Fire and Ice

by DeerShifter

Summary

Even when memories are wiped, you cannot always wash away the impressions they have left behind, like a glacier's slow but unmistakable footprint in the land. Dead on the battlefield, a mortal spirit is reborn in a very different world, to a very different lifetime—and yet, one similar enough that the position change leads to definite contradictions. Sasu-is-Hiei, rating may go up.

Update: As of 7/20/15, temporarily on hiatus so I may concentrate on my other work.

Notes

I know I'm not the only one to compare these two characters, but I wanted to explore for myself how the mentality of one might lie behind the remarks and behavior of the other. IF YOU'RE READING FOR A PAIRING OF HIEI AND SASUKE, TURN BACK. YOU WILL NOT FIND THAT HERE. Nor will you find any other pairings, at least for now, except a few possibilities mentioned in the prologue. Crushes, yes, pairings, no.

Other Warnings: possible spoilers through current Fourth Shinobi War Arc (as of New Years eve 2012), including everything involving Uchiha. also possible divergence from this point and a bit further back. DO NOT GIVE ME REVIEWS SAYING I'M INCORRECT ABOUT CANNON THIS IS FANFICTION FOR A REASON.
Disclaimer – I do not own anything of Naruto or YuYu Hakusho. The poem 'Fire and Ice' is, of course, the work of Robert Frost. Any other poets or quotations will be given their due credit if used.

At this point, this is intended as a one-shot with the possibility of a continuation or sequels. It depends. For now, enjoy as is- Fire and Ice.

UPDATE 8/10/14: Reposting from Fanfiction.net
Life In Death

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

'Fire and Ice' by Robert Frost

Chapter One: Life in Death

By the time it all ends in a swirl of blood and fire, he can barely remember what things used to look like, the childish worldview of white and black, skewed into different squares of gray and attempts at tinting in blue and yellow and green and bloodredbloodredbloodredbloodredbloodred bloodred bloodred bloodred bloodred. Cursed-Sharingan scarlet and swirled Mangekyo black darkness. The fires are gone and the ashes of revenge are so cold they burn.

How does it end for such a man—or such a monster, depending on who you ask—how does such a being die?

Some say he killed all those directly responsible before stepping in the way of his once-bestfriend's fiancé's sword—of all the rookies, all the original, still-loyal Konoha Twelve, only the traitor and the weapons mistress have taken to the sword; the former ROOT's tanto doesn't count. None of the Teams survive unscathed—the once passed-over heiress can only run field missions now with her insides so scarred and twisted, the prodigy cousin and the once-favored-spare are killed fighting back to back, the flower turned healing herb oversteps herself trying to heal everyone and scars her own Chakra Network for life, the viridian taijutsu virtuoso loses too much blood defending his longtime crush, the faithful hound permanently lames his left forepaw dragging his master out of a minefield, the mistress of mental infiltration lies comatose, the genius who reacted too late to a stray kunai is blind… but why go on? They're all dead or out of commission or permanently broken in some way or another. Those left over marry, or somehow cling to each other in other ways and try to tell themselves there will be no more leaving.

Some say he and the never-crowned Hokage kill each other in a double suicide, Naruto only surviving thanks to his tenant, a cruel parody of the battle at the Valley of the End. After that, Naruto claims he can't stomach the job—it has too many memories attached to it. Instead he forces himself into what was once Danzo's role, ensuring that the Uchiha tragedy will not replay itself, nor will ROOT. No one is more surprised than Hinata when Naruto recommends her husband for
the Hat, with the exception of perhaps the artist himself. The photographs of his shocked, fish-face impression reaction are blackmail good for years—while he's gotten much better at body language, displaying the correct facial expression still poses a challenge for Sai. Sakura remains a doctor and head of the hospital, and though it takes ten years for Shino to agree to her proposal, they do eventually marry—after teaming up to stomp all the bee-honey-flower jokes.

And while the monster boy who never had a chance to fully become a man is buried with a thousand corpses, his memory will not fade, even if his name does. Naruto makes certain of it, just as he makes certain to burn every Uchiha eye and trace of blood. Unlike the phoenix, this pyre will not birth a new being.

Or will it?

No. At least…

Not in this world.

Not in this race.

Not in this birth order.

For reincarnation and karma must balance. Where one once had everything, then lost what he valued most and ended by throwing the rest away, now one must start with nothing, despised from the start, and work to gain all. And yet enough of the challenges must be the same for him to be judged properly by them. So very complicated, the selection of a new life, let alone for such a—a soul, perhaps, is most fitting now, or better yet, spirit—as this one. Even when the memories are wiped, you cannot always wash away the impressions they have left behind, like a glacier's slow but unmistakable footprint in the land.

What will become of his world?

Who knows? The old one, the Land of Fire, he has left burning merrily. There will never be peace there again, only ceasefires in a never-ending war of secrecy and lies and truth torn open at the guts.

And the new world, which names him as its ender before even existence sparks, is, perhaps fittingly, a land of snow and ice.

A land where he is condemned not for deeds, but gender and existence.

In one world, Uchiha Sasuke's death rattle is gasped out to an empty sky, eyes wide and flat and open as the empty husk settles into rigor mortis.

In another world, Hiei opens his eyes, and stares at the mother he does not yet realize he is about to lose.

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn't understand the character references

the weapons mistress (Tenten)

the once passed-over heiress (Hinata)
the prodigy cousin (Neji) and the once-favored-spare (Hanabi)

the flower turned healing herb (Sakura)

the viridian taijutsu virtuoso (LEE)

the faithful hound (Akamaru) and his master (Kiba)

the mistress of mental infiltration (Ino)

the genius (Shikamaru)

the artist (Sai)

Also—even if I didn't mention them, IF I DIDN'T OUTRIGHT SAY HE OR SHE WAS DEAD, ASSUME ALIVE. Not that it matters much, as we probably won't be coming back to them. But yes, Chouji, Kiba, Shino, Shikamaru, Hinata, Sakura, Naruto, Tenten…they're alive. I probably missed some others and I didn't think all that much about the other generations. We won't be returning here, so it doesn't really matter now.
Fallen From 'Grace'

Chapter Notes

Would appreciate a little feedback to know if it is worth continuing, people. Please? Just a few words to tell me if it's still holding up in quality and interest.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There, out in the darkness
A fugitive running
Fallen from god
Fallen from grace
God be my witness
I never shall yield
Till we come face to face
Till we come face to face

He knows his way in the dark
Mine is the way of the Lord
Those who follow the path of the righteous
Shall have their reward

And if they fall, as Lucifer fell
The flame, the sword!
- excerpt from 'Stars,' sung by Javert, Les Misérables

Chapter 2: Fallen From 'Grace'

His mother's name is Hina, he learns from the words of those around him (for some reason, this name echoes oddly in his ears, somehow incorrect and yet right at the same time). She is all pale moonlight and softness, frail in her beauty as a thawing icicle. Whatever her normal strength, she is weakened by the birth—too weak to protect him as the elders tear him from her arms in mere moments. His own attempts to struggle bother his captors not at all; in his mind, a voice distorted as if by distance sneers at his weakness, infuriating him.

The old women and the younger ones they order about take care never to touch him bare-skinned; they wear gloves, or, in emergency, wrap their hands in their long sleeves. It has something to do with their coldness and his heat, he supposes; young as he is, he can tell this is not his natural environment, and if any doubts were left, the way they spit out 'fire' in the same tone as 'Imiko', cursed child, settles it. Even their name for him, Hiei, Flying Shadow, speaks of their fear of him. Again, he supposes it has something to do with his heat and their ice.

They do have the courtesy to give him a diaper before wrapping him up in bandages and ofudas until he can barely breathe, let alone move. So much protection for them from his aura and power? This is laughable, how much they fear him! Him, a babe!

And yet somehow, this is as it should be, and he already knew it. It only serves to confirm his impression of them as blind fools afraid of change and difference.
He does not know the specifics of why they do this, however, until the day he is carried to a cliff. He sees his mother, struggling between two of her age mates. Like all the others, she regards him with fear—but in her eyes, there is love, too. Not fear of him, but rather for him? Foreboding clenches his gut, anger rising though he does not know why.

He listens as the most wrinkled crone of all, her mouth in a permanent scowl, proceeds to list his mother’s crimes: to seek out a male - and not just any male, but a fire demon, their antithesis of the ice-women - to lie with him, to bear a boy like her paramour. In the end, all crimes are one: she has Broken the Rules (he can hear the capitals) and created a fire demon son whose very existence is apparently against nature.

This crime of existing sounds very familiar, but he does not know why. He is very certain of the punishment, however.

He refuses to fear such fools, who kill what they cannot understand, the judges who are not even brave enough to kill him themselves. Instead, they delegate another woman – Rui, who cradles him with sad eyes – to do the job. And when she hesitates on the edge of the cliff, the oldest witch of the mob sprinkles poisoned words in her ear, pretending to sympathize, understand the difficulty of killing the child of one’s best friend – and still insisting that she do it, even as Hina struggles harder to get to them, as futile an effort as a fly trapped in a web, and just as progressively frantic as death creeps forward on eight legs.

And then the Elder's words become even more familiar:

"But you must do this for her own good, and yours, and ours. This imiko, this boy of fire, will slaughter us all!"

Again the words echo like something he has heard before. Rage fills him – how dare they condemn a child as a murderer already? Do they really believe they can keep their hands, their snow-white fingers, clean by justifying the unconscionable? That their choir of angels will stay pure if his 'taint' is destroyed or removed?

Maybe he will do as they say if he stays here. Maybe not; why make such an effort if not needed? And why do they actually think he'd slaughter a kid, let alone a large group of them? Where is the proof? In his red (yes, they are red – he caught a glimpse in an ice mirror as they trussed him up in bonds) eyes? In his black hair, already on his head, so unlike their white or blue or green locks? In his skin a shade more tan than the snow? These are no angels, no heavenly bodies, no stars—and their pretense as such is ridiculous.

A pause – Rui has not reacted to the words, or moved. But he can feel her fumbling in her sleeve for something, covering it by whispering an apology to him.

What a sheep. Even if logically there is nothing she can do, shouldn't she at least try?

The elder hears the half-whisper, and snaps at her, "Do not pity The Beast!" (Funny. If he's a beast, what does that make them?)

"You killed my son!"

Hina's cry cuts the wind that fills the silence. Her scream is one of agony, combining despair and desperation and defiance all at once. No one can doubt the love, though, when she names him thus—MY son. Past the curve of Rui's arms, he can somewhat glimpse his mother, still struggling in the hold of two women her own age, their faces turned away from him as if to avoid contamination, their arms never loosening even as Hina reaches out her one free hand, still trying to save him. Even now, when some sign of repentence might grant her some mercy, readmit her to
this 'heaven', she hasn't given up physically, even if her words already name him dead. A rush of tenderness fills him, and he wonders why she is so different from the rest of these hags – and they are most definitely pitiless hags, no matter what their age or beauty. And his mother is most definitely different, with the boldness to create and keep and birth a being so mysterious and different to them as Hiei himself.

Rui is tucking something into his bandages. His tiny fists grasp instinctively to the shiny stone. It's the same one that fell from his mother's face as she held him, he is certain, realizing with astonishment that it is her crystallized tear.

Raising his eye to his carrier, he hears words, but not with his ears. Somehow Rui must be pushing the message to him through other means, wary of the still observing elder. The method, while curious (and, dare he say, somewhat ticklish), is less important now than the message, and he devotes his full attention to it.

- When you come back, seeking the revenge that you and - – her 'voice' breaks momentarily, before continuing – - and we, deserve – please kill me first. -

He does not blink as he accepts the tear gem, an acknowledgement of the words somehow passed straight to his mind, words she dares not speak aloud—and his own, wordless promise to fulfill the revenge she describes.

Revenge. Though less than two days old, it sounds somehow familiar, like a garment made for him. And yet, at the same time, it is like rewatching a play, but from opposite the side that he is accustomed to being on.

As she closed her eyes, the end of the message comes through, a part he is uncertain whether she means him to hear or not:

- It's the least I can offer to atone for what I'm about to do. -

And with that, his forboding becomes reality, as she extends her arms –
and drops him into the sea of clouds.

He hears one last tear choked cry, his mother naming him as hers once more, even as the rushing air around him cuts off further noise. He falls from heaven, condemned for existence, with only a starry jewel, a name, and a purpose of vengeance.

My mother's tribe called me Hiei the imiko, the cursed child of the Glacial Village.

-Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: The Secret of the Jagan

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Bad fortune to the Korime elders, for he lands not on hard ground, but in water, in a free-flowing river, and while stunned from impact, he does not die.

AN: Remember, comments and criticisms appreciated, particularly if reasons are included!
Chapter 3: Deep Roots Are Not Reached By The Frost

Bad fortune to the Korime elders, for he lands in water, in a river, and while stunned, he does not die.

Though in later years he scorns luck as a turning force in battles, Hiei never forgets how incredibly lucky he is to have survived to reach his twentieth year, let alone any stage of physical maturity. No matter how much stubborn determination he may possess, no matter how much intelligence, he is still less than three days old when he is dropped.

The water is the first of his saving graces.

It is quick flowing at his entry point, but within a few long turns, it begins to slow enough that he drifts to one side and is caught in the reeds.

His second grace is the bandit who comes to do his laundry.

It has been a good day for the gang of robbers and cutthroats – many valuables 'acquired,' many enemies slaughtered – and, of course, much blood staining the victors' clothes. Laundry is immediately necessary for their sensitive noses (while they hardly mind the smell, it does make it more difficult to pick out old blood from new, and that could be fatal), and it falls to one of the less-skilled members to start cleaning up first, while the more successful, more senior members get to divide the loot, gloating and glaring and grabbing fair shares.

The sight of the bundle naturally makes the demon curious. The sight of a face shocks him, especially when the occupant is awake and aware and alive enough to track him with its eyes. Even so, this is the Makai, and a particularly vicious quarter of it. There is no reason for him to have further interest in the bundle, now that it is proven to be neither threat nor food nor valuables.

Or is it?

Hiei's third grace is Hina's hiruseki stone, the cord still tightly clenched in his hand.

Curiosity leads the brigand to rub at the muddy pendant with a wet thumb until the shine is revealed. Though he does not know the value, he knows that shiny things are as often valuable as not, and even if not, can be passed as such before the eyes of the ignorant.

But when he tries to pull the cord, it does not come free.
The tiny imiko, small enough to fit into their cooking pot three times over, may not be strong enough to wrestle two snakes at once in his cradle and crush them both. But he is stubborn, and this is his – the last thing he has of his mother – and this man has no right to take it unless he is strong enough to do so. Well, this infant is a little more stubborn than the man is strong.

This is the Makai. Strength is interesting.

Unwilling to let go of the jewel (and reluctant to leave the owner even so), the lesser demon picks it up, bundled baby and all, and carries Hiei back to camp.

The next one he shows the jewel to appears to be the leader. If the brawn, size, and intelligence tuckeed into slits of eyes weren't clues, the fact that he was getting first chance at seconds at the soup pot would tip it off. Or maybe it's just the confidence that is only exuded when a demon knows he is in his own territory, the territory he has fought and scratched and bit and killed for, drawing the boundaries in his enemies' guts, the confidence that says this is mine, I rule here, what are you to me?

Will they never learn? This one wants the shiny crystal too, and is actually willing to stick a second finger close when one hand alone does not pull it free. Foolish to get so close to such a small space with little room to maneuver. Hiei has no qualms about defending what is his, no fears of the large hand. He is a child—why should he not find himself equal to the world? What evidence is there that the bandit is any stronger or less foolish than the inhabitants of the Glacier Village?

The possibility of hesitation does not exist. He has no sword, but his teeth are sharp enough, he thinks.

And as the brigand pulls back, clutching his already bleeding finger, offering a backhand compliment to the 'little rodent's' fangs, he bares his own teeth in a grin, the sort that innocents might find terrifying, but Hiei finds familiar. It is a grin of welcome to a worthy opponent.

He will never know the fire demon who contributed to his creation. He doesn't have to.

He doesn't need any kin in the ice maidens; though he will not forget the mother who claimed to love him, he cannot forgive that she was too weak to keep them together. Words are only good so long as one can and does back them with actions.

What does that matter? He has found kin, blood-kin, even if it is the sort of blood kin formed not by shared ancestry but by shared experience in battle and survival. And in some ways, that is even sweeter.

Here, he will grow strong.

_That bandit was to become the closest thing I had to a father._

_-Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: The Secret of the Jagan_

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: My one reviewer (on fanfiction.net) worried that I was too focused on
YYH, to the point that this wasn’t a crossover. I can only agree that YYH is strong now. The memories are going to start playing a greater role in a few chapters—in connection to a special kind of eyes.

Hope for some more reviews now!
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Updates less frequent due to college and real life.

_The Kingsword will stand in its scabbard of granite,

The quicksilver forged in the pools of the sky._

_A rumor explained by the one who began it._

_A boy's hand will grasp it, a man's raise it high._

- _Heather Dale, "Kingsword"

Chapter 4: Quicksilver Forged

All children take after their parents, no matter what race.

When it comes time for Hiei to choose a weapon, he is instinctively drawn to blades.

At first, like many children, he enjoys borrowing his father's things; the flapping cloak for a man three times his height and a double-edged sword as long as he is tall. It is only because of his speed that he is able to wear both so effectively.

His father, however, eventually wants his things back permanently. Hiei still enjoys the cloak and sword combination, but eventually sews a cloak his own size from some better-woven cloth they manage to 'liberate' on a rare occasion. Though shorter, it still flutters delightfully when he moves (terrifying one's enemies into making mistakes is always fun), as well as keeping him dry (warmth is a _slightly_ lesser concern, given what he is). As his style grows to rely more and more on speed, Hiei acquires a katana, single edged but lighter and therefore better adapted for his katas.

Not a child's katana either. A man's.

Nobody dares mock him, despite the fact that his current blade is almost as long as he is tall.

Those who try…well, Hiei's always been a quick learner (_no he hasn't he doesn't improve fast enough_). Anyone who has little stray thoughts taunting him in the back of his mind about his weakness would strive to improve. With Hiei's fire youkai heritage and eidetic memory, improving is inevitable.

Just as well, really. The Makai is a harsh world.

Hiei wouldn't have it any other way.

As he grows older, there is only one incident where he is afraid his family will rid themselves of
him. The summer he is ten, when he nearly loses control of his flames in a fit of frustration.

His adoptive father is very angry at that. He takes Hiei off with him, and forces him through exercises in manipulation over one of the biggest deserts Hiei has ever seen, until Hiei has his flames under control even during nightmares.

The nightmares are odd ones. Usually they involve a frantic chase down empty halls of stained paper and scarred stone, a frantic patting of bare feet as he finds body after body, no one alive, and no one he knows, as he keeps searching for people he knows, but finds no one. He doesn't even know why he's so terrified in the dream; he doesn't exactly mind blood, no youkai worth the right to exist minds blood, and Hiei and his not-kin-not-clan-but-still-family revel in it. But that dream—

Enough. It is a dream. He needs to concentrate on the real world.

Weapons is, of course, hardly the only thing he learns. In the school of his raider 'uncles,' Hiei is firmly educated in Battle, Winning, Deception, Highly Expressive Language, Cunning, Ambushing, Searching and Plundering, Interrogation, Reconnaissance, Exploring Another's Anatomy for Pleasurable and Painful Reasons (all theory on the Pleasurable side – for now), Dirty Tricks, and Bloodthirst.

They may have taught him the last one too well.

He begins to seek fights, an addiction as ruthless as cards or dice with high-stakes risk for a gambler. His mother's tear gem is his stake, worn outside his shirt until someone sees the glint and asks him to give it up. He will refuse and run, fast enough for his tattered cape to cease catching on the ground, but never out of sight, just out of reach. Really, it should clue them in that he's playing with them. It's not like his speed is a secret.

But they never notice.

And so, at the last moment, he will stop, turning on his feet and unsheathing his sword in the same instant.

Three eyeblinks later, his quarry for the day is on the ground, in pieces. Sometimes still twitching with the last command the brain sent the muscles, not quite caught up to their own death.

And Hiei only has as much blood on him as he chooses.

What need is there to search for a monster in the dark, if Hiei becomes the monster? What need to search out an unknown village, a place that was part of him for only a moment, no matter what they did to him? Why on earth would he abandon his family and a life that he loves so much for that? The ice-women might be fools to his mind, but they are not hypocrites or traitors—they made him no promises, only served him and themselves according to their own rules. He can respect that even if the rules are ridiculous. Why should he care about being evicted from a home he didn't have enough time to grow attached to?

He doesn't even dream about the mother who fought for him vainly anymore.

Bloodletting is his favorite childhood game, one he often plays and always wins. It never occurs to him that not everyone might be so pleased with his habits, especially as the frequency rises. He doesn't realize there is a problem until the day he returns to camp and all suddenly goes quiet.

He can only gape as they scurry into the cave. His 'father' is the last one in, sparing barely a glance over his shoulder before letting go of the cloth barrier. And it is only when the curtain drops, the cave goes quiet, and all that is left outside is a little bundle full of the few objects he has claimed for himself and supplies for a few days, that he realizes it has happened again.
He has unknowingly shifted from a part of the group to the outside threat. From 'us' to 'them.'

A distant corner of his mind (the bit that isn't quite consumed by shock) finds this humorous, that a group of bloodthirsty mercenaries have apparently decided they have had their fill of blood, at least by his blade. He, who was one of them, had gotten too bloodthirsty for a group of battle-hungry youkai! He hasn't even reached his first heat cycle!

Yet he cannot be angry. He has just become what he is, and that is apparently too different for them to accept. At least they were polite about it; they didn't have to leave the supplies along with his things. Hell, they could have simply told him to his face he wasn't wanted. Instead, they chose to let actions speak.

It hurts, yes, but it is a clean pain. And he will not slaughter them for being who they are. Not when they have not provoked him.

His 'father' knows him well. Apart from participation in the group raids, Hiei does not seek out fights; he just lures them in.

There is a rock next to his bag, flat and narrow, sticking upright in the ground. He does not know why he pauses, flipping it flat on the ground, before hoisting his bag and turning away, trudging into a future he has no way to predict the course of.

Even as a child I found tremendous pleasure in spilling my enemies' blood. Their screams of agony were my music box. Once I realized my mother's frozen teardrop was highly valuable, I would purposefully wear it in clear sight of everyone, hoping their greed would entice them to challenge me, thus giving me the opportunity to take another life. I suppose I wanted to prove that my mother's people were right to abandon me. For years I spent every waking moment looking for my next kill.

I started to wonder if finding my mother and the glacial village mattered at all. It wasn't long before my former life started to become a faint shadow on the outskirts of my consciousness.

...The bandits, who I had come to look upon as a family, soon grew weary of my murderous habits. And once again, I found myself shunned.

In my solitude I found myself gazing into my mother's stone for hours, finding I would be taken over by a strange calm. And the desire to find the home of my birth began to churn up inside me again.

- Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: The Secret of the Jagan
Sorry this has taken so long, guys. Figured I'd try and get it up as a Thanksgiving present for you all before I go deal with family.

STORY REC: I have just discovered another Sasuke reincarnated into another anime story. Please check out Obnoxious Bonds, by Kolbie Ru-Ru, if you want to see our dear avenger reborn as a certain Disciplinary Committee Head known as Kyouya Hibari. Highly recommended. Story id 9713661, on fanfiction.net

On this story – Heading closer to the series timeline, can anyone direct me to a really good timeline of events for Hiei’s history? I’d like not to get mixed up as we get closer to directly pre-cannon.

And for the crossover urgers? Hiei gets his first direct notification that something might be off in his own head.

Disclaimer: See Chapter 1

No matter how many times that you told me you wanted to leave
No matter how many breaths that you took, you still couldn't breathe
No matter how many nights that you lie wide awake to the sound of poison rain
Where did you go? Where did you go? Where did you go?
As days go by, the night's on fire

Tell me would you kill to save a life?
Tell me would you kill to prove you're right?
Crash, crash, burn, let it all burn
This hurricane's chasing us all underground

No matter how many deaths that I die I will never forget
No matter how many lives that I live, I will never regret
There is a fire inside of this heart
And a riot about to explode into flames
Where is your God? Where is your God? Where is your God?

- 30 Seconds To Mars, "Hurricane"

He lives his life by habit and whim both. Washing, hunting, and cooking is on as regular a schedule as the sun rising and setting—though the Makai has the advantage of a certain demon's stomach's rumbling as a three-times-daily food alarm clock as well.

For all he is a fire demon, Hiei quickly comes to realize that he is a terrible cook. He would much rather steal food than hunt it and turn it over a spit on a fire. But he forces himself to become better. He tells himself he needs to stick to the somewhat wild regions while he figures out what to
do, and that requires hunting.

He refuses to admit his distrust of settlements, or the fact that he is unconsciously veering away from thought of stealing. He refuses to admit how he spends more and more time lost in thought, staring into the calming sparkles of his mother's tear stone, until one day he finds out a whole hour has passed without his notice.

He will not admit how used to the soothing effect he has become until he loses it.

Careless of him, really. An oni of no particular relevance or importance or strength or sword skill has seen the gem and attacked him for it. It's the sort of scrap – not even worthy of being called a fight – that he could probably do on autopilot these days if he didn't enjoy bloodshed so much.

They're battling on top of a cliff above a ravine. It adds an element of risk to the otherwise near-boring quality of the scrap. He's even the one with his back to the cliff. Given he is half the oni's size, no doubt his opponent thinks the battle good as won.

They lock swords, and stay locked, glaring into each other's gaze, muscles straining with the effort. Hiei reassesses the threat level as his foot is pushed back in an effort to stay upright and off his knees. Time to finish this.

Then stone crumbles under his left foot.

As he desperately tries to regain his balance, shocked at the tables turning on him, the oni's face fills with bestial triumph, and he swings his sword back for a clean decapitation.

Hiei only just manages to lean back enough to save the skin of his throat without going off the cliff.

The string of his stone is not so lucky.

A double slice, and the loop becomes a string, and an untied pendant with trailing ends.

His eyes follow the stone as it drops away from his skin, shock causing him to lose his balance from the cliff, fall with it—

Hiei does not lose.

A graceful arc of his body, turning him upside down and vertical once more.

A swift stab with his bending katana into the cliff face.

A push with his feet, launching him back up the cliff he fell at least halfway down.

And a perfect stab, straight into his opponent's heart.

Hiei doesn't even pause to shake the blood off the blade after withdrawing it (he's never needed to think about killing, just cleanup), just takes two steps to the edge of the cliff and looks down.

All the way down.

To the rock filled rapids below.

A very distant part of him absently considers that he was lucky not to end up in this river during that long-ago fall.

The rest of him is reeling at the knowledge that the stone—his stone—is gone.
And there is no way to retrieve it, though he only consciously acknowledges the fact after a week of traipsing the river and checking to see if the string caught on anything.

He hadn't realized how much he valued the feel of the string, the weight of the stone. His neck feels strangely, unpleasantly bare.

And that doesn't even begin to go into the strange dream that started after the loss.

It plays like a memory, his memory, but it's nothing that's ever happened to him.

*The memory holder sits next to a boy in nauseatingly bright colors, who is talking through a mouthful of noodles at a volume that has no business being so close to the ear of the addressee. The clothes are strange, as are the smells and background sounds, but they are blurred beyond any attempt at recognition.*

*It doesn't matter. For some reason, he's focusing on the necklace in the hollow of the boy's throat. It has three stones, not one, and they're cut very differently. But the sensation of looking at it is the same as the necklace that man used to wear, once. It has the same feeling of importance. Clan-importance.*

He wakes with a silent gasp on the third morning of the dreams, mouth immediately narrowing into a frown.

Hiei has always known that the unknown is dangerous. His own treatment in his first few hours is proof of that.

Now there is unknown, and it's not from an outside source.

This…is unacceptable.

Hiei rises to his feet, methodically setting himself and his surroundings in order, hiding traces of his night spent in the tree.

He didn't know just how much he needed the stone until now.

He is a bandit, the son of a bandit. He is the one who takes; no one takes from him!

Except someone has.

Well, then. He'll find the village and the stone. And get these nonsensical dreams tucked away wherever they came from as soon as he's thoroughly investigated them.

And he knows exactly how to kill three birds in one stone, too.

It's time he started retracing the story he heard around the campfire one night, back when he still had uncles and a father.

It's time he found himself a Jagan eye.

*As I set out to find the Glacial Village, I was faced with new opponents, each one trying to take away my stone.*

*Eventually, one of them succeeded.*
I hadn't realized until that moment how important it was to me. And I knew I had to do whatever it took to find not only my mother's village, but her stone.

- Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: The Secret of the Jagan

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Shigure's surgery room
With the worst of the exams and holidays over, I figured I'd get this out in time for the one year anniversary – and before next semester of college begins. Happy New Year, everyone, and my gift to you all is the beginning of true crossover elements. I look for suggestions for the next chapter in your reviews, but for now, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

David walked into the valley
With a stone clutched in his hand
He was only a boy, but he knew
Someone must take a stand.

There will always be a valley,
Always mountains one must scale;
There will always be perilous waters
Which someone must sail.

Into valleys, into waters
Into jungles, into hell
Let us ride, let us ride home again
With a story to tell!

Into darkness, into danger
Into storms that rip the night!
Don't give in, don't give up
But give thanks for the glorious fight.

You can tremble, you can fear it
But keep your fighting spirit alive, boys!
Let the shiver of it sting you,
Fling into battle, spring to your feet, boys!
Never hold back your step for a moment,
Never doubt that your courage will grow,
Hold your head even higher and into the fire we go!

Are there mountains that surround us?
Are there walls that block the way?
Knock 'em down, strip 'em back boys
And forward and into the fray!

Into terror, into valour
Charge ahead, no! never turn,
Yes, it's into the fire we fly,
And the devil will burn!

Someone has to face the valley
Rush in, we have to rally and win, boys!
When the world is saying not to,  
By God, you know you've got to march on, boys!  
Never hold back your step for a moment,  
Never doubt that your courage will grow,  
Hold your head ever higher and into the fire we go!

- excerpt from 'Into the Fire,' sung by Percy Blakeney and Percy's Men, The Scarlet Pimpernel

Chapter 6: A Story to Tell

Hiei does not count time much beyond the passing of seasons, and he does not know much about his own species, so despite having some idea of his age – within the decade, anyway – he has no idea where he is on the physical maturity scale.

That said, for someone who left his father's camp after nearly one and a half centuries of constant battle and bloodshed, another half-century of near-aimless wandering before losing his stone, and a full century of investigating far too many dead ends before finally tracking down this last, promising lead in his most recent half century – Hiei fully considers himself an adult at his sum of approximately three and a half centuries, and is just as certain that he has wasted far too much of his own time already.

He really hopes Shigure can live up to his reputation as the Surgeon of the Damned. He absolutely refuses to have another century of confusing not-memory dreams and random flashes of vivid emotion that he cannot figure rhyme or reason for.

If the stone was suppressing these – echoes, for lack of a better term, then he thinks he wants to learn how to control his own mind before he finds it. He will not give himself a crutch, a weakness for enemies to exploit.

He pushes open the metal door to face a tall back complete with high ponytail and muscled arms. The male hasn't turned around, though Hiei has been (comparatively, for him anyway) noisy enough to politely announce his arrival, something he usually doesn't bother with. His hands don't stop moving; from the back view and with the help of smells, Hiei can guess that he's polishing something, but not see what it is.

The deliberate lack of reaction is a clear non-verbal message – you're not worth the effort needed to acknowledge you, not near dangerous enough.

He understands the truth of that in his bones. Doesn't stop it from rankling.

He displays nothing in body or voice, merely states his purpose, and who he seeks. If this is Shigure, all well and good. If not, he doesn't care to waste his time with this male.

The male who still hasn't reacted at all.

Angry, knowing he is being baited, Hiei can't stop himself: "Did you hear what I said?"

A pause. The male turns, slowly, a tinkling bell accompanying the movement, and faces him, taking in the fire demon half his size in one observant glance that records and dissects but gives nothing away, before turning back to his work. But he's talking now, so that's something.

Even if it's just more insults.

"A scrawny little groundling like you isn't cut out for that kind of suffering." The tone is clinical, and that makes the follow up even worse: "Now, run along home."
Hiei's eyes widen at the insult. How *dare* this peon *insinuate*, without *any* information—

"You're not hurt, are you…scaredy-cat?"

An orange clad arm, a bleeding hand filled with poison – a kunai stabbed straight through the back and the palm –

He comes back to momentarily bewildering pain—when did he get hurt?—and realizes he's shoved his katana through his weaker hand.

"I'm sure that I can handle it," he spits at the staring surgeon, and withdraws the blade in the next moment.

He refuses to let another one of these false echoes ruin a single more fight with blackouts midway through. Particularly since a lot of them seem to involve calling him names.

Shigure – and who else could it be, after all – stares at him for a moment, then nods and turns back to the strange chin hook he was cleaning, beginning to negotiate his next terms, now that Hiei's proved his tolerance for pain: "There's one more condition. I will only agree to operate on those who have lived a life that holds my interest. I'm not about to waste my talents on some insufferable boor, so you'd better have a decent story to tell. So, let's hear it."

…This Shigure is *good*. He gives nothing away at all. It's annoying, but impressive. Or it would be if Hiei didn't have other things to be doing.

He snorts. Might as well get it out of the way.

A story, huh? He'll give him a story.

"You may regret this after I'm finished," he warns bitterly. "In fact, just thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach."

Shigure turns his ear toward him, the light reflecting off the jewelry momentarily making Hiei hallucinate spectacles that aren't there.

Yeah. He didn't think that would put the sadist off either.

Despite his naturally taciturn nature, Hiei is aware of the threat that, should the story be boring, Shigure will turn him down flat and nothing will change his mind. He forces himself to draw the story out in detail, managing to surprise himself with the seven hours he spins it into (it would probably boil down to two hours if he kept to the brief summary of his background and purpose that he'd initially planned on, but that would have left out most of the twenty-plus decades he spent getting here).

He does not mention the echoes. Maybe he should, given the possible medical factor – but something holds him back. He may need Shigure's services, but he is nowhere near trusting the man.

( Particularly when he keeps hallucinating the man's face altered by either glasses or purple eyeliner, in a few cases both, and the level of distrust increases with every mirage he has to shake off.)

In the end, even he isn't sure why the surgeon finally stands at the end and motions him into the operating room.

Being strapped down with restraints goes against every instinct he has, but he submits, grudgingly
brain-connected surgery such as a new eye would require the anesthetic to be left off, anyway (not that he'd take anything that dulled the security of his senses to begin with), and that means he has to be stopped from flinching somehow.

If worst comes to worst, he'll draw the heat away from the cuffs until they ice and break. Not as quick as fire, but he knows these are fire proof.

Then the knife comes down.

The first stage is opening a hole. It is similar to the pain of a sword through his hand, if much slower and drawn out, and far more painful – he can see why Shigure has pain as one of his pretests. Still, it's manageable, even if he's glad for the leather strip he's received to bite.

The second is removing tissue to make a place for the new eye – and suppressing his regeneration from healing it before the job is done. The resulting sensation is similar in form to the one time Hiei was caught in a desert sandstorm without shelter and a cloak already badly damaged from a fight: an endless scouring of the exposed tissue, somewhat less so for the covered bits, and a fire that has nothing to do with heat and so leaving him with no inborn protection from the resulting burns as his outside is slowly scraped away. The only difference this time is that it's concentrated on his forehead and skull rather than his whole body. He's honestly not sure if that improves the experience or not. Still, he grits his teeth; hell, if he could risk opening his mouth without risking biting something important at an unexpected sensation, he might even ask what all the buildup was about.

The third stage is implanting the Jagan and bonding the tissue to its new home – and inducing his body to accept it.

If the first two stages are battering rams, opening doors in his natural protection, the third agony is a bit of quiet, cool and calm.

For the fifteen seconds it takes the surgeon to stop his scalpel, reach for the implant, and lay it in its new home.

Hiei usually has a millionth of an instant of sensory flicker in-and-out as a warning to one of his echoes, and unless he's dreaming, they come one at a time, usually in contexts that make no sense, unless it's possible motivation for fighting (which isn't needed if that's the case, so why –?)

The third wave's calm is a prelude to a tsunami, and it has no warning but words

*I'm sorry, Sasuke. There won't be a next time.*

Emotional agony of a level of passion the adolescent fire demon has never felt breaks through his too slow, too weak, too hastily erected mental barriers with the force of an glacier's inevitability on a hut of twigs, bound up in the package of ten thousand echoes at once.

Hiei's vision goes white as his mind totters, unable to process them fast enough to recover.

He screams.

*I have never before or since experienced the level of flesh-searing pain that was inflicted on me that day.*

- Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: The Secret of the Jagan
Aaaaaaand it's here. Crossover fans, we have arrived! Please suggest significant Sasuke development moments for me to use, people!

Next Time: The tsunami of memories overwhelms Hiei.
Here's your one-day late Valentine's Day present. I have agonized over this chapter, and I'm still not quite satisfied with it. But any further changes do not feel like they improve it. So…here you are. Enjoy.

And I really would appreciate reviews on this chapter in particular. Hint, Hint. Even one sentence or two. Thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I wasn't born to walk on water
I wasn't born to sack and slaughter
But on my soul, I wasn't born
To stoop, to scorn, and knuckle under
A man can learn to steal some thunder
A man can learn to work some wonder
But when the gauntlet's down,
It's time to rise and climb the sky

And soon the moon will smoulder
And the winds will drive
Yes, a man grows older but his soul remains alive
All those tremulous stars still glitter
I will survive!
Let my heart grow colder and as bitter as a falcon in the dive

There was a dream, a dying ember
There was a dream - I don't remember
But I will resurrect that dream
Though rivers stream and hills grow steeper
For here in hell where life gets cheaper
Oh, here in hell the blood runs deeper
And when the final duel is near
I'll lift my spear and fly

Piercing into the sky and higher
And the strong will thrive
Yes, the weak will cower while the fittest will survive
If we wait for the darkest hour
Till we spring alive
Then with claws of fire, we devour like a falcon in the dive!

- excerpt from 'Falcon in the Dive,' sung by Chauvelin, The Scarlet Pimpernel

Chapter 7: Falcon in the Dive

The sharpness of fingers clenched around his eyeball getitoutgetoutoutoutnow switches abruptly to a finger poke on the forehead –
"Sorry, Sasuke; maybe next time" –

Sasuke? That's the same name he was called before, but who –

*Red eyes with black spirals open slow as a rising sunset* getawaygetawayNOW but he can't move and he's falling so far –

The lights of the operating room flicker. Is this a hospital or a lab?

But no, it's lights on the surface of a lake still steaming with heat as his lungs heave with the fire they've expelled, and he turns in pleasure to stare at his father behind him –

"I will say one thing: From now on, walk your own path, not in the footsteps of your brother."

Brother? He doesn't have a brother... does he? And he never knew his father, was exiled for the man's existence and part in Hiei's creation –

Hina's face appears and then *it's a woman with long black hair, just like his, and a sweet face that tends to smile, but right now is serious with sympathy.*

"That's not it... Your father is the representative of the whole clan... if the clan is in a bad position, he must protect it. Itachi is the older of the two of you... the job of looking after the clan must be left to him..." –

Mikoto and Fugaku – those are the names on the tip of his tongue. Sasuke's parents, who he has never met was raised by since the day they brought him home from the hospital and the only person cooler than them is his big brother Itachi, who is the acknowledge genius that Sasuke has to catch up to – "keep this up and you'll be just like your big brother" – oh make up your mind didn't you just say not to follow him but no this is earlier –

His name is Hiei, not Sasuke! He doesn't know any Itachi!

– *A boy with angry red eyes and black spirals, hair tied back in a pony tail, three men sprawled around him on the ground – a man, face obscured by the cloak sprinkled with bloody clouds, holding him up by the neck and glaring – A boy in black clothes and white armor, their home empty except for the two of them and bloody corpses littering the streets, spatters of bright red in a black and white world and they're everywhere –*

"You and I are flesh and blood. I'm always going to be there for you, even if it's only as an obstacle for you to overcome, even if you hate me... that's what big brothers are for."

"There is no value in killing the likes of you... my foolish little brother... if you wish to kill me, curse me! Hate me! And survive in the most unsightly way. Run, run and clinging to life..."

"You still lack hatred." –

There's a knife scraping his brain with a white-hot flame, and lava running through his veins, from the teeth of the eyeshadow freak shemale he bit my neck, but not to tear out my jugular, why and then the nightmares are starting all over again because you're nothing but a weakling! And though he can outrun fangirls, he can't outrun this guy and now his teammates are going to die just two more people he couldn't save no no no!

He can't save anyone, can he.
Save? Since when is he focused on saving?

"My name is Sasuke Uchiha. I hate a lot of things, and I don't particularly like anything. What I have is not a dream, because I will make it a reality.

"I'm going to restore my clan, and kill a certain man."

Not an imiko, then, if Sasuke can hope to actually find a mate who will willingly give him offspring. And the certain man sounds like Itachi.

His sword is pierced through the redhaired girl and the man behind her. The traitor who ordered his thirteen year old brother to kill the rest of the Uchiha – and offered Sasuke's life as the carrot. Danzo.

He may have killed Itachi blindly, but now that he knows the truth, he will make sure the whole world knows what his brother did to save their undeserving existence before he makes it burn.

The pictures start to fly faster.

A masked man, telling him the truth he doesn't want to hear, but it explains so so much, and his older brother still existed oh god he's dead he's dead Itachi's dead and the blood is on Sasuke's hands on his face on his blade get it off off off off NOW he has to make this right, has to burn them to the ground, has to make sure this never happens again –

"Those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash." Is Kakashi enjoying reinforcing the memo in their head by putting them on garbage collection duty? –

"I… I love you with all my heart…" no you don't you don't know the meaning of love shut up "I would do anything for you so … please just stay with me!" don't you see that the kindest thing I can do is leave?! "Sakura… thank you." and he knocks her out. –

The golden haired boy, carrying a swirl of ki in one hand, while Sasuke's arm is wrapped in lightning. They leap from a hospital roof, and meet in midair in a waterfall valley, bodies changed with faces more animalistic, and wings flapping behind Sasuke's back while an orange battle aura envelops what he can only assume to be a kitsune hanyou.

There are two paths.

One ends with the boy, human once more, impaled on Sasuke's arm.

The other ends with them, older once more, and Sasuke doubly skerewered on Tenten's blade and Naruto Rasenshuiken. He intentionally stepped in the way of the first. He got in the way of the second when Naruto tried to push him away, thinking Sasuke was about to attack her.


Which is true?

And finally, there's Itachi, his face peeling away as the reincarnation jutsu ends.
"I failed. I won't put myself above you and tell you this and that, it's too late. So this time, for once, let me tell you one small truth.

"It's alright if you never forgive me.

"But no matter what, I will always love you."

And he spirals away to consciousness, and a world that makes no sense at all, and far too much.

…When Hiei wished for answers, he decides, he should have remembered to be careful when tempting fate.

Chapter End Notes

… Memories acquired. If not exactly sorted.

Next time: Hiei recovers from his surgery, attempts to sort out his identity, and reprioritize his life.
Chapter Notes

Last update before exams. Long (and hopefully interesting) author's note at the end. Enjoy!

_The snow of yesterday_

_that fell like cherry petals_

_is water once again._

- Gozan, Japanese haiku poet

**Chapter 8: The Snow of Yesterday**

He awakens to a grey ceiling full of pipes, the lab table underneath him, and has to blink a few times to reestablish depth perception. His forehead is tightly bandaged, his skull is pounding. He blinks again, preferring not to let his eyes water. There is a strange whistle coming through the window.

He feels extraordinarily weak, as though all his chakra – no, his _youki_, his demon energy, had been drained from him. Ah, well. Shigure warned him of the physical cost of the surgery beforehand. His A-Class power is gone – there is passing amusement at the similarity of the Makai and Shinobi in their power-grading system – and he is now back at D-Class.

Ah, well. He never did take the chuunin exam, so he was always technically a Genin.

…Which is not a relevant point to Hiei. Just to Sasuke. And Hiei is not Sasuke, hasn't been for several centuries.

He doesn't have to touch the bandages to identify them, having secured his hair similarly prior to his battle with Itachi. There is a soft ache at the reminiscence; Hiei pushes it aside.

He sits up, and sees his cloak, boots, and sword lying at his feet. Good. It's time he moved on. As little as he likes to admit it, he may well be about to have a breakdown, and he can't do that in unsafe territory.

As he opens the door to the outside, he hears the strange whistle in the air, abruptly cutting off as a circular, edged ring with a grip at one point ends its flight path in the surgeon's hand.

"And what do you call that monstrosity?" He has no real curiosity in the matter, simple absentminded questioning. His head is still pounding, but the only physical acknowledgment of the pain is in his slower than usual walk, ensuring he keeps his balance rather than totter like a drunkard. The question is simply a method to deflect attention from himself.

"It's a phosphorous ring sword, made from the bones of the wild oxen that roam through the forests of the Makai," Shigure explains, turning to better display the blade – not quite half as thick as Zabuza and Suigetsu's massive cleaver, but bizarre enough to deserve a place as a weapon.
alongside those made for the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, Hiei decides, ambling closer to the edge of the clearing—

"What are you doing?" As with most questions Shigure asks, it sounds more like a statement.

Hiei turns his head only barely over his shoulder. "I have what I came for. And now I'm leaving." It's the way he's always operated, always walking the path of the loner even when surrounded by companions. If they try to get too close, he leaves.

"The Jagan operation has drained you of almost all your youki." It's a matter of fact statement, as if inquiring which brand of tea would be preferred; Shigure shows no hint of care, just curiosity. "If you attempt to brave the woods now, you will most certainly be killed."

"…That's not your concern." Because it isn't. Any more than Sasuke's leaving was Sakura's or Naruto's – and if a tiny voice whispers liar at the comparison, he can't do anything but ignore it right now.

Shigure may be right about his chances for physical survival, but Hiei can't stay here with nothing to do, with a man he doesn't trust. He needs his mind intact, especially since he can feel something stirring in the back of it. And he cannot afford to have a flashback to Orochimaru in front of this doctor.

"If you stay, I'll let you learn my sword technique."

Hiei takes two more steps before freezing as the words sink in. He turns, knowing his face is displaying more sullen scowling than he's allowed it to openly wear for decades. "Why should I?" He probably sounds like a petulant child, challenging the need to sleep, but he is too tired to care, at least right now.

Shigure's gaze is neutral, only the barest hint of passion for his kenjutsu still in his gaze. "If I'd just had a Jagan implanted, I would want to survive long enough to use it."

If it wasn't a swordsmaster as well as a surgeon talking to him in that moment, neither side of Hiei's still shaky identity would listen.

Years later, he's still not sure why he listened to a man who reminded him so much of one of his truly awful decisions, of a man who manipulated him like a pawn.

Maybe it's the wish to soothe his aching mind in the surety of his katas, and the offer of a teacher to guide him through them. Realigning his body and mind is a good mental and physical therapy no matter what the circumstances after an injury.

Perhaps it's the exhaustion that he knows will kill him before any foe.

Perhaps it's his insatiable desire for useful knowledge cropping up again, as it always does at the worst times.

Or perhaps it's the memory of his elder brother's smile, and the feeling of a ghostly poke to a forehead.

Or maybe he's just run out of reasons for arguing besides fighting for the sake of it. And as much as it makes him mentally snarl, he knows that never turns out well for him.

Whatever the reason, he will spend the next three moons training his mind and body in that clearing, his identity latched to the role of temporary student as he slowly sorts through the rest of the debris of memories.
He learns to use the Jagan, mastering its use just as much as the Sharingan, With its help, he can spend his nights organizing the flashback dreams as they come, rather than wading through them in confusion and waking up with a headache from frustration. Now that he knows the outline of the life, piecing the details together comes easier. Each morning, he runs through his memories as Hiei, reaffirming his own identity.

He refuses to let himself fall into Sasuke's habits. Sasuke was a pawn, a powerful one for a human, but a pawn nonetheless, unable to function without master or goal for long. He knew that the moment he remembered that Sasuke had intentionally provoked a grief-mad weapons mistress into charging him with her own blade, then turned his own sword aside at the last minute to impale himself on it.

Hiei has been relying on himself since the day he was born. He makes his own goals, his own dreams, his own strength. He bows to no one, living, dead, or memory. He seeks not perfection (a synonym for stagnation) but rather continuous improvement.

Sasuke never really grew up from that little boy looking for someone to blame, to kill so the world would become right again. Even when the only one left to blame was himself, the Uchiha fought for revenge and death.

Hiei has been growing up since the day he was ripped from his mother within moments of birth. He has never had the option to sleep heavily in safety, trusting the honor of his enemies to let him nap without attempting to kill him. He has always gathered his own food, always looked his kills in the eye even if he stabs from the back. He has always had his goals, and the first of them has always been a refusal to die.

If he didn't have the memories, Hiei is certain he could never have believed in the existence of a person who chose to fight for his own death.

He still cannot comprehend making such a choice, consciously or unconsciously.

Probably something human, then. Good thing he's not that pathetic anymore.

Really, the only worthwhile thing about that human was his focus on revenge, and that's admirable until Sasuke reached the point of tunnel vision, and completely unacceptable once he first considered killing himself if it meant he could take his foes to hell with him.

Hiei knows killing one's foes is only the first step. You have to be alive in order to piss on their grave.

Oh, yes. He's got his head sorted; now he can use the Jagan to start searching for their precious untainted-by-males island in the sky. And he will find it. And then the ice maidens will die, killed by their prophesized doom incarnate. And they will have no one to blame but themselves. He will make certain they know that, before the end.

Hiei will make the glaciers *quake* with his gleeful triumph.

xxx

"Give me honorable enemies rather than ambitious ones, and I'll sleep more easily by night." - Jaime Lannister, from *A Game of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin

xxx

*I'm not sure why I decided to stay. I suppose deep down I knew he was right. A night alone in
those woods would have been the end of me. And at the very least, I could steal his fighting technique. [Pause] I never thought our paths would meet again. And still, it seems fitting that I should die by his sword.

- Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: Secret of the Jagan Eye

Next Time: The Glacier Village

Bonus AN:

First, a story rec: A Traitor's Play, by frznlights, on fanfiction.net. Harry Potter/Naruto X-over, featuring a Snape reborn as Sasuke. Very well thought out. Enjoy!

Second, an explanation for last chapter's revelations.

I usually make a practice of privately replying to my reviews, but the last chapter's only review (on fanfiction.net) required a very thorough response, one which I thought merited posting the explanation since it helped me create a large part of this chapter. Includes explanation about Hiei's memory format, and also something of why I chose to use these characters in the first place, and how they are similar and different. Long, but hopefully useful. Let me know what you think.

Warning for potential spoilers for Shinobi World War arc…but you already knew that.

Reviewer Akayuki Sawada, on Chapter 7: ... Wow. This will not be easy to recover from. Sasuke and Hiei were very alike, and both could have chosen the other path. Isn't it a bit ironic, that the human chose revenge, and the demon life?

Answer: First of all, thanks for your faithful reviewing. It's very much appreciated and looked forward to, at this point.

Second, you're right, this isn't going to be easy. Hiei has just had the equivalent of a library card catalogue dumped in his head, with instant access to the books the second he picks up a card. Only this card catalogue? Somebody opened all the drawers, dumped the contents on the floor, swept them into a pile like leaves in autumn, jumped in said pile like a little kid to scatter them, repeated the sweeping and jumping several times-and then refilled the drawers with the cards, in the order of whatever-comes-to-hand-first.

Hiei's got the memories, but they're not in order. While he now has a somewhat more general idea of said order than when he was just receiving flashbacks through his dreams, and the Jagan will help with the whole sorting business, he still needs to proceed through them. On the plus side, he's had several centuries to form his own sense of identity, goals, values, and things he needs to accomplish. Which means he isn't going to try to get back home.

It's not like he really has anything left there.

In Canon!Naruto, after he killed his brother but before he found out the truth, Sasuke was left feeling rather empty. He was very good at planning and acting while he had a goal, but without it, he's left drifting. Until someone gives him a new goal and he latches onto it like a leech. Which is
a repeated pattern, by the way - He starts out trying to prove himself to his father, but after being
told not to follow his brother any more, he's left rather confused. He still craves approval, though,
so he keeps up his training regime and the focus on pleasing his father and family head out of
habit. When Itachi destroys the clan, there is no one left to please. I fully believe that Itachi got
him focused on revenge, knowing exactly how Sasuke would tunnel vision when given a goal,
with at least the partial intent to prevent Sasuke from becoming so aimless he would attempt
suicide to follow his relatives - and by offering this goal himself, as someone Sasuke had respected
and sought to please, Itachi made it clear in some form that he thinks Sasuke can do it. When told
the truth about his brother, Sasuke refocused his goal of revenge to go after those responsible.

He's never really been able to grow up from that little boy, who is looking for someone else to
blame but always somewhat turning the blame on himself, too self-centered still to be able to not
relate something back to himself.

My Sasuke diverges from Cannon after that last conversation with Zombie!Itachi. With a focus on
protecting children and keeping the Uchiha situation from ever happening again, he chose to give
the information he'd learned to one of Naruto's clones in written form, via one of his summons,
after he'd hunted down and killed all but one of those responsible for participating in and
instigating that night. (Including Tobi and Madara, by the way, but not in such a way that people
would know he'd done it.) With Danzo's use of Uchiha eyes and Orochimaru's fascination with
the perfect vessel, Sasuke decided to never have children or risk the genes being passed on, or
even keep himself around. He therefore made sure that the last person he killed was one of
Danzo's lesser known spies - a spy closely connected to Tenten, by the way (don't bother looking
for said spy, she's an OC Plot point) - and then, when she came hunting for him, he faked enough
of a fight to get Naruto's attention, then deliberately made a mistake while Tenten was still mad
enough that she wouldn't see he was using her in a suicide-by-cop.

Hiei, on the other hand, has grown up in a life where he has always expected betrayal, is very self-
sufficient, and fully able to decide and act on his own goals and evaluate others. He is now much
more aware of the risk of being manipulated by those more powerful than him, and even more
determined not to let anyone close to him lest they be used for manipulation.

It's not so much that Sasuke chose death and Hiei chooses life. Rather, it's that they're both
fighters. But Sasuke couldn't conceive of a world that had Uchihas in it, had a place for him, when
he was already so broken and tainted - he couldn't see an option where life existed as being
remotely powerful. Plus, he's a bit of a drama king, so glamorous suicide is good - he fought for
revenge and then death before he could harm anyone else. Hiei, on the other hand, has been
dealing with people who wanted him dead, for no reason he could understand as remotely valid,
since the moment he was born. He cannot conceive the notion that someone might want to choose
death, because that would mean that his enemies win. He doesn't know how to stop fighting.

That, and at the moment, he doesn't really think much of humans (and thinks that Sasuke is a
particularly pathetic example) so he will do everything he can to show that he's nothing like his
past self. So, he is somewhat choosing revenge. Just a very different form of it, where the best
revenge is living well. And Hiei intends to live very well indeed.

…It will take a while before he realizes he's internalized his memories of Itachi as something of a
moral guideline, as well as Naruto and Sakura to some extent. And even longer before he'll admit
he's not just looking at those memories as a list of what *not* to do.

Thanks a lot for adding this to your favorites. It's very confidence boosting.
Beat upward to God's throne

Chapter Summary

Warnings for discussion of death, abandonment, and possible passive suicide.

Chapter Notes

Have received my first flame. Find it oddly amusing--a Sasuke loving scum writer, really? Still prefer constructive criticism.

We come closer and closer to cannon. Memories mingle. Fewer crossover elements here, as Hiei gets some news and has to make decisions.

Warnings for discussion of death, abandonment, and possible passive suicide this chapter. and mild swearing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;  
That only men incredulous of despair,  
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air  
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access  
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness,  
In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare  
Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare  
Of the absolute heavens. Deep-hearted man, express  
Grief for thy dead in silence like to death—  
Most like a monumental statue set  
In everlasting watch and moveless woe  
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.  
Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:  
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

- Grief, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Chapter 9: Beat upward to God's throne

True to his predictions, once Shigure approves removing the bandages and letting him open the Jagan alone, it's a matter of days before the costly eye finds the place he's looking for.

The stone…not so much.

He tells himself that it's just a matter of time; perhaps it's even for the best that he doesn't see it right now. He doesn't want it getting lost again once he has it, after all. Best to take care of business first, and leave himself as unrecognizable as possible.

Which means no stone to identify him as the Forbidden Child, returned for his prophesized
vengeance.

He is once again grateful to his foster family's teachings. A sky island make winged transport absolutely necessary, and such creatures were the bandits' preferred pets. Finding the island is easy, but Hiei *cannot* fly on his own.

One of the few things he absolutely approves of in the Uchiha lifetime is Sasuke's second summon contract. The memories of flying on the back of his hawk…

Flying outside combat situations was one of the few times the self-proclaimed avenger willingly forgot all thoughts of vengeance, refusing to taint his few memories of absolute freedom with the chains of duty and honor.

Hiei's current mount, of course, is more like a gryphon. Rather than balance on it's back and head, one hand in harness, he rides it like a horse and keeps his legs away from the wings. Not the easiest endeavor, given how short they are. He rarely mourns his lost inches – his small size is a bonus for his fighting style – but he could use a little more to grip the body with now.

Perhaps it's just as well. Sasuke's hawk was a true partner in so many ways. But it was far too large to be even remotely stealthy.

So Hiei forces aside his memories and concentrates on his plan to scan the territory, find a landing spot, and head in for reconnaissance. He didn't exactly have the best viewing spot of the island geography to begin with, and at this point he's been away for so long that even those memories are faded.

It's only when he gets near the village that he realizes the flaw in this plan.

He's never, not once, done stealthy in this life in an area he's already familiar with. And rarely in this sort of territory.

He is spotted almost immediately.

It's his own fault for stopping dead in his tracks for an instant when he sees the woman from the back. For a moment, he thinks it's *her*, the woman who kicked and screamed for him even as he was dropped.

Then she turns her head and sees him.

There's no recognition in her eyes. Nothing familiar in her scent or face.

This is not anyone he has ever met.

Pure terror fills her face, though he has made no move. She drops her basket and runs toward one of the houses, shooing a girl-child ahead of her and slamming the door.

Hiei cannot believe the feelings of fear and timidity coming off her. Nor that the thoughts he catches, all connected as they are, *stranger-male-Fear-Danger-HidehidehideNOW*, are the only thing she thinks of. Pushing her child inside and away, he can understand. Following after her, and seeking no defense for either of them but to hide and hope he would go away?

He does not understand.

His feet move of their own accord, taking him further into the village on an open, leisurely stroll. All he sees are young women his mother's age and children probably as old as him – and still treated like children.
Sasuke, don't come in!

No elders to punish anywhere.

Strangely, while he can feel and identify fear, protectiveness, pride, anger, panic, and some other emotions he does not know from their minds, there are none of the emotions generally classified as 'warm.' Or if there are, they don't feel warm.

Once again, he is struck by the image of stone gods, permanently bound in one apparent form of emotion, be it peace or battle or carnal rapture, but without a heart or brain to give truth, or life, to the image.

Statues. These people are living statues. Ice, not stone, but just as unable to feel. Except when threatened by a flaw, a crack.

He is struck by a sudden image of them fearing his sparks will catch and melt them.

He is also aware that he cannot do this job.

There's no point in killing people just for the sake of killing.

Itachi killed a family he loved because they were about to recreate a war he hated. He killed out of orders and loyalty, and to save his precious little brother.

Sasuke never really had a chance to figure out what that was like, to have a precious person. His automatic life-saving shove at the bridge on Team 7’s first mission doesn't count – the Uchiha Massacre was discussed, considered, planned, not a spontaneous sacrifice but a deliberate one. Nor was there a chance afterwards to build a relationship that might require a deliberate sacrifice. Sasuke was too out of practice with people, Naruto and Sakura were too pushy, and then Orochimaru's seal happened, and Naruto seemed to be madly outpacing him, and Itachi showed up – that path was over before it had a chance to bud, let alone bloom.

Sasuke once planned to be a father, even when he thought girls were icky, because at least that meant he could surround himself with Uchiha. Maybe with Karin, once they'd finished with Itachi – she might tease and fawn like a fangirl, but she wasn't going to disobey his orders and do something stupid to save him in a sacrifice play, either. Mainly, though, she was another final survivor, and she knew what was important if something happened again. The kids, plus an adult to protect them if possible, but kids first.

Sasuke didn't love Karin, but he might have learned to care for her somewhat in the way she hoped. And he would definitely have loved his kids, if he was capable of it (he wasn't sure, he might be too emotionally crippled to manage it), and he would have cared even if he couldn't love them. Yes, he could have had a family with Karin – after all, she was the only girl he’d met who both claimed to like him, and honestly didn't care if he couldn't talk about feelings besides hatred and vengeance. That she willingly called him out when he was deliberately being more of an ass than usual was an excellent bonus.

Only then he found out the truth about the Uchiha, and refused to ever risk it again, with Karin or Sakura or anyone.

Hiei is imiko, forbidden. No one would risk him as a mate; hybrids often do well, but hybrids’ children do not always. He will never have a family. He accepted that centuries ago after the bandits kicked him out.

He wishes his memories hadn't brought back those wishes.
This village is not what he would call a true village in anything but physical form. These families are not what he would call families, not when he cannot feel any emotion of love or devotion that precludes selfish self-preservation.

But he cannot kill these mothers, cannot orphan these children. And he cannot kill the elders without turning them all against him. Emotionless creatures are not as dangerous, but that can still be very dangerous if provoked. Hiei has no intention to start a battle he has no reason to fight.

He will do nothing, because they are nothing to him. They may be the image of perfection, but that's all they are, an image. Perfection? More like stagnation.

_I don't think something like perfection exists_, Itachi's voice murmurs from a memory. _That is why I think we are born able to absorb things and by comparing ourselves with something else, we can finally head in a good direction._

Wise words, for a human. Hiei can even agree with them somewhat.

It's a cruel mercy, to leave them alive, one they won't even be truly grateful for. Perhaps it's the best revenge to deny their expectations, though.

Even if every instinct he possess is screaming at him that a dead enemy can't get up and put a knife in your back later, so _why in the nine hells is he leaving them alive when he's let them see him?_!

Fair point. A compromise, then?

He'll keep an ear on the place once he leaves, he decides. If he hears there's another case such as his, or even anything being tossed off the island, he'll come back then and stop them. Permanently. A clean job. But apparently he's too stuck in the shinobi mindset still to do it without more recent provocation.

Or maybe he's just refusing to fall into a Sasuke-pattern. Which killing them out of revenge would risk.

Whatever. He's nothing like that damned human. No matter if they do both like winged beasts. And fire. And swords. And – _damnit. This is Itachi's fault somehow, I know it._

Abruptly he hears familiar voices from the clearing ahead; he's left the village and is in the forest. Dampening his power until it is woven into the forest, he strains his ears.

" – Rui, you must look after these while I'm gone."

A voice cracked with age and hoarfrost. It's neutral now, not cold with deadly malice or sugared with pretend sympathy. Leaving somewhere? Maybe he can ambush her if she's journeying beyond the island. Should he, or should he leave her alone? If he reveals himself to her, he must kill her, or she will hunt him forever to stop a vengeance that now will never come.

"Yes, elder, I won't let you down, I promise."

A young woman, calm and respectful as always, mature with adulthood and hard decisions, serene even when she was sad. The voice that asked Hiei to slay her first when he returned to massacre them, and masked her emotions with politeness. His first direct mental contact in this life.

"I shall return on the Solstice."

"Have a safe journey."
The kōrime that ordered his murder picks her path away. The one that tossed him over the edge and offered her life for the deed stares after her leader.

It is more important to speak with Rui while she is alone, and will not raise the alarm, he decides.

Sensing the elder going beyond the range of his Jagan, he deliberately crunches snow with his next step.

She whirls with a gasp, and immediately starts stepping backwards. Just like every other person here.

Honestly, just how scary do they find a male, to flee from a short one of unidentified type? Okay, a short male who managed to find his way up to their impenetrable paradise. Maybe it's understandable, even if he's D-Class at the moment.

"Don't be afraid." He tries to sound soothing, but it comes out as curt. Sakura's voice chides him mentally for his lack of bedside manner, while Naruto's voice snickers. Great. He's imagining their presence in his head. He does what usually works with their real life counterparts and ignores them. "I won't hurt you." That's better, a little more clear sincerity if not soothing.

She's stopped walking backwards, so maybe it worked? For now, anyway. He'll take what he can get.

"I'm looking for a woman I used to know named Hina." He has no idea who his father was, or what he looked like. Hopefully Rui doesn't either. It seems safer than his own identity, at any rate, if he's assumed to be looking for an old lover.

Rui swallows, but nods, and beckons him, turning to another direction. Away from the village.

Has his mother been exiled? Or is this a trap? He keeps his guard up.

Then she leads him to a cemetery. To an ice pillar with Hina's name.

Oh.

Grief and numb shock mix with denial for a single instant. He allows the memories to confuse him for once, mingling acceptance of Mikoto's loss with the discovery of this new loss, refusing to let himself cry. He dares not give himself away with stone tears.

"She – didn't want to go on. Not after she gave birth to a son who the elders chose to exile immediately. She was already weak from the birth. I think she just – gave up. When all her fighting hadn't been enough to save him." Rui's voice is somewhere distant, even though she stands just out of one sword-thrust's reach behind him to his left. "She stopped going outside or eating. She sat close to the fire always, as if trying to recapture his warmth. One day, she sat down there and never got up again."

Suicide, then. From a woman who felt she had nothing to live for.

"Hina also had a younger daughter that she named Yukina."

His posture does not change, but his mind snaps up, even as his mind goes blank. The Jagan is recording this, engraving it into his memory.

He has a sister?!

A younger sister.
He's an older brother.

"And she was the most gentle, beautiful baby that any of us in the Glacial Village had ever seen."

Itachi must be laughing his head off somewhere, Hiei is certain of it, even as a picture from Rui's memory paints itself into his. A happy, laughing girl-child, cheeks still round with baby fat.

Pink skin, not blue or green. Ice green hair.

And red eyes.

Manda and Ten-tails and Raizen's growling stomach. He's not just an older brother, he's a twin.

His mind snaps onto another point – his mother died while she still had a child that needed her to care for it? Suddenly he is much more disappointed in the grave. More like Fugaku than Mikoto, perhaps, if she could focus on one child to the exclusion of the other.

He'd better take a look at Yukina. He might be a killer, but he takes his responsibilities seriously. He can't just abandon her now that he knows about her. Not when Sasuke's memories and his own both offer clear evidence of what that kind of abandonment does to a person. Time to ask to see her, then, and hope Rui will cooperate.

"A few years ago, she suddenly disappeared, without so much as a word. And none of us has ever heard from her since."

Hiei gets an image of a young woman, his age, her back turned to Rui as she packs. Not the full truth, he sees; Rui told her about her brother and allowed her to leave in search of him.

A sheltered ice maiden who makes friends with nature, wears a restrictive kimono, hasn't finished training as a healer, and has no idea how to fight. And is out on a wild goose chase with far too little information.

Has he mentioned that he utterly despises Itachi? Because this is Itachi's Fault. Hiei is certain of it. Once-brother or not, the man had a sadistic sense of humor. And he would think it funny, putting his one-time little brother into the position of protective elder to oblivious younger sibling, while said younger sibling just wants to chase him. Even if Yukina doesn't know it's him.

Damn it to hell.

He's not nearly noble or foolish enough to play Itachi. And yet, it looks like that's all he can do.

He's a touch rough, perhaps, as he greedily plucks the information on his sister and copies it from Rui's mind; she gasps at the touch.

Time to go.

He walks away, forcing himself not to break into a run.

Another flash of memory: he's looking at himself, a baby wrapped in ofuda, with only a tear gem to his name.

She knows.

She gasps. "Wait a minute. Hina was your mother, wasn't she? You're the one, aren't you?!" He hears her trip. Stupid, trying to run in a furisode, even if there's nothing for the sleeves to catch on.
"I am so sorry for what I've done to you." She's weeping into the snow where she's fallen.

He keeps walking, looking neither left or right.

He has a purpose once more.

He's not going to fail this time. Not if he can help it. Because this time, someone's depending on him.

* x * x *

My mother's people were a gloomy, timid race. It seemed as if ice was pumping through their veins instead of blood, like their spirits had been frozen, and they were incapable of love. My impulse to kill faded. They were already dead.

– Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: Secret of the Jagan Eye

After I found out about Yukina, a new search began. I knew I would never be able to rest until I found her. [Pause] I sensed that she was somewhere in Human World.

– Hiei, YuYu Hakusho, Episode 100: Secret of the Jagan Eye

Chapter End Notes

Hina dies after giving birth in the manga, but commits suicide in the anime. I chose to combine the two by having her choose to starve to death out of depression. It seemed like something Hiei would consider suicide and cowardly.

As for him cursing out Itachi…ever heard of the idea that grandparents find it amusing when their grandkids put their children through the same hell they went through raising them? 'May you have a child just like you,' indeed. Hiei must now consider exactly how hard Itachi had to work to keep Sasuke alive and safely oblivious – and now he gets an in-perspective view of why. He'll be considering what to do about it all next chapter.

Next time: a new search begins, and a new purpose for Hiei's life.
Be What You Wish To Be

Chapter Notes

Ok, still not really satisfied with this chapter, but I'm going back to school at the end of the month, and wanted to get this out. Constructive criticism much appreciated.

Shout out to Reyka_Sivao on AO3, whose character study pieces for YYH, particularly Shigure's, were instrumental in finishing this chapter.

Also, I need a beta. If you're interested, please send me a PM.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Little girl, be careful what you say
when you make talk with words, words—
for words are made of syllables
and syllables, child, are made of air—
and air is so thin—air is the breath of God—
air is finer than fire or mist,
finer than water or moonlight,
finer than spider-webs in the moon,
finer than water-flowers in the morning:

and words are strong, too,
stronger than rocks or steel

stronger than potatoes, corn, fish, cattle,
and soft, too, soft as little pigeon eggs,
soft as the music of hummingbird wings.

So, little girl, when you speak greetings,
when you tell jokes, make wishes or prayers,

be careful, be careless, be careful,
be what you wish to be.
- 'Little Girl, Be Careful What You Say' by Carl Sandburg

Chapter 10: Be What You Wish To Be

He doesn't quite remember the process of getting off the island. He knows he used his intended mount, and he remembers first wiping the memories of the villagers who saw him, lest the old hag find out and come after him (a voice like Naruto shouts its disapproval, but Sakura echoes understanding, if not agreement, and Itachi's adherence to security would certainly have demanded it—and the very fact that he's re-reviewing his own choices using their moral guidelines should probably be an alarm bell on his own mental state, one that should necessitate an identity check, but it all seems so very distant at the moment).

He did not wipe Rui's. He isn't sure if that is his form of mercy or revenge on her, to leave her to live with the guilt of her own actions and no executioner to look forward to. Please kill me first,
and he will have to keep that promise if he ever changes his mind about leaving them to their existence; his word is only as good as he keeps it: this state of affairs leaves the promise unfulfilled-as-yet, not broken. But Rui doesn't know that there's potential for altering his decision and must resign herself to life.

(She's about as weak as Hina, both of them desiring death, but neither really having the courage to do anything about it. Hina just let herself go, fully aware that she had responsibilities and not caring about them. Rui may have raised Yukina but the fact that she let her go off so woefully underprepared appears to Hiei, even if he hasn't finished sorting through her memories, just another way of dropping her dependent as quickly as possible – and sending said dependent off to find the axe-man that hadn't come quick enough for her neck when she'd washed it in readiness for his blade. After preparing said child at the moment of exile so he would come back and play the part they'd named him for, hoping for a quick, cleans death as a reward. Can't turn her blade on herself, so she makes another do it. As selfish as Itachi, to make a child kill him. As pathetic as Sasuke, to need another's help and seek his own death.)

(No, he does not care to continue that thought further. He is not Sasuke. Or Uchiha. And he doesn't want to be. He doesn't want that life back. He doesn't.)

He doesn't deserve that thread of hope that came when he heard Yukina's name. He cannot afford to risk caring for someone like that, someone who is the equivalent of a civilian medical student with two self defense classes. He can't.

Because if he loses one more person, to death or memories or the barrier between universes and lives, he will... he will...

He doesn't know what he'll become. But he's certain that, whatever name he calls himself in his thoughts, he wouldn't be there. Because it doesn't matter how much fire you nurture under ground and out of sight, once you go cold like that, you never come back. You don't know how to.

It took a double revelation of Itachi for Sasuke to break into something like sanity. He never broke from the numbness of the shocks, though. He couldn't.

Hiei refuses to be responsible for breaking someone into that state, be it himself or an innocent civilian. Even if he's never met Yukina, his first memory of her was of a smile like a sunrise. He's never seen that before in his lives.

No, that's a lie. He remembers seeing it on Itachi once, when his big brother had just started the academy and came home and agreed to play with the sugar-sweet toddling brat that went by Sasuke instead of starting on his homework immediately.

It's the only smile of Itachi's that isn't a madman's grin, or limited to the eyes, or happiness in a sunset as he enters the freedom of death.

Hiei can understand why Itachi would feel happy in the freedom that only death offers; the clan heir had been increasingly weighted down with chains of obligation and duty to multiple sources, then forced to completely sever some of the bonds that depended on him, in order to keep other responsibilities halfway intact, even if it meant delegating the care of his surviving responsibilities (Sasuke and Konoha and the nations free of international civil war – when he knew the full truth, Sasuke would try not to wonder which ranked higher for Itachi). And then, because Itachi was thirteen and inclined to blaming himself as the most fully informed person, because he was an ANBU captain and a goddamn genius and that meant he should have managed to find a third option that kept everyone alive; he wallowed in guilt because the whole world centered on him and Sasuke and yet he couldn't be comfortably selfish enough to avoid thinking of the big picture and greater good. So Itachi destroyed himself, because he couldn't bear hurting others even when
he had to, and he needed to blame someone, and the only acceptable target was himself. *Death is lighter than a feather; duty, heavier than a mountain.* Small wonder that Itachi smiled at the freedom from the weight that choked him, crushing the air from his lungs.

Hiei can understand that. He just doesn't understand why Itachi could find it acceptable to seek his own death, seek a way out of his responsibilities. Responsibilities don't just disappear because you repay debts or delegate duties or pass on positions or knowledge.

Because as far as he can understand it (at least, what he got from lectures about fighting with his schoolmates or bothering a busy Itachi, or even from eavesdropping on the negotiations for Itachi's marriage prospects – *if he ever got anything from the fangirls' rants or Karin's philosophizing, he'll deny it to the grave and beyond*), love means not just doing what you think is best for the person you care for, but having the kami-damned respect to inform them of your thoughts, listen to theirs, and let them make their own choices, for good or ill. Love means letting other people make mistakes and successes that are their own.

And duty means acknowledging your own mistakes and taking care of them in full yourself. It does *not* mean setting your little brother up to kill you – that might wash out the clan's honor, but Itachi knows their family runs to depressive-aggressive. He shouldn't have assumed Sasuke could deal with the guilt of kinslaying. Particularly when he'd refused to stomach killing his best friend just to get a pair of eyes that might have helped his chances of revenge.

Hiei shoves away the stray question that creates, the terrifying notion that Itachi might have intended the kill of an adoptive brother to ease Sasuke into the idea of actual fratricide.

Enough of Sasuke and Itachi, damn it! He is *Hiei*, and he needs to consider his own lifetime's problems.

His mother is dead, indirect suicide by starvation. His father is unknown, and will almost certainly remain that way. The *kōrime* have no knowledge or evidence of his visit left to them, and Rui will keep her mouth shut, suffering in silence (she is *so very good* at doing that). The dead and the oblivious are not his problem. The living and the half-aware necessitate his attention.

Hiei knows his sister has never left the island before her departure to search for a brother she only knows through reputation and guesses and a single recounted memory. He has no idea where the hell she will be looking for him, either; the Jagan has copied her mental presence from Rui and seeks her through the Makai even as he travels; he'll know soon enough if she's in this realm.

He just hopes she hasn't gotten into any permanently damaging danger. The girl is a half-trained healer, no combat training or practice at using her ice abilities offensively, no knowledge of tracking or hunting or surviving in wilderness or strange cities, and an utter naiveté that will leave her prey to any demon with a lick of street smarts. (And an optimist, too, going off as unprepared as she was and with no way to track down a brother whose survival she had no proof of.) Memories of both lifetimes keep hitting him with images of horror, practices he's long numbed himself too suddenly dipped with disgust, replacing the faces of the victims with Yukina, her eyes wide with pain and shame and terror and, worst of all, the incomprehension of *why?*

Worse still, she's soft hearted with a tendency to cry. And a person that can cry tears of valuable stone is very vulnerable indeed. Hiei trained himself out of crying as soon as he had control over the correct muscles for it, just to remove that all-too-easy chance of recognition.

He didn't ask for this – when has he ever asked for anything like this? His duties in this life have been simple, and if there is ever sadness, it is soon gone from his mind as he focuses on the all-consuming business of the present.
Jerking himself back, Hiei frowns at the forest around him. He doesn't remember getting off the island and back to the plains below. He is certain he dismissed his mount properly; his lack of injury attests to such. But he does not remember doing so. Nor is he certain how he covered the remaining distance from his landing point to Shigure's hut.

Actually, he's not even sure why he's there.

Yes, he owes the surgeon for talking him out of being stupid – not that he'll ever admit it. The surgeon is far too prone to claiming debts as it is, and has been hinting about payment for the sword lessons.

Funny. Hiei had thought said lessons had been proposed as a bribe to keep him from undoing the good of the operation. Sasuke's memories of the medics and scientists with medical skill of his acquaintance, however, are enough of a pressing nuisance that he's not going to argue. No one knows how to best mess you up good like the guy who learned how to put you back together by taking others apart and then stitching up the mess. Pissing off a healer is plain stupid.

Shigure no more qualifies as a healer than Kabuto – all the skills of a master, none of the compassion to complete the title – but the principle stands. You don't piss off a scientist either, particularly not by ruining their work.

So he will settle his 'debt' and go. He can't afford to stick around when all his priorities are mid-shuffle. He needs to sort himself out, in private, and make new plans.

He has made exactly one decision so far – find Yukina, assess her situation, keep an eye on her if all's well, adjust plans if something needs fixing. Further data is necessary before he can make more plans.

He finds Shigure in the clearing, taking advantage of the sunlight to care for his many blades. The ring sword is already cleaned and sharpened, drying in the noon sun; so are half of the scalpels in front of Shigure.

The surgeon looks up at his approach, clinically observing Hiei. Doubtlessly he's cataloguing every visible change in his patient since Hiei left him.

Time to get this over with. The less time he spends here, the better.

"You said I owed you for the sword lessons. What do you want this time?"

Shigure's eyes dance with amusement at the bold request. Hiei notes the glee with unease, and deliberatedly focuses on his physical self. He is a placid lake, free of the ripples from wind; he controls his own reactions firmly; there will be no change in breath or posture, no flicker in his eyes to clue Shigure to his thoughts. The scientist has too much to work with already.

Even the non-reaction is too much; the scientist is already making note of it as he lays his newest scalpel on the cloth to dry and picks up the next one.

"Two things. First, you didn't kill anyone. I want to know why. The second...involves the next person you seek. I'll have the details when I have your answer to the first part. That will be your final payment for the surgery." He picks up his whetstone and sets it spinning, laying the scalpel across its edge.

Hiei mentally flinches at the whirring screech of blade on stone, disruptive agony to his senses. He has full sympathy for Kiba's complaints about Sasuke's fangirls in this life, if their shrieks were anything akin to such a frequency. It will be impossible to lie outright with such a distraction, and very difficult to lie by omission.
Still, he tries. It's not just his safety and privacy on the line after all.

Carefully, he runs through the events of his arrival and first entrance to the village, the first time someone spotted him, the villagers' reactions to him. Though he tries to be clinical, he finds his bewilderment with their emotions creeping in. In a moment when Shigure pauses to check the edge of his wicked little knife, he manages to turn his words to his disgust at their selfish nature, their lack of warm emotions, the utter pointlessness in killing them.

He cannot let Shigure guess at his memories. Not when he has hidden them so well already. The doctor-patient confidentiality is only for civilians, in Sasuke's life, and nonexistent once he left Konoha's gates for Sound. He cannot risk any chance on Shigure having morals.

Then he gets to Rui and the elder, and the news of his mother's suicide. He would like to stop there. He has to stop there. But the physician stares at him coldly, and D-Class demon that he is now, Hiei does not have enough spirit energy to stand up to him.

You are weak. Why are you weak?

Because...you lack... hatred.

Hiei lacks no such thing in this moment, but it cannot save Yukina, not as his traitorous mouth spills the secrets in a flood of words he tries desperately to dam. He spins it as a feeling of responsibility that he seeks her now, and is uncertain how much Shigure believes him. He cannot afford to care, under the surgeon's eye.

He rushes through the end, of wiping his visit from the minds of everyone but Rui, lest they remember and target him in a manhunt, and departing the island. He makes much of his decision that killing them is pointless, because they are already dead in his mind. He dreads the finish, knowing what will come.

If this is the hint of precognition that is a possibility of the Jagan, he does not think he wants it very much at the moment.

When the last words leave him, bleeding out of the open wound he is unfortunate enough to call his mouth, Shigure is silent, absently cleaning his last blade. Hiei, numb with his own discomfort, awaits the sentence.

"So, you wish to seek out your sister?"

He frowns. "It is not a matter of wishing. She is my responsibility; I am the last of her kin, apart from our mother's people who have willingly let her leave." His eyes narrow. "If you think of keeping from that responsibility as your price, forget it. I have little enough honor; I will not sell it so lightly."

Shigure is already shaking his head. "I do not trade in honor, little knife. I trade in irony and blood. By all means, seek out your sister. Protect her. Meet her. Talk to her—" He suddenly straightens, his eyes catching Hiei's before the fire demon can form the thought of blinking, and holds him there, trapped in serpent-worthy hypnotism.

"But you may never tell her who she is to you, who you are to her. You may never call her sister, nor name yourself her brother. Never. Nor may you tell anyone else and have them tell her." Shigure's grin is edged as fine as the blades lying between them on the grass.

Hiei stares at him a moment.
"That's what you want? For me to keep blood ties secret from her?"

That's all?

He doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

(He hasn't wished for a family since the hour he uncovered the true curse of the Sharingan. He didn't need to wish for one in this lifetime; he never cared for his traitorous kōrime blood kin, and he was adopted by the bandits before he could grow lonely. He is a distrustful loner by nature. Sasuke or Hiei, he has walked alone since the night of the massacre, sharing companionship only out of necessity where circumstances required it.)

Were he only Hiei, with no memories of Sasuke, this bargain would seem an easy dream. With Sasuke's memories, he knows exactly how much secrets and lies can poison and twist a life, turn an innocent smile and desire to please into a lust for blood and death and a despairing cry for why, nii-san, why?

(He has no idea how to care for a sibling. He doesn't want a sister, doesn't want to want a sister.)

But Shigure won't change his mind, and Hiei can't let him twist the bargain any further.

(He can't do this.)

"So be it. It seem the decision has been made for me," he murmurs, standing. "I will be everything a brother can be without being the brother she longs for."

(He has to.)

And with the final courtesies out of the way, he jumps into the trees, and bounds away, the poisonous promise snaking through the honor of a man who rarely gives his word but will bend over backward to keep it, breaking his spine before he breaks his oath.

His thoughts on the matter are irrelevant. Hiei reminds himself as the wind of his passing whips the tree branches into frenzy. Itachi left Sasuke behind for the sake and safety of them both, willingly donning the reputation of a kinslaying turncloak to keep his little brother clean of betrayal's taint – but didn't hesitate to stop in Konoha and arrange a personal sighting and battle, just to remind the new temporary heads of government of their promise and his retribution if they broke it.

It's almost easier for Hiei, in this case. Yukina doesn't know anything about him, not even his name. Just their shared parentage and his legacy as a forbidden child.

And Hiei has been cautious. No one knows that he is anything but a fire youkai, if a rather small and slender one. He has tested his vulnerability to both heat and cold in private, but only in private. There is nothing to trace, for her or his enemies.

As long as he keeps the connection secret and only intervenes from a distance to keep her safe (something that the Jagan will make much easier; it doesn't have to be his actions that help her), there's no reason for anyone to target her for him.

He can't be the big brother Itachi was. He wouldn't want to. He never wants to take such life forming decisions out of another person's hands. He never wants to break a child from their childhood the way Sasuke was broken from his. Nor does he want his criminal acts to be put on a pedestal.

(The brother Yukina worships is a blank faced idol Hiei can never begin to live up to, any more
than Itachi could live up to Sasuke's idea of him. Kami save him if she found out the truth and actually started idolizing killing and fighting – he understands very well now why Itachi never wanted to play ninja or practice throwing shruikens, if the flashbacks he's been plagued with were anywhere near as likely to pop up for his aniki."

(It's better she worships a dream. Reality, Hiei knows, is never anything but a disappointment.)

Track down Yukina, confirm her safety and happiness, alter situation as necessary, then let her live her life. It's the only kindness he can give her, and the only way he can fulfill his too-long-neglected responsibility towards the little innocent.

His smile curves too wide, bitter with the taste of his own blood. When did he bite his tongue?

It's not ideal, but it's the only thing he can think of to do.

_Death is lighter than a feather, duty heavier than a mountain._ – Japanese Proverb

_Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken._ – Oscar Wilde

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed. Getting closer to the cannon storyline. May start time-skipping a bit soon once we get there. Since I'm a bit less interested in YYH than when I started, and I really just wanted to see Sasuke stuck in a position as close to Itachi's shoes as I could get them.

We'll get to see Yukina before the end, don't worry!

I love reviews with questions about the storyline, by the way, and particularly about character thought processes.

Next chapter: possibly a sighting of Human world, and our favorite botanist kitsune!
The Tongue of a Gossip - As you call and call

Chapter Notes

Originally, this was going to be one long chapter. I've split it in at least two, and apologize for the cliffhanger with the promise that the rest will be up by the end of Thanksgiving break. 4,000+ views on fanfiction dot net, and 100+ views on ao3? Love you guys, even if I wish for more reviews, or at least kudos. Also, can anyone tell me why I had a sudden spurt of viewers on ao3?

Credits to the Manga Exclusive chapter, "Two Shots," for events and dialogue reused here. It can be found at the end of Volume 7, if you wish to reread it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Winter's ahead,
What can you read in November
That you read in April
When Winter's dead?

I hear the thrush, and I see
Him alone at the end of the lane
Near the bare poplar's tip,
Singing continuously.

Is it more that you know
Than that, even as in April,
So in November,
Winter is gone that must go?

Or is all your lore
Not to call November November,
And April April,
And Winter Winter—no more?

But I know the months all,
And their sweet names, April,
May and June and October,
As you call and call

I must remember
What died into April
And consider what will be born
Of a fair November;

And April I love for what
It was born of, and November
For what it will die in,
What they are and what they are not,

While you love what is kind,
What you can sing in
And love and forget in
All that's ahead and behind.
- The Thrush, by Edward Thomas

Fire and swords are slow engines of destruction, compared to the tongue of a Gossip. - Richard Steele

Chapter Eleven: The Tongue of a Gossip – As you call and call

It takes a week for Hiei to scan the Makai for Yukina, using the Jagan, rather than over a century of unreliable and unconcealable physical searching, and eliminate any idea of her presence.

It takes two weeks, much more carefully spent, to find her access point to the Reikei, and from there, to the mortal world.

(At least, he hopes it’s her access point. Even with the Jagan, he’s working with a second-hand mental signature, and the few times he’s forced to let others in on his search (before he cleanses their minds of the event, very carefully) he has to broaden his scan to a female with ice powers; kōrime are only one race of many to fit that definition.)

And by the time he reaches the world of humans, a full month past that final conversation with Shigure, he’s following a thousand traces of rumors, each less likely than the last.

He can confirm his target’s path (even in his thoughts, he dares not name their relation; his recent surgery has given him too much of an appreciation of mental vulnerability. Even his theft of a volume of mental exercises is less helpful than he’d like; apparently this many centuries away from a library has gotten him out of the habit of reading, and his kanji are archaic and unfamiliar, even if the recent memories help. He can only be grateful that at least it’s not a different alphabet) to this world if scanning from either the Reikai or the Makai. But once he has crossed the barrier himself, he cannot sense her. Troubling. Either she has learned how to shield (which means an event that would make her think she needed to) or someone is shielding her (for purposes of their own, more likely). Or—

No. He refuses to think of that option. No body means alive until proven otherwise. And even a body must be checked; corpses can be faked. He learned that from mere exposure to the Otokage and his right hand of a scientist.

Either way, he is now stuck tracing rumors. The hard way.

Just as well he has practice leading a manhunt. Sasuke does, anyway, and Hiei has no trouble drawing on the human’s memories for this purpose. Even if he lacks the team he’s used to.

It’s definitely similar to tracking Itachi or the Hachibi, Hiei admits. In both cases, much of what he had to go on was rumor. But he’s lacking some fairly key components: contacts like Grandmother Cat, for one. Karin’s chakra sensing might have a replacement in his own Jagan, but not enough experience or side commentary using it.

(And no, he does not miss Team Hawk or their bickering or loyalty. Just their skills.)

(…He’s wasting time arguing with memories again. Damn it.)

Two days into the human world, he finally gets a rumor that seems promising.
When he hears it in full, he doesn’t even bother with more than a rudimentary repair-wipe on the mind he’s been scanning; he just grabs his katana, steals a map, and hitchhikes on top of a noxious, noisy machine he’s heard referred to as a ‘bus.’

_Yatsude. Eight-Hands._

It’s one of the names he’s heard in passing while infiltrating the Reikai. Office gossip, then; life-threatening now.

‘You don’t get to make any comments on my quota, Mr. High-and-Mighty! Do you have any idea how difficult it is grabbing hysterical souls with spirit powers, sorting out human from youkai, and sprinting the hell out of there all while trying not to get caught? We’re just lucky Yatsude eats the flesh and not the souls, too, to get power from them. It’s not just humans, it’s youkai too if he can get it, and always with a taste for females! He’ll have one meal for each hand, too! Ugh! You get the cleaning bill for this kimono, buster! Blood is one thing; slime and bone dust is too much!’

He’d tuned out after that, but now the conversation returns. Yatsude: eight-handed demon, known for eating both human and youkai, gaining power from consuming flesh, and a marked preference for female meals. This latest rumor suggested the perverted scavenger had snatched a wounded female in the aftermath of a catfight for territory—and that Yatsude had come out of the encounter with a case of frostbite as well as a full gut.

_Please, please, don’t let me be too late before I’ve even begun…_

The demon was known for underlings as well, weak and cowardly male demons who, for the right to nest in the _oni_’s territory unbothered, would use their powers to draw the targeted girls off alone by various means. Once they were vulnerable, Yatsude would snatch and consume them. It was a coward’s way to hunt, and Hiei would have despised it on principle alone. But he would have let the scum be if not for their coinciding target.

Naruto wouldn’t have. But he’s not Naruto. If he is anything from that old life, he is an Uchiha, with an Uchiha’s knowledge of the necessity of flame. Lest a grassfire consume the whole world in its insatiable hunger, sometimes one must preempt the crisis and set a controlled fire oneself, before the drought creates a land ripe for an inferno. He will save what he calls precious. He cannot save them all.

But maybe he can save one person.

Snarling, pushing his memories aside, Hiei leaps from the top of the foul machine. The crackling voice within has announced its arrival at the town Hiei has sought.

Ten minutes later, having stolen a snack of rice balls (the only thing he recognizes for sure), a drink of water, and another, more local map, Hiei shelters himself in his chosen tree. Eating slowly but carefully – ugh, too much salt, and so many chemical traces even in the fillings – and washing it down with water, he evens his breathing.

A mild power assessment confirms his fears – his powers remain drained. At this point, he’s about a D-Class demon in terms of power (he really does not need the memories of collecting trash and walking dogs that the similarly-named ranking system calls up, even if the many humiliations of Naruto offered some much needed humor). Not E-Class, thank fortune – that would put him at risk against even a human opponent. But it’s humilitatingly weak and slow compared to _Sasuke_ at the time of his death, let alone Hiei’s stamina before the surgery. His practice with Shigure, plus several bandit gangs and bar brawls turned to stains on the ground back in the Makai, have thankfully gotten him used to the difference – but against Yatsude…
It wouldn’t be so much of a problem if it weren’t for the oni’s choice of diet. That particular mystical meal was a popular choice for lower-class youkai who didn’t mind being inconspicuous and risking Spirit World justice in exchange for an instant power boost per serving. Yatsude’s species might have started him out as D-Class, but at this point, considering how long rumor said he’d been doing this… and the fact that Reikei’s justice hasn’t stopped him…

It could be a case of corruption, of course, but that didn’t seem quite as likely if Yatsude were interfering with the ferry girls’ work.

(A more superstitious part of him remembers the Eight-Tailed Ox’s jinchūriki. “Power of Human Sacrifice,” indeed. He thought he’d captured that one. Instead, the joke was on him.)

(And now he’s dealing with an Eight-Hands, who has no problem with sacrificing meals to his giant maw for power…)

Enough!

He will defeat this… deviant. If Yukina has not run into the bastard, it is best to make sure she won’t in the future, and he wouldn’t leave a loose end, anyway. But he cannot afford to let the beast’s power rise any higher. He doesn’t have a team to back him up, this time.

Just an eye.

He swallows a sudden desire for Karin and Suigetsu’s manic jabbering, and Juugo’s quiet attempts to play peacemaker. Wherever they are, they are beyond him. Yukina is not, not for certain, not yet.

He closes his eyes, spreads out his senses, and unknots his bandanna.

The hardest part of the surgery recovery has been getting used to the new neuron pathways and the information the eye brings him. He has gained a new appreciation for Kakashi’s lopsided hitai-ate; if the Sharingan is anything close in power-draining-causing-headaches in a non-Uchiha to the way Hiei’s Jagan behaves now, it’s no wonder the man kept it covered all the time, even with his jounin-level chakra reserves.

Ignore the background chatter of the city. Ignore the traffic. Ignore the minds at work. Search for disappearances…

A police sergeant in an odd uniform, wearily looking over another missing person’s report.

A mother and her nine-year-old son, posting flyers for a missing dog.

A “middle school,” whatever that is – tense with energy, waiting for the final bell. In some classes, the students clean up for clubs; in others, they get a head start on strange worksheets full of numbers.

And in one…

“Again? Some students have disappeared again?” --This is the third time in a month…..--

“I heard of a couple that disappeared, too…”

--Oh, oh, I know!-- “Maybe they went to town? The local area’s pretty boring…”

--Honestly, these people are idiots…-- “Ah, Minamoto-kun! What do you think?”
Youkai aura. Jackpot.

Mentally marking the school location and matching it to the map in his hand, Hiei rises to his feet, settles his bandanna back into place, and begins to roof-hop across the blocks between the bus stop and the civilian academy. D-Class or not, he’s still fast enough to be invisible to untrained human eyes.

Halfway there, he stops to recheck his position, and curses as he feels the rise in youkai energy – and the accompanying thought…

-- I had hoped not to use my youki… but apparently they’re not leaving me with any choice. --

Not Yatsude himself, but a subordinate?

His ears prick up at a young, female voice – a human aura, if one with a little higher spiritual energy than usual, perhaps academy student level, first year – and a male voice he matches to the youkai presence.

“I… I see. I’ll go now…”

One last jump to the other side of the street.

The male grips the girl’s arm abruptly, stiffening. “Keep close,” it orders, eyes tracking Hiei’s path.

No!

Hiei lunges, but the youkai in human skin is too fast; he and his target are five steps away. All Hiei has managed is to slice their schoolbag straps.

“You were able to evade it?!?” Cursing his slowness, Hiei raises his blade for another pass, one meant to blind the other.

Instead, his katana clashes with another blade – a distinctly green one.

If there was ever a time to desire grass-cutter Kusanagi, the sword that could not be blocked, it’s now. Damn it, can he never get anywhere without facing down a damn Mokuton user somewhere along the line? You’d think crossing dimensions/lives/whatever-this-is would do it.

“You’re pretty good,” he huffs, as they clash and spring apart once more. Not the level of Mifune, General of the Samurai – that man was fast enough that Sasuke was limited to his sword and techniques without handseals – but still very, very good. Which makes the connection to Yatsude all the more odd. “Why’s a skilled guy like you working for a creep like Yatsude?”
His Jagan is covered, but still passively working. Even without it, Hiei could have read the absolutely genuine shock in his opponent – and then the horror.

“What?! Yatsude?! You mean he’s here?!”

Nothing ever matched the shock of the night of the massacre, save the discovery of his sister; and nothing ever surpassed it save finding out it was all a lie in the case of the first.

But this comes as a pretty close shock, if one compares the discovery of Kakashi’s Sharingan.

“What?” Hiei lands on the ground, several meters away from his erstwhile opponent, who has lowered his blade. “You mean… you’re not working for him?” It comes out as a question, though he means it more as a statement.

“I see,” breathes the redhead, looking at him with understanding green eyes – eyes that do understand, unlike Sakura’s, without offering pity by the name of compassion. “It’s okay; you can put your weapon down. I live in this town,” he explains, condensing his own blade.

The adrenalin is draining, along with the desperation that has clouded his thoughts too much of late. Hiei shakes his head, resheathing his katana in annoyance with hands that shake too much. “Tch! I lost my temper too quickly…”

As usual… I assumed I knew it all, and now it bites both me and those I hold precious…

Straightening his shoulders habitually, he stops and grimaces at a warm wetness in his side. A drop slaps the ground, and he knows it isn’t rain.

This amount of blood loss really shouldn’t hurt that much. Or cause that much exhaustion. He knows from experience.

He barely remembers collapsing to his knees as the light fades from his vision.

Chapter End Notes

AN: And…cut!

Sorry about the cliffhanger; Like I said, I realized the chapter was getting overlong, and split it. I should have the rest up soon. Sorry about the short fight scene, I'm not the best with those even when I'm just retelling it.

Actually…know what? To quote a certain blond vampire:

"I was rash, and if I had to do it all over again… [laughs] Who am I kidding? I'd do it exactly the same way, only I'd do this first!"

Unfortunately, unlike William the Bloody, I cannot put fanfiction above schoolwork except when I don't have any. But I seem to be on a roll, so I'll do my best. Thought-provoking or thought-provoked reviews especially welcome.

Next time: Kurama and Hiei talk. Hiei compares the redheads he knows.

Yes, that means exactly who you think it does.
AN: As promised, the second chapter of the two-part installment. Warning: I also posted the first of these two new chapters a couple days ago, so if you haven't read that yet, click back first!

Quick note on Hiei's collapse previous chapter, due to a reviewer question: No, it's not poison. Hiei has been overstretching several new muscles and a whole new set of recently rewired neurons. Basically, he's getting good at sprint running, but he's behind on stamina. He was running on an adrenaline high and panic, and was overusing his energy because he's used to being A-class or S-class, not D-class. And it's only been a few months since the operation…

Basically, the same thing that happened to Kakashi in the first fight with Zabuza. Hasn't recently used that special eye for extended periods of time, isn't quite as used to pushing himself in the ways he needs to for the eye to be effective, and gives himself chakra exhaustion. Or in Hiei's case, youki exhaustion combined with blood loss.

Students who crash post-exams often have their immune systems crash with them at the drastic change in stress levels. Same thing.

But Kurama does use poisons, and just plain drugs. And Hiei is going to wonder about their possible effect on him when he wakes up. It's not like he trusts this stranger…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_The Greyhound's sinking in the waves, and fast the sea receives her._
_Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!_
_And Captain Bryce is on her deck, so we, her hands, may leave her._
_Curse the Reaper, bend your back and cheat your sorry grave!_

_Curse the Reaper cowled in black, he's laughing at your failing._
_Pull that oar until it cracks, we're bound for better sailing, bound for better sailing…!_
_- excerpt from 'The Greyhound,' sung by Heather Dale_

_Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. But anger is like fire. It burns it all clean. – Maya Angelou_

**Chapter Twelve: Curse the Reaper**

He awakens to a white plaster ceiling, a raised bed with a mattress underneath him, sheets neatly made up. He's stripped to his pants and shoes and bandanna. For a moment, he's back with Team Hawk in a hotel room, and tenses, waiting for Karin to sense his chakra switch from sleeping to waking, and come barging in the door.

"You have a fast capacity to recover."
He remembers.

"Only four hours..." the soft, but unmistakably male voice continues, as he sits up. The other male is sitting across the room on the floor, beneath the windows covered in curtains. Out of reach of a sleeping, or abruptly waking, warrior's retaliation, intentional or unintentional. And blocking the escape route.

The rest of the floor is clear, aside from the glass table in the middle, with two cushions by them, and a desk and chair and a bookshelf along the other wall.

His surroundings memorized, Hiei glances down at himself, then looks again.

His wound should be an ugly, raw, red. Instead, it's a healthy, healing pink.

The kind he'd expect to see after a few days of full rest, at his current regeneration levels. Not four hours.

"Your wound was very deep, so I healed them without asking," the redhead continues.

A redhead, a healer, and quiet and polite? Will wonders never cease... Pragmatic in immediate reporting of the situation, however, so somewhat like Karin in her professional moments. More prone to random acts of kindness, though. He's reminded of the one time Naruto ranted about Zabuza's apprentice, when Sasuke was pretending not to listen, and the details of politeness mixed with firmness and skill, all played for underestimation.

And we fell for it. I walked right by him...

"Healing herbs from the Makai are very effective."

...Yep. Zabuza's apprentice. Karin would never be this quiet, even if she managed the polite. It was a damn good mask, too. People saw the loudness and never guessed there might be anything else to look for.

Hiei allows the spark of amusement to flare for an instant, then spots his clothes and katana at the foot of the bed and reaches for them.

Recovery aided or not, he's still stupidly drained his youki. Too damn used to A-Class levels to draw on, and too panicked to recognize he'd gone past the safe limit. It's a miracle he didn't crash sooner. Stubborness, thy name is Uzumaki-partnered Uchiha.

And with the confirmation of healing herbs, Hiei's rescanning that fuzziness in his mindset. He does not need either an allergic reaction to his unique physiology or a deliberate poisoning attempt.

"By the way... did you know that you talk in your sleep?"

...Perhaps not so like Haku, then. Karin had a habit of interrogating and lecturing him when he was down, too. He could usually get out of it...

"Who is Yukina?"

No, no, no!

He's shrugging into his cloak, determinedly and swiftly scanning himself for any sedatives, burning the traces he finds out of his system.
"You weren't born with that Jagan," the redhead continues, not having moved an inch – confident, and with reason, it seems. "The surgery to acquire it was recent, I think; your youki is still weakened from getting it. You must be very determined to use a Jagan. To go after Yatsude all by yourself… you must have a very good reason for doing such a daring thing."

Cloak and scarf secured, katana checked and sliding into place. *I am not weak; what right has he to comment or question?*

"What does that girl have to do with Yatsude?"

There was no one to get close enough to Hiei to know such things, but anyone who could claim to know Sasuke with any sort of truthfulness knew that pushing him like this was exactly the wrong tactic to take. Karin was one of the few that could get away with it, mainly because Sasuke had mentally appointed her as something of a morality/stupidity chain.

This stranger might share her hair color. But he does *not* share that privilege.

"You're very talkative, aren't you?" Hiei grits out, turning his flattest stare on the redhead; glares become rather less effective when someone has seen you at your weakest. "If you hadn't helped me… I'd kill you for what you think you've figured out." Actually, more likely, he'd rip his mind to shreds first, then kill him. But he doesn't have enough energy left for even one more Jagan use at the moment. Not without risking unconsciousness again, let alone fight Yatsude and his minions.

He crosses to the window. Time to leave while he still has a fresh trail to follow, before there are any more victims. And preferably while he still has a little dignity.

*Damn it. I owe him.*

Hiei also remembers *exactly* what price his last doctor charged.

"Instead of a reward, let me give you some advice." He shoves the curtains aside, and the window open. Ah, good; the next roof is close enough that he needn't jump to ground. "Your naivete is going to get you killed someday."

"Off to fight? It's too soon. What about your injuries?"

—'Did anyone get any leads on Itachi?'

*Karin's arms are folded, hip cocked as she stares down at him on the futon. Even sitting up, he's aware of the height difference. And the way she stares reminds him of the bandages around his forehead, the gauze pack on his cheek, the cuts on his arms, the scratches on his face left open to air. He doesn't exactly have much dignity. Especially not when all three teammates are in the room with him, and he's the only one injured*

'Are you kidding me!? You're half-dead and you're still trying to be a tough guy?!!'

You needn't put it so blatantly that I got my ass kicked kicking the other guy's, he thinks, but he is smart enough not to say aloud. Not when she's legitimately pissed. *Karin is scary in healer mode.*

—

Just like Karin, critiquing his decisions when they hurt him personally. Calling him. *One would almost think he cared.*

"The more Yatsude eats, the stronger he gets." If the redhead's even half as intelligent as he's implied, given he knows enough to recognize Yatsude by name, that will be enough. *There isn't*
"At least let me know your name?"

Seriously? This guy has done nothing to earn that –

"It's... Hiei."

It's a good thing he already had one foot on the windowsill; he's actually able to get over his startlement at actually giving the name up in time to land properly.

He gave away his name.

To an utter stranger.

And he hasn't wiped the mind. Hasn't even tried.

What is wrong with him?

Two minutes of rooftops later, he hears a panicked shout behind him: "Hiei! Wait! I'm going with you!"

He twitches, startled.

'I'll go... if you insist, I'll go with you.'

"Yeah? And why is that?" he shouts back.

'What are you saying? You changed your mind quickly...'

"I have my reasons..."

'The swords of the 'Seven Ninja Swordsmen' were passed down from generation to generation. I... admired the Seven and trained because of it. As long as I have this large sword, I wouldn't lose even to you... maybe.'

'I can't let you die... you're all I have left to remember Kimimaro.'

This seems very amusingly familiar, suddenly. Suigetsu, who wanted the Seven Swordsmen's Swords; Karin who insisted she was merely going in the same direction; Jugo who needed Sasuke, as inheritor of Kimimaro's will, to control him. They all had their own reasons.

Perhaps Suigetsu had the right idea.

'Come on, let's go, Sasuke. It seems like Karin won't come.'

"That girl?" He even manages to add imaginary wiggling eyebrows into his tone, and is quite proud of himself for it.

'No... She says she'll come...'

"Shut up."

'Wh... Who said I'll go! I'm jus... just heading... to the same direction...! Um...!'

Yep. Exactly like Karin. A shyer, politer Karin, but... he already feels less lonely.
He doesn't know if he's fooling himself or not, but… He always could trust Karin with his back. Even when Team Taka, then Team Hebi, all followed him for their own reasons – Suigetsu for his swords, Karin for her loyalty, Juugo for someone who could control him – he could trust them.

It would be nice to have the companions back who understood him in his darkest days.

"How naïve… Your tongue still hasn't slacked off. You're not saving it for our ki."

"Decide that after we beat Yatsude."

Hiei understands why Suigetsu had so much fun teasing the rest of them, especially when faced with such an Uchiha-like response, short and to the point. It is a great deal of fun when you're not on the end of the teasing, and even when you are.

Quite simply? The reactions are vastly amusing.

Said amusement holds out until they land in what his companion calls 'an abandoned factory.' What it made, Hiei cannot imagine; the life-sized mannequin parts strewn here and there confuse him. He can find no memory in either lifetime of why they would be useful. Unless for one of Suna's puppeteers, perhaps, but he has found no evidence of chakra users anywhere here, and he does not know if pure ki could pull the same tricks.

The darkness and stench of mixed stages of putrification makes him wrinkle his nose. Even an ordinary human nose could pick up this level of decay without needing Inuzuka ancestry or jinchūriki level senses. If he still believed in the gods, he'd call a miko to deal with this plague.

His companion scowls. "He's got really bad breeding. Mixing the dolls with the parts he's been saving to eat." He carefully steps around a rotting head, one eyeball torn out and the stains gummed across the cheek; beside it, casually arranged atop a porcelain limb, are the tatter flesh remnant of its real-life counterpart. Hiei has seen such damage when animals tear out the bones and suck the marrow. The beasts are generally neater about it.

The redhead (he really needs a name, but doesn't have the energy to waste on the Jagan before it's time) has a point about the squalor. Hiei suspects that, raised among bandits as he was, he would be rather less clued in on such things without the lifetime that included being raised by Uchiha Mikoto. Manners were pounded into the clan head's son from an early age; had the massacre never occurred, Sasuke might well have been groomed to be a diplomat.

Or at least there would have been an attempt. He's not sure it would have actually proven workable in reality.

"Kitajima!" his companion calls aloud desperately.

Damn. There goes the element of surprise.

"You're dead!"

Reflex has him springing away from the punch that hits the ground, splitting to opposite side of the room from the redhead. Hiei simultaneously curses himself for letting someone get the drop on him, and, for the first time, is consciously grateful to the memories.

Eight-Hands, despite having four times the upper limbs of a normal person (with the last set of hands being a replacement for feet that don't exist, and the top pair seem to have replaced his ears), doesn't punch nearly as accurately or powerfully as Sakura. He, no it, barely managed to crack the concrete floor. Despite having muscles to the point of appearing obese. And a face that would rival any Noh mask for sheer creepiness. He's also filthy, beyond what even a self-respecting
bandit would counteract – a loincloth so matted with dirt and blood and other fluids it's impossible to tell the original colour, barely held up by a belt of skulls. Skulls about the size of Hiei's own head. Some human, some demonic-humoid, and all remarkably intact.

"You guys are very stubborn," Yatsude rumbles, arms opened wide, ready for a sumo wrestler's crushing grip if they give him the slightest chance.

Hiei takes a deep breath, condenses his youki in preparation for the Jagan. He asked a question of this same importance a lifetime ago, but this time he has an advantage to tell if the answer is true. "I'll ask you just once…"

"I want to ask you one last question… Who is the third Uchiha survivor? The one you told me about?"

"What is the name of that kōrime, that ice maiden that you ate?"

"Oh? Why should I tell you?" Amused condescendence oozes from the unchanged grin. It pissed Hiei off, and he works to control his temper.

"Your underling grabbed a girl earlier today," the redhead speaks up, drawing the thing's attention away. "Where is she?" He hides his panic well, but Hiei can smell it even through the stench of blood and putrification.

"Hm? You know her?" Yatsude's only sign of interest is in his voice, the rest of him is unreadable except for an immense sense of hunger that Hiei refuses to go anywhere near. "I'm sorry…" One of the ear-arms reaches back to scratch the greasy locks, picks something out.

"Was she a friend?"

A bloody foot and calf, limp as a noodle with the bone removed, dangles from the hand.

The only warning is a low, subvocal growl that makes the hair on the back of Hiei's neck prickle in anticipation.

"BASTARD!" The redhead is in the air, leaf-sword grown from his fingertips in a fraction of a second. As Yatsude raises an arm to shield his face from the blade, dropping the foot as fresher prey glides within his reach, Hiei darts under the redhead's path, sliding out his katana to cut the tendons at the knee/elbow.

Shhk!

Yatsude's long claws catch each blade between them, and Hiei can't disengage in time to avoid the punch coming at him, any more than the foolish youkai-turned-schoolboy.

Yatsude is laughing as he sends them flying. "You're not so pathetic after all!"

Hiei curses, rubbing at his jaw as he lands on his feet. For a moment, he's twelve years old again, charging at his jounin instructor, determined to fry the book if not the bells.

Wait. That's it.

Even as he has the idea, he's opening the Jagan behind the bandanna, communicating a single thought to the redhead. - It's useless if we attack him separately. - A series of images follow, including the doll on the floor that is most complete, wig and all.

He loosens his cloak – and moves.
In unison to rival a certain Uzumaki's clone coordination, they swing their blades from midair.

"An impromptu double-play?! You attack me as a pair?!” Yatsude is surprised, but still condescendingly amused. Again, he fends off the swords with his claws, but this time, the pair land on their own account – and cross, Hiei behind the other.

The Jagan, still active, catches Yatsude's slimy thoughts.

- He disappeared behind the other? Heh… It's an old trick… -

Indeed it is, one of the oldest tricks in the book – and yet Sasuke used it successfully against both Zabuza and Itachi. It was a shruiken that hid in the shadows, then, not a living being, even if the first case was Naruto in weapon-Henge.

- He's coming from above! -

The *oni* does not even appear to look anywhere but the redhead, but he's spotted Hiei's cloak. A flying shadow and a white scarf, descending from above.

Again, the schoolboy slashes; again, Yatsude catches the sword, and holds it, readying a punch. "You're pretty new at this, aren't you? It's no use…"

The angle abruptly changes upward; Yatsude is fast for such a gluttonous beast.

"I've seen all through your stupid plan!"

The head above the cloak shatters – with a tinkle of breaking porcelain.

"…A doll? A trap!"

But Yatsude's arm is fully extended in the wrong direction, and Hiei, hidden in the shadow of a doll hidden in the shadow of the redhead, is too close.

Yatsude only has time to swear before simultaneous decapitation and bisection at the waist.

Even as it falls, however, the head is still talking.

"Not bad… As a reward, I'll tell you… That girl is safe… As for the körime… if I'd eaten one of those… I wouldn't have lost…"

The head rolls to a stop, the brain finally having caught up that the body is dead. Yatsude is slow even in death.

*She's not with him…*

Hiei doesn't know whether to be relieved at the absence of proof of death or despair at yet another dead end.

In the end, he does nothing. He strips the mannequin of his cloak and scarf, and wipes clean his blade. The redhead has found his friend off to one side, and pulls her up for a piggyback.

The last time Hiei was involved in one of those as the carried was when as seven year old Sasuke, before the massacre, on the back of his beloved nii-san. He'd sprained his ankle in training.

The last time he was involved as the carrier was also as Sasuke. Karin had narrowly escaped Amaterasu with a mild case of burns and unconsciousness and despite his own wounds and
exhaustion, Sasuke had shrugged off Juugo’s offer and pulled her on his own back, the better to monitor her breathing and confirm he hadn't killed her. Juugo got to carry Suigetsu and the false Hachibi.

He can see the same unconscious trust in the slump of the female child on the redhead's back, and the exhaustion and fear in the old-young youkai. And despite shutting off his Jagan, the effects linger. He can feel the resolve forming in his erstwhile battle partner to do something.

He only realizes what when he catches the scent of a flower in spring that should not be outside of Makai. But given the redhead has access to Makai healing herbs, he's no longer surprised when it turns out the redhead has the Pollen of Forgetfulness.

When his friend stirs on his back, she thinks she's dreaming. Hiei makes note of the name she uses, even if 'Minamino' is doubtless a human alias.

Then his ears prick up, as the redhead hypnotizes her back to sleep.

"Right, it's all just a dream… You'll forget it all when you wake up…"

That's about what Hiei would do in his place.

"You'll forget it all, including your love for me…"

He likes to think he would not make the final command.

"That's a mugen flower pollen," he comments. He will not have the redhead erase his memories either; it's doubtful the Jagan would let him succeed, but Hiei is pretty certain his head has been screwed with enough times. And he only just finished reordering his memories. So he has to tell him he's aware of what he's doing. "You're erasing her memories?"

"It's for her own good." The reply is surprisingly cold. Hiei scowls at the reasoning, reminded both of Itachi's high handedness and of Shikamaru's tactical brilliance, only fully fueled with motivation when Asuma was killed. It's the kind of reasoning a commander uses, a reasoning that distances casualties into numbers and statistics. All the same, he mentally notes never to use the jagan on his temporary companion; he's not sure he could cover it up and has no idea how the redhead would react, but given how much the redhead reminds him of Karin, who he learned a few weeks before his death was actually an Uzumaki, it would undoubtedly be unpleasant. Mix that in with the Nara-worthy intelligence and Aburame-level calculation…

But another part of him whispers the memory of their combination attack. He's never coordinated with another person so quickly before. Not even with Naruto. But with this person… even with the Jagan, that's rare.

This is a contact he needs to keep as an ally. An ally that he wants to cultivate.

(He doesn't need friends. Friends betray you easily and sometimes even unintentionally. Allies don't, because they can prearrange rules.)

He glances over again, nervously. He's never been very good at the social thing. Usually, people introduced themselves to him, not the other way around. Or they weren't around long enough to require names.

But he needs a name for this one.

"By the way, you still haven't told me your name…"
Too forward?
Oh, who cares.
"...I'll make an effort to remember it."

...Damn his brain-mouth filter. That's not something *either* Uzumaki of his acquaintance would let him get away with. It's an awful, Uchiha-arrogance joke.

Fortunately, the redhead seems amused.

"It's... Kurama." He looks about as surprised to have willingly offered the truth as Hiei was earlier this evening.

Kurama.

Another bit of Reikei office gossip pops into his head, from the department that went over what Uchiha Fugaku would have called 'cold cases.'

Youko Kurama. A famous kitsune thief, A-Class rank, who disappeared from the Makai just over a decade ago, hotly pursued. But no trace of the body was ever found, even if no further activity existed to prove him among the living. Nor had his soul been processed by the Reikei.

...*Definitely* a contact he wants to keep cultivating.

(If he also wants to be close to the person who has gone through the closest form to his own rebirth that he has found, Hiei will hardly admit it aloud).

Over the months that follow, Hiei begins using Kurama's house as a home base of sorts while he scans the various places of human world. Kurama ends up giving him lessons in human currency, geography, and, he's somewhat ashamed to admit, an update on his kanji and katakana. The former thief eventually offers details of how he wound up in a human body (to regain his own energy) – and why he ended up staying (a mother saving him from a floor of broken glass, a selfless act for a selfish being).

Hiei has to admit, he's a bit envious of Kurama, having Minamino-san as a mother. Hina doesn't even come close, and Mikoto doesn't come nearly as close as he'd like. He makes an effort to study her parenting of Kurama, who treats it with good grace and is mostly well-behaved. After she nearly catches him sleeping over in her son's room, however, he panics enough to take an extended three-month trip away to explore some rumors.

He quickly became convinced that the search would be easier with more eyes. However, he cannot trust anyone else with the information, and he's not experienced enough with the Jagan to make puppets on the scale of White Zetsu's loyal clones, nor ready to deal with the attention such would draw. At this point, he's even been looking at the jewelry market. But there are no *kōrime* tear gems, or even rumors that match their description.

When he returns home, furious at his lack of progress, it's ten months to the day that he met Kurama. For once, the redhead does not acknowledge him. He's sitting on his bed, staring out at the world. Shock and faded tears mix in his scent, the salt stinging Hiei's nose.

"What happened?" he demands, unnerved at this out of character reaction, hand idly plucking at his sword, wishing for a straightforward foe that he senses does not exist.

Kurama takes a few minutes to respond. When he does, Hiei does not understand him, and is forced to replay the memory using the Jagan – he's High D-class these days, he has the energy and
stamina to spare.

Then he pales.

"My mother's in the hospital. It's…not looking good."

After I found out about Yukina, a new search began. I knew I would never be able to rest until I found her. [Pause] I sensed that she was somewhere in Human World. [Pause; sword and rose whip clash. It's Kurama in lower school with short hair] Once there, I became acquainted with the demon named Kurama, who had taken human form.

- Hiei, Yu Yu Hakusho, Episode 100: Secret of the Jagan Eye

Chapter End Notes

AN: And that concludes the events of 'Two Shots.'

Canon timeline: there is a year between Hiei and Kurama's first meeting and their heist at Reikei, when Yuusuke is sent after them. I figured that even a master thief would need a little time to get really desperate, research, find a third partner to take the fall, and finally carry out the heist. Hence the two months to the canon convergence deadline. Probably a couple chapters story wise.

I leave on break tomorrow, and I have exams to study for and then take within the next couple weeks. If you offer some thought provoking reviews to stimulate chapter ideas, I might be able to get one last chapter out before Christmas break starts. If not, I'll try to have one more out by New Year's but no promises.

Optional bonus: When I originally started making notes to write this thing, I went through the TV Tropes page on both characters, then double checked which ones I felt applied to both, and wrote them down, with notes on how each trope applies. If you review to say you're interested, I'll publish them as part of my authors end notes next chapter.

Otherwise: happy Thanksgiving, and a toast to good food and drink.
The Riddle

Chapter Notes

AN: Wow, I'm really on a roll, it seems. Was not expecting this to get done as well!

Now beta'd by Akayuki Novak. Thank you so much!

Additional thanks to reviewers OkibiKitsune on ao3, and Akayuki Novak (formerly Akayuki Sawada) and DragonBlaze66 on fanfiction dot net. Their conversations and reviews formed a fundamental part of this chapter for me. Will write some of what we covered in the endnotes for this chapter. Unfortunately, I need to fill the beginning with a short notice.

Anonymous reviewer who begs me not to make Hiei gay: I do nothing that is not canon at the moment, so I think you might need different priorities, especially given this story is a general category. However, since you're so curious, let me remind you that sex is an act of trust. Hiei does not have enough of that in anyone for such a thing to be possible at the moment. That said, I'm aware of the evidence in the last couple chapters, given my comparisons of Kurama to Karin. Let me remind you of two things: First, Karin is not the only Uzumaki Hiei remembers and is comparing Kurama to. Second, I go with what Yu Yu Hakusho's author said when questioned if HieiKurama was a thing: he didn't intend to write it as such, but in retrospect, he saw that given how he set up and developed that relationship, he could certainly have taken it in that direction. I personally write and see Hiei as grey-asexual, as that will hopefully be the least offending to anyone, and Kurama as a sexual kitsune whose natural personality is casual and equal-opportunity flirtation, regardless of personal inclinations. (You may remember an anime scene in the last season between him and Hiei where he pretended to take something Hiei did as a confession. Hiei's face was priceless.)

Now that the rant's over, Enjoy the chapter!

Slight format change: Have split a long song, and put one verse in the beginning, middle and end. Will be back to normal format on the quotes next chapter.

Chapter Thirteen: The Riddle

See the moon sink down in the sky, darling,
Let your fantasies fly, darling,
Life is cold, and the game is old –
Just see how virtue repays you:
You turn and someone betrays you –
Betray him first, and the game's reversed!

For we all are caught in the middle
Of one, long, treacherous riddle –
Can I trust you?
Should you trust me too?
We shamble on through this hell
Taking on more secrets to sell
'Til there comes a day,
When we sell our souls away!

- First Verse and Chorus of "The Riddle," sung by characters Chauvelin, Maugerite and Percy Blakeney, from the musical 'The Scarlet Pimpernel' by Frank Wildhorn

Information first.

"How long has this been going on?" It's curt, and probably rude, given the way the Sakura-voice that he's come to see as one of his mental advisers (What? He never claimed to be sane) is muttering under her breath.

But he needs the redhead to snap out of it.

"She fainted at work two months ago. When they brought her to the doctor's, he realized she'd lost significant muscle tone and nutrient levels were falling rapidly, despite no change in diet, environment, or routine." Kurama's voice is still too distant, and Hiei must sit as close as he can and concentrate on lip-reading to be sure of the words. That Kurama doesn't tease him about it, irritating as such a thing is, tells him precisely how shaken his partner is.

(He'd never thought he'd call someone that – but there is no other term that better encompasses their bond. He trusts Kurama, not blindly, not completely, but more than he does anyone else in this life.)

(Because, for all he is a kitsune, the redhead isn't a betrayer. A liar, yes, but Hiei always knows when he lies, and he never breaks his word, so that's alright. Hiei can deal with showmen, enjoys dealing with this one.)

"He was unable to diagnose beyond the symptoms; multiple testings showed no cause for it," Kurama's breathing would have seemed normal to anyone else, but Hiei knows him. It's ever so slightly faster and less even than normal. For someone like Kurama, who is control of every part of himself at all times, to lose his grip when not needing to make an impression on strangers that he is doing so –

It is honestly a little frightening.

Sakura, who did this to you?

But this is not the Forest of Death, and there are no Oto Genin he can crush to remove that empty shock from a teammate's gaze and make his world balance back into place.

This is not something an assassin or a bandit or an avenger or a ninja or even an imiko can do anything about.

Yukina could. She heals people…

Yukina was half-trained when she left, there are no leads in sight, and Kurama's mother needs help now.

As he told Shigure, he has little enough honor, but he'll not sell what's left cheaply. Though he's no financier, Hiei and Sasuke have always balanced their relationships with others like debt-
books. Kurama has come through for him multiple times in the last year, enough for Hiei to offer him a few details on the search, if not why he's doing it or who Yukina is to him. Kurama has guessed a fair bit more, but doesn't pry or push.

For that, Hiei needs to fix this.

But he can't.

Hiei is very, very good at breaking people. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Unfortunately, he is not nearly as good at putting them back together.

And no matter how much Kurama might look like a mix of Karin's hair and Sakura's eyes and have their respective attitudes with an added dose of politeness and ruthless cunning, he's a different person. Just as Hiei is not Sasuke, even if those memories have reshaped him greatly over the years, subconsciously and consciously.

However, if there is one skill that Hiei has learned from the memories, it's the knowledge that he can't do everything – and therefore, how to delegate.

He can't fix Kurama's mom, certainly not when the fox would have already tried everything he knew how, and failed, enough that he's conspicuously neglected his grooming. The hair he'd been growing out in the months since their first battle, now reaching just past his shoulders, is unbrushed and tangled with herbs. His usually carefully hidden window garden is out on the glass table for all to see and run across, next to a pile of notes. No one who didn't know the redhead would call it at all messy, but the little details, the lack of ironing on the usually crisp school uniform, tell Hiei enough.

"I think it might be my fault."

Hiei jerks, and stares at the redhead. "Explain." His tone is flat and uncompromising, the one that would force answers at swordpoint if necessary.

Kurama gives him a bitter smile. "You remember my classmate, the first time we met?"

"Vaguely. Not her name, but that she got kidnapped, and you wiped her memories. Did it not take?" If a human has found a way to revenge herself that Kurama can't counter… but there's no blood on the redhead's claws, and his human mother is one of the few people Kurama would risk breaking his cover and killing for.

"What? No, it took fine. But the reason she was out there that night…" Kurama sighs. "She was able to see youkai. I sealed her abilities, along with her memories. But she had awakened her own spirit energy – and I suspect the trigger was exposure to my presence. It wasn't much, but it was enough to see youkai and their traces." He chuckled ruefully. "Our classmates thought she was willing to believe in anything. They weren't wrong, but that was because she could see the evidence to back it up."

Hiei scowled. "I trust there is a point to this tangent? What does this have to do with anything?" Even as he says it, he suddenly understands.

Damn it, how did he not notice his partner has a martyr complex?

"Who has been more exposed to me than my mother? In the years before she saved me from the broken glass, I wasn't exactly careful with my youki beyond what was needed for concealing my presence from Reikei's Hunter Division."

…Lovely. He has a bloody Tsunade on his hands – and he's making morbid mental puns about it.
Sasuke might not have met the woman in person except at a distance, given she was absent from
the Kage's Council he crashed, but he'd met Sakura before and after she was apprenticed to the
woman, and he'd been around Orochimaru long enough for the Sannin to recount a few things.
Granted, the stories the Snake Contract-Holder told his apprentice were usually part of tactics
lessons, but it was still enough to get an idea of her personality.

Greatest medic nin in history, as every one around her kept informing her. And she couldn't save
either her little brother or her fiancée, the latter dying as she struggled to work on him. Is it any
wonder that she became unable to handle her own skills in an operating room, or gave herself the
excuse of alcohol and gambling to reenforce her own low self-esteem? That Naruto managed to
get her to a state where she could actively heal on the battlefield again is one of his former
teammate's greatest accomplishments, in the opinion of both Sasuke and Hiei.

Geniuses don't deal well with failure unless they're geniuses whose successes are built on failure.
Otherwise, failing throws them off, sometimes permanently, usually for extended time periods
without help. And since they don't know how to recover and never needed to work on something
that required working with another for success – they can't change. So they die.

Kakashi's first lesson was one Sasuke desperately needed. Even if Sasuke did not bond quite as
tightly with the teammates chosen for him as Konoha intended, he still learned it to some extent.

'You can't do everything and be everywhere; not even if you are as much a master of Kage Bushin
as Naruto himself. So you need teammates to cover your blind spots.'

Sasuke was not a genius like his brother. But his exposure to Itachi and others raised his
intelligence by interacting with them. He didn't have to be the smartest person in the world. He
just had to be smart enough.

The same is true of Hiei.

And fortunately, thanks to Naruto, he knows a little of how to deal with this.

He sharply smacks the back of the baka kitsune's head, then does not retaliate when a thorny vine
catches his arm before he can draw it back.

"So that's it? You're just going to blame yourself and give up and wallow in your own grief? What
happened to the partner who wouldn't stand down even when you thought your classmate was
dead and in pieces?"

Kurama stares at him, startled. It's a surprisingly compelling look. He'll have to shock the fox more
regularly.

"Are you the greatest thief of the Makai or not? If we can't find the solution here, we can go look
elsewhere! Reikei's library has records, and there's nothing new under the sun, so we can find a
solution there! Or – Or we'll steal a healer! Or something! There's always another option, even if
we have to use magic!"

The fox is still staring at him.

"What?"

"...Why?"

There are so many ways Hiei could take that. He chooses not to be oblivious, even if it's
awkward.
"You're my partner. You value her, even if I don't entirely understand why. I owe you more than I
can easily repay at the moment. So we're going to find someone or something that can fix her, and
I can balance my debt books."

He looks away, unable to say this last bit while looking at his partner's face.

"I don't find my own mother, what I know of her, particularly reliable or worthy. But yours is
another story. She raised you, and without you I'd have gotten myself killed against Yatsude. So I
owe her too."

And if he's flushing with embarrassment enough to raise the room temperature a couple degrees, it
doesn't matter. Because the empty look is, while not gone, faded a bit from Kurama's eyes.

"…Why Reikei?"

Hiei gives him a Look. Why does he always have to explain the obvious? It figures that the being
he's mentally classified as an honorary Uzumaki would have his moment of stupid now of all
times. Naruto did it the first time Sasuke threw himself between his downed teammate and a
hailstorm of needles.

Unlike that time, Hiei actually has a reasoned answer, instead of having to limit his explanation to
an observation that neither of them yet understood the implications of. And a listener who will
actually understand and appreciate the reasoned answer, rather than screw up his face into his best
impression of his wise grandfather figure and pretend to get it.

"You're older and more experienced in both the Makai and Ningenkai's resources. If there were a
solution in either of those, we'd have found it. So we need to look in the Reikei for it. … Besides,
it's not as if it's out of my way. I've hit another dead end in my search, so I'd like a chance to hack
the records. But your mother is more urgent, as far as we know."

He stands. Better to get moving before the baka kitsune gathers his wits enough to protest.

"Pack your bag, fox, and make whatever 'calls' you need." He still doesn't entirely understand
how the telephone works, despite Kurama's best efforts to explain, but he knows what it's capable
of, and how to break it if necessary; that's enough to go on. "We're going to the Reikei. I'll check
in with a few contacts and meet you at the hospital in an hour. And if you're not ready then, I'll
track you down and drag you along anyway."

He sounds far too much like Naruto, Hiei decides as he springs out the window and over the
rooftops. But given he's borrowing this solution from his teammate's experiences, that can hardly
be helped. Rephrasing it like he'd prefer might make it break down. After all, like the telephone,
he doesn't know why or how it works, only that it does.

(This time, he doesn't notice, not even in retrospect, that he's referred to Naruto as 'his' teammate
rather than 'Sasuke's').

---

Through the mist your lover is beckoning,
Comes that moment of reckoning,
Faces change, even smiles grow strange.
And we all have so many faces,
The real self often erases
Enticing lies flicker through our eyes.
Feel the Terror draw ever nearer
The more you stare in the mirror,
But hold your own!
Face the wind alone!
Reel on, love, toughen your scars!
Year by year, we're falling like stars
'Til there comes a day
When we sell our souls away!

- Second Verse and Chorus of "The Riddle," from the musical 'The Scarlet Pimpernel' by Frank Wildhorn

In retrospect, entering the Reikei to search for records is much easier than expected. Hiei can't decide if it's the advantage of having a partner who specializes in thieving, the fact that more attention is devoted to the barrier on the Makai side, or a trap. He is twitchy the whole time they're there, so much so that Kurama eventually completely takes over the file snatch-and-copy and leaves him to act as sentry.

Hiei has an energy-overuse headache for hours after they return to the world of humans and he permits himself to crash. When he wakes, his visibly frayed restraint on an actively irritated temper is worse than a demon with a hangover on an empty stomach.

Kurama offers painkillers.

Hiei doesn't bother with words; his handsigns may not channel chakra or ki, but a civilian could easily translate this particular suggestion for where Kurama can shove his damn painkillers along with his tail—and Hiei can assist with his Katana, if Kurama's rose whip isn't long enough.

Kurama takes the hint. He leaves the pitcher of water out where Hiei can grab it and a glass, and goes back to work translating Reikei shorthand while Hiei attempts to nap enough of the pain away to be able to sit up and help comprehend the damned kanji and katakana swimming before his eyes.

By the time he's able to do so, Kurama has managed to work through three quarters of the files. They are being sorted from 'still have to read' into 'promising, but dangerous,' 'only rumor,' 'sounds true but actually propaganda,' 'irrelevant/useless,' and, off to one side, 'Yukina-relevant.' Hiei ignores the temptation for now and moves over to Kurama's side, trying not to notice how many have hit the 'useless' pile.

In the months to come, Hiei will blame his headache and unpracticed reading skills for missing the fox's attention to a particular file, and then the moment he slips a façade of normality and renewed confidence back on.

(It will take many years before he realizes that headache's effects were the Jagan's efforts to warn him of an outside interference, one that penetrated his barriers anyway, and twisted his perceptions just ever so slightly, increasing the tunnel vision he was always prone to and lowering the carefully constructed mental safeguards against that very failing. But King Yomi's plots are far and distant and invisible as tree roots far beneath the soil, and their rot hidden with them, unknown to surface bureaucracy. The only reason the world-domination suggestion doesn't take is because of the memories of Tobi and Madara, memories that thankfully the manipulator does not find.)

But Hiei does not notice, nor does he know enough of Reikei's history to know the truth of the file
Kurama presents to him with a nervous smile and eyes hopeful for the first time in hours. To know the exact price that such objects demand. And once more, his paranoia and desperation conspire against him.

Certainly, the Artifacts of Darkness seem a solution, to both his need for more eyes and ears and search minions, and to Kurama's mother's illness. The leftover jewel is useless and attention drawing. Perfect for a final partner – and given part of the Artifact Security is that three beings are needed to unlock the door, they will need a final partner – who will, in actuality, be their fall guy.

Kurama has no immediately noticeable ties to his former identity in this body, and Hiei will likewise be a first-time offender under Reikei law should they get caught. A stupid but cunning criminal with a previous record is therefore the desired partner profile. Good enough not to mess up the job, short-sighted enough to be caught in the immediate investigation and stir up enough ruckus that his quieter partners can slip away unseen.

It all has the taste of a Black Ops mission. Hiei hates it. But Minamino Shiori is fading faster by the day, looking so much like Mikoto, the one parental figure he still holds untainted affection for in his memories. And Kurama looks like Itachi did in the months leading up to the fracture of their world, desperate and potentially very stupidly reckless as a result and doing his best to hide it all. Hiei dare not leave him alone; the thief would do it anyway, and damn the consequences. Shiori is the Sasuke to Kurama's Itachi, and it's all wrong – but he can't dwell on that, not if the mission is to work. There cannot be mistakes here.

Hiei knows the artifacts will have their price. The Gakidama, the Hungry Ghost Gem, takes human souls. The Koma no Ken, the Sword of Demonic invocation, takes humanity and transforms its victims into E-Class cannon fodder. The Ankokukyo, the Mirror of Darkness, takes the user's energy to grant the desired wish, Kurama claims, and Hiei accepts without questioning because the lie matches the tale.

(There is no scent change, no energy shift. Kurama is telling the truth.)

(He just doesn't tell Hiei that it's the sum total of the wisher's life energy it takes, rather than enough to knock one down a power class like the Jagan surgery.)

It's dangerous. It will require breaking a partner out of prison that's actually plausibly interested in the Gakidama and getting that partner to work with them – possible with a combination of drugged suggestibility, the Jagan, and simple intimidation. It will require slipping past high-alert Reikei security, both ways, even if it's lightened while King Enma is on one of his numerous 'business trips' (and shouldn't it be the other way around, a memory questions, but Hiei isn't listening). And it will require fast work to make best use of the items before Spirit World's Private Detective (unfilled job slot currently, but rumors say a candidate is being processed soon) and his backup come running in and make a muck of things.

(And that's his second mistake, in retrospect.)

(He forgot he could be wrong, that he could miscalculate.)

(He forgot he could be manipulated.)

(He's fallen short again.)

(And once more, worst of all – he forgot that he isn't necessarily the one who pays the highest toll for it all.)

So he researches, and backs his partner up, and they look for the ‘fall guy.' (Fugaku Uchiha must
be rolling in his grave, which is more than acceptable.) They train and exploit the hell out of their powers, pushing each other to new limits – Hiei uncovers a frightening new form as the Jagan's influence spreads over his skin, eyes in every surface, in every direction – if this is what the Byakugan is like, no wonder Hyuuga are arrogant – he refuses to think about the Cursed Seal of Heaven; besides, the energy costs are not efficient enough to be worth it – and Kurama switches from adequate sword skills to a rose whip that is impressive as a control exercise, and so very easy to poison. Kurama also keeps up sword practice; apparently the whip is too connected to his past identity to be useful if he wants to carry off the mostly innocent look.

Eventually, they settle on Gouki ("'Strong Ogre,' really? Are you sure he's not compensating for something with a name like that?" "He'll do the job. We're looking for a grunt, not a fellow intelligent species to bugger things up." "Your compliments make me swoon, they really do." "You need a regular ego deflation; I'm happy to do the job so you can walk through the doors still."). a Kyūkonki, a Spirit-Sucking Beast, with twelve previous criminal records, currently serving time in a Reikei minimum security cell for murdering and feasting on the souls of both humans and Reikei inhabitants alike, and slaughtering dozens of Reikei hunters sent to subdue him.

Almost like Juugo, but without the redeeming desire to control his homicidal urges. Truly a one-dimensional grunt.

(He ignores every scream in his gut that this is wrong. It's for Kurama and Yukina. And for them, he can do anything.)

(It's a queer riddle, his code of debts and balances. Whatever happened to 'I will not sell my honor so cheaply,' as he told Shigure?)

Just as it seems Shiori's health will take a turn for the worse, Hiei finally receives word from one of his marks.

"Enma has passed the bureaucratic power to his son for ten days. It's time."

The full moon is due in five days, and it's the only time the Mirror of Darkness can work.

(The answer, of course, is that every man, or youkai has his price. It seems Hiei has found his, and if it tastes like ashes, he's a being of fire, so it's not so surprising.)

Time to stage a prison break for their final ally.

---

"Can I run to you? Are you true to me?  
I'll do unto you, as you do to me!  
And we slowly learn, someone has to burn!  
Better you than me,

O, every Judas once loved a Jesus,  
But finally, treason will seize us!  
And only fools, play by golden rules!  
We all are caught in the middle  
Of one long, treacherous riddle  
Of who trusts who –  
Maybe I'll trust you –  
But can you trust me?"
Next time, the prison break, the actual raid on Reikei, and, hopefully, canon begins. This will take a while even once exams are over – I need to rewatch and reread the source material first before I can start writing.

Now then, conversations with various reviewers, summarizing answers for sake of length:

Okibi_Kitsune on ao3, thanks for reminding me of the importance of energy, especially in a switch of world running on chakra to world running on ki. Look on ao3 if you want to see my full reply to the comment. (if only fanfiction dot net had that feature; I'd need shorter authors notes!)

On fanfiction dot net:

DragonBlaze66: Will Hiei use his old moves? It's a possibility, at least for the moves that don't require chakra, since this dimension is on a ki based system and the change in species switched the energy he's used to using anyway. He might reuse his old sword techniques, and certainly his tactics. Not Katon Jutsu, though he might see if he could recreate something similar.

Probably not for a while, though. He's still on the kick of 'Humans are pathetic and Uchiha Sasuke the most pathetic of the lot' so he's mentally doing everything he can to distance himself from that life on a conscious level. He'll be more willing to compromise with Yukina involved, but up until she arrives I intend to stick very close to canon, albeit with more active and frustrated search attempts on Hiei's part.

Does Hiei considered Naruto pathetic? Will he meet his past self in his mind?

…I don't think Hiei particularly likes thinking about Naruto. Especially given his last chronological memory of him involves Sasuke using Naruto as a witness to his suicide-by-cop with Tenten, Naruto's fiancé.

If he does think of him...Well, have you read Rurouni Kenshin? I think Hiei is a bit of a more cynical Kenshin in Kenshin's initial attitude to Kamiya Kaoru's sword-style, which is meant only to protect and not take life:

Himura Goheh: "...Do you believe in "the sword that protects life" like this little girl?"

Kenshin: "...No. A sword is a weapon. The art of swordsmanship is the art of how to kill. Whatever pretty words you use to speak of it, this is its true nature. What Kaoru-dono says are the words of one that has never bloodied her hands. A utopian ideal. However, when I compare the two, I much prefer Kaoru-dono's idealism to swordsmanship's true nature. If this one had but one wish, it would be that the best of her ideals became the truth of the world."

That's Kenshin, on Kaoru's beliefs. Sasuke and now Hiei is a bit more cynical about Naruto's ideals actually happening; Sasuke was certain they had no chance in a world where the Uchiha still existed. Hiei has no way of knowing what happened after his death. But the essence of the message is the same: "It's a nice dream. Really nice, but a dream. I'm not sure if I'd have a place in the world if you made the dream a reality, but I'd really like it if you could make it a reality."

Will he meet his past self in his mind? No. the closest he came to doing that was during the memory deluge, when he wasn't quite sure who he was for a bit. Rather like a fantasy version of Multiple Personality Disorder, really. But if we go with that comparison, Sasuke-personality is
dead/reintegrated, and Hiei is determined to keep him that way. There is not room in his head for a pathetic past-self *and* a Jagan eye.

Conversation with Akayuki Novak involved more of this chapter's development, and a significant discussion of Hiei's and Kurama's sanity. I told my most faithful reviewer (every chapter!) that "I have Hiei awkwardly trying to grief-counsel Kurama and use a variety of what is popularly referred to as Therapy no Jutsu-and he starts comparing the fox to people he knew only at a distance as Sasuke. And is forced to acknowledge the redhead as his own person."

Akayuki Novak: Oh boy. Hiei trying to counsel Kurama during this time? He's still a bit shaky in his own head, don't know if he should be trying to set someone else straight. *amused* This should be fun.

Author: Believe me, Hiei is much more comfortable when he has a straightforward enemy to kill. That said, he is surprisingly insightful when it comes to people's personalities and the many ways they can break, which means he knows what trouble spots to look for.

And since he knows exactly what kind of trouble an Uzumaki can cause, he really doesn't want to see the fallout of an honorary Uzumaki's breakdown. He knows exactly how badly the members of the Rookie 9 and their various mentors reacted to death of a precious person. Shikamaru to Asuma, Naruto to an apparently dead Sasuke on the Wave mission, Naruto to Pein's destruction of Konoha and near-fatal injuries to Hinata, anyone? And that doesn't even cover what Karin did when you made her mad, if Suigetsu's complaints about experiments are anything to go by.

Plus, Naruto could cut a swath of destruction with only partial demon backup. Kurama is a full youkai in human form, who had a very detailed reputation. Hiei does *not* want to see what this person can do when insane.

(It's probably just as well that he doesn't know the Kyuubi's actual name, or he might have run screaming already.)

Yes, he's a terrible therapist and he knows it. But the alternative of letting Kurama deal with it on his own is too risky to be acceptable.

Consider: the last person he knew who had such a mother-issues-related breakdown is Kabuto (the revelation of Yakushi Nonou's existence and death happened during the fight where zombie Itachi partnered with Sasuke to take down DragonSage!Kabuto, conveniently right before I break from Naruto canon). Hiei does not want to risk it. Scientists that go wrong and don't have anchors to keep them from falling over the edge are very dangerous enemies, neutrals, and allies. Given Kurama's analytical mindset is geared toward plants and security systems with a bit of side-knowledge in medicine and seduction, I feel safe classifying him as a scientist.

Hiei's intelligent, but he knows he's nowhere near genius level. That's people like Shikamaru, Itachi, Orochimaru, Kabuto, Neji, Tsunade - all of them acknowledged geniuses in their own field from very early on, and all of them have some sort of semi-permanent break with reality when their mentor (or, in Tsunade's case, partner and fiancé) is suddenly, permanently gone. Sasuke's breaks with reality, haven't been nearly as self perpetuated. In each case, first Itachi and then Tobi intervened, creating a situation that cracked reality and then fitting the pieces together in the way that furthered their goals while Sasuke was still reeling. Neji and Tsunade are actually the luckiest ones, in some ways; despite having lost their identity anchors, they chose to direct those negative energies inward, and got themselves on a more positive track when Naruto derailed their train of thought (please ignore the unintentional pun).

Because geniuses don't fail, they have no idea how to deal with failure. Given that the definition of insanity is repeating an action but expecting a different result, this is probably why
neurotypicals view most geniuses as not entirely sane - a genius' usual response to a first failure is a moment of disbelief, at least one or two repeated tries, and then either continuing to try the same thing or giving up entirely.

Hiei is not a genius. He cannot stop Kurama if something goes wrong. He is very aware of this. It doesn't matter if Kurama has not hit that point yet; if he does, Hiei cannot stop him. And he's not close enough Kurama to be able to serve as a backup anchor on sanity - they're allies, but there isn't enough mutual trust.

Especially when Hiei no longer has the Sharingan - the one weapon he knows for certain can stop an enraged Bijuu in its tracks.

Our conversation was longer than that, but this is already a longer author's note than I feel comfortable with. Also thanks for helping me find a realistic way to deal with how much Hiei is aware of the price of the Mirror of Darkness, and how and why he was willing to let Kurama use it if he was aware of it, given his history with the Mangekyo eyes and their cost. That bit of our conversation… well, I'm not willing to give spoilers, yet. Maybe next chapter's notes.

Next time: Enter Canon territory, with the theft of first a partner in crime, and then the Artifacts themselves!
Chapter Notes

Sorry if this is a little later than planned, and possibly a little lower in quality. I'm afraid I've received some rather bad news unexpectedly, and have been distracting myself with writing this. Will try to go back and edit later.

That said, as promised, this chapter enters Canon. Credits to a flashback sequence in Episode 47 for the first part of the chapter, and line borrowing from episodes 6 and 8 for the latter part. Quotations credited and formatted as usual. Enjoy.

Beta'd by the ever-loyal Akayuki Novak, without whom I could not hope to begin explaining Hiei’s ever complicating mental landscape. Many thanks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

…The bells were ringing in the dale,
And men looked up with faces pale.
The dragon's ire, more fierce than fire,
Laid low their towers and houses frail.

The mountain smoked beneath the moon.
The dwarves, they heard the tramp of doom.
They fled the hall to dying fall
Beneath his feet, beneath the moon.

Far over the Misty Mountains grim,
To dungeons deep and caverns grim,
We must away, ere break of day,
To win our harps and gold from him!
- Excerpted from 'Over The Misty Mountains Cold,' written by J.R.R. Tolkien and originally published within his novel 'The Hobbit'

Chapter 14: We Must Away, Ere Break of Day

A forest clearing at twilight. Nothing particularly noteworthy at first glance.

Hiei’s steps on the leaf mould are silent; his companion’s sneakers crunch them. Once more, he reminds himself of the necessity of working with the brute. He went and sprung him from his prison cell not three hours ago, just after the change of the guard, for a reason, after all.

And it wasn’t anywhere near as easy as Sasuke had it when recruiting for Team Hebi. Kurama concocted a fast-evaporating plant gas to make the guards less alert and remove evidence of tampering, and Hiei made free use of it. He baited Gouki into following him with the prospect of a team heist and partnering the famed Kurama – out of action for the last decade and a half. Had the brute been less predictable and raised a ruckus, it could have all been ruined at that moment. Fortunately, the Kyūkonki is more cunning than intelligent as a whole, and Gouki has proven a true member of his species.
Now, they bind him to the job and introduce the last partner.

Gouki is expecting silver hair and fox ears, claws, and an aura that reeks of deception and danger.

When the slight redhead clad in a maroon school uniform steps from the trees, he is understandably less than impressed.

More precisely, he thinks it’s a joke.

For a minute, he’s laughing so hard he can’t get a word out, before wheezing, “You’re telling me that this is him?! That’s very funny, Hiei!” He gasps out a few more chuckles.

Just as well they had a Plan B for if the ogre refused to be led completely blind on this. Unbeknownst to Gouki, the entire ground is listed with gases to make him more suggestible to intimidation when the demonstration occurs.

“I heard boogeyman stories about Yoko back in lockdown, and this red-haired princess ain’t it. You want me to believe you’re the real legend? You’re gonna have to get out of that skin!” He ends with a middle finger raised high from his right hand, as if to punctuate how far below him in both height and power he finds this human.

To be fair, Hiei would have been fooled too. If he hasn’t used it in the last ten minutes, Kurama has a complete lockdown on his youki, suppressing it to the levels of a mildly spiritually sensitive human at all times. He can suppress it further if necessary, but that requires concentration and is uncomfortable for extended periods.

Kurama only smiles at them both, a smile that reminds Hiei far too much of another deceptively feminine male, whose power he realized too late. But Kurama is not like that snake, and will not become like the mad scientist. Hiei won’t let him.

Isn’t that what Naruto said about taking you back home?

Dammit, Hiei is himself. Not Sasuke. He has the lessons of experience of a lifetime and a half to draw on, and he will succeed.

“I cannot do that.” Kurama’s smile never wavers. “This is a merger, not a possession. I can no more separate from my current human biology than you can from your Kyūkonki horns.”

Gouki, of course, will not accept such excuses with only their word. Given their target, the Spirit King’s most secure vault, Hiei wouldn’t either. Still, calling him “a human kid playing pretend”?

Impatient as ever, Hiei drawls his suggestion that Gouki fight him to prove his worth. It certainly worked on Sasuke when the Sound Four came calling. Gouki immediately accepts, without even the Jagan’s push for him to make the choice.

Of course, the brute is as unpleasantly surprised as Team Seven in the Forest of Death when Kurama unleashed energy creates a shockwave that raises the dust of leaf mulch.

“It is true, I am not as strong as before.” Green eyes narrow. “But, I have also acquired priorities to protect.”

Having stepped to one side and closed his eyes, Hiei’s passively running Jagan picks up an image of a soft hand smoothing a bandage across the nose, a kind smile and shocked trust and safety. Given the height of the point of view, Hiei suspects this is the incident he’s heard only peripherally about, when Shiori saved her son from broken glass. The incident that sealed the bond of mother and son to be more than one-sided and in name.
When Hiei produces the rose, Goui is still cocky enough to make a joke about going on a date, despite his surprise.

Hiei shakes his head, eyes still closed. He doesn’t need to see this; his ears will paint a perfect picture as it is.

“Rose Whip!”

A light touchdown of feet, behind Goui, who has yet to move despite his bluster.

Crack. Crack. Kreeeak…

Th-Th-Th-Thump.

Hiei opens his eyes in amusement. As if to add insult to injury, Kurama’s not only divided the semicircle behind him into stumps and logs, he’s cut them so that the trees fall and land parallel to each other, neat enough for splitting the logs.

An elemental youkai’s nose is not as keen as an animal youkai’s. Hiei can still taste the sudden stink of sweat on the air.

“O-Okay, Kurama. I was just jokin’. I’m sure you’ll be fine to work with for a while.”

Smart choice. Apparently, Goui can learn.

With four days and six hours until the full moon, they infiltrate the Spirit King’s Palace Vaults. Hiei’s proud to say they do it without alerting a single guard. The unlocking goes equally smoothly.

At first.

Three beings are required to unlock the artifacts. One from Ningenkai, one from Reikei, one from Makai. Technically, they’re cheating. Kurama’s body is soaked in Ningenkai energy from its lifetime there. This is the first time he’s crossing the border in this form – it’s one of the reasons Hiei had to break Goui out alone. Hiei’s birth energies are Makai-tainted from the centuries growing up there – a mere year away isn’t enough to overcome that. Goui, thanks to his time in Reikei prison, ‘feels’ like a native – albeit one of the darker residents.

The fooling works well enough on the lock. But not enough to keep the alarms silent: as Goui hits the last trigger, even as the doors swing open, the siren blares and the intercom crackles.

Guards come running. Cursing, Hiei draws up his white scarf from his throat – if he can avoid a mug shot, it will be helpful. His partners’ attire is no good for such. Snatching the sword from its resting display, he knocks down the first guards – yell at your partners later, deal with these obstacles now – while Goui forces the Gem into the pocket of his too-small jeans and Kurama secretes the Mirror inside his school coat.

Kurama doesn’t need to show off his elegant style. A tap of his fingertips, each coated with poison, and the guards are woozy, their reactions slowed, easy prey for Goui’s sluggish and untutored fists, a civilian dart board for ninja-trained Hiei. Weak. Slow. Easy prey, waiting to be snatched up.

Goui roars in triumph and snatches up the closest one, eyes glowing red with unleashed yoki, intent on having a celebratory meal right then and there. Then the intercom fully wakes up: “Security Breach on the Artifact Vault!”
“Alright, Gouki, that’s enough,” Hiei snaps, reminding himself to end it non-fatally. He’s been careful to leave them unconscious; Reikei has no problem with quizzing their staff’s ghosts, and none of them need a murder count added to their charges. No matter how much like prey they seem, a live-combat crisis is not the first time to test a blade.

The stupid being barely turns his head in acknowledgement of the words, and Hiei doesn’t need the Jagan to understand the ‘don’t tell me what to do’ inherent in the bloodlust on Gouki’s face. It takes Kurama’s additional reinforcement, that they’re running short on time, to get the thug to listen enough to drop the guard.

The intercom blares as they speed their way out: “All guards report to the palace perimeter! Seal the doors! They’ve taken all three of them!”

Unfortunately for Reikei Security, they did not come through a door. They came through a window. And from the window, it is a short drop and run to the portal, and all of them, even Gouki, are at least twice as fast as their quickest pursuer.

Human energy and the vacuum of the portal hit him like a shock of cold water. He is suddenly aware of his own battle high, like a beacon in this place to those who know how to look, and forces it down. Kurama’s hand on his wrist is helpful, the pressure a sharp anchor.

“Play human, now,” the kitsune murmurs, his own energy tightly locked away again. Gouki and Hiei force their levels down as much as they can, Hiei forcing his hand off the sword and tucking it within the energy concealment woven into the shadow threads of his cloak. He’s reluctant to take his hand off the blade, lest it decide him an unfit master and attempt to cut back.

Kusanagi had its own tests for him to pass before it accepted him as a master. This blade he has sated with blood before sheathing it again, but will it be enough? Or will it insist on not merely blood, but lives to slake its thirst?

He could always test it, of course, Hiei muses, absently aware of entering a local café (they’ve landed in an uptown business district, some miles away from the hospital and Kurama’s home both) and ordering a fine green tea. For once, he has the money to spare without resorting to common pickpocketing. It would be easy enough to test the blade and gain some more – foolish humans, building in gridlocked patterns like this, weaving their own net-snares. Easy prey, ripe for the taking. Their waitress’ bones are fine enough that she might not even notice the cut – no, no, fool, we can’t draw attention here, we’re hiding.

Hurriedly blowing on his tea, Hiei breaths and counts. In for a slow count of ten, hold for a count of six, exhale a count of twelve, wait another four, inhale for ten once more… repeat three times, sip tea once, repeat again.

His battle high reined in once more, Hiei forces himself to keep his Jagan closed, relying on his other senses to assess his partners. Sasuke relied on that Cursed Seal too damn much in non-emergency situations. He is not Sasuke. He will not use the Jagan merely to tag his partner’s mental states. Or to wipe Gouki on the sidewalk like the insect stain he is so close to becoming. They are in public, and they are avoiding attention. Shaking off the hunt. He is not prey. He does not need to assert such by turning predator and searching out prey.

He really shouldn’t need to be reminding himself of all this either.

“If I can keep my hand off my prize, you can keep your hands off yours, Hiei,” Kurama breathes. He starts, and pulls his hand away from his cloak and back toward his teacup. Damn it, he should know better than this.
“Ten more minutes, Kurama. That’s all I can stand of the crowding here.” And as long as I can keep us shielded from prying eyes with the misdirection.

Nodding, Kurama signals for their check. Hiei is using too much energy to keep up his façade of impenetrable confidence to argue when the kitsune pays for the lot. Not even a mental grumble about how this isn’t a date. Just as well that Gouki is keeping them company. Too many people have made assumptions when he and Kurama do lunch meetings alone, on the rare occasion they can’t use Kurama’s room to talk.

He’s grateful when they enter the sealed forest clearing, safe and sound and sealed. Gouki’s jewel is proving true to its name, hungry indeed. He’s heard at least one commotion of a collapsed person on their way over here. He doesn’t have the spare time to sort it out, not before he sorts out the sword.

Gouki is laughing in victory, far from the sight of human eyes. Kurama remains subdued and on guard, and Hiei can’t be sure if there’s some hidden watcher he hasn’t sensed and doesn’t want to reveal the Jagan to, or simply that his partner finds Gouki untrustworthy. He should probably be worried about it all, but he really isn’t. Kurama can take care of himself (no he can’t you damned idiot), and Hiei won’t betray any possible weak spot in front of untrusted eyes. So, the watcher needs a distraction, one Hiei is happy to provide.

Instead, he begins practicing katas with the new blade, reminded of sword practice with Kusanagi once more. It’s a different weight than his usual katana, and sings a different song with his swings. Come to think of it, the orb is rather like Itachi’s mirror-shield in its absorbison of souls, even if Itachi only ever absorbed Orochimaru, and the Mirror, too, absorbs life energy. (And later he will curse himself for not following that thought up, and be suspicious that he did not think to do so, and rejudge his own mental state completely once more – but that will be later).

Entering more and more difficult katas, Hiei launches himself into the air, thinking to reproduce Kurama’s feats with his Rose Whip. It’s a good chance to test the sword’s other rumored abilities as well.

Let’s see what army you can forge of my prey.

He slices a tree, which becomes an E-Class winged demon with a tail – perfect for scouting purposes if mass-produced – if it didn’t become petrified wood again a few minutes later.

“If this sword can make youkai of trees, just think what it could make from humans!” he laughs, landing on the ground, caught up in exhilaration and the power high of his own prowess. Half-jokingly, Hiei turns to the others and proposes that they go to the next city – he’ll create an army a thousand youkai strong from humans (an image of black scelera and cracked skin, and glasses and snake scales, flits across his mind) –

– and Gouki can feed their thousand human souls to the Gakidama before the transformation occurs (the Shinigami towers over them, without concept of mercy or justice or anything but sacrifice for sacrifice) –

– while Kurama can use his Mirror at the full moon, and supposedly bring them complete control (red rings and black tomoe and interlocking circles and all the world’s a stage of puppets and their strings).

That last image brings him back to himself, aware that, if for but a moment, he was not just joking. Hiei can tell the sword would enjoy being used by someone with such a goal, but he is not Madara. He would only ever do it for her, just as that man would only ever do it for a little boy that never wanted it, and another for a dead girl, and another for revenge and spite on a world that
did not favor him as fully as he likes. But Hiei is not an Uchiha, even with an Uchiha’s memories, and he knows the world takes care of itself very well. It unnerves him that he even needs to remind himself of that.

Gouki, however, takes him seriously, and asks Kurama to join. Kurama apologizes, declaring “I must withdraw from this alliance.”

For one moment, Hiei is filled with fury at the reply, at another person leaving, (“Coward! Your years of hiding yourself in the Ningenkai have made you just like them, spineless and ready to be walked on!” Weakling. Prey.) before he remembers the plan, remembers why they did all this in the first place.

Then he’s just angry at himself.

He’s not Naruto, to fight for someone who wants to, needs to leave. He’s not that selfish.

(Even if it hurts.)

Suddenly, horribly aware that something is wrong, he pushes at his own mental bonds, vaguely aware of the continuing conversation. Gouki, equally scornful, suggests Kurama hands over the mirror, in that case: he has no right to the loot if he’s withdrawing.

“I can’t. I have great need for it myself first.” Hiei screws his eyes shut, desperately fighting for mental control, Hina and Mikoto and Shiori all laid over each other in his head…

The wind whistles as Gouki winds up for a punch, stating he will take the mirror back in that case…

“Yo! Hang on!”

Abruptly, a new voice enters. It’s a human boy, who proposes an alternative: he beats them up and takes the Artifacts back. It sounds so like Naruto for a second that a double image imposes itself over the boy. But no, he’s too tall, too differently colored, even the look in his eyes is different.

Hiei swears at himself; how the hell did this guy sneak up on him? How has he gotten so wrapped up in himself that he missed it? Damn it, he knows he has a tendency to tunnel vision; he thought he’d learned to compensate and constantly scan for outside influence! “Who are you? How do you know about the artifacts?” he manages to hiss out in a moment of mental clarity (if that’s what you call a momentary lessening of the bloodlust that washes his vision in red).

The fact that he’s stalling with stupid queries for identity and how the boy knows such information while scanning for spirit energy levels indicates exactly how much of his brain is on autopilot – should let someone else ask, shouldn’t draw attention yet, what kind of ninja is like that, he’s not the idiot in orange.

“Oh, I was hoping you’d ask. The name’s Urumeshi Yusuke. I’m a Spirit Detective.”

Both Gouki and Hiei are incredulous: a human servant for Koenma is one thing, but for one with such low Reiki to be sent after them, one known murderer and two unknowns, is an insult.

Something in his grin and introduction style reminds Hiei of Sasuke’s memories of his idiot teammate.

Hmm, there’s an idea…

Testing his hypothesis, Hiei chooses his next words carefully. “Don’t worry, he’s just one of
Koenma’s fools.” Nobody likes being called an idiot. “He must have been the only human they could round up! His spirit energy is pathetic!” More precisely, it’s so low that Hiei can’t even register it. “And he looks weak.” So did Naruto, deceptively so. Still, if the boy reacts to it, it’s worth it.

Gouki follows the conversational lead, claiming the human will be dead in one punch.

“Idiots! I’m not afraid of you at all!”

Cocky. But does that confidence come from youthful belief in one’s own indestructibility, or with reason? Hiei forces himself to remember, past the dark haze of amusement that comes with toying with a weaker foe, that Naruto only seemed weak in the classroom, and hid the greatest of the biju within himself, even if one discounted the idiot’s post-graduation personal growth rate. The inability to register on Hiei’s sense could also place him at the opposite end – past the levels Hiei can chart.

“I won’t be participating in this fight!” He leaps into the trees, gaining a bird’s eye view before the detective can react.

No matter which lifetime, Hiei has always preferred to observe his foes first.

Not that he’d lose in any case, but a ninja always takes the extra advantage when he can, no matter how dishonorable a samurai might call it.

Reality beckons once more as Kurama turns his back and walks out of the clearing. “I don’t have time to be arrested.” *Sorry, Hiei. I can’t be caught now.* An image of Shiori accompanies, along with a calendar.

And that is enough for Hiei to understand – and cover accordingly for his partner.

One last shout to throw the detective off. “Stop, Kurama! You can’t just walk out on our plan!”

One last dash to follow after his partner for a short while before they split, and one last mental promise to meet up the morning after the full moon at the old warehouse, if all is well.

Behind him, he hears the detective protesting their leaving just as he arrives, and Gouki moving to confront him.

It’s the last clearly aware thought Hiei has for some time. As much as he’d like to tag Gouki’s mental presence, he’s exhausted, and his mental defenses have taken a battering.

As soon as he’s in his warded section of the abandoned warehouses, his defenses of traps and alarms active, he collapses without even taking the time to eat. Sleep is more important, the Jagan a watchful sentinel but one that drains his energy.

One hand is still resting on the blade’s hilt.

He will not awake for two days, and then only to eat and drink before collapsing back into bed. By the time he rises on the fourth day, the night of the new moon, he barely has enough awareness to function.

But it’s enough to operate the Jagan, and get an update on the situation.

Report, shinobi.

“Their mistakes were simple ones,” Hiei murmurs, idly caressing the bandages he uses as a
headband. “Gouki’s was overconfidence, and Kurama’s… sympathy, for his human prey.” Not prey, mother. But aren’t the two synonymous, given the examples I’ve seen?

“I… am the only high-class demon left.”

_I am the last of my clan who remain loyal to its values._

“I certainly won’t make the same mistakes,” he reassures himself. The blade tilts in his hand, his birth eyes reflected on its lower half, his active Jagan above the center fold of the metal. He has not held a blade of this type before, but it suits him, he thinks. “My plan’s too good for that!”

_I’ll create a demonic army, who will only heed my instructions and bring me the things I want… the person I want…_

(Reviewing that memory a week later, Hiei will decide that shoving Sasuke’s memories away in mental cupboards was not, actually, the best way to deal with things. If he’d actually used the memories rather than denied them, he might have realized that he was starting to sound like Tobi and Madara. Particularly once that bit about the demonic army as more than scouts became more than a joke.)

(But that is later. Much later.)

_The Shadow Sword will transform any human it cuts into the lowest level of youkai – a strong but sluggish creature – spreading poison from its initial cut and changing all its energy to that of a youkai. Only the sword itself can reverse the effect._

It took him two hours with his out-of-practice reading skills and kanji that had undergone an evolution, it seemed, to understand those two sentences on his own.

He didn’t think he’d have to do it alone.

“It’s better this way,” he assures himself. He’s always worked best alone, without a partner. Didn’t his time after the bandits prove that? “The other two wouldn’t have the courage to use the weapons as they’re intended. I will!” One is a thug who prefers using his fist, while the other never did like getting his hands dirty, or his clothes. The justification seems reasonable, especially with the sword thrumming with approval in his hands.

“But first…”

He launches himself from the warehouse roof.

“I’ll kill Urameshi Yusuke!”

The blade might slice the air, but Hiei is truly the flying shadow he is named.

No shadow touches the ground. The warehouse is quiet and deserted once more, the presence gone with less evidence than a ghost left in its passing.

Chapter End Notes

And Canon is begun. Happy New Year to all. I'll be heading back to school soon, so please enjoy.
Next time: Hiei kidnaps Keiko, battles Yusuke, and suffers an unexpected betrayal – all while battling his new blade for control.

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