Following Dreams (to Doom or Desire)

by Hiruma_Musouka

Summary

In a world full of spells and spirits, humans have found ways to make magic mundane. If it was an everyday thing, it was controlled. It was safe. The wonder was gone, but so were the Gods: all they were was stories.

Notes

Writing this was a little like being possessed. I'm so glad it's finished, but *gods* it was fun! So much worldbuilding. And definitely a lot of Crocodile Hunter in this writing style. Either that or my normal Gardening style accidentally grew a Devil's Snare.

See the end for ART LINKS and other (spoilery) notes like how blackkat and insanescriptist helped inspire this monster.

See the end of the work for more notes
'Science' Fairs at the Witchcraft and Magework Academy were nothing less than a nightmare, and this one hadn't even started yet.

"Breathe, Ebisu," Tobirama commanded, conjuring up a brown paper bag and pinching the bridge of his nose.

WaM's logistics manager breathed into the bag as he huddled against the wall. Tobirama raised an eyebrow at Genma who was sitting next to the man and barely hiding his amusement as he rubbed soothing circles into Ebisu's back.

"Someone finally told him that Fire's Kage was personally attending the Fair," Genma explained, lips twitching as Ebisu wheezed.

"Isn't that automatically implied given that his grandson, Konohamaru Sarutobi, is part of the team working on the experimental project on sex shifting? The one with multiple layers for transitioning that Mito's nephew spearheaded?" Tobirama asked, idly shooing off some of the lingering seniors. Ms. Mitarashi, for one, looked much more interested in watching a staff member have a breakdown than following her friend to the library.

"Apparently that never caught up to him until the kid mentioned it to his friends."

"We do not have the necessary security for a public figure!" Ebisu said frantically, white around the eyes. "What if he gets too close to one of the projects! What if one of the kids decides they need a 'volunteer' for a demonstration! They have no sense! What if—!"

"Breathe, Ebisu," Genma said, shoving the bag back over the man's mouth as the potioneer pushed Ebisu's head down between his knees. "Kage Sarutobi was a highly respected professor of witchcraft before going into politics. He's not like the other idiot parents we'll have to deal with: he's not going to get caught in anything by accident. Hell, he's probably better prepared for the kids' insanity than I am. And the Bicker Boys are focusing on external security for the entire thing, so it's not like any threats are getting past them. Well, provided Rin doesn't kill them both before Friday evening, in which case there's still the Kage's bodyguards."

"Ms. Nohara isn't allowed to kill her contemporaries! I don't have time to hire suitable replacements this late! We don't even have the shielding between exhibits set up yet and it's tomorrow!" Ebisu exclaimed, wild eyed but a bit less gray.

"Calm down, Ebisu," Tobirama said. It was probably a useless encouragement, but at least he had said it. "Mito is having one of her graduate students set them up right now as part of their thesis project."

Ebisu seemed comforted by that, although it actually wasn't something Tobirama was enthused about. He still remembered how Chōjūrō had frequently frozen up whenever he'd narrowed his eyes at the boy and how twitchy he had gotten during committee presentations. Of course, that had been before the young man changed his focus from water magework to Mito's hybrid program on runes, so maybe he'd grown into himself by now.

Maybe.

Either way, Tobirama wasn't going to be the fool who expressed doubt in Mito's assessment.

"See, Ebisu? Everything will be fine," Genma said, patting the man on the shoulder and dragging
him up as he got them both to their feet. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Tobirama and Ebisu just stared at Genma. Nohara, who had entered the hallway in time to hear that, abruptly spun around and walked away.

"Have you been inhaling your potions’ fumes?" Ebisu demanded, taking off his sunglasses to clean them vigorously. "Why would you say that! We are in the middle of campus before a large event! All the magic is running high! Something is bound to go wrong now. Give me that stirring rod you're chewing on: you've obviously been exposed to damaging chemicals!"

Tobirama shook his head and started walking back to his office while Genma fended off Ebisu's attempts at confiscating his property. Kankurō should be ready by now to talk about his latest roadblock in sympathetic prosthetics, and there was still paperwork after that to complete before he could go to lunch. Then he needed to make sure all his research was secured or safely in stasis, otherwise something was bound to go off when Hashirama inevitably barged in to drag him out on Saturday.

You would think that after all these years of being a Dean at the Academy that Hashirama would be less excited about Spring Break, but between him and Kawarama, there was no way to successfully fend off the unnecessary enthusiasm. Hopefully they'd at least learned their lesson last year about trying to surprise-kidnap relatives after Itama's friend had mistaken them for home invaders and attacked them with a barrage of sharpened chopsticks.

At least Itama had thought that was a bit funny after getting over his guilt for the misunderstanding. Tsunade hadn't been anywhere near as amused about being woken up at four in the morning to yank wood out of her cousins' backsides. She'd taken extreme pleasure about warning them all about what would happen if she got called out again next Spring Break.

...Maybe he should further ward his house at some point before tomorrow night.

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"Well, that's interesting," Mito said, raising an eyebrow, fork paused over her baked ziti while she watched a plume of smoke rise in the distance.

Tobirama, sitting across the table with his own fresh-baked supreme pizza, grit his teeth. He considered his lunch before sighing and closing the box as he stood up.

"I think I'm going to take Genma to the gym later and see whether or not he's kept in shape," he said, grabbing his briefcase and food before heading for the exit. Mito followed on his heels as they dodged around gawking students, breaking into a run once they had cleared the restaurant.

"Specifically concerning Muay Thai."

"While I'm certain that will be character building for him, how is Genma involved given he should be nowhere near the auditorium?" Mito questioned, juggling her lunch and bags before simply shoving her ziti at him as she dug through the bottomless pit of her purse.

"He set up a verbal jinx earlier regarding the Fair, and I haven't had an opportunity to speak with B about the speech-craft wards."

"They're overrun," Mito replied briskly, finally surfacing with the calligraphy case she keeps stocked full of pre-made scripts, ink, and chalk. "There were some parties last weekend that apparently involved Truth or Dare among other games. Add it to the stress of midterms, the Fair, and chronic..."
sleep-deprivation, and they're constantly at full-capacity from ill-thought out words. B is having trouble keeping up as he talks down all the trapped phrases in the wards along with unwinding off-hand curses, so the more tricky statements are slipping through the cracks. What exactly did he say?"

"What - possibly - could - wrong - go," Tobirama said dryly.

"Oh for—," Mito narrowed her eyes. "Genma is from a powered background, not a baseline family. He should know better. I'll grab B's new orange-haired apprentice along with Hashirama, and we'll find a way to quickly drain the backlog. I think B was planning to have his classes drain the reservoir tomorrow anyway, but doing it early won't hurt."

"I'll ensure this issue's dealt with then," he said, handing her back her lunch before they separated at the auditorium doors.

Tobirama left the doors propped open with a nod towards some unusually sensible students who had chosen to loiter outside rather than enter. Or perhaps, he thought with a wince at the shrill noise, they just hate the fire alarm more than they're curious. A twist of his wrist made the water from the sprinkler system avoid him, and after that, it was just a matter of following the yelling to figure out which way to go.

It was less than no surprise to find that the problem was in the open area reserved for the Fair presentations. There weren't that many people around right now, and judging by the floor designs, Chōjūrō hadn't managed to ward more than a quarter of the available space before he and Mito had stopped for lunch. Of course, from the look of things now, several people were going to have to work very quickly to have everything fixed and ready.

Tobirama's faint headache spiked at the sight of the large crumbling hole still burning away in the ceiling, and he followed the faint trail of smoke down to the floor. Since nothing else seemed to be on fire, he went to the control panel in the wall and turned off both the sprinklers and the alarm.

"What exactly is going on?" he asked, sweeping an arm up to his chest before carefully directing the gathered water upwards to douse the remaining flames.

"Apparently there's a new definition for a glass of pure water and dirt," Konohamaru said with a cheeky grin, gesturing over his shoulder with a thumb before using both hands to ring water out of the shirt he'd taken off.

Tobirama looked at ground-zero and narrowed red eyes at his youngest cousin.

"Er, hi, Tobirama," Nawaki said, laughing weakly.

The teen waved sheepishly from inside a smoking summoning circle. He was wet, his clothes were charred, his face was pink and lightly burned, and he was being held a foot in the air by a fist clenched in the front of his shirt.

A new definition indeed, Tobirama thought, blinking as he looked at the black-haired man standing dead center in the middle of the rune circle.

He certainly looked worse off than Nawaki. He was less wet given the roof above him was gone along with its sprinklers, but parts of his hair were damp and clinging while other parts looked like they'd been dried with a leaf-blower. He had no shirt, no shoes, and his loose pants looked as if they'd had holes forcibly pulled open in a dozen places. More importantly, he had painful looking scalds and blisters over his torso and arms like he'd been splattered by super-heated water.

"I would appreciate it if you let my cousin go, please," Tobirama said, meeting the stranger's eyes.
The man seemed faintly surprised; his scowl fading as he looked up and saw Tobirama. His black eyes shimmered with a color Tobirama couldn't catch as they briefly glanced toward the red lines on Tobirama's cheeks and chin before meeting his eyes.

"This is the idiot responsible for me being here, isn't he?" the man asked, voice rough with a sharp undertone that faded as he spoke.

"Probably," Tobirama agreed, ignoring Konohamaru's amused snort and Nawaki's indignant look.

The man let out a sigh, running a hand through his hair roughly, and wincing as his skin pulled with the movement. Light reflected sharply off the red beads that pinned a handful of hawk feathers into his hair. Tobirama frowned, looking back at Nawaki when he realized that he'd been rubbing three fingers together, wondering what the feathers felt like.

"I suppose if he's blood then you've got to care even if he is brain-damaged," the man said, shaking Nawaki lightly when he opened his mouth. "Brain-damaged enough to cross a rune circle spontaneously after it's been proven faulty."

"Senju Nawaki!" Tobirama snapped.

"I'm sorry!" Nawaki defended, throwing up his hands and dangling wildly as he flailed in midair. "I didn't think! But it's my fault and his burns!"

The teen threw a distressed look at the stranger's chest, missing the genuine surprise that crossed the man's face before he sighed and lowered Nawaki to the ground.

"I suppose it doesn't matter. It's not like it was still active," he said, flexing his fingers gingerly as he released Nawaki's shirt.

And... well, Tobirama had to give him that. The rune circle on the floor wasn't so much deactivated as it was annihilated. Most of it was simply gone in a mess of scorch marks and pocked, warped material where the heat had washed over the area, instantly boiled any moisture, and then ate away at the remaining fibers.

Given their surprise guest was standing a few dozen centimeters lower than floor level in smaller circle that didn't have so much as ashes left, it was amazing he wasn't burned worse than he was. Tobirama had never seen a rune circle backfire so violently while still bringing something through, never mind something living.

Although how had Nawaki gotten a human when he wanted a jar of water and dirt?

"I'm Madara," the man introduced, glancing over at Tobirama with a guarded expression before turning his attention to the rest of his surroundings. "Where exactly am I?" he asked, interested eyes looking over the surrounding building, pausing tellingly on locations where Tobirama knew the wards were anchored.

"This is the auditorium on the main campus of the Witchcraft and Magework Academy," Tobirama said, shifting his pizza and briefcase distractedly while he tried to place what it was about this Madara that seemed so familiar.

There was a faint wolf-whistle from the door as an unfamiliar girl with dark-pink hair looked in. She made suggestive motions involving her flute and mouthed something at the boys with a toothy grin. Nawaki groaned, looking skyward, and Konohamaru shoved his hand against his mouth as he bent over laughing, pounding a fist against his thigh.
"I really don't want to know," Tobirama decided, glancing at them as other students started to hesitantly trickle in, a few glancing with wide eyes between the two teens and the damaged ceiling. One dark-skinned woman that Tobirama recognized from Mito's rune program took a single glance at the damaged floor and started cursing virulently in Ningo, which caught Madara's attention and made the man laugh roughly.

"I'll help fix it later if you like," he offered, lips quirking as he crossed his arms over his bare chest.

"Er-!" the woman stared at Madara, eyes widening as embarrassment seeped in. "No! No, no, that's- that's OK!" she said loudly, deliberately sticking to Common. "We'll just... um..."

"Considering it was one of our students who did this," Tobirama interrupted, catching hold of black eyes once more, "that makes it the responsibility of the Academy. I apologize for both the inconvenience and the injuries you've sustained. As a senior practitioner here, it's my duty to ensure the situation is handled. To start: let's see about getting your injuries treated by a Healer. And perhaps some food," he offered, gesturing towards the door with the hand holding his pizza.

"Alright," Madara agreed.

The man stepped up out of the shallow dip in the floor, posture slightly rigid as he walked. There was a strong smell of burnt wood and ozone around him which almost hid the stink of charred skin and hair, but under it all was the sharp tang of cinnamon and chilies and... salt water?

Tobirama frowned.

"Where is this main campus, by the way?" Madara asked, eyebrows furrowed.

"About 150 kilometers south of the city of Konoha," he said, distracted as he tried to place that sense of deja vu.

Madara glared. "And that's in which country?"

"... oh fuck," Nawaki said, faintly.

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He runs.

The blood clumps on his fingers: slick, chunky, black and red and inhuman and alltoohumanohGODS-

He gags on bile, stumbles and slams his shoulder into something shaped like a treerockhill.

He keeps moving.

Screams ring out behind him, impossibly loud, more agony than sound. Human voice meshed with jagged thunder and a whining cry so piercing it's more felt than heard. It ricochets through his head, vibrates inside his skull.

He'll never forget this sound.

It will reverberate in his bones, echo through the hollow spaces between atoms until it blares through his conscience into the quiet moments of his life. No matter how long he lives, he will never find anything glorious enough to escape this taint, nothing hideous enough to match what he's done.
Not that he'll live long. This will be the death of him.

/TRAITOR/

He stumbles, heart skipping at the second roaring voice as light blazes behind him and the sky catches fire in a riot of blue-white and black. Heat licks at his back even from this distance, and he fumbles both of his gory prizes into one hand, lips spread wide in a macabre smile to fight down his rebelling stomach.

He shoves a hand into his pocket, cutting open his palm as he grabs broken mirror shards. He throws them behind him unseen, followed by moonstones and a dream-catcher strung with spider's silk dyed with blood.

He's almost there. He's almost there!

The voice bellows with rage behind him, drowning out the agony of the first with echoing bellows and a shrill war cry so piercing he staggers as razor beaks slash through his ears.

Heat falls away from his back as it encounters his traps, but it's just a delay. It's seen him. It was back too quickly from the distraction she mentioned and it's seen him. Seen the truth of him. It knows him now and he can hear far off wolves howl as other curious things draw closer.

He'll die for this.

He hadn't wanted... He'll never forget that first scream. He hadn't wanted, but there was no choice. No choice, no choice, he needed it. He needed it. His son...

His son. Gods forgive him: there was no choice.

She said it would work. It has to work. He's almost there, almost there, almost there!

They're soft in his hand, so delicate, so powerful, and the blood clings to his fingers and he'll never be clean and nothing will silence those screams in his mind and his son! his son! his son!

The gods won't forget this.

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"Well, 'lucky' isn't the right word, but you're certainly something," Tsunade said, using sterilized forceps to carefully pull up a piece of blackened skin before snipping it off. "Some of these are definitely third degree burns, but nothing reaches deeper than the dermis. The hypodermis is absolutely untouched, which is medically impossible and frankly ridiculous, so I'm assuming magic."

"He came through a faulty summoning circle Nawaki made," Tobirama said, politely keeping his eyes on the magazine he wasn't reading as a muffled curse came through the mouth guard Madara was biting down on.

"Nawaki did what!" Tsunade demanded, briefly lifting her hands from the mess of Madara's back to give Tobirama an incredulous look. "I take it back, you're definitely lucky. Nawaki doesn't know a damn thing about summoning living creatures. He's not even supposed to be working with organic material yet, so it's incredible that you're not a slab of smoking meat. And look at the bright side," she said, shifting on her rolling chair as she refocused on the last few burns on his back, "you might be immune to anesthetic spells right now, but without damage to the hypodermis or your nerve endings,
you won't need any skin grafts or minor surgery before I can heal you."

The incinerating glare Madara gave her, from where he sat with white-knuckled hands around the bed's metal railing, argued that the man would have preferred if those nerve endings were gone right now.

"Alright, that's the last one," Tsunade said, dropping her tools on the tray lying on the bed before grabbing a massive clay jar she'd set aside earlier. "Hold still."

Madara jerked as soon as she opened it, reaching up a hand to yank out the bite guard.

"What the fuck is that?" he said, voice muffled from where his fingers were pinching his nose shut. "Did you put decomposing entrails in there or something?"

"Shut up and sit still on that damn stool!" Tsunade snapped. "It doesn't smell any better to me, but your magic already rejected the anesthetic so healing spells are useless. Just tolerate it for maybe an hour and you'll be fine. Or should I knock you out and add blunt-force trauma to your list of injuries?"

"Don't further injure our guest, Tsunade," Tobirama requested, glancing up at the two from where he was sitting with his back blocking the exam room's door. Madara's back was a painful looking mess even at this distance, although it was noticeably better than his front had been earlier.

"It would be for his long term benefit," she countered. "It's not like hits have negatively effected Jiraiya, even after all these years. He has as many brain cells as he was born with, sad as that is to say. And damn it, this mane of yours is far too heavy. It just broke my hair band," she said, hand glowing green for a moment as she banished her latex glove to catch the mess of hair before it could touch Madara's cleaned wounds.

"I'll deal with it," Madara said, ignoring her snap to stop moving! as he gathered his hair up into a messy horsetail. A faint red-orange glow around his fingers left behind a tight red ribbon before the man looped his hair to make it shorter and then dropped his arms after a second glow secured the rest in place.

"You listen about as well as Kakashi does," Tsunade complained, pulling a fresh glove back onto her hand. "Although it looks like you have a better pain tolerance than him because he would have actually listened to that order, and gods know, I never expected to say that."

Tsunade took a deep breath, jar balanced on her thighs, and held both hands over the opening. A soft green glow started from her hands, spread down to the medicinal paste inside, and then she twisted her hands around in a circle and the medicine flowed upward.

It gleamed as it twisted through the air, sparks of spring green, moss green, neon, and pine, all glinted off a clear paste that refracted light like crystal. For all her complaining and temper and questionable bedside demeanor, Tsunade set the medicine onto the wounds with precise and gentle movements: no more and no less of it than necessary and with as little pain as possible. It was a beauty to watch even if Tobirama did have to agree with Madara that the smell was awful.

It was also a technique disregarded by most healers as unnecessary because it was ridiculously hard to control, quite showy, and had no benefit except how it negated the need to physically touch to apply a salve or bandages.

Which made a lot of difference to someone without anesthetic.

"There," Tsunade said briskly once she'd finished. "Leave that on and don't touch it until it's finished
healing in an hour. Now take off your pants."

Tobirama's eyebrows shot up.

"What!?!" Madara choked, jerking up away from the bed to stare at her. He looked a little ridiculous with the multi-hued green shimmering in splotches all over him, but it didn't detract from the incredulous look he gave Tsunade.

_She_ just looked fed up.

"What do you mean what," she barked, thrusting her finger in his face. "Do you think I'm actually stupid enough to think that your legs escaped unscathed given how bad your torso and arms were? The very fact you only have small burns on your neck and face with none on your scalp is ludicrous, but those pants are torn to shreds which is evidence enough. Shuck um!"

"You are the most forward—!"

"Like you have a single thing I haven't seen, you ridiculous—"

"I am not taking—"

"—ct would you rather just go around with burns on your ass—"

"—completely uninjured! I do not—"

Tobirama carefully balanced the chair on its back legs so that his head was reclined and calmly put the magazine over his face, crossed his arms, and started counting prime numbers. Given that mathematics wasn't his favorite discipline, it took enough focus that he could almost pretend that he wasn't hearing this argument.

The magazine also shielded his face which would give Madara privacy for the results of the argument he was about to lose while conveniently keeping Tsunade from assuming anything if his skin changed color.

His dear cousin had the worst evil streak out of the entire family, as proven by her capacity to bulldoze right over Orochimaru and Jiraiya. He had no desire at all to deal with whatever she'd think was amusing since it would be guaranteed that Hashirama's over-the-top reactions would follow right after, possibly as a deliberate part of Tsunade's plan.

"LET GO OF—"

"You are a grown-ass man, you whining— don't back into that! You'll smear the salve!"

"What the hell kind of healer—"

_Lunch after this_, Tobirama thought, trying to block it all out. _I want the rest of my lunch. We'll have pizza delivered to my office... no, Hashirama might 'helpfully' sneak in with the pizza, I do not have the patience for that_. He started tapping a finger against his bicep idly. _I'll ask Mito to deal with my research lab. If she seals the entire interior of the room in a stasis barrier, I can ignore it until afterwards. But we'll need clothes before we can leave here_. Although if that magic Madara used was the summoning I suspect rather than conjuration he might be able to call up his own clothing. _Interesting technique to get through the intricate warding on the Infirmary without being noticeable._

"FINE! You—" Madara fell into a slur of foreign speech over the sound of rustling cloth.
"... What are those pants made of?" Tsunade asked incredulously. "They're torn all over, it's not silk, it's not battlehide, it's not armored and you're untouched. It's looks like cotton! Lift up the soles of your feet."

"I told you," he snarled.

"If you think I haven't met enough patients who would stupidly try to write off amputated fingers in the hopes of walking it off then you really haven't met enough healers to judge anything." Tsunade said, speaking over him. "You two can wait in here until the medicine finishes and starts flaking off. There's a shower down the hall to the left, Madara. There are no clothes except the paper gowns though."

"I'll handle it," Tobirama said, lowering his chair and removing the magazine to meet her brown eyes evenly. She narrowed her eyes at him as he picked up the chair to let her pass, but she just tapped his arm with the back of her hand like she normally did before closing the door behind her.

"Your relatives are something alright, Tobirama," Madara said. He went to cross his arms and sighed impatiently when he remembered all the salve on him.

"I don't recall mentioning either my name or that she was related," Tobirama said, a bit of coldness leaking into his voice. And yes, he should have introduced himself far earlier considering he had taken responsibility for this, but the point was that he hadn't yet.

Madara snorted.

"Well, it's a good thing Kato mentioned your name because you certainly weren't getting there. And I'd get laughed out of my position if I couldn't detect something as easy as a blood connection. She must have taken her lover's last name since that's a thing here. Are all of them like that? Because you seem like the odd-ball out."

"Excuse me," he said, temper flaring and magic shifting inside like water in a unsteady bottle.

Madara went to open his mouth before something shifted in his face and his expression clouded again. Black eyes flickered as he closed and reopened them. He eyed the salve on his arms considerably, flexing his fingers and watching the tendons and muscles shift in his arms.

"She's an excellent healer though," he muttered, slowly stretching his arm. "Really excellent," he said, narrowing his eyes at the door.

"Tsunade is world-renown for her skill and the techniques she's created. I'm surprised you haven't heard of her."

"It's not really relevant to my area," Madara said, muscles shifting in his shoulders as he shrugged. Tobirama watched as he moved over to examine one of the diagrams posted on the walls. It was the one showing the most common layout for magical coils and how they interacted with the 7 chakras and the tenketsu openings. Very complicated and detailed rather than the more simplified notices displayed elsewhere. Tsunade had dozens of pamphlets in the outside waiting area to educate people about warning signs for breast cancer and diabetes and magical burnout, but she preferred to have the more thorough diagrams on hand while she was explaining things to her own stubborn patients.

And magical universities certainly provided an endless amount of ambitious mages who needed things explained to them after they'd messed themselves up.

Madara traced over the coils located in the figure's head, shifting down to its chest and back, careful not to touch the paper with the medicine on his hands.
"You're familiar with this then?" Tobirama asked, moving to stand at the other's shoulder as black eyes flickered over the labels too rapidly to be reading them.

"We don't call them by these names, but yes. The chart's a great deal more detailed than the last one I saw a healer draw. A bit too simplified in the skull, but you'd have to enlarge it to fit in all the details."

"What is your position?" he asked, eyes catching on the simple gold and ruby drop earrings that had been hidden by Madara's hair. "I've never seen anyone so calm about getting yanked unexpectedly through a circle on top of being badly injured. And that hair band was a summoning rather than a conjuration which means you drew it right through all the wards on Tsunade's infirmary. Not easily done given the effort put into keeping foreign influences out while people are treated. And to just block out Tsunade's healing magic... Tsunade has more reserves than five other healers combined, along with sparring with battle magic in her free time. She's not weak in either magic or will."

"No, really?" Madara's left eye twitched. "She's— nevermind. If the Nin hadn't been reduced to what they are, I'd be a samana."

"A shaman?" Tobirama translated, honestly shocked.

"Is there an issue?" Madara asked, lips spreading in what could be vaguely termed a toothy smile if you were both insensitive to the building weight of magic and blind on top of that.

Tobirama straightened, matching Madara eye to eye and refusing to waver. "Of course not," he refuted. "But I touched on the Nin in my studies: there's not much left of their magical culture. Their Council of Leaders declared the Spirit Ways lost after the Purges. And since you can't be shaman without Walking the Pure Land—"

"Walking is never the problem," Madara refuted, with a sharp jerk of his hand. "Any moron who can meditate and read a map can get there if they have the magic to touch beyond the surface. You've proved it with those marks on your face. The problem is people not knowing how to show respect, instead of being arrogant, deceptive—!"

The poster on the wall caught fire as Madara's volume spiked, and Tobirama's head jerked away from the sparks even as his own power snapped out to smother it in water.

"I was under the impression," Tobirama said cuttingly, eyes flashing as Madara clenched his teeth and dragged a hand down his face, "that a shaman's primary duty was to mediate between gods and humans which implies some skill in diplomacy."

Madara snorted, a little tension draining as humor snuck in through his anger. "You'd be surprised how effective yelling over other people can be when it comes to getting results. All a shaman needs is to understand the spiritual world and know how it effects the physical one so that you can help your people and solve problems. Being nice about it comes from someone else's preconception: it's certainly not my concern."

"It's a wonder your stubborn idiocy didn't get you smeared across half a mountain range if that's the attitude you took with you into the Pure Land."

"I'm not some half-rate wanna be summoner. If anyone would attract trouble there, it's you with that fire at the core of you," Madara shot back before grimacing. "And now I've got this shit all over my face. I'm taking that shower."

"It hasn't been an hour," Tobirama snapped, stepping in front of the door to block the idiot. "No
matter how much of a fool you are, you hardly deserve third degree burns. Just hold still. There’s a
towel—"

"It's fine," Madara insisted, using the edge of his hand to wipe some salve off his chest. "See?"

Tobirama stared at the skin under the brunet's left collarbone. Barely twenty minutes and all that was
left was the vague pinkish red of a light sunburn instead of the vicious white-red boils that he’d seen
earlier. He reached out to touch and the texture was normal: just smooth, healthy skin over taunt
pectoral muscles.

"How?" he asked, meeting Madara's dark eyes.

"Even the weakest of samana could do it after such effective care. Lack of an official title doesn’t
make a difference in ability," Madara said, stepping back and around Tobirama to get to the door.

Tobirama shifted out of the way, not watching as the other man stepped out and headed down the
hall. He could still feel the blazing warmth under his fingertips from where they'd rested on fresh
skin, and underneath the pungent medicinal herbs, the scent of flame and spices lingered in the room
as a potent reminder.

It occurred to him, as he picked up the collection of feathers Madara had taken off earlier, that he
might actually be in a bit of trouble here.

/A little further, you can manage it, I've got you./ Sak’mo says, voice a comforting rumble as he
catches Iz’na stumbling.

/My brother— where’s—/ Iz’na stumbles, hissing through clenched teeth in a sound like loosed
arrows as pain spiked through his head.

/Easy, easy. MEI'O!/ Sak'mo yells, voice echoing out over miles as they approach the familiar
glowing red-gold pillars that frame the entrance to Mei'o's domain. He takes a deep breath, but he
still can't smell if she's home over all the sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide in the air.

Given her personal scent is that plus the smell of melting stone, they wouldn't know she's here even if
they were on top of her.

/Sak'mo./ Mei'o greets, stepping out of the lava fountain which decorates her entry hall. /It's a
pleasure to see you aga- Iz'na!/ 

/Mei'o. Long time, no hear, honored sister./

/Who dares do such?/ she asks, earth shifting beneath their feet at her words, ground rumbling as
molten rock turns underneath.

/Human kin,/ Iz'na says, voice crackling, furious and grieved all over again.

/I need you to take him,/ Sak'mo says, shifting Iz'na over to her. /I have to go before the Eater blurs
the trail./

/I do not need managed!/ Iz'na snarls, stumbling against Mei'o's side as he spins in a whirl of silks
and armor. /I will not leave my brother running up against that bitch by himself!/
He'll stay here, Mei'o says, voice implacable. Not even the Eater can find a way inside without someone to deceive and nothing lives in my inner sanctum.

Good. Sak'mo sighs, stretching out his neck and taking off his fur vest. He tosses it next to Mei'o, watching as the fur morphs into an enormous auburn dire wolf. Hiko will stay with Iz'na to help guard or send messages. Send out word of what's happened, please. I have to catch up with Mad'ra. He tore after the man in a fury, but he's following Iz'na's magic so I doubt he noticed her presence on the trail before he hit the first traps.

Iz'na curses but shakily buries his fingers in Hiko's fur when she presses against his side. How is she even loose?! She was supposed to be sealed until we could find a way to kill and replace her!

Weren't those sprites all aflutter years ago because of some human teenager? Mei'o considers out loud. If the land resonated with someone once again, an ignorant sage could have shifted the Tree.

Unfortunately, Sak'mo has to agree with that possibility. And with no śramaná left to sooth the living currents, it would have resonated into the Pure Land... We'll need Yam'to to reseal her.

How about we just rip out her three eyes, chain her with her own hair, and bleed her this time. Iz'na suggests, darkly vicious. Maybe she won't escape if we keep her weak, and punishments should at least try to match the crime.

Either way, we need find Yam'to before the Eater can consume him. Mei'o says, handing Sak'mo an obsidian kunai. This will burn through any spells given time. Ensure Mad'ra's not trapped and that he's on guard. She'll want him taken out. You'll have to track down whoever Yam'to has currently reincarnated into: no one else will find him in time. And we'll need to look for humans to Choose. All the mortals have in the home countries are Summoners and Contracted with a handful of partial sages.

The new bloods killed our people! They've no right to be Chosen when we can't even have proper śramaná! Iz'na says fiercely.

The people who did that are long dead, Iz'na. Mei'o reminds. Along with their children and their children's children and more.

And I don't think there's much choice, Sak'mo sighs. There aren't enough Nin left for a proper Choosing. It will take more than just breaking silence or Walking once more to protect our people. And we can't count on the Strange Ones for assistance: they've waned with the loss of their worship if they're even awake at all.

A chorus of howls go up in the distance and Iz'na's head jerks towards them. Is that...

They've caught sight. Sak'mo confirms. I have to go.

Wait! Iz'na says, lurching forward to reach out for Sak'mo. Mei'o takes a step in concern, red hair gleaming brightly, but Sak'mo quietly waves her back. Let me se— Give me your arm.

Sak'mo takes Iz'na hand from his shirt and gently guides it to his right forearm. The black-haired male shoves up Sak'mo's sleeve and, gritting his teeth in frustration, slowly traces out the veins on Sak'mo's arms by feel, blue-whites sparks trailing after his fingers.

Once he finishes, Iz'na steps to the side and, holding Sak'mo's arm out straight, sweeps his hand out horizontally from the tips of Sak'mo's fingers. A bright wave of power follows his hand and solidifies into a gleaming saber.
"Keep it with you," Iz'na instructs, stepping backwards into Hiko's flank. "It's not as versatile as Mei'o's kunai, but it's more powerful than that skinning knife of yours. Look after my twin and that sword will look after you too, Hunter."

"We'll both return," Sak'mo promises.

With one last nod to Mei'o, he slips away from her realm and back into his forest.

..."

" Seriously, Bakashi, if you don't stop treating me like a delicate maiden, I'm going to punch you in the face."

A black-haired man with a medical eye-patch watched his masked companion grab the bowl of udon that the cafeteria worker had just set down and place it on his own tray before turning to eye-smile at him.

"As you wish," 'Bakashi' replied, cheerfully continuing to carry the overloaded tray. "What's next?"

"It's my eye, you over-protective ass. *One* eye. And my vision didn't work on that side much even before the surgery! They said the healing magic would finish in less than a week. *I can carry my own stuff.*"

"It has nothing to do with you, Obito. I'm saving the cafeteria's dishware. We wouldn't want you to knock over yet more things with your lack of depth perception."

"Me! That's rich coming from the asshole who's kept his right eye closed for a month. When are you going to get that spell-graft fixed anyway?" Obito demanded, heading for the refrigerated shelves where the side dishes like onigiri and fruit were stored.

"I don't fix things that aren't broken, honey-bear," the silver-haired man said, lifting up the tray to avoid being hit as two young teens darted past him.

"You get massive migraines when you use it to examine micro-magic for longer than an hour a day *total*. Not one continuous hour: *in total*. That's a problem, Kakashi!" Obito said, glaring at the man in frustration.

"Maa..."

"Don't 'maa' me! Rin's going to kick both our asses when she figures out that you're hiding it rather than just being a weirdo, and then *Tsunade* is going to find out and— what the fuck?" Obito blinked as his hand closed over empty air instead of the last container of inarizushi he'd been looking at two seconds ago. "Where did it go?"

"See, you're mis-seeing things even with your good eye," Kakashi pointed out brightly. He winced as Obito deliberately trod on his toes while stomping away from him. Coincidentally, he also went right past the long-haired brunet man standing by Tobirama Senju that Kakashi had just seen snatch the inarizushi while Obito's back was turned.

"Professor," Kakashi greeted, amused as he nodded at both men.

"Hatake," Tobirama returned, watching as the man followed his parter towards one of the cash registers. "Does being a shaman involve stealing food then?"
"Picking the perfect moment is a valuable life-skill. And I happen to like this one best," Madara said with a small smirk as he tossed the package lightly into the air before picking up the large container of stir-fry Tobirama had been holding for him.

"Right. Let me pay and we'll sit down to eat."

"I can get my own food," Madara said, frowning.

"I'd rather you don't use whatever magic you're planning on right now. It probably qualifies as counterfeiting. You can't possibly have access to a valid currency for this country if you didn't even recognize the name of its capital."

"I was going to switch it out with an item of equal value!" Madara insisted, as Tobirama handed over a few bills to the extremely interested young man at the register.

"Hey, Prof! Is this the guy that showed up earlier when Nawaki—"

"That table's open," Tobirama said, cutting in as he started heading for a table near the windows, ignoring how the cashier whined dramatically behind him. He only had enough patience to deal with one person reacting like Hashirama during a single day, which meant he needed to save it all for when Hashirama appeared himself rather than using it up on theater students who embraced their roles 24/7. "And my apologies: you're correct. That wouldn't be counterfeiting: it's theft instead."

"It is not theft," Madara said, bristling as he pulled back his chair. "They would have been compensated by something of slightly higher value for the inconvenience which is a hell of a lot more considerate than people used to be."

"And people currently have laws on the book that specify that the removal of possessions by a secondary party without the permission of the first qualifies as stealing. All that leaving compensation does is make you a very odd thief."

Tobirama sat down across from Madara, leaned his briefcase against the table leg, and gave a considering look towards the students and staff in the cafeteria. While most seemed to be living their own lives - working, eating, or trying desperately to caffeinate themselves - there was a large number of people who were pointedly not looking in their direction in a way that said it was all they were focusing on.

Except for Mitarashi. She was blatantly unrepentant about waving at him while holding her phone pointed in their direction no matter how desperately Yuhi tried to sink into the floor next to her.

"It's a little impressive how shameless she is," Madara commented with a smirk, spearing some chicken and carrot on his fork.

"My lunch has already been interrupted once today," Tobirama replied. He ran the side of his finger along his glass of ice water, gathered the condensation, and with a dark-blue glow, flicked the droplets onto the floor.

The smoky shimmer as the privacy screen circled them made more than a few people groan.

"Now that we've covered healing, food, and clothing," Tobirama said, eyes flickering to the sleeveless crimson tunic Madara had appeared with after his shower, "there's the matter of legal regulations and compensation."

Madara hummed, more interested in his mouthful of stir-fry.
"WaM's students and property are covered by the Learning Clauses for magical institutions, which means that there's leniency for unintentional magical accidents. Your case doesn't qualify as kidnapping technically, but you were forcibly removed from your previous location and, more importantly, grievously injured during that time. In addition, Tsunade informed me earlier that if the Academy returns you through any kind of ungrounded magical transportation within the next five days, she will be obligated under her Oaths to report it as a form of reckless endangerment."

"As a result," Tobirama continued, "your only safe methods of transport within that time frame are the ITC located in Konoha or through technical methods like rapid trains. However, the International Transport Circle has a limited number of time slots available for reservation around this time of year since next week is Spring Break. It might take longer for a slot to become available than it would to wait for the five days to finish and then ask Mage Mito Uzumaki to set up a rune circle."

"My twin can track me," Madara said dismissively, "and an old friend was nearby when I left, so he knows what's going on. I don't care about the time it takes. Waiting longer is fine."

"You do have the right to legal representation if you want to file a civil charge," Tobirama added, opening the cardboard box but not picking up his pizza as he stared at it.

Madara stayed quiet long enough that Tobirama looked up to meet his gaze with a neutral look. Madara just looked at him, idly sipping from his coke before he shoved black hair back behind his ear and smiled slightly.

"You're concerned because it's your cousin," he said, no hesitation in his words at all. "I bet a part of your brain has been going over every inch of that legal code since I walked out of that circle just so you can make sure this hurts him as little as possible. And sure, if it was my younger brother covered in burns, I would be furious and confrontational about everything involved, but it's me. I don't care, Tobirama. Burns aren't an issue."

"In fact," Madara said, light glinting off his earrings as he leans forward to place his right elbow on the table, holding his arm up, palm facing his body, "I'll give you my word. I swear on my fire, at no point will I seek retribution on Senju Nawaki, in any form, for the events which occurred today in that auditorium."

A swirl of black flames blazed in a ring around the base of his smallest finger, and Madara lowered his arm.

"Of course," he continued, grabbing his fork, "you're putting me up until I transport myself out later on. And the food's pretty good so you're either paying or getting over that thievery allegation."

"It's not an allegation, it's a legal violation," Tobirama said, shoulders relaxing for what honestly feels like the first time in the last two weeks. A sabbatical without his family was becoming more appealing by the day, frankly. "And thank you," he adds quietly, "the oath wasn't necessary, but... I appreciate it."

"You seem more comfortable with trusting evidence than blindly believing in people," Madara idly explained, missing Tobirama's surprise at the statement as he fights with a stubborn piece of tape holding the inarizushi shut. "It's part of why you're a researcher, right? And it's your cousin involved. Your family, I understand that. I respect that. My own brother's done some ridiculous things, but I'll always look out for him."

Tobirama had to nod in agreement at that, lips tilting up slightly before he blinked, head tilting to the side.
"You've heard of my work, but not Tsunade's?" he asked, honestly curious at the discrepancy.

It was almost always the other way around with the Senju family. Tsunade held the most renown simply because healing applied to all people, magical or not, while the rest of them had gone into other fields. A person was far more likely to hear about a famous physician rather than a researching spell inventor or a nature sage. Even Itama had heard at least one person go 'wasn't there some doctor named Senju?' which was impressive given Itama worked in historical anthropology. Most of his coworkers were far too busy stuffing their heads full of foreign languages, history, god stories, and primers on 'what not to do to avoid being cursed' to pay any attention to current events outside their purview.

"I've heard a bit," Madara said, suddenly scowling as he bit aggressively into the tofu-wrapped rice. "There was a... a thing and I didn't have a chance to look into it further. Someone attacked and I had to drop it to get there quickly so... you're not actually going to eat that, are you?!"

"My pizza is fine," Tobirama said, narrowing his eyes at Madara's disgusted face. "It's cold."

"That's what happens when it's been out of the oven for over an hour."

"The cheese has congealed!"

"If you deliberately make my lunch sound disgusting before I get a chance to finally eat, I'm going to throw this glass of water at your face," he warned. "It's not like it'll improve in the microwave."

Madara made a revolted expression and promptly grabbed Tobirama's left hand when he went to eat. He then rapped the back of Tobirama's other hand with his fork when Tobirama tried to make him let go, and the researcher promptly started considering exactly how out of control his students would get if they heard that he drowned a visitor in the cafeteria.

"There! It's warm," Madara declared a second later, prudently scooting his chair further back and taking his food and drink with him as Tobirama glared.

The pizza did look better: cheese remelted with a delicious smell wafting off and no sign of the sagging crest you'd have from using the microwave, but— "If you burned a layer of cardboard into my food..."

Madara scoffed. "You've experienced some pathetic fire wielding, haven't you?"

"Fire doesn't tend to cooperate with delicate magic use in the Elemental Countries, even if it does work better than lightning." Which is a shame, Tobirama thought, watching the cheese stretch slowly as he picked up his first slice and promptly bit into it.

It was unfairly perfect, so Tobirama decided to forgive this one presumption on Madara's part.

"I wonder why that might be," Madara muttered under his breath, shoving the last of his food away before leaning back and staring out the window with crossed arms.

They were quiet then: only the background chatter of the cafeteria around them. And it might have taken him several hours, but at least he was finally getting an enjoyable lunch with a surprisingly acceptable companion. In addition, with Mito and B handling the wards, her graduate students handling the auditorium (to their new-found despair, undoubtedly), and Tsunade handling whatever minor wounds Nawaki acquired, Tobirama could conceivably avoid getting further involved in any other complications.
Provided he could get off campus before Hashirama's secretary let his brother escape from his office.

"You said you had a twin?" Tobirama asked, once he finished his first slice. "Do you need anything to contact him?"

"It's fine," Madara said, eyebrows furrowing. "He really does know I'm fine, and there's not much that can be done about anything right now. 'Hurry up and wait', right? Irritating as hell, but true. And you?"

Tobirama raised an eyebrow, mouth full of food.

"How many siblings do you have?" Madara expanded.

"Two younger brothers," Tobirama answered after swallowing. "One older brother as well. No sisters at all. Although I may get a sister-in-law if my friend Mito maintains her questionable taste in men and Hashirama doesn't shove his foot too far down his throat while asking her."

Madara huffed. "I've considered sisters, but if they're like Mei, I'm not sure I want one no matter how Izuna argues that she counts. I swear her brain makes no sense at times, and that's after she decided I wouldn't make a good husband like she first wanted."

Tobirama had to stop and consider that for a moment.

"That sounds like an... interesting story," he offered.

Madara groaned, running his hand through his hair and clenching it around one of the feathers as he tugged. "It's a ridiculous story! There I was, trying to figure out what the fuck I think about this woman who just popped up, I'm already a bit pissed at someone's stupid comment that maybe my domain is part of hers rather than hers being a subset of mine — especially since she's younger than I am — and then she decides that I'm attractive and 'similarly suited' to her so TADA! Marriage! Like that's the default thing to do!"

"Meanwhile!" he added, flinging out a hand for emphasis, "Izuna is in the background, going from curious to cracking up laughing, and refusing to get involved because 'either way he gets a sister' and basically being an unhelpful asshole who deserved getting dunked in the sea! I avoided her for ages! There's no easy way to argue with her without things erupting because, and I still can't figure out if she does this on purpose, she mishears comments as other statements that she won't explain which results in threats or attempted beatings or -worst of all- you somehow complimenting her when you really didn't. There was absolutely no dealing with her back then until Izuna's Tōka thing happened, at which point I finally had a working threat to get him to deal with her, and somehow he twisted that make her 'sister' and just—"

Madara threw up his hands, eyes a bit wild, and Tobirama couldn't help how very amused he was even if he mostly kept it off his face.

"What's the 'Tōka thing'?" he asked, starting his second slice and watching a toothy smile spread across Madara's face.

"Tōka's a woman, and that is the real funny story. See, Izuna is better with people than I am and more or less impossible to embarrass, but Tōka..." he draws out, leaning forward, "Tōka is a warrior; a very good fighter. And Izuna's focus, the thing he's really passionate about, is fighting and things associated with it. Martial arts, armor, swordsmanship, horsemanship, strategy... he's familiar with all of it. He's extremely good at it, too. Even though I can defeat him in one-on-one combat when going all out, he's unmatched at looking at a person and knowing exactly what they'll use best in battle."
"Now, I don't know exactly how it started," he said with a smirk, "because somehow Izuna always manages to leave out exactly what was said when he starts another dreamy rendition on his ladylove, but she basically punched him straight in the face and right into a duck pond. _Izuna_. Right in the face. Right into the duck pond. Then she lambasted him for killing off all the fish like it wasn't the only possible end result for dunking a lightning rod in a pool of water. And it's not like he didn't know he was pissing her off, but it went right through his guard and it was just _beautiful._"

"And apparently that was the punch of true love because he's been absolutely besotted ever since. And fair being fair, Tōka had better sense than most women in that she thought the entire thing was set to end horribly no matter how much she liked him, so she made him a bet."

By this point, Madara had stopped smirking and looked thoughtful when he considered Tobirama.

"The bet," he said, "was that he had to, without cheating, get her to fall in love with him a hundred and one times throughout the years. I actually have to respect her for that. It's an honorable and clever way to see if he'll grow tired of her without offending anyone or demeaning her own strength by throwing herself upon someone's mercy and having them intervene."

"If he can do that and convince them both that they're really as suited as he thinks, she's agreed to marry him. Well, and also try eating this imported apple that Mei is certain she can get a hold of from a gardener she knows, but it's the marry part that Izuna's head over heels about. He's just ridiculous about it. The amount of shit he's gotten into over the years..."

"And how is it going?" Tobirama asked, closing his empty cardboard box. "Is your brother managing it?"

"It's been cen—ter of his attention for ages, but he's managed it a hundred times according to her," Madara said, ignoring Tobirama's inquisitive look at the odd way he had drawn out the word 'center'. "I'll have to get used to a sister-in-law from the looks of it. He just has to see her one more time..."

Tobirama hesitated, not quite certain what had changed in the last moment. He stood up and paused, but eventually he reached out a hand to nudge Madara's exposed arm.

"Let's go," he offered quietly. "There's a hotel fairly close to campus and my house. We can see about getting you a room there."

Madara nodded, tense as he gathered up his trash. Tobirama opened his mouth to say something, but... what could he really say? He hardly knew what had caused the change, and he had no place to ask questions from.

And the man would be gone within a week, anyway.

.. 

"He's going to live," Mikoto says with a relieved smile, tears in her eyes as she squeezes Fugaku's arm.

_Her son, her beautiful baby boy, is still hooked up to far too many machines in the private hospital room he's staying in, but he's going to live. It's so much easier to breathe, to just look at all the tubes and wires, to listen to all the beeping sounds without that lurking overwhelming certainty that one day the beeping would stop._
No mother should have to debate whether the nightmare of hearing it stop is worse than the nightmare of not being there when it did.

Sasuke has fallen asleep inside the room, propped up against his best friend's shoulder in those uncomfortable chairs, even though it's still the middle of the day. Naruto, the sweetheart, seems to be making a futile attempt to draw with his left hand so that he doesn't move the shoulder Sasuke's sleeping on. She almost feels like she should go in and help move Sasuke so that Naruto can leave if he likes, but he's gotten so little sleep in the two weeks since Itachi's full-time hospitalization. She loathes the idea of waking him up now that he's finally resting peacefully.

Besides, if Naruto is anything like his mother, he'll refuse to move until his friend doesn't need him which means neither of them will leave the hospital until tonight.

"Do you think we should at least wake him up for some food, dear?" Mikoto asks, leaning her head against Fugaku's shoulder. "Naruto dragged Sasuke to the Academy earlier to distract him with that transformation project they're presenting, but they returned so quickly that I bet they skipped having a proper lunch."

"Yes," Fugaku says, tightly. "But let's see if the hospital would allow us to have lunch inside the room even though Itachi isn't awake. We haven't had something like a picnic for many years."

"That sounds lovely, Fugaku... Fugaku, what's wrong?" Mikoto asks, concerned. She reaches up a hand, gently tracing the stress lines and fading grief that she knows are reflected in her own face, but there's some tension, some lurking worry that's different from what was there yesterday when they still thought their son would die.

"It's nothing, Mikoto," he says to her. Lies to her. "Nothing that wasn't wrong already. I would just like to spend some time with our family all together."

She considers her husband carefully, gently squeezing his arm before settling her head back on his shoulder as they watch their sons.

"You know you can tell me anything, Fugaku," she whispers.

He puts a hand on top of hers and squeezes as he buries his face in her hair.

"I know."

There were times where Tobirama seriously reconsiders the possibility that he had offended more than just that fire God.

"All of the rooms are full," he said, putting down the telephone and rubbing his temple while trying to remember if he and Itama had any painkillers left in their place. "Apparently the nearest hotel is booked solid for three days."

"Why?" Madara asked incredulously, glancing up from the couch. " Didn't you say this place is in the middle of nowhere aside from the specialist hospital and the small city that's developed around the Academy?"

Tobirama frowned at the thin knife in Madara's hand, still carving away at an apple with deliberate little flicks, occasionally shaking off slivers of peel onto the plate underneath his hands.
"I'm going to let you bleed out if you cut yourself by being a fool: stop playing with knives while distracted. I thought you wanted the apple to eat."

Madara snorted. "It'll be a sad, embarrassing day when I cut myself with a carving knife after all the practice I've had."

"So it's a habit to mutilate food then?"

"It's not mutilation: it's food art. A rite, too, but most people don't do it for that nowadays," he said, an irritated scowl slipping onto his face. "And carving is a relaxing hobby. Not my preferred one - I like wood-burning if we're talking about creative art - but you pick up things when you're waiting on people."

"You pick up carving pictures into fruit?" Tobirama asked dryly.

"Izuna likes pure sword fighting at times. I tend to slip up and use other skills because the sword isn't my favorite. Sak'— Sakumo is better with a sword than anyone ever expects from him, and Izuna likes a challenge. He's also a competitive bastard who gleefully refused to let it go after the first time Sakumo beat him. They can take awhile to finish."

"And how are the apples involved?" Tobirama asked, sitting down on the couch adjacent to Madara's armchair. His coffee table was still covered in a riot of papers and research material that he had put on hold as the Fair approached, but he was certain he remembered storing a city map and a directory on this table.

"Sakumo's pets are large, furry, overly affectionate behemoth mutts who are twenty times worse in winter when they try to smother me and he just laughs about it and finds it adorable. He's got them trained to give him elbow room when he's carving though, so carving it was. It almost wasn't worth how funny Izuna thought it was when he realized why I dragged them to orchards to fight, but on the upside, pelting them both with apples as I finish is really therapeutic. Especially that time when the alpha bitch's pup decided it liked the taste of apples, tackled Izuna, and somehow wound up sitting on his head. All several hundred pounds of him," Madara said, a smugly satisfied twist to his lips as he set the first apple to the side.

Tobirama grabbed the second apple away from Madara's reaching hand, ignoring the man's glare as he gave up on finding the map and sat back to eat the apple himself. Either he had moved the map and directory at some point on one of his research sprees or Hashirama had lost his office copy again and borrowed his without returning it. Possibly Itama had tried to 'help' clean the living room again. He mostly doubted that since the bookshelves hadn't been organized by color and size and publishing date again (thank the gods), but that could just mean that Haku had come over to work and kindly derailed Itama's impulse before he got started.

Maybe he should use Spring Break to separate all of his and Itama's books and then ward the shelves so that stopped happening? Itama was easily the kindest and most sedate member of their family, but his organizational system made no sense to anyone else and it was going to drive Tobirama crazy one day.

Madara finally gave up on getting the apple back after Tobirama bit into it. He set the knife down and gathered up the small pile of minuscule shavings before lifting the plate and gently blowing on it. And just like tinder, the peels lit up in a tiny little bonfire. Which smelled oddly like baked apples, cinnamon and all, with a touch of incense and spice.

It had to be at least partly Madara's magic that smelled like that rather than the spells. Tobirama had been around an incredible variety of people at the Academy and most magic only smelled like ozone
if it smelled like anything at all. The exceptions to that rule were generally due to the nature of the spell or from people who'd made some kind of link to the Pure Land, with Hashirama's smell of forests and wet vegetation being the most prominent example.

"You said it was a rite?" Tobirama asked, curious as he watched Madara pull a feather from his hair and casually sweep the ashes off the plate where they vanished into thin air. He dropped the feather on the table to pick the apple and knife back up and twisted the apple around to it's untouched side.

"It's a basic thing," the brunette said with a shrug, head tilting as he narrowed eyes at the apple before starting a new image. "It's in a lot of pantheons because it's a mark of respect: sacrifice of something of value, often a portion of food, and burning it. What food varies on the god and on what you're asking, but burning is pretty universal. Sometimes it's because they think the smoke takes the essence of it skyward and sometimes because fire is transformative and the change of state shifts the physical item into the Pure Land to whichever god you want. And since art takes time and effort, it's more respectful and more valuable."

"Wouldn't burning the apple rather than the discards be the right course then?" It was a little enthralling to watch someone make art when they knew what they were doing. Steady flicks, clever fingers, the slip and slide of muscle directing the human body with precision and deliberation so as to create a visible end product. It was a little like watching an advanced martial artist run through a silent routine: a show of expertise and competence. Except with less adrenaline and a wider variety of potential results.

Tobirama's own artwork had never been particularly impressive in school: just ruthlessly symmetrical. His mother probably still had a macaroni picture frame somewhere proving it, too.

"Most gods recognize that you don't have people left if you ask them to burn the bulk of their food, especially when winter's coming," Madara said, glancing back and forth from Tobirama to the apple. "So it's fine as long as you're just showing respect and giving thanks rather than asking for shit. Unless they're in front of you, playing the guest, full offerings aren't required."

"Although shouldn't you already know this," Madara demanded, pointing at him with the blade. "You can't bullshit me. The fact you went to the Pure Land is literally all over your face. Not a single thing about you suggests stupid recklessness and you aren't one of the unlucky morons who walked into a thin spot while frolicking with nature. It was definitely intentional and you were definitely prepared, if apparently poorly!"

"Perhaps it's different in the strange backwards land you come from," Tobirama bit out, "but there just isn't a lot of surviving material left about the Pure Land. The Nin were understandably disinterested in sharing with occupying colonists. It wasn't even until this last decade that they've been willing to allow outsider academics to assist in preservation and recovery efforts. I tried Walking when I was twenty-one: all of the knowledge I had to go on is on that shelf."

Tobirama fumed, trying to reign his temper in as he pointed towards the top of the bookshelf across the room. He hated that he had lost his temper over this regardless of how tactless Madara was, but it was a sore point. It had been a disappointing sore point for nine years and three months. He tried not to think about it, but he was frequently irritated with himself over how he couldn't let it go.

It wasn't that he was so arrogant as to think that he, over any other person, could manage it simply because Hashirama had been spontaneously chosen as a sage. That kind of hubris was just asking for the first god you encountered to contract with you and torment you with the powers you thought yourself entitled to. One of the few fully intact stories outside the origin myths was about a daimyo who'd made that very mistake and had demanded the attention of the God of Stone. He'd offended On'ki so badly the elder God had Chosen him as Avatar and then ensured every organic thing the
man touched turned to granite until the daimyo starved to death.

Since he really wasn't interested in finding out what it felt like to drown in his own magic, he made a point to keep that story in mind. But he had felt the raw, untouched magic in those moments before Hashirama had connected with the roots years ago and... it had resonated.

It had been beautiful and wild and a dangerous unknown and so pure it felt like you might blind yourself if you could only see it properly. It had been a mystery and a challenge and it hinted at new things to learn. The possibility it might kill him only highlighted the awareness that there were things worth taking that risk for.

He had wanted it. He still wanted it, and he wasn't exaggerating in the least when he said that every scrap of published knowledge that had been available nine years ago was sitting on that bookshelf in hardcover books and looseleaf binders. He had planned and researched as much as he possibly could, all the way down to investigating if there were clothes that supplicants were supposed to wear. He hadn't even set his heart on connecting with a god of any type. He would have been perfectly interested in being offered a summoning contract with an the Animal Boss or a major elemental if nothing else, but after he'd tried...

Whatever had gone wrong with that fire God, whatever he'd done or however he'd misspoken, it had ruined all his chances.

Hashirama had said he could tell something was different, that he felt 'more' somehow, and that there was now a hint of brimstone in his ocean-based magic. He claimed it didn't feel bad, and yet Tobirama couldn't quite believe him. No matter how rare it was to see them, every summon who wandered through the Academy, every non-human dryad or spirit who peeked in on the human magic-users, all of them looked at the marks on his face and then refused to speak first and stayed formal afterwards. Even Hatake's dogs, who have worked around the Academy for years, won't come within a meter of him.

And the worst thing was that he'd still do it all over again.

He'd do it for how his breath had hitched, standing in front of glowing lava eyes backlit by blue-white flames. For those minutes of interest and multi-toned laughter and how licks of black flame had flowed over and in front of red-orange and orange-yellow fire. For the burn of fingers tracing lines on his face and how heat had seeped through his ribs and sat like a furnace in his chest ever since.

The few times he'd been drunk after that, he'd considered creating a spell to excise all the memories of his trip from after that last bright moment. He could fully move past it, he thought, if he could just forget how the God had frozen and shifted into rage before throwing Tobirama back to earth. Everything before that was enthralling, but it was filled with the too perfect otherness that the human mind frequently glossed over. Without that dark spot reminding him that it was real, he might finally stop thinking about it whenever he ran into slow research periods or found questions he couldn't answer yet.

Of course, his drunk self also thought going back into the Pure Land just one more time was a potentially survivable idea which was why he hadn't touched a single bit of lore or related research topics since his twenty-second birthday.

He didn't need temptation around to make suicidal actions sound reasonable.

"Nine years?" Madara said, soft and surprised and angry and Tobirama didn't even know what else as black eyes turned to him. "You succeeded and for nine years you never asked anyone questions? Even summons?"
Tobirama tensed, refusing to flinch as he made himself keep eye-contact. "I didn't succeed," he countered flatly. "And maybe I didn't want answers for similar reasons to whatever excuse you have for not knowing how an electronic menu works in a cafeteria."

Madara's face went blank, then his eyes widened, and then every part of him went frustrated and angry and incredulous as he slapped the knife down onto the table, next to the plate and feather, before chunking his apple at Tobirama's face.

"How?! How are you simultaneously the most intelligent man I have ever encountered as well as the most idiotic!" he yelled as Tobirama snatched the apple out of the air. "To the void with it all! With the entire goddamn topic!"

Madara stormed over to the bookshelf, grabbed a third of the texts Tobirama had indicated earlier, and went right out the front door with the stack, yelling that he was reading outside.

Tobirama was surprised the ass didn't slam the door on his way out.

"Uhh... hello?"

Tobirama looked over his left shoulder to see Hashirama standing in the open doorway, staring with surprise at the front lawn, and just groaned.

"So that's the person that Nawaki was telling Mito and I about then?" Hashirama asked, hesitantly closing the door.

"His name's Madara," Tobirama said, leaning his head back against the couch and closing his eyes.

Hashirama came around and settled onto the couch next to Tobirama. He felt his brother's knee rest against his as they sat side-by-side, and in his mind, he could see the patient, considering look Hashirama wore during the rare times he thought someone needed a listener.

"We got onto a bad topic by accident," Tobirama said finally. "He probably doesn't even know why, and I snapped back in turn."

"Snapping is a lot of what you do, Tobirama," Hashirama admitted, "but you usually aren't bothered by someone's reaction."

"It wasn't intentional which was childish." Tobirama winced a bit as he reran what he said through his head. "And given what I said, I might have come off as a bit prejudiced, possibly classist even, given that I have no knowledge of his background. At the very least I implied he was an imbecile for not knowing how to use an uncommon piece of technology."

"You could always apologize, if you regret it," Hashirama offered, always ready to make peace and move past problems. Which was an admirable quality if you were charismatic and lacked Tobirama's stubborn pride. He didn't exactly oppose admitting he was wrong because letting pride blind you to truths was the sort of idiocy he tried to avoid, but... well, Madara hadn't so much as touched a sore subject as stomped right over it with soccer cleats and then done jumping jacks.

It would be easier to apologize for his part in it if he received an apology in turn, but he couldn't expect a stranger to understand why that had hurt if he didn't explain and he wasn't explaining.

Hashirama sighed fondly at him, and Tobirama felt him lean forwards.

"If nothing else, Tobirama, I think he seems quite fond of you, so I'm sure he wasn't that offended," Hashirama said cheerfully.
Tobirama slit open a single red eye to give his brother a withering glare and came face-to-face with Hashirama's wide grin and the peeled apple he was looking at. He stared at the intricate white lines that had been carved into the red peel and raised both eyebrows abruptly when the design finally clicked.

"Is that an aerial blueprint of campus?" Specifically it was about two-thirds of the campus with the auditorium in the center as the only building whose interior had been carved out fully rather than just outlined.

Hashirama blinked at him in bewilderment for a moment before rotating the apple so they could both see the blueprint face up.

"Huh?" his brother muttered. "That's actually pretty awesome. He even included the sidewalks and the biggest trees I've made with mokuton. But I meant this!"

Hashirama flipped the apple to the other side, showing the second picture Madara had started earlier.

It was him. It was his face, his hair, the quietly curious tilt of his chin which Madara must have seen when Tobirama had asked about the apple rite.

He had seen Madara glancing up and down between him and the apple earlier, but he hadn't thought anything about it, he realized. You were supposed to look at people you were talking to and Madara had been talking to him.

"Look at you!" Hashirama declared, grin at goofy epic proportions as he waved the apple in Tobirama's face. "No, no, don't stop! You were smiling! I saw that twitch of a smile. I'm so proud! Look at my little brother making friends! I have to tell Mito! Oh! And grab Itama and Kawarama and get dinner! We'll take Madara, too, and—"

"Get out." Tobirama sat up and snatching the apple.

"Tobirama!" Hashirama pouted.

"You're delusional. Get out and go do the rest of your paperwork before I tell Iruka where to find you. The Fair is tomorrow: you can't possibly be done this early. Go help fix the wooden structures in the auditorium," he demanded.

"My brother is so cruel!" Hashirama cried, melodramatic as always. "I'll just take Madara and—"

"He's sleeping on my couch since the hotels are full," Tobirama abruptly decided, utterly unwilling to let his brother near the man unsupervised while Hashirama had this thought stuck in his head. "And you and Kawarama don't have a spare bedroom either, so don't even suggest it."

"Really?!!" Hashirama said, perking back up immediately.

"Get out."

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"'A long time ago, when the world was young and empty,'" Tobirama reads, slowly translating the story from Ningo as an enraptured Itama listened, "'there were no people and no animals: just magic whirling through the void between stars and sinking into the ground and sky. And as the magic slowed and changed from violent rapids to living ocean, it,'" he stops, glaring at the next word as
tries to remember what that root word means. Divide? Pull apart? "it separated like a calming lake-bottom. The thickest magic, of stars and reality, which supports the earth and the Wheel, sank to the bottom. The purest magic, the bright and otherworldly power that stands between the void and life, rose to the top. And in the middle, where the thick earth was softest and the bright light was dimmest, lives humanity. We live on the edge of extremes."

"Do we really have to hear this, again?" Kawarama groans, looking as put upon as his chubby ten year old face can manage. "Why are you so lame?"

"It's not lame!" Itama snaps uncharacteristically. "I like these stories! Nana Chiyo tells similar stories all the time when I visit her, and she says they're all real even if most Gods here won't talk to people anymore."

"That old lady down the street knows exactly how to pull your strings, Itama," Kawarama scoffs, hunching over his game controller as he slammed his thumb into the button repeatedly. "She just makes up those things because she's lonely and bored."

"You should show more respect for Mrs. Chiyo," Hashirama says, missing as he hits the x-button to shoot a banana peel at Kawarama's go-kart. "Mrs. Chiyo has been our family babysitter since you were born, and she still sends over cookies whenever Itama visits."

"She's weird!" Kawarama argues, pulling further ahead on the track. "Besides, Itama makes the cookies because he's too nice and he's lame. And you are, too! You're seventeen and you're still spooked whenever she plays dead! And you let her make you cut her grass!"

"My own brother's so mean!" Hashirama says, drooping gloomily where he sits before dramatically collapsing sideways onto Kawarama as his younger brother's go-kart takes a sharp turn into a secret track using an oil slick.

"Get off of me!" the kid squawks, squirming under the heavier teen and letting out a muffled yell as his car goes careening into the whirlpool hazard. Kawarama's left leg flails violently, trying to kick Hashirama off as his oldest brother shifts to get more comfortable while steering his favorite striped car around the virtual islands. "You cheat! You cheating jerk of a cheat! You always do this on the Uzushio Waterways! TOBIRAMA! Make him get off me!"

Tobirama taps his finger on the line he'd stopped at. "Do you want me to start where I left off?" he asks, watching Itama grin down at where their younger brother was pinned.

"Tobirama!"

"That's ok," Itama said, politely magnanimous as he turned his attention back to the book. "It's really nice of you to read it to me again, but I don't want to be selfish. We could read your favorite part, maybe?"

Tobirama hums, considering the book and trying to remember if he actually has a favorite part in this volume. He idly shoves Hashirama down harder onto Kawarama with the flat of his foot after the brat loudly comments that "His favorite parts are textbooks!" and starts flipping through the pages.

"I'll read my favorites later," he settles on, deciding to just avoid the question. "Didn't you say you liked the origin myths best, Itama?"

Itama brightens, drawing his skinny knees up as he hugs them to his chest. "Yeah! I like how Nono'o came to be the most, but the twin's story is my next favorite!"
"I don't remember Nono'o," Tobirama muses.

"She's not in this volume: she's a middle God. I heard about her from Nana Chiyo. She's the God of Stories and Healing."

"That's a stupid combination," Kawarama complained, voice muffled as he tried to gnaw on Hashirama's forearm.

"It's not stupid! She was born when all the words that the other gods spoke gathered together. Because so many things had been said since everything started, the words weighed so much that they compressed into a whole new God. And then she told other people stories when they felt bad and it made them feel better and she learned other ways to make people feel better and so she gained the aspect of Healing! She's awesome," Itama declares, nodding his head firmly.

"The other two are so much cooler," Kawarama says, sulking as he finally gives up on getting Hashirama's heavy frame off him. "Who wants to be talked to life when you can be born from a giant thunderstorm hitting erupting lava?"

"I knew you listened to these stories!" Itama cries.

"I can't not listen, you giant nerd! You have Tobirama translating parts of that one all the time—"

The entire room bucks violently.

Everything starts shaking like the inside of a snow globe at the mercy of a two-year-old. Kawarama screams when the TV starts falling, and Hashirama rolls them both away. Tobirama dumps the book to the side and tries dragging Itama to the nearest door frame, but no one can stand long enough to get their feet under them. Itama tries to crawl after they fall over, but the light fixture breaks out of the ceiling. Tobirama barely has time to lunge forward and curl over the thirteen-year-olds' head before it shatters on his left shoulder, sending glass all over the floor.

It's the only earthquake they've ever experienced on the outskirts of Konoha and it's magnitudes worse than anything Tobirama's heard about in years. Books are falling off the living room shelves, an immense noise has started up from everywhere and nowhere, he can see the walls shaking...

Fuck, that's a crack.

Tobirama grabs his younger brother by the arm and drags him as they both stumble-crawl as fast as they can, ignoring how the glass and porcelain shards dig through their socks. He tries to yell for Hashirama, tries to yell for Kawarama, but he can't even hear himself over this din. He can see Hashirama though, trying to make for the nearby front door instead of the kitchen entrance Tobirama and Itama were closer to. Kawarama is still skinny enough that Hashirama just picked him up outright, and Kawarama's eyes are wide in his sheet white face as he clings to Hashirama through the stumbling and shaking.

Tobirama isn't terrified. He can't be terrified. Everything is happening too fast, it's too loud, and there's no time.

He has to take care of Itama. If the ceiling collapses while they're still inside, it'll bring the two upper floors of the townhouse down on their heads. They have to get out.

It's too late though. One more violent jerk in the floor and the crack spreads up the wall rapidly, spider-webbing across the ceiling. He can visibly see the ceiling bow as its own weight starts bringing it down while the shaking continues. Tobirama grabs his brother, curling over the younger teen as he throws all his magic out and up as hard as he can. It's stupid and reckless and a water
talent really isn't the best option for a solid shield, but it's far better than nothing. He can feel Itama copy him, tossing magic upward to reinforce his shield despite Itama's own lack of affinity, and he braces them both against the floor as he waits for impact.

Except it doesn't come.

It's the thick smell of plants that makes him look up. Hashirama had ripped soil up through the floorboards, compacting it into to a dense sphere around him and Kawarama. But through those same rents in the foundation, massive roots and vines have forced their way in, spreading up the walls, overlapping and weaving together until it looks like they're in the middle of a giant, woven root ball.

The sound of the earthquake is still omnipresent around them. Small pieces of debris and flakes of plaster fall through the openings in the living mesh, but Tobirama can see one of the support beams for the floor above catch on the plants without any visible strain. And even as he watches, they plants continue to move: growing more offshoots to fill gaps, sprouting through smaller cracks in the floor, and steadily growing through the ceiling. A few vines even curl out through the shattered living room window and start blooming.

It looks overwhelmingly like a time-lapsed video of nature reclaiming a human development.

(Actually, it reminds him of a scene from Jumanji, but that seems like an ungrateful comparison when it's saving their lives.)

Itama tentatively peeks up, but stays huddled nearby with a death grip on his older brother's arm. The shaking and the sound have finally started to die down a bit, and Tobirama can see Hashirama's earthen sphere open slowly at the side. When there's no sign of debris collapsing inward, Hashirama let's it all drop at once.

The look of sheer relief on his face at the sight of Tobirama and Itama unharmed almost hits harder than the last few minutes.

"It's glowing," Itama says, barely audible over the quake's last rumbles, as he points towards the vines.

And they are. Not the roots themselves, although there's something weird about them that Tobirama can't quite place, but the greener vines have a subtle hazy illumination to them that's only visible because all the lights have shattered. The few flowers are actual lights: gleaming shimmers of color even in the sunlight of an autumn afternoon, and the one closest to Tobirama smells so strongly of a jungle in all it's complexity that it's disorienting.

Kawarama stumbles over in a rush of pointy limbs, shaking from the adrenaline as he crashes into them. Tobirama grunts as his brother accidentally elbows him in the kidney but doesn't say anything. He's too busy watching Hashirama who's stopped at the sight of grass, flowers and offshoots growing right out of the hardwood floor around his feet.

Tobirama tenses, hands tightening in his younger brothers' shirts as the plants slowly wind their way up Hashirama's ankles. His brother carefully moves to the side, but there's no violent reaction: new plants start growing at the same gentle rate while the first flowers sway towards the brunet. The light starts slowly spreading out from the flowers and greenery, moving like rich molasses through the room as the smell of nature and wet earth and ozone grows thicker.

Red eyes catch sight of a small thorny vine winding its way past Tobirama, carrying a burst of green leaves and tiny ripe blackberries that almost thrum with magic. It circles his wrist on the floor, not
even tight enough to properly scratch him, and the way it nudges at the underside of his wrist with a thorn free patch almost reminds him of a cat.

On the one hand, he's not inclined to stupid risks and he has only a bare idea of what's happening.

On the other, it's a berry -not a seed- and Tobirama's curiosity is a driving force.

He's reaching out a hand, fingers poised to pick the fruit even if he has no intention of actually eating it, when he's yanked backwards by his shirt. He stumbles, loosing balance as he goes from sitting to standing with no in-between, and when he falls back a few steps, he passes through a cloud of heat that balances on the thin line between a sauna's pleasant intensity and the scorching air above a candle flame.

Tobirama catches himself, body sloshing between the echoes of twenty-one and fifteen and thirty, feels river waters lapping at his bare feet, and already knows what's there before he looks up.

It's the same river bank, the smooth stones familiar under his feet, the forest standing firm and strong and morphing into something new every time his eyes drift away. The river moves behind him, flowing away to the ocean, but the thick smell of salt-water drifts forward and mixes with the cold nip of ice melting into mountain streams, even though neither ocean nor mountain can be seen. Magic flows thick and rich, and the pressure is as dizzyingly light as air on a mountain peak and as crushingly heavy as the unexplored darkness of the ocean floor.

This place is the truth of the world: filtered and cleaned and purified to the edge of overdose for any being more mortal than magic.

It's all the world untouched.

And standing in front of him, right over where Tobirama's stumbling footprints are pressed into the dirt, is all the world's fire.

/You've climbed quite far,/ the God says, replaying words burned into memory. /It's been some time since someone passed up the Animals for the more dangerous trek. You stink of Cats, by the way./

Under all the feelings he can't name right now comes the familiar spark of irritation. Going off script with non-humans has pitfalls, but the amusement he can feel coming from that overgrown campfire is almost enough to make him retort unwisely.

"The Snow Leopards were rather interested," he agrees diplomatically, tongue shaping it's own reply as he flexes his fingers, adult muscles feeling new again, skin tingling and heat-dried as wind caresses his bare face.

He doesn't reach up to touch his cheeks.

"I feel I am called to the ocean. May I offer you respect on my return?"

The ritual line is polite and deferential and easy to use with only slight adjustments for anyone who travels the Pure Lands. It's meant to excuse a traveler from any god who takes notice but doesn't call to the speaker's magic. It's meant to let a Walker continue their search for a patron. And Tobirama is suited for a water god of some kind, judging from both his magic and his arrival in a river's shallows.

Except Tobirama can't bring himself to take the step back that's required after saying it. There's just something about this one...
Fire shifts. There's the impression of a tilting head in the glare of bipedal flames and then the heat condenses somehow as absent amusement drops for intense interest. Colors shift, the cooler red-orange lightening to hotter gold, and even as the God seems to solidify into a denser form, the ebony tongues of hair-like flame refuse to fully submit to gravity.

/You are deep ocean,/ the God intones, voice ringing unnaturally as he deliberately steps forward into one of Tobirama's footprints, /cold and powerful and crushingly ruthless, void of malice. Full of terribly wondrous things, full of unseen movements, full of unexpected and unconventional light./

The skin on Tobirama's arms and face feels almost sunburned as that living furnace comes closer. Eyes like a bright lava flow are locked on his own, and this is maybe one of the stupidest choices Tobirama has ever made for himself. Half of him doesn't even know why he's doing this. He's never been a child who stares at the sun. Fire magic had never really appealed when he learned the basics. He has no desire to be a moth, and a sparkler by any other name still burns itself out, no matter how gorgeous.

/You are deep sea, and the heart of you burns./ Steaming vapor rises from the riverbed as the God's steps hit water for the first time. /Passion and love vent from your core. No less an inferno for how the water hides all but the bubbles and warmth./

Hands reach for his face and Tobirama - fifteen, twenty-one, thirty - closes his eyes and leans into that warmth. Maybe all humans ever remember are flames holding back the dark rather than pyres. Tobirama takes a breath, ignoring how it shakes as strange fingers trace lines on his face. It's that pause, that moment he remembers, and like he always does, he chooses to face it with eyes open. Dream or not, there's no benefit to hiding from your choices.

Except the God's still looking at him instead of to the side.

Except instead of the dream staying the same, the God stands out now from the scenery like the only 3D object in a 2D painting.

Except instead of an anger hot enough to melt the world, there's a patient stare.

It throws Tobirama: this divergence from a nine-year-long repeating pattern. It's like being given a second opportunity to redo the scene he'd messed up except he still doesn't know his line and now he's lost his place in the script on top of that.

He's in his current body, he's thirty years old, and he's different from that young man for all that he's still the same person. The dream is disappearing all around him, river and trees turning into washed out watercolors of themselves. The sounds die and the scents fade and Tobirama opens his mouth and closes it without knowing any words to use at all.

It's easy to know he'd do it all again. It's not quite as simple to know if he'd do something different when he's happy with where his life is right now.

For all the disappointment, did he want something other than what he has?

An aggravated sigh, with a shrill undertone, interrupts his thoughts, and the God slides his hands down Tobirama's neck to rest on the front of his shoulders.
"Dream or not," he says, radiating a prickly irritation that makes little sparks flit off his arms and hair, /next time you see something edible around a non-human power, don't touch it./

And then he roughly shoves Tobirama into the river.

Tobirama looked up at his ceiling, blinking away the phantom sensation of river water.

He was exhausted, it was two in the morning, and he was chilled because he was lying on top of the covers when he'd gone to sleep underneath them. He reached into his drawer to get a thicker sleep shirt and shucked off the white one he was wearing.

His white tee-shirt had ashy handprints on the shoulders.

He threw it at his door and went back to sleep.

"Alright, I have a few student meetings and one last class, so I'm busy until lunch," Tobirama started, taking the jar off the blender as he poured a vegetable smoothie into three glasses. Itama blearily grabbed his, puffing black and white bangs out of his eyes as he poked at the scrambled eggs with a spatula. "After that, I need to help with preparations until guests start arriving at the visitor's entrance at five. The presentations officially go from six to nine with drinks and snacks set around the information area at the entrance to the auditorium. You have your copy of the exhibits, Itama?"

Itama hummed blearily, nodding with eyes half-lidded as he dumped the eggs onto a giant serving plate and thunked down into a seat at the table. Tobirama, amused, rapped his knuckles on Itama's shoulder as he walked past him into the living room.

"Madara?" he called.

His guest was meditating, seated cross-legged on the floor with his back to the couch, and opened a single black eye to look at him. "I don't have the wards configured to allow you to remain here without myself or Itama. The campus is open to you, and Mito emailed to say that she has an account at the cafeteria set up with part of Nawaki's budget. I can point out the library or computer labs unless you have plans for today?"

"You said these demonstrations begin at six?" the brunet confirmed, standing up and stretching. He'd already gotten dressed and ready so Tobirama went back into the kitchen and moved the bowl of fruit and bacon to the table as well.

"Yes, there are schedules up on the campus intranet, but physical copies will be near the auditorium before they begin." Tobirama slid some of Itama's favorite tea closer to him, absentely moving the smoothie away from his brother's elbow before nudging him again.

Itama jolted, blinking awake and muttering nonsense about night classes and the validity of being partly nocturnal as he drank his tea.

Madara looked amused as he put some of the eggs and bacon on his plate. "I'm going to walk around then. It seems like an interesting place with unexpected surprises. May as well see these presentations
later since I'm here. They sound like they have... experimental premises?" he asked, eyes considering.

"Some of them, certainly. It was originally just a informal demonstration for an audience of students and citizens with a cash prize for the opinion poll at the end, but we've had a lot scouts and headhunters for different agencies show up to investigate upcoming magic users. So it's unofficially a way to broadcast your skills and begin to establish a reputation."

"Definitely promising," Madara said, a hint of a dark smile on his lips before the fall of his hair blocked Tobirama's line of sight.

He narrowed his eyes at the man next to him, wondering what that had been about. None of the campus wards had reacted to him, and Tobirama's wards (which were more sensitive than probably necessary) didn't pick up any ill-intent, but...

Itama kicked him under the table and looked exasperated once he got Tobirama's attention. Tobirama raised his eyebrows in return and Itama just glanced at Madara and then looked at Tobirama.

Tobirama gave him a flat stare.

Itama smiled, optimistic and hopeful.

His stare got flatter.

Ten minutes of breakfast and non-verbal arguments later, Madara took a map of the area and wandered off after Itama (now somewhat awake after the application of tea) had politely shuffled him out the door, insisting that guests didn't need to help clean.

"So he seemed nice," Itama chirped, glancing at his watch and slumping when he saw the time.

"You got in at midnight and you're dead in the mornings: you can't have heard him say ten sentences," Tobirama refuted, stabbing the last piece of fruit on his fork and pausing when he saw it was a blackberry rather than the blueberry he'd expected.

He ate it anyway.

"You willingly let him stay here. That says really good things!" Itama insisted, flopping onto the couch and snuggling under one of the blankets Madara had set aside.

"The hotel was full: he had to stay somewhere."

"He could have stayed with Nawaki, Tsunade, and Dan."

"He really, really couldn't," Tobirama said, lips twitching and immensely amused at the idea of that suggestion and Madara's probable expression. "He and Tsunade had a rather memorable meeting."

"That's great," Itama said thoughtfully. "He's already passed Tsunade's trial and he doesn't even seem traumatized."

Tobirama stared at the elder of his younger brothers for a long moment in which Itama carefully refrained from looking directly at him even as he maintained his open and honest expression.

"You've already talked with Hashirama." It wasn't a question.

Itama looked sheepish and pained. "He sent a lot of text messages. I had to block his number temporarily and tell Mito to contact me for anything important. I feel a bit bad about it, but Haku was
about to start picking up the phone himself."

"Exactly how many people did Hashirama contact?" Tobirama asked, carefully concentrating on getting his tie just right rather than on how much he wanted to strangle their older brother by his own hair.

Itama groaned and rolled over, dragging the blanket over his head.

"I don't know!" he said, voice muffled. "I called Kawarama after that to see if he'd made any sense of Hashirama and he was at the Kato's and laughing himself sick with Nawaki. There were a bunch of comments about accidental wingmen and your taste in men and Nawaki and Kawarama started up that point game and I begged Tsunade to make them stop talking and she said that at least this one had enough magic to bench press a dragon along with being healthy and disease free and oh my god I didn't want to hear those things about my own brother. Why are we related to these people?!

"Perhaps it's karma for killing people for hire in another life," Tobirama offered dryly, straightening his shirtsleeves and reordering his mental list of people he was irritated with. Genma could count his blessings: his rank was dropping quickly.

"I'm pretty sure karma dictates we'd end up as fat wiener dogs or instead have mass murderers for relatives if we go with divine irony," Itama commented, rolling onto his back again although he kept the blanket over his face.

Tobirama snorted softly and snapped open his briefcase as he double-checked that he had all his papers. "Well, don't get too bothered with them all. We don't even know much about Madara. He could be a crazed psychopath with delusions of grandeur and a psychotic plot."

"... With these wards?" Itama reached out a hand and flicked a finger around in a circle. "These wards? The ones that don't like Kawarama's girlfriend because she lied about waiting for marriage because she was embarrassed to admit to being asexual? You think a crazed psychopath had breakfast with us inside these wards?"

Alright, maybe that was a little far-fetched, Tobirama thought.

"Either way," he said, clicking his briefcase shut and standing, "he'll be gone within a week so it's moot. I'll see you later this evening."

Tobirama took a last look around, turned off the unnecessary lights, grabbed his access cards and walked towards the door. He stopped with his hand on the knob though. Itama was always far too mannered to not respond if he heard you, so it was rather unusual that he was being so silent.

"Itama?"

There was a long pause and then Itama sighed slowly.

"You can, you know?" he said gently, voice unmuffled. Tobirama watched one of his brother's feet twist back and forth in the air over the couch arm, but Itama never sat up to look at him. "You can like him if you want to. Even if it seems stupid or it doesn't make sense. You don't have to be indifferent because it's inconvenient. Or not like him just because Hashirama's exuberant or Nawaki's chatty or Kawarama's Kawarama."

"It's just..." Itama hesitated, foot stilling, "it's ok to like someone even if they're leaving. That's what letters and computers and magic are for. You can visit if you want to, or have visits yourself. Or you can think about it even if you're not sure you want to yet."
Tobirama stared at the back of the couch, rubbing a thumb against the smooth leather of his briefcase's handle.

"What makes you bring this up?" he asked, quietly.

"...that feather sticks up slightly from your shirt pocket."

*It was easy, Tobirama remembered, to forget just how observant Itama was when he was both content not to stand out and surrounded by so many forceful people.*

"I just moved it there since I forgot to return it to him after cleaning up yesterday," he explained honestly. "Enjoy your nap before classes, Itama."

"... Thanks. You too, Tobirama. Good luck with the Fair."

And that was it. That *should* have been it, as Tobirama opened the door. It would have been with almost any other person except that Itama would never actually push outside of academia which meant that, paradoxically, Tobirama felt like he had to say something.

"... Long distance anything is very difficult, Itama."

"Things can work out if everyone wants it and everyone talks," Itama said mildly. "And even if it doesn't, it doesn't mean it's bad."

"... I'm not much of a distance person with close attachments." It was more of an admission than he'd really wanted to make.

"I know, brother," Itama said warmly. A hand waved in the air over the couch. "Have a good day and eat something besides power bars and shakes please."

"Get some sleep, Itama."

"This is pretty awesome," Kawarama said, watching the detailed images shift from male to female before changing to show an internal diagram of the human body. He didn't bother reading any of the labels as he walked around the display - he made a note to buy new sandals as the plastic flopped annoyingly - but all the details were right on target as far as he could see. Someone, probably Sasuke, had even done a morphing image to show how all the major muscle groups shifted to rearrange themselves in the new form when someone transformed.

"Well," he said, grinning as he looked over the two teens, "I am impressed. Well done, Duckie!" he congratulated, shooting out a hand and dragging the recalcitrant teen into a headlock so he could mess up his hair.

"HEY!" Naruto complained, folding his arms under his breasts and pouting while Kawarama caught Sasuke's vicious attempt at a dick punch. "Why are you congratulating just Sasuke?! Konohamaru and I came up with this to start with!"

"Well of course you did," Kawarama agreed, rolling his eyes at the blond. He shifted his weight to the left and leveraged Sasuke up on his hip just enough to keep the kid off-balance so the little shit couldn't flip him. "Like anyone is going to convince me that Duckie of all teens came up with a sex-shifting technique. Please. Like gender even enters his head at any point except to wonder if half of
all teenage girls undergo some sort of strange behavioral shift in puberty— ow, ow, ow! Ok!"

Kawarama yelped, straightening up and letting go of Sasuke after the kid grabbed hold of his fingers and started twisting with far more force than necessary.

"You are one of the most vicious kouhai I've ever had, young Padawan," Kawarama said fondly, carefully flexing his fingers as he grinned down at the seething nineteen year old.

"You stink and I was clean," Sasuke snapped, dragging Naruto forward to stand between them slightly. "Why the hell didn't you take a shower at the dojo and change clothes before heading over here?"

"I like my t-shirt and gi. They're comfortable," he said, patting the loose cotton pants. "Besides, there was no time and it's not that bad. You're just a finicky little feline, Duckie."

Sasuke glared, one eyelid twitching, and refused to comment. Between the bruises under his eyes, the bad temperament, and the almost palpable aura of 'fuck off' around him, it was no wonder his peers in the auditorium seemed to be giving him a wide berth despite being accompanied by Naruto in his 'Naru-chan' form. The kid had lost all sense of chill under the recent stress and sleep-deprivation. Normally, he didn't even blink an eye at the nickname anymore after eleven years of it.

The underlying thread of desperation was gone though which was fantastic. A few more days, maybe weeks, and they'd finally get him dialed back down from Grumpycat Extreme to his normal state of happy-and-sorta-unwilling-to-admit-it.

"Speaking of the Hedgehog though, where is he?" Kawarama asked. "Didn't you just say that you and he started this, Sunshine?"

"He's waiting out front for his gramps and Sasuke's dad, so we can show all this off since we came up with it," Naruto stressed, pointing a pink polished nail at Kawarama's face. "So how about some credit, huh?"

"I am giving credit exactly where it's due. Your mom gets credit for your current wardrobe. You get credit for growing that."

"Duckie gets credit for all the illusions because no way did you kids fork over enough money for someone else to do this kind of quality. And you and the Hedgehog get credit for the most impressively hilarious bullshitting I've ever heard of."

"It's not bullshit! It's an important step in creating a long-term process that lets everyone have a body that makes them comfortable and happy," Naruto huffed, putting his hands on his hips (her hips? hmm... Naruto didn't think of himself as a girl though so he shouldn't count for the pronoun) as he dragged back his shoulders to stand up taller. Not that it got him much closer to his normal height given he was barely level with Sasuke's nose right now, but the effect was cute.

Of course, as a guy with a boyfriend or maybe just because he was the antithesis to shyness, Naruto failed to take into account how much proper posture emphasized certain feminine traits, but it sure wasn't Kawarama's job to point that out. There was way too much potential entertainment in his future if he kept quiet.

Although Naruto had made up the entire technique to prank men, so that spine-straight, shoulder-back posture could be entirely on purpose. Sucked for him that Kawarama had grown up around Tsunade and also didn't think breasts were anything special compared to an awesome muscle tone and an unconscious air of confidence.

(He gave it like... twenty minutes tops before someone unsuspecting tried to hit on Naruto.
Kawarama was going to die laughing if it was a woman. Naruto had no idea how to deal with people flirting with him. Manipulating pervert guys? He had that down flat. Genuine interest? Ha! He hadn't even picked up on Sasuke liking him for the longest time.

Kawarama had fond memories of Sasuke's adolescence at the dojo. They made for some of the best drinking stories.

"An important step," he considered, grinning with all his teeth as he patted Naruto on the head, right between his pigtails. "It is an important step in the realm of gender whatever and all that, but you forget who was actually there when you dragged Hedgehog into my dojo at warp speed and kidnapped my minion right out of the class he was teaching, saying 'it was a research emergency!' and 'Sakura was going to kill us!'"

"That was completely unrelated, 'dattebayo!"

"And next you'll expect me to believe that it was an accident instead of being the entire plan that you transformed naked that first time, RIGHT PINKIE?" Kawarama asked, raising his voice pointedly as he grinned over Naruto's shoulder.

"It's a lie!" Naruto squeaked, whirling around in a flurry of blond hair. "That was an accident, Sakur —"

"F--k you, Senju!" Suigetsu snarled, baring shark teeth at the brunet as he shoved neon pink hair out of his face. "You just wait until the next Halo tournament, you asshole! I'm going to beat you into the ground and then we'll see how good you look shaved bald, huh?!!"

Suigetsu stormed off, bitching under his breath and snarling at Kawarama's mocking 'Bye Pinkie' while Naruto stood there, mouth moving wordlessly.

"I can't believe you fell for that," Sasuke deadpanned, staring at the ceiling.

"Shut up, teme!" Naruto said, elbowing his boyfriend in the side as he turned back around. "That meant nothing!"

"Yup, nothing at all," Kawarama said, nodding as he idly scratched at the cross scar on his cheek. "It's such a nothing in fact, that I bet you and Hedgehog won't mind if I just go meandering up to Sakura or Rin or Kurenai. Hey, even better, I can go catch up with 'Nade! You know, cousin Tsunade: pretty, married, blond, humongous rack. Yup, I think that's what I'll do. I'll go catch up with 'Nade first and maybe see if I can figure out where your mom wandered off to along with your Aunt Mito. And I'll just let them all know that you intentionally came up with the idea to wander around in the buff on campus as a huge breasted woman, sending off all kinds of questionable messages like 'big boobs means slutty' or maybe 'blond women are bimbos' or maybe 'guys can expect sexy attention from women if they're perverts' or—"

"OK!" Naruto said, panicked as he lunged at Kawarama and tried to cover his mouth forcibly while Sasuke smirked. "You can't tell them that! That was not what the trick was about!"

"Of course it wasn't," Kawarama agreed, blocking Naruto hands with a grin. "But some guys are really stupid and sometimes societies are really stupid and girls have the right to be offended when they're portrayed badly by men with agendas. Which, in this case, was you and your hedgehog minion. So you have to learn from your mistakes, suck it up, and take your beating like a man."

"He's going to get a bit too beat if they find out he bullshitted something from the Sex & Gender chapter of his shapeshifting textbook to cover for a perverted prank," Sasuke added, looking a bit
vampiric with the evil amusement added onto his pasty complexion and panda eyes.

"That's not being a supportive boyfriend, teme," Naruto muttered.

"He'll support you all the way to the E.R., Sunshine."

"Yeah, yeah," Naruto sighed. "What do you want?"

"How nice that you offered!" Kawarama mocked, clapping his hands together, as girlish as Naruto was pretending to be. "You and Hedgehog interrupted a lot of Duckie's martial arts classes getting ready for this, so now you're officially my gophers. You show up on Sundays — ask Duckie for the schedule — and you'll both be helping me with the intermediate girls class until the blackmail losses value!"

"... That's it?"

"Yup. The intermediate girls are under this weird impression that guys are automatically stronger than girls. I'm having trouble getting them past that because for all that Rin and Kurenai are great when they volunteer to demonstrate, they actually have lives and don't compete professionally. They're brilliant in convincing girls that they can defend themselves, not so much in convincing them they can beat boys when I always win our spars. And unfortunately the kids are observant enough I can't pretend to let them win even if the women wouldn't try kicking my ass for trying that."

"So... you want me and Konohamaru to show up as girls and beat you?" Naruto asked slowly, eyes squinting slightly.

Kawarama looked at the kid for a moment, eyebrows rising steadily with a flat look that distinctly resembled Tobirama's patented expression for Hashirama, and then exchanged a moment of silent incredulousness with Sasuke who 'tch'ed in response.

"Everything but the battle classes are for non-magical combat," Kawarama explained slowly. "You and Sasuke are going to do a demonstration spar as guys, no holds barred so they can see you keep even with him using magic, and then I'm going to shove you both in the sort of high-class limiter that I'll have to grovel at Tobes or Mito's feet to get a hold of. There will be no magic, no strength enhancements, no mass speed, no inhuman endurance, no duplication, and no immediately getting back up from punches to your sternum like the disturbing little jack-in-the-box you normally are."

"You and Hedgehog are going to thus demonstrate your skills, and then I'm going to let the girls wipe the floor with you when you're magic restricted because your form sucks, and it will be the sort of confidence boost for the kids that's better than crack. And after they've gotten over that weirdness involved with fighting boys, I'm going to have you both demonstrate other types of stuff so we can try giving them some of your off-the-wall creativity and resourcefulness, too."

"Hey, I do not need magic to be awesome! It's totally unfair to them to put me up against a bunch of little girls!" Naruto declared, whisker marks flexing as he scowled.

"Duckie's training for the A-ranks in WMA and he's taught them for months," Kawarama said, patting Sasuke on the shoulder proudly, "they're the most adorably talented little fighters you'll ever get out of a middle school."

"I'm training for S-rank in the World Magic Arena," Sasuke corrected for the twentieth time.

"I told you you could start saying that once you beat me in the Ring three times consecutively."

"I already beat you more than forty percent of the time," he said, confidently. "I'm going to hit S-rank
before I finish my bioillusions degree."

"You outlast me forty percent of the time. Reserves aren't the same as skill which is why I keep telling you the ranks are about power not skill. It's like prying open a crocodile's mouth getting you off that idea," Kawarama sighed, rolling his eyes.

"Wait, I thought he was training you for S-rank?" Naruto asked Sasuke, jerking his thumb at dojo instructor.

"He is because he's the current eight-year champion for the A-ranks, Naruto! We watched them last year, remember," Sasuke hissed.

"I thought that was that fish dude?"

"That was the Mizu regionals for the S-ranks!"

"The point," Kawarama interrupted, "is that you can't specifically train for a rank. I kick his ass for his own good between more formalized training and eventually he'll head into S-rank once he's good enough to get past the regional requirements."

"Why don't you just do S-rank if you're the A-champion?" Naruto asked. "Fights are pretty boring if you aren't going up against challenging people."

"I don't have the reserves to qualify," he said dryly. "Hashi and Tobes stole all those genes in the family when they bypassed S-rank for the special snowflake status of outright terrifying. "Tama and I can make A-rank and that's it. Now are you and Hedgehog showing up for the classes or not, Sunshine?"

"You could have just asked, you know. I actually like helping people out so sure," Naruto agreed. "But don't call me Sunshine. I don't see why only your relatives get to keep their actual names."

"This way's more fun," Kawarama countered, ruffling Naruto's blond hair. "And you've obviously never sparred with Tobes when he's Not Amused if you're asking that question."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I did give out nicknames: Tobes ignored me, Itama didn't think his was funny, and Hashi gave me one back. So I changed his name, he changed mine, so on and so forth, it was in public... Tobes ended up Not Amused and that was the end of that."

"Professor Tobirama?" Naruto said skeptically, adjusting the collar of his dress again just to have Sasuke yank the back of it down when the skirt rode up. "Auntie Mito's bookworm friend, Professor Tobirama?"

"Your naivety is so charming, Sunshine. If you're that curious, I'm pretty sure I still have footage hidden somewhere from that year Hashi and Tobes got themselves banned from the S-ranks permanently."

"You can get banned?!" Naruto exclaimed.

Kawarama started laughing.
"Kawarama looks suspiciously amused with your nephew," Tobirama said, eyes focused on one of the surveillance mirrors he had hidden within a binder. He flipped to the next plastic sleeve, carefully examining the feed coming through that mirror for any developing problems. It would be so much more convenient if they could just use a tablet and get a secured connection to the installed cameras, but wireless signals were still far too unreliable in high magic areas.

More's the pity.

"Kawarama has been amused around Naruto since the child turned fourteen," Mito replied, smiling serenely at one of the frazzled student presenters who hurried up to the refreshment table nearby to grab a handful of drinks. "But, given my dear nephew is currently wearing a cocktail dress and the body to go with it, he has a more than adequate reason to be entertained right now. I'm sure it will be character building for Naruto. That's the fourth one by the way."

"A headhunter this time, you think?" Tobirama asked, subtly eying the man in his peripheral vision as he passed by the two of them on his way towards the main room of the auditorium.

"The clothing seems a bit too classy for most of the hiring agencies we see on campus," Mito mused, taking the binder from him as she shooed him towards the snack table. "Perhaps a direct representative from a cooperation instead?"

Tobirama swiftly picked up two plates of food that were easy to eat while standing and set Mito's on the small table nearby that they'd commandeered for pamphlets and maps. The actual questions from guests were currently being handled by Chōjūrō for 'practice on necessary life skills' as Mito put it. Tobirama had internally translated that to mean 'I have hit the point where this is incredibly tedious and I want to be available for the legitimately interesting questions that will start later on and/or the minor emergency that will inevitably hit at some point after seven'.

To be fair, far too many of the guests seemed to find it compulsive to ask the same boring questions with easily observable answers. He didn't know why it was difficult to follow the large red arrows that were affixed to the floor every three feet, leading people right from the door, to the info table, and then directly down the hallway to the main room. And the large stack of maps and brochures were both clearly meant to be taken and also included the answer to every single question that had been asked so far. Even Chōjūrō seemed to be loosing patience with them, although he hadn't complained once after he'd first gone to get up and Mito had smiled at him.

Tobirama had to give the young man credit for having excellent instincts.

"By the way, Uchiha and Hatake said earlier that they've spotted three people - two women and one man, all very attractive - who are definitely some form of military. And they're trained, not simply support personnel," he said quietly as a noisier group of people arrived and distracted Chōjūrō.

"That's unusual," Mito mused, finger tapping one of the mirrors she'd been observing. "I don't recall anything in the project list that has obvious military applications. And why send fighters rather than someone charismatic and trained in recruitment if enlistment is their end goal?"

"Perhaps a more specific type of recruitment," he offered, sipping at the punch. "Fighters would have an eye for different qualities in a magic user than a standard recruiter."

"Ms. Nohara's tracking them, I assume? We can ask the three of them to compile a cross-reference of their movements within the wardscheme matched against the surveillance footage. I'm quite interested to know what or who precisely they're looking for. Eyes up front, Chōjūrō," she said, motioning the young man to turn back around from where he'd been twisted in his chair.
"But Professor Mito, isn't it my responsibility to help keep an eye on any problems tonight since I helped set up the shielding?" he asked, adjusting his square glasses.

"Are you certain you're not just looking for a more interesting distraction?" Mito replied, brushing a lock of red hair away from her eyes.

The blue haired man laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well, it is pretty boring being stuck out here, huh?" Konohamaru called out as he walked up to the desk. He grabbed a handful of brochures and gave them out to the people following him: including his grandfather and a man Tobirama recognized as Sasuke's father, Fugaku Uchiha, from a few of his visits to Kawarama's dojo. The tired man absently nodded towards them and went ahead of the group after a brief glance at the map.

"Kage Sarutobi," Tobirama greeted, nodding politely at the elderly politician who had followed his grandson to the table. Both he and Mito refrained from offering a handshake out of respect for the two bodyguards following a step behind Fire Country's leader. "It's an honor to have such a well-known alumni return to our Academy."

"The honor is mine, and my thanks to your staff for organizing such an event. I don't have the kind of time I would like to keep abreast on magical developments, but I'm quite excited to see what my grandson's been working on. I hardly expected him to go out of his way to voluntarily participate. He's been very secretive about his topic." The Kage folded his arms behind his back, raising an interested eyebrow up at his grandson who grinned mischievously, hands set on his hips.

"It's gonna knock your socks off, gramps! Boss's idea reminded me of some of your books. You're going to love it," Konohamaru declared. "C'mon!"

"I believe my brother-in-law is here as well, if you need to speak with him, Professor Sarutobi," Mito offered.

"Thank you, my dear. My best regards to everyone," he said, before following his impatient grandson down the hall.

There was a brief moment of quiet as the three of them watched the party move on before Chōjūrō, who was worrying one of the brochures between his fingers blurted out, "We're not liable if Konohamaru gives Fire Country's Kage a heart attack at our Science Fair are we?"

"I hardly think a simple transformation is going to take a man of Sarutobi's experience off guard enough to affect his health," Tobirama said, unimpressed as he finished the last of his food, carefully brushing a few crumbs off the sleeve of his dark blue dress shirt. He took back the binder from Mito as she handed it over and started eating from her own plate.

Chōjūrō fidgeted a bit, turning a slight pink as he scratched at as his neck and coughed. "It uh... it worked pretty well on most guys when Konohamaru was testing it out in the dorms."

"And you are something of an outlier, Tobirama," Mito added quietly, dark eyes glinting with a teasing edge. "Not many people would react by getting annoyed and forcibly locking them in their own transformations for twelve hours rather than being embarrassed or turning red."

"Well they're not my relatives," he said. Which had a two pronged meaning of I grew up with Hashirama and his ridiculousness and Shouldn't you be the one bothered when it involves your nephew.

Of course, expecting Mito to be embarrassed over something had just as much likelihood of
happening as asking Hashirama to do the same, if for differing reasons.

...It might explain a bit of why they worked so well together.

At that point, the feather in his breast pocket ignited. Tobirama jerked at the unexpected heat, before swiftly taking it out. Red-gold flames seethed along the spine and edges, illuminating it from within unnaturally without singeing his fingertips. A faint aura of rage and victory radiated from it which—

/WHERE ARE THEY, YOU MISERABLE WRETCH!/ 

The deafening bellow rang out through the building like a physical punch. Mito and Chōjūrō both staggered, clamping their hand to their ears. The glass in the windows and doors shattered into hundreds of pieces. The mirrors lying open in Tobirama's left hand warped and only a barrier of water-edged fire flashing up from the feather kept him from getting a face full of overloaded glass.

_I know that voice_, he thought, shocked, hand tightening on Madara's feather as connections snapped together in his mind.

He ignored the falling dust and the startled cries and how everyone except him had cringed when that inhuman voice roared out. For the brief second it took the glass to hit the ground, his brain was stuck between that knowing gut reaction and remembering all those unusual moments and flashes of déjà vu and uncharacteristic _want_ that he'd experienced in the last twenty-four hours.

The summoning circle, the burns, the Tōka story, the apple rite, the _fragrant fire_ magic...

_I know that voice_!

He dropped the ruined binder to the floor and took off like a flash towards the auditorium.

There was no time to waste when furious gods were in play.

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The inside of the auditorium was pandemonium.

Sheets of light flickered vertically where the shielding had been partially damaged. Other areas had blown out all together with the result that tables and displays had collapsed. At least half of the people in the room had been knocked out cold from being too close to the epicenter or too vulnerable to the impact. Lights and glass had shattered into grit and dust, and the only illumination came from the faulty shields and an unnaturally glowing bonfire visible somewhere further in.

There was a surprising dearth of screaming although several people were yells orders. They were probably avoiding a mob only because the people most inclined to panic were already out.

Tobirama started forcing his way in towards that blaze of power. He passed by Sarutobi next to one of his bodyguards fairly close to the entrance and noticed the professor casting various spells for crowd control along with writing illuminated words on the ceiling, ordering everyone to remain calm and help each other evacuate.

"Konohamaru!" he yelled upon the teen fighting his way towards the center while the second bodyguard tried to drag him away.

"Professor!" the teen yelled, trying to elbow loose from the guard. "It's over near the Boss and
Sasuke!

"Nevermind! You were there when Nawaki made the summoning circle." He clamped a hand on the bodyguard's wrist, sending him a scathing glare when he tried taking advantage of Konohamaru's stillness to drag the teen away. "Which symbols did Nawaki use for the circle's directive?"

"What do I know about runes?!" he exclaimed.

"It was for 'a container of pure water and earth', wasn't it?" Tobirama asked, yanking up his left sleeve and rapidly tracing runes on his arm with a glowing finger.

"Ye-yeah?"

"Which of these were included?" he demanded, showing Konohamaru four rows of runes on his arm with variations for each of the nouns in the directive.

Konohamaru squinted at the dark blue runes, but quickly picked out the four that Tobirama had suspected. Notably, while they were exactly what Nawaki wanted in the modern style, in the old style that symbol for 'bottle' had 'vessel' as an alternate connotation, and both 'pure' and 'earth' were the version of runes the Nin had used when referencing the 'Pure Land'.

It neatly explained why no one had picked up on a God arriving in their midst. He must have forced himself through the vaguely compatible summoning and twisted it to create a false form for himself. It also answered why the circle had imploded so spectacular without killing him, and the 'water' rune covered how a God got burned since that element was contradictory to this God's nature.

"Good, now go!" Tobirama ordered, wiping his arm clear. Konohamaru opened his mouth to argue, obstinacy written in every line of his face, but Tobirama cut him off. "You aren't going to help by adding yourself to the center of this! Help your grandfather get people out of the building. There are too many of them either unconscious or staggering from the soundwave!"

Tobirama abandoned them at that point. He could feel Kawarama nearby the fire and he swore, fingers clenching around the burning feather, that if his brother wasn't in perfect condition when he got there, he would do his best to drown that God under a tsunami.

It might get him killed, but it would at least force the fire God from this plane temporarily.

Luckily it didn't seem to be necessary, since he could hear several people, including Kawarama's familiar cursing, up ahead.

"Goddamn it, calm down!"

"DAD! DAD!"

"Stop! Sasuke—!"

"Not now, Naruto!" Tobirama heard his brother snap as he finally arrived at the north-center section of the auditorium.

Kawarama was on the ground, barely a yard from the blazing red flames, missing a flip-flop, with all 73 kilos of him struggling to keep his assistant pinned. He must have gotten the jump on Sasuke early since he already had the teen pinned in an omoplata hold: face down on the floor with his left arm trapped, first under and then bent above Kawarama's thigh with the forearm pinned against Kawarama's side. Kawarama's main problem, which was distressing a now male Naruto, was that Sasuke was frantic and didn't seem to give a shit if he dislocated his own arm trying to futilely buck
"Kawarama off."

"Kawarama!" he called, dodging around a collapsed table.

"Tobes!" Kawarama looked up and then promptly cursed as Sasuke used the moment of inattention to try and lurch forward. "Stop that!" Kawarama reached across Sasuke's back to knock his right arm out from where he was levering himself up, cursing as he closed one eye against the electricity sparking across Sasuke's back. "Naruto! Get over here and help pin his fucking shoulder before he wrenches his left arm out of it's socket!"

"Let me go! DAD!"

"What happened!" Tobirama demanded, kneeling near by to examine the thick wall of fire while Naruto rushed forward behind him.

"Some guy!" Kawarama yelled, putting weight onto Sasuke's lower back with his right hand while he tried holding the teen's head still with his left. "Long hair, came up shortly after Fugaku reached us. Fugaku caught sight of him and blanched. Went gray, and the guy latched onto him and just hauled Fugaku up, utterly furious. And— fuck!" he cursed, as Sasuke bucked up again, floor giving way underneath magic reinforced strength before Kawarama readjusted. "Sasuke you moron! Calm the fuck down!"

"Get off, you Senju bastard! Naruto!"

"I am not letting my student get immolated picking a fight you can't even affect, you stupid brat!"

"What then?" Tobirama demanded, looking back behind him at "Hashirama!"

"He's fine!" Kawarama bit out, as Tobirama caught sight of their brother out cold on top of a cracked table nearby. "He was nearby and tried grabbing the guy's arm after Fugaku was picked up. Got hit full in the face with that sound when it all went to shit. The guy just dumped him there before the curtain went up."

Tobirama stood up and strode over to lay a hand over Sasuke's head. Closing his eyes for a brief second, he grit his teeth against the electric shocks and hit the boy with the strongest pain-killing spell he knew, ramped up as far as he could take it. The boy's limbs went limp as the nerves numbed and Tobirama caught sight of the bare edge of a vicious, dark-eyed glare before the kid's head fell to the side.

"How long will that one last?" Kawarama asked, breathing a bit heavy as he eased up.

"It depends on how stubborn he is?" Tobirama murmured, watching Naruto try to make Sasuke as comfortable as possible while keeping a tight grip on his shoulder. "His body won't automatically try to fight it like it would a sleep spell, but he has an electric affinity. Depending on his talents, he could have much better control of his own nervous system and amplified resistance to others trying to affect it. If he wants it to break down quicker, it will."

"I am spouting rainbows of joy over that, Tobes," Kawarama bitched, frowning as he looked up. "What's the plan? And wha..." Kawarama visibly hesitated, dark eyes staring at the flames. "Who is he?"

"Don't you mean 'what'?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Kawarama's face twisted slightly. "I'd really rather it not be a 'what' question. I have strong suspicions on the 'what' if 'what' applies. Which it probably does given I've never met anyone who
could KO you or Hashi by accident. Frankly, the 'what' was a lot more comfortable to live with when it stayed inside Itama's decrepit old books."

Tobirama hummed, moving to examine the fire again as Kawarama carefully got up and followed, shucking off his remaining sandal and leaving Naruto behind to grab Sasuke and drag him a few feet further back from the heat.

The fire when you looked at it was almost opaque and far more solid than you normally saw the element. The only thing he could really see through it was a mass of darker shade which was probably Madara's hair or perhaps Fugaku's torso since he had been wearing a black shirt. The fire rotated like a cyclone, going counter-clockwise in a wide circle about three meters in diameter.

He picked up a small bit of broken wood off the floor nearby, probably from one of the project booths, and flicked it into the flames.

It flashed to ash before it even hit the fire.

"Well, that's discouraging," Kawarama said with a slight wince, crouching down beside him with his arms braced on his knees. "I don't think even Rōshi in Iwa could get that affect using pure fire."

"It's not unexpected," Tobirama said, eyes narrowed. He twirled the feather deliberately in his fingers, looked at the rotation and speed of the flames, considered how it neither blistered the varnished wood of the floor nor set any of the debris lying near it on fire. Despite the appearance of a raging cyclone, the flames were actually controlled with incredible precision: unsurprising given their source. For a God, magic might very well be the equivalent of breathing rather than requiring training or concentration.

But accompanying this precision was a predictability and, potentially, a lack of conscious control.

Which meant opportunity.

Tobirama held up the feather, carefully feeding a small bit of deliberate magic into it rather than the reflexive outburst that had occurred when he blocked the mirrors earlier. The feather's magic flared up, flames threading through the watery aura that expanded outwards from the accessory. He deliberately flicked his wrist forward, watching critically as small spheres of raw magic hit the flames and spread outwards like ripples.

Except much like air bubbles popping in a pancake, for a brief moment after the magic hit, there was an open hole in the flames.

Tobirama smirked grimly.

"And people never believe me when I tell them you're a special kind of crazy," Kawarama said with a low whistle. He turned serious eyes back towards Tobirama, resting a hand on his shoulder. "You sure you want to try this," he said softly, facing forward so neither of the boys could see his lips. "This is risky enough, but just getting inside won't be enough. And even weaker fire sprites don't tend to be the forgiving sort naturally."

"Something has to be done," he said. "And it's best done quickly by someone at least partly informed. If he's that furious, Uchiha doesn't have high chances even without waiting."

"Right, but Tobirama," Kawarama said, dead serious as firelight glinted off his brown hair, "Fugaku knew him. I said he went gray, but he did it on sight, before the guy grabbed him. He recognized him. Nobody has that reaction about without a damn good reason. And this guy wasn't just angry. He was violently controlled in the way that says he knows exactly what he's going to do rather than
raging."

It didn't bode well for any chances of getting Fugaku out alive, but Tobirama nodded his thanks as Kawarama stood up and moved back. Any information was useful information and knowing that there was more to it meant there was a framework to begin putting things together.

He'd need that in a moment.

Tobirama carefully traced a rune on the floor to his left, another a yard to the right, and then stood up as he traced a third rune on the feather itself. Taking a controlled breath, he stabbed the feather forward at a downward angle, casting a water bullet spell. As the engorged bullet opened a hole through the flames, he threw the ensorcelled feather through the opening like a dart.

The runes blazed with purple-gold light once the feather impacted, and as their three-pronged connection ripped open a larger pathway, Tobirama lunged into a forward roll and tumbled through.

It was the silence that hit first.

Tobirama stopped rolling, hand braced against the floor and almost thought he'd gone deaf except for the faint sound of choking. Even without the havoc outside, a room full of people generated a loud background drone which was never as obvious as it was when it stopped abruptly.

Perhaps that piece of wood disintegrated less because of the flames and more because it had crossed a boundary.

He stood up carefully, reaching out to grab the feather again but apparently it had hit its limits as a conduit. It crumpled in his hand, not so much falling to pieces as it turned ashy and smudged before evaporating like dispersing smoke. Which was a pity because he'd really wanted to keep that for later study, but it would have been useless in the immediate future at any rate. Only a complete imbecile, after all, would use their own weakness as hair ornaments.

"Your *entire line* exists just to be surprising, doesn't it?"

Tobirama looked up, face carefully neutral.

'Madara' was standing a few feet from him in the fire circle. He was, as Kawarama described, effortlessly holding up Fugaku by the neck and ignoring the hands latched onto his forearm as the man tried to support some of his own weight.

Perhaps he still meant to play human since his voice wasn't that echoing, tonal roar from a few minutes ago, but now that Tobirama was aware, the otherness was as obvious as an illusion you knew the trick to. The hair was a messy distraction, but the face was a bit too symmetrical. His body was scarred faintly, but no human stood *that* still no matter what magic they used. And while all the firelight played across his skin, it didn't *quite* disguise the faint glow he gave off himself in the darkened auditorium. Even this false voice had a hint of that deeper echo in the layers underneath if Tobirama listened hard enough.

Frankly, Tobirama was becoming increasingly irritated that he hadn't connected everything the moment he saw *black fire* in the cafeteria yesterday, but apparently nine years was enough to blur mental associations.
He clasped his hands in front of his chest, fingers interwoven and palms together, and bowed, red eyes on black.

"Fire God Mad'ra," he greeted, something snapping into place inside once he said the name out loud.

Black eyes stared at him before the God let out an aggravated sigh which steamed in the air. Tiny flames flickered to life in his black hair and along his arms, and the loose charcoal pants the God was wearing tucked into his boots started to shift. Like it was made of compressed smoke rather than cloth and fabric.

/You are absolutely the most brilliant moron I have ever spoken with, but your fuck-all timing!/ Mad'ra complained, not even trying to hide anymore as gold hit the floor from his melted earrings. He sounded admiring and irritated and exasperated, and his voice meshed halfway between human and other: gaining all the deeper echoes but missing the piercing cry and the crackling burn Tobirama remembered. /Two ideal opportunities and you get it now./

"You weren't being very subtle," he retorted. That curling furnace of warmth he'd become accustomed to since he was twenty-one was shifting in his chest and spreading out even as his awareness of it changed. He felt different somehow: stronger and healthier and the small ache in his right ankle where he had sprained it years ago was gone like it had never been.

It wasn't off-putting but the way it accompanied a subtle awareness of exactly where Mad'ra was standing was a bit distracting.

/It was subtle enough,/ he said, voice gaining a mean edge as he turned his attention back to Fugaku.

Ah, Tobirama thought, internally cursing as facts came together. If his purpose had always been Fugaku right from the start and I was incidental rather than the reverse...

"I request knowledge of his violation and details of your grievance, Oh Fire God," he requested formally, acting on a suspicion based on what information he remembered. It wasn't as pandering or worshipful as someone else might have tried, but Tobirama couldn't pull off sycophant if he wanted, and doormat behavior didn't feel like it would impress Mad'ra even though he might expect that from humans.

The way Mad'ra's jaw clenched and the flames in his hair flared up implied it was the right stance to take.

/You are not a śramaná,/ Mad'ra said, turning lava and blue-white eyes on Tobirama.

Tobirama narrowed his eyes at the red herring.

"A 'lack of an official title doesn't make a difference in ability'," he quoted. "I request knowledge—"

Mad'ra snarled, throwing Fugaku to the ground between them as the remaining feathers in his hair snapped from red glows to burning gold. The older man gasped and coughed, levering himself up and rubbing his throat. Tobirama carefully didn't look at or step towards Fugaku who arranged himself in seiza on the floor between them. He was a bit surprised that Fugaku hadn't attempted to move farther away, but despite how pale he was, the man's expression was resolved.

He was also intelligent enough to recognize he wouldn't make it far.

/As is your right./ Mad'ra grit out, voice making Fugaku flinch. The fire in Tobirama's chest simmered lightly with angry, prickly resignation and there was a twist to Mad'ra's mouth that read as unwillingly impressed. /The filth is kin-traitor and blasphemer, thief and assaulter. He has
blood on his hands and made pact with She-Who-Is-Nameless to achieve his ends. He has writ his own death./

Well, Tobirama thought, analyzing the words, it wasn't like I expected a simple insult, otherwise humans would see Gods regularly.

"What did he take?" he asked, remembering the roar that had started it all earlier.

Mad'ra smiled like a forest fire: consuming, deadly, and hungry as light seethed under his skin. /Iz'na's eyes./

Iz'na.

The Lightning God of War, Iz'na.

Mad'ra's twin brother, Iz'na.

It was hard to decide which was more impressive: that Fugaku pulled it off or the sheer level of suicidal insanity involved in maiming a God. Especially one with a devoted brother who embodied...

Tobirama paused that train of thought, a tentative plan forming behind other rapid calculations. Reparations were always required with gods, but the theft had to be dealt with first. If Mad'ra had any love for his brother, which was obviously not in question, it was the damage he cared about most. The treachery, insult, and cooperation with that female might be severe, but they paled in comparison to the eyes. Mad'ra hadn't immediately left Fugaku a smear on the ground which meant both that Fugaku didn't have them on him and that Mad'ra needed them back rather than Iz'na being able to heal himself.

The pact with that female Mad'ra mentioned must be how Fugaku knew how to steal the eyes, Tobirama thought. I've never heard mention of the method behind maiming Gods. Just motives which—

"You gave them to your son, didn't you?" he asked Fugaku.

/What,/ Mad'ra said flatly, head shifting to stare through the fire wall.

"Not that son," Tobirama said, watching as Fugaku closed his eyes. "Sasuke is the younger brother. But Fugaku's oldest son was diagnosed with a type of metastatic cancer that spreads throughout the magical channels in his chest. Kawarama mentioned that he was fully hospitalized two weeks ago."

/You fed one of my brother's eyes to your get?!/ Mad'ra snarled, wood blackening beneath his feet.

"There weren't any medicines that would work," Fugaku explained, hands on his thighs as he bowed his head. "I didn't... she said it was the only way to save my son. I couldn't let him die."

Tobirama watched Mad'ra start to pace furiously. The air shimmered above him as light refracted from the heat. The God was still seethingly angry, but there was something else rolling under the surface now. Something more complex than the previous view of straight-forward culpability, so Tobirama waited.

/One of the eyes.../ he muttered, /one. He IS your get, correct?/ Mad'ra demanded, storming up Fugaku and grabbing him by the chin. /Blood of your blood and direct descendant? Not adopted or from your wife cuckolding you/?
"My wife," Fugaku said, restraining his anger, "is an honorable woman!"

/You had a dream./ Mad'ra said, face inches away from Fugaku's and voice rumbling through the air, /or maybe it was a vision in a mirror. A beautiful woman and she seems everything you could want. If you're in love, she's a mother. If you want peers, she's a sister. If you're kind, she's a child. A red eye finds your heart's desires and she whispers them to you. Weaves illusions around the world so the deception tastes so sweet you miss the poison going down before she consumes you alive./

Mad'ra let him go, standing up with sharp eyes as Fugaku ignored the faint burns on his neck. /The Eater told you where to come and how to get them, but here's the part where you proved a slightly lucky pawn: she told you to feed him both eyes and you only gave him one./

"...yes," Fugaku admitted.

/Who has the other? I lost track of the first once it started breaking down, but the second has been eluding me on this damn campus under someone's personal wards./

"Uchiha Obito's replacement eye," Tobirama offered, catching Mad'ra attention. "It was a play against you both then?"

/It was a play FOR her./ Mad'ra held up one hand. /The boy consumes both. On one hand he dies: Iz'na suffers and she eats the corpse and consumes boy and eyes for power./ He raised the other hand. /The boy lives: I could have found him with both eyes together. I kill father and son and it cracks my power open on the boy's life./

"Because they're kin."

/Kin isn't the problem, the oath is the problem!/ Mad'ra slammed both of his hands together in a shower of sparks. /Clever Tōka and her bloody offspring,/ he muttered to himself, storming off to pace again as he fist ed a hand in his hair. /Why couldn't she just out stubborn Iz'na about kids every fucking reincarnation instead of most of them. Should have just rendered the brats sterile after each bloodline's the third generation./

"An interesting statement from the God of Familial Love," Tobirama said, feeling more than seeing the brief surprise and pleased suspicion as Mad'ra tilted his head.

/That wasn't stated in your books./

Got you, Tobirama thought victoriously, at the confirmation the books were correct if incomplete.

"Itama rambles. If Gods have two aspects, yours exists in subtext. You're called upon in places where a fire God would be quite strange. And people always do describe love as heat," Tobirama said, crossing his arms and settling his weight evenly on his feet.

/If you think,/ Mad'ra said slowly, narrowing glowing eyes, /that he's living just because he was a stooge../

"There's precedence."

/ No . There is not ./

"Not for the type of victim," Tobirama agreed, "but for an... equivalent action with identical motives?
One that wasn't even manipulated by another Deity? It's only prudent to take in all the facts before assigning punishment."

There was silence inside the circle. Fugaku seemed to be warily holding his breath, still unmoving in seiza as he watched the two males face off. The fire God looked a little tempted to see where Tobirama was going with this, but mostly like he was sizing up an opponent to cut them off at the knees.

Tobirama probably shouldn't find that as satisfying as he did. It almost certainly said bad things about his mental health that challenging a God was appealing. Even if he was sure Mad'ra wouldn't touch him given his actions so far.

Or perhaps that certainty was the part that made Tobirama crazy.

"There was a story of a woman with two small children," Tobirama started. "They were caught alone, far from home, in the dead of winter... in the middle of a famine."

Mad'ra looked at him sharply, /That—/

"There wasn't much food," he continued. "The mother took as little as she could, but the children were so small. There was work that had to be done to survive. If the mother couldn't work, none of them would survive."

/That is not the same./

"So she made a choice. A very horrible choice."

/That is not the same./

"And in spring, she and the smallest were alive... at the expense of the eldest."

/THAT IS NOT THE SAME!/ Mad'ra bellowed, fire roaring up and flaring white-blue all around them. The floor cracked beneath their feet, the air burned uncomfortably hot, and the God looked more fire than flesh with how bright he glowed.

"She threw herself at your judgment because she'd hated herself for what she'd done."

/Do you think that some mortal bratling betrayed by its mother is the equivalent to a GOD!/ he seethed, stalking forward. /You dream the Gods think so highly of mud men as to put them on equal standing!/ "I think," Tobirama stressed, chin titled up slightly, "that's the first time you've ever used 'mortal' as an insult. You certainly weren't bothered by your brother's choice before."

Or by me, he thought to himself.

The brief torn look suggested that Mad'ra had caught that subtext, loud and clear.

"You hated her, didn't you?" Tobirama asked, voice lowering to a private whisper between them. "It wasn't just a breaking of taboo: her actions offended half of your very makeup. Just the knowledge that a loving mother could do that to her child to feed another one of her children... and yet, familial love. You hated her more because you could understand exactly why she did it rather than for the action itself."

/Do you think she enjoyed living after I was done?/ Mad'ra asked.
"I don't recall arguing for an enjoyable life," Tobirama said, keeping eye contact. "I was under the impression your mercy was for the sake of the second child, after all. A living mother is better than a dead one, in the eyes of their child."

Mad'ra breathed out heavily and fell utterly still aside from how his eyes flickered over Tobirama's face.

Tobirama tilted his head towards the left, back towards Kawarama and the boys. "Out of curiosity," he said, coolly, "did Sasuke inherit that potent lightning affinity from your brother?"

/Such a clever bastard,/ Mad'ra complained under his breath, shoulders falling. He reached out his right hand and Tobirama held still as a thumb caressed the marking on his cheek. /Such an underhanded and ruthlessly clever bastard. A deep sea soul, indeed./

Mad'ra backed away before turning slightly so he could see both Fugaku and Tobirama at the same time.

/Get up,/ he commanded, arms crossed as he watched Fugaku rise. /I relinquish rights to your death, but Iz'na has superior claim to your line. I suggest you think about that,/ he said darkly.

"I understand," Fugaku said, serious and respectful.

/There's also the little issue of what you did with the eyes,/ Mad'ra bared his teeth in a vicious smile. /Humans aren't meant to have them: I want them back. If you want me to refrain from killing their holders, I suggest you keep either of them from reproducing while they have them. The moment they try passing Iz'na's power onto a new generation rather than letting it return to its source, they'll void their protection under my oath and I'll spread their viscera across the plains./

/Of course,/ Mad'ra added, as Fugaku's lips tightened unhappily, /I'm not leaving my brother blind either./

What happened next was hard to describe. Fugaku grabbed his chest and something moved inside him. It wasn't visible, not to the eye, but Mad'ra was clearly following sight of some movement. And Tobirama, when he didn't quite focus, could almost catch a glimpse of a sweeping rush of ghostly glints of light. A moment later, those afterimages gathered in Fugaku's left eye and Tobirama watched as the iris and pupil started vanishing as flecks of color peeled themselves away and swirled over to gather in Mad'ra's palm.

Once it was done, Mad'ra held a shimmering black sphere and Fugaku was shivering so hard his teeth were clicking together.

/Do not,/ Mad'ra said, unmoved as he watched the man shake, /side with the Eater again./

And with one last look towards Tobirama, the God was gone.

Mad'ra lands hard, slamming down on his right knee as he reenters the Pure Land with a thud.

He quickly snaps his left hand over the human energy cupped in his right, awkwardly caging it in place before it can disperse. It's hard to pull off when he has to be careful not to damage the sight
mixed in with the warmth. He's also still stuck wearing the vessel he pulled from the human ritual which makes him feel like he has thick mittens between him and the world.

Well, except for the threadbare spots he just wore holes in after his limiters melted off. Fuck, he'll have to fix that if he wants to use this again. It's not half bad for something he pulled together within a minute. He'll have to readjust half a dozen things though because he can't stand how energy-deaf he feels wearing it.

"Well, that was certainly interesting."

He looks up to find Sak'mo offering his hand while the other holds up a deep orange lantern plant.

"That's perfect!" he says, letting Sak'mo drag him up with a grip on his bicep. He carefully opens his cupped hands underneath the fruit, watching the magic seep through the papery outer skin to take root in the inner fruit. Sak'mo hands it over once it's secure and while it's not the best option, Mad'ra's satisfied that it'll hold together long enough to reach Iz'na.

He takes a step forward and frowns at the crackling pop of bone.

"You might want to take that off," Sak'mo says, as Mad'ra glares at his leg. "I think you broke the knee."

"There's no feedback from—" Mad'ra pauses from where he'd been rotating his knee with a schnick. 
"...I think I burned out all the pain nerves when the limiter gave way."

"You did loose your temper quite thoroughly before that man arrived," Sak'mo says, as Mad'ra gives up and sends the body back home in a wash of black fire. "A pity humans keep giving you gifts with low melting temperatures. Steel would have been much more useful with the ruby if less pretty. Although I think the poor people would have panicked at the very idea of not using a precious metal."

"Useless piece of... no. Nooo," Mad'ra warns, glaring at the two gray wolves slinking forward out of Sak'mo's shadow, tails wagging and tongues out. "It's spring, and you have fur coats you little leeches."

"But they like you," Sak'mo chirps, mirthful as the girl whines when Mad'ra doesn't fall over like she planned.

"Knock that off!" he snaps, trying to shove the female away from where she's started leaning against his thighs and baring his teeth at the twin grays as he puffs up larger over them. They whine a bit but that's all that changes.

"You know," Sak'mo says innocently, holding back a grin, "you're never going to scare them when they know you're full of hot air."

"I will set you ablaze," Mad'ra swears, holding the lantern fruit above his head as he shoves his way through the huddle of fur and starts walking towards his brother.

Sak'mo laughs and follows along, wolves at his heels.

"Did you find them?" Mad'ra finally asks, once the familiar view of Mei'o's volcano becomes visible on the horizon.

"Of course," Sak'mo confirms. He takes out a journal from his pouch and passes it over with the
"Once you sent me that general map, tracking the trail wasn't difficult. I can see why she went for the father, too. The younger man stunk of illness. It was like he had a piece of the void lodged in his chest. Even with Iz'na's eye, he won't possibly be up before a week."

"Good, at least we won't have to look far once I ask Nono'o to get them back."

"How about I ask?" Sak'mo says. "I think your brother wants to yell at you about haring off and getting stuck in that web trap."

Mad'ra sighs but nods. "She likes you better anyway. What's the news?"

Sak'mo tightens his hand on his new sword and frowns. "Not promising. I haven't noticed any other sign of her, and I don't smell any Zetsu on the wind. And the few young Gods I've contacted are in denial. They're insisting it's impossible that she's loose or they're just not taking it seriously."

"Void-spawned imbeciles!" Mad'ra snaps. "Like any of us would joke about her. What about the elder Gods?"

"Well, On'ki caused a massive landslide in Iwa before cursing and starting to fortify his domain, so I'm certain he believes it. And that covers any related gods under his influence because he certainly won't entertain complacency. Mei'o thinks you're a target, by the way," he says, pushing open Mei'o's gates and waiting for the key second needed for the first traps to disengage.

"We're all targets," Mad'ra says, shoving a lava wall aside and leading Sak'mo down a shortcut to the inner sanctum. "The only difference is in how direct she'll be when going after fighters who opposed her."

Sak'mo nods in agreement, dismissing his wolves as he follows Mad'ra down the corridor of trapped pumice. It takes a bit of delicate footwork to keep up with the fire God since Sak'mo has to dodge the gas traps and projectiles that Mad'ra avoids by just matching the trigger's set temperature, but it's easy enough compared to what lurks on the horizon.

Sak'mo would have welcomed another Purge over the Eater's escape.

"Mad'ra!" Iz'na cries, meeting his brother with a hug as they cross the last turn into the heart of Mei'o's stronghold. Sak'mo walks around the two with a smile, ignoring the rapid whispers and friendly insults as he buries his fingers in the ruff of Hiko's fur.

"Fair greetings, Sak'mo. Be welcome, please," Mei'o says, rising to gesture towards the seats around the low table she and Iz'na had been sitting at.

"To you as well, Mei'o," Sak'mo says, hands behind his back as he politely ducks down slightly for Mei'o to kiss the air near his cheek. "And Nono'o!" he says in surprise, spotting the familiar blonde haired God on the other end of the table. "I hadn't expected you here so quickly."

"I'm afraid we're at the beginning of a very significant story, Sak'mo," she says, taking a small sip of her tea. "How it will proceed, I can't tell, but this is merely the start. To make her entrance so prominently as to ripple throughout the world... very serious indeed."

"Will you help my brother first, Healer?" Mad'ra says, barging in as he pushes Iz'na down on the seat nearest Nono'o before sitting next to him. "There was a problem getting the eyes, but I have this for now."

Nono'o takes the lantern plant from Mad'ra as Iz'na frowns.
"Did she—"

"No," Mad'ra says sharply, "she doesn’t have your eyes. But two of Tōka’s younger descendants have them to help with physical issues. I don’t have the fine skill to separate out your power without accidentally taking the residual amount they were born with."

"What did they need the eyes for?" Nono'o asks, gently guiding Iż'na to face her as she held up the fruit with one hand and placed her other over Iż'na's blindfolded eyes.

"One ingested it somehow to fix a lethal cancer in his torso’s channels, but the other just has it implanted to replace a ruined eye," Sak'mo explains as he sits down next to Meō'o on the other side from Mad’ra.

"I'll need to deal with that quite quickly then," Nono'o says, eyebrows furrowing slightly as she leans back from Iż'na. "Once the divine energy finishes eradicate the cancer it’ll try converting his body to a full demi-god which will likely fail catastrophically. The other is less pressing physically, but the human brain isn’t meant to process the type of sensory input Iż'na is capable of seeing. There's no way of telling how sane the human will stay once the surgical marks heal and he starts actively using the eye. I can bring them to Iż'na afterwards."

"I will owe you a debt," Mad’ra says seriously, ignoring Iż'na's elbow to his side.

"I'll owe her a debt, brother: they're my eyes!" he complains, reaching up to take off the blindfold. He blinks open his left eye, leaving the empty right socket hidden by his tattered eyelid, and looks around with a bewildered squint. "What... everything's weird. It's like I can only half see things, and Mad’ra and Meo'o are far too bright!"

"That's the limitation of the materials," Nono'o says, rolling the lantern plant in her hand, the left-over magic swirling inside the orange husk. "The mortal eyesight can only perceive so much even when greatly boosted by your own energy. I've matched you as well as I can, but it simply doesn't work as you're accustomed."

Iż'na groans, leaning his head back and burying his face in the crook of his elbow. "I think I'll try to do without. My head aches and I feel almost nauseous."

"You might find it easier to grow accustomed if you limit the rest of your senses to near-human level," the Healer advises. "The side-effects develop less from the sight itself and more from how your mind processes the discrepancy between the sensory input from your sight and your aural sensitivity, for example. If you reduce the contradiction, you're less likely to develop migraines or motion sickness."

"I don't want a migraine," Iż'na groans, not quite petulant as he stretches out next to his brother. "Being a source of migraines is much better than having one. And how do you even get sick from motion?"

"Do you recall that one time you brought your mortal lady into the Pure Land?" Nono'o starts explaining, quirking a smile while Sak'mo coughs roughly in the background at Iż'na's self-description. "You tried to show her what it was like when you moved with a storm and she vomited? That's motion sickness. It's not in your nature as Lightning, but even Gods can experience it depending on their Aspect and personal constitution."

"The eye's insufficient then?" Mad'ra asks, reaching towards his own eye before Iż'na backhands him without looking.
"It's fine," Nono'o says, smiling kindly. "Even if Iz'na wouldn't dig his own heart out before letting you do that, it's best not to use such a strong foreign energy. His body would have difficulty assimilating your eye because it would resist. It's much better for him to simply make do until I retrieve the originals."

Mad'ra sighs, running a hand through his hair as he nods and relaxes back into the couch.

"Excellent," Mei'o says, leaning back, right arm crossed over her chest as she taps her chin with her left hand. "Thank you for all your kind help, Nono'o. We should proceed carefully, though. With the Eater loose, is it wise for you to go on your own? Offense isn't your strongest suit, and your skills make you irreplaceable: could She still be observing the eyes?"

"I think the trap's already been sprung," Sak'mo says, lacing his hands together. "From what Mad'ra pieced together with a mortal's help, the dying boy was supposed to receive both eyes. If Mad'ra had damaged him permanently when retrieving them, he'd have broken oath. But the father didn't follow the instructions. If she didn't have a Zetsu take action, perhaps she's abandoned that plot."

"Shall I escort you, Nono'o?" Mei'o asks, inclining her head politely. "I would be happy to ensure your safety if you feel it's too dangerous."

The God shakes her head, serenely resolved. "A Healer must go where duty calls her. And in a way, we're quite fortunate that it was Mad'ra who first broke silence so boldly. A fire God makes such an incredible impression on mortals that it could benefit us quite well in the long run. And in the short term, there are so many stories flying about so loudly that it will be impossible to detect me, if I wish to go unseen." She smiles confidently. "I will be in and out before I'm even noticed. Subtlety will be the best option here. The less She knows of us, the less She can manipulate."

"What does she know?" Mad'ra asks abruptly, serious as he glances between the other four. "We need to know what she has to work with and start preparing immediately. Well over half of the Pure Gods are too young to have been alive when she was last loose. Another quarter could barely engage her Zetsu let alone her. And the bloodline she used for this was started after she was sealed. How did she know about it?"

"Perhaps she's been able to observe outside her prison and plot ever since she was sealed," Mei'o suggests pessimistically.

"Or she got loose once the Tree moved and this is just the first sign of the plans she's made in the years since," Sak'mo says.

"And last but not least," Iz'na adds, mock cheerfully, "with Hagoromo dispersed we can't use the same tactics even with Yam'to to speak with the Tree. And without him, there's no one with significant seniority to take command without objections. Which never goes well on battlefields: take my word for it."

They were all quiet, considering the situation and their options before Mad'ra let out an irritated exhale.

"We'll need to call a Summit. I'll ask On'ki to host... What?!" Mad'ra glares as they stare.

"You dislike On'ki," Sak'mo says.

"And he's fairly enthusiastic about returning the opinion wholeheartedly," Mei'o adds.

"Because he's a stubborn, traditionalistic, arrogantly inflexible bastard," Mad'ra agrees, ignoring
how many of those traits might apply to himself. “Which is why if we’re both calling it, people will have to rethink their bullshit about it being a joke. And it’s not like water gods would like Mei’o’s domain.”

“It’s unfortunate it’s not neutral ground though,” Mei’o says. “Wind gods won’t like being under On’ki’s earth at all.”

“Iz’na can talk to them,” Mad’ra says as his brother nods. “They’re easier to persuade than water and they know the neutral areas can’t be secured any more.”

“What if she doesn’t take action immediately?” Nono’o asks, fiddling with the fruit in her hand as she looks between Mad’ra and Sak’mo. “No one who was involved likes to speak of her, including yourselves, but didn’t the first incident take centuries from start to finish?”

“It did,” Sak’mo nods, “but most of that time was filled with stealth and the Eater picking off gods before Hagoromo discovered her actions. We’ll need to run her to ground: the longer she has, the more powers she can consume. A direct confrontation is dangerous, but less so than giving her time. She’s entitled so she’s predictable in some ways, but she’s patient outside combat.”

“And new Gods have been born for the Aspects she left empty,” Mad’ra says, fire bouncing from one finger to another as he thought. “They’re not as powerful as their predecessors so she still has their strength, but she’s lost a lot of the specific abilities she stole. Letting her get them back would be insane.”

Iz’na snorted. "On top of it killing people we know, yeah.” He buried his face in Mad’ra shoulder. "What a shitty way to start off spring."

“Well," Nono’o says standing up, "since we need to start as soon as possible, I’ll go now. Here’s the mortal’s leftover magic." She hands Mad’ra the fruit and watches as he pulls the magic out and pins the resulting feather into his hair beside the others. "It was... unusually kind for you to just take half his sight and his heat. I suppose," she says, green eyes sparkling, "that you decided to follow a different precedent."

“You heard it, too,” Sak’mo says brightly, overriding Mad’ra’s insistence that it was ‘just a whim’.

“Not quite a traditional start to this genre of story, but it does have some vague similarities to a certain duck pond, doesn’t it?” she says before dispersing into green sparks.

“Have I missed something?” Mei’o asks, green eyes sharply curious as Mad’ra starts glaring at Sak’mo.

“No!” Mad’ra snaps before jerking back as Iz’na presses his face harder into the crook of his neck. "What are you doing!?"

“I smell seawater," Iz’na said, baffled as Mad’ra shoves him backwards.

“THERE IS NO SEAWATER!” Mad’ra bellows before freezing at his mistake.

Iz’na turns towards him slowly, grin creeping infectiously across his face as he pointedly inhales deeply through his nose. Mei’o’s eyebrows have gone up in surprise and Sak’mo, the ass, is visibly hiding a grin behind his hand.

“You smell of seawater!” his brother crows, before starting to cackle wildly. Mad’ra freezes, torn between the urge to baby his injured brother and the urge to incinerate all his clothes and dump him
in a mud pit. "You picked someone! You! Was that where you were right before—"

Iz'na stops and like an oncoming thundersnow, Mad'ra can see the facts clicking together in his head. The fire God looks around the room desperately.

"You were checking on that newest Senju that was Walking! You picked a Senju!" Iz'na starts wheezing, absolutely delighted as Mad'ra gives up and buries his face in his hands. "You picked someone from Tōka's original line! This is beautiful! A Senju! A watery Senju! Is she pretty? Did she punch you in the face so I can laugh about that irony, too?"

"He's the type of handsome that's a little pretty," Sak'mo offers, undeterred by the fireball Mad'ra unseeingly hurls at his head. "He argued with Mad'ra for a solid ten minutes at least. Was completely unphased by being surrounded by a blazing cyclone. You two really do have vaguely similar tastes."

"I'm going to kill you," Mad'ra says a bit shrilly, as Sak'mo catches a second fireball on the knife Mei'o gave him. "Loyalty, my fucking ass."

"Are you going to marry this one?" Mei'o asks, attention riveted at the suggestion of romance, prompting Iz'na to start choking he's laughing so hard. "You've never once picked a Favorite. I really must insist, honored brother, that you allow me handle the affairs, if so. There are so few immortal weddings I can host and making everything work with a water element will be a wonderful challenge."

"I. Am Going. To Kill You," Mad'ra promises Sak'mo, wide-eyed and frazzled as the other God starts laughing, too.

Tobirama was going to murder someone.

He wasn't yet at the stage where he'd forgotten why it was unacceptable ethically and unwise practically (especially on a magical campus under active wards, filled with his peers and the police), but he had passed the point where he needed to actively remind himself of those reasons.

Methods to get away with it were lingering in the back of his mind like the tantalizing smell of fresh-baked bread.

Kawarama, demonstrating the experienced instincts of a younger brother, had taken one look at him icily repeating himself to the fourth officer, dumped a groggy Hashirama on him, and vanished to 'check up on Duckie and his dad'.

He hadn't decided who the victim would be yet. With the possibility of getting caught, he needed to make sure it was worth it... possibly Genma for Jinxing them all, potentially Mad'ra for being the reason the entire Fair was being immortalized as a hectic failure, and definitely the unknown fool who'd called the regular police, thus ensuring Tobirama was trapped in the auditorium answering questions from a series of officers who refused to take his word for it that it was outside their specialty and they needed to let OSIB handle it.

In the end, Tobirama wasn't allowed to leave so much as he was forcibly extracted from the chaos by Tsunade.

The healer, by dint of being nearby and possessing a sense for brewing trouble, had arrived earlier
than any other responders and had worked with Sarutobi to set up a health station. She was the
healer Fugaku had been taken to once the cyclone died down, and thus the first person the OSIB
agents had started interviewing once Minato had contacted his people. She had been infuriated when
someone unwittingly informed her that Fugaku hadn't been the only person at ground zero and
absolutely intolerant when she realized that not a single medic had seen Tobirama before people
started grilling him.

To the dismay of both officers and agents, she'd come and retrieved him herself after that.

By the time she'd finished his deliberately excessive and *private* health check, Hashirama, Mito,
Sarutobi, Minato, and the head of police had gotten involved in a intricate debate about jurisdictional
responsibility, liability, magical law, and the precise chain of command.

Given there was no immediate proof that a non-human had been involved rather than a high level
mage, the police were refusing to accept that the Otherworld Species Interaction Bureau had
investigative jurisdiction. Minato Namikaze, being head of OSIB and present during the incident,
knew very well that *something* non-human had been involved. He, unlike the normal officers, wasn't
dismissing Tobirama's explanation of 'infuriated God' simply because it made reality uncomfortable.

(Not that the OSIB agents were happy to accept it was a God either. They just thought that Tobirama
was traumatized and might be mistaken about the species. After all, saying it was a God was
especially equating it to a force of nature:

Romantics heard 'rainstorm'.

Pessimists heard 'tsunami'.

Agents heard 'earthquakes' with all the unpredictability and lack of warning that implied.

More than one agent had tried giving Tobirama a shock blanket before Tsunade arrived. They
seemed almost as unnerved by *him* when they realized he was fine. Apparently, it was supposed to
be disconcerting to confront a being who could go unnoticed as easily as it could level cities.)

But that was all going to have to continue without Tobirama for the night. As much as he would
prefer to deal with everything immediately given his own involvement, things would have to wait
until Sunday. Tsunade had noticed a number of changes in his magic and while none of them
seemed detrimental, she'd made it perfectly clear to him *and the authorities* that his options were to
either rest at home without stress for twenty-four hours or do the same in a hospital room under
observation.

Tobirama couldn't exactly explain his suspicion that the shift in his magic was supposed to happen.
There were inconsistencies now between what he thought had happened nine years ago and the
varying things implied by Mad'ra's recent presence and behavior. Without being able to say what the
change was and why it happened, any implication that he wasn't confused with his current state was
likely to make Tsunade drag him straight to the hospital.

So Tobirama had quietly accepted Tsunade's order, let Hashirama check him over one more time,
and then made his way out of the building and started home. He texted Kawarama, got a quick reply
back saying Fugaku was 'ok-ish?', and asked his brother to have the man contact him once he was
available.

While Fugaku's... *involvement* with Iz'na wasn't technically a crime being that there were no current
laws governing Gods, OSIB was going to want answers. In theory, that wasn't a problem, but
Tobirama knew people. The moment anyone but Fugaku and himself knew about the eyes, they
were going to be interested. Tobirama himself would have wanted to investigate if not for the knowledge that they were part of a still-living being and the fact that every time he remembered the eyes, he remembered Mad'ra's anger and imagined Itama or Kawarama in Iz'na's place.

It would be much safer for both Obito and Itachi if Fugaku didn't reveal exactly what happened. The course with the least lying was to truthfully state that the eyes weren’t in his possession any longer, but then someone would connect them to Obito's operation. Fugaku was intelligent enough to already know that. Saying he stole something in exchange for his son's life, without specifying the item, would be best. Any attempts to force details after that could be railroaded by stating that the God made threats they didn't want to test.

There was probably something ethically questionable about collaborating stories in order to misdirect authorities, but given Mad'ra's promise to spread viscera across the plains, Tobirama had no qualms about making sure the issue never came up. He'd just have to hope that Fugaku hadn't said anything telling already. Anyone else wouldn't have a bloodline protecting them from being smote if they got greedy.

"I can't believe I missed it," he heard Itama say heartbrokenly as he opened their front door. "You could hardly have known it would happen, Itama," Haku comforted from their kitchen, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"It was on campus! I was this close to the first public reappearance in centuries!" Itama wailed, followed by a muted thud.

Tobirama walked into the kitchen to find his calmest brother practically in mourning with his face planted in their kitchen table. He raised an eyebrow at Haku, sitting across from Itama with a cup of coffee, surrounded by the books and papers that they'd presumably been working on before this happened.

All things considered, he didn't need to ask what Itama was upset about.

"You heard about the God then," he said.

Itama groaned, arms dangling by his side as he thudded his head lightly onto the table again. "I should have just gone to the Fair. I missed it!"

Haku got up and moved the dishes into the sink while Tobirama took a moment to appreciate what his life was like and the strange surreality of having this conversation in the very kitchen where Itama had sat, sleep-deprived, across from the God in question during breakfast.

"I can't believe Kawarama got to see it and not me. I know that's childish, but it's just supremely unfair of the world. Kawarama got to see it!" Itama whimpered, raising a hand to blindly wave goodbye as Haku patted him on the back on his way out.

Tobirama shifted to let his brother's friend and coworker leave, but their shoulders brushed and for a brief moment pressure popped in his ears. Haku's normal aura of snow-melt gained depth, tinged with freezing winds, sharp ice, and the smell of winter forests all over a budding sense of numbing cold sliding down into peaceful nothingness.

Haku jerked back, staring at him in brief surprise before giving him a slightly nervous smile and sliding out the door.

Tobirama stared after him with narrowed red eyes, unenthused at yet another piece of evidence that
he'd missed something over the years. Although he couldn't see how Haku had anything to do with today's mess.

Itama made another mournful sound and Tobirama sighed, turning back to the table as he dismissed the incident for now.

"Really, Itama?" he asked, pulling out a chair.

His brother lifted his head to rest his chin on the table and gave him sad eyes. "I know, but just humor me for a bit. I've only been enamored with this for over twenty years."

Tobirama shook his head and reached out to pick up the phone Itama had left on the table. He wasn't surprised, as he thumbed through the recent texts, to find that it was Kawarama who had alerted Itama. The others were undoubtedly still busy and Kawarama had always been uniquely... considerate in keeping Itama in the loop, as the texts showed.

Kawarama: [ Guess who nearly got deafened by something playing human? ]

Kawarama: [ Really like your crap better when it's written on moldy pages. ]

Kawarama: [ Should we hold an intervention for Tobes about acceptable risks? I feel like this is something he doesn't pay enough attention to. ]

Kawarama: [ Currently at hospital. EVERYONE'S FINE! JUST FINE! Tobes is fine, too! ]

Kawarama: [ Ok. He's not fine-fine. He's might-shish-kabob-someone!fine, but that's not actually my problem since he's still at the academy. ]

Kawarama: [ Hey, do you think Tobes can put 'talked down a God' on a resume somewhere? I feel like this is a piece of badassery that should be benefited from, you know? Like: got banned fr ]

Kawarama: [ om the S-ranks, bullied a God into doing what he wanted, potentially got away with murdering a cop... ]

Kawarama: [ He hasn't murdered a cop, btw, (maybe) but they're really dumb. REALLY dumb. Like fish in barrels. ]

Kawarama: [ Btw, in case you hadn't picked up on it, check it! ]

Kawarama: * .jpg attachment *

Kawarama: [ How's that for an indoor campfire? Long-haired, not-dude!person made it. Tobes earned his crazy points today. ]

Kawarama: [ I might have just drunk two Monsters and ate a snickers. Not my planned dinner. ]

Kawarama: [ Hospital food sucks. This isn't lettuce. Duckie is probably planning my murder. (Not with the lettuce.) Guess there're worse places to get stabbed. ]

Kawarama: [ Kind of concerned the stabbing might not be hyperbole: kid's pissed at me. ]

Kawarama: [ Tama, you're nice: how do you say 'sorry-not-sorry for not letting you get roasted, but you couldn't have helped your dad'? ]
"I'm a bit surprised you're not more concerned. Or asking more questions," Tobirama said, scrolling back up to see the picture again. He wasn't sure why he hadn't expected Kawarama to take a picture of the fire tornado: it was just like his brother to do so.

"Why would I worry?" Itama said, genuinely confused. "I knew you'd be ok if it was a God involved. Well, I mostly knew. I had a brief heart-attack because sometimes that doesn't end well, but Kawarama already said you weren't dead which meant you really were fine. And am I allowed to ask questions? You haven't liked talking about that stuff in years, so I didn't want to bring it up before you did."

"...Questions are alright," he said slowly, head tilting. "That seems like an awful lot of faith in me considering you know better than any of us all the ways it could go wrong."

Itama waved a hand, "You've got your trump card though. So uh... shoot, where to start... Ok! First! What did he or she look like? I'm guessing a fire God, right? Has to be a fire God. Maybe a volcano God?" Itama started getting excited, voice rushing as he tumbled over words, raking a hand through his black and white hair. "Or maybe—"

"You met him," Tobirama interrupted. "He was a male. He was indeed a fire God, and he looked much like this morning except for how he seemed made of flames at times. It's difficult to describe."

"I what?" Itama said blankly, eyes widening. "When?!"

"The God was 'Madara'."

"Madara what?"

Tobirama stared at Itama's confused face. "Madara was the God who was pretending to be human."

"That can't be right. Why would a God be on our couch?"

"... You already know the stories of Gods pretending to be mortals," Tobirama said deliberately.

"So the God was pretending to be mortal," Itama said, eyes wide with fascination. "What did he look like?"

This was starting to get concerning. "You remember Madara from this morning, right Itama?"

"Of course I remember," he said, eyebrows furrowing. "We talked about you and him."

"The God was pretending to be human," Tobirama said, watching Itama nod. "A human has to behave like a human." Another nod. "The God was pretending to be a human, so he pretended to be Madara. A blank stare and Tobirama snapped his fingers in front of Itama's face. "Madara," he emphasized watching Itama's eyes, "was actually Fire God Mad'ra while he pretended to be human."

Itama's eyes started glazing over again, and Tobirama grabbed his shoulder. With a small shock of static, Tobirama watched Itama finally get it as the thought clicked into place.
"Oh. Oh!" Itama breathed, eyes going wide as his head swiveled to stare at the couch in the living room. "Oh crud!" he squeaked. "There was a God on our couch! He ate our breakfast! He ate my burned eggs! I burned the eggs I gave a God!"

"Are you alright?" Tobirama asked.

"I'm, I'm fine," Itama confirmed, dazedly patting the hand on his shoulder. "Just... oh wow. That didn't want to connect at all. Wow... you know, you read about things like this, but it never really makes sense that people don't connect things until it happens to you... Guess it makes sense you're immune."

"You've heard about this memory trick?" Tobirama asked warily, withdrawing his hand but keeping a close eye on Itama.

"Yeah, it's not in much published material yet. We're still compiling a lot of the oral history and piecing remnants together and there's all this stuff to consider about respecting the Nin Council's requests and translations and," Itama waved his hand around as he grabbed a cup of cold coffee and sipped, scrunching his nose up as he drank. "Just... Mad'ra... wow..."

Itama froze, cup in mid air, "Wait, you liked him. That's the god who..." The glass clanked back to the table as Itama blinked at the ceiling in thought. "Huh?... I did not see that one coming."

"I don't think most people expect someone they pick up on campus to be a God," Tobirama said dryly, frowning as Itama give him a weirdly confused look. "I suppose he really didn't have to lie much to avoid people guessing."

"He lied to you? That's kind of unusual, although I suppose it could vary. I rather thought he would mislead rather than lie directly to you," Itama considered, idly drumming his fingers on the table.

Tobirama thought about that, rerunning through the different things 'Madara' had said to him.

"I suppose he really didn't." he said, reluctant appreciation surfacing, "in hindsight it was all simply questions or phrasing that you wouldn't consider from a God. The only outright lie would have been when he said he would have been called a shaman by the Nin."

"...um, did he happen to say 'śramaná' or 'samana'?" Itama asked, hesitation on his face as he scratched a finger behind his jaw.

Tobirama stared at Itama before sighing. "He used samana," he answered, pinching the bridge of his nose with a distinct suspicion about where this was heading.

"Well, technically that does translate to shaman in Common, but we suspect it's a mistranslation?" Itama offered, not quite looking at Tobirama. "I mean, it definitely means 'Wise One' which is what śramaná also translates to, and Common calls the position of śramaná 'shaman', buuut... the only interview on record where we asked what the difference was between the two terms resulted in a Nin Elder explaining that no Nin would be so disrespectful as to call themselves 'samana'. Then they refused to talk about it. So today supports our current theory that 'samana' is actually a way to subtly acknowledge a god who's playing mortal. But casual magic and advanced knowledge was often uncommon throughout history, so gods used to stand out more when they appeared. But even if people knew, it's against Nindō to guess at or even use a god's name sometimes because it can be dangerously offensive. So..."

"So he told me to my face."

Itama coughed. "Um, yeah?"
Tobirama crossed his arms and tapped a finger on his bicep, piqued as he reconsidered whether Mad'ra had even meant to trick him intentionally. Had he expected Tobirama to understand immediately? Had he been irritated himself when Tobirama didn't pick up on it? He had said...

"He said 'As is your right' at one point," Tobirama added, setting the other questions to the side for now. "I know gods are bound by oaths, but are they magically bound to other behaviors? I had thought they observed some patterns simply as preference."

"Maybe? A śramaná would know for certain, but," Itama shrugged with a regretful look. "You'd have the best chance asking. It might be considered rude for others to ask. Sprites certainly don't like talking with humans about bindings when we can lie all we want to them."

"I feel I'm missing something," Tobirama mused aloud. "He seemed really annoyed and angry at times but pleased at others. There's an incongruity there."

"He's mad?" Itama asked, biting his lip. "I suppose there's nothing wrong with getting mad, you kind of enjoy arguing after all, and he is fire..."

"It's the pleased part that stands out more considering he's the God I met nine years ago," Tobirama explained.

Itama stared at him. "I... guessed that part? Why wouldn't he be pleased with you?"

Tobirama raised an eyebrow. "Why wouldn't he be?"

Itama hesitated. "Because... he picked you?" The other man sounded like he thought it was a trick question.

"No, he didn't," Tobirama said, frowning. He watched Itama vacillate the same way he did when he found two contradicting answers in his research without enough information to reconcile them. "Just say it."

"Why would you think he didn't pick you?" Itama asked, not quite looking at him straight on.

He frowned. "Because I... failed, he wanted to say, answer burning on his tongue. Except—"

"You succeeded and for nine years you never asked more questions?" Mad'ra had said, baffled and angry.

"Why do you think he picked me, Itama?" Tobirama asked, not quite seeing the room as his brain whirled, realigning assumptions and trying to create a new pattern if this single fact had really been a lie.

"... Because of the marks on your face," Itama said. His brother had picked up a pen at some point and slowly twirled it as he watched Tobirama.

"Chosen and Avatars don't have marks," he pointed out, feeling like he was testing unstable ground with a stick.

"That's right..."

"And I'm not a sage."

"Not presently," Itama agreed, beginning to frown at him. "You could be one if you want and you'd probably get new marks when you were actively using it, just like Hashirama does... Tobira?" Itama
"They're taboo," he said evenly.

Itama gurgled, choking on air as he gaped at Tobirama in shock.

Tobirama felt like he'd missed a mental step as he read the answer written all over his brother's face. "They're not taboo," he said, watching Itama shake his head violently as he flailed for words.

It was... strange to think. Whatever they really were had to be a better option than taboo, it had to be better given Itama's reaction, but Tobirama had gotten quite used to living with that mental splinter plaguing him. He hadn't wanted it there, hadn't liked the idea at all of having some God's dislike branded onto his body, but he'd grown accustomed to it like you grew used to any ache or pain.

(Except he didn't have any physical aches now, did he?)

"You thought they were taboo!" Itama said in a screeching whisper, horror sinking into his expression. "You thought... good gods, you thought it was taboo! I'm a terrible brother!"

"Itama—"

"They're marks of favor!" his brother exclaimed loudly, shooting to his feet and switching volume abruptly like he could rewrite the past if he hit the right decibel. "You're his Favorite! Gods don't..." he scrambled again, "Gods don't mark people with taboo! Humans marked humans with taboos! Gods just maim them or kill them or send them on terrible quests to redeem themselves or— They only mark people's faces when they want to show the world that someone's taken! Chosen and Avatars get power and protection but humans and minor spirits aren't always good about detecting those bonds, and gods are touchy over Favorites so they mark them physically too! That's why so many places have taboos against facial tattoos and...and... shit, that's why you thought it was taboo."

Itama collapsed back into the chair, groaning and genuinely upset as he fisted his hands in his hair. "You thought it was taboo," he whispered, searching Tobirama's face like he was begging it to be a trick.

"...What specifically do you mean by 'Favorite'?" Tobirama asked, determined to double-check any assumptions this time despite how obvious that one seemed.

Itama's face twisted ridiculously: caught between looking like a goldfish as his mouth opened and closed, looking pale from lingering horror and upset, and looking embarrassed as his ears flushed and his eyes darted everywhere but Tobirama's face.

"Ah," Tobirama sighed, completely done with how thoroughly he'd misunderstood. "That type of Favorite."

"I just thought you didn't want to talk about it because you're a private person," Itama choked out, discomfort starting to win out over horror to Tobirama's relief. "They're not— That's— It seemed really very rude to bring up someone you might be having sss..." He couldn't seem to say the word when the topic related directly to his older brother. "It seemed rude! I thought maybe things were different, well of course they're different with gods, and you... You weren't ever interested in other
people and you ignored anyone Kawarama pointed out or Hashirama or... I thought you just didn't
tell them otherwise because they'd never let it go and," Itama rubbed his hands over his face as his
shoulders slumped.

"I should have brought up the topic," he said, sighing. "I'm sorry, Tobirama. I was a bad brother...
Nine years," he whispered to himself, rubbing his face again.

"You were trying to be respectful, Itama. You're not a bad brother," he reassured firmly. He placed
his hands on the table and caught Itama's eyes for emphasis. "You are an excellent brother. I could
have spoken of it at any time. I never did. A large part of it was just pride and disappointment, but,"
he tensed his hands slightly, "I assumed I knew what had happened just fine despite any uncertainty.
None of that was in my research. I assumed I'd been thorough enough at the time and there was
nothing else to be found."

"I never wrote down the oral stories Nana Chiyo told me," Itama said with a wince. "I gave you all
her books but... no one writes about Favorites in books. They'll describe the individuals and their
markings while discussing history, but it's considered gauche to reference it or document anything
more. It's just... that's Nindō: that's the way to behave as Nin see it."

Tobirama just nodded, massaging one temple, tired and ready for this day to be over.

"At least it explains a lot about some of our interactions. Do you," he considered, remembering how
things had changed when he'd said Mad'ra's name - when he'd acknowledged the God by name - and
how the male had complained about timing. "Do you know anything about the process of becoming
Favorite? Tsunade already noticed a change in my magic, and I feel," strong, healthy, refreshed,
alive, young, "different."

"I don't know specifics," Itama apologized, playing with pen again. "I know it always includes some
sort of explanation of interest on the god's behalf and some type of acceptance from the human. Does
that make sense?"

/You are deep sea, and the heart of you burns./

A hand pausing momentarily on the way to his face, lava eyes locked intently on Tobirama's own.

"Fire God Mad'ra," he greeted, bowing with red eyes on black.

"Yes," Tobirama said, staring at the table as warmth shifted in his chest, the phantom feeling of skin
under his fingers and water magic channeled through a burning feather. "That makes sense."

Saturday was a strange day for how normal it was.

Tobirama woke up in his own bed, without any strange dreams, to sunlight on his back and the
lingering smell of breakfast in the air. He snuck one eye open, idly wondering what time it was since
it was obviously far later than he normally got up.

The alarm clock that flew at his face was unappreciated.

Perhaps it had been premature to say Saturday was normal.

After banishing the now broken device, Tobirama dragged himself up and got ready. Itama had left a
note on the table along with a simple breakfast saying that he'd been called in as a consultant. Apparently, Tobirama's lips quirked, OSIB had finally narrowed down the list of 'potential causes for Friday evening's disturbance' and wanted to speak with Itama 'in the interest of being thorough'. There was a general undertone throughout the letter that implied OSIB still thought (or maybe prayed) that the entire line of questioning was unnecessary.

Tobirama could almost feel Itama's put-out vibes from several blocks away. He had no doubt that despite last night's... revelations, Itama was still quietly thrilled to see signs of new activity after years of studying stories and working with history. It must be baffling for him to be confronted with a group of people who specialize in navigating between humans and other species and have them be so resolutely determined to find an alternate explanation from 'a God did it'.

It did mean that he would have the entire day to himself though. And at least part of Sunday as well since Itama still had plans to spend tonight at Haku's getting ready for the interviews their department had scheduled for the next few days. Although he fully expected Hashirama, at least, to stop by personally on Sunday once Tsunade's twenty-four hours of "inactivity, relaxation, and a lack of stress or else" expired.

Not that Tobirama intended to adhere to that order. He'd obey the letter of her law by staying at home (he hardly wanted to deal with people when he was apparently summoning items with idle wishes right now), but the spirit of the law would mean not thinking of or dealing with what's happened.

Answers would reduce stress more than inactivity.

With that goal in mind, Tobirama spent the next hour calling people between eating a ridiculous amount of food. He texted Itama first, cutting off any ideas his brother had of canceling or rescheduling his plans just to spend the next few days at home.

  Itama: [ And you're really sure? ]
  Tobirama: [ Yes, Itama. I'm certain. ]

He paused, considering the phone speculatively as he dumped the vegetables and fruits he'd just chopped into the blender. He wasn't sure what had happened last night, but...

  Tobirama: [ Give my regards to Haku. Good luck to you both with your project. ]

Whatever was going on there, he still felt confident that Haku wasn't a threat to Itama. The man had been at the Academy for three years, and the worst he'd ever done was a well deserved chopstick bombardment in perceived self-defense. It would be irrational to assume that something had changed with Haku when it was Tobirama himself who'd had his magic shift shortly before coming home.

It didn't mean he'd forget something was there. Haku certainly hadn't been nervous of him before. But it was a lower priority.

By the time noon had passed, he'd contacted practically everyone. Things at the Academy were proceeding slowly but well. The auditorium was still off limits, but any damage outside the display shielding and initial pressure blast seemed to have been caused by the crowd itself. There wasn't even a mark on the floor from the cyclone despite Tobirama's memories of Mad'ra cracking the floor.

It was enough to irritate anyone with logic, but at the same time, it was proof that they really had crossed a boundary. Tobirama practically itched to see if there were signs of how Mad'ra had done it. Had he used the flames themselves to create a boundary line or were they there simply as a deterrent?
It took so much effort to make an area which restricted damage from reaching outside a boundary. The WMA paid an incredible amount of money each year to commission grounds strong enough to hold the S-rank matches, and it was always done by a Rune or Witch Master. To create one in less than a minute...

It was an amazing feat and undoubtedly one of the reasons no one else had been seriously injured. Tobirama didn't feel like he could consider himself a baseline any longer for human reactions to the divine, but he knew that Fugaku had showed a lot more discomfort at Mad'ra's voice than he had and Fugaku had his own blood protecting him.

A crowd would have been unfortunate.

As it was, Tobirama's last call, to Fugaku himself, was a serious reminder of the risks inherent with deities. Fugaku, to the hospital's confusion, was now completely blind in one eye and suffering from a seeming inability to detect warmth. His body didn't have trouble maintaining temperature, as medical instruments showed, but he felt constantly cold for no apparent medical reason.

The staff had contacted different curse breakers and were waiting for more information from OSIB, but neither Fugaku nor Tobirama expected any results. It made a twisted sort of sense for a fire God to curse someone with cold.

"It's better than I expected," Fugaku admitted, voice calm over the phone. "Uncomfortable, yes, but I had known the risks before I started. It's a small price to pay. Although without details, my son certainly disagrees."

"He's unaware of what happened then?" Tobirama asked carefully.

There was a brief pause, presumably as Fugaku considered how much was safe to say on an unsecured line during an active investigation. "There are some details that are only relevant to family, as I'm sure you understand. I'll inform Sasuke more thoroughly later so that he doesn't do anything foolish in retaliation. And Itachi and Obito as well, of course."

That would be an unpleasant conversation. Tobirama had no idea whether Uchiha Obito even wanted children, but his life hadn't depended on that eye like Itachi's had. Tobirama doubted that he would appreciate losing the option due to someone else's choice.

"Dr. Senju," Fugaku said seriously, "I owe you a large debt. Your actions were more than anyone could have asked despite your familiarity with... just a moment." There was some muffled speech on the other line. "Excuse me, Doctor. I need to go."

"Of course," Tobirama said. He stared at the phone as the call disconnected and drummed his fingers on kitchen counter.

"...despite your familiarity..."

Right, Tobirama thought, striding into the living room and clearing off the table. Clearly, that's enough.

He shoved the table farther away from the couch, dropped blank paper, pens, highlighters, and a glass of water on the table, and sat down crosslegged with the sofa at his back. Setting a sheet of paper in front of himself, he braced his arms on the table and started brainstorming.

He was fairly sure his own circumstances started with his visit to the Pure Lands at twenty-one. It was prompted by the earthquake and Hashirama's unexpected development of nature abilities, but he couldn't see how that was directly relevant or connected. He drew a quick circle in black on the left
of the page with 'Pure Land trip' written inside, followed by lines branching off to 'why me?' in blue and 'infuriated?' in red. To the right, he drew another black circle with 'Academy appearance' followed by 'why there?' using blue and 'infirmary comments > me?' in red.

Looking at the paper he had so far, Tobirama pressed his lips together, grabbed the red pen again and made several thick lines between the two bubbles with 'NINE YEARS' jotted down roughly over them in huge block letters.

He considered adding '(you infuriating asshole)' underneath the letters, but that was hardly objective. Mindmaps were for organizing thoughts, not starting lists of complaints.

He grabbed a second sheet of paper and wrote it there instead.

By the time Tobirama had gone through everything he remembered from both nine years ago and the last two days, he'd filled up several sheets of paper. They were spread out over the table next to each other, displaying a color coded map of black facts and details, blue questions, and red contradictions to the current assumption that he really was Mad'ra's Favorite. He also had separate sheets filled with disparaging remarks to let off steam or scientific questions like the methodology behind creating boundaries and vessels.

There was one sheet with questions like 'Why were you the first one I met? Was it just coincidence?' and 'Are you really waiting until O&I die before getting the eyes? That seems suspect.' Tobirama was hiding it under other pages because it also had questions like 'Is Inarizushi actually your favorite food?' and 'Why feathers?', and 'Have you had other Favorites?'. Those questions were like the campus blueprint: he recognized exactly what they implied for all they were unfamiliar.

He wasn't sure he wanted to ask them. This certainly hadn't been where he had expected to end up when he was younger.

( He made mental note to burn that particular sheet before Hashirama or Kawarama saw it. He wasn't going to deal with being written in as the protagonist of some cheap paperback romance. The reminder that burning it might send it right to Mad'ra made him frown before deciding he'd compost it instead.

He also added 'How do you separate that rite from regular burning?' and 'Exactly who did you send a blueprint of my campus to?' onto different papers. )

In the end, writing down everything helped. Seeing things laid out made it easier to untangled events from his own interpretation and bias.

The excessive politeness and standoffish behavior he'd experienced from summons and spirits could just as easily be interpreted as respectful formality as it could be discomfort and avoidance. And if it was still discomfort, Tobirama suspected it was from a desire to avoid accidentally triggering a God's displeasure. He had experienced a similar reaction from individuals in the WMA at times. It wouldn't be a surprise if spirits had a better sense for a challenge they didn't want to take on.

If gods were 'touchy' over Favorites, as Itama put it, showing any interest might get you Cursed (capital-letter intended) depending on their mood. Better not to risk ending up as the sort of moralistic warning story that introduced new words like 'tantalizing' and 'sisyphean' into Common.

But at this point he'd gotten as far as he could without further information. And maybe it was a personal failing, but Tobirama had no intention of letting things go without those answers this time.

Nine years of nothing? After being forced out of the Pure Land hard enough to crash land and break
It certainly didn't mesh with Itama's claim.

With a shake of his head, Tobirama got up and went to refill his water and grab yet another round of snacks. Perhaps he should take a break. Maybe watch some TV while there was no one around to shush him if he critiqued the different Discover Channel shows...

He moved all the papers into a pile on the table, settling back down to do just that when the page with his 'complaints' about Mad'ra slipped onto the floor. He picked it up, considered it, and then tore off a specific line towards the bottom. He set it on fire as he stood up to find the remote, but...

"Oh for gods sake," he scowled, jerking up a hand to grab the TV control that just launched itself at his head.

"Excuse me!" Mad'ra growled in his ear.

Tobirama jolted, foot lashing backwards on instinct and going right through insubstantial legs. He whirled into a spinning attack, pulse racing with adrenaline and magic surging with irritation.

He wasn't sure who was more surprised, him or Mad'ra, when his elbow actually impacted.

Tobirama watched the God tumble backwards onto the couch with a breathless grunt, remarkably pleased with this turn of events despite the fading ache in his elbow and the fact that Mad'ra's hard landing might have just finished off that old couch. The back of it certainly hadn't been that crooked before he hit it.

"I think Nono'o Jinxed me," Mad'ra bitched to himself before glaring at him, not bothering to get up from his sprawl on the couch as he rubbed his sternum. "That was not the skill I thought you'd pick up first!"

"Didn't anyone teach you basic manners about not invading people's homes?" Tobirama asked, putting the remote back on the table and crossing his arms.

"Right after they finished accusing me of theft and assault," Mad'ra replied mockingly, holding up a familiar scrap of paper. His eyes briefly flashed from the current black to glowing fire as sparks flickered in the hair spread messily across the cushions.

It would be pretty stupid to say that to a God, Tobirama acknowledged before promptly telling Mad'ra fix the couch he just broke.

"Are you actually incapable of being intimidated?" Madara asked, giving him a baffled look as he reached up with his right arm to yank the back of the couch upright.

"You did it," Tobirama pointed out, eying the back critically before reaching over Mad'ra's prone form to shove at it firmly.

"What are you doing?!" Mad'ra yelped as the couch tipped up on two feet far easier than it should have. Tobirama quickly put a knee down on the side closest to him to keep it from toppling over and flinched minutely when it thudded back down onto the hardwood floors with all the force added from two grown men weighing down on it.

"... Aren't humans picky about keeping their dwellings in one piece?" Mad'ra asked, as he looked up at Tobirama skeptically.
"No one refers to you as a God of craftsmanship," Tobirama said, ignoring how his thigh pressed into the other man's flank.

"It's a couch," Mad'ra snapped. "It's not a bastion of technological engineering! That was unintentional, wasn't it? Did you punch me by reflex? You did!"

Mad'ra groaned, dragging his hand down his face and grabbing Tobirama's shirt when he went to rise. "I can't believe you have the instincts needed to punch me successfully before consciously realizing you could even do it."

"Was it supposed to be difficult?" Tobirama said blandly, balancing uncomfortably on the edge of the cushions before giving up and shoving Mad'ra further in to make more room for himself. "You certainly didn't imply such with your story about Tōka."

"Tōka actively fought lesser gods before meeting a God, and Iz'na's power as War gives him a lot more solidity in his base state than I have. Fire and Family aren't concrete Aspects. Most humans would go right through me and regret the hell out of it," he said with a meanly amused smirk. "They certainly wouldn't break their own couch and then order me to fix it."

"You broke the couch."

"You do realize," the fire God said, poking Tobirama pointedly, "that hit would have broken my ribs if it hadn't been my own power behind it. Zetsu's going to get a nasty surprise if that's how you react to someone you actually invite in."

"I didn't invite you," Tobirama countered, adding 'Zetsu' onto a mental list next to 'the Eater' and stiffening slightly as Mad'ra caught sight of his pile of papers.

"What do you call this!" Mad'ra demanded, refocusing on the white-haired man as he held up the torn scrap which read 'moody and contradictory God who cracked several bones and gave me a concussion (possibly by accident, damn him).'

"A description."

"I've barely touched you!"

"Nine years ago," Tobirama said, a bit of ice slipping into his voice, "you shoved me, literally back to Earth, after a bout of spontaneous fury."

Mad'ra stared up at him. Tobirama could see the moment it clicked because the muscles in his face tensed as the man tried not to wince despite the feeling of 'oh fuck' radiating from him.

"That... was ill done of me," Mad'ra said, as a not-apology, contrition flickering faintly in Tobirama's chest. "I was trying to send you back through the Layers in a rush so you couldn't be intercepted."

"By this 'Zetsu' being?" he asked, watching Mad'ra's face cloud over as disgust and a dark wrath flickered to life.

"At the time, I thought not. Zetsu was supposed to have been interred with his abomination of a maker. I just knew anything which made Iz'na scream like that was going to rip right through you like a brushfire during drought."

"Nine years," Tobirama said deliberately, ignoring the steam that began to rise between them and the water sloshing in his glass behind him. "Do you think I'm somehow incapable of basic logic? Explain how you think it works that Iz'na was attacked nine years ago if Fugaku took his eyes just
"Because timelines never make linear sense!" Mad'ra yelled, flashing into fire-filled smoke and reforming across the room where he started pacing. "People only think they do because they don't pay proper attention! Time's slightly amorphous in the other Layers to start with! And the bitch ate all the primary time Gods ages ago, so she can pull shit like this unnoticed! She needed a moment where distractions lined up so she made one!"

"She can manipulate years without any of you noticing?" Tobirama asked. He was still irate and slightly skeptical, but there were a lot of stories with time being shorter or longer when humans interacted with other species. And Mad'ra felt enraged in a straight-forward way that Tobirama didn't associate with being caught in a lie.

The grimace Mad'ra made at that question also supported it being true.

"She can if no one has blocks up to stop it. There's a reason we had to resort to sealing her, and it wasn't because she hadn't earned an unmaking." The God sank back onto the other end of the couch, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "And most of us don't pay much attention to time normally. It's... not as significant among immortals."

That part Tobirama fully believed.

"Why?" Tobirama asked, watching Mad'ra as any hint of power faded back into a 'normal' appearance. "What's her goal? This 'Eater's' endgame?"

"Who knows?" Mad'ra replied. "No one even cares. It doesn't matter whether her goal is destroying the world and she eats gods to gain power or if she just wants to be the only God left and destroying the world is an incidental side effect. Either way, if it's get eaten or fight, it's obvious what you do. Well," he scowled, "provided you're not sticking your head in the sand and pretending all your elders are paranoid alarmists."

"Does she eat normal humans as well?" Tobirama asked, a sinking feeling in his chest as he looked away.

What a disappointment, he thought, looking at the table covered in notes. All those useless questions...

Mad'ra huffed. "Can you burn paper for warmth despite wanting coal? It won't boost her like gods will, but it's useful in it's own way... what are you doing?" he asked slowly.

"A conflict is starting, and your enemy wants power," Tobirama said, ignoring the spreading chill in his body as he gathered the papers and tapped them into a neater pile. "I won't—"

"What are you— how are you even?! Stop that!/ Mad'ra demanded, grabbing Tobirama's wrist, gold fire gleaming under his skin as he pushed warmth back up through Tobirama's arm.

Tobirama met his eyes as he did his best to smother that hot power under the wash of his own magic.

"If I have your magic, she'll seek me out. I will not lead her to my family."

/Stop! Ju— I swear!/ Mad'ra snapped. /I swear that you won't lead her here. She might come anyway, but it won't be for you. You're a deterrent, if anything, because I'll notice if she's—!/ /I'll swear it's not you. I'll swear it./ Mad'ra said, falling utterly still as he held Tobirama's gaze. /It's not worth having you if you don't want to be had, but don't... / his lips pressed together tightly,
shoulders tight with tension under his tunic.

...don't do this...

"... She'd come anyway?" Tobirama asked, stilling his own magic but not backing down. Mad'ra didn't let go, but his magic didn't press forward either.

/That long-haired brother of yours who smells like leaf litter: he's one of two beings who can manipulate the Tree,/ Mad'ra said, voice loosing some of the extra tones. /She'll want him dead automatically, but close kin might one day do the same./

"So she'll want to be thorough," Tobirama finished grimly, watching Mad'ra nod. He glanced between the still God, the warm hand on his wrist, his stack of papers, and he really considered whether this situation even had a good answer at all.

But it wasn't a lie. He knew it wasn't.

"I want all records and information on her," he said finally, feeling almost overheated as Mad'ra's magic blazed through his chest half a second later.

"Fine. Good. I am perfectly happy to share all the possible ways of maiming Zetsu's and making her fucking life difficult," the God offered, cautiously releasing Tobirama's wrist. "If you want strategy you can talk with Izzz—" Tobirama raised an eyebrow as Mad'ra choked to a stop. "You can talk with Sak'mo," he declared. "Sak'mo was there as well so that'll be two viewpoints for any questions."

"Not Iz'na?" Tobirama asked deliberately, watching Mad'ra twitch. "Didn't you say warfare was his specialty?"

"He'll be busy. Very busy. Once Nono'o gets his eyes back— the men will be unharmed!" he defended at Tobirama's narrowed eyes. "She's better at that than I am! But Iz'na will be busy after that. Constantly busy. Maybe for years."

"Are you embarrassed?" Tobirama asked, surprised enough that he missed his chance to block when Mad'ra snatched his papers and started pretending to be absorbed in them with a scowl. "You are," he mused, noting how the temperature nearby jumped despite Mad'ra's supposed absorption in reading.

Tobirama hummed, quietly thinking.

Regardless of Itama's overt implications last night, he hadn't actually considered this idea from all sides. The connotations for 'Favorite' were very different depending on how he thought of Mad'ra. On one hand, there was the embodiment of flame who used formal language and might operate on principles he didn't know, and on the other hand, there was the person sitting on his couch, capable of being prickly and amused and making bad diversions for why he didn't want Tobirama talking to his brother.

"If this is how your brain works, no wonder you seemed deceptively well informed," Mad'ra muttered, conjuring up a darker red pen as he slashed through something on the sheet and wrote beside it. "You're the one who made your wards, aren't you?"

"Yes," Tobirama replied, holding out a hand for his papers and waiting until the other male had given all but the top one back. Since it was the sheet with technical questions, Tobirama let him keep it.
"They're impressive," the God said, reaching up a hand rapping on thin air with the back of his hand. "I particularly like the nasty surprise you have set up as a fail-safe if an aggressor manages to take them down," he added with a vicious smile.

The wards sang quietly in Tobirama's head at the peaceful interaction, and he frowned as he noticed an out of tune note. He'd have to check the rune matrix to see what had degraded, but... "How did you not set them off at all during the last two days? They're supposed to alert for any non-human entries. In fact," he said, double-checking what he could sense, "the wards aren't detecting you as anything but human even though I can sense your power myself."

"Did you make them in the last nine years?" Mad'ra asked, jotting down another note.

Tobirama cursed internally as it clicked. "They're not calibrated right, are they? I already had your energy when I created the wards and tuned them to myself."

"They'll catch anything originating from lower layers, but a lot of the Pure Land inhabitants will read like me. Just recalibrate with your younger brother as the base example and add yourself as an exception. And put in a different kick if it breaks: Zetsu is plant-based, water won't work without a lot more pressure."

"There are limits to what you can install in a residential area," Tobirama explained.

Mad'ra looked at him like he'd suggested making the wards out of a soap bubble. "Homes should be where the strongest defenses are. If they can't kill an intruder, they're not adequate wards!"

"Gods don't have trouble making intent wards do they?" Tobirama asked dryly. Although it was likely Gods just didn't bother. There was a reason nobody trespassed into sacred places even after they were abandoned or their people conquered. "Regardless of how fitting you think death is as a deterrent—"

"You don't object to the idea!"

"—no one with sense will ever legalize that option for active wards. Personal defensive magic is one thing, but even the best wards don't truly think."

Mad'ra looked utterly unimpressed before yanking off three feathers and shoving them at Tobirama. "At least add some Forfeits as a power base and tie them to the fail-safe after you rework them. Anything that breaks them after that will need the extra kick to be impacted at all."

"So these store energy?" he asked, curious as he examined them. "What animal are they harvested from?"

"They have energy, but they're tools, not storage devices. The symbolic sacrifice will let the wards hit harder if they break. And they're not actual feathers. Gods make Forfeits when circumstances are right. I make feathers, Iz'na makes caltrops, it varies."

"They're personal then?"

Mad'ra shrugged, turning back to the papers. "They're personal when we make them I suppose, but it's not hard to find materials."

"... Why?" Tobirama asked, turning the feathers over in his hand. It was one of the things most confusing about the situation. Why? Why you? Why me? I like you inexplicably and everything you do implies you feel the same, gods know why, so if gods know, explain it to me. "Why are you so invested?"
Mad'ra side-eyed him, "Why wouldn't I be invested? Even if it's just a Chosen, who puts effort into Choosing a human when they're not interested in them at all?"

"Itama said you chose me as Favorite," Tobirama said, hearing the paper crumple as Mad'ra's fist tightened.

"That's," the God twitched, voice a bit strangled, "that's one word for it, if you really have to call it something."

"So why me?" Tobirama asked quietly. "For you it's been so little time, but right from the start..."

Mad'ra didn't quite squirm, but he did look away and rub at the back of his neck. Fire flickered in his black hair and Tobirama could almost see him thinking as the edges of his clothes blurred.

It occurred to Tobirama, as he listened to that familiarly-foreign magic inside him, that Mad'ra already knew — had always known from the moment Tobirama hadn't stepped back and the God had looked at him — exactly why he wanted Tobirama. Intent had never been in question for Mad'ra: he knew what he wanted, what path he would take, and he was sure of himself.

It was conveying it — especially to someone who didn't see the world as he did — that was tripping him up.

"You wouldn't find it on a map," Mad'ra said slowly, "but when I was born, our volcano was just breaking sea level. Iz'na and I were both born in the sky: where melted stone and steam and burning air collided with the closest thing a storm has to fire."

"We fell, of course. That's just what happens when wind and rain Gods are fighting and you're barely seconds old. And I suppose I knew right then what Iz'na would become because he landed on me and then shot right back up to join in their fight. But... the first thing I ever touched, the first thing I knew as home after my brother, was that volcano. The heat of lava under my feet and water around my ankles, the feel of steam and ash in the air, the smell of salt and brimstone and burning... In many ways, the struggle of equal elements has always been more satisfying than a forest fire raging unopposed."

"That's what your magic reminds me of. It feels like home."

"When you came to the river, I wasn't going to bother looking," Mad'ra said, eyes intent as they met Tobirama's, "because you were right: you're very obviously an ocean mage. But you never wavered at all, and then you didn't step back."

"Over seventy percent of volcanoes are under the ocean, Tobirama. Seventy percent. They're a different breed from their land-bound counterparts, but they're no less an inferno for all the water around them. Why should I like them any less so long as there's heat at the heart of it? And for all your composure, you have such a fierce fire: the world will drown you before it gets rid of your drive."

"Fire sprites might flee from water and elementals wince, but all the ocean is is a challenge willing to match me," Mad'ra said, lips upturned as he touched Tobirama's chin lightly, power thrumming with a sense memory Tobirama could almost feel for himself. "It's a trait for those with ties to volcanoes. Mei'o's just as willing to tear her way through mist and water if she has cause."

Tobirama thought about that, closing his eyes as he reached out with water to a warmth that reached back.

*Teeth bared and blood racing in the face of a match. Respect. Interest. WhatDoYouThinkofThis*
Curiosity. WhatWillYouDoIfTheWorldPushes. And deeper under it all, feelings of recognition, understanding, and a small, tiny, hidden pearl of looklooklookatthisilikethis(breath-catching,hands-cupped,something-precious).

If you could give name to the feeling that drives men to dream and moths to burn, that was it.

"So," Tobirama said softly, red eyes flickering open to look at Mad'ra, wondering if even Gods felt like moths occasionally in the light of human lives, "you chose me because my type of magic then?"

Mad'ra's hands twitched and a surge of prickly, irritated were-you-not-listening?! drowned out everything else.

"I swear you're too smart to be this moronic. When I said you were deep ocean, I didn't mean you should emulate the intelligence of amoeba!" he snapped. "What idiot would choose someone based on their type of magic? That wasn't about your magic, that was what your magic says about you! Have you never met anyone who grated on you immediately? Magic's just an extension of who you really are! You could be the flattest Baseline in the whole of humanity and you'd still be just as impressive!"

"What!" Mad'ra asked roughly, when Tobirama just looked at him.

"Do you want dinner?" Tobirama asked abruptly, expression softening slightly as Mad'ra blinked blankly.

"...What?"

"I suppose Gods never cook for themselves, do they?" Tobirama mused, abandoning the papers on the table as he stood up and headed towards the kitchen.

"Sak'mo cooks sometimes," Mad'ra said, leaving the pen and paper behind as he followed.

"Do you?"

"Why would I bother when he's already done it? It's not like I need to eat most of the time."

"I imagine you burn everything," Tobirama said, amused at the resulting spluttering coming from behind him as he dug out a large fry-pan and the cutting board.

"Excuse me?! I didn't burn your damn pizza, did I!" Mad'ra said defensively.

"That's reheating, not cooking. You liked the stir-fry, so I'll make that. And then," he emphasized, sparing the God a look, "you're sparring with me, full throttle inside a boundary, since you're the one who's ruined my instinctual control. Try to be at least as challenging as Hashirama."

"At least," Mad'ra muttered mutinously before smiling with a glint in his eye. "Challenges are best with stakes, don't you think?"

Tobirama paused, vegetables in hand as he idly turned off the faucet. "What do you want?" he asked, with a flicker of interest.

Nothing appropriate to ask, flashed through Tobirama's mind before the connection muted instantly like a lid sealing shut over a stove-top fire. "We'll put up a time-limit: make it a bit easier for you. You loose: you suffer through Iz'na making you a weapon and giving you the knowledge to master it."
"That sounds interesting," Tobirama said, not commenting on the faint concern Mad'ra was refusing to acknowledge. There was probably a catch considering he said 'suffer', but Tobirama had always wanted a properly made sword that wouldn't rust when constantly exposed to his magic.

It was also fairly telling that Mad'ra wanted to arm him if he didn't prove dangerous enough already.

"Interesting's one word for it," Mad'ra said, amused as he leaned nonchalantly against the counter while Tobirama dropped the first pieces of food into the pan. "And you?"

"You let Itama ask you anything he wants," Tobirama said, adding a little more oil.

"... Is that supposed to be hard?" Mad'ra asked suspiciously.

Tobirama carefully didn't react as he thought about uncharacteristic sulking, twenty years of steady enthusiasm, and multiple papers based on meticulous research into history, culture, and the interaction of gods and humans.

"That's one word for it," he said honestly.

End Notes

ART: Mad'ra aesthetic and a inspired AU if Tobirama was also a God

RELATED STORIES: I wrote a future drabble for this verse as Ch.1 of Character Sentence Stories.

Surprisingly, I know exactly how this fic started. A while back, I said I wanted Madara with feathers in his hair and insanescriptist wrote something nice for me! And blackkat wrote It's all downhill from here, and (you may have noticed this) but I *adore* flipping ideas around and seeing how they change, so I *immediately* wanted fire god!Madara with human!Tobirama. So when I was bored and procrastinating, I looked through my 52 weeks list to find a challenge to write.

So the entire thing started because I wanted to cross out (15. A story set at a concert or festival). Crazy huh?

(Don't ask how my brain got 'Science Fair' out of that prompt and then immediately screwed with what 'science fair' meant. It probably fits prompt 6 better now.)

But! A second round of thanks specifically to blackkat and SillyThing because I am so stuck on this ship. I am so stuck that if this ship is the Titanic, I may as well write my epitaph, so I really appreciate your awesome MadaTobi fics that I reread when my head hurts too much to write.

I'll be writing another 10,000 words if I ramble about all my stuff for this fic, but I will say a few things. (1) The foreign words used for shaman actually are related linguistically to shaman if you trace back to Sanskrit which delighted me because that's where the oldest stuff in Naruto canon drew stuff from. (2) OMG, I had so much fun with subtle references and snark in this fic. I nearly cackled in a few places. (3) It occurred to me that I hurt characters a
lot, but I guess I'm a big believer in things not going smoothly and stuff having a price. (4) My brain was practically enthralled with the Mad'ra's description of Tobirama both times he said it. Even now, I just *love* how well the image of a submarine volcano under deep water fits Tobirama. I hope I came close to describing it because I spent nearly a day with that perfect visual in my head just in awe over how beautiful it was. (5) AUAs are apparently becoming my jam rather than dealing with all the things in Naruto that made me mad or sad or ugh.

Lastly, I think I'm noticing a pattern in my preferences. If I'm not utterly in love with the main character or seduced by how someone wrote a different character, I tend to get hooked on some minor character, decide who the main person/relationship will be in a fic, and then look around at the cast going "who hasn't got enough screen time?"

It makes it difficult to write sometimes. Luckily AUAs are a bit more forgiving in characterization... even if they're also the reason characterization can be hard.

Please review about which parts you like best or ask questions if you have them!

Works inspired by this one: (Don't) Immanentize the Eschaton by elenatethehun

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!