every member of the team was able to pick seven cards, and team members could use each other’s cards when it was their turn.

The goal of the game was for one team to make it all the way around the board, back to the castle, before the other team could. Tobirama supposes it could represent Knights patrolling around the country. The board was painted to look like forests and little miniature villages scattered throughout the land.

They flip a coin to see which team was going to roll the dice first. Then they pick the order of who’s going next. It ends up being Madara, Mito, Tobirama, Hashirama, Orochimaru, Jiraiya, Hiruzen, and Tsunade.

When it was each person’s turn, they would roll the dice and advance their team by one to six steps. Once their little statuette had been moved forward, they would then draw a card from the center of the board. This is where the chance part of the game came into play. There were a lot of scenarios you could encounter from these cards: various monsters attacking your team, a team member becoming ‘sick’ so that you had to skip a turn, and realizing you had ‘lost’ something and being forced to go back two spaces.

When attacked by a monster, the person who’s turn it was would choose a card from their hand or
their teammates’, then roll the dice to see how effective their spell card would be. 1-3 would deal 30% damage, 4 dealt 50%, 5 was 75% and 6 was 100%. There wasn’t a limit to how many cards you could employ against the beasts, but no card could be used two turns in a row, so it wasn’t smart to use too many of them.

If the monster wasn’t killed with one spell, it would then attack back and deal its own damage. If a player wasn’t healed at the end of their turn, then no one on the team could use their cards until it was that person’s turn again. However, if they were poisoned instead of physically injured, then no one could use their cards until they were healed.

There were two types of healing cards: ones for physical damage and ones for poisoning. Obviously, if the one who got poisoned had the only card that could heal that type of damage, then they were out of the game. Thus, there was always at least two players who had that type of card.

The most common strategy was that everyone on the team would have a healing card, a trap card, and five spell cards. Most of the members of his team had chosen that strategy, but Orochimaru had opted for two trap cards. That meant they had five opportunities to lay an ambush for the opposing team.

Once a team landed on a square, they could set down one of the little red x’s that came with the game and lay one of their trap cards face down near it. If the opposing team landed on that square, the trap would automatically be activated. However, if the team went past the square with the trap, they would flip a coin to see if they were caught by it.

The trap cards were similar to the monsters in that they could make you require healing, but they could also make you lose one of your cards. Permanently.

It takes them a couple hours to get through one game, everyone getting more invested in winning the longer they play. In the end, it’s Madara’s team that wins, to his smugness, and Jiraiya’s dismay. Apparently, he has a bit of a rivalry going on with Orochimaru.

“That was a good game,” says Hashirama, smiling. “Thank you for playing with us, everyone. It was a good way to relax after yesterday.”

Hashirama stands from the couch and heads back to the little kitchenette, bringing back with him a couple baskets of muffins. He hands one of the baskets to Tobirama and sets the other on the table.

“Keitaro baked these earlier today. Apparently, it helps him de-stress. He gave me that basket to give to you and Madara while the other one is for sharing with Tsunade and her friends,” says Hashirama. “Go ahead and help yourselves. There’s blueberry, banana nut muffin, and chocolate chip.”

Jiraya peeks into the basket and pulls out a chocolate chip while Orochimaru and Tsunade both chose one of the banana muffins.

“Huh, these are really good,” says Jiraiya. “Can you give Keitaro my thanks the next time you see him?”

“Sure. He’ll be pleased to know you liked them,” says Hashirama.

With the game now over, Tsunade heads into her room with Jiraiya and Orochimaru, the door left open to show nothing inappropriate was going on. It’s just that teenagers liked to have privacy sometimes when talking to their friends.

Tobirama lets Hiruzen know they’ll be having team practice tomorrow. Hiruzen promises to let the others know and then leaves, off to go spend time with his family. He and Madara stay for a few
more minutes before heading back to their room, wanting to spend some time alone together.

They kick off their shoes by the door and Tobirama sets the basket of baked goods on the table while Madara lies down on the couch, eyes closed as he relaxes. Tobirama’s gaze is drawn to Madara’s throat, unintentionally bared as he rests his head on the cushions. Something primal rises up in him at the sight, and he frowns as he tries to push the feeling back down.

Madara’s eyes open before he can neutralize his expression. Tobirama doesn’t give him a chance to ask, heading into the bedroom. There’s something restless in him today, an agitation he doesn’t want to acknowledge.

He’s not surprised when Madara follows him into the room, but continues to ignore him as he lies on the bed. Madara stares at him a while, arms crossed as he tries to figure out what’s going on. Eventually, he joins Tobirama on the bed, sitting down on his legs so Tobirama can’t get up.

“What’s wrong?” asks Madara.

“Nothing.”

Madara’s eyes narrow. “Didn’t we fight a lot as kids because of this very reason? We would get annoyed with each other but never discussed what was bothering us? Just bottling it up until we ended up screaming at each other. Is that how you want us to solve our problems now that we’re married?”

Tobirama sighs, resigned. “When did you become the mature one?”

He takes down the barriers in his mind, letting the full force of his possessiveness flood throughout their bond. While Madara was still reeling in surprise, he takes the opportunity to flip them over and sink his teeth into Madara’s neck. He can feel Madara’s confusion, his mind racing to figure out what has brought about this reaction. In Madara’s place, he knows he would be thinking back to the last few days to see if anything could have sparked jealousy. Unfortunately, his actions aren’t due to anything recent.

“All those years you were gone, I still thought you were a human,” says Tobirama.

“I know—“ Madara stops talking when Tobirama bites him again.

“You know, but you haven’t thought about what that means. All this time, you knew I saw the world through a nymph’s instincts, but I thought you had the mindset of a human. Dragons mate for life, and most nymphs do as well. Half of all human marriages end in divorce.

“Dragons and nymphs are physically incapable of falling in love with someone else while still in love with the first person. Nymphs can remarry if their spouse dies and if the mate bond wasn’t strong enough to kill them as well,” says Tobirama.

“Is that one of the reasons the water nymphs were against you marrying me?” asks Madara.

“I’m sure that factored in somewhere,” says Tobirama dismissively. “But they aren’t the point of this conversation, not directly. They drove you away from me for ten years, chasing courting gifts. You should have told me more clearly why you were leaving, not announced that you wanted to become mates when you came back and then run off before I could reply.”
Madara winces. “I wasn’t sure how you would react.”

“Yes, but I will hunt you down if you ever try to pull a stunt like that again. I didn’t know why you were leaving. I thought it must be important, and that becoming mates before you left would have made the separation more difficult for both of us. If I had known you thought you had to leave to become mates, I would have chased you down that day,” says Tobirama.

“But then you wouldn’t have the books— “

“The books aren’t more important than you,” interrupts Tobirama. “And I certainly hope you were teasing when you implied they were. If the nymphs damaged your self-esteem that badly, I’ll hunt them down and kill them. And did you know it wasn’t just you they were trying to manipulate? They were more subtle with me, which is why I didn’t catch on sooner. They’ve always been trying to steer me away from getting attached to any non-nymphs.”

“They didn’t even want you to have human friends?” asks Madara.

“No. Which is weird because they have human friends. I can only assume that being a young prince made them both overprotective and have an unhealthy sense of entitlement towards me. If Mother had realized what they were doing, she would have smacked them for trying to parent me. And, possibly, for doing a bad job of it. If you’re going to try and do her job, then you had better do it well.”

Madara stifles a snicker but amusement floods through their bond. Tobirama gives him a wan smile before continuing.

“Now, the whole point of this conversation was that I thought you were a human while you away. Ten years is a long time for humans. It’s very easy for them to fall in love, and I wasn’t around to keep your attention. We hadn’t even really started dating yet, either. I worried sometimes that you would fall for someone else, and when you finally returned, it would be with a spouse. Or even if you hadn’t found someone else, your feelings for me might have faded. There was also the worry that when you said ‘mate’ you really meant ‘marriage.’ Humans have bonded with nymphs before and found that the mental connection felt invasive to them. There are a lot of things that can go wrong in a human-nymph relationship. It was a relief to realize you had similar instincts to myself,” says Tobirama.

“So the problem is that you’ve felt that way for ten years, and it’s going to take time for that worry to go away?” asks Madara.

“Yes.”

Tobirama licks at the bitemark on Madara’s neck, feeling calmer now. When Madara shivers, he does it again, kissing and sucking on the soft skin. He lets his emotions flow freely through the bond, his sense of possessiveness gentler, but still there, now that the frustration was gone.

Madara lets his own possessiveness come to the forefront of his mind, slipping a hand underneath the back of Tobirama’s shirt as he tilts his head to seal their lips together. Tobirama all but purrs into Madara’s mouth, more reassured by that feeling of mine than any words of faithfulness Madara could utter.

Is that so?

Tobirama shudders as Madara’s voice reverberates through his mind, startled and more than a little turned on at how strong their bond was now. He hadn’t realized it had grown so quickly, that now
they could share thoughts. However, it requires no barriers between their minds, allowing them to sense each other’s emotions as well.

Madara uses his distraction to flip them back over, using his weight to firmly pin him down to the bed. He can feel Madara focusing on his emotions, wanting to know exactly how he reacts to what Madara is doing to him. A smirk curls at the edges of Madara’s mouth at Tobirama’s instinctive pleasure to the show of strength.

Tobirama grabs the nape of Madara’s neck and tugs him back down into another kiss, his other arm curling around Madara’s back. Madara slips his hand between them, pushing his shirt up. Just the touch of Madara’s fingers to his stomach is enough to send heat flushing through him, his back arching up into the contact.

_You look beautiful like this_, thinks Madara.

Tobirama smiles against Madara’s mouth, letting his eyes close as he enjoys the pleasure of Madara’s touch. His lips tingle as Madara gently bites down, soothing the slight sting with the brush of his tongue.

Both of them are unhurried as they let their hands wander, casually pushing clothes aside to reveal more skin to caress. They don’t need to speak to know what the other one wants, meeting each other’s desires as soon as the thought forms.

Only the sound of their breathing and quiet moans could be heard in the otherwise silent room. The sun shines in from half-closed blinds, bathing the room in its pale light. Somehow, it made the setting feel more intimate.

Their pleasure builds up slowly as they do their best to touch and kiss every inch of skin they can reach. Then it crashes over them like a wave, leaving them gasping for breath in its wake. Limbs feeling pleasantly lax, they lie still on the bed for several minutes, waiting until the afterglow fades before getting up to take a shower.

They begin to raise the barriers in their mind once again as they get dressed. As nice as the emotional connection is, it would be a distraction to hear the other’s thoughts all day.

Tobirama grabs one of his notebooks from the desk and heads into the main room to lounge on one of the couches. Madara watches over his shoulder as he writes out his to-do list for tomorrow. He’ll need to assess his student’s combat readiness, which means sparring with them and checking their gear. Then he’ll quiz them and see how much they remember from his lectures on the magical animals roaming this continent.

“My basilisks even be controlled?” Madara wonders out loud. “I’ve never heard of any sorcerer trying it before. You’d think that would be one of the first monsters they’d try to control, considering how deadly they are.”

Tobirama pauses in his writing as he contemplatess the question. It was true that there was not a single story of a basilisk doing the bidding of humans. Manticores, on the other hand, were easily persuaded to attack anything they set their eyes on.

“I don’t know, but I hope we don’t have cause to find out. Basilisks are the last thing we need right now,” replies Tobirama.

“My more like they’re the last thing we need at _any_ time,” says Madara. “The only thing they’re good for is making armor.”
“Well, they do eat manticores. That’s useful,” says Tobirama.

“….I had forgotten that,” says Madara, looking disconcerted. “How does anyone take down something that can eat manticores?”

“Very carefully,” replies Tobirama, smirking in amusement. “Now, will you sit down already? I don’t need you hovering behind me.”

Madara huffs but sits down beside him, reaching for one of the muffins on the table. He eats it quietly while Tobirama finishes his list. When he sees Tobirama eyeing the basket a few minutes later, he hands over one of the blueberry muffins, Tobirama’s favorite.

“Thank you,” says Tobirama.

“Sure. Keitaro really has improved his baking skills over the years, though it’s a shame the muffins came about due to stress,” says Madara.

“At least he has healthy coping methods. Do you still set things on fire when you’re stressed?” asks Tobirama.

“….Maybe.”

Madara nudges his arm against Tobirama’s when he snickers, then frowns when he realizes how cold his skin is. He sends a spark of magic towards the fireplace, lighting it up almost immediately.

“Your skin is freezing. Why didn’t you say anything?” asks Madara.

“Hmm?” Tobirama looks at his hand, flexing his fingers. “I didn’t really notice, though I guess that’s why my hand was feeling so stiff. Since winter has just begun, I’m in that in-between stage where my body is trying to adjust to the temperature. I can still get cold, but I don’t feel it as much.”

“Then I suppose it’s my duty as your husband to help keep your warm,” says Madara, before summoning one of their warmest blankets from the closet.

It comes soaring into the room and drapes itself across both of them. The blanket was made of soft wool and dyed dark blue with dots of white scattered across it to represent the starry sky. There was even a crescent moon in the middle to complete the image.

“Your ability to summon things does come in handy,” says Tobirama.

He lays his notebook aside and leans against Madara, who wraps an arm around his shoulders. Warmth slowly seeps back into his fingers, and he lets out a small sigh of relief. He hates feeling cold.

His eyes close as he lets himself relax, drifting off into a light doze. Despite their late night battle, they hadn’t slept much, and he was feeling tired. And since he has patrol tonight, it would be helpful for him to take a nap before dinner. He was sure Madara, or their grumbling stomachs, would wake him up when it was time to eat.

Chapter End Notes

The Spirit of Nature and Magic has two nicknames: Mother Nature and Mother Magic.
People generally don't think of her as the creator of all life, but they do believe she's the one who gave them magic. She's the spirit of the planet itself and doesn't like it when one of the species living on her planet is endanger of becoming extinct. She favors the nymphs, dragons, and kitsune because they can sense her presence within the earth.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

And here's the next chapter! Sorry it took so long, but writer's block comes and goes. I haven't given up on writing the story, though. It just takes me a while.

Warnings for this chapter: There's talk of a woman losing her child. Also, talk of a creature that may or may not be human trying (not succeeding) to eat people, but it's a story of something that happened in the past not something the characters are currently dealing with.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light flashes along the runic circle before abruptly dimming, leaving Tobirama trying to blink the spots out of his eyes. No matter how many talismans they make, his eyes can’t seem to get used to it. At least they were done for now. It had taken a week and over a dozen sorcerers donating magic, but they were finally done crafting the talismans for the forty werewolves.

“Whew. That really takes a lot out of you, doesn’t it?” asks Aimee, the current sorceress helping him and Minato. She gets to her feet shakily and puts a hand on her stomach. “I’m starving. Good thing it’s time for supper.”

“I know what you mean. I feel like I could eat a whole cow,” says Minato.

“I would concur, except I don’t like the taste of cow’s meat,” says Tobirama. “And meat is harder to digest anyway. I would suggest eating more fruits and vegetables, lest your body struggle to digest food with energy it doesn’t have.”

Minato sighs. “So you keep telling me.”

Tobirama shrugs, eyes flickering to Aimee, and Minato nods in understanding. It wasn’t just Minato that he was giving the warning to, but also the sorcerers that were helping them. And since they got a new helper every day, it means he has to repeat himself every day.

“So, are you telling him he shouldn’t eat any meat?” asks Aimee.

“No. He just shouldn’t have it be the main dish. This advice goes for you too. Fill up on vegetables and fruit and eat a small portion of meat. Preferably, this is how non-vegetarians would always eat their meat for optimal health, but I understand not everyone is willing to do that. But when you’re magically exhausted is the time to get over any aversion to vegetables you may have,” says Tobirama.

“Is it really that serious?” asks Aimee.

“It is. If you don’t replace the nutrients you lost soon, you’ll pass out. Some can even slip into a coma. That’s why it’s important to eat foods that digest quickly and have a high nutrient content,” replies Tobirama.

Caelan, the werewolf whose talisman they had just made, watches the three of them in amusement. When Minato catches his gaze, he realizes they had accidently started ignoring him and apologizes.
“No, that’s okay. It’s interesting to learn about this magic stuff,” says Caelan. “But maybe you guys should move this conversation to the Dining Hall so you can start eating.”

“Good idea. Would you like to join us, Caelan?” asks Minato.

“Thank you. I’ll walk with you, but I’ve already made plans to sit with friends at supper,” says Caelan.

“Alright then. Let’s go,” says Minato.

The four of them head to the Dining Hall and pick up food at the buffet table. There had been more meat options over the last week due to their werewolf guests. Although werewolves were omnivores like humans, they did have a strong preference for meat.

Tobirama ignores the animal products entirely and gets two sweet potatoes, a small salad, a banana, an apple, a few tablespoons of almond butter, and a cup of brown rice. Minato gets a small steak, green beans, a baked potato, and two peaches. At Tobirama’s pointedly raised eyebrow, Minato adds a cucumber to his plate. Good. He had noticed this past week that, after the first plate, Minato had a tendency to fill the rest of the way up on desserts. While that would normally only end up being one or two pieces, with their increased appetite, Minato could still eat half a pie after just one plate of food.

He’s glad to see that Aimee takes his advice to heart and gets more vegetables and fruit than meat. One of their previous helpers hadn’t listened to him and ended up feeling lethargic and vaguely ill for three days.

Speaking of lethargy, he’s starting to feel sluggish himself. He all but collapses into his seat at the table, quickly setting his plate and drink down before he spills everything. His hands almost start shaking as he picks up the apple, taking a large bite and chewing slowly. Not because he wants to make sure his food is thoroughly ground up either; he simply doesn’t have the energy to chew any faster.

He waits until his hands are steady before taking the lemon slices arranged around the top of his glass and squeezes the juice into his water. Adding less than teaspoon of sugar to the water, he stirs it in and downs nearly half the glass. Dehydration was one of the most uncomfortable things for a water nymph.

Even after he’s finished everything on his plate, he still has to go back to the buffet to get more. It’s an odd sensation to go from feeling completely full to being hungry again as his body uses what little magic it has left to rapidly break down the food in his stomach. It takes three plates of food before his body decides it’s satisfied and lets him start digesting at a normal pace again.

“Ah, that was good,” sighs Aimee happily. “Now all I wanna do is head home and go to bed. Who knew just sitting on the floor and giving magic could be so exhausting?”

Minato hums in agreement. “It is exhausting. Though at least you don’t have an infant in your home to wake you up in the middle of the night.”

Aimee gives him a sympathetic look. “I remember what that was like when my sister was young. My poor mother always looked so exhausted before the baby learned to sleep the night through. Maybe you could find time to take a nap tomorrow?”

“Yes, I should be able to now that the talismans are done. Everyone’s been on high alert this past week, barely stopping to get food let alone to nap,” says Minato.
“Touka’s been making extra weapons,” says Tobirama. “The Knights will be well equipped when Kaguya strikes again.”

Just as they’re finishing supper, Kushina enters the room with a grim expression, little Naruto held in her arms. Obito trails along beside her and helps Kushina carry her plate back to the table. Even before Kushina had given birth and needed extra help, it wasn’t surprising to see Obito with her. Since his parents worked late hours, Obito often took his meals at the castle and ate with Kushina and Minato. Although, now that he was dating Kakashi, Obito occasionally ate supper at his boyfriend’s house.

Minato volunteers to hold Naruto when Kushina joins them at the table, freeing up her hands to eat.

“The two of you look worried,” says Minato. “Did something happen?”

“Obito was helping me with Naruto today, so I let him accompany me to a meeting with Grandfather. We’ve received news from one of the Uzumaki diplomats. A town in Ritia was attacked,” says Kushina.

Ritia. That was two countries over from them. There were three countries bordering Whirlpool with the ocean south of them. Just head straight North and you would pass through Lahana and then find Ritia. Kaguya had managed to travel quite a distance in only a week.

“Are the people alright?” asks Aimee.

Kushina shakes her head sadly. “Grandfather will be giving an announcement tomorrow about the attack. Hardly anyone survived. Ritia is full of basilisks and mostly human cities. The nymphs are more wild there, preferring to live in the woods with the kitsunes. There was no one in the village to channel the Spirit of Nature.”

“Basilisks. Even those who’ve trained to fight those creatures need a team to defeat even one. So she is taking this more seriously now,” says Tobirama.

“Yeah,” sighs Kushina. “Apparently, there were even a few manticores there too.”

“And the basilisks didn’t eat them? The level of control she has over those things is unnatural,” says Minato.

“It’s proof she’s teamed up with Misery again,” says Tobirama. “Though I suppose someone would have found her corpse if he had decided she was of no use to him anymore. I doubt he intends to leave her alive when he’s done with her.”

“I don’t understand why she’s doing this,” says Obito quietly, poking at his food with his fork. “How can she be so cold-hearted as to kill that many people?”

“Obito…” Kushina rests a hand on Obito’s shoulder, offering comfort. “Sometimes…sometimes people just turn out bad. I don’t know what her life circumstances are, but nothing can justify what she’s doing. But we’ll stop her, for sure. Nature is on our side.”

“Maybe we should try and break her hold on the basilisks and see if they eat her. Karmic justice,” says Aimee.

There’s a moment of shocked silence before they start laughing. It’s a morbid joke for a morbid situation, but a laugh is what they needed to ease some of the worry.

“We’ll call that Plan B,” says Tobirama.
He stays to chat with them for a little while longer before the exhaustion starts kicking in, and he goes to his room to sleep. It’s disappointing to find that Madara isn’t back yet, but he doesn’t have the energy to stay up waiting for him. Madara would return when he was done training with his clan.

Tobirama sighs and brings Madara’s pillow closer to his face, breathing in his scent. He’s pretty sure he’s only feeling so melancholy from Madara’s absence because of how tired he is. That always makes the slightest negative emotion stronger than it should be.

Willing himself to relax, he forces his mind to quiet down so that he can sleep. He barely stirs awake when Madara returns, but quickly settles back down when Madara lies beside him. They’re given several hours to sleep before a knock on the door rouses them.

Tobirama reluctantly gets out of bed, crosses the lounge room, and opens the door. An apologetic looking servant stands on the other side.

“Ah, good morning, Lord Tobirama. I’m sorry for waking you, but King Noboru thought you would want to know that one of his relatives has returned to the castle with news of Kaguya. Apparently, they have discovered information about her origins. There will be a meeting in the throne room in one hour.”

“Right. Thank you. Please let King Noboru know that Madara and I will be there,” replies Tobirama.

“Yes, sir.”

Tobirama hears the distant sound of the shower when he steps back into their bedroom and grabs a change of clothes to take with him to the second bathroom. If they hurry, they should have enough time to visit the Dining Hall and grab a quick breakfast before the meeting.

After their showers, he greets Madara in the lounge with a kiss and murmured “Good morning.” He appreciates that Madara doesn’t expect him to be talkative in the morning, letting them walk to the Dining Hall in silence. Although he’s capable of being coherent before breakfast, he’s generally not in a sociable mood before his first meal.

Looking around the Dining Hall, he can see that all of the Senior Knights present have been invited to the King’s meeting by the nervous anticipation in their expressions. Everyone is eager to find out why Kaguya attacked them, besides the vague answer of ‘revenge’.

“How did training go yesterday?” asks Tobirama after he’s almost finished eating.

“Theyir reaction time is getting better,” answers Madara. “And they’ve also started training in control, so that they can use their fire with less magic. The younger ones are also strengthening their shield spells.”

“That’s good,” replies Tobirama. He can see his own worry reflected back in Madara’s eyes at the fact that the young ones even need to be learning shield spells. At the very least, everyone in the Uchiha has some form of magic. Not everyone in the Senju clan does.

Madara sighs and sets his fork down. “I’m done. Ready to go?”

Tobirama chooses not to comment at the food left on Madara’s plate and stands up. He knows that Madara tends to eat less when upset, but they don’t have time for this argument now. If Madara doesn’t eat enough for lunch, he’ll say something then.

When they reach the throne room, it’s already half full. It seems the King has invited as many Senior Knights to the meeting as possible. He can see a few Junior Knights and recognizes them as the
students of the absent Senior Knights, those who are currently on patrol or on a mission outside the city.

On average, there’s between three to four hundred Senior Knights in the capitol at any given moment. This number doesn’t include the Junior Knights and the trainees. Throughout the entire country, there’s an average of three thousand Knights. It’s a sign of how strong Kaguya is that Tobirama has to wonder if they have enough fighters.

“All right, settle down, everyone,” says Noboru. The quiet murmur of people whispering to each other ceases as Noboru takes his seat on the throne. “Good. I believe we’re all here now, so let’s begin. An Uzumaki diplomat returned from the country of Tsuki just last night with news of Kaguya.”

A few shocked whispers sound throughout the room before Noboru’s stern gaze quiets them. Tobirama can’t blame them for their surprise. Tsuki was at the other end of the continent. To travel that distance and back in just a week. How fast was this relative of Noboru’s?

“Yes, it was a long distance. No, I won’t be telling you how she did it. Let’s just say that she didn’t get much rest on her journey and is currently sleeping off magical exhaustion. Now, the King of Tsuki was thankfully willing to see her right away and had no doubts of what Kaguya had done. My relative was then introduced to Kaguya’s two sons, Hagoromo and Hamura, who reluctantly divulged their mother’s past,” says Noboru.

Noboru straightens up in his seat, giving all of them a solemn look. “Five years ago, Kaguya was the head of a Noble clan and a powerful sorceress. Due to political differences, a rival clan sought to kill her. To that end, one of their members befriended her and then betrayed her. Kaguya survived the stab wound….but her unborn baby did not.”

Several people in the audience shift uncomfortably at the news. It was not easy having sympathy for an enemy you knew you would need to kill, but no one could deny the pain Kaguya must have felt to lose her child.

“In her grief, Kaguya delved into the dark arts to try and bring her child back to life. She sacrificed the one who tried to kill her and brought to life…something. They say the infant did not look entirely human with dark grey skin and sharp teeth that could tear flesh. Instead of milk, the baby craved blood. They still aren’t sure whether the infant actually had her son’s soul or if it was a completely failed ritual. The babe grew quickly, and within a few months, looked like a toddler. And once mobile, Kaguya had a hard controlling the child. It would attack animals and eat them, and soon began to attack humans. Kaguya managed to get to the child before it could eat anyone, but not before it had caused serious injury,” says Noboru.

“It tried to eat people?” hisses someone from the back of the room. He was quickly shushed.

“As you can imagine,” continues Noboru, ignoring the interruption, “the citizens who learned of this creature’s existence were not very happy. The King himself ordered its execution. Kaguya was enraged, but she didn’t have the power to defeat all the Knights the King sent to kill it. And so her unnatural child was killed, and her quest for vengeance began.”

“Excuse me, your majesty, but was it ever explained why Kaguya thinks she needs the magic of several countries to get her revenge?” asks Raisa.

“That is believed to be the Spirit of Misery’s doing. Her sons did hear her ranting about how she needed the power to bring her son back to life again, but this time stronger and more stable, and the power to keep anyone from trying to kill him again. Perhaps she even believes that the only way her son will ever be safe is for everyone else to be dead,” says Noboru.
“And that’s exactly what Misery wants. For all of us to be dead,” says Misaki. Standing beside her father’s throne, hands crossed within the sleeves of her kimono, she regards the crowd of Knights before her with a determined stare. “But we will not allow that to happen. When you became Knights, you swore to defend the lives of the entire nation. If Kaguya dares set foot within our borders again, we will be ready. We will stop her. We will end her.”

Misaki smiles as shoulders straighten and confidence replaces fear in the eyes of her subjects. She gives her father a nod, conceding the floor back to him now that she’s uplifted their spirits.

“Thank you, Misaki. I have no doubt that we will win, and I want all of you to spread this message to your fellow Knights. Tell them of Kaguya’s origins and make sure they understand that this does not excuse her actions. We can have no mercy on someone so entranced in dark magic. Her sanity, her compassion, her morals. They’re all gone. It’s our job to put her out of her misery now so that her soul can move on and, hopefully, be purified of its taint,” says Noboru.

Noboru waits a moment for his words to sink in before continuing, “There is one other message I need you to spread. And while Kaguya’s origins can be told to the civilians as well, I would prefer this news to be kept between the Knights. There was an attack in the country of Ritia. A small village was all but wiped out. Hundreds of people were killed, eaten by manticores and basilisks and their magic taken by Ghouls. This situation with Kaguya is a serious one, but I do not want our citizens to panic. Try to seem calm when the civilians catch sight of you patrolling or training.”

With that said, the King dismisses them. Tobirama and Madara hang back by the wall as they wait for everyone else to file out, not wanting to push through the crowd of shocked-looking Knights.

“Tobirama. Hashirama. Come here a minute,” says Noboru. He waits until they’re standing in front of him, not protesting that Madara came closer as well. “I’ll be sending a message out later today to the entire country, but I thought I’d tell you now while you’re here. There’s been a rise in Kelpie action the past few days.”

Tobirama’s muscles tense, just the mention of those horrid creatures enough to unsettle him. A Kelpie was the work of a minor spirit, created by the panic and terror when someone died by drowning. They were not the actual soul of the drowned person. Despite how many stories there were of them, ghosts did not truly exist.

After the spirit was created, it would seek out the nearest horse, kill the poor animal, and then possess its corpse. It then proceeded to lead anyone it could to water and drown them. Rather than a new Kelpie being born, the one responsible for the death became stronger.

“I assume you’ve sent someone out to deal with them?” asks Tobirama.

“I have, but they’re tricky creatures. As nymphs spend the most time in nature, I felt it was best to inform you two quickly. You can make sure your relatives know to stay in groups when going down to the river,” says Noboru.

“Could the Spirit of Misery be involved in this?” asks Madara. “I’ve read a bit about spirits since our encounter with him. He’s the most powerful dark spirit there is, if you’re of the belief that Death is a neutral spirit. With Misery being more active in the world, it could be inciting the others to act out as well.”

“That is a possibility I had considered. Unfortunately, there isn’t much we can do about it. With any luck, the creatures will calm down after we’ve defeated Kaguya,” says Noboru.

‘That’s not good enough,’ thinks Tobirama, biting his tongue to stay silent. There isn’t any point in
taking his ire out on Noboru. The man was doing the best he could.

“I wish there was a way to stop Kelpies from forming in the first place,” says Hashirama. “Has anyone ever tried to make that happen?”

Tobirama shrugs when they look to him. “We’d have to know why they form in the first place to stop it. Supposedly, they form naturally, but I would need a live one to study to know if that were true. They dissolve once they’re dead.”

Noboru taps the arm of his chair thoughtfully. “I believe I will send a team of sorcerers out to the next Kelpie attack, directing them to capture the creature if possible. They truly are a plague on our society, and if there’s any way to get rid of them for good, then I wish to know about it.”

Tobirama voices his agreement and then they’re allowed to leave. It’s frustrating that he can’t march out there and find the Kelpies himself, but he has to stay within the capitol to keep his clan safe. There are a few Senju who live in other cities, those who traveled in the past and fell in love or those who found work elsewhere, but most of his clan lives here. He can’t leave when Kaguya could come back at any moment.

It feels confining in a way he’s never experienced before. He doesn’t often feel the overwhelming need to travel, but suddenly not being able to makes him crave it. He hadn’t realized how much freedom he truly has until it’s gone. As one of the stronger Senior Knights and brother to the Princess’s husband, he’s allowed to choose practically any mission he likes and decline them if his skillset isn’t vital.

Biting back a sigh, Tobirama turns to Madara. “Are you planning on doing more training today? I don’t go back on patrol until tomorrow, and I need to do something that gets me out of the castle.”

“There should be a training session going on right now, actually. What about you, Hashirama? Want to join us?” asks Madara.

“Perhaps in about an hour? I have to let someone in the clan know about the Kelpies so they can start spreading the word. You can inform your family at the same time. I know a lot of Uchiha, kids and adults, like to play in the woods,” says Hashirama.

“Good point. We’ll see you when you’re done then,” says Madara.

They separate at the castle gates, the Senju and Uchiha houses on either side of town. The Senju clan lived in the older, wealthier district while the Uchiha were slowly moving into the newer houses. Their clan had not been very well off in the beginning and so they had to settle for cheaper buildings, saving up their money until they could purchase houses that would stand the test of time.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Madara occasionally glancing over at him, a faint feeling of concern thrumming through their bond. After a few minutes, Madara’s hand comes up to rest on his opposite shoulder, his arm a comfortable weight against his back. The gesture does help him relax, shifting all of his attention to Madara instead of the current crisis.

Madara was warm against his side, chasing away the winter chill. Though he’s certain he won’t have to worry about being cold once they reach the training grounds, not with the Uchiha throwing around fireballs. Although ‘training ground’ isn’t an entirely accurate description of where they’re meeting.

There’s no official field for them to train at, like what the Knights have. Instead, a few of the Uchiha who live side by side have volunteered their back yards for spell practice. It’s private, too. The
Uchiha, he’s noticed, don’t put up fences between each other’s property. If any of them live next to each other, the fence goes around their combined yards so that their children can play together or so that the adults can share garden space.

Today, they’re in Jiro and Takeo, Keitaro and Itama, and Izuna and Touka’s backyard. When they arrive, they find Jiro giving the children tips on how to use their fire magic while Touka was giving a demonstration on how to properly wield a knife. It wasn’t just the children here either. There were a few teenagers and adults who needed to practice.

“Uncle Tobi. Uncle Mada,” says Ayame, breaking away from the group when she sees them.

“Ayame. Are you enjoying lessons with Uncle Jiro?” asks Tobirama.

“Mm!” She nods her head energetically, her multiple braids swaying with the motion. “Uncle Jiro is fun. And he likes the bracelet I made him. See? He’s wearing it now. I made his red and yellow ‘cause of the fire. Mom’s is purple and green. Those are her favorite colors. Dad’s is blue and orange.”

Tobirama’s eyes scan the yard, looking for the people in question. When he spots them, he smiles at the sight of homemade, beaded bracelets on their wrists.

“I see them. The bracelets look lovely. Is this a recent interest of yours?” asks Tobirama.

“Yeah. Some kids at the park were wearing them. They called them friendship bracelets. I made one for you and Mada. I’ll go get them,” says Ayame, before running off into the house.

“She’s a very friendly child,” says Madara. “It almost doesn’t seem safe.”

Tobirama shrugs. “She’s more reserved around strangers, and her parents keep her well-guarded. No one’s going to run off with her.”

“Good.”

Ayame comes sprinting back outside a minute later, holding out the bracelets for them to take. “Here you go. Tobi’s is blue and green ‘cause Mama said he was a water nymph and Mada’s is black and red ‘cause Dada said that’s what his dragon form looks like. Black scales and red eyes.”

“Thank you, Ayame. It looks nice,” says Madara, slipping the bracelet onto his wrist. “You know, that’s what your Dad’s dragon form looks like too. A lot of Uchiha have black scales, though some of them are dark blue or dark red. And so far, all the Uchiha dragons have red eyes.”

Ayame tilts her head. “So, I’ll have red eyes when I transform? Hmm….pink would be cuter, though I guess red is a shade of pink. And it would be prettier to have purple scales. Has there ever been a purple dragon before?”

“I haven’t heard of one,” replies Madara, giving her an amused look. “I’ve seen white and pale grey dragons, blue or green, varying shades of brown, and black and red. Generally, the color signifies what type of element the dragon will have, but not always.”

“So I’ll probably have black or red scales,” says Ayame. She cups her hands together and a small flame ignites above her palms. “I learned how to do this yesterday. I don’t want to hurt anyone, but Dada says I’ll only have to do that if an enemy finds me without an adult around who knows how to fight.”

“That’s right. None of us want you and the other children to have to fight. If you do get caught alone
or with a civilian, then I would suggest trying to make a wall of fire between you and the enemy. That will let you get away and find a trained adult to protect you,” says Tobirama.

“Okay. Uncle Mada, can you show me how to make a firewall?” asks Ayame.

“Yes, of course. Let’s go over here, away from the others, to practice,” says Madara.

Tobirama stands nearby, listening with interest as Madara explains to Ayame how to expand her fire and keep it in the shape she wants. Apparently, it’s all about willpower and staying focused.

Ayame manages to create a small wall for about ten seconds before it stutters out. She frowns at her hands then tries again, keeping it up a few seconds longer the second time.

“You’ll get better each time,” assures Madara. “No one expects you to be an expert at five years old. Just keep trying.”

Ayame bites her lip and tries again, eyebrows scrunched as she concentrates. After a few more failed tries, she gets the fire to stay lit for an entire minute.

“Good. Now that you can keep it up that long, you’ll have time to lock it into place. You need to use your magic to make it hold its shape and the rest of the magic you give it will act as fuel for the fire,” says Madara.

Ayame frowns thoughtfully and tries to get her magic to do what Madara said, but it’s tricky. Her magic wants to create fire, but it doesn’t like making it hold its shape. Fire was fluid. Always shifting, never holding still. She says all this out loud, wondering if they have any suggestions.

“What about a boundary line? The fire doesn’t go past the perimeter you set, but continues to move inside that area,” says Tobirama.

Madara blinks. “I hadn’t thought of it in those words, but that’s essentially what we’re trying to do.” He turns to Ayame. “Does that explanation help?”

“Mm. I think so,” replies Ayame. She tries again, and it’s definitely easier this time, thinking of the fire as just being in a box created by her magic. It was also starting to make her hungry, which her parents said meant she was using a lot of magic. “Can we practice more later? I think I need a snack now.”

“Sure. Do you need any help?” asks Madara.

Ayame shakes her head. “Mama put some apples on the table for me before she started teaching. Do you guys need anything?”

“No, we’re fine. Go eat your snack,” replies Madara.

They keep an eye on her as she heads back into the house. Using a lot of magic at once can cause dizziness, but her gait is steady and no fainting spells occur. Tobirama catches Touka’s eye as he looks around the yard, and she gives him a thankful smile for looking after her daughter while she’s busy.

“Touka’s been working hard lately, making new weapons every day. On her day off, she’s giving free lessons to her husband’s cousins,” says Tobirama.

Madara rolls his eyes. “Yes, I get it. She’s nicer than I thought she was. We’ve been getting along better now lately. You don’t have to point out her good qualities to me.”
“You’ve been getting along better with her because you’re getting along better with me. She’s like an overprotective big sister. I’m glad you two aren’t fighting anymore,” says Tobirama.

“I’m glad we aren’t fighting anymore. It’s just less of a headache not to listen to her complaints,” says Madara.

Tobirama rolls his eyes and goes over to join his cousin. He has enough experience with weapons to help her teach the kids. Madara circles around the yard, giving a few demonstrations of different ways he’s used his fire in a fight. There are about fifteen kids here under the age of thirteen, five teenagers, and three adults seeking instruction. Between Jiro, Takeo, Izuna, Touka, Itama, Tobirama, and Madara, they have more than enough teachers for them.

He’s a bit curious to know why Keitaro is in the house, instead of out here with them, but his question is soon answered. Just as everyone is starting to look tired from the magic use, Keitaro steps outside, carrying a large tray of banana nut muffins. It’s apparently something the kids have come to expect as they all go converge around him as soon as he appears.

Keitaro laughs, handing out muffins. “Patience, everyone. There’s enough here for all of you.”

Tobirama watches the scene in amusement, noticing how polite the children were that all of them said thank you for the food. The children take their muffins over to the fence where a series of bags were laid out, each person having their own bottle of water, to spare Keitaro from having to clean a dozen extra glasses each day. They probably also had a spare change of clothes in their bags, in case their current outfit got singed during training.

A few of the children go back to Keitaro after they’ve finished eating, each of them with a dollar in hand.

“Our parents asked us to give you this, to help with the cost of food,” says Akemi.

“Oh, they didn’t have to do that,” replies Keitaro.

“Yes, but it can’t be cheap to give us snacks every day,” insists Akemi, grabbing Keitaro’s wrist to put the money in his hand. “We appreciate you giving us sweets just when we need them. This whole situation is stressful. We know we’re being trained in case someone tries to kill us. You make us feel better. We don’t want you to go broke trying to feed us all.”

Keitaro stops protesting, smiling at them fondly. “I’m glad I’m able to help. You don’t have to worry about me going broke, but I am grateful you guys are wanting to contribute. I’ll let you guys get back to work now, but let me know if you need any more snacks. I don’t want you guys passing out from magical exhaustion.”

With that said, the children go back to training and shortly after, Hashirama shows up with Kawarama in tow. He can tell immediately from their expressions that they have unpleasant news. Not someone-is-about-to-die or the-enemy-is-attacking-at-dawn news. Their expressions are more like ‘I don’t want to be lectured’ but with less personal guilt. So someone else has done something they think is going to piss him off.

His eyes narrow. “What happened?”

“Well… I told everyone about the Kelpies, but apparently, a group of nymphs had already made plans a couple days ago to take their kids to the forest today,” says Hashirama.

“Let me guess. The threat of Kelpies hasn’t changed their mind?” asks Tobirama.
Hashirama shrugs, lifting his arms in a ‘what can you do?’ gesture.

“In their defense, there hasn’t been a Kelpie near the capitol in fifty years,” says Kawarama. “And there are only three to five Kelpie attacks a year. They probably don’t think it’s very likely that they’ll encounter a Kelpie in the forest.”

“They’re also worried that if they don’t take their kids into the forest, after promising them that they would, then the kids will just sneak out on their own. Then they’ll be in a possibly Kelpie-infested forest with no adult supervision,” says Hashirama.

“….A fair point,” Tobirama concedes grudgingly.

At the last census, there were at least 62 full-blooded nymph children, 31 half-nymph children, 15 one-fourth nymph children, and 16 one-eighth nymph children. Any lower a percentage than that and they didn’t have the necessary instincts to be considered nymphs.

He could understand why the parents weren’t going to keep the kids cooped up in the city without hard evidence of a threat. 125 children throwing a tantrum because their instincts for trees and rivers were being denied? Nightmarish. Still….

“They are at least taking more precaution than normal, right?” he asks.

“Right. They’re hoping a few Uchiha adults will come along as well. Their fire magic will come in handy if we are attacked,” says Hashirama.

“Madara and the others should be done soon. When are the nymphs planning to leave?” asks Tobirama.

“They said they’d wait for us, but that they want to leave at least a few hours before sunset,” replies Hashirama.

“Okay. I’ll start talking to Madara about it, and we can ask the others when they’re done,” says Tobirama.

Luckily, it doesn’t take much to convince them. They’ve got the same need to be out in nature that nymphs do, though they generally prefer to be in the sky or up on mountaintops instead of in forests. That mountain home Madara had created for the two of them really was the best place for a nymph and dragon couple.

There’s only one thing wrong with their plans. Ayame overheard them.

“I want to go too,” insists Ayame. “I haven’t been to the forest in a week. Mama and Dada were too busy.”

Touka and Izuna exchange glances, both of them looking like they want to protest but not certain if they should. Ayame notices their reaction and her cheeks puff up like she’s drawing in breath to scream. Except instead of shouting, her mouth stays firmly shut, her chest stilling.

“What are you doing?” asks Touka. “Are you holding your breath?”

“Where did she even learn that from? Did you see other kids throwing tantrums this way? It doesn’t work,” says Izuna.

Ayame stays stubbornly silent, her cheeks slowly turning red. Izuna and Touka start to argue about how they should handle this while Tobirama comes up behind her, his hands skimming up her sides.
She lets out her breath in a shriek of laughter, batting away his hands.

“Uncle Tobi! No fair! That’s cheating,” complains Ayame.

“And threatening to suffocate yourself to get your way isn’t?” asks Tobirama dryly. “Look how worried your parents became. Why don’t you go apologize and ask them nicely if you can go with them?”

Touka kneels down as Ayame shyly approaches, giving a quickly amused glance up at him. She clearly remembers how he had acted as a pseudo-parent towards his younger brothers when their actual parents were busy. He had known how to get them to listen, too.

“I’m sorry for worrying you, Mama. But I really, really, really want to go to the forest with you and Papa. Can I go, please?” asks Ayame, giving Touka the puppy eyes.

Touka sighs softly. “If it means that much to you darling, then yes. But, you have to stay where we can see you. We don’t know for sure, but the forest might be dangerous right now. Don’t go wandering off, for any reason. Understood?”

“Yes, Mama. I’ll be good,” promises Ayame.

“Alright then. Let’s get our supplies,” says Touka.

The supplies, in this case, being backpacks with water bottles, trail mix, and first aid kits. Most of Madara, Tobirama, and Hashirama’s belongings are back at the castle, so Madara borrows a backpack from Izuna, and Tobirama and Hashirama borrow supplies from Kawarama and Itama. Once they’ve got everything they need, they start rounding up the kids and the few other adults who’ve volunteered to go with them.

There were three wood nymphs (Antoine, Noya, Bernette) and two water nymphs (Keiran and Viatrix), plus himself, Madara, Izuna, Touka, Hashirama, Itama, Kawarama, Keitaro, Jiro, and Takeo. That was fifteen adults to thirty-one children, which was not a bad ratio at all.

However, it still makes him uneasy, the idea of taking this many kids out in possibly Kelpie-infested forest. It doesn’t help that at least a third of the children were water nymphs. Normally, he’s content to let them be Noboru’s responsibility, what with them living in the man’s Kingdom. However, his instincts still say they’re his responsibility as the highest-ranking water nymph in the area.

Tobirama sighs and quietly asks Hashirama, “They do know that Kelpies are one of the few things that can drown a water nymph, right?”

Hashirama gives him an awkward smile and shrugs.

“Right,” he mutters. Then at a normal volume, “Is everybody here? Do we have everything we need?.....Okay, then, let’s go.”

Tobirama leads the trek down to the forest, the guards at the West Gate quickly letting them through at the sight of his irritated scowl. It isn’t until he notices how intently the little water nymph children were watching him that he forces his expression into something neutral. No need to traumatize them with his bad temper.

He starts out by taking them to the glade closest to the city, though he knows it won’t satisfy the water nymphs for long. Sure enough, after just half an hour of climbing trees and picking flowers, the children are asking to go to the river. His instincts practically scream at him not to go, but no one else seems to find anything amiss. Was he just overreacting?
With a rising feeling of trepidation, he walks with them to the river, the adults all in a loose circle around the children. They spread out a bit more once they reach the water, with adults on either side of the bank.

He calms down a bit when he sees how happy the children are, splashing in the water and skipping rocks like he and his brothers used to do when they were younger. It was nice to see Ayame making new friends too.

Unfortunately, that feeling of foreboding slowly creeps back in. He glances around surreptitiously, trying to see if anyone else has noticed anything odd. Frustratingly, no one else seems to think anything is amiss. Why was he the only one sensing danger?

Shouldn’t the wood nymphs be able to sense if a Kelpie was in their forest? Even Hashirama didn’t seem alarmed and he was the strongest wood nymph here. But maybe wood nymphs couldn’t sense Kelpies?

He’s never personally encountered one. All he knows about Kelpies comes from a book. So what does he remember then?

They can only be killed by fire, but trapping them is the tricky part. They can drown any creature with just a touch, even creatures that shouldn’t be able to drown. And…..they got the most energy from the death of strong water nymphs.

Oh. He was the Kelpie’s target?

His muscles tense as the sounds of a horse echoes through the forest, as the though the Kelpie was just waiting for him to catch on before making a move.

“Everyone out of the water!” shouts Jiro.

The children scramble to get to dry land as a green-skinned horse comes galloping out from behind the trees. Antoine is the closest adult and responds by opening a large crack in the ground, but the Kelpie leaps high up into the air, nearly landing on him. The Kelpie rears up on its high legs and kicks Antoine in the chest before he can move back, causing the man to choke as his lungs suddenly fill with water.

Izuna unleashes a stream of fire at the Kelpie, forcing it back and giving Antoine time to cough the water out of his lungs. Tobirama feels a rising sense of fury as the Kelpie’s next target was Viatrix, one of his water nymph subjects. He flares his magic, causing the creature to pause and stare at him, its eyes like twin pools of ink.

He grimaces as it suddenly charges at him, drawing his dagger, though little good it’ll do him against a creature like this. However, Madara steps in front of him before the Kelpie can reach him, creating a ring of fire around the two of them.

The Kelpie stomps his feet as more rings of fire appear, one around the children and Touka controlled by Keitaro and another around the adult nymphs controlled by Izuna. That left Jiro and Takeo outside the rings to fight the Kelpie. Although Hashirama soon proves that he doesn’t have to be outside the rings to fight as vines begin to shoot up from the ground, trying to wind around the horse.

Before the vines can do any damage, the Kelpie’s hooves strike out, causing the plants to become a water-logged, wilted mess. Tobirama doesn’t like the implications of that. Could the Kelpie use that ability on any organic matter? People, for instance? All this time, had Kelpies chosen not to use their
most effective ability against people because they could only gain energy through drowning their victim?

Tobirama grimaces as one of the children start crying, quickly glancing over to see Touka trying to calm him down without letting go of Ayame’s hand. Keitaro had to stay focused on the fire wall, leaving him unable to help comfort the young ones.

Hashirama and the other wood nymphs were all focusing on the ground, loosening the soil beneath the Kelpie’s feet to make it lose its footing and then sending jagged spears of rocks at it. For a moment, the plan seems to be working, but then the creature leaps into the river and a wall of water rises up to block everyone’s attacks.

“Okay, this isn’t working. Anyone have any ideas?” asks Jiro.

“Does anyone know how to perform an exorcism?” asks Keiran, only half joking.

Tobirama’s eyes narrow in thought, trying to figure out what kind of rune configuration would be needed to separate the dark spirit from the dead horse. He blocks out the sound of battle as he thinks, only snapping back to awareness when Madara grabs his wrist, his fire ring disappearing as he drags him to safety as a wall of water comes crashing down on them.

He has a moment to notice Keitaro and Touka leading the kids out of the forest before the Kelpie is charging at them again. It’s moving much faster now. Apparently, they’ve pissed it off.

It dodges Madara’s fire spear and tries to kick him, but pulls back at the last second as flames appear along Madara’s skin. Instead, it turns its attention to Tobirama. A foolish mistake on its part, turning its back on a dragon.

He has to draw magic from the earth to boost his speed, but he’s able to keep the Kelpie from touching him as Madara creates another wall of fire to separate them from the beast. Tobirama grabs a stick from the ground and begins to work on drawing the runic circle while Madara keeps it occupied. He has to make the circle large enough for the Kelpie to fit completely inside, so it takes a few minutes.

A very stressful few minutes as he has to ignore when the Kelpie lands a blow on Noya and Viatrix. His instincts scream when the latter gets hit, gritting his teeth as he hears her choke. The Kelpie would die for attacking one of his subjects, he would make sure of it.

“Lead it over here!” he calls out once the runes are done.

Tobirama stands behind the circle and flares his energy. Madara reluctantly lets the creature slip past him and Tobirama actives the runes as soon as the Kelpie was fully inside the circle. He can feel its spirit fighting against his magic and pours more energy into the runes.

“Try setting it on fire now,” suggests Tobirama.

The Kelpie screams as it’s set on fire, though it sounds more enraged than pained. He isn’t even sure if they can feel pain. And with the creature distracted, his runes are able to do their job, forcibly separating its spirit from the dead horse. Dark smoke pours out of the creature while the horse’s body begins to turn to ash.

He steps back as the smoke tries to come towards him, but magic suddenly surges up from the ground and envelopes the Kelpie’s spirit. His eyes snap closed as the magic gives off a bright, white light, and when it dies down, the spirit is nowhere to be found.
“What just happened?” asks Izuna.

Tobirama frowns thoughtfully and crouches down, laying his hand flat on the ground. He barely has to send any of his magic out before he’s being met halfway, feeling Nature’s mind brush against his own. His breath catches at the wave of fondness that he senses from her.

Along with a staggering amount of protectiveness and a vague smattering of possessiveness. That was...kind of odd, but not exactly unwelcome. Apparently, Nature had taken a liking to him after possessing him last week. If he was understanding things correctly, she had sensed him draw on her power earlier and had decided to check on him. Upon finding out that a minor spirit was trying to kill him, she had not been happy.

“It was the Spirit of Nature. She saved us,” says Tobirama.

“Saved us or saved you? She didn’t interfere until it looked like the thing was going to get you,” says Bernette.

Tobirama pauses. “...I don’t know.”

Bernette frowns at his answer but lets the subject drop. “Right. We should get back to the kids now that the Kelpie’s taken care of.” Then he looks around suspiciously. “There aren’t any more of those things running around, are there?”

Tobirama is shaking his head even before Nature sends feelings of safety to him. His instincts are quiet for the first time since they stepped into the forest. And he still doesn’t know why he’s the only one who could sense the Kelpie’s presence. A side effect from hosting Nature or a result of being the Kelpie’s preferred target?

“We’re safe for now, but we should leave just in case,” says Tobirama.

He stands up and disconnects his magic from the ground, but Nature’s presence doesn’t entirely disappear from his mind until they’re out of the forest. It was odd to know that he had somehow become one of her favorites.

They find the rest of the group inside the city walls, waiting for them near the gate. After escorting the children home and warning the parents about the danger they encountered in the forest, they return to Izuna’s house to discuss what happened. They being Tobirama, Madara, their brothers, Touka, and Ayame. The other adults they send on their way.

“So...that happened,” says Izuna. “What are we going to do now? The kids can’t go into the forest if Kelpies could be showing up at any moment.”

“What did you guys do to get rid of it?” asks Keitaro. “Can it be taught to others?”

“The runic circle I used to exorcise it could be taught, but Nature is the one who got rid of its spirit. I don’t know what would happen if she didn’t intervene at that point,” says Tobirama.

“It is considered unusual for her to interfere with mortal matters without being directly asked, is it not?” asks Takeo. “I didn’t think you had time to get her attention before she was helping you.”

He must be silent too long because Madara leans forward, eyes intent as he stares at him from the opposite couch.

“I understand why you didn’t say anything in front of the other nymphs, but you’re among family now. What are you hiding?” asks Madara.
Tobirama shoots him a mildly annoyed glare but Madara doesn’t back down. It isn’t like he really wants to keep it a secret, but things like this aren’t common. He doesn’t want them to worry.

“Nature seems to….favor me now,” admits Tobirama. “I think she knew the moment I was in danger and intervened when she realized I couldn’t deal with the threat on my own.”

Madara scowls. “She isn’t going to try and possess you again, is she? If she favors you….would she want you to turn into a tree?”

“Nature probably likes trees. She might not see it as harmful,” muses Itama.

Ayame gasps. “I don’t want Uncle Tobi to turn into a tree!”

Everyone turns to stare at her.

“…..Should we be having this conversation in front her?” asks Jiro.

“Well, probably not,” admits Touka, “but I don’t feel right keeping secrets from her either.”

Tobirama gestures for Ayame to come over to him and puts her in his lap when she does. “There is only a very small chance of me turning into a tree, Ayame. You don’t need to worry about that. I wish we could shelter you from the danger, but our enemy isn’t going to ignore you because you’re a child. Still, as long as you don’t go running off on your own, we should be able to keep you safe.”

Ayame twirls a lock of her hair between her fingers, a nervous gesture, and doesn’t stop frowning. “I know. I trust you guys to protect me, but I’m worried you’ll get hurt. I know what death is. I don’t want any of you to die.”

“That’s….I can’t truthfully promise you that there’s no chance of any of us dying, but I don’t think it very likely. Everyone in this room, besides yourself, knows how to fight. The Spirit of Nature will help us deal with Kaguya, but we can handle any creature she might throw at us,” says Tobirama.

Ayame gives him a slightly dubious look but some of the worry eases from her expression. “If you say so.” She’s quiet for a moment, then asks, “Can we have a sleepover? I don’t get to see all of you together like this often. Today was fun before the Kelpie attacked.”

Tobirama raises an eyebrow at Madara who shrugs. He takes that to mean that Madara will stay if he does. Then he looks to Izuna and Touka, who are quietly whispering to each other. He waits patiently for them to make their decision.

“A sleepover is fine with us,” says Izuna. “We’ll need to get extra blankets and pillows, create a makeshift bed on the floor.”

“And you’re welcome to invite Mito and Tsunade if you want, Hashirama,” says Touka. “We should have enough room for everyone if we push the couches back to the wall.”

Hashirama grins. “That sounds wonderful. I’ll go ask them now, and bring some blankets back with me. Do we need any other supplies?”

“I don’t think we will. Between our three houses, we should have enough food for the….thirteen of us. Wow. We’ll probably need to go grocery shopping in the morning though,” says Keitaro, giving a short laugh. “Though I’m thinking we might need to move the party to mine or Takeo’s house. We have less bedrooms but more living room space.”

“We have more cooking pots at our house,” says Itama. “If we’re going to be eating supper together,
it would make sense to pick our house.”

“Sounds good to me. Takeo and I will get the spare bedding from our house while you guys get started on clearing space,” says Jiro.

“And I’ll go ask Mito and Tsunade if they want to join us,” says Hashirama.

Ayame does a little wriggling dance in her excitement, causing him to hold onto her lest she dance right off his lap. “Sleepover, sleepover, we’re going to have a sleepover,” says Ayame, clapping her hands.

“You’re really happy about this, aren’t you?” asks Tobirama, amused. “Would you like to help me carry the bedding into the other house?”

“Yes!” Ayame jumps out of his lap and heads for the hall closet. “This is where the extra blankets are!” She opens the door and tugs at the blankets, sending them crashing down on her in an avalanche of cloth.

Tobirama takes the blankets from her and has her carry a few pillows. Madara helps Keitaro and Itama move the couches over while the rest of them start spreading the sheets out. They put all the thickest comforters on the bottom, leaving at least a foot of space away from the fireplace. Even with the Uchiha’s higher than average body temperature, they would still need more heat than that during a winter night.

They’re just finishing up when Hashirama comes back with his wife and kid. Tobirama is pleased to see that Tsunade appears happy to be there. He knows that some teenagers go through overly independent phases where they don’t like to hang out with their parents and older relatives.

After adding the new bedding to the pile, they start to debate over what to make for supper. Then they assign tasks: chopping vegetables, sautéing the meat, setting the table, etc.

There’s a brief moment of confusion when they try to figure out seating arrangements. Not all of them can fit at the table. Instead, Itama hands out hand towels for them to put on their laps, underneath their plates, and they all sit on the living room floor.

“Anybody want hot cocoa after we eat? This seems like the perfect day for it,” says Keitaro.

“Due to the weather or as comfort food after being attacked?” asks Kawarama.

Keitaro shrugs. “Both?”

“Hot cocoa sounds good to me,” says Tsunade.

“Me too. I love chocolate;” says Ayame.

“You love all forms of sugar,” says Touka. “But at least you don’t complain about brushing your teeth like I’ve heard other kids do. I’d hate for you to get cavities.”

Ayame wrinkles her nose. “Brushing is boring. But I don’t want teeth pain.”

Jiro leans forward and ruffles her hair affectionately. “No one wants teeth pain, kiddo.”

Ayame sticks her tongue out at him, smoothing her hair back into place. She goes back to eating, happily munching on the fish and not even hesitating at the vegetables. Touka and Izuna did well to not raise a spoiled child.
After dinner, everyone relaxes with a cup of cocoa and Keitaro lights up the fireplace. Amusingly enough, the calm atmosphere seems to put everyone in a cuddly mood. Tobirama and Madara sit leaning against the wall, Madara’s arm a comfortable weight against his shoulders.

Izuna finishes his cocoa quickly and lays his head down on Touka’s lap, who tolerates it with fond amusement. Ayame sits in Tsunade’s lap, reminding Tobirama of his childhood when he would hold his younger brothers. Hashirama and Mito are by the fireplace, heads bent together as they converse quietly.

Keitaro tolerates the inactivity for a few minutes before getting up to do the dishes, Itama following him into the kitchen with a slight sigh. It’s not even that Keitaro doesn’t know how to relax, but that he has a very active mind. It’s what makes him so good at coming up with new and unique fire shows, but he’s gotten used to being constantly on the move unless he’s tired.

Jiro all but pouts as Takeo gets up to help them, leaving him with no one to cuddle. He mutters something about his brother being ‘too nice’ and offers to collect everyone’s empty cups before joining Takeo in the kitchen.

“Perhaps we should start getting changed into our night clothes, then?” suggests Touka. “The youngest can go first.”

Along with the blankets, they had also brought a change of clothes and a toothbrush. When it was Tobirama’s turn to change, he wasn’t surprised to find his blue yukata in amongst his night clothes, but Madara was.

“What…” asks Madara.

Tobirama shrugs. “I told Hashirama a while ago that this was the first courting gift you gave me, beside the house. But houses have a different sort of sentimental attachment to them.”

Madara gives him a bemused look but knows better than to say anything negative about it. He’s happy that Tobirama likes his gift, of course, but he doesn’t understand the level of attachment he has to it. Though, Tobirama doesn’t understand his own need to hoard certain objects, so he’ll just have to accept that their instincts are different and learn to deal with it.

When they get back to the living room, Tobirama insists on taking a spot closest to the front door. Kawarama quickly takes the spot next to them. Hashirama looks ready to protest when Mito intervenes, saying they’ll sleep next to the window. This leaves all the entrance points guarded by someone with Knight training.

Tsunade and Ayame end up in the middle of the bed, the most well-guarded position. Tobirama suspects they would be doing it this way even if they weren’t worried about Kaguya attacking at any random moment. Dragons and nymphs were very protective of their young.

“Can we have a bedtime story?” asks Ayame.

“I suppose so. What kind of story are you in the mood for today?” asks Touka.


“Oh? And what’s to stop the dragon from rescuing himself?” asks Izuna.

“Because they caught him in human form. He can’t transform or they’ll learn his secret. But the two girls are his friends, and when they learn about his capture, they go to save him,” says Ayame.
“Very well then. It was a dark and gloomy evening when Lady Ayame and her best friend Lady Tsunade heard the terrible news that their good friend, Hiraku, had been taken hostage by a group of bandits,” says Touka. “They were very troubled by this news, not only because they worried for their friend’s safety but because they knew his parents were only of average wealth. And the ransom the bandits were asking for was much too high!”

“However, his parents were also unwilling to risk anyone else’s life to ask them to save their son. They had determined they would just have to pay the ransom, even if it meant going broke. Lady Ayame and Tsunade couldn’t let that happen. They knew where the bandits would be waiting to pick up the ransom money, so off they went to save their friend,” says Izuna.

Together, Izuna and Touka weave a tale of two young teenagers with the power of water and earth navigating a treacherous forest, filled with dangerous creatures, and heroically risking their lives to defeat the bandits that stole their friend.

“In the end, the young man was so impressed by their loyalty that he revealed to them his dragon form. He was very happy by their positive reaction, for he was adopted and had no else to share this secret with before now. His adoptive parents had raised him to keep it a secret lest someone try to use him for his power,” says Izuna.

“But Ayame and Tsunade continued to be great friends with Hiraku, growing up to great adventurers, able to fly all over the world with their friend and help others in need,” says Touka.

“And nobody got married because kissing is weird,” declares Ayame.

That comment earns some startled laughter, causing Ayame to frown.

“It is!” she insists. “All those Princess books have her marrying the Prince and kissing him and stuff. Who would want to kiss boys? It’s weird.”

“What about kissing girls then? Does that sound weird?” asks Jiro.

Ayame stops to consider it, then shrugs. “A little bit. I don’t want to kiss anyone.”

“Most children your age don’t have an interest in that. You might change your mind when you’re older, though some always find kissing to be weird,” says Takeo.

“Jiraiya has already started showing interest in girls,” says Tsunade, frowning. “He was only stupid enough to flirt with me once. I told him Princesses don’t do casual, so unless he decides he wants to marry me one day, he better keep things platonic. He looked quite alarmed by the idea of marriage.”

“Does your teammate often flirt with women?” asks Jiro.

“If he thinks they’re pretty, yeah. Izumi-sensei taught him to how to flirt respectfully when he realized Jiraiya was growing interested in women, so hopefully, he’ll manage not to grow up into a pervert,” says Tsunade.

“Perhaps I should give him some tips, too. As someone who also flirts extensively, I have experience on what people respond positively to,” says Jiro.

Tsunade snorts. “He doesn’t need any encouragement, but yeah, go ahead. If it makes sure he stays polite about it, then I welcome your help.”

Ayame interrupts any further conversation by yawning widely, prompting the adults to check the time. Deciding it was late enough for bed, they turn off the lights and get under the covers. Takeo
chooses to sleep next to the fireplace, casting a spell over it so that he’ll be alerted if it gets out of control or starts to die off.

Tobirama tugs a pillow closer, sharing it with Madara as they lie side-by-side, breaths mingling as they watch each other through the flickering light. He traces his finger down Madara’s cheek, stopping at the corner of his mouth. Madara catches his hand, laying a kiss at his wrist before brushing their lips together.

They keep it short, not wanting it to be remarked upon by the others in the room. Though, really, it isn’t as though the other couples aren’t doing their own good-night rituals. He still doesn’t want any of them to coo over how ‘romantic’ or ‘cute’ they’re being. Hashirama can be annoyingly sappy, and Izuna loves to tease Madara.

He closes his eyes and relaxes as Madara wraps an arm around his waist. The energy of the room slowly calms as everyone drifts into sleep. In the morning, he’ll have to get up and take a shift patrolling the city, but for now, he can enjoy a peaceful night with his family.

Chapter End Notes

So that’s Kaguya’s origin story. What do you think? Was it unexpected?

Also, I want to make it clear that the miscarriage was not what caused Kaguya's insanity. It was her delving into the dark arts to perform necromancy.
Tobirama scowls down at the reports in his hands, sitting on one of the benches near the training grounds while his students spar. He’s mostly here for moral support or in case they have any questions. Most of his attention is on trying to figure out a pattern to Kaguya’s attacks.

Three months since she started her war by attacking their capital city, and now she’s attacked at least one city in every country. There’s no pattern that he can see. No rhyme or reason to why she attacks a smaller city one time and then a larger one the next.

She’s also, unfortunately, become smarter since their encounter. No one has reported any sighting of her, though it’s undoubtedly her work. It seems she’s not willing to give any of the nymphs a chance to channel Nature and battle her directly.

How are they supposed to defeat an opponent that refuses to show themselves? They need to come up with a way to draw her out, preferably in a location without any civilians. All of their Knights are currently equipped for battle. They’ve either purchased new armor or had their old set checked for weaknesses, and everyone now has a blade of some kind capable of piercing basilisk armor.

The sorcerers had taken a month to accomplish that task. Every blade had to be inscribed with runes and charged with magic. Basilisk scales would simply reflect a spell shot at them directly, and so instead they used that magical energy to sharpen and strengthen their blades.

Danzo approaches him after his spar with Koharu, giving his papers a curious glance. “Do you think Kaguya plans to come back any time soon? She’s attacked a city in every country now, and she started with us.”

“That is possibility. However, we have no way of knowing who she’ll attack next. In some countries, she’s already attacked two cities. We’re not the only ones she’s only attacked once,” says Tobirama.

“And she may not even be trying to attack us all evenly,” says Danzo.

“Exactly. We need to come up with a solution soon. Everyone’s getting uneasy and impatient with this situation, even Grandfather, and he’s the most patient man I know,” says Tobirama.

“King Kaimana’s palace isn’t being targeted,” says Danzo, confused.

“No, but he’s been wanting Madara and I to visit for months now. He knows that I can’t leave while Kaguya is still a threat. Besides the coastal cities, the capital has the highest level of water nymphs in the country. Everywhere further inland just has a few water nymphs. There are a lot of wood nymphs throughout Whirlpool, but my instincts don’t make me as protective of them,” says Tobirama.

“Their safety is technically the responsibility of the wood nymph King, right?” asks Danzo. “Who even is that, at the moment?”

“For this country, we currently have a queen. Althea. She’s over seven hundred years old. I’ve heard she’s thinking of retiring soon. A nymph’s life starts winding down after a thousand. Most don’t live a decade more than that. And with a long life comes a long job and a long retirement,” says
“Does she have a replacement in mind yet?” asks Danzo.

“I don’t think anything’s been decided yet. There are some that think Hashirama should be next in line. He’s powerful and already part of a royal family, both by marriage to Mito and by being Kaimana’s grandson,” says Tobirama.

“Hmm. Does Hashirama even want to be royalty?” asks Danzo skeptically.

“Not even a little bit,” confirms Tobirama. “He’s content with the responsibility he already has and wishing he had less probably. Managing a Noble clan and raising his daughter is enough for him.”

“To be fair, it does sound like a lot of work, especially taking care of a kid. Personally, I don’t see the appeal,” says Danzo.

“No? Not even as a babysitter?” asks Tobirama.

Danzo snorts. “Sensei, by the time you and Madara get around to having kids, I’ll probably be too old for babysitting duty.”

Tobirama stills, staring at the ground with an unsettled frown.

“Sensei?” asks Danzo, concerned.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” admits Tobirama. “I don’t want to wait so long that my children never get a chance to meet my students.”

Danzo blinks, then his lips curve up into a small smile. “Well, assuming nothing kills me off before retirement age, Knights tend to be in good enough health to live at least until their nineties. Kids don’t tend to remember events very well from their younger years, but if I at least meet them when they’re teenagers, they should remember me later.”

Tobirama hums thoughtfully. “If I had children when you’re sixty, then that would give them about thirty to forty years to know you. And since they would become adults during that time, you would be able to get to know their full personality as well. That’s about forty years away. I could work another thirty-eight years as a Knight, then spend two years traveling with Madara before coming back to have children.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all figured it out,” says Danzo, amused. “Now you just have to get Madara to agree.”

“I don’t believe that will be a problem. Madara seems to look forward to my retirement more than I do. He’ll be thrilled to hear I’m only going to work for a few more decades before vacationing,” says Tobirama.

“You’ve said before you don’t want to be a Knight while raising a child, but do you have other career goals in mind? I can’t imagine you to be content sitting at home with the children all day,” says Danzo.

“I’ve had more time to devote to research these past few months. It’s something I enjoy and not a career that will ever be unnecessary. Society is always moving forward. I’m sure I’ll find something to do,” says Tobirama. “But that’s in the far future. I’m content to focus on being a Knight right now.”
“A Knight who does research on the side?” asks Danzo. “It’s not like all you do is battle monsters. I’ve heard some joke that you must have been born with a book in hand.”

“I did learn to read at an early age,” Tobirama says with a smile. He turns his attention to the training grounds when he notices his other students approaching. “All of you have improved a great deal since I first started teaching you. I don’t doubt that you’ll all qualify for Senior Knight in a few years.”

“Thank you, sensei,” says Kagami.

“We’d get to teach students of our own then,” says Koharu. “I think I would like that.”

“I think I would prefer teaching the basics to the trainees than being assigned my own team. It seems like it would be less stressful than having to keep teenagers safe during missions,” says Homura.

“I can say from experience that the Knights who take on teams will be grateful that they don’t have to teach their students how to hold a sword or keep it sharp,” says Tobirama.

“And how to throw a punch without breaking your thumb?” asks Torifune.

“Exactly,” says Tobirama dryly.

“Personally, I’ve been enjoying my time as a teaching assistant,” says Sarutobi. “I’m looking forward to having students of my own.”

Tobirama gives him a fond look. There’s something rewarding about having a student of his decide he wants to be a teacher as well. He feels it reflects well upon his own teaching ability that Sarutobi thinks positively about the career.

“Are we doing anything else? Because I’ve got to be at the village gates in—” Kagami checks his watch—“two hours. I’ve been requested to help with a Kelpie.”

Tobirama frowns. “There wasn’t another fire user they could ask for?”

“There was. He’s going too,” says Kagami. “The more fire elementals, the stronger the flame. And the stronger the flame, the less time it takes to kill the Kelpie.”

Apparently, the way Tobirama had chosen to deal with that Kelpie had been unusual. The normal method was to trap the creatures in a runic circle and burn them until their magic ran out (which usually took hours). With no magic, they couldn’t shield themselves and were killed. His method had directly expelled the spirit with its magic intact. The general consensus right now was that Nature wouldn’t have interfered if the spirit hadn’t been able to harm him. So the slow method would have to do.

“I see. Do the rest of you have missions today?” asks Tobirama.

“I’ll be going with Kagami,” says Koharu. “They’re trying to train younger sorcerers on how to deal with Kelpies.”

None of the rest of his students have a mission today, so he wishes Kagami and Koharu good luck and sends them on their way before going back to training with the others. He doesn’t have that much left to teach them. They’ve become proficient in his style of martial arts, can expertly wield a sword, and hit the target dead center with a knife ten out of ten times.

Koharu doesn’t have his interests in runes but is capable of using them. He’s taught her the most
important sequences she’ll need in the field, but he doubts she’ll ever truly become a rune master. For that, you have to be able to come up with your own sequences and draw out a complex runic circle in under a minute.

None of them are water elementals, so he can’t teach them the tactics he uses for that. He was able to be some help to Kagami, having seen the way other Uchiha use their fire techniques, but Kagami has plenty of clansmen to give him advice. Likewise, Torifune and Sarutobi were able to receive training from family on how to use their animal affinity gifts.

Perhaps when his current teams are promoted, he should see about getting another set of students. He’ll still be able to spar with his former students, but it isn’t quite the same as teaching them. Perhaps if one of them develops an interest in research, he might still be able to act as their mentor.

Although, it may be best for him to wait before requesting another team. It takes more time in the beginning to personally train a set of students. Madara would become rather annoyed if he was always busy. Hmm. Perhaps in another five years? If he spaces it out well enough, Madara shouldn’t complain too much.

With that uplifting thought in mind, he goes in search of his husband. He finds him in the hallway outside of the rooms, a hallway that regretfully leads to other Nobles’ rooms as evidenced by the scene before him. Adeline Belrose, a Noblewoman in her twenties, was standing just inches away from Madara, her hand upon his arm.

Now, such a thing would not normally be a problem, if the touch was platonic. Why do people have to look at his husband with such obvious interest? Well, obvious to him anyway. Madara has proven many times in the past to have trouble telling when someone is flirting with him unless they were being blunt.

From the emotions drifting over their bond, Madara was torn between pushing Adeline away and trying not to come off as rude. The Uchiha clan had officially been declared a Noble clan a month ago with Madara and Izuna as co-leaders. If Madara was seen being rude to other Nobles this soon, it could hurt the clan’s reputation and possibly get them knocked back down to regular clan status.

“Heir Adeline, is there a reason you’re accosting my husband?” asks Tobirama.

He sees her grimace before her expression smooths out into a falsely pleasant mask. She also takes a step back, to Madara’s obvious relief.

“Heir Tobirama. Don’t be silly. Madara and I were just talking.”

“I see. Perhaps, then, in the future, you could talk from a distance? Neither Madara or myself are comfortable having a near stranger so close to our person,” says Tobirama.

Adeline gives him a considering look then nods. “Of course. I would not wish to make either of you uncomfortable.”

In other words, she was not one of the few trying to steal his husband from him. She was one of the few who wanted to become their surrogate. Unfortunately for her, she would be too old to conceive by the time he was ready to have children. Not to mention how outraged the Kaiyō Nobles would be if he chose a human to be his surrogate.

“Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse us? I have important matters to discuss with my husband,” says Tobirama.

Adeline dips her head, just low enough to signify her respect to someone of a higher station. “Very
well then. I will leave you to your important matters. Perhaps we could talk again soon?”

“Perhaps,” says Tobirama, noncommittal.

They watch her walk away and Madara all but sags in relief when she’s out of sight. Tobirama opens the door to their rooms and gestures for Madara to follow him in, not wanting to talk out in the hallway where someone could overhear them.

Madara kicks off his shoes by the door and flops onto the couch. “That’s starting to get really tiring. You think if we make some kind of announcement about when we’re actually going to have kids, they might back off until that point?”

“Some of them might. That’s actually something I wanted to discuss with you. A conversation I had with Danzo earlier made me realize that I don’t want to wait so long that all our human friends are dead before we have children,” says Tobirama.

“And I suppose you’ve already created a timeline of how you want events to unfold?” asks Madara.

“Of course. Did you even need to ask?”

Madara shakes his head. “So, what have you planned for us?”

“I’ll work as a Knight for another 35-38 years, then we’ll take two years to vacation around the continent. We can spend the first six months just the two of us, and then our brothers can join us for the rest. After the vacation, we’ll come back to the capitol, choose a surrogate, and have at least two children. I’ll work on research projects in my spare time, and you can do…whatever it is that you want as a career. Job opportunities will probably be a bit different forty years from now,” says Tobirama.

“So in other words, we’ll plan to make a plan,” says Madara.

Tobirama’s mouth twists in displeasure. “We can’t plan for future circumstances if we don’t know what they’ll be.”

Madara nods agreeably, looking amused. “So a plan to make a plan.”

Tobirama huffs, irritably pushing Madara’s feet out of the way so he can sit beside him. So he likes to make detailed plans. What was so strange about that?

Madara wraps an arm around his waist and pulls him closer, pressing a kiss against the side of his neck. “Strange isn’t what I meant, but you can’t deny that the majority of people don’t get the same enjoyment from planning everything out to the last detail.”

“Everyone else gets enjoyment from chaos,” mutters Tobirama.

Madara laughs and the amusement ripples through their bond. Tobirama closes his eyes and immerses himself in the connection between them, letting his thoughts drift as Madara’s emotions flow through him.

As peaceful as it is, he almost falls asleep. Madara nudges him upright before he does, insisting they still have things to do today. Tobirama sighs but gives up on the idea of napping.

“Good. Now, you promised that you’d help me look over these business proposals,” says Madara. He gets a pile of folders off the bookshelf and returns to the couch. “These five are what Izuna and I think might be worth investing in, these two we’re not sure about, and the rest we’re pretty sure are
“Right. Let me see the ones you’re thinking about approving first,” says Tobirama.

Madara hands the files over and Tobirama flips through them, scanning through the proposals quickly. Then he goes over the most promising one more thoroughly.

“This clothing shop might be worth investing in. Not only do they make up their own designs but they also import clothing from all over the continent. The Nobles especially are always looking for new and exotic things to spend their money on. And since this business is looking to expand to selling jewelry as well, that will broaden their customer base. More profit for them and more profit for your clan,” says Tobirama.

“That’s the one Izuna favored as well. What’s the standard way to do this? Interest rates and payment plans?” asks Madara.

“That’s the first method. Typically, you don’t start charging them interest until a few months after giving them the loan. That gives them a chance to start making a profit. The amount they pay you each month is determined by how much they’re making. If you charge them too much, they’ll go broke and won’t be able to pay you anything,” says Tobirama.

“Right. And the second method?”

“Instead of them paying back the loan, you get a certain percent of their profits, either indefinitely or over a certain number of years. The percentage is higher in the beginning, and then goes down after you’ve earned the same amount that you loaned them. This is the method I prefer as it gives a higher profit overall, even if you don’t make as much in the beginning as the first method would give you. However, not all businesses are willing to accept this second method,” says Tobirama.

“Okay. Then if Izuna agrees, I’ll offer the business the second method of paying back the loan,” says Madara. “Should I only invest in one business to start with?”

Tobirama hums contemplatively. “Normally, I would say yes, but you do have the finances to stay ahead even if one of the businesses fails. I would suggest investing in two to start with. That way you’ll still make a profit if one of them doesn’t do well.”

“Alright. Which of the other businesses do you think would be most successful?” asks Madara.

Tobirama reads through the other four proposals, then hands one of them to Madara. “The restaurant wanting to move to a larger location. They’ve already got a wide customer base. I’ve even eaten there a few times before. They’re good.”

Madara scans through the paper for the name of the restaurant. “I haven’t been there before. I’d like to taste their food for myself before making a decision. And, now I’m wondering, is it normal for Nobles to invest in different types of businesses? And does the reputation of the business affect the reputation of the Noble?”

“It does. And it works in reverse. The businesses will advertise that they’ve been sponsored by you. If your reputation is positive, then they tend to get more customers. But if they do something the public finds distasteful, they’ll wonder why you would sponsor someone like them,” says Tobirama.

Madara makes a slight grimace but doesn’t comment, so Tobirama continues speaking.

“As for your other question, the Nobles who exclusively make money from investing tend to sponsor many different types of businesses. The Nobles who have their own businesses might invest in one
or two, and that usually only occurs because they know and are friends with the owner. For example, the Belrose clan owns a vineyard and makes enough money to support the entire family. No investments needed. Hashirama decided when he took over the clan that the orchard wasn’t enough anymore. He wanted to be able to support our clansmen when they needed financial help,” says Tobirama.

“And now he can afford to pay for everyone’s medical expenses,” says Madara.

“And for the women to take maternity leave,” says Tobirama. “Or to help supplement a family’s income if one of the parents wants to stay at home with the kids full-time.”

Tobirama looks at Madara curiously when he stays silent for a few minutes, but waits for him to get his thoughts in order. His mate has had to deal with him getting lost in thought as a new research idea pops into his head often enough that he can be patient.

“Hashirama is a sentimental fool, but sometimes his ideas make sense,” says Madara. “I want to be able to give the same financial security to my clan. I know a few of my cousins have wished they could have spent more time at home with their children.”

“Alright,” says Tobirama, wondering what else is wrong. Madara wouldn’t get silent like this just because he agrees with Hashirama. “What else is on your mind?”

Madara scowls, the expression looking more like it’s directed at himself. “I don’t like the realization that Hashirama is more responsible than me.”

Tobirama blinks. He starts to open his open to refute it, then stops because, well….he’s not entirely wrong.

“You see it too, then? With your help, Hashirama has been working on making his clan prosper while I spent the last ten years traveling. And while I do consider that time to be worthwhile, I want to do better now. To help the clan,” says Madara.

“To be clear, your clan hasn’t exactly been suffering in your absence. However, I’m sure they’ll appreciate not having to worry about bills if their business isn’t doing very well that month. And if you’re seeing Hashirama as a role model in this endeavor, maybe you’ll want to create your own charity like he has,” says Tobirama.

Madara makes a face at the idea of thinking of Hashirama as a role model, but then gets thoughtful as the rest of what Tobirama said registers. “A charity? What’s the goal of his charity? Who does his organization help?”

“He started with the goal of helping single parents, and then it was any family that struggled to put food on the table. His overall goal is to make sure no one starves, with a side mission of trying to help anyone unemployed find a job,” says Tobirama.

“Worthy goals,” says Madara. “Should I just donate to his charity when I have the money? There doesn’t need to be two charities doing the exact same thing, does there?”

“No, there doesn’t. However, it won’t be as noticeable to the public eye that you’re helping if all you do is donate to an already existing charity. On occasion, you could give money to the children’s school or the public library. That would catch the public’s attention,” says Tobirama.

“I do like the idea of donating to the school, but it seems weird that we have to think about reputation when talking about charity,” says Madara. “When did the Nobles turn generosity into a publicity stunt?”
“One has to wonder if it was the Nobles who started that nonsense or the common people who felt inclined to know everything that the local rich people were doing,” says Tobirama.

“And then they got used to the attention and became obsessed with their reputation?” asks Madara disdainfully.

Tobirama understands his frustration. They were both private people, but for the sake of their clan, they were willing to step into the spotlight. Noble politics were like a minefield with a pile of gold at the other side. Take one misstep and everything starts blowing up around you, but cross the field correctly and you wind up rich.

“About half of them did,” says Tobirama. “The other half are a bit more sane. Anyway, let’s put the paperwork aside for now. You can talk to Izuna about the investments later.”

“Sure. What’s next on the agenda?” asks Madara.

Tobirama checks the time. “Lunch is in half an hour. I suppose we could play a game until then, or just…talk about something that isn’t politics and war for a while?”

“I could tell you more about my travels?” suggests Madara.

Tobirama finds himself subconsciously leaning forward, interested to hear more about Madara’s adventures. “I’ve been wondering. Did you participate in any tournaments while you away? Since that’s one of the ways you made money in this country.”

“I competed in a few. It was interesting to see how I compared to the other countries’ warriors. Mostly, I made a living out of helping potion masters find rare ingredients. Some of them paid in money, others traded me for items I wanted to add to my hoard. Since I mostly ate whatever I hunted or scavenged in the forest, I didn’t need a lot of funds,” says Madara.

“And you helped families with chores and home repairs when you wanted a place to stay and a home-cooked meal,” says Tobirama.

Madara nods. “It came as a surprise when I realized I was enjoying the construction projects. Creating sheds and fixing roofs. Making bird houses. And I liked designing our cave house.”

“What other objects have you learned to make besides birdhouses?” asks Tobirama.

“Bookshelves, tables, chairs, cabinets, rocking chairs. Once I was able to make these things on my own, not just assist, I was able to start selling them as well. A family would let me stay with them for a few months. Rent free in exchange for an item for their family, and I would contribute to the groceries with the money I made selling items to other families,” says Madara.

“And this allowed you to get rich?” asks Tobirama.

“Not exactly. I was able to make more money off the items I put custom designs on, but that can’t account for the number of jewels I brought back. No, sometimes when I made trades with rare collectors, I was able to get two items in return. One of them for my hoard, and one of them to sell or trade to someone else,” says Madara.

“Is that something you’d want to continue doing now? Making furniture? Perhaps as a hobby or to make extra money. You could charge more now that you’re a Noble,” says Tobirama.

Madara takes a moment to think about it. “…Yes, I think I would like that. I made all the bookcases in our library and the kitchen table. All of the wooden objects in the house, actually. We seem to
have everything we need right now, furniture wise, so I’ll sell whatever I make or give them as gifts to a family member.”

Madara had made all of the bookcases? The ones with floral designs carved along the borders and some type of animal on the side? He had seen a falcon on one, a fish on another, a lion, a tiger, and many others. That must have taken him a long time.

Once again, he was floored by how much time and effort Madara had gone through to get him all those gifts. All of their wooden furniture was hand-made and Madara had spent years bartering, buying, and fighting to get him dozens of rare books.

Placing his hands on the back of the couch, on either side of Madara’s shoulder, he shifts forward until he’s straddling Madara’s lap. Before Madara can do more than blink, he slots their mouths together, kissing him slow and sweet, the full force of his love and affection sweeping through their bond.

Madara makes a soft, shocked little moan and clutches at his hips. Even after all these months, he can still feel how relieved Madara is to have his love returned. He keeps his anger behind his shields, not wanting Madara to misinterpret it. Those Kaiyō nymphs had done everything in their power to try and keep him from marrying Madara. It was infuriating.

Every time he thinks about it, he wants to do…something. Not hurt them, necessarily. His instincts won’t allow for that. Perhaps some form of public embarrassment. They had overstepped their bounds, thinking they could control who their Prince married. When he finally gets an opportunity to visit the Palace, he’ll see about setting up a few pranks to make his ire known to them.

Tobirama runs his fingers through Madara’s hair, lightly scratching his nails against his scalp. Madara shivers faintly and drags his hand up underneath Tobirama’s shirt, hand smoothing over the planes of his back. Threads of desire curl between their minds. Such a simple touch and yet it leaves him wanting more.

“Ah, do we have time— Madara’s voice hitches as he nibbles on his neck—“for this?”

“Perhaps not to go all the way, but we can still have fun. Can you summon a small towel from the bathroom?” asks Tobirama.

It takes a moment for Madara to concentrate on the magic, and Tobirama’s wandering hands were not helping, but he gets the requested towel and hands it over. Tobirama sets the towel aside for the moment then starts to pull both of their pants down a few inches. Madara catches on quickly and helps him, then he spreads the towel across Madara’s lap, to catch the mess when they were done.

“There, now we won’t have to worry about showering afterward. That gives us enough time,” says Tobirama.

He shifts forward, shuddering in pleasure as their cocks slide against each other. His breath exhales out on a soft moan as Madara wraps a hand around both their erections, stroking over both of them slowly enough to be a tease.

“Weren’t you the one… ah…worried about the time?” asks Tobirama.

Madara gives a narrow-eyed look at the clock then shakes his head. “We won’t be late just because I take more than thirty seconds to get us off. Don’t be impatient.”

Despite the admonishment, Madara does speed up, the allure of pleasure too tempting to resist. Tobirama cups the back of his head and kisses him, hips subtly twitching every time Madara’s touch
slows down. Pleasure flows through their bond in a feedback loop, bringing them to the edge much faster than if they had the bond closed-off.

It was something they had needed to learn to manage in the beginning. They like being able to feel each other’s pleasure, but have the bond too open and they didn’t last nearly as long as they both wanted.

Tobirama reaches down between them, lightly running his fingers over Madara’s balls, smirking when it makes the other hiss in pleasure. Madara retaliates by swiping his thumb over the head of his cock, dragging drops of precum down the rest of his length. Tobirama nips at the side of Madara’s ear. Madara scrapes his teeth over the sensitive skin of his neck.

It quickly turns into a competition to see who can make the other cum first. Madara lightly tugs at his hair before trailing his hand down his back and farther still, fingertips rubbing gently at his entrance. His hips twitch at the spike of pleasure and he bites at Madara’s neck. They don’t have time to go all out, but being touched down there almost always makes him want to be fucked.

Madara chuckles softly at his reaction and a bottle of lube comes sailing out from the bedroom. A moment later, Madara is pushing two slick-coated fingers inside him, finding his prostate with practiced ease. Heat flushes through him and he grasps Madara’s shoulders as he rocks his hips into his mate’s touch.

His breath catches as pleasure sears through him, muscles clamping down around Madara’s fingers as he cum. Madara shudders underneath as the pleasure transmits through the bond, sending him over the edge as well. They take a moment to enjoy the afterglow before using the towel to clean up and put their clothes back in order.

With that done, they make their way to the Dining Hall. After piling their plates high with food, they look around to see who’s already here. Mito and Masaki were at the far left table, chatting with a few Nobles. They glance at each other, silently coming to the agreement that they’d rather avoid politics for now and keep looking for a place to sit.

Kawarama notices them first and waves them over. His brother is sitting with a few of his Knight friends, a conversation about how boring patrol is coming to a close as he and Madara near. With Madara’s presence, it gives one of them the idea to talk about the latest fire show, letting Madara know that he finds his clansmen’s performance impressive.

Tobirama listens to them silently, eating his food slowly. He doesn’t know why, but he’s feeling… sluggish. Tired. He just wants to go back to their room and take a nap. It’s a little confusing. Training today hadn’t been that intense.

Now that he thinks about it, he had started to feel tired while sitting on the couch with Madara, and it had only gotten worse as time went on. Was he coming down with something? He hates getting sick.

Closing his eyes, he turns his senses inward to his magic. There was usually some indication in his energy before the real symptoms of illness kicked in.

He tenses as he recognizes a tendril of Nature’s magic inside him. What was she doing? When he sends his confusion to her, he gets back an image of the full moon and Kaguya.


He startles at the sound of his brother’s voice, pulling away from his connection to Nature to open his eyes. For a moment, he isn’t sure what to say, still trying to interpret his message from Nature.
“I think Nature just tried to warn me,” realizes Tobirama. “An image of the full moon and Kaguya. And for the past few hours, she’s been trying to get me to fall asleep. Perhaps so that I’d be well rested if there was an attack tonight.”

Maxwell sits up straight, eyes widening. “Should we alert the King?”

“Yes. It won’t hurt anything for everyone to get ready for an attack tonight, even if my interpretation of Nature’s message turns out to be wrong. While not taking it seriously could result in a higher fatality,” says Tobirama.

“While that is true, we might not want to be obvious about our sudden wariness,” says Varnax. “If Kaguya realizes we know she’s coming, she may decide to postpone the attack or strike out at a less well-defended village.”

“Makes sense,” says Kawarama. He frowns as Tobirama just blinks at them, eyes a bit unfocused. “Madara, why don’t you take Tobirama back to his room so he can get some sleep? I can let King Noboru know what’s going on.”

“Right. Up you go,” says Madara, tugging at his arm.

Tobirama stands up before Madara can get it into his head to try and carry him. He gives a nod to Kawarama and his friends, not having the energy to give a verbal goodbye. It’s a relief to get back to their quarters and collapse onto the bed, slipping out of consciousness as soon as his head hits the pillow.

Madara stares at the sleeping form of his mate for several minutes after he falls unconscious, more than a little disturbed by how much influence the Spirit of Nature has over him. He knows that Tobirama is confident that Nature would never hurt him, but he isn’t. A being like that doesn’t have mortal values of what is and isn’t harmful. Nature could have the best of intentions and still cause irreparable harm to him.

With any luck, Nature will leave Tobirama alone after Kaguya has been dealt with. They don’t need any spirit nonsense in their lives.

Sighing irritably, he gets out the alarm clock from the nightstand, gives it a little magical charge, and sets it to wake them up in four hours. If the attack wasn’t going to happen until the moon was out, they would have enough time after their nap to dress in their armor and have a light meal. They would need the fuel for energy, and as long as they didn’t stuff themselves before the fight, it shouldn’t lead to stomach cramps and/or vomiting.

Still, to be on the safe side, he stays fully dressed, except for their shoes, which he leaves beside the bed. Likewise, he retrieves two swords and a few daggers from the closet and puts them within easy reach. In the unlikely chance that something sneaks into their room while they’re sleeping, they’ll be prepared.

Thankfully, nothing that dramatic happens, though he does nearly get an elbow to the face when Tobirama startles awake at the sound of the alarm clock. He reflexively throws up a shield around his head at the sudden movement, wincing sympathetically as Tobirama’s elbow painfully connects with the shield.

Then he has to do hold back a snicker as Tobirama stares grumpily at the alarm clock. Though his amusement soon fades as Tobirama’s eyes take on that glazed look that means he’s communicating
with Nature. He hates it even more when Tobirama snaps out of it and he can see Tobirama trying to
decide what to tell him.

His eyes narrow.

“You get worried every time I communicate with Nature,” explains Tobirama.

“And you think lying or evading the subject every time one of us might get worried is the way to
deal with it?” demands Madara.

Tobirama sighs. “No, of course not. Nature has just given me Kaguya’s location. I think Nature
wants me to fight Misery with her instead of one of the other nymphs.”

The temperature in the room kicks up by about ten degrees. He draws in a deep breath, sees
Tobirama wince, and changes his voice to a low hiss instead of an angry yell. “Does she want you to
turn into a tree?”

Madara feels surprise from their bond at his lowered volume and feels indignant. He can be
considerate! It’s just that he usually doesn’t want to be. However, Tobirama isn’t the one he should
be yelling at when it’s Nature he’s pissed off at.

“I don’t think she wants me to turn into plant life, but communicating with pictures and feelings isn’t
an exact science,” says Tobirama.

“Right. And you made sure to tell Nature it would be better for someone else to channel her energy,
didn’t you?” asks Madara.

Tobirama doesn’t answer.

Dammit. Apparently, he does have a reason to yell.

However, before he can even open his mouth, Tobirama is hopping out of bed and slipping his shoes
on. He quickly follows suit and manages to make it to the door before Tobirama can leave the room,
crossing his arms and glaring as he blocks the doorway.

“Why didn’t you tell her no?!” demands Madara. “You know it’s dangerous. You’re the one who
told us about the dangers!”

“Madara…” Tobirama trails off, sighing. “…You’re asking me to say no to the only one who can
help us defeat Misery. That type of spirit is too strong for us on our own.”

“Then let someone else channel her energy. It doesn’t have to be you,” insists Madara.

“And if she gets offended and refuses to help us at all? What then?” asks Tobirama.

Madara scowls and falls silent. He doesn’t have a good answer to that. The whims of spirits are a
mystery to mortals. It was impossible to tell how Nature would react if Tobirama refuses her.

Tobirama reaches out and lays a hand on his shoulder. “I know you’re worried, but I’ll be careful. If
I think harnessing Nature’s power is getting dangerous, then I’ll stop.”

Madara gives him the most skeptical look he’s ever made. “No, you won’t. Not if someone’s life is
depending on you risking yours.”

’Sometimes you know me too well,’ says Tobirama through their bond. Then aloud, “I have to do
this. Our families will be in danger if I don’t.”
Knowing he’s right but unwilling to admit it, Madara grabs one of the swords and marches out into the living room. He’s halfway to the door when he feels arms wind around his chest from behind him.

“I’d rather we not go to battle angry with each other,” says Tobirama.

Madara deflates, turning within the circle of Tobirama’s arms to draw him into a kiss. He intends it to be a quick peck, but Tobirama doesn’t let him withdraw so soon. He’s flushed and panting by the time Tobirama is satisfied that they’ve properly made up and more than half inclined to drag Tobirama back to bed.

“We can finish this later,” promises Tobirama. “That’s incentive enough for us both to survive, don’t you think? Now, come on, the Dining Hall should be serving something to eat by now.”

A rare sight greets them when they make it to the Dining Hall. About a dozen magical blenders are spread out across one table, Knights of every age making themselves smoothies in preparation of going into battle. It’s the most efficient way to get a lot of calories into your body without using a ton of energy digesting them. Still, it garners them some odd looks from the Nobles across the room who are eating solid food.

Tobirama gets in line for one of the blenders, making himself a banana-blueberry smoothie with flax and chia seeds when it’s his turn. Madara blends together bananas, strawberries, and sunflower seeds. Then they grab a couple of spoons and find somewhere out of the way to eat their snack.

“We’ll need to get a team together to defeat Kaguya. A large one. She has more than just ghouls guarding her this time,” says Tobirama.

“You’ve mentioned the werewolves wanting revenge against Kaguya. Some of them will want to come along,” says Madara.

“Right. We’ll need to coordinate with the King, find out who’s already on patrol and make sure he doesn’t assign one of the people we need to a different task,” says Tobirama. He sets his now empty cup in the bin set out for dirty dishes and waits for Madara to finish before heading to the door.

The meeting with Noboru does not go as quickly as he would have liked. Once the King learns that he intends to channel Nature’s power himself, he spends several minutes trying to talk him out of it. Although he’s flattered by this obvious show of Noboru’s concern for him, proof that the elderly man does consider him family, it’s more hassle than he needs right now. He could feel how insistent Nature was to use him as a conduit. Changing her mind is very unlikely at this point.

Things go much smoother once Noboru reluctantly accepts this fact and they move on to choosing who will be assigned to his team. Hashirama is the strongest wood nymph they have in the city, so it makes sense for him to go along. Kawarama, as the second strongest wood nymph, is assigned to the West gate, near the forest.

There’s some debate as to whether they should bring Itama with them but eventually decide it’s best for him to guard the nymph children. If there are any Kelpies in tonight’s attack, there’s a high chance they’ll be a target. Alongside Madara, they recruit Jiro, Izuna, and Hikaku to go with them for the firepower.

That still leaves them needing another water user. He’s going to be too busy fighting Kaguya to deal with any of her monsters that might be best defeated with a water attack. Mito went with them last time, but they found out last week that she’s now pregnant. Tsunade is still reeling with the news that she’s going to have a sibling more than a decade younger than her. Though, according to Madara,
that isn’t unusual in dragon families.

Madara’s parents would have waited longer between children except they were both in their late thirties when they had the first child. Both of them had wanted to go traveling when they retired, rather than cast an illusion as they pretended to get older and feebler. They had made the decision then to have five children close together so that they would have each other for company when their parents decided to go traveling.

The plan had then been that when Madara and his siblings were old enough that their lack of aging would start to become suspicious, they could make the decision to either cast illusion spells or seek their parents out. Obviously, the lack of aging was no longer an issue for Madara, Izuna, and Keitaro as they were now mated to a nymph. Such a bond always kept the human as youthful as their nymph spouse. He should make it a point to ask Jiro and Takeo what their plans were. He can’t imagine that their brothers would be happy if the two of them left indefinitely, only to be occasionally reunited when the three brothers went on vacation to visit them.

No, it’s more likely that they’re all going to end up moving to another country years down the line. He’d say Noboru probably wasn’t going to like that, but by that point, the man would have likely faked his death to avoid suspicion. They could include him in on the planning and eventually end up living in the same city again.

Anyway, the point was that Mito would be unable to accompany them. She would still be helping to guard the castle as her elemental abilities are good for long-range attacks, but it would be dangerous for her unborn child to be around as much dark magic as Kaguya would be throwing around.

They end up calling Masaki, Kushina, and Minato into the room. Masaki and Kushina meet both their elemental and sorcerer needs while Minato can help them with runes. Little Naruto will be given to whoever is guarding the Uchiha children before they leave.

After that, they choose half a dozen Senior Knights that have master-level swordsmen skills. A blade through the eyes or the roof of the mouth and into the brain is the only reliable way they’ve found so far to kill a basilisk.

“Alright. Is that everyone you need?” asks Noboru.

“I believe a few of the werewolves may wish to accompany us,” says Tobirama.

“Very well. Take a few of their strongest with you. The rest of them that wish to fight within the city will be assigned a Knight to stay with them, just in case the amulets aren’t as effective as we’d hoped. Now, if that’s all you need—” Noboru pauses for Tobirama to nod—“then good luck. May you all return safely.”

With the meeting over, Tobirama goes in search of the alpha werewolf’s house while the others gather up their supplies and prepare themselves to face down Kaguya. It had been a surprise to many when forty of the fifty werewolves had decided to stay in the capital city and form a pack even when it became apparent that Kaguya wasn’t going to return soon. Werewolves did not often prefer to live in large cities and certainly not in such large numbers.

Many had been uneasy at first, distrusting the wolves that had been forced to attack them. Tobirama and Hashirama had put a stop to that, requesting that their fellow Knights be seen publicly having friendly conversations with the werewolves. That had helped put the citizens at ease.

He doesn’t even have time to knock before the door is being yanked open. Viridian takes one look at his face and grins ferally.
“It’s finally time, huh?” she asks.

“Yes. Kaguya will be attacking soon. I intend to track her down, along with a carefully selected team. Will you be joining me?” asks Tobirama.

“Of course. My second will be coming along as well,” says Viridian, meeting his gaze and almost daring him to say no.

“Does he have experience fighting in wolf form?” asks Tobirama.

“Yeah. The whole pack does now. We’ve been training these past few months, waiting for Kaguya to show her face again.”

Tobirama nods. “Then he can come along.”

He leaves her to find Blaise, and the entire group meets up at the West Gate before the sun goes down. The moon slowly makes its appearance and by the time they’re halfway to Kaguya’s location, the two werewolves have transformed. A few minutes after that, their amulets give a dim glow and the wolves shake their heads irritably.

“You two still with us?” asks Hashirama.

Viridian dips her head, letting out a soft woof.

“That’s good,” says Hashirama, relieved. Then to Tobirama, he asks, “Did you sense Kaguya’s magic too? I think she just tried to control them.”

Tobirama hums in agreement. “It’s good to finally have confirmation that the amulets work. I wonder how much of her plan hinged on being able to take control of them again.”

“We’re already one step ahead of her,” says Jiro.

That victory is short lived as a manticore springs out from between the trees, the werewolves’ hackles rising in alarmed surprise. There must be some kind of silencing spells on them for the wolves to not have heard them coming.

Jiro’s hand alights with fire but two of the swordsmen step forward before he can attack.

“Please allow us to handle them. This is why we were brought along,” says Ahnna.

Jiro nods and allows them to meet the manticore’s attack. He observes them for a moment before turning to the rest of the group. “They seem to have this under control. We should keep going. The sooner we defeat Kaguya, the safer everyone will be.”

Tobirama hesitates. It was a manticore that killed his father, but Butsuma had been fighting against an entire pack of them. Two Knights should be enough to handle one of them, surely?

Still feeling uneasy, he gives the signal to move forward. His worry only increases when they don’t encounter any other manticores on the way to meet Kaguya. How large of a pack can two Knights take down?

He senses Kaguya’s energy up ahead and cautiously moves forward, pausing when he catches sight of a wall of scales. The creature was twice his height and wound around the clearing Kaguya had set up base in. It doesn’t take long for it to notice them, opening a mouth full of razor sharp teeth as it strikes out.
They scatter, the elementals and Minato going one way and the swordsmen another. Normally, the basilisk would seek out the highest source of magic, so the swordsmen make it a point to draw the creature’s attention their way. Slashing at its side and making it hiss in pain as the enchanted metal sinks in past the scales.

The Knights lead the basilisk further away, revealing Kaguya in the center of a large runic circle, surrounded on all sides by a mob of ghouls. She waves her hand lazily, gesturing for her creatures to attack and raising a shield at the same time.

The werewolves circle around her shield, looking for an opening, while the fire elementals quickly begin throwing flames at the Ghouls, but there are too many for them burn before they can reach their little group. Hashirama has his vines wrap around their ankles to slow them down while Masaki and Kushina begin to wrap streams of water around the Ghouls and freeze them in place. However, not soon after they begin using their power do they hear the sound of hooves stomping at the ground.

“Minato, Kushina, do you remember the runic sequence to trap Kelpies?” asks Tobirama.

“Yes, but I can’t write it out as fast as you two,” says Kushina. “One of us needs to distract the creatures while the others write the runes, right? I’ll do it.”

Tobirama grimaces but gives her the go-ahead. Kushina flares her energy in response and begins weaving water around the trees, attracting the attention of the Kelpies. He loses sight of her as she runs further into the forest, luring them away while he and Minato quickly sketch the circles.

They’re lucky none of the horses stay behind with Masaki still using her powers to subdue the Ghouls, but perhaps Nature’s rising presence in the clearing has something to do with that. He can feel her in the back of his mind, preparing for their confrontation with Misery. But with how dangerous it is, he doesn’t fully let her into his magic yet and won’t until the actual time of the battle.

Perhaps that’s why Kaguya hasn’t directly attacked them yet. She’s hoping her monsters will finish them off so that they’ll be no-one left to channel Nature. Well, she’s going to die disappointed because nothing she’s thrown at them so far is enough to kill them off.

Kushina comes back to the clearing at their signal, clothes soaked and hair sticking to her scalp. Apparently, she hadn’t managed to completely evade the Kelpies but she was still breathing, so Tobirama considers it a victory. Luckily for them, the Kelpies don’t appear to be very bright, allow them to rather easily trick them into the runic circles. Then Kushina switches places with Madara and Hikaku, freezing the Ghouls in place while the two Uchiha take care of burning the Kelpies to ash.

Kaguya watches it all with an unreadable expression, as emotional as a block of ice. Though considering the runes she’s standing on, it might be that she’s too distracted to pay them any mind. Honestly, Tobirama would prefer her attention to be on them instead of whatever chaos she’s orchestrating within the city.

“Kushina, can you take over for me? I believe I just sensed another basilisk approaching our friends, and they could probably do with some assistance,” says Masaki.

“Yeah. I have enough control handle this many water streams,” says Kushina.

“Excellent. Then I’m off to get myself a new pair of boots.”

“I’d say make sure they don’t turn you into footwear, but they don’t have feet. Don’t let them turn you into pancakes,” says Kushina.

Masaki recognizes the concern underneath the humor and pats her daughter’s shoulder reassuringly.
before taking off into the forest, one of the werewolves deciding to follow after her for some reason. Honestly, the wolves aren’t truly equipped for this kind of battle, one where an enemy either shouldn’t be touched directly or whose hide is resistance to their claws. They’ve essentially entered a sword fight without opposable thumbs.

Kaguya purses her lips in annoyance at how casually they’ve dealt with her minions so far and sends out a signal with her magic for another creature to enter the clearing.

Hashirama audibly gasps at the sight of it, outrage in every line of his face. “A griffin! One of the most peaceful creatures in the world and you’re forcing them to attack humans?”

“What do I care for peace?” counters Kaguya. “I will not be satisfied until everyone who would oppose me is dead.”

Hashirama actually scowls at her, one of the few times Tobirama has seen him make that expression. It takes a lot to get Hashirama truly pissed off, but Kaguya has managed it.

“Then you’re never going to be satisfied,” says Hashirama. His magic flows into the ground even as he speaks, long vines bursting up from the earth to catch the griffin as it leaps at them.

It doesn’t make a sound, too caught up in Kaguya’s spell to feel outrage at its capture. The griffin’s wings flare out, moving before the vines can wrap around them. The creature gains altitude, rising about three feet until Hashirama sends out even stronger vines to bring it back down to earth.

With all the creatures successfully subdued, it looks like it’s time for him to face Kaguya. Ignoring the way Madara begins to frown as Nature’s magic fills the clearing, he stops trying to keep her energy from mixing with his. It’s almost unbearable, the pure, unfiltered force of Nature’s magic filling his soul.

His vision shifts just like last time, letting him see all the energies of the world. However, unlike their last encounter, he notices a tendril of Misery’s magic wrapped tightly around Kaguya’s soul. What kind of effect must that have on a human to be constantly exposed to Misery’s energy? It certainly can’t be doing anything good for her sanity or her sympathy for anyone else.

Though right now, he can’t afford to have any sympathy either. The world itself is in danger as long as Kaguya is still alive. And that sense of urgency only increases as he watches Misery’s magic slowly pour into Kaguya’s soul until her eyes turn pitch black, a sign that she’s being completely possessed.

He lets himself relax within Nature’s control, allowing her to move him as needed. It’s a bit unsettling to be directed like a puppet, but hopefully this won’t happen often enough for him to get used to it.

The air stirs violently as white and black magic clash, creating sharp winds that rattle the leaves and gouge deep lines into tree bark. Nature is at a slight disadvantage in that she also has to focus on keeping a shield around his friends, but that just means the battle will last longer. Misery is one of the major spirits, but he’s nowhere close to being Nature’s equal.

An eerie howl sounds through the forest as Misery wails out his frustration, and the trees around them begin to decay. His friends move out of the way of the slowly increasing sphere of destruction as even the Ghouls begin to rot. He just barely has time to notice Hashirama getting the griffin to safety before Misery attacks in full force.

Their magic clashes violently and his body trembles as more of Nature’s energy pours through him in
response. His mind starts to drift as the more connected he is to Nature, the more he begins to perceive of the world. He catches snippets of visions of the other fighters throughout the city.

Archers on the wall, lighting their arrows on fire, the enchantments keeping them lit as they turn the Ghouls to ash. Griffins and manticores descending from the sky, attempting to land on rooftops but getting rebuffed by the war-wards. Basilisks slithering down the street, chasing after sorcerers only to have sword-wielding Knights step out of hiding to drive a blade up into their open mouths.

The pack of werewolves were chasing after……..were those kitsune? He would have blanched if he was still in control of his body. The wolves weren’t actually hurting the shapeshifters, just keeping them from causing mischief under Kaguya’s order, but it was still an indignity for them to have been brainwashed by a human at all. He can’t even imagine how furious they’re going to be when they come back to their senses.

His worry over their situation is put to the back of his mind as his vision begins to drift again, further and further away from his real body. Colors start to blur and his soul strains at the distance before Nature intervenes, forcibly yanking his stretching spirit back into his body. She gives off a feeling of apologetic concern, perhaps at not noticing his plight earlier.

He doesn’t have time to respond, caught up in the battle again as Misery attacks. As he watches, he soon realizes that Nature is trying to sever the connection between Kaguya and Misery, which makes sense as it would give her an advantage. As long as Misery is connected to a human, it alters something about his spirit, allowing him to phase through another spirit’s attacks unless they’re also connected to a human. Nature will be able to do much more damage once they’re separate.

And as he soon finds out, someone else will be able to deal out damage to Kaguya once Misery is pried free from her soul. For as soon as that’s accomplished, an unbearable chill sweeps through the clearing, making even his soul ache. Nature is quick to throw up a barrier around them, thick enough that he can’t even see his friends through it.

Madara’s furious concern sweeps through their connection a moment later. Rather than dampen it down, Nature prods at the temporary barrier he’s set up between his and Madara’s mind. He doesn’t understand why, but he trusts her judgment and lets the barrier crumble, letting Madara’s emotions into his mind.

However, Nature isn’t satisfied. She prods further at their bond, dragging at Madara’s magic, pulling at least half of it into his soul. Madara startles, mentally flailing, but doesn’t fight the pull once he realizes the magic is going to Tobirama and not Nature.

‘What is she doing?’ asks Madara.

‘I don’t….know.’ Tobirama trails off as that ice-cold sensation worsens; the only thing that saves him from getting soul hypothermia is Madara’s magic. Even still, it’s unbearable, his soul instinctively trying to get away from the entity materializing in front of him.

He isn’t given a chance to see what the entity looks like beyond a flash of blue as Nature closes his eyes. And all it takes is a flaring of the other spirit’s magic as it attacks Kaguya for him to pass out. His mind wasn’t built to comprehend what Death looks like, not while he’s still living anyway.

Visions flit through his mind as he sleeps, possibly from Nature. She seems to communicate easier with him while he’s unconscious.

First, he sees a wood nymph, surrounded by Nature’s glow, and he wonders for a moment if Nature is about to tell him about one of her previous favorites. But then the blue glow of Death appears and
the nymph crumples to the ground, his chest not rising to draw breath.

Then a vision of a water nymph, also within Nature’s control. She doesn’t die as quickly when Death appears, but die she does. The next host is also a water nymph, but she doesn’t appear alone. Beside her, connected by a thin stream of magic that he recognizes as a mate bond is another water nymph. She dies almost as fast as the wood nymph when Death appears.

The next one is a water nymph with a dragon for a mate, also with water as an element. Her death is only slightly slower than the previous host. The scene shifts again, a water nymph like himself with a fire dragon spouse. He’s still breathing with he hits the ground but only for a moment.

Tobirama can’t stop a spike of fear when the vision shifts to reveal himself and Madara. Is he about to watch himself die? Is Nature trying to tell him that he’s dying? He hasn’t found a way for Madara to reincarnate with him yet.

But no, his doppelganger doesn’t die. Instead, another pair of Tobirama and Madara’s pop into existence a few feet away from the original two. It’s this new pair that gets subjected to Death’s presence, or rather, the Tobirama does. He doesn’t think the nymphs’ mates are actually supposed to be present when the nymph encounters death. They’re just here to represent the bond, and the fact that their mate can access their magic.

When Death shows up, he watches as his doppelganger slowly weakens and falls unconscious, but his breath doesn’t slow. A minute passes and Death leaves, so that means he’s probably not completely immune to Death’s presence, just that he can survive long enough for Death to finish his business and depart.

Why? What makes him different from the other water nymph with a fire dragon mate?

Nature created two doppelgangers of himself and Madara in this vision. Was that to represent that he’s been her host twice? If channeling her power too often is enough to turn someone into a tree, then perhaps every time he hosts her, it changes him a little more.

Considering that no one else has hosted her in centuries, he’s starting to understand why she insisted he be the one to help her fight Kaguya today. It isn’t because she has an unhealthy attachment to him, as Madara assumed, but that she knew Death would be paying Kaguya a visit today. She didn’t want to get her host killed.

The vision disappears as soon as his revelation is made, and he can distantly feel Nature’s magic leaving him. His vision darkens as he slips further into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, the final battle with Kaguya. Hopefully, the fight scene was interesting enough. Please let me know what you thought of it. :)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter we get to see the aftermath of Tobirama's encounter with Death, plus Tobirama and Madara finally get to visit the Underwater Palace.

Tobirama wakes slowly, mind and body feeling sluggish as he opens his eyes. The lighting was dim, but thin beams of sunlight shine through the partially closed curtains. Slowly sitting up, he asses his surroundings, finding himself in the hospital wing. Rows of beds line both sides of the long room, a few of them occupied by his fellow Knights.

Disappointingly, Madara isn’t in the room, but he can sense him nearby. Prodding at their bond results in an influx of surprise, worry, and elation. He breathes in deeply and gently pushes the emotions away, not going far enough to block the bond but damping it down. The force of Madara’s emotions is too much for him so soon after waking up.

“Ah, Lord Tobirama, you’re finally awake,” says Healer Alvaro, briskly walking at a near run over to his bedside. He lays a glowing hand over Tobirama’s heart, checking his vitals. “You’ve been asleep for two days. Everyone’s been a bit frantic. Healer Yuuna couldn’t find anything wrong with you besides magical exhaustion. That must have been some battle.”

Tobirama hums noncommittedly. “Kaguya is dead?”

“Yes, they found you passed out next to her body. I guess you fell unconscious before you could check for yourself?” asks Alvaro curiously.

“I believe I should discuss the matter with King Noboru before giving any details,” says Tobirama.

“Yes, of course. I understand,” says Alvaro.

Before anything more can be said, Madara finally enters the room with Hashirama, Itama, and Kawarama following behind him. Well, that explains why it took Madara so long to get here. He was letting Tobirama’s brothers know that he’s awake.

“Tobirama, you’re okay!” says Hashirama, relieved. Then his expression shifts into worry and he turns to Alvaro. “He is okay, right?”

“Yes, Lord Hashirama. Aside from the slow recovery of his magic, which can be explained away by the decreased food intake during his coma, your brother is in good health,” says Alvaro.

“That’s good to hear,” says Itama.

“Is he cleared to leave the hospital wing?” asks Kawarama.

“Yes. Though, he may get light-headed when standing up, due to the change in blood pressure after lying still for two days,” says Alvaro.

Madara steps closer to the bed, holding out his arm. Tobirama lightly grips his forearm, just in case, but it proves to be unnecessary. Aside from his vision momentarily blurring, he remains steady on his
feet.

“I feel fine. Is the Dining Hall serving food at the moment?” asks Tobirama.

“It is, though it may be better for you to eat in our rooms for now. Everyone is excited to hear how Kaguya was defeated,” says Madara. “You’ll be bombarded with questions if you go into the Dining Hall now.”

Tobirama grimaces. “I would prefer to avoid populated areas until the official story has circulated. To that end, I will need to speak with Noboru.”

“I can get something from the Dining Hall while Madara makes sure you get to your rooms safely,” says Itama.

“I’ll let Noboru know you’re awake so that he’ll be ready to speak with you when you’re done,” says Hashirama.

“Thank you.” Tobirama addresses his brothers then asks Madara, “Have you eaten yet?”

“I—no. I wasn’t hungry earlier,” says Madara.

Tobirama gives him a long look, catching sight of the dark circles underneath Madara’s eyes and the pale cast to his skin now that he’s paying more attention. How many hours of sleep has Madara gotten over the last two days? How many meals has he skipped?

“We’ll bring food for Madara too,” says Kawarama. “And now that you’re awake, you can make sure he actually eats it.”

Madara scowls as they all stare at him in concern. “Stop looking at me like that. I’ll eat the damn food.”

Tobirama stifles a laugh as his brothers exchange long-suffering glances. He can tell that they’ve had a trying two days, attempting to get his husband to eat. It shouldn’t be funny, honestly, but he’d rather find humor in his brothers’ expressions than worry about how little Madara eats when he’s upset. It’s something they’re going to have to work on. What if his coma had lasted longer? Would he have woken up to find his mate so thin you could see his ribs? It was an appalling thought, though he’s certain his brothers and Madara’s brothers would have stepped in long before that could happen.

“Let’s go then. Before the hunger sends me into another coma,” says Tobirama.

Madara frowns at him, not looking amused.

Tobirama sighs. Apparently, it was too soon to joke about his near death experience.

They make it back to his room without incident. A few people they pass in the hall look like they want to approach, but Madara’s glower keeps them at bay. And he manages to get there under his own power, to his relief. He just left the hospital wing. He doesn’t want to be carried back there so soon.

Relaxing on the sofa, he waits for his brothers to return. Madara sits beside him, not saying anything but occasionally looking at him with concern. There isn’t anything he can do about that, though. Madara will just have to see for himself that he’s alright now.

When Keitaro and Itama return, it’s with mostly raw fruits and vegetables. Carrots, cucumbers,
celery, apples, peaches, and oranges. Things that are commonly served for lunch. However, there’s also biscuits with blueberry jam, which is a breakfast item. It’s a welcome item, certainly, as he likes their homemade blueberry jam, but it’s still baffling.

“They made up a batch fresh this morning, and one of the Knights requested that they serve what was left with lunch as well. And I guess the cooks took pity on him, since the Knight was injured during Kaguya’s invasion,” explains Kawarama.

“I see….How many were injured?” asks Tobirama.

“Well, there were a lot of minor injuries. Bruises and scrapes,” says Itama. He grimaces then, hating to give bad news. “A few people nearly lost their arms, but the healers got to them in time. As for casualties….three civilians died….as well as five Junior Knights and two Senior Knights.”

Tobirama pales, feeling every death like a knife to the heart. He doesn’t notice he’s made a fist until Madara is prying at his fingers before he can hurt himself, revealing that he’s already made four crescent-moon shaped indents on his palm.

“Your team is alright, though Kagami and Koharu are upset that they were out of the village when the attack happened,” says Kawarama.

“Right. How are the funeral preparations coming along?” asks Tobirama.

“They’ll happen at the end of the week. Noboru has decided to give them a Death Parade,” says Kawarama.

A Death Parade. He probably should have expected that. It was the highest honor for a deceased Knight, and they had lost their lives to defeat an enemy that threatened the entire continent, perhaps even the world.

Their caskets would be carried one after the other down the street, all the way from the castle to the cemetery. Everyone in town, who was physically able to attend, would be expected to line the street and pray for the Knights’ souls as the caskets passed by. It was considered the height of rudeness not to attend a Death Parade unless you were injured or sick.

“I’m glad I awakened from my coma before then. I would not have wished to miss it,” says Tobirama.

He keeps an eye on Madara as he talks with his brothers, making sure that his husband is eating. Of course, the same can be said in reverse. Anytime he goes too long without taking a bite, Madara glares at his plate then up at him until he starts eating again.

It’s as they’re finishing that Hashirama returns….with Noboru. That was fast. He had thought he would need to make an appointment and visit him in his office.

Noboru waves him back down when he starts to stand. “No, no, stay sitting please. You were just in a coma. That’s why I came down here for your report. I want you to take it easy for the next few days, just to make sure there aren’t any lingering side effects from what happened.”

Tobirama frowns. “You don’t even know what happened.”

Noboru raises an eyebrow with an unimpressed gaze. “I can make an educated guess. You were exposed to a major Spirit’s magic, which overwhelmed your consciousness. And the effects of such are still largely unknown to us. If there are any other pertinent details, feel free to fill us in any time now.”
“The spirit who killed Kaguya wasn’t Nature. It was Death,” Tobirama says bluntly.

Everyone stares at him for a moment before Madara breaks the silence with a flat, “What.”

“It was why Nature wanted me to host her that day. She knew Death would show up,” says Tobirama. Then he explains the visions Nature gave him and his interpretation of them. “She had no choice but to insist it was me. There was no time for her to find someone else that fit that criteria. Anyone else wouldn’t have survived long enough for Death to take Kaguya’s soul.”

“Is that why she chose to possess you the first time? Because you have a soul bond with Madara?” asks Itama.

“That, I don’t know. I suppose it depends on whether she knew, even back then, that Death was going to come for Kaguya’s soul,” says Tobirama.

“Why did he?” asks Madara. “The stories of Death are even rarer than of Nature and Misery. Why did he choose now to….to kill a mortal himself? I’ve never heard a single story where he’s done that.”

“Most mortals don’t try to bring back the dead,” says Noboru. “Ghouls are merely reanimated corpses. Death could have taken exception to Kaguya attempting to steal her son’s soul from his realm.”

“What should the official story be?” asks Tobirama. “People were nervous enough just knowing that Misery was active in the world again. I can’t imagine how they would react if they knew that Death had personally killed someone.”

Noboru tries to repress a grimace. “No, they would not be reassured to know who was responsible for Kaguya’s defeat. Unless we get a message from the spirits that they disapprove, we will credit Nature with Kaguya’s death.”

Tobirama nods.

“Alright, then. Have you been informed of the Death Parade?...Okay, I think we’ve covered everything….Ah, you should probably send a letter to your grandfather. Once he hears that Kaguya has been taken care of, he’ll want to make arrangements for you and Madara to visit,” says Noboru.

“It’ll be nice getting out of the city for a while,” says Tobirama.

“If it’s alright with the two of you, I’d like to come along,” says Itama. “I haven’t seen the Palace since I was a kid.”

“It’s fine with me,” says Madara.

“And me. What about you, Kawarama? Hashirama?” asks Tobirama.

“Eh….” Kawarama makes a face. “I’m not big on the whole underwater thing. I mean, I’ve got enough water nymph blood that it doesn’t make my instincts shriek, but it’s still a bit unsettling to be so far away from the earth.”

“It’s a bit uncomfortable for me as well,” says Hashirama. “Plus, I don’t want to travel so far away from Mito while she’s pregnant.”

“Understandable,” replies Tobirama.
“Has a fire dragon ever visited the palace?” asks Madara. “Do we know how my instincts are going to react to being underwater?”

Noboru turns thoughtful, absently stroking his beard as he thinks. “I believe I’ve heard something about that. A fire dragon that was friends with a water dragon and visited the palace with them. If I remember correctly, he was fine as long as he was in a room with air. It was the journey up and down with just a small bubble of air around him that caused a feeling of disturbance.”

“That’s….somewhat reassuring,” says Madara, with an edge of doubt in his tone.

“We can always leave early if being down there makes you feel stressed. This is meant to be a type of vacation, after all,” says Tobirama.

“Sure. A vacation with those prissy Nobles making subtle digs about what an unfit mate I am for you,” says Madara.

“A vacation in which you get to see me glare at them until they run away in terror,” corrects Tobirama.

Madara smirks at the images that come to mind, starting to actually look forward to visiting the palace.

“Well, if that’s all, I should be getting back to my office,” says Noboru. When no objections come forth, he bids them a good day and exits the room.

“Perhaps we should leave as well then so that you can get some more rest,” says Hashirama.

Tobirama snorts. “I rested for two days, but I suppose I wouldn’t object to having alone time with Madara. Still, before you go, it’s been on my mind since the funerals were mentioned. Did I know any of the Knights that died?”

Kawarama and Hashirama exchange looks, both looking reluctant to speak. Finally, Kawarama seems to lose their silent battle of wills, if only because Hashirama makes sad puppy eyes.

“Well, most of them you only knew in passing, but one of them you’ve gone on a few missions with. Ahnna,” says Kawarama.

Tobirama sags forward, forearms resting on his knees as he stares at the ground. Ahnna was dead? His throat aches as grief threatens to overwhelm him, blinking rapidly to keep the tears from forming. He may not have been close friends with Ahnna, both of them having stronger connections with someone else, but they had spoken on several occasions over the years.

They had exchanged stories about their families and shared tips on how to train a student with magic when you yourself had none (Ahnna) or had the wrong type of magic for spells (Tobirama). Her students must have been devastated when they learned of her death.

His mind replays every interaction he’s ever had with her, their conversations and the missions they went on together. Ahnna had been a good comrade in the fight against evil and a good friend. He would miss her.

He doesn’t realize that he’s started shivering until a blanket is being draped over his shoulders. Jerking his head up, he finds Madara watching him with concern.

…..Why was he so cold all of a sudden?
“You shivered for at least the first six hours of your coma. The only thing that seemed to warm you was my magic,” says Madara. Then he frowns at their guests. “I think it’s best if you leave now. I’ll take him to a healer if he doesn’t warm up soon, but I don’t think it’s a coincidence that he started shivering after thinking about his friend’s death. He probably needs to be distracted more than anything else and to get some rest.”

“Madara—” says Tobirama, reproachful.

“No, it’s alright,” interrupts Hashirama. “He’s your mate. It’s normal for him to want to be alone with you so soon after you were injured. We’ll come back tomorrow afternoon to see if you’re alright.”

A bit reluctantly, Tobirama lets his brothers leave. Itama takes the empty plates with him to drop off at the kitchen, so at least they won’t have to worry about that. Madara would probably insist on taking them back himself, otherwise, leaving him here alone.

He doesn’t want to be alone right now.

“I’m going to light the fireplace and make us some hot chocolate,” declares Madara. “And while I’m doing that—” He grabs a photo album from the bookshelf—“You look at this and think positive thoughts, alright? Don’t even think about the d-word.”

Tobirama snorts and takes the photo album, flipping through the pages. It was filled with pictures of him and his brothers when they were younger, along with some group photos with their parents, and a few with other relatives.

As cute as the pictures are, his grief isn’t so quickly forgotten. His thoughts still try to drift back towards Ahnna, causing a soul-deep chill every time. It was starting to get unnerving. Was he going to have this reaction every time he thinks about death from now on?

He hisses in a sharp breath through his teeth at the sudden shock of cold, worse than before, the air fogging in front of his face. And then he’s jerking back as a mug is suddenly shoved in front of his nose, Madara scowling down at him.

“I told you not to even think of that word!” Madara keeps pressing the cup forward until he’s forced to take it or have scalding hot chocolate dumped into his lap. “Maybe we should go into the bedroom. There aren’t any windows here, and sitting in sunlight might help you.”

“Well, it probably can’t make it worse,” says Tobirama.

He follows Madara into the bedroom, sipping at his hot chocolate while Madara opens up the curtains. Sunlight floods the room, and it does make him feel better. He moves to stand directly in front of the window, and Madara drags the desk chair closer for him to sit down.

Then Madara’s magic fills the air, raising the temperature. He then cups his hands together and creates a small fireball. Watching the flames dance, Tobirama finally starts to feel himself warm up.

Madara smiles, relieved. “Sunlight and heat are integral to life, the opposite of that cold spirit. Perhaps if you sunbathe every day, the effects of being in its presence will eventually wear off.”

Tobirama starts to agree but then remembers that the ocean palace is underwater. No sunlight.

“I’ll need to get as much sunlight as I can before we leave for the palace in a few weeks. We can only hope I’ll be cured by then. Or that it’s even something that can be cured,” says Tobirama.
Madara frowns. “If a cure doesn’t exist, then we’ll make one.” Then his eyes catch sight of Tobirama’s talisman. Pointing at it, he asks, “What about another talisman, this one to mimic the feeling of sunlight? It’s not a permanent cure, but if you aren’t healed by the time we visit the palace, it could be a temporary solution.”

“A sun talisman?” asks Tobirama, bemused. “I’m not sure I could do that artificially, but….I could probably make something to absorb sunlight. Then place it in the window until it’s time to leave. It’ll be able to emit as much light as it’s absorbed when I activate it.”

Madara raises an eyebrow. “Not all at once, I hope. You’d make everyone in the room go blind.”

Tobirama smirks.

Madara lets out a short laugh. “You’re thinking of weaponizing the sun now, aren’t you?”

Tobirama widens his eyes in an expression of feigned innocence. “I’m sure I have no idea what you mean. If my amulet were to go off after one of those Nobles made a rude comment….and we just happened to be wearing sunglasses….then I’m sure it would be a complete accident.”

“How!” Madara clutches his sides as he starts laughing, his mirth heightened by Tobirama’s own humor through the bond, both of them feeling a touch of vindictive glee at thinking of a relatively harmless way at getting back at those who’d wronged them. “I can’t wait to see that.”

Tobirama sips at his cocoa, then the absence of a cup in Madara’s hands registers. “Weren’t you making cocoa for the both of us?”

Madara blinks, looking down at his hands. “Oh, right. It’s still on the counter. I’ll be right back.”

Tobirama shakes his head as Madara leaves, then gets up to retrieve paper and pen from his desk. Might as well start that letter to his grandfather now. As he thinks of how to word the letter, he notices the last of the cold has left his soul. Perhaps humor was part of the cure?

When Madara returns, he finds Tobirama sketching out a series of runes, the unfinished letter to his grandfather sitting forgotten on the corner of his desk.

“Is this for the sun talisman?” asks Madara.

“Sort of. I think I’ll actually make it into a bracelet. Half of the beads will absorb sunlight, and the others will absorb positive emotions,” says Tobirama.

Technically, he could make it into a necklace, but he already wore the anti-possession talisman full time, and his marriage seashell when he wasn’t training or on missions. He doesn’t need a third necklace weighing his neck down.

“Positive emotions? Have you noticed them lessening your chill?” asks Madara.

“I believe so, though it’s difficult to tell for sure. Will you be willing to help me infuse the beads? I was thinking of having them absorb amusement, joy, and love.”

Madara frowns at the rune sketches with a dubious expression. “I’m willing to help, but how is this even going to work? Are we going to have to suddenly feel those emotions on command for them to be absorbed?”

“….That’s a good point. I’ll create a runic circle that will encourage us to feel those emotions….then figure out how it’ll interact with the runic circle to infuse the beads with the emotions,” says
Tobirama.

Even as he speaks, he’s writing down new ideas, voice trailing off to a murmur. His focus narrows down to the pen in his hand and the paper he’s sketching on.

Madara lets him be, well aware of his mate’s researching habits. If he interrupts him now, he’ll lose his train of thought and be cranky for days afterwards. Instead, he retrieves a book from the living room then sprawls out onto the bed, propping himself up with some pillows so that he can still drink his cocoa. He feels the stress from the past two days slowly slip away as he senses his mate’s contentment, reading his book to the backdrop of Tobirama’s pen scratching against paper.

That’s how they spend their afternoon, relaxing together in companionable silence. And yes, Tobirama does eventually get around to writing that letter to his grandfather. After Madara reminds him.

Sprawled across the deck of the ship, Madara stares up at the darkening sky, wondering if they’ll reach their destination before it rains. He was starting to find the subtle rocking of the ship to be relaxing, but going below deck makes him feel claustrophobic. As much as he hates getting drenched by cold water, he’d still rather stay out in the rain than go downstairs.

He’s out of the way of the crew here, lazily turning his head to watch them scurry about….doing whatever it is that people do to keep ships moving. It’s not of interest to him, but Tobirama and Itama seem to hold more curiosity for the process.

Jiro and Takeo, the only of his brothers that had agreed to come with him, were up in the crow’s nest, using their dragon-enhanced sight to keep a look out. The captain isn’t exactly worried about pirates, not with this many nymphs on board, but it doesn’t hurt anything to be cautious.

Tobirama was discussing how the ship functions with one of the crewmembers, occasionally touching the bracelet on his wrist. It had only taken Tobirama a few days to figure out how to create it. The sunlight would need to be recharged after use, but the emotions were permanent. They didn’t get used up, which Madara thought was the best thing about them.

He had frequently seen Tobirama touch the ‘love’ bead, not just when he was feeling a chill coming on either. Just for the sole purpose of feeling Madara’s love for him. Madara wonders if they can find a way to sell these things. Have people pay them to help infuse their emotions into jewelry to give to loved ones. It should be especially popular with couples in which one partner travels frequently.

A crack of thunder scatters his thoughts, watching the play of light zigzag across the sky. The rain follows a minute later, unenthusiastically dripping down in a light shower. Annoying, but not enough to make him run for cover.

His eyes close as the water hits his face, bringing a hand up to shield his eyes. A moment later, footsteps approach and the water stops coming. He knows even before he opens his eyes that it’s Tobirama, using nymph magic to divert the rain away from them.

“We’ll reach the top of the palace within the hour,” says Tobirama, sitting down beside him. “Should I bring both of our bags up? I know how much you hate going down below.”

“….Yes….I would appreciate that,” says Madara.
Loath as he is to admit any kind of weakness, it isn’t as though his mate, of all people, is going to mock him for it. Madara doesn’t even know why he hates it so much, but small spaces are maddening. He’s not even sure he can blame his dragon instincts for it. Not a single house he’s ever been in has been large enough for him to transform, so what difference is it to his instincts whether a room is small or extra small?

Tobirama briefly rests his hand on Madara shoulder (a comforting gesture?), then he rises up from the ground to venture downstairs. He blinks up at the sky when the shield doesn’t disappear with Tobirama’s departure. Though, he probably shouldn’t be surprised. Tobirama is known as one of the most powerful water nymphs for a reason. A little distance isn’t going to make his control falter.

When they reach their destination, Tobirama lifts the ocean water up into a platform. Itama and the other two nymphs making the trip with them step onto the water with no hesitation, and Tobirama only pauses long enough to hand him one of their bags before following suit.

Madara takes a steadying breath and grasps Tobirama’s offered hand, letting his mate pull him up out of the boat. Jiro and Takeo seem just as dubious about the platform as he is but step forward at Itama’s encouragement. He tries not to let his unease show as the water rises over them in a sphere, the soft nature of the ‘floor’ giving the impression that he could fall through at any moment. Is this how Tobirama feels when he takes him flying?

He doesn’t let go of Tobirama’s hand as they start to descend, warily looking around at the water that stretches out farther than the eye can see. The only reason he isn’t feeling any true fear is because Tobirama is the one in control of the water. Maybe he would also trust Itama to have both the control and motivation to not kill him, but no one else.

Eventually, he calms down enough to really start noticing the sea creatures around them. Fish of all kinds, sharks, dolphins, a few turtles, and what might be a whale in the distance. He even starts to see a few merpeople as they get closer to the palace. Or are they sirens? They look almost identical, the only real difference being their inner magic.

The outside of the palace is all sleek, curved lines, hardly any sharp corners to be found. It was made out of a blue material, looking to be opaque glass, though he hardly thinks something that fragile could survive down here even with magic. He doesn’t know what it’s truly made out of, but it’s gorgeous.

As they get closer, he can see various windows, some open for the merpeople to swim through and others quite solid to keep the air in. They enter through an open archway and float up into a throne room. The water circles around three-quarters of the tiled floor, stopping when it reaches the wall that has the throne. A good security measure. Reduces the risk of an enemy getting behind the king.

Kaimana wasn’t here yet, but there were about a dozen people spread throughout the room. There were low tables near the water, nymphs playing board games with the merpeople. A guard standing beside the only door in this place beckons them over, greeting Tobirama with a bow.

“Welcome, Prince Tobirama. Prince Itama. I am Guard Glaucus. Your mother has requested that I bring you and your guests to her as soon as you arrive,” says Glaucus. His eyes flick between them curiously. “And I was told there would be two traveling down with you that have made arrangements?”

“That would be us. I’m Edmond and this is Cosette. One of our friends lives in the palace and invited us to visit. In his letter, he says he booked us guest bedrooms for the week.”

“What is your friend’s name? I will send one of the servants to let him know you’re here.”
“Ethan Myara.”

Glaucus nods, a flicker of recognition in his eyes at the name. Then his gaze turns back to Tobirama. “If you’ll follow me, Prince Tobirama and Prince Itama? I can escort you to your mother now if you’re ready.”

Edmond and Cosette stay behind in the throne room while the rest of them follow Glaucus, traveling through many winding hallways before reaching Sakiko’s rooms. Some of the walls they passed on the way were transparent and filled with water; merpeople, sirens, and fish swimming by them. Madara is starting to get the impression that this palace has as much water inside it as it does air. A palace built for creatures of the sea.

Glaucus announces their arrival, and holds the door open for them at Sakiko’s call to enter, then excuses himself to attend to his other duties.

Sakiko’s eyes light up at the sight of her sons, and she rises from her pile of pillows on the floor to greet Tobirama and Itama with a hug. “It’s so good to see you again, my sons. And my son-in-law and his brothers. It’s a shame the rest of you couldn’t come down as well, but maybe next time. How was your trip here? I can show you to rooms now if you’re tired or we can sit and talk for a while.”

“Perhaps we should put our things away first?” suggests Itama. “That way we’re not cluttering up your living room.”

“A good idea. Follow me this way, then. You and Tobirama still have the same rooms. Father has decreed that they be permanently yours. Madara will be staying with Tobirama as his mate, and I’ve picked out a two-bedroom guest suite for Takeo and Jiro to stay in,” says Sakiko, leading them down the hallway.

She points out Itama and Tobirama’s rooms before going all the way down the hall to reach Takeo and Jiro’s rooms. “You’re farther down than the rest of us because these are the guest bedrooms. That is, the guests of the royal family. This whole wing is for my family. Shall we meet back at my room in thirty minutes?”

Jiro shrugs as Sakiko’s gaze sweeps across the group questioningly. “Sounds good to me. We only brought a week’s worth of supplies, so it shouldn’t take much time to put away.”

She gives them a serene smile as the rest of the group agrees and leaves them to their unpacking.

Madara looks around curiously as he follows Tobirama into his room, seeing the numerous pillows scattered across the living room area with a low table situated in the middle. To the left, there was a small kitchen with a stove/oven, refrigerator, sink, and a pantry. There were three bedrooms in the suite, each with their own bathroom.

The strangest thing he notices about the rooms is that they don’t have beds; they have hammocks. Large netting stretches out over nearly a third of the room, two feet off the ground with a small step stool near the wall.

“This is just how their culture developed,” explains Tobirama, seeing his baffled gaze. “Perhaps they wanted to do something unique, or the first royal family could have just really liked hammocks.”

Madara snorts. “Probably the second. Does one of these doors lead to a closet?”

“This one does,” says Tobirama, sliding the door open. He steps inside and begins hanging up his shirts and pants. “You can have the left side.”
Madara raises his eyebrows at the large, empty closet, shaking his head as he begins to put his things away. “There is way too much space in here for someone who only visits for a week at a time.”

“All of the royal suites have large closets. It would have been more inconvenient to give me a smaller room at the other end of the castle,” explains Tobirama.

Madara gives a distracted hum to show that he’s heard, then wanders away into the bathroom. There’s a place to put his toothbrush, but all the other toiletry items have been fully stocked. Toothpaste, towels, shampoo, soaps. Many, many soaps, actually. The cupboard under the sink was full of different scented shampoos and body washes.

“They’ve apparently decided to spoil us,” says Madara as Tobirama joins him in the bathroom.

Tobirama just sighs. “…They do this every time.”

He pretends to be annoyed when Madara starts laughing, but can’t quite stop his lips from twitching up in amusement. Snapping the doors closed only causes his laughter to start up again, to which Tobirama rolls his eyes.

“You’re in a good mood,” he observes, pleasantly surprised. “It doesn’t bother your instincts then? Being down here?”

“It’s not as bad as I expected, especially when I’m in a room like this without a view of the water,” says Madara. “The ride down was unnerving, but it didn’t fill me with the impulse to set myself on fire to evaporate all the water.”

Now it’s Tobirama’s turn to laugh, as much from surprise as actual humor.

“A good thing. You would have passed out from magical exhaustion long before you evaporated the entire ocean,” replies Tobirama.

He ignores the too-familiar stubborn expression that crosses Madara’s face, the one he gets every time he wants to do something just because someone said he couldn’t. (Likewise, he pretends that same impulse never occurs within himself). He ignores it, and leaves the bathroom, tossing his empty bag against the wall.

“I can sense the others heading back to Mother’s rooms now. Shall we join them?”

Madara nods and walks beside him down the hallway. The others are already waiting for them when they arrive, sitting on pillows around a low table filled with food.

“I had the kitchen staff prepare us a light meal,” says Sakiko. “It’ll be expected for us to eat supper in the Main Dining Hall tonight. The royal family always does, but you’re free to request that the staff bring breakfast and lunch to your rooms if that is what you desire.”

“We usually just eat our meals in the dining hall back home,” says Tobirama, sitting to his Mother’s left with Madara right beside him. Itama sits to her right with Takeo and Jiro across from her.

“Though, I suspect we’ll be having some of our meals delivered while we’re here. Many of the nymphs here seem to have a fascination towards me, simply for being the Prince that’s hardly ever in the palace.”

“Or for being fifth in line to the throne,” corrects Sakiko. She slashes her hand through the air when Tobirama starts to protest, making him fall silent. “I’m fourth in line but I have no intention of inheriting, nor does the second in line. My brother, Haruto. It hasn’t been officially announced, just in case one of us changes our mind, but unofficially, you’re the third in line. And Father won’t be
retiring for another few centuries. My siblings may decide by then that running a kingdom isn’t for them.”

She sighs when Tobirama’s expression turns vaguely panicked. “You don’t actually have to accept the crown. I simply want you to be aware that it may be offered. You have a few cousins. One of them may end up inheriting the throne if their parents aren’t interested.”

“Is it really such a stressful thing being the ocean king?” asks Jiro.

“It can be,” agrees Sakiko. “My father is the king of all the water nymphs, all over the world. There are trade agreements, alliances with the merfolk to maintain, and disputes to settle. Sometimes two countries will be at war, which creates hostilities between the nymphs who have families living in those areas. My siblings and I help to some extent, mostly by acting as diplomats. Father doesn’t like to leave the palace very often.”

“I’ve heard that water nymphs have an easier time traveling to other continents,” says Takeo.

“We do. There are actually several visitors in the palace right now from around the world. I can introduce you to some of them later if you want to exchange cultural information,” says Sakiko.

“I would like that. Thank you,” says Takeo.

“Have you ever been to another continent?” asks Madara.

“Not yet, but I’ve been seriously considering it. Did you know that there are large sea serpents on the other side of the planet? They rarely come this way, so I’ve yet to see one. They’re not hostile to merfolk or sea nymphs, and the merfolk think they’re intelligent, but they can’t seem to speak our language. I think I would like to meet one someday,” says Sakiko.

They serve food onto their plate as she talks. Grilled fish, oysters, bowls of rice, cucumber slices, and a fish flavored soup with specks of seaweed. Takeo and Jiro barely fumble with their chopsticks as they eat. Forks and spoons may have been the most common utensil in Whirlpool, but there were enough water nymphs living in and visiting the capitol that chopsticks were readily available for people to practice with. Some seafood restaurants even encourage their customers to try using them.

“Have they ever attacked humans?” asks Madara.

“Well, not violently,” says Sakiko, with a little grimace. “They’re territorial when it comes to land creatures getting too close. They’ve never killed a human…or a human-disguised dragon, but they will scare them off. Unless they’re a water dragon; they seem to tolerate them well.”

“Exactly how intelligent do the merpeople think these sea serpents are?” asks Tobirama. “The fact that they can recognize fellow water creatures could just be a sign that they can sense magic. Have they shown signs of being able to communicate with each other?”

“The merfolk have observed that multiple sea serpents will use the same noise to get a specific serpent’s attention, and that they each have their own unique noise. So they seem to have names for each other, but dolphins have been shown to do the same thing. There isn’t really any way to tell at this point whether they have the same level of intelligence as us,” says Sakiko.

“Have the water dragons ever tried to communicate with them? We can speak human language in our dragon form, but we also have our own language that only another dragon can understand,” says Madara. Then he has to choke back laughter as the three nymphs turn to stare at him in shock, all with nearly the exact same expression.
“You never mentioned that,” says Tobirama, voice mild but with an undercurrent of annoyance.

Madara shrugs. “It hasn’t come up before. I’m sure you’ll still be learning new things about me centuries down the line.”

Tobirama frowns but doesn’t argue. As irritating as it is, he knows Madara has a point. He can’t expect Madara to remember every detail about his species’s physiology and culture all at once and info dump the knowledge to him all in one day.

“Well, I do not recall any mentions of such,” says Sakiko. “However, not many water dragons visit the palace, perhaps to lower the chances of our kind finding out about their human forms. I’ll try to get a message out that a fire dragon is wishing to speak to a water dragon that’s seen a sea serpent up close.”

“Thank you.”

They eat in silence for a few minutes before Sakiko brings up a new subject. “There are ten Noble families in the water nymph kingdom. They’ll each send someone from their family to greet you at some point during your stay, perhaps even tonight at dinner. If they’re smart, they’ll also be apologizing for their daughters’ and nieces’ behavior while they were living in Whirlpool. If they don’t, you have the right to take offense.”

She says this directly to Madara, who leans back in surprise.

“They hurt you more than me,” explains Tobirama. “Although interfering in their Prince’s love life is rude, it was your self-esteem they attacked. They tricked you into leaving the country, into leaving your home. If they don’t apologize for what they did to you, I will take offense.”

“What happens as a result if you take offense?” asks Takeo.

“Considering who I am, the least of it would be that they lose favor with the royal family. Nobles usually get preferential treatment. They’re able to request that food be delivered to their rooms, instead of forced to eat in the dining halls or else cook their own meals. They can have the palace servants do their laundry and clean their rooms. If they lose favor, they’ll have to pay for those services out of their own pocket,” says Tobirama.

“The middle and lower class will follow our lead and stop showing them as much respect, which is a large blow to their ego. They can lose out on different alliances and trade deals. And if the Head of the Noble family continues to insist that their relative did nothing wrong, they can even lose their Noble status.”

“What happens if they do apologize but he doesn’t accept?” asks Jiro. “They messed with him so much that he stayed away for ten years. Should they be let off so easily?”

Sakiko purses her lips thoughtfully. “While I do agree that the specific nymphs who waged psychological warfare against Madara should be held accountable for their actions, I do not believe that their family members should suffer for their actions. Public opinion must also be taken into account. Nobody wants to think that the royal family would punish them for something their cousin did.”

“Then what should be done?” asks Jiro.

Madara taps the table to get their attention. “One of the things they always bragged about was that they could give Tobirama heirs, and I could not. Now obviously, we’re not going to choose one of them as Tobirama’s surrogate when the time comes, but I don’t want them to have the satisfaction of
one of their family members being his surrogate either.”

Tobirama looks darkly pleased at the suggestion. “And if their clan knows that it’s their fault none of them will be even considered, they’ll have to deal with their family’s anger. Even the ones who don’t want to or can’t be surrogates will be displeased that their family will lose out on the chance to give birth to royalty.”

Takeo, however, was frowning. “There was no guarantee any of them would have become your surrogate in the first place. You’re not taking anything away from them or forcing them to put in effort to earn forgiveness. It is a good way to create strife between them and their family, but it doesn’t seem like enough. We need to make a firm statement, that there are consequences to verbally attacking a friend of the royal family.”

“An apology gift,” says Sakiko. “There is precedent when one clan causes grave offense to another. And the quality of the gift will show their sincerity….or the lack of it.”

“People aren’t going to think it’s greedy to ask for a gift?” asks Madara.

Sakiko shakes her head. “We will list the crimes they have committed against you and Tobirama and say that words alone are not enough to prove their repentance. They ganged up on you, using words to chip away at your confidence and the bond between you and my son…….The metaphorical, emotional bond that is. You didn’t have an actual bond at the time. But the bond you have now makes their actions more heinous. They tried to deny you both a soul-deep love that will last until death.”

“And after,” says Tobirama, quietly. Then firmly, “I don’t care how long it takes; I will find a way for Madara to reincarnate with me.”

Sakiko stares at him in surprise for a moment. “To love him so much you would spend years trying to defy death…..If they try to give you a mediocre apology gift, I will make sure the entire royal family expresses deep offense.”

Tobirama blinks, then looks down at his plate, taking a cucumber slice into his mouth as an excuse not to respond. He tries to convey his gratitude with his eyes, the words sticking on his tongue. Judging by her fond smile, he thinks she understands.

“How is the worth of the gift determined?” asks Takeo, interrupting the silence before it has a chance to become awkward. “Should it be personal or expensive?”

“Hmm. I’d say personal is a secondary-goal, a bonus. The expense of the gift is determined by the wealth of its recipient. It would be acceptable for them to give an item easily affordable to them but expensive to the recipient if they were giving it to someone from the middle or lowest class. But Tobirama is of a higher rank. They’re going to have to go through some effort to find something acceptable to give to him. Either something of high value or not easily obtained. One of a kind items are especially well received,” says Sakiko.

She pauses a moment then pulls out a folder from underneath the table. “Before I can forget, I’ve made a list of all the Noble families and what they specialize in. Along with the name of the Head of the family, their heir, and the ten names of the ones who’ve wronged you. I’ve also written down what popular slang words I can remember that aren’t commonly used above land and their definitions.”

Tobirama accepts the folder from her and begins passing out the papers. Then they take turns reading each of the pages and passing them to the left when they’re done. He already knows the first names
of the women who’ve pestered him for years to marry them, but he takes a moment to make sure he
has their last names memorized as well.

“Another thing you may not be aware of is that dinner is considered a very social time here. We’ll
often have board games set up for people to play while they eat. And people usually stay sitting at
the table until everyone in their group is done eating,” says Sakiko.

“Is there any other dinner etiquette we need to know?” asks Jiro. “I imagine the utensil etiquette is
different, considering you guys don’t have multiple types of forks for different dishes.”

Sakiko laughs. “No, we don’t have to worry about that, thankfully. The only thing that stands out in
my mind is if your chopsticks touch something on the serving plates, then it’s yours. You don’t get
your saliva on something unless you’re intending to eat it, basically.”

“Sounds fair,” says Jiro, amused.

“What about the seating arrangements?” asks Takeo. “Do the Royals and Nobles sit among the other
classes like they do in Whirlpool?”

“They can…but they normally don’t,” says Sakiko. “There are no rules against it, but it is considered
rude for one of the lower classes to sit next to someone of a higher class without being invited.
Though, really, that could be considered true of same classes. No one likes it when someone’s being
pushy.”

“But it’s more socially acceptable for same classes to ask to sit next to each other?” asks Tobirama.
“Whereas it would be considered odd for a lower class to ask to sit next to a Noble?”

“Essentially, yes,” replies Sakiko. “Now, I think I’ve taught you what you’ll need to know for dinner
tonight. Let’s talk about something more fun. I’ve heard rumors that Mito is expecting. Has she
chosen a name yet?”

“They’ve been thinking of Nawaki if it’s boy, but haven’t decided on a girl’s name yet,” says Itama.
“Hashirama has been really excited about her pregnancy now that the threat of Kaguya is gone.”

“He’s still as excitable as ever, isn’t he?” asks Sakiko, smiling. “I should visit during the last month
of her pregnancy. I think it’ll do her good to have a sympathetic ear who understands firsthand how
uncomfortable being ninth months pregnant is. And I could even stay for a second month to help
with the newborn. Though I’m sure there will be plenty of other volunteers.”

“Sure. There were a lot of people who wanted to help out with little Tsunade,” says Itama. “But if
you’ll remember, Mito was only really comfortable letting family members near her daughter for the
first two years. You counted as family due to being her mother-in-law.”

“A dragon’s protective instincts,” says Madara. “Parenthood can make them overly protective and
even paranoid at times. It doesn’t help that Mito is a public figure and is sure to have enemies. But
dragons are almost incapable of betraying their kin, especially when it means hurting children. If
Mito let you near Tsunade as an infant, then that means she considers you family.”

Sakiko is delighted to have confirmation that Mito sees her as family and spends the next half hour
happily chatting with them. Eventually, she notices the bracelet on Tobirama’s wrist and asks about
that, appearing fascinated by its function until she learns why it was created.

“Death killed Kaguya?” asks Sakiko in disbelief. “Why on earth….” Then she shakes her head with
a slight huff. “Something isn’t adding up.”
Tobirama frowns. “In what way?”

“Nature isn’t afraid of Death. And while Death isn’t exactly afraid of her either, he knows better than to pick a fight over something so small. He could have easily waited until Nature chased Kaguya away from you before striking. That vision she gave you explains why you survived, not why she let you be exposed to him in the first place,” says Sakiko.

The temperature of the room spikes up by several degrees, causing Itama and Sakiko to flinch in surprise. Tobirama barely reacts, used to his husband’s temper. Though it’s interesting for him to note that Itama isn’t used to sudden temperature changes; apparently, Keitaro is as even tempered at home as he is in public.

“She did this to him on purpose?!” growls Madara. Even Jiro and Takeo were starting to look angry, the temperature climbing another few degrees. “Why would she do that?”

“I think she did it to him on purpose,” corrects Sakiko. “We can’t know for sure unless she confirms it. If I had to speculate her motives, it might be that she thought it would benefit him to be touched by Death. There are a few stories about those touched by Nature that find certain types of magic easier.”

“Death magic…?” asks Tobirama, puzzled. All of the death magic he had heard of was dark. Why would Nature want him to use it?

“Nature has a connection to life,” muses Itama. “What kind of new magic could you use having a connection to both Nature and Death?”

Tobirama’s eyes widen as the pieces click together inside his mind. “Death and life. She increased my chances of making Madara reincarnate with me.”

The temperature slowly lowers back to normal as his words register, the dragons’ rage cooling down as they understand that Nature was trying to help them.

Sakiko shakes her head in bemusement. “That is very odd. We don’t have many fire-elementals visit us, and I’ve never noticed a water-elemental change the temperature because of their mood. And I’m sure at least some of them must have been dragons, so it can’t just be a dragon thing.”

“I think it’s a matter of control,” says Takeo. “Water dragons have to deliberately try to freeze water, whereas fire dragons will subconsciously raise their body temperature when they’re cold. Therefore, we have a natural tendency to create heat without intending to.”

“If we try not to, we can stop ourselves from raising the temp when we’re angry,” adds Jiro. “And maybe it’s just a learned thing since many of our clanmates express their anger by creating heat. Madara, you probably met a few angry fire dragons on your journey. Did any of them react the same way we do?”

Madara doesn’t even need to think about it. “Yes. Every fire dragon I’ve met that became angry inevitably raised the temperature. I would say it must be an instinct, but I don’t feel the need to make the air hotter. It’s just more comfortable that way when I’m angry?”

“Same,” says Jiro.

Takeo rolls his eyes at Jiro’s short answer. “It doesn’t feel like a need for me either, but I do feel safer. It’s as though my magic is on high-alert, ready to attack whatever danger has angered me.”

Sakiko lets out an interested hum and the conversation turns to the differences between dragons, elementals, and nymphs. They don’t spend the entire time before dinner talking as they need to save
some of their social energy for tonight. Instead, Sakiko offers to let them borrow any book from her shelves to unwind, or they can choose to return to their quarters to rest.

Thirty minutes before dinner is to start, they regroup back in Sakiko’s rooms, where she gives them the outfits she’s picked out for them to wear. Tobirama recognizes the robes as being semi-formal from the times he’s visited in the past. And like those previous times, he has to resist the urge to sigh as Mother insists he wear a Prince’s circlet, covered in tiny pearls.

“I know you don’t like it, but it’s traditional for royalty to wear a crown or circlet, depending on their rank, to dinner and formal events. Even Father doesn’t wear his crown all the time, so you’ll only have to put up with the circlet for a few hours at a time,” says Sakiko.

Tobirama concedes the point and lets her set the circlet atop his head. At least she had chosen a simple one for him instead of the elaborate type that she was wearing. And she wasn’t making him wear any extra pearls like at truly formal events.

She gives the same type of circlet to Itama, who doesn’t protest though Tobirama can tell he’s just as uncomfortable wearing it as he is. They’ve also been given the same style of blue robe, which is less flowy and has fewer layers than his wedding robe.

Madara, Jiro, and Takeo’s robes are made of a dark orange-red fabric, with swirls of blue around the collar of Madara’s robe. It was meant to highlight his connection to Tobirama, married to a water nymph. And Mother takes it a step further by giving Madara a chain necklace with three pearls spaced an inch apart.

“Pearls are seen as a sign of the upper-class. The Nobles will think it odd if someone married to royalty isn’t wearing any,” says Sakiko.

Madara shrugs and wears the necklace. Pearls are considered a bit feminine in Whirlpool, but he’s visited multiple countries where feminine and masculine were the opposite of Whirlpool’s values. It doesn’t bother him anymore.

Once they’re all dressed up, they make their way to the Main Dining Hall. Madara is relieved to note that although there are two pools on either side of the room, the walls are quite solid. Solid and decorated with seashells of all shapes, sizes, and colors.

Low tables are scattered across the floor with thick, circular cushions to act as chairs. There were already dozens of people in the room, as well as mermaids and sirens sitting on ledges within the pools. Even as he watches, members of the kitchen staff prepare plates of food for them.

“They catch fish for us,” says Sakiko, following his gaze. “In return, they’re allowed to eat at the Dining Halls for free. They don’t have ways to cook food themselves or have access to the produce that we have. As much as they love raw fish, they do like the variety.”

Sakiko leads them to the table where her father and siblings are already seated at, introducing them as they sit down. She has two older brothers, a younger brother, and an older sister. Kenshin, Haruto, Jaxon, and Lilith.

“Welcome back to the palace, nephews,” says Kenshin.

“Thank you, Uncle,” says Tobirama, cautiously.

When Kenshin’s normally neutral expression softens into something affectionate, he relaxes. Kenshin is the current heir and one of Kaimana’s few children that actually wants the throne. With all these rumors of Tobirama someday inheriting, he hadn’t been sure how Kenshin would respond.
“Have the walls changed color since we were last here?” asks Itama.

“They’re blue now instead of white,” confirms Haruto. “Many of the rooms in the palace have been repainted to appear more welcoming.”

“One of the recreation rooms has been painted to resemble a sunset,” says Lilith.

Jaxon interrupts their small talk. “There are a lot of people here tonight, more so than usual. And all the Clan Heads are here as well as those females, the manipulative ten. I think the non-Nobility are expecting a show.”

“The manipulative ten,” repeats Tobirama, amused.

“A fitting name for them,” says Madara.

“They’ll wait until we’re done eating to approach,” says Kaimana, eyes narrowed as he surveys the assembled crowd. “I made my preferences clear to them before dinner started.”

“Thank you, Grandfather. I was not looking forward to them interrupting our meal,” says Tobirama.

He begins to pick up food from the serving plates as they talk. There were multiple kinds of grilled fish and bowls of rice with a large serving spoon. No soups at the moment, but a large variety of salads. He likes how efficient their system is here. There was a side door next to the only tall table in the room where kitchen staff would bring out plates of food, disappearing back through the door to pick up more dishes from the kitchen. Then other staff members would determine which tables needed more of a dish and deliver it themselves. And every piece of food was perfectly spaced along the plate so that someone could pick up an item without their chopsticks touching multiple pieces.

Next to everyone’s seat is some type of board game. If he remembers correctly, the game between him and Madara is called mahjong. Which, wasn’t that a single player game? At least, it was in Whirlpool.

“How is this game played with multiple people?” asks Tobirama.

“There are two ways. You can either take turns finding pairs or there’s speed mode where you each keep taking as many pairs as you can find. The game ends when no more tiles can be removed, leaving whoever has the most as the winner. Usually, people take turns when playing the game at dinner so that some concentration can be put towards conversing,” says Haruto.

“Is it…fun?” asks Madara, staring at the board skeptically.

“The fast pace version is to me,” says Jaxon. “You don’t have to play the game next to you if you don’t want to. You can either switch with someone else or just focus on eating and conversation.”

“Hmm. I’m not really in a gaming mood, not with what’s coming next,” says Madara.

Haruto gives him a worried frown. “They were really horrible to you, huh?”

Madara grimaces. “They were very…dismissive about my worth in a number of ways. Finances, gender, social status, species.”

“Huh. They must have been rather persuasive. I heard you left for an entire decade,” says Haruto.

“It was subtle at first. They never could convince me that Tobirama would see me as lesser the way
they did, but I worried that he would choose a mate that fit the Nobility’s expectations. He’s duty-orientated, helping Hashirama run the clan when he’d rather be researching. I thought I had to become someone his nymph relatives would approve of before he would accept me as his mate,” says Madara.

“….Well, we approve of you just as you are,” says Haruto, uncertain of what else to say.

It was the right thing to say. Madara visibly relaxes, his guarded expression melting away. The conversation flows much more smoothly from then on, now that Madara doesn’t feel as though he has to impress Tobirama’s family.

The tension returns after the meal is over and the Nobles begin to approach. They move until they’re on the same side of the table with Madara and Tobirama in the center of their line and Kaimana to their left. Then the Nobles take turns approaching, two at a time.

First, they bow to Kaimana, as is appropriate, then Kaimana introduces them to his guests.

“Lord Morel and his youngest daughter, Jolna.”

“Sire,” says Lord Morel, bowing again. “I have heard what my daughter did to Prince Tobirama and his mate. She wishes to apologize for her appalling behavior.”

Kaimana inclines his head to Tobirama, giving him permission to reply.

“Does she really?” asks Tobirama, catching sight of the veiled hatred in Jolna’s eyes and the barely hidden distaste in Morel’s eyes when they look at Madara. “Tell me, Lord Morel, did your daughter inherit her hatred of humans from you?”

Morel looks startled, probably at being called out on his behavior.

“Oh? Then I suppose I just imagined the dozens of protests Jolna made about a human being an unfit mate. Or perhaps Madara just imagined how often she insulted him, saying his human weakness made him an unfit husband for myself. What do you think, Lord Morel? Did we just imagine it?”

Morel pales. It was a serious accusation to say that a royal was lying, with a severe penalty if the accuser was the one found to be lying. He would either have to admit to his daughter’s misdeeds or commit a more serious social faux pas himself.

“No, Prince Tobirama. I’m sure your memory is…..accurate,” he says reluctantly. “However, my daughter has since realized the error of her actions and wishes to make amends.”

“To make amends? Are you telling me you aren’t just here to offer me empty words? Because it’s going to take more than a few false apologies to prove your sincerity to me,” says Tobirama coldly.

It takes a moment of his words to sink in, but when they do, Jolna slowly turns red with anger.

“You expect us to give you an apology gift?! You’re the one who chose a human over us! If anyone should be apologizing, it’s you!”

“Jolna!” says Morel sharply. “Prince Tobirama does not owe you an apology simply because he chose someone else as his mate. Your mother has absolutely spoiled you if you truly think otherwise.” He then bows to Tobirama, grabbing his daughter’s shoulder to make her do the same. “My apologies, Prince Tobirama. I did not realize the full extent of my daughter’s crimes against
you. How long do we have to acquire a gift for you and your mate?”

Well, at least he realized that the gift would be for both him and Madara. Perhaps he wasn’t a complete idiot. He turns to look at Kaimana.

“How long is considered an acceptable time to acquire a gift?” asks Tobirama.

“Three months should be long enough. Nobles generally already have contacts with those selling rare items,” says Kaimana.

Tobirama raises an eyebrow at Madara who nods back. He addresses Morel, “Very well then. Three months works for us.”

“Three months is a very reasonable time. Thank you, Prince Tobirama.”

Morel looks back to Kaimana, who dismisses him with a wave of his hand. He and his daughter return to standing beside the other Nobles while the next two approach.

“Lord Niven and his niece, Trina.”

“Your majesty,” says Niven, bowing. “My niece is here to apologize to Prince Tobirama.”

Trina scowls, looking sullen.

Tobirama raises a skeptical eyebrow at Niven, who looks back at him awkwardly.

“What excuses do you have to offer me, Trina?” asks Tobirama.

“I said what I believed to be true at the time. Madara has not been raised among Nobles. He does not know our ways,” says Trina.

“And you think him incapable of learning?” asks Tobirama, unimpressed. “Madara learned about many different cultures while he was away from me. Some he learned during the first year, and yet nine years later, he still remembered enough to teach me. And yet you think Noble politics would be such a challenge?”

“If you think him so sufficient, then why does he not answer these accusations himself?” counters Trina.

The air in the room drops several degrees as his eyes narrow. Tobirama doesn’t notice. Madara does.

“It may have escaped your notice, but your Uncle didn’t actually address Madara, despite the fact that you have caused more harm to him than to me. Lord Morel made a similar mistake.” And here, his eyes glance over to Morel, to revel in his look of dawning horror. “Although, he at least realized by the end of the conversation that his gift would be to both of us.”

Morel’s slump of relief when he realizes that he’s accidentally abated some of Tobirama’s ire is almost comical.

Tobirama focuses back on Trina. “If you think you’ll earn my forgiveness without winning Madara’s first, then you are greatly mistaken.”

Niven glares at his niece as she hesitates. “Trina, you will apologize to them. I’ll be personally overseeing your selection of their apology gift. If you draw the ire of the royal family onto our clan due to your foolishness, I will disinherit you.”
Trina stares at him in shock for a moment, then steels her expression into false contrition, bowing to the space between Madara and Tobirama. “My apologies, Prince Tobirama, Lord Madara,” she says stiffly. “I should not have said what I did. To prove my sincerity, I will procure an apology gift for the two of you.”

The level of formality was a clue to him that Trina was insincere. He had known her for more than ten years. She uses formality to cloak her true feelings. Still, there was no gain to be had by pointing it out to her.

“I'll believe that when I see it,” says Madara, scathingly.

….His mate has a different opinion on the matter, it seems.

Niven grips his niece’s shoulder before she can retort, bowing to Kaimana and asking for dismissal. Permission granted, he drags his niece back to the group of Nobles before she can make the situation worse.

“Lord Adesso and his second daughter, Aiya,” says Kaimana. “Here to apologize as well?”

“Yes, sire,” answers Aiya. She bows first to the King and then to Tobirama and Madara. “I am sorry for the pain my actions have caused you. I did not fully understand the depth of your feelings for one another. I wrongly assumed that you both would be able to move on after one or two years apart.”

“That doesn’t excuse your actions at all,” says Tobirama, dissatisfied. “Everyone has the right to choose their own mate. The ten of you seem to think that being a prince means I have less right to make personal decisions. It’s insulting.”

“And condescending,” says Madara. “To think that they know what’s best for you and this country more than you and the royal family do. None of your relatives think me unsuitable as your mate due to your rank.”

“Yes, I’ve come to realize that you are not as incompatible with Prince Tobirama as I had first assumed,” says Aiya. “You’re good for him, and I regret trying to keep you two apart for so long.”

Tobirama and Madara exchange vaguely baffled glances. That had actually sounded sincere. What alternate universe had they stumbled upon?

‘What do you think? She wronged you the most,’ says Tobirama through their bond.

“The apology is appreciated, but it isn’t enough,” decides Madara. “You were the least cruel out of the ten of you, but you still helped them drive me away from my home. I'll judge your gift less harshly, but I can’t accept your apology without one.”

“I understand. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make amends,” says Aiya.

Lavira and Yovina turn out to be almost as apologetic as Aiya, recognizing that they’re in the wrong but still unsatisfied with how things turned out. The other five still clearly hold a grudge against Madara, but hold their tongue to avoid backlash from their clan.

However, he does have to remind them that Madara’s proper title is Prince, not Lord. They seem to have spent too much time in Whirlpool to have forgotten that in the water nymph kingdom, people rise in rank to match their spouse.

Or perhaps it was a deliberate dig? At least half of them had protested his marriage because Madara would have become a King with him if he ever inherited the throne.
It’s a relief when they’re finally able to leave, and Tobirama heads straight back to his room with Madara, promising his family that they can talk more in the morning. He gets dressed for bed, shivering in the moments his clothes are off. He wraps the blanket around himself and Madara, snuggling up to his mate’s warmth. Normally, the palace was the perfect temperature for him, but he feels so chilled right now.

“You should use your sun bracelet. I don’t think this cold is natural,” says Madara.

Oh. He supposes that would explain it. A light shines underneath their covers as he activates the bracelet, warm sunlight spilling across their skin and his mate’s love filling his mind. It makes him snuggle closer to Madara, the positive emotions naturally putting him into a cuddly mood.

“You made the room colder earlier just from being angry. Isn’t that unheard of for a nymph?” asks Madara.

“….I didn’t notice that, but I was already feeling cold. It seems that thinking of death only gives me a chill, but thinking of killing other people makes the cold spill out to the rest of the room,” says Tobirama.

Madara huffs out a short laugh. “You were thinking of murdering them?”

“I’d be doing the world a favor,” mutters Tobirama resentfully.

“You’d be starting a civil war is what you’d be doing,” says Madara.

Tobirama hums discontentedly and pulls the blanket up over his head. The light from his bracelet quickly becomes annoying, so he dims it down while focusing on keeping the heat on. Madara helpfully raises his own body temperature, and Tobirama finally begins to feel warm again.

“Good night, husband,” says Madara, amused.

Tobirama smiles, mood uplifting at the reminder that Madara is his husband. Ten years of waiting has paid off.

“Good night, husband,” says Tobirama.

They fall asleep together on the hammock, Tobirama’s senses stretching out in his sleep as he feels all the water around them. He feels at home here, surrounded by his element and safe within Madara’s arms.
Tobirama relaxes as he sinks down beneath the water’s edge, lightly pushing his foot against the wall to sink further down. He was in one of the Palace’s recreation rooms, this one with a pool that leads to the ocean. Madara, Jiro, and Takeo were with Jaxon, receiving a tour of the palace.

Itama was in another one of the recreation rooms, making friends with non-Nobility. His brother wants to find out what life is like for them here and whether they’re happy. Tobirama wishes to know the answer to that as well, but why should he force himself to talk to a multitude of strangers when Itama is willing to do it himself?

Tobirama follows the tunnel down until he finds the door to the ocean, glancing around curiously before picking a direction at random. He can hear siren songs in the distance, just enough magic in the tune to increase its appeal without inducing hypnosis.

Still, sirens are known for their mischievous natures, so he lets his body merge with the water before getting closer. The vibrations of their song flow through him, not quite translating into sound but enjoyable nonetheless.

When he gets bored of the melody, he continues forward and down, the palace having been built on a hill. It’s dark enough that he wouldn’t be able to see anything even in solid form, but he can sense the movements of the various creatures around him. There are whales in the distance and a squid larger than himself nearby.

Feeling playful, he carefully pokes at one of the squid’s tentacles, causing the creature to begin looking around curiously. He wonders if the squid can tell he’s there. Some animals are more sensitive to magic than others.

After playing with the squid for a while, he ventures further down into the ocean’s depths. There was something at the edge of his senses, calling to him. It feels like Nature’s magic, so he doesn’t hesitate to seek it out.

Eventually, he reaches a rock wall that slowly cracks down the middle when he approaches. It seals itself up behind him and then he’s falling. He’s not afraid. Water doesn’t feel vertigo or that awful swooping sensation in your stomach when you fall. There’s no physical stimulus to tell him he should be afraid.

He turns to steam when he reaches the bottom, floating along corridors that would kill him if he were in his nymph body. The very air is saturated with Nature’s energy, but there’s one cavern that outshines them all. Literally.

Countless glowing crystals line the walls, singing to him in a language that can only be felt through the soul. He floats around the room, stopping when he finds one that calls to him louder than the
others. It detaches from the wall, no bigger than his fist, and floats within his misty body.

Nature chooses that moment to link her awareness to his, sending him images of him and Madara holding the crystal together. Infusing it with magic during a ritual. Then it changes, a third person touches the crystal and the scene darkens, a sense of dread filling him.

‘Only Madara and I should touch the crystal?’ guesses Tobirama.

An affirmative. Then an image of magic. She waits.

‘And it shouldn’t touch anyone else’s magic?’

Another feeling of yes. Then an image of himself and Madara appear in his mind again. A bright golden chord trails out from his chest while a thin, silver thread comes from Madara, both of them connecting to the ground. First, she shows him dying, the chord tugging his soul down to join with Nature’s magic, allowing her to reincarnate him. But when Madara dies, the silver chord snaps and Death appears to take him away.

Then a second scene, the crystal floating between the two of them. The golden chord goes from the earth, through his chest and into the crystal, then out again to Madara. This time when they die and Madara’s thread snaps, the connection facilitated by the crystal tugs Madara along with him to Nature.

‘I can use this in a ritual to bind Madara’s soul to mine?’ asks Tobirama.

Yes.

‘Thank you.’

Nature projects her affection and then helps him find the exit, the doorway once again sealing up without any cracks. He has a feeling that no one can even find this place without her permission.

With the crystal now firmly in his possession, he heads back to the castle and resumes human form at the pool entrance closest to his room. He receives some odd looks as he keeps his hands clasped together, a layer of his magic wrapped around the crystal. His narrowed eyes stop them from asking questions as he briskly exits the room, not slowing down until he reaches his bedroom. He isn’t going to take any chances of someone else’s magic coming into contact with Nature’s gift. It’s too important to risk.

‘Madara?’ he asks through their bond. ‘Are you busy? There’s something I want to show you.’

He receives a mental shrug. ‘The tour is almost over. I can leave early?’

‘That would be appreciated.’

That gets Madara’s interest. Tobirama senses his pace quicken as he makes a beeline for their bedroom. He meets Madara at the door, pulling him in by his shirt, silencing his surprised protest with his lips. Then he starts to tug him towards the bedroom, pausing only long enough for Madara to kick the front door shut.

His right hand is still clenched around the crystal, and he presses it against Madara’s skin as he tugs at his mate’s shirt. Madara gives the crystal a curious gaze, but obligingly takes off his top.

“What is that?”
Tobirama presses closer, curling his hand around Madara’s hip as he lays kisses down his neck. ‘A gift from Nature to bind our souls together. We’ll have to use a runic circle to complete the process, but the first step is to soak the crystal with our magic. When we die, Nature will be able to use our connection to put you in the reincarnation cycle with me.’

Madara automatically tilts his head to give Tobirama more room, then goes still as his words register. ‘I’ll be able to reincarnate with you?’

Tobirama responds with feelings of joy and triumph as well as a great deal of mine.

Madara snorts. “This is what got you in the mood?”

Tobirama bites his neck, hard, in retaliation. Blood trickles into his mouth as Madara hisses but tellingly doesn’t pull away. ‘We’re going to be together for eternity. Nobody and nothing will take you away from me, not even death.’

Madara groans softly and lets Tobirama push him down onto the bed, tilting his hips up for Tobirama to remove the rest of his clothes. ‘You make it sound like we’ll be lovers for eternity as well. I thought we wouldn’t keep our memories in the next life?’

‘No, but we’ll have a deeper connection than any other reincarnated pair. We won’t just have a sense of familiarity and trust. It’ll feel like we’re meeting the other half of our soul. The odds of us not getting together again are astronomically slim.’

Madara stares up at him for a moment then pulls him down into a hard kiss, biting at his lips. He shudders as Tobirama’s magic flares out against his bare skin, realizing for the first time that the air was practically saturated with his mate’s energy. ‘What are you doing with your magic?’

Tobirama mirrors him, bite for bite, keeping it just light enough that no blood is drawn. ‘No one else’s magic gets to touch the crystal until the bond is sealed. Saturating the room with my magic keeps anyone else’s energy from drifting in.’

Madara responds by letting his own energy flare out, even as he starts tugging at Tobirama’s shirt. ‘For someone who practically tore off my clothes, you’re a bit overdressed for this.’

Reluctantly separating from Madara’s lips, he sits up and grabs the hem of his shirt, sliding it up and off. Then come the pants, kicking them off his legs and onto the floor. Now completely naked, he settles his weight back down, rocking his hips forward.

Tobirama exhales on a shaky moan as pleasure sparks through him, looking at Madara’s face as he moves again to watch his eyes glaze over. He loves seeing that expression.

Setting the crystal down on Madara’s chest, he lets his hands wander, finding all of the places that make Madara arch up into his touch. Which then knocks the crystal off. Hmm….

Madara laughs at his disgruntled expression and pulls him down into a kiss before he can complain, threading his fingers through his hair. ‘What are you in the mood for?’

‘I want to fuck you.’

Tobirama smirks at the flare of lust in their bond, eyes flickering over to the bottle of lube on the dresser. It only takes a moment for Madara to catch on, his mate’s magic reaching out to bring the bottle closer. ‘I take it you’re on board with the plan then?’

Madara rolls his eyes and tosses the bottle at Tobirama’s head. “Don’t play dumb. It doesn’t suit
“Mm. One could almost take that for a compliment,” says Tobirama, catching the bottle out of the air.

He pops the lid open and slicks up his fingers, nudging Madara’s thighs apart with his knee. It’s interesting to experience sex from this side, to see Madara mirror his easy acceptance of the other taking control. Neither of them are normally submissive men, but it feels different with each other.

Tobirama watches Madara’s face carefully as pushes first one, then two fingers inside him, looking for any discomfort. Ninety percent of the time, he’s the one being taken, so he has to remember to go slower. Dipping his head down, he licks a stripe up Madara’s shaft, swirling his tongue around the top before taking the head into his mouth.

Madara curses, bucking his hips as he claws at the bedsheets. Tobirama gives a pleased hum and lowers his head, waiting until Madara is completely distracted by pleasure to add a third finger. He takes his time thoroughly stretching him, mostly avoiding his prostate to prevent him from cumming too soon.

“Enough,” pants Madara, pushing at his head. “I’m ready.”

Tobirama resists for a moment, enjoying the feel of Madara in his mouth, but Madara keeps tugging at his hair until he sits up. He slicks himself up with his free hand before removing his fingers, replacing them with his cock before Madara really has time to notice the empty feeling.

They nearly groan in sync as pleasure sparks through them both, heightened by the bond still wide open for their telepathic communication. Tobirama’s breath hitches as Madara’s nails lightly dig into his back, pulling him down into an open-mouthed kiss.

Their magic fills the air as they begin to move, half of it being soaked up by the crystal. Tobirama moans softly as he feels their connection deepening, possessive love flowing through the bond from both of them.

Madara reaches between them, pinching Tobirama’s nipples even as he tightens his muscles around his cock. It makes Tobirama’s hips snap forward, which is exactly what he was aiming for. He wraps his legs around Tobirama’s waist and urges him to go faster, letting out a wordless shout as heat flows through him like molten ecstasy.

Tobirama shudders as Madara pulls at his nipples again, grabbing hold of the other’s leg as he tries not to let his pace falter. He grits his teeth as the pleasure spikes higher, forcing himself not to cum until Madara does. Thankfully, he doesn’t have to wait long. A few more thrusts and Madara clamps down around him, semen leaving a sticky trail across their stomachs.

He muffles his moan against Madara’s neck, hips stilling as he finds release. They stay like that for a moment, just catching their breath, before Tobirama reluctantly pulls out. It’s disconcerting to lose that physical connection, and he all but wraps himself around Madara to keep that feeling of closeness.

“You were an octopus in a past life, weren’t you?” asks Madara.

Tobirama smiles against Madara’s chest. “Perhaps. There’s no evidence that animals can’t reincarnate into people, after all.”

Madara stills. “…Is there evidence that they do? Does it work both ways? We’re not going to wake up as snails in a few thousand years, are we?”
Tobirama snorts. “I doubt Lady Magic would be that cruel. You’d make a lovely sea serpent. Perhaps I’d be an otter,” he says thoughtfully. “They’re rather curious creatures, aren’t they?”

“I really hope you’re joking,” says Madara.

“Of course not! I really do think you’d be a wonderful sea serpent,” says Tobirama teasingly. He laughs when Madara tugs at his hair. “Yes, I’m joking. Nymphs don’t reincarnate as animals, and neither will you with our connection. Nature has grander plans in mind for us than that.”

“Oh? What kind of plans?” asks Madara warily.

Unseen to both of them, his eyes faintly glow white as he replies, “World-altering plans. We’re going to bring in a new era of prosperity.”

“Well, that’s…good,” says Madara, shell shocked.

“Hmm? Yes, I suppose it is,” says Tobirama, absent-mindedly, eyes focused on the crystal. He reaches for it and smiles at the energy he feels beneath the surface. “A few more sessions like this and the crystal will be ready for the ritual. Think you’ll be ready for round two soon? I want you to fuck me this time.”

Madara exhales sharply, a new wave of arousal flushing through him. “You’re trying to kill me,” he says ruefully. “A heart attack from too much sex.”

Tobirama hums thoughtfully, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I don’t know. You’re a rather healthy individual. I think it would take a few days of non-stop activity to kill you. Shall we test that theory?”

Madara can’t stop himself from laughing as Tobirama caresses his chest suggestively. “You’re insatiable. But thankfully for my health, I think one of our relatives would come looking for us if we stayed cooped up for more than a day.”

Tobirama grimaces. “Hashirama would probably interrupt even before then if he was here. He has terrible timing.”

“At least he’s not doing it on purpose. I’ve never seen someone look so horrified as when he walked in on us, and we had only taken our shirts off!”

“You also had your hand down my pants,” says Tobirama wryly.

Madara pauses. “….That might have had something to do with it.”

Tobirama rolls his eyes, but fondness spills out from his mind into their bond. He continues resting against Madara’s chest until they’ve both recovered their energy, then lets his hand drift lower. A competition to see who has the most stamina sounds like an excellent idea right now.

“A few of my cousins are going down to the coast in a few days to spend a week at the clan’s beach house,” says Obito. “They’ve invited me to come with them. There’s enough room for you and your dad to come to with us, if you want.”

Kakashi looks up from brushing Urushi’s fur. “A beach house? Could be fun. It’s a bit short notice for a Senior Knight to take a vacation. He’ll have to see if anyone’s willing to cover his shift.”

“He has a lot of friends. One of them should be willing to help out. They know he’d return the
Obito startles as his hand is nudged, Shiba demanding he continue with the brushing. He ignores Kakashi silently laughing at him in the background and turns his focuses back to grooming the dogs. There was so much fur. It’s no wonder Sakumo and Kakashi were covered in it all the time.

“I’ll talk to him about it when he comes home tonight,” says Kakashi. “I’m sure he’ll say yes if he can.”

Fifteen minutes later, they’re still brushing dog fur. Clumps of it lay on the floor, peeled away from the brush.

“Why do you even have so many dogs?” asks Obito, frazzled. “Normal parents let their kids get one or two pets, not eight.”

“Most parents don’t take their kids’ pets with them on tracking missions,” replies Kakashi, dryly. “We had two in the beginning that he took with him. Even with the babysitter around, I started to get lonely with all of them gone. Getting a few more dogs just made sense. It all spiraled out from there.”

“Into having eight of them,” says Obito, amused.

Kakashi shrugs, not showing an ounce of embarrassment. “Dogs love my family. Most people with an animal affinity find it difficult to stay away from whatever type of animal they’re drawn to.”

Obito tilts his head in thought. “Doesn’t the Sarutobi family have an affinity with apes? And the Akimichi with bears? I suppose the latter could visit whatever bears are in the forest, but there aren’t any apes around, are there?”

“No. You have to travel halfway across the country to find the nearest ape colony. Which is why nearly half the Sarutobi clan lives out there,” says Kakashi.

Obito blinks in surprise. “Oh.”

“You didn’t know that? If I remember correctly, Hiruzen Sarutobi’s grandfather moved to the capital when he was a young man to become a Knight. Then his son and grandson followed in his footsteps. Not everyone with an animal affinity finds it convenient to stay with said animal. It doesn’t hurt them to be away from them, but it can give a sense of loneliness,” explains Kakashi.

“And thus, eight dogs,” says Obito.

Kakashi shrugs again and gently pats Bisuke on the shoulder, letting him know he’s done. The dog wags its tail and wanders off to play in the backyard. Obito watches it go with envy, but dutifully keeps helping his boyfriend with all the fur. When they’re finally done, he stretches his arms above his head to loosen up his muscles, then follows the last dog outside.

It’s a lot more fun to play fetch with the dogs than to brush them. They’re all full of excited energy, chasing sticks around the yard and wrestling with each other. He barely even notices the time passing until Sakumo returns home, not until the man is calling them inside to help prepare dinner.

“A beach vacation?” asks Sakumo, taking a moment to think about it. “Yes, that does sound like a good idea. I’ve done enough favors for other Knights to help them get time off when they needed it. One of them should be willing to cover my shifts.”

Obito turns to Kakashi and grins. “We’re going to the beach together! Have you ever been surfing? I haven’t tried it yet, but cousin Hirako says it’s fun once you get the hang of it. Oh, and the seafood
restaurants that close to the coast are amazing.”

“You said they’re leaving in two days?” asks Sakumo. “Are we walking to the coast or taking a carriage?”

“Well, actually, we’re flying,” says Obito.

Kakashi chokes on his food, giving Obito an incredulous stare. To which Obito just shrugs at him.

“My clan said he could know. Since he was married to someone with dragon blood and now has a kid with dragon blood, that qualifies him to know,” says Obito.

“Dragon…blood,” says Sakumo slowly.

“It’s diluted, but yes. Aunt Yakino is good at sensing magic, and she says that one of Kakashi’s great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents was a lightning dragon. You can’t tell anybody, but dragons have a human form.” Then he pauses. “Well, I mean, technically we can’t stop you? But if you tell anyone, not only will it put my clan in danger, but one of them will kill you.”

Kakashi covers his face with his hand, muttering under his breath, “Why would you say that?”

“He needed to know!” Obito says defensively. “It’s a real danger to his life. If he tells anyone about the Dragon Secret without the express permission of Dragons, then they’ll kill him!.....And whoever he told, probably.”

The last is tacked on as an afterthought. Kakashi slowly lifts his face up, giving Obito a deadpan stare. Obito rubs the back of his head nervously and looks away.

Sakumo clears his throat to get their attention. “I don’t entirely understand what’s going on, but if you say it’ll hurt your family for me to tell anyone, then I’ll keep silent. You know I’m not a malicious person.”

“I do know that,” says Obito, trying for reassuring, “but I had to make sure you understood how serious this is. People used to know about dragons’ human forms, and attacked them while they were more vulnerable. No one wants to return to those days, so dragons are very cautious with who they’re willing to trust.”

Sakumo’s expression softens. “Then please let your family know that I’m honored by their trust. Now, you said we would be flying there? Should we pack light?”

“Eh, not really. The weight of a few bags isn’t going to drag us down. Just don’t try to bring your whole house, and we should be fine,” replies Obito.

They discuss the trip a while longer before the conversation turns to how the village is doing. A few buildings still need repairing, but the construction workers are making good progress. The kitsune will be leaving the city tomorrow, half of them returning home while the others will be visiting other kitsune clans to share the knowledge of anti-possession talismans. They had practically demanded the knowledge of how to create them once they awoke from Kaguya’s control, and Tobirama had readily agreed to teach them.

After dinner, Obito joins Kakashi in his room and helps him choose what he’s going to bring with him. Sunscreen, definitely. Kakashi’s skin is as pale as Obito’s, and he doesn’t have a fire dragon’s protection from the sun’s rays. Then he has to talk Kakashi into bringing more than four outfits. Yes, they have a washing machine at the beach house, but who wants to do laundry while on vacation? Packing light isn’t necessary when your mode of transportation is a dragon.
The sun shines high overhead as Obito and his kinsmen fly to the coast, a good omen that their vacation will be a happy one. With any luck, the weather will remain this pleasant for the entire week. Obito intends to spend as much of his time on the beach as possible, making sandcastles and swimming in the azure-blue sea.

It’s with that thought in mind that he rushes through unpacking, then practically drags Kakashi out of the house as soon they’ve dressed in their swim trunks. Though Kakashi really only puts up resistance long enough to grab their supplies, shoving them in a backpack before following Obito out the door.

“You really like the ocean, huh?” asks Kakashi.

Obito gives him a puzzled look. “Are there people who don’t?”

Biting back a laugh, Kakashi gives a short nod. “Not everybody likes large bodies of water. It’s actually a stereotype that fire elementals don’t like the ocean.”

Obito rolls his eyes and grabs the sunscreen out of the backpack. “It’s not like I’m going to be conjuring fire while swimming. And if anything, fire elementals should enjoy the beach more than everybody else since we so rarely burn.”

“Mm,” Kakashi makes an agreeing noise, eyeing the bottle in Obito’s hand. “Speaking of, want to help me put that on?”

Heat spreads across his face as he nearly drops the bottle, nodding his head and hoping he doesn’t look too eager. He probably doesn’t succeed, judging by the amusement in Kakashi’s eyes. But as long as Kakashi doesn’t say anything, he can live with the embarrassment.

A different kind of heat flushes through him as he smooths the sunscreen across Kakashi’s skin. At least he’s the not the only one affected. When Kakashi pulls down his mask to kiss him, he can see that he’s blushing too. Then both of them end up looking away in embarrassment when their sensitive ears pick up someone cooing about ‘how cute the young lovers are’.

“Do you….want to make a sandcastle with me?” Obito asks, trying to break the awkward silence.

Kakashi looks dubious but agrees. He’ll just have to show his boyfriend how fun sandcastles can be. They pick a spot a few feet away from the waves and begin building. Without a bucket, Obito uses his magic to get water when the sand isn’t wet enough, but the actual building he does by hand.

“We should build a moat,” says Obito.

“Are there castles that actually have moats? I’ve yet to see one,” says Kakashi.

“How many castles have you seen?” retorts Obito. “I have heard of one of the other countries having moats, but I can’t remember which one. Either way, they’re fun to make. The small versions for sandcastles, anyway. I’m sure the giant moats are a pain to dig up.”

“Unless they use earth elementals and nymphs. With enough of them, they could have a fully-formed moat in a just a few hours.”

“Ah, true.”
He doesn’t have anything else to say at the moment, so he concentrates on shaping the sand. Without discussing it, the two of them have automatically started to recreate King Noboru’s castle, as that was the one they were most familiar with. Not the most creative way they could have done this, but it’s still fun.

Obito startles as their hands touch, reaching for the same tower. Then melts inside as Kakashi lets his hand linger, fingertips brushing across the back of his palm. It’s little moments like these that he treasures the most, where Kakashi pauses what he’s doing to show his affection.

Tilting his hand up, he laces their fingers together. Kakashi meets him halfway as he shifts closer, pulling down his mask so that they can kiss. It’s slow and languid, a gentle expression of their feelings. They get lost in their own world, magic surging up to hum just beneath their skin. Obito can already tell that they’re going to bond someday. Their magic wants to meet, and it’s only a matter of time before their souls feel the same draw.

It’s the happy shrieking of children that gets them to pull away, both unable to hear a sudden noise and not look. There’s a group not too far from them, three adults and five kids of varying ages splashing in the water. It’s a nice domestic scene, but as cute as it is, it doesn’t give him any desire to have kids of his own.

Maybe that’s just because he’s still a teenager? He knows that people can change their minds about things like that, but he has a feeling that he won’t. How soon is he supposed to talk to Kakashi about that? They may be young, but their relationship will last forever if they end up bonding.

“What’s that intense expression for?” asks Kakashi.

“Er, well. I guess I was thinking that while kids can be fun to play with for a few hours, I’m not sure I’d want them full-time? And I don’t know what your thoughts are on parenthood, or whether we’ll still have the same opinions twenty years from now.”

Kakashi looks back to the group of children with a dubious expression. “I don’t think I’m anywhere near ready to be a father, or if I ever will be. What I do know is that, whatever happens, I want us to stay together. If one of us ends up wanting children later down the line, then we’ll find a way to deal with it.”

Obito smiles widely and doesn’t care if he looks ridiculous. He’s so happy he feels he could burst from it. Whatever happens in life, he knows that Kakashi will be by his side, and it’s an amazing feeling.

Kakashi makes an amused sound in the back of his throat, then looks back down at the sandcastle. “This looks done, right? I’d like to swim for a while before the sun sets.”

“Sure. Race you to the water,” says Obito, scrambling to get up.

Kakashi quickly follows suit, the water splashing around their ankles as they sprint into the sea. They don’t even need to say anything to turn it into a swimming race, though they do end up having to communicate how far out to sea they’re willing to go.

They don’t stop until the sun is a mere sliver in the sky, recognizing the dangers of swimming in the dark. But instead of returning to the beach house, Obito takes Kakashi’s hand and leads him along the boardwalk where a few vendors are still open for business.

Obito gets them some food while Kakashi wanders over to the vendor selling various forms of seashells and rocks. One in particular catches his attention, an oddly shaped white rock that resonates
with his magic.

“What is this?” asks Kakashi.

“That’s fulgurite, a rock formed by lightning hitting the sand. This one came from a natural lightning strike, not from an elemental.”

“Huh. How much is it?”

“For one this size, ten dollars.”

Kakashi frowns, but pays the man. On the surface, it seems expensive, but a naturally made item tends to have more magical properties. If another elemental had made it, the fulgurite was more likely to break than accept his magic.

“Thank you for your business,” says the salesman, happily accepting his money.

Kakashi stops himself from rolling his eyes and goes to join Obito further up the boardwalk where there are a few tables. On the way, he begins to channel his magic into the white stone. Just a slow trickle at first, to see how much it can handle. For its size, it can store quite a large amount. By the time he reaches Obito, the stone is all but radiating with his energy.

Obito passes him a plate as he sits down, staring curiously at what he’s holding. “That’s one of those lightning-created rocks, right? I forget what they’re called.”

Kakashi blinks, not having expected Obito to know about fulgurite when even he hadn’t. “The vendor called it fulgurite. It seems to hold my magic rather well. None of it is leaking out.”

“Any plans for it? Might make a good battery,” says Obito.

“I was actually thinking of giving it to you,” says Kakashi, trying to sound casual.

Obito’s eyes go wide. “A gift that has your magic. That’s considered…intimate to my kind. Almost like an engagement present.”

Kakashi wills himself not to blush. “Well, I wasn’t quite thinking of it that way. More like a courting gift that demonstrates my serious intentions. We’re a bit early in the relationship to get engaged, but someday….”

“Someday,” agrees Obito, accepting the fulgurite into his hand. He can feel his dragon instincts immediately latch onto the object, a possessive feeling of mine. No doubt this will be a cherished part of his hoard for a long time to come.

Epilogue

A young boy trains by the river, loops of fire spinning around, faster and faster. His eyes narrowed in concentration, he doesn’t notice the water nymph watching him from behind the trees. It’s not until he loses control of one of the rings that the nymph comes out of hiding. Water spouts up from the river, quickly dousing the tree before it can become a full-blown forest fire.

“You’re not very careful, are you?” asks Tasi.
Makai’s mouth snaps shut, astonishment turning to indignation. “Excuse you! I had everything under control!”

Tasi hums skeptically, eyeing the scorched tree.

Makai flushes red. “Shut up! What are you even doing here? Who are you?”

“This forest is right outside the Academy grounds. I’m waiting for orientation to start. My name is Tasi.”

“And I’m Makai.” He eyes Tasi speculatively. “You got into the Academy of Arcane Magics too?”

The academy was a boarding school for teenagers. They accepted people of all races from around the country, but only those with high levels of magic and above average intelligence. Not genius levels, but they wanted people who learned quickly. This was a school meant to create Masters in their chosen field of study.

“Of course,” replies Tasi, seemingly bemused that he even has to ask. “I received the highest score in rune affinity that they’ve seen in decades. It made the news.”

Makai blinks, memory striking like lightning. “I remember that! My school actually had a lecture on affinities after that. You have the ability to understand runes on a deeper level than anyone else our age. It’s kind of cool, but I don’t think I’d have the patience to create new runic matrixes. Spells are less complicated.”

Tasi shrugs. “It’s not for everyone. Are you a dragon then? Or an elemental that can do a few spells?”

“A dragon. I assume you’re a water nymph? You’ve got kind of a blue tinge to your hair,” says Makai.

“Yes. My father is full-blooded while my mother is half-human. She’s the reason my skin is white instead of green,” says Tasi with a small smile.

Makai shares his amusement. No matter how many nymphs he encounters, it’s always a shock to see light blue or green skin. “Are your parents back at the school?”

“Mmhmm. They’re meeting all my teachers right now, learning what they can about the school. They were very proud when I got accepted.”

Though his tone is pleased, Makai can see a hint of embarrassment in his eyes. He wonders if Tasi’s parents bragged to all their relatives like his did.

“I took a tour of the school with my parents earlier, then left to explore the grounds when they began talking finances. Our family makes a decent amount of money, so I think the school’s hoping for a donation,” says Makai.

“They have to get their scholarships from somewhere,” says Tasi, shrugging. “Think we should go back now? They’ll be making their big welcoming speech soon.”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Makai reaches for his hand as they begin walking back to the school, not even thinking about it, just an instinctive act. As soon as he does, it’s like his world reorients itself around Tasi. He can’t even properly explain what it feels like, to just suddenly know that Tasi is his and always will be. That
there isn’t a day that could go by without wanting to be by his side.

It’s disconcerting to have his feelings suddenly shift, but he’s not afraid. Somehow, he knows that this is what was supposed to happen, not something that was done to them unwillingly.

“We…reincarnated,” Tasi says slowly, eyes wide. “I’ve heard stories, where bonded nymphs would recognize each other in the next life, even though they don’t remember anything from before.”

“I thought nymphs only reincarnated as nymphs?” asks Makai.

Tasi nods, the dawning light of realization in his eyes. “I was born a week after Tobirama and Madara died. Their biography said they were working on a way to tie their lives together, so that Madara would follow Tobirama into the next life.”

“You think we’re them?” asks Makai, staring at him incredulously. “The ones who united the continent and made it safe for dragons to reveal themselves?”

“Does that answer feel wrong?” asks Tasi pointedly.

Makai opens his mouth. Closes it. Realization settles in his chest like a lead weight. No, it doesn’t feel wrong. But it must be. There’s no way……

“Why does this disturb you so much?” asks Tasi.

“It’s just….” Makai struggles to find the words to explain his emotions. “Madara and Tobirama have legends written about them. They’re famous the world over and accomplished so much. How could we ever compare to that? If we really were them, are we supposed to follow in their footsteps?”

Tasi regards him thoughtfully. “Most nymphs never knew who their past selves were, thus it’s expected that they would be different people. Still, if they actually knew who we were, it might be different. I think it’s best if we keep that to ourselves, and live our lives for ourselves.”

“Right. Good idea. But, what about the bond between us? We’re….not going to ignore it, are we?”

He can’t keep the apprehension out of his voice, and almost immediately after, Tasi is there, hugging him. It’s instinct to return it, his magic brimming beneath his skin. His control snaps when Tasi answers in kind, their magic twining together joyfully. It’s a matter of moments before a full-blown mating bond snaps into place between them.

Makai hugs him tighter as Tasi shakes within his arms, a soul-deep love flowing between them. This is what their past selves felt, a love so powerful that they defied death to stay together. A love that followed them into their next life. He doesn’t even really know anything about Tasi, but he can’t imagine his life without him now.

“We’re going to have to hide this,” says Tasi, wincing at Makai’s instinctive aversion to the idea. “I know, but how would we explain this to our parents? We have to at least wait until the end of the school year. It’s not common for nymphs to bond young, but it happens. They’ll write it off as us being impulsive lovestruck teenagers, not the legendary Madara and Tobirama reborn.”

“Yeah….fine,” says Makai, reluctantly. He presses a kiss to Tasi’s forehead, the action familiar even though he has no memory of ever doing so. “Maybe we can get them to assign us as roommates? Tell them we became friends while out here and want to stay with someone we know.”

“That might work. It would also help explain how we became close enough to bond in just one year,” says Tasi.
It’s a sound plan, so they begin suppressing their magic. They’ll need to be careful not to cast any strong spells while their parents are still around. Their teachers aren’t as familiar with their magic, so the bond will hopefully go unnoticed during the school year.

They walk back to the school hand-in-hand, making small talk along the way. Getting to know their new spouse. Both of them feel the same joy, knowing they’ll never be alone, no matter what life throws at them. Together, they face their future.

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