

## 蟾蜍 (three-legged toad)

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by [wrenuu](#)

## Summary

At that moment, when Izuna's body touches the ground, the look on Madara's face makes Hashirama feel as if he is five and looking up to his father bokkēn, again. He wonders if this is the true moment when he lost his friend. Between them, there were always a few things, maybe several things, that they found very difficult to forget.

Hashirama's earliest memory was of battle.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Chapter 1: a frog. the well

THE MINISTER MUNE-YUKI MINAMOTO

THE mountain village solitude

In winter time I dread;

It seems as if, when friends are gone,

And trees their leaves have shed,

All men and plants are dead.

This is a story, a very old one, of a frog who had always lived in his well — he believed it to be all that existed.

But, one day, he was visited by a sea turtle who told him of the ocean.

*"The sea is greater and even more colorful than the skies! My eyes can never find the end,"* the turtle said, amazed, *"I would bet that it would take me more than a thousand lifetimes to explore its vastness."*

Upon hearing this, the frog realized he had a very limited view of the world. He felt ashamed about his boastful declarations of his well, so tiny and secluded from the splendor of the grand sea.

(That's where the saying is from, for after that the turtle told everyone, *"The frog in the well cannot talk of Heaven."*)

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Hashirama's earliest memory was of battle.

He remembers the day clearly, the moment he first felt pain as men do — coming from the hands of his father. Not the kind that derives from scratches or knee bruises from playing, but from injuries that you carry for a long time, even after they heal.

The child was suddenly taken from his room and harshly told to defend himself with a bokkēn in their yard. Until that day, Hashirama realized he had never felt truly afraid of Butsuma before as the man came onto him with all his strength, giving the boy no chance to succeed. His father's brow was deeply furrowed, eyes dark and slightly clouded beneath, and his mouth turned down with disappointment.

*Like an ōni*, the boy regretted the thought immediately, no matter how true it rang. That day, he left the training limping and crying so hard his throat became ragged and his swollen cheeks were left stained with tears.

(Hashirama is tired, but he shakily lifts the wooden sword and tries to ignore the ache traveling up his limbs.

*Why is Otō-sama so angry with me?* he thinks but does not voice it out loud. The sweat runs down the child's forehead as the clan head's arm suddenly comes crashing down with the power of a hundred horses. When their weapons connect the force travels up and Hashirama falters, and despite his best efforts, he ends up sprawled on the floor — stone breaking the skin of his elbows.

They fight until the sun hides behind the mountains, the sky transforming from blue to black and the crickets starting to chirp with the coming of the night. Hours later, the wood of the bokkēn, gripped tightly by his open knuckles, is stained accusingly by drops of red.

“My son is weak,” the shadow above him spits and it's like a new hit to the gut. “Get up, boy!” It bellows and Hashirama tries, but his legs betray him, and he finds himself in the ground once more.

*Being on the floor is a blessing*, he contemplates and watches the grains of dust move beside his head, for he knows he couldn't fall any longer.

For a second, he wonders if Butsuma would kick him in the ribs when he sees the look on the man's face, but his father leaves him there, bruised and dirty, until one of the servants comes and takes him inside.)

Ironically, the only thing Hashirama can't recall from that day was the reason for such violence. In any case, while he doesn't remember the cause of his father's actions, he can't find in himself the will to forget or forgive the consequences of his anger.

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Hashirama is eight and he's always thought that people were incredibly strange. There was a dichotomy that lingered outside of humankind that was so intense it pained him, sometimes. People, in a way, were unpredictable, they shifted and morphed — and he didn't like to be caught unaware.

In the same breath, he would say that there was something calming in the way the forest remained unchanged, despite the passing of time.

(The wind of March calls from distant lands, whistling for his ears only, “The forest is forever, it dies and dies and becomes alive again.” It's airy and fickle, but no less powerful. Hashirama doesn't understand, so he asks the wind what it meant. The air around him laughs, amused by his confusion, and kisses his hair goodbye.)

There is no sorrow to be felt when a sycamore tumbles down into the earth, only muted gladness. The ants collect the leaves, the fox hides its tunnel below the branches and the beavers use the wood to build their winter homes in November to prepare for the first frost.

And, after a long while, the once tree becomes one with the soil again, remembering the days it used to be only a seedling.

He couldn't understand how people thought themselves so very different and dissociated from nature. The boy felt the death of a dozen trees the moment he could access his chakra — he saw them in the fireplace, supporting the walls of the stables, on the chairs and statues around the compound.

Hashirama is surrounded by death, and it seems like he is the only one who ever acknowledges it.

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The Naka is a sanctuary he stumbled upon a year ago while walking around the Clan Lands. Since then, he finds respite from his lessons by playing by the river bed, listening to the songs of the birds and the thrumming of the running water.

It's at one of those days, when his joints are aching and his legs cry tired that, among the greens of the grass, he spots someone with dark hair laying down, relaxed and content while bathing in the sunlight.

(Kā-sama is always with Tobirama, hiding inside her quarters full of scrolls and lanterns, in a room marked by the stinging smell of smoke. Hashirama, who doesn't like to be scooped inside too much without feeling the humidity of the earth between his toes, finds himself more in the company of his grandmother, learning how to tend to the garden in the backyard of the main house.

There is a difference between being the strongest as opposed to being the most talented, he understands. There is a reason that Tobirama is the one who knows that Kā-sama's favorite flowers are tsubakis — that she prefers winter to spring.

Sometimes, embarrassingly, he wonders if his mother would pray to Totoyama-hime to whisk her away from their home. If she would've liked to become a dragon and fly far after giving birth to him, in the same way the daughter of Watatsumi had.

He never asks.

“If you want to grow cordon tomatoes, then you will need a stake or bamboo cane to support the plant, and you'll need to pinch outside shoots to keep it fruiting on one central stem.” Obā-san shows him how to do it, hands wrinkled and marked by age, as they both crouch around the naked piece of upturned soil.

They bury the sections of stem that will then produce additional roots and carefully place the stakes beside them. They are still small, but he knows they will grow past his height in a few weeks. “Remember that tomatoes are tender, so before planting out, my boy, acclimatize them to garden conditions by hardening them off,” she instructs, gray hair tied up by a colorful cloth and eyes kind when they rest on his form.

They stay in silence during the remainder of their task, until the warmth in the back of his neck starts to become a burn and his nails look dark from humus. When they come back inside and she starts to make tea in her old stove, Hashirama takes the chance to ask more about the plants under her care around their home.

“You don’t usually need to stake bush tomato varieties,” Babā answers, and her croaked voice is serious when she delivers a lesson. She hands him his tea, and warns him to be careful of the hot ceramic. “But they may need a little support for any stems that are in danger of snapping or touching the ground under the weight of their fruit.”

The old woman eyes him and her expression is undescribable — hiding pity and resignation. Hashirama becomes uncomfortable under her stare for reasons unknown to him yet and decides to turn and look down at his simmering cup instead of trying to decipher her gaze.

Growing tomatoes is a fun and rewarding task, he learns. Resulting in masses of fresh, nutritious fruit that tastes better than anything they can buy in the shops around the compound. He likes to nurture them until they sprout, to see the deep red fruit growing stronger each day and to taste the sweet juice he helped create.

When they harvest the fruits months later, all collected in a full basket that weighs a lot more than the child expected, Hashirama feels a sense of pride he couldn’t never achieve by brandishing sharp steel.

“You’re a natural.” Babā praises him, and the force of the smile stretched upon his face is enormous.)

There weren’t many clan children who he could relate to, and even his brothers weren’t an exception. Hashirama loves greatly and with passion, like a thousand suns. And he loves all of his brothers. However, being the first son of the Clan Head meant strenuous hours of training and studying, and deep connection requires time. So, when he comes around every other day to the river and wins silly games of throwing rocks, Hashirama grows to slowly call this stranger, Madara, a friend — his first one.

For a month, everything was good in the world. Hashirama had someone to talk to, who wouldn’t judge him for his soft heart. Father was satisfied with his progress on taijutsu, and there were no more skirmishes at the border of Fire.

He turns twelve when Karawama dies during a scouting mission.

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“Hashirama, you are my firstborn,” Butsuma starts, as they both sit in seiza inside the clan’s sanctuary, nested in the belly of the Senju’s woods. “My might and the beginning of my strength, excelling in honor and power.”

He is nervous and his hands shake, so Hashirama hides them inside the pockets of his hakama. At the core of the building everything feels colder, the air humid as it sticks to their skin, and their voices carry through the corridors for a second too long. The boy cranes his neck and stares at the carved human features of the Shishigami, the Deer God, that sits in the altar in front of them.

The sculpture stands proud, with the animal’s chest puffed in the direction of the sky, daring. His eyes and face, saturated crimson, make it seem as if masked by blood. Except, they shine kindly in the stone, almost humanly, and his many antlers look harmlessly dull — the same as old tree branches.

Hashirama wonders if it was lonely, repeatedly dying and becoming alive again. To be the only one able to grow plants in a quick spurt under his hooves and to heal wounds with one lick of his tongue.

(When he awakens his wood release, Hashirama laughs until his belly hurts just from breathing. *Babā was right*, he contemplates as a tiny ūme blossoms from the safety of his palm.

*I really got a green thumb.*

If he is wary of the new developments, he doesn't let it show. Hashirama lets himself become more naturally, simply as if forecasting the force of the tide. When the day ends, people shuffle and look at him as he passes by, and he can't help but see a bit of fear hidden beneath their stares.)

“One morning,” his father comments without facing him, still like a cornered rabbit, “You are going to rise and I won't be here anymore.” It's a chilling thought, one the child doesn't like to dwell on too much. One day, Hashirama will have to spread his wings and learn to fly on his own. “Until then, I will be standing by. But, I need you to understand, son, what it takes to be the heir — what it takes to be a leader.”

His father is tall where he sits beside him and his voice reminds the boy of thunder. Butsuma feels greater than the world, stronger than Yorimitsu, blessed by the guardian deity Hachiman, the god of war. Though, Hashirama's perspective of things didn't count too much — to a child their parents would always seem indubitably big.

*What it takes to be Clan Head*, Hashirama knows what he didn't say.

*The firstborn is always dearer*, he remembers some old men rejoice on the night when one of his aunts gave birth. There was sake thrown around and hearty laughs coming from everyone. They were happy, but Hashirama felt only a sense of dread.

Coming morning, no one comes out of the new parent's house and, years later, he learns that the baby was born a little girl.

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Now that he is gone, Hashirama thinks of Kawarama all the time. He trains until he can't think anymore, to try to get the sight of the body, small, bandaged and lying curled in the heart of the earth, out of his mind. He remembers being his brother's age and now it feels too young. Very soon to die by the hand of adults who don't care if their enemy, wearing ill-fitted armor, hasn't yet grown past their waist.

(Hashirama has a compilation of his brother's drawings, the ones he hides from father, painted in the border of the parchments they use to learn their kanji. They are silly images and excerpts of bad calligraphy, caricatures of the old history sensei that bores Kawarama to sleep, sketches of the cat he feeds in secret after dinner every night and little snippets of the haikus the youngest likes to write in the quiet afternoons after training.

He stacks them inside one of the trunks that sits around his room, and whenever Kawarama is annoying Tobirama, or wallowing, or when he wants his little brother to laugh, Hashirama picks them from their shadowed place and shoves them into his face and threatens to show them to Babā, because they are sure that she would make him apologize and bow to the horrid man victim of their ridicule.

Kawarama protests loudly, but Hashirama knows he doesn't hate it. He knows, because after they brawl halfheartedly on the ground for a bit, his brother always has to fight down a smile.)

These things have been haunting him and the lack of sleep makes him forget about consequences and reasons, and how they don't always correlate to each other. He let's tongue loose, a foolish mistake. Hashirama thinks too much, questions too much — and his throbbing cheek is proof enough of that.

Kā-sama was more lively the evening of the funeral than he'd ever seen her. She cried under the intimacy of their walls, loud and ugly. Hashirama was weeping on his own futon, but he could still hear her from the other end of the hall.

He wonders if she would mourn like that for him, too.

It was the first and shallower of his grievances, that should have prepared him for all others to come.

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He drowns himself in fights, and paints the battlefield red with all the blood his grinding teeth yearn for.

Hashirama loses pieces of his mind with each strike of his katana. Adrenaline pulses and scores through his veins until all he can hear is the beats of his heart echoing inside his ears. He struggles to slow down after there is no more of the enemy to kill, and he struggles to stay upright on his feet after the excitement of the battle ends.

Hashirama thinks that he is losing his ability to be gentle — to care.

His face and armor reek, and his hands are warm and wet. He can feel the bitter taste of iron resting on his tongue, and he recoils from nausea at the sensation.

He cannot lose himself — he can't.

*He can't.*

Later, when the Senju can view all the mangled dead warriors cut and smashed by his arms, he throws up in the back of their side of the mud terrain. Then, Hashirama sees his cousins pick out spinning eyes from the deceased Uchiha like flowers plucked out from the earth — and he doubles down for the second time, throat burning from the acid and brain whirling.

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Hashirama is fifteen, and then he is seventeen, but he no longer dreams. Nowadays, his nights are plagued by nightmares of the accusing empty stare of raven haired children. It became a routine to wake up in the middle of the night and press the heel of his shaking hands strongly against his brows. That's why he refrains from deadly blows when he encounters a team of four Uchiha men outside of Tea. He doesn't kill them, but he thinks they wish he did.

"Why would you let them live?!" Butsuma screams at him as he slams his fists on the table inside of his office when his son relays the outcome of his journey. The Senju heir's face is carefully blank but, unnoticed, he digs his nails deeper on the meat of his palms. "In this world, ruthless is mercy! You did us a disservice today, Hashirama."

There are many well crafted weapons lined up on the study's walls — all of them bearing two colored fans.

*Spoils of war*, his mind provides, unhelpfully, *Spoils of murder*.

"Know this," his father glares at him with venom pouring out of his mouth. The young man doesn't recognize it, this beast that made home inside his father's flesh. It doesn't seem to recognize its son, either. "The blame of every death of our clansmen by the hands of those pests you saved will be weighed by your shoulders, alone."

On his way out, Hashirama is surprised by his own control when doesn't slam the door shut.

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On the second day of summer of his twentieth fourth year, Izuna falls from Tobirama's sword.

At that moment, when Izuna's body touches the ground, the look on Madara's face makes Hashirama feel as if he is five and looking up to his father bokkēn, again. He wonders if this is the true moment when he lost his friend. Between them, there were always a few things, maybe several things, that they found very difficult to forget.

(Madara's voice is rough, but Hashirama always thought that his laughter could light a room.

"There are all these legends, you know—" The man hiccups and almost drops his cup full of alcohol. They are both sitting on the top of the mountain looking down at the village, and the breeze is chilly from where Hashirama is resting. The stars are shining bright and beautiful above, and there is nowhere he would wish to be right now. "About these cursed eyes of ours."

Hashirama looks towards him, and has to fight down a flinch. Madara's orbs bleed red, dripping onto his cheeks like tiny river arms.

His smile bears a dark edge and the Uchiha Clan Head doesn't let his sight stray from the Senju's front, tomoe swirling lazily and hypnotizing. "They say that the eyes that open in grief know the face of the gods.")

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*After the Nindaime killed Uchiha Izuna with the Hiraishin, Uchiha Madara decided to accept the Shōdaime's peace offer and, thus, Kōnoha of the Hidden Village was born. That's what the records say.*

Nevertheless, Hashirama knows better.

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A leader does what has to be done. They don't cry — they don't mourn.

“You have to live with the decisions you make,” Bustsuma explains, weary as he hastily scribbles a heavy parchment. They are both sitting in the study, reading the treaty documents from around Hi no Kuni, and listing the motives behind each decision that was made — the number of crops, the size of the terrain marked for the animals to roam, the fonts of clean water around the settlement. “Always do what must be done. We can't afford to simply sit and stare at our wounds forever.”

Hashirama looks down, and whispers, shoulders shrunken, “Even if it hurts?”

His father's mask is cracked only for a moment when he drops his hands just a bit further from their higher place next to his line of sight, before becoming encompassing, again. He is tired, Hashirama notices, and his hair is starting to gray at the edges.

His father is old, and has already buried two of his sons.

“Yes,” Bustsuma replies and there is an ache hiding behind his eyes that even Hashirama can acknowledge, “Even more so.”

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Hashirama is nineteen when he becomes Clan Head.

These days, when he looks into a mirror, he can only see his father's face.

They always had the same hair, straight and dark as bark, with the similarities becoming even more obvious after he let it grow past his collarbone. His skin, tan and healthy as copper, only becomes darker from his exposure to the outside. He looks older, like Bustsuma did — exhausted but poised. Hashirama has always been more akin to his father than he ever did his mother.

He can't find traces of her narrow eyes on his own, not the way Itama had. His figure is bulky and large compared to Tobirama's thinner frame and smaller height. Even Kawarama had held her colors — all of his brothers did — and Hashirama was the only one singled out from the trait that ran in Kā-sama's family line.

(He wonders if she appreciated the physical proof of their differences. Hashirama would never be more her son than he already was his father's.)

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It's raining.

Madara is dead and the raindrops still fall. Hashirama's clothes are drenched and his hair, now a few shades darker, sticks to his face without managing to mask the scowl that manges his features. Maybe, he thought the world would suddenly change now that his life feels like it was turned upside down.

(Hashirama stares in bitterness and detachment as gore begins trickling down the corner of the steel. His hand was firm, and his aim sure.

He didn't miss.)

The man looks forward, farther from his friend's body and sees himself looking back — Hashirama looks into his younger self's eyes and only sees disgust.

Madara dies and Hashirama's heart turns into wood.

(He listens to Madara's voice as he rambles about their dream, an idea they are not sure will ever come out of the realm of imagination and longing.

He listens, and Hashirama knows they could live a better life than they do now. Softer and kinder. At this point, they can only manage to endure, to laugh when they should be crying.

“Maybe someday,” Madara whispers while picking some blades of grass between his fingers, eyes lost far away.

*Maybe, Hashirama smiles at him, Someday.)*

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Hashirama learns that there is an uncrossable boundary in human relations, beyond which neither love nor passion can reach. Madara, who strived to reach this edge, had become mad while drowning in silent rage. And he, himself, was shocked with anguish after seeing all of their work being targeted by the one who helped create it.

(Would he have done this all again, if he had known that this friendship would end in heartbreak?)

All that is known it's that Hashirama will always remember Madara exactly as he was — his greatest friend, and his greatest foe.

He must kill this memory — of better times or worse ones, he can't decide — once and for all. Hashirama turns that part of his soul to stone, and throws it in the depths of the river because he has to learn to live again.

He must. He has to. Hashirama thinks will manage, somehow.

He is responsible for more than himself, more than the Senju, now. And it should be a scary notion, to shoulder all of this responsibility, but he finds himself flourishing and growing into his new role.

Deciding between letting his heart crack open or closed was probably one of the hardest things he would ever do. Hashirama is not the only person to suffer from the ways of their

lifestyle and he won't be the last. There is not one person in the village, in the world, who hasn't lost a loved one. And there they were. So he finds kinship and comfort in their company.

Maybe that was the way he failed Madara the most. The man thought he was alone in his pain, and that was an untrue and terrible way to live his life. Or Hashirama likes to think it was, because this way there was something he could have done to ease his burden. If it was not sorrow that held Madara's complete attention, but hunger, Hashirama doesn't — wouldn't know what to think — how to live with the fact that he didn't understand his friend at all.

And how could he have loved Madara if he didn't know him? How could he have lost something that they never had?

He thinks of his grandmother one more time.

(“You know,” she started to murmur in her place on top of the futon, eyes gone milky and skin as pale as cooked rice. Babā cups his cheeks gently, like a mother, and Hashirama can't contain tears and the sobs that clogged his throat from coming out in the open air of the room. Her voice is frail, and he has to move his ear close to her lips in order to understand her words.

“A seed needs to destroy itself completely to become a flower.”)

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Limping, Hashirama carries the body down to the creek a few minutes away from the waterfall where the beams of sunlight manage to escape the heavy clouds above their heads.

Madara's weight slows him down, but Hashirama is strong. Strong enough to carry him nursed in his breast, like a newborn that falled asleep in their father's arms.

*He isn't heavy*, Hashirama reflects. He is Madara, who knew how to hurt him so terribly, who he loved like a brother — like his own blood.

Hashirama buries him with care, straightening his clothes and brushing his hair out of his face to show deathly, frigid eyes that stare at the sky unseeing.

Before letting go, Hashirama presses his forehead against his cold one firmly, and his heart stutters when he can't feel any breath fanning his face nor the faintless movements from the ribcage beneath his own.

*What have you done, what have you done—*

When looks down, he would've considered Madara to be just resting if not for the open wound that rips his flesh, weeping blood across his chest. He leaves his friend there, dirty, bruised — hidden and nested inside the welcoming arms of the earth.

Madara's life could have been narrated as a fire, Hashirama believes. All consuming, bright, scathing and not very lasting.

*Something in Madara was always burning, Hashirama guessed, limbs numb where he stood, Because he could see more than anyone would.*

In the last few months before his desertion from Konoha, Hashirama looked into his friend's eyes and held the gaze of a man that was both living and dying at the same time.

When he walks away, the flowers around his feet turn to face him as he strolls by. They unfurl, even as Hashirama steps uncaringly on top of the lush buds, in awe with the familiarities they share.

After years of surviving the battlefield, only a man gets to make home alive — but it's no longer Madara.

As Hashirama leaves the clearing, alone, he knows he won't ever be the same.

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He forgot — when a rotten tree falls, the forest doesn't shed a tear.

## Chapter 2: Glossary

- **蟾蜍 (three-legged toad)** - In Chinese mythology, the Three-Legged Toad is said to only exist in the moon which it swallows during the lunar eclipse. Since this toad is located so remotely, it symbolizes the “unattainable”.

- **井の中の蛙大海を知ら** (I no naka no kawazu, taikai wo shirazu ) “The frog in the well knows nothing of the sea.” is used to describe an individual who cannot or refuses to see the big picture because of being sheltered and close-minded. Frogs are also predators of insects, including ladybugs. Their presence is a key indicator of a healthy aquatic environment.

- **The Minister Mune-Yuki Minamoto** - The poet was a grandson of the Emperor Kwōkō, and died A.D. 940. The Minamoto family, who sprang from the Emperor Seiwa, who reigned 856-877, was at one time very powerful, and produced many famous men, including Yoritomo, the great founder of the Shōgunate. The Taira family and the Minamotos were the Yorks and Lancasters of medieval Japan; but, after thirty years of warfare, Yoritomo finally defeated his rivals in a great battle fought at Dan-no-ura, in the Straits of Shimonoseki, in 1185; the entire Taira family was exterminated, including women and children, and the infant Emperor Antoku. The Minamoto clan themselves became extinct in 1219, when Sanetomo was murdered at Kamakura, as related in the note to verse No. [93](#).

- A **bokken** (木剣, bok(u), "wood", and ken, "sword") (or a **bokutō** 木刀) is a Japanese wooden sword used for training in kenjutsu. It is usually the size and shape of a katana, but is sometimes shaped like other swords, such as the wakizashi and tantō.

- **"What we're doing is simply being respectful.** Once you set on the field of battle, regardless of age, you will be treated accordingly. Raising our children into capable shinobi... is the most sincere form of love a parent can give!" - This is one of Butsuma's quotes that inspired me to write this the way I did. Butsuma did love Hashirama, I am sure, but his violent love came from a place of fear that bred in Hashirama a type of resentment towards him that you can only have for a parent, or for a leader or authority figure that you think does not deserve the title. He was rough because that's the way he got to survive this long and he wants the same for his children - for them to live honorably, or die trying. He

knew how dark the world was, and was making sure that they knew it, too. I think he could've been a better father, if the world they lived allowed it.

## End Notes

First and foremost, I would like to thank my wonderful betas, pixel\_and\_pixels and bluemermaid92 for helping some sort this out. It took me a while to craft this story, but at the end I got it right!

It was, as you can guess, very difficult to work on Hashirama as a person. He is such a complex character that it took my brain a while to figure his character out. I think I wrote more about him than Madara, which was a surprise. A good one, but still, I didn't expect the rush of creativity to come from him, of all Naruto characters.

This was made for prompt Thursday- memories

The second chapter of this work is, as always, a glossary about the terms and cultural references that I used. Feel free to comment below and share your opinion about this project, I'm always happy to hear from you guys.

Thanks for reading,

cmsvgp

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!