The Windmill Turns Both Ways

by Blaizekit

Summary

12-year-old Uzumaki Naruto loves to dream big about the future, but when he finds himself launched four years into it, not everything is as rosy as he envisioned. Konoha has been leveled to the ground, Akatsuki is reaching the fulfillment of their plans, and the Fourth Shinobi World War is just around the corner. To make matters worse, his friends and enemies have both outgrown him, and things are more dangerous than ever. But sitting around doing nothing has never been Naruto’s style. Determined to change the course of history, he tries to find out as much as he can about the future, while searching for a way back to the past. What exactly is the "Time-Spanning Incarnation" jutsu, and why was it used on him?

Notes

*Additional warnings provided on request! Don't hesitate to ask, or to message me if you want to know if (insert content here) is in the story or to what extent.

This story contains: canon-typical combat violence; four-letter words; horror elements (suspense/surprise); canon-typical creep factors such as weird body stuff, weird eyeball stuff,
undead people, everything that Kabuto and Orochimaru are, plant cell clones, blood, corpses, deaths on-screen as well as off, puppets (in combat, but also a scene with a room filled with life-sized puppets at various stages of assembly), genjutsu-induced hallucinations, children in combat, war, torture (off-screen), and psychological manipulation. There is one section of the chapter 6 'extras' that is rated M due to excessive and graphic violence--this scene is the depiction of a genjutsu vision that happens but is not actually described within the main text. It is very skippable.

**This story does NOT contain:** Sexual content of any variety; romantic content (aside from vague crush mentions and maybe three total crushly blushes); character bashing; f-bombs; or explicit depictions of Danzo.
Introduction Arc: Part I

One hundred thousand organic clones made from the cells of Senju Hashirama grew in the vast cavern, rustling and shifting beneath the unsuspecting earth. Kabuto looked down at them from the water's surface and cracked a sly smile.

After being accepted as an ally in the upcoming war, he was brought to this cavern and shown the army Tobi was growing. It was a show of good faith that they were all on the same side now. But Kabuto had gone through some changes lately, and he wasn't as interested in their alliance anymore. That was why he was in this room alone, in secret, for the sake of his own ambitions.

Well, not entirely alone. He knelt down on the water to get a better look at what lurked below. The silence defied the sheer amount of life in this cave. Itachi and Nagato were standing behind him, still and silent as everything else, mindless puppets with blank eyes and vacant expressions. The one presence that Kabuto didn't take into account, however, was the one that watched him with suspicion.

Zetsu the original didn't trust Kabuto. Neither did Tobi, for that matter, which was why Zetsu was now keeping an eye on their new partner. His head was poking out of the wall high up in the dark heights of the cavern, watching Kabuto carefully as he looked down at Zetsu's thousands of weaker siblings.

"What an incredible source of life energy. Hashirama was a really remarkable man," Kabuto murmured.

The command was unspoken, but no less compelling. Kabuto inclined his head toward the stem of the great plant, and Nagato walked forward and laid his hands on it.

And what does he plan to do with that? Zetsu wondered.

Nagato was absorbing chakra from the plant. His silver hair turned blood-red, and Kabuto grinned to himself again. He stuck his hand under the water and shot a stream of snakes down toward the mob. The Zetsu clones didn't react, not even when the snakes wrapped themselves around a single one and tore it away from its brothers. It was dragged up to the surface and smuggled into Kabuto's voluminous cloak by the time Nagato came walking back to his side.

"Let's go," Kabuto said, Body Flickering away. Itachi and Nagato followed behind him.

The Time-Spanning Incarnation Jutsu. When Kabuto first discovered the thin research notebook in a hidden room of Orochimaru's lair, he never expected the incomplete jutsu would become an obsession for him. Since the moment he discovered it and started piecing its missing elements together, it gradually wormed into his thoughts until he forgot everything else. The war, Edo Tensei—all of it.

At the time, he didn't question why. The idea was just so intoxicating to him. Why should he limit himself to stealing the fixed powers of shinobi that were dead and gone, if it were possible to take living ones—still malleable, still changing? To take them from a younger age, while their potential was still being realized? All it required was the summoning formula, the right power, and a compatible vessel.

It was harder than it sounded. If his theory was correct, this jutsu had the potential to utterly destroy
the user. Time travel was a crime against the natural order of things, after all. As a rule, the past was meant to stay pressed and preserved between the pages of time and never opened again.

That was why the idea to make one of his Edo Tensei puppets perform it was nothing less than sheer genius. With the energy that he'd made Nagato absorb, and the fact that the undead couldn't die even if the jutsu backfired, it had to work.

And he'd chosen the perfect medium for the summoning. A Zetsu clone was a body with amazing powers of adaptability; one that would maintain its underlying properties even after superimposing another will upon it. It had the capacity to imitate living tissue almost flawlessly, yet it wasn't bound by the same rules. Kabuto scanned over his work with satisfaction.

The stolen Zetsu clone was laid out on the stone floor of one of Orochimaru's old hideouts. At its feet was an unrolled scroll: a copy of the summoning formula. Kabuto didn't understand every nuance of the formula, but he didn't need to in order to copy it down and use it. There was no danger to himself, after all.

And if it endangered the one he intended to drag out of the past, what of it?

"Oi, Naruto. Can you make a delivery for me, since you're done with that?"

Naruto peered at Teuchi over the edge of his ramen bowl, slurping down the last of the broth. He set the bowl down with a loud, contented sigh and rubbed the back of his head.

"I'd like to, gramps, but I'm supposed to be meeting Iruka-sensei here. He's running late, but…"

"Come on," Teuchi insisted, putting the delivery box on the counter. "I'll tell him where you are. That bowl you just had as an appetizer will be on me."

"Awright!" Naruto snatched the box and bill slip. "I'll be right back!"

Naruto jogged lightly through the village, feeling very content with the world. It always felt good to see home again after a mission, but this last one had not only been crazy dangerous—even Orochimaru showed up at one point—but it was also more important than any before. After all the pain, terror, and uncertainty left in the village in the wake of the disastrous chuunin exams and the Sandaime Hokage's death, the village had a strong pillar to rebuild on again. He had brought them a Hokage, and all the security and hope that came with the title.

Ero-Sennin had been there too, of course; it's not like he could take all the credit. Jiraiya had taken care of most of the whole fighting-super-dangerous-missing-nin part. Facing two Akatsuki members and Orochimaru within the span of a single journey would have been a bit too much for Naruto to handle alone.

Still, it seemed like most people didn't even realize that Naruto had gone on the mission to find Tsunade, much less be grateful for his help. It was disappointing not to get the recognition his heroic efforts deserved. Naruto couldn't be upset at a time like this, though. Not when it felt like the great oppressive blanket of fear and mourning had finally been lifted off the village.

"Delivery!" Naruto chirped, stepping into the Yamanaka flower shop.

"Naruto?" Ino stood up from where she had been sitting behind the counter.

"Oh, good," a tall, vaguely recognizable man with a long blond ponytail came walking in from the back. "Since kaa-chan is out today, I thought we'd have lunch in the shop, Ino. Fast service! Thanks
for bringing that, Naruto-kun."

Ino pointed at Naruto accusingly, other hand on her hip. "But why are you the one bringing it? Is there even anything left in that box?"

"Pfft, why would I need your ramen? Iruka-sensei's back there waiting to treat me! Later!" after raising his hand in a brief wave, he turned to run out.

"Wait—Naruto!" Ino called after him, and he turned back around. "Sasuke-kun…has there been any…"

Naruto looked at her hopeful, anxious face and broke into a wide grin.

"I finally dragged Tsunade-baachan down to the hospital a few hours ago," he said, giving the sparkling thumbs-up he'd learned from Lee. "She used her medical ninjutsu on Sasuke and he woke up right away. He's going to be alright!"

Ino covered her mouth, tears welling up in her eyes. "Thank goodness."

"You can go to the hospital after we eat," Inoichi said gently. "I'll look after things here."

Smiling, Naruto turned and dashed out. That warm feeling was expanding in his chest, making his heart float like a balloon.

No—right now, it didn't matter. It was enough to know that he'd had a part in something significant for the village… and his friends. It was worth it to see Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei open their eyes again, and Sakura's smile.

Naruto went back the way he came, dodging civilians pushing wheelbarrows and carrying timber, repairing the damage from Orochimaru's attack. Everyone was working cheerfully, banded together and confident in the village's strength. They no longer had the anxious air of a leaderless people that might be attacked by a foreign power at any moment.

As expected, Iruka was there when he got back. He looked up when Naruto came in, slurping the noodles that were hanging halfway out of his mouth.

"Iruka-sensei!" Naruto cried indignantly. "You couldn't wait until I got back?"

"Hm," he snorted as Naruto slid into the seat beside him and Teuchi quickly put a fresh bowl of ramen in front of the boy. "You started it. You didn't wait until I got here—Teuchi-san told me."

"But," Naruto frowned. "I was hungry and it was boring just sitting around here waiting. What made you so late, anyway? Tsunade-baachan reminded me I was meeting you, and I ran here all the way from the hospital, but you ended up way later than me. If I'd have known, I could have stuck around to see what she thought of Bushy—I mean Lee's injuries."

"Right, sorry," Iruka said. "I was in a meeting and it ran over a bit. Everyone is overworked. Academy classes have been disrupted so often lately that we're trying to negotiate a way to cover one another's classes, if someone has to leave suddenly or is needed for a mission."

"Mhm," Naruto mumbled through a mouthful of ramen.

Iruka watched him out of the corner of his eye with a small smile. "I heard that your trip ended up being pretty interesting. It's not every day you get to see all three Sannin in action at once. I bet the landscape didn't fare too well."
"It was incredible!" Naruto said eagerly. "And I won this from Baachan because she bet I couldn't learn my new jutsu in a week," he pulled the First Hokage's necklace from under his shirt. "Wait 'till you see my new jutsu! It's just as good as Sasuke's Chidori. He got ahead of me in the Exams, but I figure we're on equal ground now."

"You really have grown quickly, Naruto. It seems like just yesterday you wanted to borrow my headband."

"Right, right?" Naruto said gleefully. "Even someone like Ero-sennin acknowledged me and taught me the Rasengan. It's clear that I'm naturally awesome!"

"Now now, you have a long way to go yet," Iruka said with mock sternness, waving his chopsticks. "The village is going to need that strength in a time like this. Get ready to work even harder!"

Yes, they were getting back on their feet. The non-stop chaos since the start of the Exams gradually faded into the past. In three days, a new Hokage would be inaugurated, and everything would be alright. That was the mantra everyone from the civilians to the elites repeated to themselves.

"Isn't Tsunade-sama amazing?" Sakura said, her eyes shining with awe as she and Naruto looked up at the Hokage Tower from below. "It's strange seeing her in the Hokage hat after seeing an old man wear it for so long."

"Pfft," Naruto said, hands linked behind his head casually. "She's pretty old too, y'know. She just uses some technique to look young. But, yeah, she's still pretty cool."

"Just by her presence, you can tell she's a powerful shinobi. Just like Jiraiya-sama," Sakura said. "And Orochimaru was also like that, in the Forest of Death, even though that was more terrifying than anything. It makes you realize what it means to be Kage-level." She smiled cheekily, and Naruto grumbled.

"Whatever. I wouldn't want it to be too easy, or it wouldn't be worth going for," he said. "We can only go up from here, Sakura-chan."

"Mhm," Sakura absently touched the ends of her newly shortened hair. "I know I don't have a chance of being promoted to chuunin this time, since I didn't pass the preliminaries, but maybe you or Sasuke-kun will. After everything that happened, it's really made me realize that I have to become strong enough to handle things on my own in a situation. It can't all go one way; if we're a team, we protect one another." Her eyes drifted to where Sasuke and Kakashi were standing behind everyone else.

"You're right, but I'm not going to get knocked out and make you have to defend me ever again," Naruto crossed his arms. "That was just embarrassing."

Sakura's eyes flashed. "Oh, so it's embarrassing to be defended by me? You're welcome!"

Naruto winced. "No, I didn't mean it like that, Sakura-chan! I just meant... I should have been there to help, but I wasn't. And we had to rely on other teams until Sasuke took out those Sound guys. I still don't even really know what happened with all of that."

"Oi," Kiba butted in. Team 8 had been beside them since the start of the inauguration. "Do either of you know when they're supposed to tell us who made chuunin?"

"Whoever made it would probably know by now," Shino intoned. "Why? Because Kurenai-sensei said the Godaime would follow the choice the Sandaime already made."
"That's probably true, but she's bound to have been busy with other things besides the chuunin selection. Not to mention that there are some other people who also get a say in it," Sakura said.

"I haven't seen anyone promoted yet," Kiba said. "God, it would be so annoying if they just called it off and no one gets it."

"No way, the other countries wouldn't stand for that," Sakura said dismissively, waving a hand. "If no one makes it, it'll be because no one was good enough. Why do you care, anyway? You lost in the preliminaries like I did."

"Well, Naruto beat me that time, but if he beat me to chuunin too, I'd have to seriously consider quitting as a ninja—" he dodged Naruto's punch with a cackle and hid behind Hinata, who spluttered at being brought into the middle of it. Akamaru barked excitedly from on top of Kiba's hood.

"Bastard!" Naruto fumed as Sakura held him back. "I'll take you on any time! And quit hiding behind Hinata!"

"He didn't mean it, Naruto-kun, he was just trying to provoke you—" Hinata started. Her words were drowned out by the sound of applause. They had missed the end of Tsunade's address, and now it was over. Guiltily, they broke apart and joined the applause.

Tsunade, Jiraiya, and the Elders left the roof of the tower and the crowd was gradually dispersing. A lot of people had duties and missions to get back to already, but those that didn't lingered around. Most of the stores and restaurants were staying open late tonight, and it was sort of like a miniature holiday, as most of the nonessential shinobi and civilian workers had the day off.

"How do you feel, Sasuke-kun?" Sakura asked as she and Naruto drifted back to the rest of their team.

"Tired," he said, not bothering to elaborate. He looked tired. There were bags under his eyes even though he'd spent so much time sleeping recently.

"Eh, you just need to go home and rest," Naruto said gruffly. "You're still better off than you were yesterday, so I'm sure you'll be at full strength tomorrow."

"Maybe... maybe we should ask if our team can wait a little longer before we go on any missions?" Sakura glanced from Sasuke to Kakashi.

"No," Sasuke said, his voice sharpening. "I'm not so weak I can't handle whatever stupid little D or C-ranked mission they decide to send us on next. It's better than sitting around here doing nothing."

"Well..." Kakashi said, and he eye-smiled when they all turned to look at him. "Just so you all know, I think you will have to do this next one on your own. I have a solo mission starting, but you three will be sent out once you are ready, whether I am back or not. Perhaps it will be more of a challenge than you think."

Sasuke just gave a 'hn' in response, which rolled off of Kakashi, as usual.

"I have to be up very early, unfortunately, so I will see you all later," Kakashi said. He casually withdrew his Icha Icha Paradise and walked off with his nose buried in it.

"Early? That sounds suspicious to me," Naruto said.

"A mission on our own..." Sakura bit her lower lip.
"Don't worry, Sakura-chan. After all, it can't be worse than the Forest of Death, and we did that on our own," Naruto said confidently. "And Sasuke has his Chidori once he gets better, and I just got a super-awesome new jutsu that I didn't have back then, either." He hinted the last part heavily while looking at Sasuke, but the other boy didn't take the bait. He just stood there with his hands in his pockets and a dispassionate expression.

"I guess I'm going home," Sasuke said. "Don't bother me tonight unless it's about a mission or making chuunin."

"I'm going home, too," Sakura said quickly. "I'll walk with you part of the way." Sasuke didn't answer, but she started after him anyway when he didn't say no.

"B-but Sakura-chan, I thought we could…" Naruto started, but the other two were walking away and had stopped listening. Naruto sighed and scratched his head. Now what?

Evening was gathering in the edges of the sky, and he hadn't eaten since the morning. It'd be boring to go somewhere alone, but he was reluctant to leave the celebratory atmosphere downtown. Naruto settled for people-watching on a wall while he slowly finished off some dango.

_I wonder how Gaara's doing_, he thought.

As the sun dropped lower in the sky and he was just thinking about going home, Jiraiya found Naruto and told him that he was leaving Konoha tonight.

"What?" Naruto jumped down from the wall he'd been sitting on. "But why? You just got back to the village! And Tsunade-baachan is your old teammate, right? Why don't you want to stay around a little longer? I'm not sure if Shizune-nee-chan can keep her in line alone."

"I was invited to the party, of course, but me being there wouldn't help at all," Jiraiya said, shaking his head. "Besides, it's going to be a more diplomatic affair than Tsunade's really wanting anyway. The whole Council and the Clan Heads are going to be there, so it's all very aboveboard."

"In other words, you're trying to escape the politics," Naruto guessed.

Jiraiya grimaced. "Hey now, I really have some things to do. I help Konoha maintain its ties in other lands, after all! That's especially important now that we have a new Hokage. A long-time teammate has the best insight into her personality and policies."

"You mean Konoha's ties in other lands' bathhouses," Naruto muttered.

Jiraiya just smiled and ruffled Naruto's hair. "You'll see me again really soon. I've just got a few important things to check on, and depending on that, I'll need to come back here for an important mission."

"What's that?" Naruto asked quickly.

"If it concerns you then you'll know then; if not, then you don't have to worry about it. Later, kid." He waved with a smirk and walked off through the thinning crowd, heading in the direction of the village gate.

Naruto huffed mildly and stretched. Everyone was packing up now, so he decided to finally go on home, too.

Walking lazily through the streets, Naruto's thoughts drifted back to the inauguration. He imagined himself standing in front of a large crowd wearing the Hokage hat and looking out over everyone
with his arms crossed in a cool pose (looking older, and stronger, and ravishingly handsome, of course). His teammates behind him, and his village before him, he'd say something impossibly badass, but also very profound and inspirational. And he would invite Tsunade to his party and let her drink and gamble as much as she wanted. The thought made him grin widely to himself.

When Naruto got into his pajamas and crawled into bed minutes after arriving home, he was still so absorbed in fantasizing about the future that he would wonder later whether everything that came after was just the by-product of his overactive imagination.

There was one problem with that theory: none of his visions of the future included war.

Naruto grumbled in a half-conscious protest against the sun filtering through his eyelids. He rolled over and made to pull the covers over his head, but couldn't find them. Frowning slightly, he moved his hand around to try to find his blanket, but he still couldn't feel it. Annoyed, he opened his eyes—and blinked in confusion.

Naruto sat up hesitantly, looking around. He was in the forest, at the base of a very large tree. The light looked like early morning, and the air was slightly chilly. He was wearing the same thing he went to bed in: a pair of orange shorts and a black shirt with a spiral on it.

"What the hell?" Pause. Naruto shook his head and slapped the sides of his face, but nothing changed. It didn't feel like a dream. Was it genjutsu?

He stood up and looked around uneasily. They were taught to search for anything strange, to tip of the presence of an illusion. Naruto squinted toward the edge of the trees, where the sun shone brighter, and thought he could see a few wooden buildings in the distance.

"If this is an illusion, I'm probably supposed to go there, and then it's a trap," he murmured, scratching his head. Oh, well. Facing it directly was way better than sitting around waiting. He turned and ran up the side of the tree he'd been laying under… and only made it up a couple of meters before his feet detached. It was so unexpected that Naruto fell backwards with an undignified cry and landed hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

"Ow!" A few leaves fluttered down and landed on his hair and face. He stood up and shook them off. "What was that?"

Naruto held up his hand in a half-ram seal and concentrated on his chakra. To his surprise, it was almost completely depleted. He could feel a small trickle that was steadily replenishing his reserves, but it felt… odd. Slippery to control.

And the fox's energy, too. He could sense it—that was good at least—but barely. If his own lack of chakra was worrying, that was downright alarming.

"Man, this is bad." Naruto opened his eyes. He wished that he'd gotten Sakura to teach him how to dispel genjutsu so he'd at least be able to tell whether all this was real or not. But (as far as he knew) even the most skilled users couldn't keep a genjutsu going forever, so that question would soon resolve itself one way or another.

Deciding to act rather than trying to guess at the details, Naruto walked carefully toward the distant buildings. If he wanted to figure out where he was, or find the person casting this illusion on him, that was surely the place to go… trap or not.

It was a small village he didn't recognize; just a collection of farm houses here and there, with fields stretching all around. A few people were in the fields already, tending to the crops. Naruto could see
a few chickens pecking on the side of the road near a dusty building. He squared his shoulders and started to walk, keeping an eye out all around him. At least this place still looked like the Land of Fire. Maybe there was a small glimmer of hope?

As he approached, a boy about his age that was hoeing near the edge of the road stopped in his work to stare at him.

This was it. Naruto took a deep breath and put on a friendly look. "Uh, hey! I was wondering if—"

"DAD! KITO! THERE'S A WEIRD GUY HERE!" the boy yelled toward what looked like a work shed nearby, cupping his hands around his mouth for volume.

"No, wait!" Naruto said, waving his hands. "I'm not anyone suspicious, I just—"

"What're you yelling about, Shinji?" a middle aged-looking man and a younger man came out of the shed. They were wearing thick gloves and belts with wood-working tools in them.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle anyone!" Naruto said. "I'm just lost, and I was hoping you could give me some directions."

"He came out of the woods!" Shinji said, holding the tool like he wanted to run Naruto through with it. "He might be a bandit!"

"What the hell makes you think I'm a bandit, bastard?" Naruto finally lost his cool and shrieked at the other boy. "Do you have dirt clods for eyes?"

"I like this kid," the young man, Kito, laughed.

"Calm down, Shinji," the older man sighed. "Please forgive my son," he added to Naruto. "The shinobi that was posted here on watch had to be called back to Konoha recently, so we're all a little on edge. We've heard that criminals have been taking advantage of places where the shortage is leaving them undefended."

"Oh, so that's it." Naruto was still confused, but at least he was in his own country. Though, he'd never considered that the shortage would affect ordinary citizens like this. Iruka hadn't been kidding about how serious things were.

"I'm actually on my way to Konoha right now," Naruto said. "Can you tell me how to get there from here?"

"It's not far," Kito said, "But…” his eyes traveled over Naruto's odd appearance, from his bright clothes to his shoeless feet."You should probably rethink going there right now. The village is still recovering from the attack, and Hokage-sama isn't letting visitors come in for the most part, except for aid workers. Most of our people went to help build in order to feel a little protected within the walls, since Tsugi-san had to be called back into duty. It's a mess over there."

Naruto frowned. Were things really that bad? "Well, that's alright, I'm not a visitor. I may not look it right now, but I'm actually a Konoha shinobi. Uzumaki Naruto, nice to meet you!" he added brightly.

The three glanced at one another and all burst out laughing at the same time.

"What's so funny?" Naruto fumed. Okay, so he didn't exactly look very official in his nightclothes. But that wasn't his fault!
"So, you're the Land of Fire's Jinchuuriki? Konoha's hero? The one who stopped Pein all by himself?" the old man chuckled.

"Pein… Jinchuuriki?" Naruto tilted his head uncomprehendingly, scowling. Now he was confused and annoyed. Unfortunately, that seemed to amuse them even more.

"I heard he was still pretty young, but there's no way he is a little squirt like you," Kito said. "It's cute that you look up to him, kid, but it's a hundred years too soon for you to go around claiming to be him."

Naruto was getting frustrated. "I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I am most definitely Uzumaki Naruto!" he slapped a hand on his chest. "And I am a Konoha shinobi, and I need to get back to my village before Tsunade-baachan finds out I'm missing and decides to beat me up for skipping out on missions when we're short on forces!"

This caused them to sober up a little bit.

"Well, if you really are a shinobi, even a weird one, it's true you need to get back there. Konoha needs all hands on deck right now," Kito said seriously.

"That's what I'm saying," Naruto said, nodding vigorously. "So can you help me out?"

"You just take this road south," The old guy said, pointing down the road. "It's about half a day's travel from here. Ah, well, probably less than that for a shinobi. I still find it hard to believe you are one, but if you weren't, I guess you wouldn't be fool enough to try to go to Konoha and pass for one."

"Where's your hitai-ate?" Shinji said suddenly, glaring at Naruto. "And all your ninja gear? And how did you end up here and not even know where Konoha is?"

Naruto grumbled and rubbed his head. "I dunno! I just woke up a little way into the woods there. I don't remember how I got here, so I'm hoping someone at home can figure out what happened."

"Ah… are you alright to go on your own?" Kito was looking doubtful, too.

"It's fine! It's fine," Naruto insisted, nodding. "But, um..." he looked down at his feet. "I need some shoes… I don't have any money on me, but I'll pay you back as soon as I get a chance if you'll let me borrow some."

They agreed, and even though Shinji protested, they let Naruto take a pair of his shoes. They were simple straw tabi, not nearly as good as his ninja sandals, but better than nothing. The boys' father also insisted that he take a small pack of onigiri with him. Naruto thanked them and promised repayment repeatedly.

"Will he really be alright, I wonder?" Kito mused as they watched the boy take the road toward Konoha.

His father shrugged. "If he's really with Konoha, there's nothing to worry about. If he's not an enemy, they probably won't do anything to him. Even if they're on high alert right now, Tsunade-sama is still kind."

Naruto munched on an onigiri, walking at a slower pace to eat, now that he was starting to recognize the surrounding area. He knew that he really wasn't far from Konoha at all.
His chakra was restoring itself very quickly, and the food helped. He found that he could climb up a tree if he went slowly and concentrated. He had already used that to confirm his location a couple of times.

The tension he felt waking up had evaporated, but he was still confused. So far, nothing horrible had happened to him, and no one had confronted him. The road was quiet.

Naruto didn't know that Konoha had resorted to discouraging visitors. It probably reduced the chances of Orochimaru or the Akatsuki slipping in again, but how were they accepting missions if no one was allowed in? Naruto shrugged mentally and licked his fingers when all the onigiri was gone. Hopefully, no one had noticed he was missing yet. Team 7 would probably assume he was out training if they had nothing to do, but if they were called to do a mission, he might be in big trouble. Naruto winced. How was he supposed to explain what happened, when he had no idea himself?

A sudden loud bark and deep throaty growl made him jump. Dropping into a battle-ready position in an instant, Naruto looked around quickly. The dense foliage on either side of the road made it difficult to see very far. He soon saw it, though. A huge white beast came stalking out of the bushes, head lowered menacingly. It was… an enormous dog.

Naruto stood very still and tried to figure out what to do. Distract it, and then run away? He might have enough chakra control for a few Kage Bunshin.

The dog came closer and sniffed at him. Suddenly it perked up its head, tongue lolling out of its mouth happily. It barked twice with a decidedly different tone than before and bounded up to Naruto, nosing at his face in greeting.

"Good dog…?" Naruto said warily, and the beast wagged its tail furiously.

"Oi! If it's just Naruto, then why did you run off so fast? You made it sound like there was an intruder or something," a familiar voice grumbled, and Naruto let out a breath he'd been holding when he saw Kiba emerge from the bushes behind the dog. "Sorry, Naruto. We were on perimeter duty and Akamaru heard you coming. We didn't smell you at first, so I think it threw him off a little bit." He walked closer and looked at Naruto suspiciously, then sniffed. He pondered for a moment then shrugged, apparently satisfied, and jumped onto the giant dog's back.

"Um…" Naruto said. "Are you saying… that… is Akamaru?"

Kiba frowned. "Well of course he is, duh."

"But… he's HUGE!" Naruto wailed, and Akamaru whined through his nose.

"Seriously, why do you always go on about that?" Kiba crossed his arms and scowled. "I haven't noticed any difference. You exaggerate too much."

Naruto spluttered, completely unable to put his words together, but Kiba ignored him. He and Akamaru turned to face down the path where Naruto was headed.

"I guess you're heading back to the village? We'll go too, since it's time for us to change shifts anyway. Our team's been on perimeter duty since early on." He didn't wait for an answer, and the alleged Akamaru broke into a light run.

"W-wait!" Naruto jogged to keep up with them. "Perimeter duty?"

"Yeah, we've been put on that for now, since we're all good tracker-types and all," Kiba yawned. "I wish we didn't have to start so early, though. Damn! I need a nap. My mom dragged me out of bed
before I was even awake. Why are you coming back to the village so soon, anyway? I thought you had that S-rank mission with Gai-sensei and those other old guys."

"Eh? S-rank? With Huge Eyebrows-sensei?" Since when did he get S-rank missions? Ones that he couldn't remember receiving, at that.

"Why are you asking me? You're the one that told me about it this morning," Kiba snapped, glancing over at him irritably. His gaze stayed a little longer this time though, as if he suddenly noticed something. "Naruto, did you change your clothes since this morning? You look weird."

"Ah..." Naruto laughed confusedly. He wondered if he really did leave on a mission that morning and ended up in some kind of enemy trap that caused him to have a memory lapse. Or maybe it just messed up his brain so that nothing made sense.

Then again... he eyed the huge Akamaru and looked at Kiba, realizing the other boy looked a little off, too. He sort of seemed taller and more built, though it was hard to tell next to the huge Akamaru. Or maybe Naruto just wasn't used to seeing Kiba without his trademark hoodie on. For some reason, instead, he was wearing a tough-looking leather jacket that made him seem... older, Naruto decided.

Maybe this was the sign of weirdness that he had been looking out for? Naruto tensed and glanced all around them as they ran. If someone was about to attack, he wished they'd get it over with already. All this tension and weirdness was getting on his nerves. He wasn't good at dealing with it.

They emerged on a hill Naruto was familiar with, one that overlooked the village.

"I'm gonna go around since I have to go report at the main gate," Kiba said. "See you later, I guess."

Naruto didn't answer. More specifically, he couldn't answer, because his voice stopped working. He stared down at his supposed home with wide eyes, and knew that this could not be reality.

The settlement he saw down below was only a little bit bigger than the one he had found earlier, and made of similar wooden structures. But it was nestled in a space much too big for it. Naruto would have denied to the end of his breath that it was Konoha, except that he easily recognized the village wall and gate, like his home had been gutted from the inside of its shell and hollowed out. And at the back of it, there was the iconic Hokage Monument, displaying five faces. Five faces, even though the Fifth Hokage had only been inaugurated yesterday.

Konoha was simply gone. There was a gaping hole in the ground where his village used to be, and that was terrifying even if there was no way it was real. A cold numbness weighed down his limbs and completely jammed his thoughts.

"Uh, are you okay?" he heard Kiba say distantly.

Akamaru barked. Naruto barely caught movement out of the corner of his eye before the feeling in his body suddenly returned, at the point where he felt a sharp pressure prick his throat. A kunai.

"Hey!" Kiba cried. "What're you—"

"If you're going to impersonate someone, you should research it a little better," Naruto heard a chilly voice from behind him. "Your disguise is out of date."

Naruto turned his head a little to the left, away from the edge of the knife. "K-Kakashi-sensei?" The man behind him tensed when he spoke.

"OI." Kiba interjected loudly. "What's going on?"
Naruto was going to ask the same thing, but when he turned his head some more, he caught sight of an angry red Sharingan, which swirled and pulled him into the blackness.

"Kai!"

Naruto opened his eyes and gasped as if emerging from deep water. The first thing he noticed was that he was bound tightly to a chair, ropes tied to his ankles, wrists, and around his chest. He was sitting in a dim wooden room. It was dingier than what he remembered of the Hokage's office, but that was unmistakably where he was. The desk in front of him had a banner with the kanji for "Hokage" draped over it and the Hokage herself was sitting behind it, arms crossed and looking at him with a great deal less warmth than he was used to seeing in her eyes. Morino Ibiki was standing behind her at a respectful distance, but still looking very imposing.

"Whatever it was, I didn't do it!" Naruto wailed, noticing Ibiki's presence. "Please don't torture me!"

"Tsunade-sama..." Kiba started, and Naruto looked to see both he and Kakashi there standing a little bit behind him. "I don't understand what's going on. What's got you and Kakashi-sensei so worked up? It's just Naruto..."

"Naruto left the village on a mission this morning," Kakashi said in a steely voice that sent a shiver down Naruto's spine. "Besides, can't you tell that this guy isn't our Naruto? He looks years younger, as if the enemy was working off of old data to try and imitate him."

Kiba scratched his face. "Does he? But he smells like Naruto..."

Tsunade leaned forward to rest her chin on her hands, eyes narrowed at Naruto. "If you put aside the fact that it is an outdated imitation, it is a perfect one, which apparently works even while the user is unconscious. It seems strange that an enemy would be able to pull off such a complete transformation, but make such a basic mistake as getting the age wrong."

"Akatsuki has created perfect copies in the past, using human sacrifices," Ibiki spoke up, stepping a little closer. "Though the user of that technique has been neutralized now, they showed it was possible. And we can't forget that Orochimaru also had considerable expertise in ninjutsu transformations, as well as actual physical alterations. With Yakushi Kabuto still at large, it's definitely possible."

"I agree; but the question is, why would they go through the trouble for a disguise that would be seen through right away?" Kakashi said. "And if they were going to send a spy, surely it wouldn't be one that could be taken out by a simple genjutsu."

Naruto was a little irked by that comment, but he was too confused and afraid to really feel angry about the potential slight at the moment. "Look, I don't know what's going on either, but I really am Naruto! Come on, Baachan... Kakashi-sensei!"

Kakashi sighed and rubbed his head. "There is another possibility... it could be that it is Naruto..." Naruto perked up at that, turning his head sharply to give his sensei a hopeful look, "...that he found out the true purpose of his mission and is pulling some kind of distraction scheme in order to escape."

Tsunade pinched the bridge of her nose. "Mattaku," she grumbled. "I would rather it be an enemy nin..."

Kakashi thwacked him hard on top of the head with his fist, causing Naruto to screech indignantly. "Oww! What the hell was that for?"
"Well, we know this one isn't a Kage Bunshin, at least," Kakashi said cheerfully.

"We'll know for sure once we get a reply back from Gai," Tsunade sighed. "If Naruto is still with them, they are supposed to confirm that it's really him."

Naruto squirmed in his bonds. "Um… you guys keep talking about some mission with Huge Eyebrows-sensei… as for me, I don't even remember getting a mission like that, so I think I'm probably having a really weird dream right now, or else I'm in some kind of genjutsu… for one thing, I know for a fact that Orochimaru's attack didn't destroy the entire village."

"Orochimaru?" Tsunade raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about? Pein of the Akatsuki destroyed the village."

"That's common knowledge all over the world by now," Ibiki noted. "Unless their intention is to divert, I don't see how this can possibly be an enemy spy."

"Akatsuki?" Naruto gasped. "Those black-cloaked bastards that put Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei in the hospital?"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Kakashi looking at him very seriously.

"Naruto," he said slowly, "What is the last thing you remember?"

Panic seized his heart—was it that he had amnesia or something, and that was why nothing made sense?

"Tsunade-baachan was inaugurated as the Godaime, and you and Sasuke were released from the hospital, though Bushy Brow was still hurt from the exams," he looked anxiously at Kakashi's face, trying to glean some meaning from his impassive expression. "And after that Ero-sennin told me he was going to leave for a little while to gather some information. And then I went home and went to sleep and when I woke up, I was in a village a little outside of here."

Tsunade stood up, hair concealing her eyes. Naruto gulped as she walked around her desk and toward him. She reached out a hand and he flinched—but she only pulled at the string hanging around his neck, pulling it from under his shirt and revealing the slightly luminous green stone attached to it.

"You gave me this, yeah? Don't hit me," Naruto said instinctively.

She held the stone between her thumb and index finger, squeezing it slightly and frowning, as if listening to it.

"This was destroyed in the fight against Pein," she murmured. "No one should be able to replicate this chakra crystal."

"Baachan… h-hey!" Naruto said as she let go of the necklace and pulled his shirt up to where the ropes were tied around his chest.

"Shut up and focus your chakra," she demanded. "Mold it as if you were going to do a jutsu."

Muttering curses, Naruto did as he was told, and all the adults present craned to see the seal appear on Naruto's stomach.

"That's exactly how it looked before sensei re-did the seal, when it nearly—" Kakashi gave a sharp intake of breath.
"Okay, is someone going to explain to me what the hell is going on?" Naruto said.

"Seriously. I don't get this," Kiba agreed, and Akamaru whined. "Is it Naruto or not?"

"Ibiki!" Tsunade said sharply, turning to the man. "Relate all of this to Shizune. I am going to send a small ANBU unit to scout each of the nearby villages for any recent Akatsuki sightings. First will be the village he arrived in. Where was it, Naruto?"

"Um, it wasn't one that I knew," Naruto said. "It was about half a day north of here, but—"

"Shizune will bring in the readiest available combat squad for briefing and they'll be sent right away. The rest will be organized into smaller scouting units and scattered out. You will be in charge of anything that they find. Try to contact Anko's team for any updates on the enemy's movements. Normally they would tell us right away if anything happened, but if the enemy got to them first…"

"Understood," Ibiki bowed and then vanished.

"Something like this happens right after Kabuto and the remnants of Akatsuki join forces. Who's to say the two are even acting separately anymore? Damn it, how can this be possible?" Tsunade stalked back and forth like a restless lioness, biting her thumb nail.

"They had immortals among their group," Kakashi said in a low voice. "There is no way of knowing the extent of what they are capable of, and if their goal is to capture Naruto, it makes sense they would go after a less experienced, more vulnerable version, if they had a way of doing that…"

"If that's the case, then why not get him as a young child, or even infant?" Tsunade said, just as quietly and intensely.

"I don't know," Kakashi admitted. "Maybe they can only detect hosts if they've already made contact with the bijuu's power, and Naruto didn't until after he became a ninja…"

"OI," Naruto said loudly. "Eek!" he squealed as Tsunade shot a dark glare at him.

"No matter what, you always cause us trouble, don't you?" she growled. Suddenly her face softened and the corners of her lips even tilted up a little. "I forgot how cute you were at this age." She ruffled his hair. "Look at those puppy-dog eyes, Kakashi. No wonder I couldn't resist coming back."

"Baachan," Naruto said, half questioning, half embarrassed.

"Naruto," Tsunade inclinded her head toward Kakashi, who nodded and began untying Naruto's ropes. "We're going to take your word for it for the time being and trust you a little, but you need to listen to us in return, alright?"

"Sure," Naruto said cautiously. "Does that mean you're gonna tell me what's going on?"

"We don't really know what's going on, but yes," Kakashi finished untying and patted Naruto on the head. Naruto scowled.

"You can go, Kiba," Tsunade said. "But don't tell anyone about this for right now. If I'm not mistaken, you're supposed to be changing patrol shifts, aren't you?"


That was really weird. Since when did Kiba have responsibilities and actually listen to orders without..."
complaint? Naruto's unease increased further.

Kakashi noticed him watching Kiba leave with confusion and coughed. "You're both way too thickheaded sometimes. Notice any differences with Kiba, Naruto?"

"Well, Akamaru got really huge all of a sudden," he scratched his head, "but Kiba acted like it was just my imagination or something."

"You know," Kakashi said mock-conspiratorially behind his hand at Tsunade, "I guess I never noticed since it was so gradual and slight, but I think he did get smarter over the years."

"Ahhhh, mou!" Naruto shrilled, pulling at his hair in frustration.

"And a few decibels quieter, too."

"Just a few." Tsunade smiled, crossing her arms.

"You're doing this on purpose," Naruto accused, pointing at Tsunade and Kakashi. "First acting all scary like you're about to drag me in to be tortured, then making fun of me and talking in riddles!"

"Calm down, Naruto," Kakashi sighed, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We couldn't help ourselves. Seeing you like this really is nostalgic. But the truth is, we're worried," His grip tightened. "It seems that someone brought you here through time. What I mean to say is, you're in the future."

"Eh?" Naruto said blankly.

Neither of them answered and there was silence for several moments. But Tsunade and Kakashi stared at him.

"What do you mean, future?" Naruto elaborated, looking back and forth between the two adults.

"What do you think?" Kakashi asked, but he was asking Tsunade. "It doesn't seem like he wants to go along with my crazy idea. Either this guy is really good, or we're dealing with the real thing."

"We can figure that out later," Tsunade said. "Right now, whatever we believe, it comes down to the same thing. Whether it is really Naruto or an exceptionally good fake, we have to assume that Madara or Kabuto is involved. We don't know of anyone else that would have the power and motivation to do either."

"I believe he's real," Kakashi said. "It would be pointless for them to make a fake like this. It would make much more sense to try to switch him with an appropriately aged replacement, en route to the Lightning Country. On the other hand, if the enemy had the ability to pull a more inexperienced Naruto to our time, they would do that without hesitation."

"Don't… don't joke like that, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said, smiling shakily. "That's impossible. You're still messing with me, aren't you?"

"Naruto, how else do you explain the village being destroyed?" Kakashi asked softly. "You said yourself the last thing you remember is right after Orochimaru's attack, and it wasn't nearly as bad as this."

"Yeah, but…" Naruto threw his arms out, eyes wide. "How? How could that be?"

"As I was saying, the only ones with both the power and the motivation for this are Akatsuki," Tsunade frowned. "Right now we're going to assume it was their doing. You are aware at this age
that they are hunting for you, right?” she looked like she was trying to remember.

"Yes…” Naruto said slowly. "Uchiha Itachi and a weird fish-looking guy tried to kidnap me when we were out trying to find you, Baachan… and Sasuke showed up, but neither of us were any match. If Ero-sennin hadn't rescued us…” his eyes darkened at the memory. "Ero-sennin said that they were after… after the Kyuubi.” Even though he had come to accept his burden, he still didn't like speaking about it out loud.

"If you understand that much, it will be easy for you to understand what is going on now, at least the basics,” Tsunade put a hand on her hip. "Shortly after that time, Akatsuki seemed to quiet down and leave you alone for a while. We aren't entirely sure why, except that you did travel with Jiraiya for a long time, and that probably had some influence. But recently, they have been going after you actively again." She bit her lip, worry clear on her face. "That is why they may have brought you here: to try to capture you at a younger age. But that is just a wild guess. We can't actually say until we know more."

"They're still after me… wait, is that why they destroyed the village?” Naruto croaked. "To get to me?"

Tsunade hesitated, then nodded.

"Please don't start blaming yourself for that now," Kakashi said, knowingly but a little exasperatedly. "The you in this timeline has already done that enough."

"But… how am I still alive after that? From what I saw, it looked like someone dropped a huge bomb on this place. When did they invade? How many people died?" he buried his face in his hands. "I didn't think all that out there was my fault."

"Fortunately, you weren't in the village at the time,” Tsunade said. "Naruto," she added gently, stooping down in front of his chair to look him in the face, "Because of you, the village wasn't wiped out entirely—"

"What else would you call that—"

"Idiot!” Tsunade cut him off. "A village is more than a few buildings! A few years ago, we didn't fully understand how powerful Akatsuki was. What happened here wasn't an invasion. All of the destruction was done by a single shinobi. And you were the one who confronted him and made him back down. He had god-like powers of destruction and revival. He killed half the village and then turned around and sacrificed his own life to bring them all back. All because of you!"

Naruto stared at her, eyes wide. "But… wait. Am I really that strong? The villagers I met this morning were saying the same thing."

"You didn't defeat him with your fists,” Naruto turned to look at Kakashi, who eye-smiled at him. "Though you didn't do half bad with those, either.” He opened his eye and looked very serious. "I was one of the ones he had to bring back. You saved my life."

"Wait…” Naruto's wide eyes fixed on him, trembling. "You mean you died, Kakashi-sensei?"

"Maa,” Kakashi waved a hand. "That is all in the past now, for me at least, so don't worry about it —” he was cut off as Naruto tackled him.

"Stupid sensei! How can you say that like it doesn't matter? And why did you do something stupid and get killed in the first place!” Kakashi was slightly surprised at the moisture shining in the boy's eyes. "It was bad enough when you got put into a coma…"
Kakashi shuddered and gently pried Naruto off of him. "Trust me, Naruto, that time was way worse. I'd take death over that kind of torture again any day. Besides, it worked out. Ne? I'm still here."

"I think that's enough for now, Kakashi," Tsunade said warningly. "It's probably not a good idea to tell him too much about things that have happened, especially not until we understand what this is. If he's really from the past, it could alter things. Besides, I get the feeling there are quite a few things about the future that he would not like to hear."

"Like what?" Naruto said immediately, glancing at her.

"Hokage-sama is right," Kakashi rested his hand on Naruto's head. "Right now we need to figure out what we are going to do with you. Honestly, it's lucky you managed to make it back to the village before Akatsuki or whoever did this found you."

"Lucky… or it could be intentional," Tsunade considered. "We can't let our guard down." She sighed heavily. "Great. Now we have two Narutos to hide instead of one. Just when I thought this job couldn't get any harder."

"Well if it's true, hopefully this one will be a little more apt to listen to us, since he at least realizes he can't take on Akatsuki by himself," Kakashi said, poking Naruto's forehead.

Naruto scowled and rubbed his forehead. "Quit messing with me! Sheesh. I didn't realize you were this touchy-feely. Or are you even more of a pervert in the future?"

"Sorry, sorry," Kakashi held up his hands pacifyingly. "You're just like a cute younger-brother version of the Naruto that we know now, so it's difficult. I bet Tsunade-sama's just dying to pinch your cheeks."

Naruto glanced suspiciously at her again and she looked away, neither confirming nor denying it."

"Ahem," Tsunade coughed. "I'm sorry, Naruto, but since we aren't sure whether or not this is an enemy trap, you're going to have to stick with Kakashi and stay out of sight for a while. You do understand that, right?" she leveled her amber eyes at him. "The only way we can remain convinced you aren't an enemy is to have your cooperation."

Naruto was thrown by how serious she sounded suddenly. "I… I understand."

"He'll have to stay in the village until we figure out something else. There's too much to do with the cleanup and preparations to figure out a plan right now," she said in a clipped voice to Kakashi. "For the time being we need to keep this to ourselves, even within the village. I don't think it would be unbelievable to anyone in Konoha at this point, after we've seen what Akatsuki can do. But the less chance the enemy has of knowing where he is, the better. If it does turn out to be true, though…"

She frowned. "We'll have no choice but to tell the other Kage, at least. They wouldn't appreciate it if they found out I was hiding something like this if it directly has to do with the enemy's plans. For now, we have some leeway because we don't know exactly what is going on."

"The other Kage?" Naruto said, puzzled. "You mean the Kage of other Hidden Villages? But why?"

"Enough," Tsunade said. She bent down in front of Naruto again and did a series of hand seals before poking him in the forehead, eliciting a small half-growl from him. "Get over it. I've placed one of my specialty henge on you, so it should work until I choose to take it off of you, or if your chakra can't maintain it. Considering your ridiculous reserves even at this age, I don't think that will be a problem."

Naruto felt of his face. He hoped that was the case, since his chakra had almost entirely returned.
"What did you do?"

Tsunade pulled out a compact mirror from her sleeve and handed it to him. "I just made you look like a generic genin for the moment. It's not a permanent solution, like I said, but it'll suffice for moving you right now."

Naruto peered at himself in the mirror. Generic was right. He had plain brown eyes and hair; longish hair that was tied back, and a hitai-ate draped around his neck. He wore a dark green square-necked tunic that closed with two ties on his right side, with standard pants and sandals. Not even a speck of orange anywhere.

"Where am I going?"

"Mm..." Tsunade straightened up and put the mirror back in her sleeve. "Well, I have no idea as far as the long run. But for right now, Kakashi will take you to your room, since it's vacant since this morning. You may have noticed that our housing is... limited right now. And Kakashi is next door to you."

"Many ninja unaffiliated with any of the major clans have been put in boarding houses like this," Kakashi explained when Naruto looked at him in surprise. "Construction is moving along very quickly, though, so we won't be in this awkward situation forever."

"I'm counting on you, Kakashi. Naruto," Tsunade added, and Naruto looked at her. "I promise I won't forget about you being there, so try to stay put and out of sight, please?"

Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "I'll try, but you know, Baachan, when I get into trouble I don't usually mean to do it..."


"Time to go," he said. He pulled out an unfamiliar, green-covered Icha Icha volume and slouched casually toward the door.

Naruto paced after him until he caught up. "You're still obsessed with those perverted books, Kakashi-sensei?"
Even though Naruto couldn't stop himself from looking all around as they walked through the village, he tried his best to keep the agitation off of his face in order to maintain at least some semblance of acting natural. If he didn't know any better, he would have said that he had gone backwards in time, not forward. He doubted that the village had looked like this since the very earliest days of the Shodai Hokage.

It hurt to know what lay in store for his beloved home, and what was worse, all because of him. Or rather, the thing he had inside of him. It was the complete opposite of what he wanted; of the rosy thoughts he had had the previous day about being the village's under-appreciated but gracious benefactor. How could he—the him of the future—have allowed things to stray so far from that?

They emerged out on a wide dirt thoroughfare that seemed to go right through the center of the rebuilt settlement. Naruto's eyes darted back and forth, apprehensive but curious. The biggest assurance that the village's destruction had not come with massive casualties was that there were people everywhere. The street was busy as a hive.

He could tell that it had been long enough since the attack for the initial shock to wear off for the villagers. When he looked around, he saw everyone at work and generally happy, with shinobi and civilians and outside contractors working side-by-side. As Kakashi said, things seemed to be moving along swiftly and efficiently. It reminded Naruto very much of the reality that he had just left, except on a much grander scale. It was baffling, and the sense of pride he had felt before in Konoha's strength came back to him as he looked all around, even though it was muted somewhat by the disbelief and anger that someone would do this.

"Where is everyone staying?" Naruto asked. "There's no way there are enough houses yet for this many people, right?"

"Hm?" Kakashi said, not looking up from his book. "Most of the contracted workers are living in tents, and the clans have to rough it with everybody in a single building until they can recover their old grounds. Shinobi families with underage children and many civilians are still living in the evacuation shelter in the mountain. Most other active shinobi, like us, are out here in housing blocks grouped according to unit. Teams are in the same place whenever possible so they can react quickly if necessary. It's convenience over comfort for everybody," he explained.

"Oh," Naruto said.

He knew one thing. If he made it back to his own time, this would never happen. Even if he had to leave the village. He could go into hiding somewhere. Or… try to go find Akatsuki. Maybe he'd be able to put at least a scratch on them. And if they killed him… at least they wouldn't be hunting him down and destroying his village in the process. He vowed right then and there to use any means necessary to find out the details and make it back to stop this from happening. Naruto clutched at the front of his tunic, over where the seal was hidden, concealed by the henge. Kakashi looked down at him from the corner of his eye but did not comment.

"Here we are," he said lightly. They had arrived at a row of identical white houses with green tiled roofs and wood trimming. He entered one through a plain-looking wooden door and Naruto followed.

To the left was a room filled with low tables, where a few shinobi were lounging around, but only a few. Naruto supposed most were out working this time of the day. They mounted a narrow wooden
"A friend of mine made this particular block of houses. It was one of the first," Kakashi commented. "You know him too, in this time. He left with the future you, Gai, and some others this morning."

Naruto didn't answer. He still seemed to be deep in thought, which Kakashi knew was a sign of something major.

"Hm," Kakashi pondered. "I wonder if the timing is a coincidence. The whole purpose of sending you to the Land of Lightning, after all, was to make you untraceable so Akatsuki couldn't find you. Maybe, instead of going to find you, someone made you come to them."

Naruto looked up sharply as they stepped out onto the second floor. "Are you saying, they probably already know that I'm here?"

Kakashi shrugged. "You said you landed outside of here, but unless whoever brought you here made a mistake… they had to know you wouldn't stay put, but try to get to Konoha as soon as possible."

"But… but then…" his eyes were wide and he grasped at the front of his tunic again. "why am I still here? The village will be in danger again—"

"That's why you're disguised," Kakashi poked him in the forehead again, if for no other reason than to wipe the frantic expression off of his face. "And I won't say that you will be able to stay here indefinitely, but…" he rested his hand on a doorknob and turned to look at Naruto seriously. "I think you might be misunderstanding something. We didn't send you off because we were worried about the village's safety. After all, there isn't much to speak of it left right now, and our enemy has bigger goals than picking on a beat-up ruin. It was done to protect you."

"To protect… me?"

He motioned into the room and Naruto walked in front of him.

"How do I put this…" Kakashi said, "It's less along the lines of 'if you're here, Akatsuki will come here' and more along the lines of, 'if you are here, it will be easier for Akatsuki to find you.'"

"Huh? What's the difference…?"

"Perspective," Kakashi said enigmatically, and Naruto scrunched up his face uncomprehendingly. "A lot has changed since you were just a cute little 12-year-old Genin."

Naruto looked around his room slowly, almost surreptitiously—remembering suddenly that his other, older self had lived in there up until that morning. It was a very creepy feeling, yet strangely comforting at the same time.

The room was extremely basic and mostly bare, but there were one or two items he recognized. Most likely, that was all that was left from his home after the destruction of the village. There was an unfamiliar trunk, a futon folded up neatly beside it, and a cover folded up on top of that, yellow with white spirals all over it. He walked over to a small wooden bookshelf by the window (he was pretty sure he recognized), and slow smile came over his face as he picked up the picture frame sitting there. It was the familiar photo of Team 7.

"So then, how old am I now?" he set the frame down and turned to Kakashi excitedly. "How much time has it been? I'm strong, right?" He clenched his fists and gave a face-splitting grin, savoring the thought. "I bet I have some incredible jutsu by now! Hehehehe. Hey, Kakashi-sensei!"
"You are sixteen," Kakashi said calmly, keeping his nose buried in his book. "And… I'd say you get by."

"Kakashi-senseii," Naruto managed to bring some of his natural whine into the neutral voice he'd adopted along with the henge. "Show me a jutsu I can do in this time. I know you've probably copied them all. Come oooon."

"Hm," Kakashi murmured vaguely.

"Obviously, I'm not Hokage yet, but…" Naruto rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "If I can take on someone from Akatsuki, I at least have to be a jounin by now!"

Kakashi snickered.

"What?" Naruto huffed. "Surely it can't hurt to at least tell me something like that! Or…" his eyes lit up. "Or, what about Sasuke and Sakura-chan? And everyone else? Oh, wait, wait," Naruto held up his hands in a halting gesture, not noticing how Kakashi's posture stiffened slightly, "did I pass the Chuunin exams the first time? Or at least before Kiba did? Man, if I had known, I would have asked him… oh, he'd be so mad… no, wait!" Naruto grasped at his hair in horrified realization, and Kakashi just watched him blankly. "Why am I worried about rankings when the village was just attacked? Kakashi-sensei, did everyone—is everyone—"

He turned his suddenly fearful eyes on Kakashi, realizing that even though he had seen a lot of people out there, he hadn't seen any of his friends. Kakashi sighed and put Icha Icha Tactics back in his pocket.

"No significant casualties resulted from the village's destruction," he said carefully. "The results would have been catastrophic… but as you heard, the attacker was an insanely powerful shinobi who was persuaded to reverse the loss of life that he had caused, at the cost of his own life."

Naruto gave a little uneasy laugh. "That sounds… crazy."

Kakashi shrugged. "It was. But that's the kind of enemy Akatsuki is. There aren't many of them left now, but the ones that are, are just as unbelievable as that one. The ones really pulling the strings are always stronger than the ones that show themselves in the beginning."

"But, everyone made it through the attack," Naruto sighed in relief. "At least… I don't have to worry about being responsible for my friends getting hurt."

"Yes, everyone made it through the attack," Kakashi said with a frown. "That may be true, but, being here, you should really…" he rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. "I agree with Tsunade-sama that we should be careful about what things you know. But I think it's inevitable that the longer you are here, the more you'll be able to piece things together, whether we want you to or not. Some of those things… well. Situations haven't always turned out as nicely as this one did, Naruto."

Naruto lowered his gaze and bit his lip. "I know."

"You do?" Kakashi raised an eyebrow.

Naruto closed his eyes and nodded. "I've seen enough of our world to know that bad, senseless things happen to people who don't deserve it. People hurt one another. Bushy-brow didn't deserve to have his arm and leg crushed by Gaara, and Gaara didn't deserve to be shunned by the Sand, but the Sand didn't deserve to be fooled by Orochimaru, either. Even Zabuza and Haku didn't really deserve to die, and you know the Sandaime didn't," he opened his eyes and slowly looked up at his teacher.
"It scares me to think that stuff like what I've already seen has continued to happen all the way until now, but... I can't honestly expect it to have not. It's why I've continued to get stronger, in order to protect what I can, right? This time, I even managed to prevent anyone dying," he grinned suddenly. "Whatever else happened, I guess I didn't grow up too badly!"

Kakashi stared blankly at him for a long time. Then, with a soft chuckle, he stepped forward and placed a hand on top of Naruto's head. "What do you know. Maybe we should have all given you a little more credit a long time ago."

"Eh?" Naruto swatted the hand and ducked, glaring at Kakashi suspiciously.

"Anyway, I need to go see if Gai has responded back yet. We can't even have a basic grasp on this situation until we confirm whether the you of this time is still around, or if something happened to him."

"Can't I—"

"You stay here," Kakashi said firmly, holding up his hand as Naruto stepped forward. "I didn't bring you here just to turn around and take you back. The less you see right now, the better, at least until it's allowed. I will tell you what we find out, unless there's a really really good reason for me not to, in which case I will at least tell you that I can't tell you." He smiled cheekily.

Naruto grumbled and plopped down on the floor in front of a low wooden table. "What am I supposed to do, then?"

Kakashi sighed. "It would be difficult for anyone to stay inside knowing they've arrived in their own future, but... just try to bear with it at least until I go find out something. If you get hungry, I'm sure you can find some ramen stashed around here somewhere if you look hard enough. Other than that, just find a way to quietly amuse yourself... ah!" he suddenly appeared crouched on top of the table, holding up Icha Icha Tactics in Naruto's face. "Here. You wouldn't have read this one yet!"

"No thanks," Naruto said resoundingly, crossing his arms.

Kakashi pouted. "Here I was being really generous, too. Ah well," he buried his nose in the book and stood, walking off the table nonchalantly and toward the door, "You'll read it someday anyway."

Naruto cast him a horrified look. "What?"

Kakashi paused and turned slightly to look back at him. It was difficult to tell with the mask, but he may have been smirking. "After all, you're the one that gave me this."

"Noooo, don't tell me that I grow up to be a pervert that reads Icha Icha..." Naruto buried his face in his hands.

"The inventor of the Oiroke no Jutsu really has no place saying that," Kakashi said lightly before stepping out into the hall. "Later! Be good now!" he raised a hand in a lazy wave before closing the door behind him.

Naruto groaned and flopped practically face-first down on the table. He sat with his chin on the table staring blankly at the wall for several minutes. Now that he was listening, he could hear indistinct voices from somewhere below, and the sounds of distant hammering and sawing coming from out in the street.

"Just sit around? You try sitting still in a situation like this, jerk." Naruto muttered, but with no real vehemence. He'd rarely felt so far out of his depth before. The last time had been, well... the first
time Akatsuki had come for him. He suppressed a shudder as remembered opening the door to Uchiha Itachi, looking down at him like an ant with his murderous red eyes as if he could rip all the limbs from his body just by looking at him. He probably could have.

*Pull it together.* Naruto commanded himself, sitting up with a forceful shake of his head. It wasn’t time to be afraid when nothing had happened to him to yet… aside from the ridiculous time travel thing. He needed to keep it together to take advantage of this opportunity and learn as much as he could, whether anyone was going to help him or not.

Naruto went to the window and looked out at the street and the very open skyline, previously dominated by the sprawling, cheerful buildings he was used to in the past. The enemy had the power to do *this.* One shinobi alone. Admittedly, he’d heard of people that strong before. It was pretty much a given that all the Hokage—and the Kage of other lands as well, he supposed—could take on whole armies or defend the hidden villages all on their own. The Shodai Hokage in particular had a reputation for being able to change the face of the landscape itself when he fought. And Naruto had been exposed personally to touches and glimpses of the capabilities of ridiculously powerful ninja, like the Sannin and the Sandaime Hokage, and the brief encounter with Akatsuki.

For *him* to face someone like that *by himself* like everyone said; maybe not on completely equal terms but still, survive and even… win? It wasn’t like he didn’t expect to get stronger. He had plenty of confidence in himself outwardly (as anyone who had ever met him knew, since he declared his intention to become Hokage to almost everyone) and inwardly, he was already proud of his abilities and knew they could only get even better. But still… he could not wrap his head around it. As messed up as some things were, that part was pretty damn awesome.

He turned and peered curiously around at his room again. There was nothing in it to suggest that its occupant had the power to go toe-to-toe with an S-rank missing-nin. There really wasn’t much of anything in it at all. Though, he couldn’t really expect it to have as much personality as the apartment he’d lived in most of his life. Just four plain wooden walls, and a small alcove with a sink. The toilets and bathing areas were probably communal.

Naruto got up from the table and crouched curiously in front of the bookshelf, probably the only scrap of personality the room had. He definitely recognized it as a piece from his old room, as it was carved with various boredom-induced doodles and lines. He tried to imagine what it would be like to pick through the ruins of his home to find anything salvageable. Did it hurt? It was impossible to guess his future self’s mindset at that point. It wasn’t like he cared overmuch for his crappy apartment, and the fact that everyone was alive would mean a lot more. But still, everything that he knew was destroyed.

He ran a finger over the few books that the little bookcase held, looking for clues. He wondered if it could be considered snooping if it was all technically his stuff.

To his dismay, he found several volumes of *Icha Icha,* including the one Kakashi had shown him, *Tactics.* Why had he offered to lend his, if Naruto already owned it? Just to get on his nerves? … Most likely. Looking closer, he saw that their spines looked new and unscuffed, and their pages were crisp and stiff. It didn’t look like *these* particular copies had ever been read, at least, and he was beginning to suspect that Kakashi had just been pulling his leg about the whole thing. Most likely, he or Jiraiya had given the whole set to Naruto as a gift once in order to try to corrupt him. Why had he thought it was a good idea to trust *Kakashi’s* word about his future preferences? Damn it.

Naruto’s hand landed on a small brown-covered book that looked much more broken in than the others. He curiously pulled it out to look at the cover. *The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi.* Now that sounded like the kind of story he could like, and judging by its well-worn edges, he did.
Standing, Naruto laid it down by Team 7's picture for later and turned to the wooden trunk. He thought it might be locked, but it wasn't.

"Excuse me," he mumbled as he opened the trunk, though he was still undecided about whether this could be considered snooping. He was delighted to find several stacks of his favorite instant ramen on the left side and clothes folded up on the right.

"Whoa," Naruto said, holding up a mesh armor shirt that was several sizes too big for him. Below that there were a few T-shirts much like the one he wore underneath the henge, except they were bigger. Below that he found a pair of standard black ninja pants and he hopped up excitedly to hold them up to his waist. The hems trailed over his feet and he snickered gleefully, holding them at arm-length again to try to calculate how much height age would grant him.

A polite knock came on the door and Naruto scrambled, nearly got tangled on his own feet somehow instinctively trying to stuff everything back in the trunk, realized that was stupid, finally was able to stand and not fall, then stood very still. His heart was thumping very fast.

"Naruto, are you there?" a soft, neutral male voice came from behind the door.

Naruto paused for a moment but the visitor seemed content to wait for a reply and not elaborate at all on why he was visiting.

What to do? The smartest thing would probably be not to answer and just wait for the person to decide he wasn't home and go away… after all, if he hadn't come here, that's exactly what would have happened.

But, he was transformed and no one would be able to tell it was him, so what would be the harm in seeing who was at the door? It was obviously someone that knew him, and that made Naruto curious.

But what if it was someone that knew him that wanted to capture him? The shiver-inducing image of Uchiha Itachi standing over him passed through his mind again. But surely someone after him wouldn't just walk up to his door when they were in the middle of the village?

"I heard you in there," the calm voice came again. "Are you hiding from Sakura for some reason? Should I pretend that I did not hear you? If yes, knock once."

An expectant silence followed.

"Oh, right; if no, let me in."

Another silence followed.

Naruto's eye twitched. How the hell was he supposed to resist that? Besides, they already knew he was there, so it would be better to let the person in than to raise suspicions. Yes.

Squashing down his doubts, Naruto walked over to the door and opened it.

His visitor was a boy in his mid-teens with jet black hair and eyes, and unnaturally pale skin. He wore a purple long sleeved button-up shirt, with matching purple pants and black sandals. He was carrying what looked like a spiral notebook. Naruto could not see a headband, so he couldn't tell if the boy was a shinobi or not. The only thing he was absolutely certain of was that he had never seen this person in his life.

If the boy was surprised or abashed that he had been talking through the door to the wrong person,
he didn't show it. He just looked down at Naruto with his head tilted slightly to the side.

"Oh, excuse me," he said mildly. "I thought this was my teammate's room."

"Teammate?" Naruto echoed.

"Yes; Uzumaki Naruto of Team Kakashi, under the command of Hatake Kakashi. I was under the impression these were his living quarters." The boy's voice never seemed to vary in tone, but kept the same light, vaguely pleasant intonation throughout. It wasn't a monotone, exactly, but it was the same type of artificial lightness one found in instructional videos and public announcements. It was damned creepy.

"He... he left on a mission earlier this morning," Naruto said, trying to act normal. "Um, the Hokage is letting me stay here temporarily while some more apartments are being built."

He smiled resolutely through feebleness of his own excuse, and the other boy seemed to accept it.

"I suppose that makes us neighbors then, if only temporarily. My name is Sai," he said with a weird smile that didn't look right on his face. He held out a hand. "It's nice to meet you..." he paused, looking at Naruto very intently.

Crap, I haven't thought up a fake name or anything! Naruto thought frantically. Now he's waiting for me to say something!

"...Stupidface," Sai said finally, and he gave his weird smile again. "I hope that we can be good friends!"

A silence fell. If one listened closely enough, they could hear the snap of his self-control breaking.

"What did you call me?" Naruto burst out, baring a fist. "It's no more stupid than yours, with that creepy-ass smile you've got! What's your problem?"

Sai laughed sheepishly, which made him seem a little more human, but only made Naruto feel a little confused.

"No good, huh?" he glanced at Naruto and then away, scratching his cheek. "Maybe Naruto and Sakura were right. I should probably stop trying to give people nicknames."

"Eh?" Now Naruto wasn't sure whether to be angry or not. "Well, whatever it was they told you, I'm sure I agree with them."

Sai dipped his head. "Sorry to bother you," he made as if to leave.

"Wait, um..." Naruto started. Here was a person that didn't know they weren't supposed to tell him anything. If there was any way to get some information out of him...

"Yes?" Sai said curiously.

"Um... if you wanted to leave him a message, I could pass it on... if I see him, I mean. I don't know when he's coming back," Naruto said.

"It's nothing really important," Sai said. "I was just going to ask him about yesterday when he disappeared from the ramen shop and everyone started panicking. I only just heard about it, but I'm sure Sakura knows what happened, so I'll just ask her."

"Where is she?" Naruto asked before he could stop himself. He winced internally, hoping it wasn't
"She's been spending the majority of her time with the Medical Corps lately, though she's probably doing work for Hokage-sama this time of day," Sai said. "Do you know her?"

"Not… not really," Naruto said cagily. "I mean, I know of her, I know who she is, but she doesn't know me."

Sai stared at him for a while. He may have been surprised—his eyes were just a fraction wider, though it was hard to tell—but then the corners of his lips lilted slightly. It was a much fainter but much nicer smile than before.

"Oh. Is this what they call having a boyhood crush? I read about that in here," Sai said cheerfully, pulling a book out of his pocket—and for one horrible second Naruto thought it was *Icha Icha*—but it was titled *Making and Keeping Long-term Relationships*. "Although, I'm not sure if she'd be interested in a puny little shrimp like you—" (Naruto's eyebrow twitched; this guy seemed to have a knack for saying inflammatory things in the most pleasant of voices) "—but at least, you're pretty brave for liking someone scary like her."

"Forget I said anything about it," Naruto said loudly.

"Already failing at keeping quiet, I see," Kakashi said cheerfully, appearing behind Sai's shoulder.

"Did you find out something?" Naruto asked instantly.

Kakashi gave him his infamous dead-eye look. "You do realize that there's almost no chance the message has even reached them yet, right? We only sent it a couple of hours ago."

"How the hell was I supposed to know that?" Naruto grated. "I was just going by what you said! What were you doing, then?"

"Oh, nothing," Kakashi said lazily. "Just got the boss to spring you from your prison cell. You're welcome."

"What? Really? So wait, that means I don't have to stay cooped up in here? How did you manage that?"

"Um…" Sai shuffled to the side to get out from in between Kakashi and Naruto. "I'll just… go…"

"Wait," Kakashi caught his arm, "I need to tell you about your new mission. Come in here for a minute."

Looking bemused, Sai allowed himself to be led into the room and Kakashi shut the door behind them. The Copy-nin settled down at the table and Sai and Naruto followed his lead.

"I'll make this quick," Kakashi started. "Right now, I'm heading out in the second wave with my ninken to help with the scouting. In the meantime, we think that it's safe within the village's boundaries—or at least, it's no safer in this room than any other place in the village. Actually, I think Tsunade-sama was expecting me just now. I didn't even have to beg to be sent out," he smiled. "At any rate, we still need to be very cautious until the investigation is complete, even if there is no particular point in keeping you in here, specifically."

"I don't understand, Kakashi-sensei," Sai said.

"I'm putting you on the same protection mission I have," Kakashi said. "It will only be C-rank in
terms of difficulty—I hope—but it's A-rank or higher in terms of importance to the village and the level of danger if any shows up at all. The two of you need to stick together like glue until I get back."

Sai looked at Naruto and then back at Kakashi. "I'm sorry, I still do not understand. I don't think an A-rank is any place for a genin, even if it is easy for the rank."

"He's not going on the mission with you. He is the mission."

"I don't really need a babysitter, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto growled. "Who is this guy, anyway? He acts like he's from our class or something, but I don't remember him at all. Is he really on our team?"

"It's a long story, Naruto. Can we just focus here? You're going to have to have someone competent with you if you're going to be allowed any freedom at all. Get over it."

"Naruto?" Sai said confusedly, staring at Naruto.

"Listen up. And don't interrupt me again, squirt," Kakashi added with a pointed look at Naruto. "Sai, I don't have time to go into the 'why's and 'how's—we don't know all of them anyway—so you're going to have to just go along with it for now. This kid is Naruto," he gestured at Naruto. "Tsunade put a henge on him. The reason for that, and the reason why he doesn't know who you are, is because he isn't the Naruto you know. Somehow, someone—maybe using some kind of summoning or space-time ninjutsu we don't know about—brought him from the past into our time. He is Naruto from four years ago."

Sai's eyes were definitely noticeably wider this time. "That's…" he looked at Naruto.

"Very bad," Kakashi supplied. "Obviously, no one would do something like that without a reason. Fortunately, it seems that they didn't have very good control over where they brought him, because he ended up some distance from the village and still managed to get here without being attacked."

"Unless that was their intention," Sai pointed out.

"Right," Kakashi sighed. "It's risky, but it's probably even riskier for him to be outside of the village. At least here, there are lots of other shinobi around, and he can blend in with the henge. But since neither of us really believe Naruto would ever be content with staying put here, I need you to stay beside him while I'm gone helping with the investigation," Kakashi's eye crinkled, "We're probably going to be yelled at once the council finds out, but fortunately, you're a good choice for this mission. You can quickly send information or an SOS to the Hokage if necessary. I will also leave Pakkun with you. I'll reverse-summon him if we find anything out there." Kakashi bit his thumb and went through some seals. "Kuchiyose no jutsu!"

A pop and a puff of smoke revealed the diminutive pug sitting attentively on the table where Kakashi had slammed his hand down.

"Leave it to me, I'll keep an eye on them," Pakkun said, saluting with a paw.

"Pakkun!" Naruto said happily. "You haven't changed a bit!"

Pakkun looked over his shoulder at Naruto. "You have, though. Are you really that short, or is it just the henge? I don't remember being able to stand eye-to-eye with you."

"That's—! I'm sitting down, and you're on the table!" Naruto jumped up to demonstrate he was still, at least, taller than a dog.
Sai laughed. Naruto shot him a disgruntled look, but didn't retort. It would have been easier to react if
the laugh had been distinctly mocking, but it wasn't. It was genuine and warm.

"No, you really haven't changed all that much," Sai said. "Actually, I'm surprised I didn't figure out
who you are sooner."

That was discomforting, coming from a complete stranger.

"Though I wonder if at a younger age, you have even less of a—"

"Okay," Kakashi cut in neatly. "Another thing, Sai, is that while this isn't exactly a secret, we want
to keep it quiet until a decision can be made by the Hokage and the Council. That is also why you're
a good fit for this. I doubt it will be necessary, but if anyone asks, he's a survivor from Root that
you're mentoring."

"Ah," Sai gave an understanding nod, but Naruto was completely lost. "That is good; it won't be
necessary to explain his lack of a background then. The knowledge of most of our true identities died
along with Danzou-sama, after all."

"Yes, and it's caused quite a bit of headache trying to assimilate them into the regular forces, so it's a
good cover. Naruto's personality doesn't exactly fit that, but it's all just for the time being anyway,
while the higher-ups have their meeting." Kakashi stood up. "By the way, Naruto, before you go
out, I have to warn you…"

Naruto sighed. "I'll behave. And I won't run off. I just want to see things and help the village if I can.
Even I can tell this isn't a good time to be pulling jokes."

"Ah, not that exactly… though you're right. No, what I was going to say was that not everyone will
be fooled by your transformation. The henge didn't change your smell, so anyone with a sharp nose
will suspect something. And there might be others that are sensor-types or just clever enough to
figure it out."

Naruto scratched his head. Then what was the point?

"But those who are good enough to figure it out will also be clever enough to play along with it,"
Kakashi continued. "We're going to have to explain about you to the village at some point if this
goes on anyway, but everyone knows what is at stake when it comes to you and Akatsuki. More
importantly, you need to try to act normal, even if you see or hear something that surprises you. Can
you do that?"

Naruto nodded cautiously.

"I really mean it," Kakashi said dryly. "You need to stay calm no matter what, or we'll have no
choice but to hide you in an underground bunker until Akatsuki goes away. And if Sai tells you to
run, or stay out of a fight, you need to do that without complaining."

"You're making me nervous, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto said with a quavering laugh. "Is it going to be
that risky just to walk around a little bit?"

"Probably not," Kakashi allowed, "but never forget that capturing you is one of Akatsuki's
objectives. You need to not draw attention to yourself; which you may find more difficult than you
think, seeing as how not only the village, but all the people in it are different from what you know. If
they attack the village again in the state we are in, there's a good chance that they'll succeed in taking
you." He eye-smiled but his words still gave Naruto a chill.
"Okay, okay, I get it," he mumbled.

"Great. We're not going to be able to keep you in the dark about everything, but… Sai, try to keep him away from anything that's a little too big to be dealing with right now. He says that he left the night of Tsunade's inauguration, before…" Kakashi didn't finish the sentence, but his hand gave a strange deliberate twitch, like a hand sign, only it wasn't a ninjutsu one that he recognized. Naruto barely caught it, but Sai looked very grave and nodded.

"Understood," he said.

"Be good and stay out of trouble, you three. Later!" and Kakashi disappeared with a puff of smoke.

"Kage Bunshin," Sai said. "They must have already left."

"Yep," Pakkun said. "They were ready to go as soon as Kakashi showed up. He didn't even have to give Hokage-sama his puppy-dog look to convince her. They're both so soft on the brat."

Feeling somewhat awkward and not knowing what to do with his hands, Naruto walked over to the trunk and started putting away the clothes he'd pulled out.

"So…" he started slowly. "Why are they sending out a search right now? I mean, what are they looking for?"

Sai watched him impassively, head tilted slightly. "It's safe to assume that if someone deliberately brought you here, they would be looking for you. If that person knows where you ended up, they are probably heading there now. If we send forces there, then there is a possibility of capturing them."

Naruto snapped the trunk closed and stood up fully to frown at Sai.

"What?" Sai said lightly.

"I'm sorry, I really can't figure you out," Naruto scratched his head. "Are we… friends? In this time, I mean."

"We're comrades."

"We're comrades but we're not friends?" Naruto looked unimpressed.

"Mm…" Sai shifted uncomfortably. "It's not that. I'm just not exactly sure how the whole friendship thing works. If it makes you feel any better, though, I think the older you would say we are friends. I've been reading up on it," he tapped his pocket, "but I've pretty much come to the conclusion that it will take time to figure out."

"Oh," Naruto said. "See, this whole time I've been trying to imagine—figure out what kind of person I am in the future. Not that I mind having more friends, but you're kind of weird."

"That, coming from you?" Pakkun said. "Relax, Naruto. He's one of us."

Sai shrugged and laid his notebook flat on the table, smoothing the cover. "Back when we first met, I thought it would be easier to interact with people if I put on an act that kept them from caring about me. So actually, you hated me," he started absently flipping through his notebook. Now that it was open, Naruto could see that it was actually a sketchpad, and he walked over to get a closer look. Sai paused on a pastel drawing that didn't look like much of anything, just a swirling mass of different colors. He tapped it with his finger and smiled. "Sakura punched me really good in the face once."
Naruto winced. "Yeah, I know that feeling."

Sai shook his head, closing the sketchpad. "I wonder if you do. Anyway, a little while later, I decided to drop the act and be myself. So we get along pretty well now," he offered a small smile over his shoulder.

"Hm," Naruto said. "So you like to draw?"

"Yes; it's also part of my jutsu. I can show you sometime if you want, but aren't you interested in seeing the village?"

"Yeah, I am…" Naruto said. "What Kakashi-sensei said freaked me out a little bit, but I want to see how things are going after the attack. I didn't see much when we were walking here."

Sai nodded and stood, tucking his sketchpad under his arm. "Is there anywhere in particular you would like to go? If you're hungry, they just reopened Ichiraku's not too long ago."

Naruto's stomach growled at the thought. He didn't have to ask how Sai knew that would be a tempting offer. It was strange, but pretty convenient to meet someone that already knew him. "Ahh, now you're talking! I haven't had any lunch yet. It's good to know that Ichiraku's is still around at least. I don't think it would be right otherwise."

'Operation: learn about Konoha of the future' was about to begin. It just so happened that the ramen bar was a good a place as any to start.

"I love the new place!" Naruto gushed, settling in on a stool. "It looks like it's been expanded! Thank goodness the menu is the same, though," he added, looking over one of the signs hanging up.

"Oh? Thanks!" Teuchi said, looking up from his chopping to smile proudly. "It's thanks to Naruto that I was able to reopen so quickly. He wouldn't rest until Yamato-san made it a priority. What can I get you?"

Naruto's grin was a mile wide. "A large tonkotsu miso with pork cutlets please! Oh, with some eggs too."

"Same for me," Sai said.

"Sure," Teuchi said. He tapped the blunt edge of the knife against his shoulder contemplatively. "Sorry, I don't remember seeing you in here before, kid. What's your name?"

Teuchi had a sharper memory for faces than any ninja. He made it a point to keep a rapport with all of his customers.

"It's—er—um… Shinji," Naruto stumbled out. He glanced at Sai nervously.

"Sorry, if he was here before, then it was probably a long time ago," Sai took over. "He was in Root."

"That group, huh?" Teuchi said with dark understanding. "If it wasn't bad form to talk badly about a Hokage, even just a candidate one…" he muttered and turned around to start his work.

The fact that it had been that easy to deflect suspicion at the simple mention of Root piqued Naruto's curiosity. Kakashi's lazy attitude had given him doubts, but it really seemed to work.

"What is this Root thing, anyway?" Naruto whispered to Sai behind his hand.
"Later," Sai said.

After they got their ramen, Naruto ate quietly for the most part, turned halfway in his seat to watch the street through the open doors of the shop. Plenty of new questions occurred to him while he was sitting there, but he didn't want to express them while Teuchi was working in the background. Pakkun was staring at him none-too-subtly and Naruto gave him pork cutlets from his bowl.

"I wonder if they found anything yet," he said.

"Nothing worth summoning me back for, at least," Pakkun said. "And I don't hear the village sirens going off either, so that's a good sign."

"Maybe it wasn't anyone after all. Maybe it was just a freak accident."

"I'm not sure if that would be better or not," Sai said, putting down money on the counter. "You don't have any money on you, do you?"

"Ah—! Crap, I forgot about that. Sorry," Naruto said sheepishly. "I can pay you back if—you think they'll let me pick up a few D-rank missions around the village or something? I should help work while I'm here, anyway."

"I don't know. I guess it depends," Sai counted out the amount for Naruto and put it down. "Do you want to go see Sakura?"

"Eh? Would that be alright?" Naruto asked as they exited the shop. "I mean, I'm not gonna complain if you're suggesting it, but…"

"I think it'll be ok. Why else would he give you the warning about keeping calm, if he didn't expect you to see familiar people?"

"Will seeing Sakura give me a reason to not keep calm?" Naruto asked, very nervously.

"We're probably gonna run into her sooner or later anyway," Pakkun said. "Plus, she might have biscuits."

"This way; we'll check at the Medical Corps first," Sai said, motioning for them to follow. Naruto trotted up beside him, looking dubious. "Unfortunately, I can't really tell you if she has changed, since I only joined your team this past year. I do know that she couldn't have started apprenticing under Tsunade-sama until after she was back in Konoha, so I suppose that could have had an effect."

"She's apprenticed under Tsunade-baachan?" Naruto said curiously. "How so?"

"She's a Medic-nin now," Pakkun said. "Our little Sakura-chan has gotten to be very reliable."

"That's awesome!" Naruto said. "But… something confuses me, Sai. I didn't get what you meant at first when you said I was your teammate, but all that with Kakashi-sensei, and just now when you said you joined our team this past year… are you saying that you're really a permanent team member? How does that work, when we've already got our established Team 7?"

Sai was quiet for a moment. Pakkun looked up at him but didn't say anything either.

"Team 7," Sai started finally, "as a training unit under a jounin instructor, has been dissolved just like all genin teams after promotions. Now we are Team Kakashi, which, while maintaining the structure of the original Team 7, is a regular unit that is subject to adjustments as necessary. For example, sometimes Yamato-taichou takes command of the team instead of Kakashi-sensei. Right now,
Yamato-taichō is with the older you on the way to the Lightning Country—or at least, that's the way things were since this morning. With the two of you gone, and Sakura spending most of her time with the medics and working for Tsunade-sama, our team is a bit scattered at the moment."

Noting the obvious lack of one member of the team being accounted for, Naruto asked curiously, "So where's Sasuke?"

Sai laughed nervously and Pakkun bit him on the ankle. "Oww! Ah, um. I don't think I should really get into what he's doing out there, but the last correspondence with him was near the Land of Iron. I believe you, Sakura, and Kakashi-sensei met with him there not long ago."

"Oh," Naruto said with great interest. "So he's on some kind of secret mission right now."

"Something like that," Sai said, eyes wandering in the opposite direction of who he was talking to. "I really can't say anything about it. So, why Shinji?"

"Huh?"

"The fake name you gave Teuchi-san."

"Oh," Naruto shrugged. "It was just the first random name that popped in my head. It's the name of some jerk I met on the way here."

"Ah, that makes sense," Sai said without the slightest hint of irony. "I just thought it was funny that you chose that, since it reminds me of my older brother. His name was Shin. And he was in Root, just like I was."

"Again with the Root? What is it?"

"Later."

"You're doing this on purpose…"

Kakashi was easily able to track Naruto's trail back to where he had arrived from. He had simply traveled along the trade road between Konoha and the little farming village, after all.

Kakashi and his ninja hound Shiba led the way with a small group of ANBU behind them. The rest of his hounds were scattered about with the other teams, each sent to any other small settlements close to Konoha. Even though it was most likely they would find something in Naruto's initial location if there was anything to be found, it paid to be thorough. They could not allow any enemies in their back yard.

When they arrived, they held back, hiding in the trees to observe the village. They already found the place where Naruto had emerged from the woods to look down on it. Kakashi's eye narrowed as he scrutinized the place from up in his tree. Below it just looked like a peaceful little hamlet. Ever since the majority of the residents had left to lend their carpentry and building skills to Konoha, this place had been even quieter than ever before. Only a handful remained to tend to the crops; around 20 or so. Fortunately, they had suffered no collateral damage from the blast that had destroyed Konoha, so there had been no need to stage a cleanup here, nor had there been any reason to keep the Chuunin who was stationed there. If anything happened, the few residents that were there would be left completely undefended.

Kakashi touched the microphone on his neck. "There's no one in the fields or on the street. The whole place looks like a ghost town."
"Proceed with caution," Boar's voice sounded in his ear. "I will back you up. Raven and Tiger, stay in the trees and out of the line of sight. It doesn't look like much of anything is going on here, but we won't know for sure until we can make contact with some of the residents."

Kakashi heard the other two give their affirmative and he jumped down from the tree and sprinted through the grass, Shiba bounding beside him easily. He heard Boar behind him, his steps a faint whisper on the ground, surprisingly quiet for a man his size.

Shiba's nose was to the ground. He sniffed along the street and paused beside one of the fields, giving it several sniffs and turns.

"Seems like Naruto met up with some people here," he said. He trotted down the street a little more and ambled over some freshly plowed earth toward a house on the edge of the field. "Looks like they went in there," he raised his head to stare at the house.

It was a simple wooden structure like all the others. It couldn't have held more than a couple of rooms. Kakashi could see a small tendril of smoke rising from the chimney, which most likely meant that someone was home. He strode up to the house and knocked on the front door.

There was no response, but at this point he hadn't really been expecting any. Something here felt very wrong.

"Is there anyone in there?" he mumbled to Shiba. Kakashi's own nose wasn't all that bad, and he knew what it was telling him. Still, it didn't hurt to have a second opinion.

"Yes," Shiba said with certainty.

"How many?"

"Three. No enemies… I don't think."

Kakashi opened the door and walked in cautiously. He saw that the fire in the hearth was really nothing but a collection of cinders. A pot of stew was over it, still warm. He could smell white rice and daikon and beef.

And there were three bodies splayed on the floor. They were lined up all in the same posture: knees slightly bent and their hands tied behind their back. An old man, a young man, and a boy. It looked as if someone had lined them up on their knees and killed them one by one, leaving them slumped over wherever they fell.

The bizarre thing was, there were no wounds. There was no blood. Poison? Kakashi bent down and sniffed at the abandoned food around the hearth.

"Senpai?" Boar said from the doorway. "Did you find something?"

He came further into the room and saw the bodies. Boar uttered a soft curse under his breath and tapped his radio. "We have three bodies. Move in and search the other houses. If you find anyone, don't move them unless they are still alive and need medical treatment. Prioritize the recovery of any survivors. We will regroup after searching the whole village."

"What do you think?" he asked Kakashi.

"It isn't poison," Kakashi said, standing up from his inspection of the bodies. "There's no scent of it on their mouths or food and there are no puncture wounds from a syringe. We will need an autopsy to be sure, though, since it could be a new or undetectable type. The way they are tied up suggests
they were restrained and kept alive for a little while before they died. My guess is that someone interrogated them. It could be that they died as the result of some sort of mind-destruction jutsu…” he looked down at the boy's staring, glassy eyes.

"The enemy could have also realized that these people had contact with Naruto," Boar theorized. "But they don't seem outwardly as though they were tortured for information. Why would they just kill them outright like this?"

"If they didn't bother with asking…” Kakashi said slowly, "if the method of getting the information itself was the cause of death."

Boar became very still. "We have seen this before… but that's…"

Kakashi drew in a very long breath. "What is going on here?"

The medic-nin seemed busier than almost anyone else in the village. The rebuilt hospital wasn't their only place of operation; they had multiple tents set up at different points in the village for minor care, in order to save space in the hospital for only the most serious cases. They also had a warehouse that was being stocked with supplies and organized by genin helpers. At that moment, the work there was being overseen by a single medic.

"Put them all in the same place," Sakura said to a genin team that was pushing a huge wheeled cart full of wooden crates. "Tsunade-sama needs this inventory report today. Just there, and go get the next one. I'll unload these." They gratefully scampered off.

"Sakura," Sai called.

Sakura turned around as they approached and her face brightened. "Oh hey, Sai! Did you come to help?"

"Nope, just came to say hello," Sai said cheerfully. Sakura grumbled and started unloading the cart.

She was taller and more sinewy than Naruto remembered. She still had the cropped hair that she had just switched to in his time, tied with a red hitai-ate. The pink hair and striking green eyes were the same as ever, but for the first time, Naruto really felt as though time had passed. She wore tall boots with a dark navy skirt and a sleeveless red vest that was reminiscent of the dress she used to wear, with a light-colored tee underneath it.

She was even taller than him than before. And there was something else there too; an aura of confidence that he hadn't even realized until now that she had been lacking before.

"So, what are you doing?" Sai said.

Sakura set down another crate and straightened up, dusting off her hands. "Tsunade-sama wants an inventory of all our medicinal herbs, in order to determine if we need to go collect some more. What are you doing? It's not nice for people on their days off to come taunt those that have to work, you know."

"I am working. I've been assigned to guard this person," Sai motioned toward Naruto.

Sakura shifted her attention to him for the first time and Naruto blushed a bit as she appraised him, looking a little confused. After all, he looked just like any other genin. She glanced at Pakkun near his feet and then back at Naruto.
"Who is this?"

"It's Naruto!" Sai said cheerfully.

"Ack—! Sai!" Naruto tugged on his arm. "I thought Kakashi-sensei said we were supposed to be top secret right now!"

"It's alright," Sai said. "Because Kakashi-sensei enlisted me for this task, this is a Team Kakashi mission now. That is why he put me on this task, and why he suggested we go out. If he doesn't say it explicitly, he can't get in trouble for it later."

"In theory," Pakkun added.

"Naruto?" Sakura frowned, hand on her hip. "I thought you were being sent out to the Land of Lightning. Or was that just a decoy or something?"

"Ah… he was sent out," Sai said. "But this one suddenly showed up, and we might have two Narutos running around now."

Sakura unexpectedly narrowed her eyes at Naruto with a hard, sharp expression he never knew she could make. It wasn't the usual glare like when he did something stupid. It was the cold, professional look of a shinobi analyzing a potential threat. Suddenly he felt very much like a bug pinned to a board.

"I was about to take a little bit of a break," she said lightly, in a tone that completely defied her expression. "Let's go catch up some."

She turned on her heel and walked toward the back of the warehouse. The boys followed; Naruto apprehensive and Sai as blandly chipper as ever. They arrived in a small breakroom and Sakura closed the door behind them. Naruto and Sai sat down in mismatched chairs around a folding table, and Sakura poured herself a cup of coffee from the coffee pot on the counter.

"Alright, what is this about?" she said, settling down at the table with them.

Sai explained everything to her, including about Kakashi and the ANBU's scouting mission. It didn't take long and she didn't interrupt, but by the end of it Sakura lowered her head, bangs covering her face. Naruto wondered if she was about to explode.

"I suppose what we do about it in the end depends partly on what they find," Sai finished. "And whether or not the older version of Naruto is still around, or if they traded places somehow, or whatever else."

Sakura looked up, but she didn't seem angry like Naruto had thought. Instead she looked concerned, and she turned to Naruto, who had been mostly quiet throughout the conversation.

"Are you all right?" she asked gently. "I know all of this must have come as a shock to you. I mean, with the village being destroyed and everything. It isn't exactly the future we had in mind for ourselves."

"It's…" Naruto tried to think of what to say. "It's not as bad as I would have thought, I guess. I didn't realize what a relief it would be just to have everyone survive. Oh!" he sat up very straight in his chair suddenly. "I have something really important to ask you!"

"Oh?"
"Yesterday—well, yesterday for me anyway—we were at the inauguration and Kiba was being a jerk and you had to hold me back from pummeling him, do you remember that?"

"I think so… why?"

"Why?" Naruto slammed his hands on the table impatiently. "He was talking trash about me even though I beat him in the preliminaries! I forgot and didn't ask when I saw him earlier, but… please tell me I beat him to Chuunin!"

Sakura blinked at him a couple of times and then burst out into full-blown laughter. Pakkun chuckled and Sai fake-smiled out of habit.

"Sakura-chaaan!" Naruto ground out indignantly. "Why does everyone keep laughing when I ask that?"

"Oh… I'm sorry, Naruto," Sakura wiped away a tear of mirth. "Don't get mad at me, but… technically, you are still a genin."

"You are the only one of our age group registered as an active Konoha nin that is still a genin," Sai offered helpfully.

"What?" Naruto said, stunned.

"You didn't have to say it like that," Sakura smacked Sai on the back of the head.

"I'm not the one who was laughing at him…"

Naruto stared at their bickering, his fingertips lightly touching the table and halfway out of his chair. Had he completely misunderstood something? He racked his memory. Everyone said he faced the Akatsuki member that had destroyed the village, right? But Kakashi had also said that he didn't actually beat him; that he'd sacrificed himself after being convinced to give up. That didn't really mean that Naruto was necessarily powerful at all! He was just good at talking people into committing suicide? After all this time, he was still the dead-last, the only one in their group still a puny genin?

"Maa, Naruto," Sakura said as Naruto hit his forehead on the table. "You don't have to take it so hard. I said technically you're still a genin; everybody knows that you're better than that. It's just the circumstances made it to where you haven't had a chance to take the exam since the first time."

"Oh, really?" he said tonelessly.

"Yeah," she answered earnestly. "Take the current situation, for example. Could you imagine us holding a Chuunin Exams in the state we're in right now? And you've been out of the village a lot, training or out on a mission at all the wrong times. It's just a coincidence, I promise."

"Then… how strong am I?"

"Mm…" Sakura glanced to the side and rubbed her arm. "I don't think it would be a good idea to tell you a lot about your future self. What if it changes something? Besides, you should already know that you are strong."

"Uh huh," he crossed his arms, dissatisfied.

"Since you guys are just waiting around, come help me unload some boxes," Sakura said, standing and rinsing her coffee mug out in the sink. "We're shorthanded anyway."
Giving a defeated sigh at the change of subject, Naruto followed her out along with Sai and Pakkun. They only barely made it out of the breakroom before Sakura stopped dead.

"KONOHAMARU!" she roared. "What do you think you're doing?"

The others looked around Sakura curiously. Moegi and Udon were unloading crates, and two Konohamarus were pouring the contents from one barrel into another barrel. They were all wearing hitai-ate. They were all genin. And all of them were currently frozen in place, staring at Sakura.

"Th-this barrel was almost completely empty!" Konohamaru said defiantly, but with an undercurrent of nervousness. "I figured it would help save space if—"

"Idiot!" Sakura raged, punching one of the Konohamarus. The clone disappeared in a puff of smoke and the barrel fell to the ground. "You can't mix random medicinal herbs! Now this stock is unusable. These have already been dried, crushed, and prepared! There's no way to separate them now!"

"Waaahhh, Sakura-neechan!" Konohamaru cried, reeling backward as he dodged another punch. "I'm sorry!"

"Konohamaru-kun…" Moegi sighed, doing a facepalm.

"Oi! Squirt! Konohamaru!" Naruto called, running into the scene eagerly.

Konohamaru stopped in his retreat long enough to glare at him. "Who are you calling squirt? You're smaller than I am, kore!"

With dismay, Naruto realized that he was right. Shorter than Konohamaru. This was what it had come to. No, he was almost certain that he would be the taller of the two if not for the henge, at least by a few centimeters. If he could just dispel it…

"Nevermind that," Naruto said out loud, trying to shake off his irritation. He had completely overlooked the fact that Konohamaru would probably be a ninja by now. There was something much more pressing at hand. "Let me see your Oiroke no Jutsu!"

"Eh?" Konohamaru stopped to look at him in confusion. It was fairly likely that he was put off by a complete stranger asking to see him turn into a naked woman.

Naruto didn't notice Sakura stalking toward him until it was too late. With a vicious cry of 'shaannaro!', she reared back and planted her fist into his jaw. Naruto flew, skidded a few times across the warehouse floor, and finally rolled to a stop against a stack of crates all the way on the opposite end.

Sai had been right to question Naruto's experience. Sakura definitely hit harder than before.

"10.0, Sakura-neechan," Konohamaru chirped.

"Owww, what the hell?" Naruto groaned, sitting up and rubbing his jaw.

"Sorry to interrupt, everyone," Sai said, stepping in between Sakura and Konohamaru before more bodies went flying. "Sakura, Pakkun just vanished. Kakashi-sensei must have summoned him back."

"That's the signal that they found something, right? Do you think we should go back to the boarding house to wait for him?" Sakura said.
"We'll go," Sai said. "If you don't hear anything then come by when you're finished up here. Somehow I don't think Tsunade-sama would like you just skipping out."

"Ugh. You're right. But send me a message if he shows up. I'll be over as soon as possible."

Naruto had dragged himself back to their group, still rubbing his face and muttering under his breath. Sakura sighed and reached out toward him. Naruto winced but she just placed her hand on the side of his jaw. A moment later her hand glowed with green energy and the pain and swelling faded away.

"You're blushing, Stupidface," Sai observed with interest.

"S-shut up! I am not!"

Sakura just shook her head as the two walked away, Naruto shooting venomous words at Sai with no effect whatsoever.

"What was that all about… kore?"

"Get back to work!"

"Eep! Yes, Sakura-nee-chan."
It had been hours now since they had gone back to the boarding house to wait. Naruto thumbed the edges of *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi*. He'd settled down to read in order to try to pass the time, but he ended up fidgeting restlessly with it instead. There was something slightly awkward in this atmosphere that made it difficult to focus on anything.

Sai was sitting at the small wooden table across from him, sketching peacefully. He had changed into a more battle-ready gray outfit, complete with hitai-ate and implements for his jutsu, just in case Kakashi's discovery meant they'd be moving out soon. Sakura was sitting in the sill of the open window gazing out at the darkening sky, an occasional breeze lifting the ends of her hair.

As weird as Sai was, at least he was an unknown to him from the start, and he seemed way more forthright when answering Naruto's questions, even if he still didn't give away very much. Sakura was just… odd. She deflected even his most (relatively) sneaky attempts at getting information out of her, and he couldn't even get a read on how she felt about him being around. Whatever she thought, she was doing a good job of keeping it to herself. Naruto's attempts at conversation had puttered out a while ago. Things were quiet, peaceful, and still, and that was just *grating*.

"He should be back by now, right?" Naruto burst out. "It has definitely been enough time to get from there to here."

Sakura turned her gaze from the street to Naruto. "Maybe, but if they found something it's possible they had to investigate it a little more. Besides, you know that Kakashi-sensei likes to take his sweet time when people are waiting for him."

"Yeah," he grumbled. He perked up suddenly. "Hey, hey, Sakura-chan, did we ever get to see under his mask? Is he horribly disfigured, or what?"

"Sorry. At this point I think it'll never happen," Sakura waved a hand. "He'll probably take it to his grave."

"Figures," Naruto leaned his elbow on the table and cradled his chin thoughtfully. "Is it really true that he died during the attack on the village?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"He told me. And the guy who did it all had a super-crazy-revival jutsu and brought everyone that died back to life."

"If he told you, why are you asking me?"

Naruto scowled at her. "I thought maybe you could tell me more about it. Like… like how it happened and why I wasn't here to do anything about it."

Sakura bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Naruto, but if there's any way we can reverse this and you go back to your own time, if you know too much—"

"But it would be a *good* thing if I could use my knowledge to keep people from getting killed, right?" Naruto pressed.

"It's not your responsibility. We've already relied on you too much."
Sai stopped sketching and watched their exchange with unreadable black eyes.

"What do you mean?" Naruto said, slightly hurt. "Don't you trust me?"

"It's not like that. It's just that it's dangerous to meddle with time. Haven't you ever watched late-night made-for-TV films?"

"No. I'm a growing boy who needs plenty of rest. I go to bed at a reasonable hour." Naruto said virtuously.

"And you don't watch anything that could have ghosts in it," Sai added.

"W-why would I care if something has ghosts in it?"

"You're scared of them, obviously. You would rather camp outside than willingly go into a potentially haunted house."

Naruto 'hmpf'ed obstinately. "You piss me off, you know that?"

"And all was right with the world," Sakura said brightly.

"What about him?" Naruto jerked his thumb at Sai. "I'm not supposed to know him yet. Aren't you afraid that could change things?"

"Maybe, but… back then, he was in Root."

"Right," Naruto said flatly, putting his chin back on his hand. "Because that explains everything."

A smart rapping came on the door and everyone jumped slightly. None of them had heard or felt a presence out in the hallway.

"Finally," Naruto jumped up.

"Wait, Naruto," Sakura slid down from the windowsill. "Let one of us—" but he was already opening the door.

The first thing he saw when he opened the door was a plain black cloak. His eyes trailed up and fixed on a pale face with fine cracks running through it like an ancient porcelain doll, framed with black center-parted bangs. Set in this face were terrifying eyes with black sclera and red irises with three tomoe marks in each of them.

"No way," Naruto said, stunned.

A kunai slipped into Uchiha Itachi's hand and Sai pushed Naruto hard in the chest to force him back. Sai used the other hand to block Itachi's strike with the tantō strapped on his back. Naruto stumbled backward and ran clumsily into the corner of his bookshelf—but he barely registered this. Sai and Itachi locked eyes only for a brief moment, but Sai suddenly stilled, before crumpling to the ground. The proportions of red and black in Itachi's eyes melded and shifted back from the strange form they had taken. He stepped over Sai's prone form into the room.

"S-Sai!" Naruto choked out. He pushed off from the bookshelf and crossed his fingers. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

His chakra was fully restored but still felt slightly slippery to control. However, he was able to summon two stable clones. The first one rushed Itachi as a distraction and Naruto held out his hand to the other one to begin molding chakra on his palm. The first one was swiftly dispatched with a
spinning kick, and when Naruto couldn't feel the Rasengan forming, he glanced at the other only to see it staring at him with a sadistic grin on its face.

"Wh—"

The clone lunged at Naruto and grabbed him from behind, looping its arms under his and locking its hands together behind his neck.

"The joke's on you, Boss," it said.

Itachi was steadily approaching and the kunai slipped into his hand again. Naruto tried to wiggle out of his own clone's grasp but it was no use. He could only watch as Itachi reared back and plunged the knife into his heart, blood springing free from his body and splattering on that impassive face. He screamed.

"Wake up, Naruto!"

He gasped and blinked. Sakura's hand gripped his shoulder firmly.

"He had you in his genjutsu," she said grimly. "Try not to look at his eyes or hands. Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah." He said shakily. Itachi was still standing at the front of the room with Sai lying on the floor behind him. Naruto decided to give it another shot. He crossed his fingers.

"Wait," Sakura hissed, pulling on his shoulder insistently. "I had to disrupt your chakra to snap you out of the genjutsu, and it broke your henge! If he didn't know it was you before, he definitely does now! You have to get out of here!"

Naruto summoned two more clones, which were, sure enough, the spiky blonde variety he was used to. The first stood in front of them protectively with their arms spread. The second finally managed to get started on a Rasengan in his palm.

"We can't just leave Sai," he said. "If I hit Itachi with this to keep him busy, do you think you could reach Sai? If we have to run away, we should at least do it together."

"I wasn't saying we—"

Naruto already started his charge. His two clones dispersed and he lunged at Itachi, who was walking forward slowly. The silent Uchiha didn't dodge when Naruto gave a battle cry and plunged the Rasengan into his chest. The whirling spiral of chakra met unresisting flesh and Naruto's hand went through his body before the energy dispersed into the air. Itachi's body jerked and ash-like flakes flew from the wound, but there was no blood, and he didn't cry out or change his blank expression. Confused and slightly horrified at the sight of his hand piercing through someone— something he'd only seen Kakashi accomplish—Naruto was caught off guard and Itachi gladly took that opening. He grabbed Naruto by the throat with a bone-crushingly strong grip and lifted him off the ground.

Naruto choked and kicked out with his legs, but it was no good. He remembered all too well when Itachi had used a tactic like this on Sasuke. It hadn't ended well. All of his body's alarm bells were screaming at him to escape.

He was only suspended there for a moment, however. A flash of pink entered his vision and he saw Sakura cleave through Itachi's arm below the elbow using the blade above her tool pouch. Itachi stepped back and Naruto fell to the floor, coughing. The arm dissolved in ash-like pieces and started
re-forming itself on the stump Sakura had left him with.

"What the hell is going on?" Naruto coughed, his voice coming out raspy from his abused throat.

"I'm not sure," Sakura said tersely, putting away the blade and standing in front of Naruto with her fists raised. "We once fought against someone we thought was Itachi but it turned out to be one of Pein's techniques, that allowed Itachi to channel a portion of his chakra through someone else and fight as if it was him. But… this doesn't look like that technique. That time, he was able to take damage and the medium changed back to themselves once the chakra sustaining it ran out. Besides, Uchiha Itachi isn't in a position to donate his chakra like that," her fists tightened. "I have an idea of what this might be. I really hope I'm wrong, though."

"What do you think we should do?"

Itachi's arm finished regenerating and he lifted his re-formed hand into a half-ram seal. A wave of heavy, overwhelming pressure fell over them like a sudden increase in the pull of gravity on their bodies. The lights in the room started to dim to almost nothing and darkness encroached on their senses.

"He's trying to trap us both at the same time," Sakura said through gritted teeth. Her hands and arms were drooping and her back was bending as if her limbs suddenly weighed a ton. "Need to… break out of it…" she tried to lift her hands to form a seal, but it was proving difficult.

"Damn it," Naruto muttered. He tried reaching for a kunai—he knew the only chance he had left of breaking the genjutsu would be to disrupt it with physical pain—but was quickly reminded that he had left his kunai, along with the rest of his equipment and everything else he owned minus the clothes on his back, in the past. His hand flopped to the floor uselessly once he realized that, energy spent from the simple movement.

"It's just an illusion, he tried to tell himself. Your body isn't really this heavy. It's suggestion. Snap out of it!

The mere effort of standing was making Sakura breathe heavily, and her knees were bowing in as if they were mere moments away from folding. She gave a long inhale, squared her shoulders a little bit, and then wrenched her arm back as far as it would go with an enraged roar.

When she hit the floor with her fist, it disintegrated into wood pulp and thousands of tiny splinters. Naruto closed his eyes and felt the entire world collapse out from under him. Large cracks ripped through the floor, wood groaning and snapping like broken bones. The whole mass churned and took him with it as it fell down to the story below, pelting him with debris in a heart-stopping drop that felt much longer than it must have really been. He landed on his back hard enough to evict the air from his lungs and he reflexively curled and put his hands over his head as debris continued to fall around him. Through the chaos he heard shrieks and shouts. These went on after the noise of the collapse subsided. New voices emerged and settled into a loud running hum of confusion and distress.

Naruto heard a muffled cough much closer by and he squinted through his arms. Sakura was hanging over him, coughing into the crook of her elbow, trying to turn her head so as not to cough on him. Her other hand was next to his head and he realized that she'd shielded him with her body. She didn't appear to be mortally wounded, but her arms and face had scratches on them and the end of a beam was propped up on her back looking like it had fallen on her.

"S-sakura-chan?" he said through what felt like a mouthful of sawdust.
"Are you okay?" she asked, turning to look down at him.

"Am I okay?" he yelped, "You just made a floor of a building fall on top of yourself."

"It's alright, no broken bones or concussion," she frowned suddenly and put a glowing green hand around his head, as if checking him for concussion. "More importantly, we broke out of that genjutsu. Otherwise, we'd probably be dead."

Naruto sat up quickly and she didn't try to stop him. Apparently he wasn't concussed, then, though he felt a little bit like he was. "Itachi? And Sai? What happened to them?"

"Oi! What happened?"

"What's going on?"

"An explosion?"

"Someone alert Hokage-sama!"

Sakura stood up, wrestling a little with the beam before managing to slide it safely to the side.

"I don't see Itachi; he may have gotten away. With all these people around… not even he can take on the whole village," she said. "We need to find Sai, though; he was unconscious—"

"Sakura!"

Naruto peeked over the edge of the little hole of debris they were in and saw Ino jumping lightly over the barricade of splintered wood. Part of the first floor's wall had been knocked out and he could see Shikamaru and Chouji standing in the street, but they too were approaching quickly with looks of shock and concern.

"What happened?" Ino landed lightly in front of her best friend and gripped her by the arms. "Are you okay? We were just passing by and heard this huge crash—"

"I'm fine," Sakura reassured. "but there might be people buried in the collapse that need help."

They had landed in the lounge/eating area on the first floor. Most of the middle of the room was piled with debris. Everyone that had been in the building was gathering around the damage; some of them were on the second floor peering down through the room-sized hole. A crowd from the street was also rapidly forming. Several cooks were huddled at the doorway to the kitchen; it was adjacent to the dining room and there was no clear path for them to get out.

"Sakura-san," one of the cooks called anxiously. "I remember there were four or five shinobi sitting out here."

Sakura turned to them, stretching her neck to see over the large pile of debris in between them. "Taki-chan? Can you guys get out? Were there any civilians in the dining room?"

"I don't think so; the maid left hours ago and all of us cooks were in the kitchen getting dinner started," Taki said.

"We're fine," a tall, apron-wearing man beside her said. "Get the others out first."

"Oi! Anyone under there! If you can answer, speak up!" Ino shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth.
"I'm here!" called a voice weakly from somewhere in the mess.

"Help me," pleaded another. "I… I think my leg is broken."

Sakura cursed to herself and clamored gingerly toward the voice. "Hold on! We'll get you out!"

"Now you've done it, Sakura-chan," Naruto stood up, dusting himself off.

"Naruto?" Ino looked down at him confusedly from her at-least-a-head-taller height, holding out a hand to compare the difference. "What happened to you?"

"Eheh… long story?" Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. Ino just blinked at him. Like Sakura, she'd grown taller and fitter and some of the childishness had gone out of her face. However, unlike Sakura, she had grown her flax-blond hair back out from when she cut it in the exam. Shikamaru didn't look very different aside from the fact that his body had grown, though he did look sort of funny in a chunin vest. It was hard to imagine him getting promoted (and even he had, while Naruto was still a lousy genin?). Chouji was as big as he ever was, but his proportions had evened out a bit and he had grown his hair out. He now wore a more traditional looking Akimichi-style outfit with armor plating. Naruto was relieved that all three seemed more concerned with the matter at hand than his own oddly young appearance at the moment.

"Chouji," Shikamaru said, nodding toward where Sakura was kneeling and peering into a hollow.

"Yeah," Chouji held his hands in his family's signature Expansion Jutsu sign and reached out with a huge hand to lift debris off of the unfortunate shinobi. Sakura wasted no time in attending to the man's leg. Chouji carefully dropped it all to the side and reached out to continue clearing the room.

"Naruto, we could use a few dozen of you to help clear this stuff out, alright?" Shikamaru spared him a glance. "Ino, let's get everyone out of the building, starting with those cooks. If the structure was damaged it could come the rest of the way down at any time. Be careful where you step," he jumped over the pile to the doorway of the kitchen and the cooks backed up to let him through.

"Right!" Ino said, following suit.

"Osu!" Naruto concentrated on his chakra. It seemed to be flowing more naturally each time he used it, like a sputtering tap that had been dried out. 30 clones popped into existence and he set most of them to the task of lifting and moving everything to the edges of the room, but a few he sent to wiggle into tight spaces, looking for people. Naruto himself picked carefully toward where he thought Sai could be. He saw the table from his room and headed toward that, sparing half a thought for the irony that now he was getting to experience picking his things out of ruins. So far, the hypothesis that he worried more about the safety of his friends—even if they were only his future friends—was proving true.

"Sakura-chan, there's a guy here with a pretty bad cut on his head," one of the clones called out.

Shinobi from the second floor that had been watching the whole thing jumped down through the hole to help shift things out of the way, calling to one another and organizing their efforts. It was no wonder; they were practically professional disaster-recoverers at this point. Naruto looked under the thick wooden table from his room and was semi-relieved not to see Sai there; something that heavy falling on him would have been really bad. However, he did find Sai's sketchpad poking out of the pile of splintered boards nearby and he tucked it under his arm. Naruto peered around. The impact from the table's fall had caused some of the tatami mats in the dining room to bend and stick up in the air. He shouldered himself under a likely-looking tatami mat and saw a pale arm.
"Sai," he said with a mixture of worry and relief, and grabbed the boy under his arms and pulled him backwards out of the pile. Fortunately, he didn't have any apparent injuries aside from superficial scratches. "Hey, wake up, Sai," he said, slapping the sides of his face lightly.

Sai's face twitched and his eyes opened. His gaze looked vague and glassy. It was an expression that looked horribly familiar.

"Oh, crap," Naruto mumbled, waving his hand over Sai's face. "Don't tell me he did that… that thing…"

Sai lifted his hand up a little and Naruto paused his waving. Sai blinked and slowly pushed Naruto's hand away.

"Don't worry," Sai said in an uncharacteristically dazed voice. Then he passed out again.

Naruto put his arm over his shoulders and stood up resolutely, putting Sai's sketchbook in the pouch he was wearing so it wouldn't get lost. He jumped over to the hole in the wall that led out to the street —only to find his way blocked by a very large, soft pair of obstructions.

"What the hell happened here?" Tsunade seethed. Her hands were on her hips and he could swear her long pigtails were swaying in the energy radiating off her body.

"B-baachan!" Naruto said, terrified as he was relieved. "I was going to try to find you—you have to help Sai, he had that brain-melty thing done to him—"

"I thought I told you stay out of trouble," Tsunade raised a fist and Naruto backed up by a step. "Can you explain to me why you insist on doing the opposite of that all of the time? And what happened to your disguise?"

"Tsunade-sama," Shizune said, laying a hand on Tsunade's arm and looking at Sai.

"I can explain it later," Naruto said quickly. "It's Sakura-chan's fault anyway, so you can yell at her about it. But forget about that right now; Itachi showed up and used that Tsuku… whatsit on Sai. And there are probably a couple of other people that need to go to the hospital too."

"Itachi?" Shizune gasped. "You don't mean Uchiha Itachi?"

"Tsunade-sama," Shikamaru interjected, causing Naruto to whip his head toward him—he hadn't noticed the other boy approach—"the building's been evacuated and we think we've recovered everyone buried in the debris. Sakura said she could give her report at the hospital after moving everyone that needs treatment there."

"Fine," Tsunade said curtly, turning to her assistant. "Shizune, you go on ahead to the autopsy room. I'll be down there after I deal with this, but send for me if you have to. Shikamaru, go with her."

"Hah? Why me?"

"I sent Kakashi out to investigate something earlier," Naruto looked up sharply at the mention of his teacher's name, but Tsunade ignored him. "Apparently, they found something pretty mysterious. Shizune will be busy, so I need you to listen to his report and, along with Shizune's findings, put together some possible explanations for what they found."

"Right," Shikamaru sighed. Shizune nodded and walked away at a brisk clip. Shikamaru glanced at Naruto and Sai one last time before trailing after her looking in much less of a hurry.
"Alright," Tsunade said resignedly. "Follow me, Naruto. I don't know why I thought things could ever be quiet with you around…" she grumbled as she turned and stalked toward the hospital.

"Geez," Naruto said, letting out a long breath. "Maybe all this really is a dream, and I just have a great imagination."

Tsunade and Sakura looked at him. All three were standing in the hospital room where Sai lay sleeping; thanks to Tsunade, it was a natural sleep untroubled by dreams. Night had truly fallen now and the florescent lights made him look even paler than usual. The two women had been murmuring quietly together when Naruto's musings drew their attention.

"It's like…" Naruto wrapped his hand around the cold metal of the bed's footboard, "all of this just happened, where I was, but it was all slightly different. An attack on the village. Itachi. Someone ending up… like this," he gestured toward Sai. "I could maybe make something like this up. Now that I think about it, Sai sort of resembles Sasuke; though I don't know why I would have made him look like a vampire…"

Tsunade sighed and moved beside him, laying her hand over his. "Sai is going to be fine. His body is just trying to compensate for what it thinks has been multiple days without sleep. He has had a lifetime of specialized psychological training; a Tsukuyomi designed for just any shinobi is unlikely to have a lasting effect on him. Sadly, it's even likely that he has experienced worse… in his training. The attack's effectiveness depends a lot on how well the caster knows the victim's tolerances. I hate to say it, but out of the three of you, it was probably best that it hit him."

"It was aimed for me," Naruto said in a low voice. "Sai jumped in between us. He could have defended himself if he hadn't been trying to push me out of the way."

"It's an especially good thing, then," Tsunade said lightly, trying to joke. "I'm sure that Sai is more than capable of handling three days of watching someone eat ramen in front of him without sharing."

Naruto shrugged unenthusiastically.

"In all seriousness, though, that's probably what saved you from being captured. It's not the kind of move that can be done multiple times in succession. Most likely, the confrontation was only meant to last a few seconds. As it was, there was time to realize what was happening, involve a bunch of witnesses," her voice turned wry, "and cause a massive amount of collateral damage."

Sakura stiffened noticeably; it would probably be a while before that would be let go.

The door to the hospital room opened, and all of the room's (conscious) occupants turned their heads to see an aged woman enter. Her face was deeply lined, her hair in a tidy silver bun, and she wore loose but elegant clothing. Naruto recognized her as a member of the Third's entourage, but since she was one of the adults that seemed to consistently act as though he didn't exist even when he was in the same room, he'd never bothered to pay her much attention either.

Tsunade put her hand on the footboard beside Naruto's and turned her body toward the visitor in a seemingly unconscious movement that blocked him most of the way from view. Naruto peered around her arm curiously.

"Koharu," Tsunade said. "Did you need me for something?"

Koharu frowned, possibly in reaction to Tsunade's somewhat rude way of addressing her, which she chose to return: "Tsunade. Why are you here instead of the autopsy room? I understand that you haven't even bothered to hear Hatake's report yet?"
Naruto could sense the tension in the room even if he wasn't entirely sure why it was there. The way Koharu scolded Tsunade like an erring child was surprising to him—he didn't think anyone existed that would try to talk to her like that, much less get away with it.

What was more surprising was the fact that Sakura's body language was somehow even more defensive than Tsunade's. Her back was to Naruto, so he couldn't see the expression she was leveling at the old lady, but her shoulders were taut and her fists were clenched at her sides. He didn't know much about the situation, but he was at least fairly certain that Sakura decking the older woman would be an even worse idea than punching out the floor of a building.

"There was no real need to go while the autopsy was still pending, since we need that data before any solid conclusions can be made anyway," Tsunade said. "In the meantime, I was hearing Sakura's report on the attack inside the village—which, I thought, took precedence over whatever happened outside."

"Very well," Koharu conceded with a nod. "And? Any leads on who would try to incite panic by making it look like Uchiha Itachi appeared suddenly in our midst? Do you think it was done as a distraction to turn our eyes inward?"

"It was neither a distraction, nor a trick. It was really him," Tsunade loosened her death grip on the footboard and gestured at Sai's prone form. "This boy was definitely on the receiving end of his Tsukuyomi. That is not a power that can simply be imitated."

Koharu's normally squinted eyes opened as she fixed Tsunade with a serious look. "But he's dead."

Naruto, who was listening intently to the conversation in order to learn anything he could out of it, felt a swooping sensation in his stomach, as if he'd missed a stair.

"From what Sakura described, it was almost certainly Kuchiyose: Edo Tensei," Tsunade said steadily.

Koharu's posture stiffened. Sakura still looked as if she was barely keeping herself from saying anything. Naruto continued listening with every fiber of his being.

"We can discuss this on the way to the autopsy room," Koharu said finally. "In the meantime, what will you do with Naruto? You never gave an answer about that."

Naruto was listening so carefully that he physically jerked when his name was said out of nowhere. She had to know he was there; he wasn't out of sight entirely… but she wasn't looking at him. She only looked at Tsunade, who continued to stand in front of him like she thought the old woman planned to run him through with a sword.

"Naruto and Sakura will stay in here with their teammate until I get back," Tsunade said. "I do not think they will try to go after him again tonight, not after putting the entire village on high alert. Besides that, we shouldn't even think about moving him from the village until we can make an arrangement among the Allied Shinobi Forces with regards to his protection."

Koharu scoffed. "Unusual circumstances aside, do you really think the other nations will accept the idea of two Konoha Jinchuuriki? If the original nine are already accounted for, there is no need to volunteer the information that there may be another one. Have you even checked to confirm whether this is even an issue worth talking about?"

"Not thoroughly," Tsunade said through clenched teeth. "We're not going to talk about this here. Come on," she marched toward the door. "Sakura, keep an eye on Naruto and Sai until I get back,
"Yes, shishou," Sakura said stiffly, and she closed the door as the other two left. Naruto sat down slowly in a chair beside the bed and Sakura sat down in a chair on the opposite side. She looked at Sai, but now that Naruto could see her face, he could tell that she wasn't really seeing what she was looking at. Her nose was wrinkled in disgust and she was glaring at Sai as if he'd mortally offended her. (No doubt that had actually happened at some point, with his weird personality, but in this moment it didn't fit.)

"Sakura-chan?" Naruto called softly. She blinked and her eyes snapped to him, the harsh expression melting into a politely questioning one. "What is it between you and that old lady? I've never even seen you give me a look that bad."

Sakura took a deep breath, held it for about ten seconds, and then let it out slowly. Her eyes dropped to where her hands were lying in her lap.

"It's not her," she said eventually. "Not really. Not… personally, I suppose. It's that whole mindset I hate. She's definitely not the only one; and not even the worst. It's more of… things it reminds me of and what I've seen that kind of thinking do to my friends," she took another deep breath and blew it out noisily. "After everything the village has been through, I'm just sick of it. When I think about it being directed at you—even more than it already has—I get so mad, I—" she brought her hands up to her face, and he was startled to see tears rapidly swelling in her eyes.

"Hey now… calm down," Naruto said uncomfortably, lifting a hand to reach out to her. "What mindset? Reminds you of what? If it's really on my account, you don't have to get so mad. That old lady hasn't done anything to me as far as I know, and if it's something from after my time… well… it's not upsetting me, so you shouldn't let it upset you."

Sakura scrubbed her face with her hands and seemed to compose herself. "You're right; it doesn't matter that much anymore. If you'd shown up while that man was still around…" she shuddered. "Anyway, I probably shouldn't get into that. If I did, I wouldn't be able to keep my mouth shut on other things that I really should."

"Why?" Naruto said earnestly. "Sakura-chan, if you tell me, there might be a chance I could—"

"No," Sakura growled.

"Well… well…" he cast around for another topic she might be willing to go into. "What were they talking about a minute ago? About me leaving the village? Kakashi-sensei was talking about something like that too, earlier on."

"That is the reason the older you just left for the Lightning Country," Sakura said. "So it will be harder for Akatsuki or anyone else to track you down. I'm not surprised it's the first thing they thought of. Tsunade-sama must have told the Council about you already, since it's a pretty big deal."

"It is?" Naruto frowned. "I mean, obviously me showing up here from the past is a big deal and everything, but that old lady seemed to care less about that than getting me to go into hiding as soon as possible."

"Yes, well, we've had a little more time to see just how serious our enemies are," Sakura said dryly. Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "It's just… weird, having people make this much fuss over me. Last time, Itachi and that fish-guy both appeared in the village and took out a few jounin, but nobody was saying I needed to be shipped off back then…"
"I guess back then, no one really understood the danger," Sakura shrugged. "Except for Jiraiya-sama, maybe. But now that they've managed to capture almost all of the Jinchuuriki, people are finally starting to care a little bit about the threat Akatsuki poses to the ones that are left," she rolled her eyes. "Though not necessarily out of the sheer goodness in their hearts."

There was that word again. Naruto frowned. He could dismiss it, if only people didn't keep using it in reference to himself. "Jinchuuriki?"

"That's what it's called when someone has a bijuu in them," Sakura said slowly. "I don't know when the term got coined, but I thought it was way before our time… you didn't know it?"

"Biju?" Naruto scowled.

A pit of unease was growing in his gut and his heart was starting to beat a little faster, but he wasn't sure why. His body was already reacting to something that his mind hadn't quite connected together yet.

Sakura stared at him. She was starting to look as uneasy as he felt. "You… you do know why the Akatsuki want to capture you in the first place, right? I thought…" she fell silent.

Naruto nodded emphatically, feeling his heart beat somewhere in the vicinity of his throat. He couldn't speak, or else he thought he might choke on it.

"Because, you know…" she looked around helplessly, as if searching for a more delicate way of saying it. "That's what the Kyuubi is."

Naruto shot up out of his chair, staring at her in wide-eyed realization. He backed away and stumbled a little on the legs of the chair before he backed into the wall and couldn't go any farther. He pressed himself against it like he desperately hoped it would swallow him up.

Sakura looked almost as alarmed as she stood up too. "Naruto? I'm… I'm sorry, I thought that you already knew why they were… crap, I wouldn't have wanted you to find out like this…"

Naruto just shook his head. He wanted to explain to her that he knew exactly why Akatsuki was after him; that wasn't the problem. The problem was that, last he checked, the only people that knew the Kyuubi was sealed inside of him were all old enough to actually remember its attack on the village. There was even a law about it. Even he wasn't supposed to know about it!

And after he'd found out, part of him had been glad for the law, because most of the people who knew the truth couldn't trouble themselves to regard him as human. The problem was that the thing that always hurt him the most, even before he knew what it was, had always been locked up tight where it couldn't spread to anyone he actually gave a damn about. He knew that the handful of understanding adults in his life were rare exceptions to the rule.

And now, the hidden barb he always tried to cover up was apparently common knowledge, exposed for everyone to see? Naruto bit his lip and opened the window beside him with fumbling hands.

"Wait—Naruto!" Sakura called in alarm, but he was already out the window and running across the rooftops. She sighed.

"I hope I didn't just do what I think I just did," she told the unconscious Sai.

Naruto figured that Sakura would probably be coming after him soon, maybe even with Tsunade, and it was possible that both of them would be very angry. That was alright; he just needed a little
time for the reeling in his brain to stop.

How could he have just assumed that everyone was as much in the dark about him as in his time? The whole village had been leveled to the ground just to find him. That was bound to make it pretty obvious that he wasn't just a normal kid. People would have to have answers. They would need to know exactly why their homes were destroyed. They needed to label the source of their pain in order to be able to understand and move past it.

Jinchuuriki. He rolled that word over and over in his mind. That's what they called it. Sakura and the old lady had said there were others like him and that was what they were called. Really, that shouldn't have been a surprise either. He'd met someone else like him already, hadn't he? He'd never considered the wider implications of it, though, when he met Gaara. He'd just empathized so immediately and intensely with the other boy that all his focus had been on trying to show him that he didn't have to live his life in the hell called loneliness.

Naruto hopped down from the rooftop into a narrow gap between two buildings and leaned back against a wall, concentrating on breathing deeply with his eyes closed.

Gaara had been a frightening glimpse at what could have been. Everyone in Suna knew what he was. Even his own siblings were terrified of him. It had made Naruto all the more grateful that people his age didn't know; didn't get the chance to decide he was a monster before he could show that he wasn't.

My friends had the chance to know me first, he told himself, letting out a long and slow breath. They had years and years. It's not the same.

Naruto stood there leaning against the wall for what felt like a long time. Hiding in close, dark spaces was a habit left over from his childhood that he rarely did anymore. In general, he preferred to deal with stress by facing whatever was stressing him head-on. But when he needed time to soak something in, the instinct to hide so that no one could see the extent to which he had been affected would come back. He hated pity more than anything else.

The quietly bustling sounds of the street slowly came back as a measure of calm returned. Naruto knew that he could trust his friends. It was just… a minor shock to realize it so suddenly after walking around the whole day unaware that everyone knew about him. Even the first people he'd spoken to in this time had known, and they weren't even citizens of Konoha. Yet, they hadn't sounded disgusted when they talked about him. That had to count for something.

And Gaara? Did all this mean that he was in danger, too? That Suna was in danger? Or, could he have already been…

Naruto opened his eyes and looked up at the small rectangular patch of the night sky that he could see from down in the narrow alley. He had to know. No matter what Sakura said, he would poke around until somebody told him whether or not Gaara was safe.

Having something to focus his energy on made his head feel a lot clearer. Naruto sidled sideways until he was out in the street again—only to come face to face with a girl with long, dark hair and pale eyes looking at him curiously. She was slightly younger than him, and looked like an Academy student. How did she…?

The girl gave a small, polite bow, and when she looked at him again he abruptly realized it. Her large, pale eyes marked her as a Hyuuga. She had seen him skulking in his hiding place with her Byakugan.
"Naruto-san," she said with a hint of curiosity. "What were you doing back there?"

Naruto squinted at her and racked his memory, trying to figure out whether he knew this girl or not. Honestly, it was difficult; to him the people in her family all looked alike.

"Ah, um," he scratched his cheek, "nothing sneaky, I just needed to be alone to think for a moment. Did I… that is, do I know you? I'm not exactly…"

"I know; you're not the Naruto-san that everyone knows," she shook her head. "The Clan Heads and the Council have all been told about what has happened. By chance, I was there too. Word about it will probably spread pretty quickly in the village now."

"Oh," he said awkwardly.

"Anyway, to answer your question, no, you don't really know me," she said quickly. "Forgive me for being rude. Sometimes I get scolded for being too curious about things. I should have just passed by if you wanted to be left alone."

"Oh no, it's okay," he smiled. "I'm mostly over it now. Besides… seeing someone that looks down and wanting to help them, that's nothing to be scolded over. So, thanks."

"I was out of the village, too," the girl blurted out. "When it happened, I mean. My father and I were on a training journey and we just got back. So, I know how you feel, I mean, a little bit. When we left, everything was fine. When we came back, it was all gone. And also, I wanted to thank you for what you did. Father wants to thank you too, I think, but he feels ashamed for not being here. He thinks that he should have been the one—after neesan—"

"Wait, wait, wait," Naruto said, shaking his head. "I don't really get much of what you're saying, and it wasn't me that did anything, so no one has to thank me. But," he perked up, "if you wanna explain to me what happened in detail, that would be pretty cool."

"Hanabi-sama!" a Hyuuga man came trotting up, looking relieved. "Why did you wander off like that all of a sudden? Your father…" he drifted off when his eyes landed on Naruto.

Naruto almost flinched; after the thoughts that he'd been going over earlier, he half expected the man to give him the most disdainful look a Hyuuga could muster and pull the girl away from him. Instead, the man did something that would have been unprecedented in Naruto's own time—his face broke into a genuine smile and he bowed, dipping his head much lower than Hanabi had. From the look of the bandana he had tied around his head, he was a Branch House member.

"Naruto-san," he greeted warmly. "I would have thought you would be with the Hokage right now."

"I'm sorry, Ko, was Father angry?" Hanabi asked.

Ko shook his head. "No, but he will want us to head back soon. Things are very busy right now, and as the Head, he naturally has to juggle many village and Clan responsibilities. It will take some time to work through everything that has piled up in his absence."

Naruto hit his fist to his palm in realization. "You're Hinata's little sister!"

"Oh, yes. It was rude of me not to introduce myself," Hanabi gave a short bow. "Excuse me, we have to be going now. When you talk to her, please tell my sister that Father will be holding a clan meeting tomorrow, so when she comes home she should go see him." She turned and walked away. Ko gave Naruto a bow and followed after her.
"Okay…" Naruto said to himself, "but why would you think that I am going to—"

"Oiii! Naruto!" a familiar cocky voice called and Naruto turned to see Kiba and Akamaru ambling toward him, with Shino and Hinata flanking him on each side.

Naruto looked his friends over with interest. Now that he knew Kiba really was older, it was much more obvious. Shino… he was so covered up with clothes that if he hadn't been with the rest of his team, Naruto wasn't sure he would have known him. Hinata had grown her hair out and stood taller, and it wasn't just her literal height. The way she was standing made her look less curled into herself than before, though her feet were still a little pigeon-toed. The biggest difference, though, was that she was looking right at him, whereas before, she would have been looking at the ground near his feet. Currently her brow was crumpled in consternation in a way that clearly showed that she also knew the reason for his odd (for this time) appearance.

Kiba was looking at him with much more interest than he ever had before. "So, it's true then?" he said without any preamble. "You're actually from the past?"

"Probably," Naruto said, rubbing the back of his head. "I haven't ruled out that maybe I just ate too much before I went to bed last night and this is just a crazy dream."

"You know, a lot of people thought it was the worst idea of an infiltration attempt they ever heard and thought you should be arrested, instead," Kiba said seriously. "We just came from where your boarding house got halfway destroyed. Ino said someone already tried to get to you. I guess that backs your claims up."

"What, you don't believe me?"

"Nahhh… I knew what I smelled, and besides, Akamaru can always sense it when someone has evil intent, and he walked up to you right away. Man, only you could have something like this happen to you, though." He patted Naruto on the head in a way that he really didn't like, and with far more force than was necessary. "I should have realized something was going on, with how short you are."

"Piss off, Kiba," Naruto growled, ducking out from under his hand and glaring. "You might be a few years older than me now, but I can still take you on, any time!"

"He is just relieved," Shino said. "He thought that he might have been mistaken and led an enemy to the village. Even so, he still let his guard down. He depends on his nose too much."

"Get off it, Shino!" Kiba snarled. "Like you don't use your bugs for everything and like Hinata doesn't use her eyes for everything! We all have our own skills we depend on."

"Hey, don't put Hinata in the same category as you! She's definitely smarter than you are," Naruto snorted.

Hinata bit her lip. She seemed too worried to be quietly amused as she normally would be by their banter. She frowned and pressed the tips of her fingers together anxiously. "Are you alright, Naruto-kun?" her voice was remarkably steady, especially compared to the way he remembered it, but it was still very soft and quiet.

"Ah… yeah, I'm fine! You don't have to worry about me," he grinned reassuringly. "It's no big deal. All I have to do is figure out how to get back to my own time, and everything will be okay. The only hard part is figuring out the weirdness of this time. Everyone seems so grown-up and amazing. I really want to know more about myself, but no one seems to want to tell me anything."

"He'll be fine. He's too simple to even let an attack from the Akatsuki get him down," Kiba retorted.
Then he sidled next to Hinata and elbowed her in the side. "Hey, you'll want to be careful, it looks like your little sister is moving in on your territory."

"Eh?" Hinata turned red and suddenly regained some of her old tongue-tiedness. "T-that's not—I mean—they're both only—"

"Oh yeah, Hinata, your sister said something about there being a Hyuuga meeting thing," Naruto said, remembering suddenly. "You're supposed to go talk to your dad about it or something."

"A…ah. Thank you," Hinata said, nodding.

Naruto tilted his head. "Um… is there a reason why she wanted me to tell you instead of telling you herself? Are you guys having a fight or something?"

"What? No, nothing like that. She probably…” Hinata fidgeted a little. "She probably just wanted to make sure that we got to meet. The two of you have never spoken, but she does admire you, in her own way. She was with Father at the meeting of Clan Heads earlier when Hokage-sama told them about your situation. There was talk of you being sent somewhere to hide, and she didn't really agree. Of course, it really wasn't her place to say anything about it one way or the other. She wasn't really even supposed to be there in the first place."

"Huh," Naruto said. " Weird."

"D'you know where you'll be going yet?" Kiba asked.

"No… I don't even really understand why I have to leave anyway," Naruto grumbled. "Kakashi-sensei said it was just because it's easier to find me here… and I guess he's right, since I was here for less than a day before Itachi came after me—"

"What?" Hinata gasped, and Shino raised his eyebrows.

"Oh," Naruto said. "I thought Ino told you?"

"All she said was that someone tried to kidnap you and the house was damaged in the struggle," Hinata said. "Was it really him?"

"I thought that guy was dead," Kiba said.

"I know what I saw," Naruto said heatedly. "Ask Sakura-chan, she was there. She's the one that smashed our boarding house in order to escape from his genjutsu," he paused, weighing his words carefully. "Why is it that people think he's dead, anyway? Was it… I mean, did… did Sasuke finally kill him?"

Saying this thought aloud gave him a slight chill; to imagine Sasuke killing his own older brother was a little difficult for him. He didn't doubt Sasuke's determination… especially after seeing the encounter he'd had with Itachi last time… but it was still surreal to imagine that he could have already fulfilled his ambition in this time. It was even harder to imagine when he had seen for himself just how much in another league Itachi was from him or Sasuke. To pull it off, Sasuke would have had to improve at an insane rate in the intervening years.

"That's what I heard," Kiba said. "But I guess there could always be a mistake. They definitely fought. We didn't get to see it, though. Our team and yours tried to go to where it was happening, but that masked bastard got in the way and kept us from interfering. By the time we got there, it was just a bunch of rubble. There weren't any bodies, so I dunno, maybe he did get out of it alive. I don't suppose anyone's bothered trying to ask Sasuke if he's sure he killed him or not."
"K-kiba-kun, be careful," Hinata said.

"Oh yeah…" Kiba frowned. "Er… well, you know. That's not the kind of thing you just come out and ask someone, especially someone like him. You know how touchy he can be," he rubbed the back of his head awkwardly.

"Ok…" Naruto said, slightly perplexed. "I'll just ask Sakura-chan about it when I get the chance, I guess. Her and Baachan seem to think that Itachi is dead and it's just some kind of technique that makes it seem like he's alive again. Ah, damn it!" he put his face in his hands and groaned. "I forgot, she's probably looking for me right now. I'm kind of supposed to be waiting with her at the hospital. I guess I'd better be going back before she finds me and turns my insides into my outsides."

"That would probably be wise," a dryly amused voice said, and everyone started when a cat-masked ANBU appeared in their midst. Naruto vaguely recognized her mask, as well as her long, purple hair. He'd had enough clashes with the ANBU in his life that he knew several of them by sight. "Did you really think that you would be allowed to wander off alone?"

"No," Naruto said honestly. "I thought Sakura-chan was going to come after me and punch my head in."

"Ah," she said. "I don't know about the last part, but she did want to come after you. However, we convinced her to let us handle it."

Naruto glanced behind her and saw two more ANBU standing on rooftops at a distance. Undoubtedly they were scanning the area for potential threats even as Naruto and the purple-haired lady stood there talking. He fleetingly wondered if this was what his stay in the future was going to be like from now on.

"I'll talk to you guys later," he said glumly.

All of them, even Hinata, looked noticeably disgruntled at the abrupt end to the conversation.

"It was cool seeing you!" Kiba called after him as they walked away, Cat poised her hand behind Naruto's back in a half-protective, half-ushering motion. "We should totally have a rematch from the Exams! I'll definitely be able to show you a few new tricks."

"Nah," Naruto called back. "I could still beat you as easily as I can fart." He snickered as Kiba's indignant growls chased him down the street. Cat chuckled. Naruto's other bodyguards didn't join them; instead, they leapt across the rooftops, running slightly ahead and flanking them on each side of the street.

Now that he was being escorted by ANBU and no longer disguised, he attracted looks from many of the people on the street. There was almost pure darkness outside the sphere of lamps and storefronts, but walking right through the heart of it offered little cover.

The looks he attracted, though, were not the same looks he was used to. It was true that in his time, the hostility had dimmed down greatly since he became a shinobi and subsequently defeated Neji in the Exams. But even then, it had mostly been replaced with indifference and the occasional curiosity.

Quite a few people were looking at him curiously now, while some looked concerned; some people even smiled fondly at him. He felt a little self-conscious that he was still wearing what amounted to his bedclothes. They would probably have to do something about that soon, since he was too small to fit into his own clothes from this time.

"So…" he said awkwardly as the hospital came in sight. "You guys were guarding us the whole
"Yes," Cat said. "Though another attack so soon is unlikely, neither the Hokage nor the Council want to take any chances by assuming the village is reliably safe, since the majority of our former infrastructure has been demolished. It was that relaxed assumption that led to tonight's incident."

"So I guess… you heard our conversation? It's true, then? I mean… everyone really knows about me now?"

She knew that he didn't mean about him coming from the past. "Yes… they do. It was necessary, once the Akatsuki started taking serious action against the world's Jinchuuriki. They had to know why you were being hunted, and why it was so important that Akatsuki be stopped."

"Was it... how was it? Just tell me. And don't try to say you can't," Naruto said, not looking at her.

"Everyone accepts you, Naruto-kun," she answered in an uncharacteristically gentle tone for an ANBU. "You're the village hero. Your old schoolmates in particular have collectively said 'so what?' to the news. The older generation already knew, and the younger ones followed the lead of your contemporaries. If someone from Akatsuki came after you in the street right now, they wouldn't have just us ANBU to contend with. They'd have to fight through everyone down to the civilian street sweeper with their broom, just to get to you."

He felt warmth rising to his cheeks. Okay, that had to be an exaggeration, but it felt good nevertheless.

"Can't you tell me something about my older self?" he asked hopefully.

"It would be difficult to say. We aren't personally acquainted."

At his disappointed look, she added, "But from what I can tell, you haven't changed very much, and what change there has been has only been for the better. Just like all shinobi, you've had to learn how to go through loss and be stronger for it, rather than letting it drag you down. On that point, you have grown up admirably."

"It doesn't always go that way in our line of work, you know. Everyone has a breaking point, where it is all too much to take in at once. That is partly why we do not like to tell you too many details."

They walked into the hospital, which looked relatively dim and subdued, though a few people were sitting in the waiting room. They bypassed the desk completely and made their way up the stairs to Sai's room.

"Someone once said that all shinobi must confront hatred. This is especially true for Jinchuuriki, but that does not mean that the experiences that you have been made to live necessarily prepare you to do that well. That challenge requires not only a strong character and strength of will, but maturity and time. That is the kind of strength that you grow into, and it is shaped by pain and struggle."

Cat left him at the door to Sai's room with assurances that he could call one of them if he or Sakura needed anything. Sighing, he went inside.

Sakura looked up from a book she was reading. She didn't look angry, like had only half-jokingly suspected, but deeply apprehensive.

"I'm sorry," she said immediately. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay, Sakura-chan," he interrupted. He walked over and made to sit across from her again, but
paused when he saw a drawstring bag sitting in the chair.

"One of the ANBU went and collected some of your things," Sakura said. "I think most of it will be taken to the Hokage Tower until we get moved to a new building… or whatever else they decide to do with you," she said in a joking tone.

He opened the drawstring bag and saw his Team 7 photograph laying on top. *Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi* was below that. Was it the only book they could find, or did they somehow know it was his older self's favorite? Below that were a few shirts, and what looked like an updated version of his old nightcap. It was deep orange and had two oval-shaped, golden eyes with flat-looking irises on it.

"We'll both be spending the night here, since our apartments are destroyed anyway," Sakura explained. "They didn't bring any of your pants since you most likely wouldn't fit them. The shirts are a little big but they should be fine for sleeping in. A lot of salvaged clothing has ended up here at the hospital for charity, so I grabbed a few things for you," she gestured at the bed across from Sai's, where a few small piles of folded clothing lay.

"We're sleeping here?" Naruto said in dismay as he dragged his bag over to look at what she'd brought. There were a couple of pairs of shorts like the ones he was wearing, as well as a few pairs of shinobi pants and one pair of striped pajama bottoms. There was also a pair of standard-issue sandals, except they were black instead of blue like his usual ones. And then there were some plain T-shirts that were in his own size.

"Sorry about that. They have this room secured now, so you're not going anywhere else tonight at least. I'm kind of glad… this way I can look after my patients and you, too," she smiled.

"I don't need looking after," Naruto grumbled, twitching the curtains around his bed and changing from his old bedclothes into new ones. "This is all way overboard, Sakura-chan. I'm a ninja."

"I know," she conceded. "And under normal circumstances, I'm sure everyone would be happy to just leave a ninja to face the murderous S-ranked organization trying to kidnap them by themselves. But with you there's more at stake than just yourself."

Naruto murmured an indistinct stream of curses and grumblings as he pulled on the proper pajama bottoms Sakura had scrounged for him. He set his sandals down below the edge of the curtain and packed the straw tabi carefully in the bag. He would return them to Shinji, if he was ever allowed out of the village ever again.

He put on one of his older self's shirts to sleep in. It felt more comfortable than any of the other clothes from strangers; it was his favorite style and it smelled familiar. It was one of the few tangible connections to someone that seemed like a bizarre abstraction in his mind. It was sort of like sneakily stealing clothes from an older brother behind his back. He also put on the nightcap.

Naruto pulled the curtain back and crawled into bed with his book and turned on the little bedside lamp. He may have to stay here, but he was determined to stay awake until Tsunade came back like she said she would. He would not be left out of hearing any updates she brought to Sakura.

Once settled in, he looked over and saw Sakura grinning at him.

"That cap is so cute! I haven't seen you wear one in a long time," she said.

"What? I don't wear this?" Naruto said, surprised, tugging at the end of the cap. "Why? The older me must not have as good tastes as I thought if he wouldn't want to wear something this cool."
"Hinata-chan made that for you," Sakura said. "She had based it off of your… ah, nevermind."

"What?" Naruto said suspiciously.

"Er—toad summons," Sakura supplied lamely. At his dubious look she hurried on, "At any rate, I think you—he felt like it was too nice to use; he didn't want to mess it up when she worked hard to make it."

"Pfft. Well, it's awesome and I'm gonna wear it. I don't care if he gets mad," Naruto pulled the covers up to his chest and leaned back against the stack of pillows. "Isn't Tsunade-baachan supposed to go see what Kakashi-sensei found out? And why doesn't he come here?"

"I don't know; I've been out of the loop right beside you, remember? But Koharu-san did say they were going to the autopsy room. My guess is that wherever they went, there was a death that was unusual for some reason, and they can't make any conclusions until they figure it out. At least, that's what Shishou said when Koharu-san asked why she was taking her time here instead of going to talk to Kakashi-sensei."

"Oh yeah. I remember that," Naruto mumbled. "Does that mean Akatsuki didn't just attack here today?"

"Maybe," Sakura said cautiously. "We'll just have to wait and see what Kakashi-sensei or Tsunade-sama says."

Naruto gripped the blankets on his lap. "Will I ever actually be told anything, though?"

"Well… I guess it depends."

"Great," Naruto grumbled, rolled on his side, and opened his book. "Itachi shows up for me again, my room gets smashed, I have to sleep in the hospital even though I'm not sick, I'm covered in ANBU, and I don't even know if I've screwed something up by getting someone killed that shouldn't have been."

"Whatever happened, or whatever happens, you know it's not your fault," Sakura said. "Don't forget that. It's someone else doing this, and it's not fair to you."

Naruto didn't answer right away. No matter how many times people told him the future was none of his business, it wouldn't change how he felt. It went beyond just the implications it held for his own reality. No matter where he was, when he was, he could not be indifferent. He could not stand back from the things right in front of him.

Naruto had the most practice in involving himself when others didn't want to include him. He had it down to an art form. They really should have known better.

"Okay, tell me one thing and I promise not to bother you again about it for the rest of the night," Naruto rolled over and peered over the book at Sakura.

"If I can, but you know I can't really promise that."

Naruto scowled. "Okay. Um, what you were saying before. About the… Jinchuuriki," he forced the word out. It was still hard to comprehend that there was a term for it, like it was an experience that could be reduced to just a few syllables.

Sakura stiffened and looked at him uncertainly.
"First of all, you don't have to worry about having told me anything I didn't already know; well, except that I didn't know the words for it. And I'm not mad that you know about it, either," Naruto sat up and draped an elbow over his drawn up knees to look at her seriously. "I'm really… I mean, when I was out there… I don't know how it happened, but I'm really relieved that everyone knows now and it's all okay.

"What you said about all the Jinchuuriki in the world being in trouble. There's only one person I've ever known like me, and he wasn't someone that struck me as having a lot of people that would be willing to stand up for him."

Naruto tried to swallow the heavy lump settling in his throat. He halfway didn't want to ask, because he had a very bad feeling about the answer. After all, she'd said most of them were already taken. A boy whose own people had already tried to dispose of him would have no chance; Naruto couldn't help but think this was one of those 'pains and struggles' Cat mentioned.

"You mean Gaara," Sakura said.

Naruto nodded. "What happened to him? Akatsuki went for him too, didn't they?"

"Well…" she looked reluctant, like she wanted to find a way to steer the conversation away from the topic.

"Just tell me if he's safe," Naruto pleaded.

"Hm. Safe? I don't think any of us are really safe," Sakura folded her hands in her lap. "But… he is alive. He is well. And…" she smiled. "I can at least say that his village accepts him now, too."

Naruto stared at her disbelievingly. Then he grinned widely. "Are you serious?"

"Very. He's mellowed out a lot since meeting you. He even has fangirls in his village now. I've seen it," Sakura laughed.

"That might be the craziest thing I've heard since coming here!" Naruto said. "You're seriously not just messing with me right now?"

"Nope! I swear."

"Aw, now I feel silly for worrying so much," Naruto laughed and lay back against his pillows, relieved.

"You had good reason to. Well, that's that. Remember what you said: no more pestering me for information tonight."

"Argh… fine," Naruto grumbled. He still wanted to find out what she knew about Itachi's possibly-dead, possibly-not-dead status. Whatever had happened between the Uchiha brothers or how reluctant Sasuke might be to divulge it, he knew that if anyone was privy to that information, it would be his team.

Tsunade was the other obvious choice, so Naruto resolved to be patient and wait for her or Kakashi to come by. If not, there was always tomorrow. And the next day. And however long he had to be here.

"I'm not going to sleep," he informed Sakura petulantly. "Not till Baachan comes back or Kakashi-sensei tells us what they found like he said he would."
"Okay, you do that."

"I will."

"Good."

"It is good."

"Right."

Naruto opened his book and narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously over the edge of it, before shifting his gaze to page one with a resolute air.

He was asleep by the next hour. Sakura crossed the room and carefully picked the open book on his chest out of the hand curled loosely over it. She marked his place and set it on the bedside table before shutting off the bedside lamp.

It was just as well, because neither Tsunade nor Kakashi came back to the room that night.

News from Anko's Infiltration and Reconnaissance team brought a telling update on the movements of one Yakushi Kabuto. Evidence was rapidly falling into place that he had an agenda separate from the supposed alliance with Madara; one that involved the Reanimation Jutsu Orochimaru had perfected.

His motives were unknown, and it was unclear whether his suspicious behavior had anything to do with Naruto's appearance out of time. Like Orochimaru before him, he was becoming the wildcard; an agent of chaos that liked to make waves in the world. They, along with others of the Konoha elite, spent the better part of the night scrambling to compile everything they knew into a coherent theory Tsunade could take to the coming meeting of Kage in Kumogakure. Everything that had happened moved up the date of that meeting significantly.
The same day the boundaries of time were definitively shattered, near sunset when the ANBU investigation team was meeting with its backup to organize the transport of some twenty bodies, a hooded figure was racing through the woods like all the demons in hell were after him.

The surrounding area was quiet save for the hollow thunk of the tree branches as he jumped from one to the next, and the blazingly orange horizon made the tree trunks ahead stand out in stark, inky blackness. Despite the fact that his pace suggested great urgency, his relaxed posture did not. He wore a voluminous burgundy cloak that had a hood decorated like a snake's head, and the visible lower half of his face was cracked into a manic grin. Though his physical appearance had lately gone through quite a bit of changing and warping, it was definitely the one and only Yakushi Kabuto.

'Definitely' and 'one and only' meant in the loosest possible way, of course. Simultaneously searching for and crushing his own identity was beginning to drive him slightly mad. It was a pity that he probably would not realize its full extent until it was too late.

Kabuto came to a halt as the air shimmered and swirled above a thick branch in the tree in front of him, materializing into his recent ally, 'Tobi'. The creepy plant-like one emerged from the tree's trunk.

"Aaah, you found me," Kabuto said with a mock pout. "What gave me away?"

"The spores," the black half of Zetsu said. "They don't just drain chakra. We used them to track you."

"Oh, that would explain it, then," Kabuto said pleasantly. "They're for all kinds of things besides meddling with other people's experiments. I see."

"Zetsu recorded the whole thing," Tobi said, barely contained rage seeping through his voice. "Had I known you intended to undermine our partnership right after it was made, I would have killed you from the beginning and gotten it over with."

"You misunderstand. It's nothing to do with you," Kabuto said, giving out a strange giggle through his nose. His right arm twitched sporadically. Overall, he looked a bit more unraveled than usual. "All that matters is the experiment. Knowing what I could do; what change I could bring to the world with my own two hands!" His voice grew louder and he shouted for no reason, "That is it! It is just a side project. It doesn't concern you."

"What did you do?" Tobi snapped, ignoring Kabuto's bizarre behavior. "Zetsu says that you made the Kyuubi boy appear using a seal. From where I'm standing, it looks like you had every intention of taking the bijuu for yourself, which concerns me very much."

"And what's more, he was just a little brat," Black Zetsu added. "Explain."

"It was definitely his chakra, bijuu and all," White Zetsu said interestedly. "So how did you bring him though time, Kabuto-san?"

"I was going to tell you all about it," Kabuto said. "You didn't have to crash my experiment and steal him from me, you know. Now he's holed up in Konoha and I'll have to fetch him the old-fashioned way. I'll help you with your war, like I promised. That hasn't changed. Just stay out of my way when it comes to this little Naruto-kun."

Tobi's one visible Sharingan eye narrowed behind the mask. "I thought the agreement was that you
would help in exchange for Sasuke."

"Things are different now," Kabuto bowed his head, his shoulders shaking in silent chuckles.

"How so?"

Kabuto grimaced and grabbed his left arm with his right. He appeared to be having a fierce internal struggle. He gasped and pitched off balance, nearly throwing himself off the tree branch, but then slowly steadied, reaching out and digging his pale, scaly fingers into the tree trunk. When he looked back up, he looked less insane and a lot calmer.

"I apologize," he said steadily. "I'm not completely well at the moment. I am struggling with the fragment of Orochimaru-sama's consciousness embedded in mine. Let me explain it to you from the beginning, so that you can see that I have no intention of going back on our agreement. No secrets."

"By all means," Tobi said dryly.

"It was right after I first put the fragment of Orochimaru-sama into my system," Kabuto began. He grinned and his glasses flashed. "I found an unfamiliar research journal in the same hideout near Konoha that I used today, tucked away among the research that Orochimaru-sama did while trying to perfect the Edo Tensei. Of course, all I wanted was to advance my own efforts in improving the jutsu, but it was a curious little diversion, and it caught my attention. The journal contained a theory of using a similar method to summon and bind someone here from another time, rather than from the world of the dead. It even came with a hypothetical seal formula for enacting it, though it was incomplete. Originally, I was only interested in it for what it revealed to me about the Edo Tensei. Comparing the formulas helped to increase my understanding of the underlying theory of summoning and binding human life energy, and how to bring it under the caster's personal control.

"But my mind kept drifting back to that incomplete jutsu. There were two principal problems with it. First, there was a large chance that it would destroy the caster, since it requires a cost of life energy to use, the way that a true Reanimation does. Putting aside the cost, though, one has to be able to use that kind of advanced manipulation in the first place. The ability to create physical reality from imagination is almost unheard of, and it typically requires high-level dōjutsu, which I am sadly lacking in."

"You mean like the advanced techniques of the Sharingan or Rinnegan," Tobi said. "But why would that be necessary to summon someone already alive, when Edo Tensei, though a lesser reincarnation technique, doesn't?"

"It is precisely because they are already alive. With Edo Tensei, it is just a matter of moving them from one world to another. Orochimaru-sama's immortality technique, the same; he just moves from one vessel to another. Ordinary chakra can also be split among any number of bodies, and that includes the bijuu, whose beings are just large masses of chakra; as you know, the beasts themselves can even be split up and put back together again. Unlike chakra, which is remade continually in one's chakra system like the blood, one's own life energy is finite. It is possible to use portions of it, but at extreme cost to yourself. Naruto-kun is already alive in this time. The only way to summon a living earlier version of him, rather than a mere echo or chakra construct, is to get that spark of life elsewhere."

"Then, a living sacrifice?" Tobi guessed. He paused thoughtfully. "You mean it is like Nagato's Shouten no Jutsu, that attaches someone else's chakra to a living body and forces it to take on the user's form and abilities?"

"Close," Kabuto said, pushing up his glasses. "There's also the aspect of navigating the time stream
so that the form you want appears. That part is actually much harder than reaching someone in the world of the dead, you know. There are a few other differences, but I won't bore you with the details right now. More importantly, you should know that I made all of these discoveries very gradually, and I am being sincere when I say that it wasn't my intention to take it this far. I just thought of it as a side curiosity. I tinkered with it even as I continued on with my original plans. What I failed to realize was the extent to which that curiosity was motivated by Orochimaru-sama's influence.

"Around the same time that I completed the seal formula and jutsu theory, the bit of Orochimaru-sama's consciousness was starting to physically change my appearance. I didn't think the two things had anything to do with one another then, but that was the precise moment I started losing my perfect control. Soon after, I had a confrontation with Naruto-kun and his team. During that confrontation, it very suddenly occurred to me that he would be the most wonderfully interesting person to test my newly completed jutsu on. I stole a capsule of his blood under the cover of a short fight with the team, and then escaped. I had thought at the time that those were my choices alone, but I now believe that I have been manipulated into doing all of this, including targeting Naruto-kun specifically. I do not know why."

"You kept it a secret from us the whole time, but now you want to say that it wasn't really you?" White Zetsu said, and Tobi crossed his arms in a skeptical pose.

"I still have every intention of cooperating with you, as agreed," Kabuto said smoothly. His face spasmed on the left side and he clutched at it with a grunt. "It's just that this consciousness is a little stronger than I anticipated, and it seems to have other plans."

"This is ridiculous," Tobi said bluntly. "You mean to say that Orochimaru isn't actually dead?"

Kabuto smirked widely behind his hand, "Oh, he is very much alive. I am finding that out more and more. But mastering this fragment and winning the fight for my body will make me even stronger. Orochimaru-sama's incredible force of will is truly awe-inspiring. All the more reason to pit myself against it, with my own existence on the line!"

"Good for you and all that, but how are we supposed to trust you when you're in such an unpredictable state? If we can't rely on you, there's no point in joining forces," Tobi said, annoyed.

Kabuto began his mad giggling again, dipping his head and nearly doubling over in mirth.

"Can't we just kill him?" Black Zetsu deadpanned.

Kabuto stilled himself again, and raised his head to crack a wide, mad grin at them. "Listen and I will tell you how. We will just make a new arrangement."

When Naruto awoke in a hospital bed, the first thing that crossed his mind was to wonder how badly he'd been hurt to end up here without remembering why. Then he saw Sai sleeping in the bed across from his, eerie pale skin reflecting the morning sun and lighting up his unconscious face, and it all came back to him.

"Damn it, I fell asleep!" he blurted out loud, throwing his covers off and sitting up. Looking around, Sai was the only other person in the room, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Naruto got up and pulled the curtains around his bed and dressed hurriedly. The choice of clothing was paltry, but Sakura had done a good job choosing the right sizes, at least. With dismay, he realized that he didn't have any fresh underwear. Should he ask…? No, that was where he was putting his foot down. He would NOT let Sakura choose his underwear for him. Ignoring the flush of embarrassment he felt rising to his face, Naruto quickly decided that would be a good excuse to leave. Now he just had to
escape before anyone realized he was awake.

He had just about reached the door before someone opened it from the other side. It was Kakashi, smiling at him in the most irritatively knowing way imaginable.

"You're in a hurry. Going somewhere?"

"Oh, hi, Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto said in an over-bright voice, backpedaling quickly. "I was just going to go find out where they keep the donated clothes and stuff. Sakura-chan got some for me last night but she forgot to get me any underwear. To be honest, I'm glad. I don't think a girl would be really good at picking underwear for a guy. You gotta have some room to move, you know what I'm saying? Well, I guess I'll see you—"

"Nope," a very unimpressed-looking Tsunade steered him by the shoulders back into the room when he tried to sidle past Kakashi into the hall. "You can worry about that later. We have things to do, and we don't have all day. I would have thought you'd appreciate us coming to visit."

"I do, if you're gonna fill me in on things," Naruto stopped resisting and looked back and forth between Tsunade and Kakashi.

"Yeah," Kakashi said. "I don't feel like repeating myself, though, so I'm going to wait until Sakura gets back," he settled against a nice comfortable patch of wall and pulled out *Icha Icha Tactics*.

"Sakura's just checking up on some other patients right now, so don't look so sour," Tsunade said. "I need to give you a look-over anyway to see what effects, if any, the time travel had on you physically. Have a seat," she indicated Naruto's hastily made bed.

Naruto sat down, growing uneasy. He hated medical examinations. "I'm not going to have to take off my pants, am I?"

Tsunade sighed. "No. The main thing is making sure your seal and chakras are all okay. We didn't really get to have a good look at the seal last time, so you'll need to take off your shirt. The pants can stay."

Relieved, Naruto peeled off his shirt and Tsunade pulled a small wheeled cart over to the side of the bed. It had a machine on it that he recognized from the regular checkups that were mandatory for active duty shinobi. It resembled a lie-detector machine, with arms that skated over paper according to what it measured, only it was a device that measured chakra. It *could* be used to detect lies, as one's chakra usually spiked unnaturally when lying—a fear reaction—but in medical situations it was mostly used to make sure everything was normal with the chakra network. It could also be used to confirm someone's identity, since everyone's chakra makeup was unique. Naruto suspected the test was for *that* reason as much as it was to make sure he was healthy and sound. Good; it would prove once and for all that he wasn't an imposter.

Knowing the drill, he extended his hands and Tsunade put a suction cup on the center of each palm, where chakra was most easily manipulated and could be easily brought to the surface.

"Alright," Tsunade said, straightening up. "Let's see what's going on with you," she flipped the 'on' switch and the suction cups began to hum and buzz, sending a slightly numb sensation into his hands.

Naruto watched as the machine's little arms drifted back and forth in a bunch of squiggly lines that he couldn't comprehend. Suddenly, he felt very nervous. If this thing could prove his identity by coming out normal, the opposite was also true. What if there was really something wrong? Immediately he thought of how slippery his chakra had been to control yesterday. What would he do if it said he *was*
an imposter? How could he stand up for his innocence against an impartial machine?

"Calm down," Tsunade said, frowning over the paper. "This thing is supposed to measure your chakra flow in a state of rest, and you're gearing up like you're ready to jump out of the nearest window." She raised an eyebrow. She was making a lighthearted reference to the night before when he had done just that, but he was too nervous and didn't realize it until after the conversation was over (at which point he felt sheepish and was glad to have missed it).

"Sorry," Naruto said, taking a deep breath. "I just remembered something. When I first woke up here, I could hardly feel my chakra. I tried running up a tree, but I just fell off. It started coming back pretty quickly, but I still had a really hard time controlling it. It was like, um..." he tried to think of how to describe it, "It was like when we first started learning how to use chakra at the Academy, and I had to concentrate really hard to get it to do what I wanted it to do. Normally, all of my usual jutsu I can do without even thinking about it. I did still manage to do a Rasengan last night, though. Even though it was kind of a sloppy one..."

"Hm," Tsunade inspected the report printing out at the end of all the squiggly lines. She turned the machine off and tore the sheet from its perforated edge. Naruto pulled the suction cups off and flexed his hands, trying to get some feeling back into them.

"The seal looks completely normal from here," Kakashi commented. He had at some point drifted over near them. "What does the report say?"

"There does seem to be something disrupting his chakra, but it's very faint."

"Like I said, it HAS gotten a lot better," Naruto offered. "I barely even notice it now."

"I don't think there's anything surprising about that, all things considered. We have no idea how the time travel may have affected you. I think this is pointless, but everyone wants data on you, so..." Tsunade picked up another sheet from the wheeled cart and held the two side by side. "Fluctuations aside, your chakra's makeup matches your records at this age perfectly, except..." her eyebrows scrunched together in confusion.

"What? What is it?" Naruto asked worriedly.

"There's an extra thread in your chakra's makeup that I've never seen," Tsunade put the two papers down and put her finger on the same line from each sheet; the old one's line was completely flat, but his new report spiked on the corresponding line. "These bottom lines have to do with the chakra's composition. It shows what elements you can use, kekkei genkai, or anything else thrown into the mix, like the chakra you have sealed in you that isn't native to you. There are inhuman elements. See? The Kyuubi's line is right above that, so it proves that his presence is still there. But he doesn't account for this other line."

"So what is it then? A-aliens?"

Tsunade rolled her eyes. "No. It isn't aliens," she pursed her lips for a moment. "Actually, I've seen this kind of pattern before on someone else." She blinked and her expression suddenly cleared. "Huh."

"Anything to worry about?" Kakashi asked, trying to sound casual, but watching very attentively.

"It's a trace of plant-like energy. Yamato has this same line, except that his is much stronger and more refined. More regular. It's the chakra type affiliated with the mokuton kekkei genkai."

"Eh?" Naruto looked terribly confused, though it was more because he couldn't understand why
there would be a change, and less because 'mokuton' meant anything to him. "Last time I checked, I don't have any kekkei genkai."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Kakashi asked. He'd actually fully lowered his book to stare at the report.

"I can only guess," Tsunade said. "I wasn't there to observe it directly, but when Akatsuki attacked at the summit, one of them showed the ability to produce parasite-like spores that could absorb and disrupt chakra, and track someone they were put on. According to the report the Mizukage made, that power did seem to be based on the Shodai's mokuton affinity. Maybe that would explain why it's showing up, and why your chakra was disrupted," she told Naruto, "Sometime, somehow, you could have had some of those spores put on you."

"What should I do?"

"I don't like them potentially being able to track you," She thought for a moment, tapping her foot against the linoleum. "If the disruption effect was caused by the spores, and it has already mostly worn off, we might assume that the spores are temporary and will soon be completely inert. We'll do another test later tonight to see if there's any change between now and then. In the meantime, you should take a shower. If we're really lucky, it'll be as simple as washing the spores off."

"Aw, I already dressed for the day and everything."

Tsunade ignored him, busy herself with the machine. She rolled it back to its spot and came back with a small capsule with a needle on the end, which Naruto eyed warily.

"The last thing is I need to get a blood sample for the lab," she explained, and Naruto reluctantly held out his arm. He barely felt the thin needle as she stuck it in his vein. "We'll be able to do some more accurate tests on that. If the spores are in your blood, at least we'll know. And hopefully, everything else will match up enough to count as proof of your identity that I can take with me to the meeting of the Kage."

Naruto gave a puzzled frown. "I'm not trying to agree with that old lady or anything, but why do you have to tell them about me? I thought all the Kage pretty much hated each other in that smile-to-your-face, stab-you-in-the-back kind of way. Is there about to be a Chuunin Exams or something? Sakura-chan made it sound like we weren't participating in one since the village was destroyed."

Tsunade pressed a square of gauze to the small hole on Naruto's skin; an almost pathetically unnecessary gesture, since the nearly invisible puncture sealed up within seconds. The boy would never make a blood donor; he would probably clot up the tube by a third of a pint.

"Since all the world's Jinchuuriki have been threatened, the five Great Hidden Villages have formed an alliance in order to take out the Akatsuki and protect the remaining Jinchuuriki," she explained. "That is why they have to know, because part of the alliance agreement is for everyone to share anything they know about the Akatsuki and what their plans might be. Something like this is too big to justifiably keep a secret. Regardless of what certain people might think," she added wryly. "Cooperation is the only way that the alliance has any meaning. We are stronger when we stand together."

"I like that," Naruto grinned, "Am I gonna get to go with you to the meeting?"

"No," Tsunade said bluntly, wiping the smile off his face. "You're not leaving the village until the Alliance decides what to do with you. Besides, the meeting is going to be held in Kumogakure in the Lightning Country, and it's best if the two versions of you, if there are two, stay far apart from one
another. There hasn't been an answer from Gai and the others yet, which could just be because they are at sea and taking the scenic route, but I don't like not knowing how things stand. I might go to investigate myself if there still hasn't been an answer by the time I get to Kumo. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I should only be gone a few days, since we will be taking the direct route. Until I get back, you will have to stay here in the hospital with Sai."

"Baachan, how could you do this to me?" Naruto said, dismayed. "You know I can't stand being cooped up in the hospital—and this time, I'm not hurt or sick or anything!"

"If an injury is all you need to get you to stay here..." Tsunade began threateningly, cracking her knuckles.

"No... no, that's fine," he said hurriedly.

"Good. I promise that when I come back, we'll have worked something out, and the chances are good that you will get to travel outside of the village. And you won't be alone, either. If you have to be sent somewhere, I'll send you with people that you know," she patted his knee and stood, walking to the door. "The floor's yours, Kakashi. I'll send Sakura in."

Kakashi put his book away and knelt beside Naruto. He brought up a hand and touched his glowing fingertips lightly on the seal. It reappeared at his touch, responding to the probing, invading chakra. Naruto squirmed as it tickled slightly.

"It's all okay, right?" he asked, being unable to discern anything from the small visible patch of Kakashi's face.

"It's exactly how it was before," Kakashi said, pulling his hand back. "Really, I don't think we need any other proof that you're yourself. It would be nearly impossible to replicate your seal anyway; it would be really impossible to replicate how it was before it was reset, since only a handful of people even know when it was reset, and how, and why."

"Let me guess; you can't let me know that either, right?" Naruto grumbled, pulling his shirt back on. To his surprise, Kakashi seemed to be genuinely considering it. His brow was furrowed thoughtfully.

"I mean, if only a few people know anyway, they wouldn't know if you told me," Naruto said quickly, sensing weakness. "C'mon, Kakashi-sensei. I'll keep my mouth shut about it. I promise. It's my seal, so I have a right to know."

"Yeah, I think you do," Kakashi said seriously. "Now that you've seen what's happened to the village, I bet you've decided to change history the second you get a chance, regardless of what any of us say, and by using any means necessary. Am I right?"

"Well... well... what would you do in the same situation?" Naruto said defensively.

"I'm not saying I blame you; I'm saying that it might be impossible for anyone to hope at this point that nothing will change. Even if you tried to keep it the same, you probably couldn't. So it might be good to warn you about that incident, at least."

Naruto nodded, not daring to speak lest Kakashi change his mind.

"Your seal is designed so that the Kyuubi's chakra slowly merges with yours over time. It also lets you use its power in life-threatening situations. You've seen how powerful it can be."

"Yeah. I can understand why people would want to steal it."
"Just be careful. The seal will start to weaken on you very soon. If you make it back, I have no doubt that you'll want to be stronger right away to change things, but you can't draw on that power for that reason, okay? The more you use it, the more quickly the seal will corrode, and I really don't know what the result would be if it happened too early."

"What?"

"The seal was close to breaking," Kakashi said quietly. "It was steadily weakening anyway. But when you were fighting against Pein, your rage nearly broke it entirely. The Kyuubi was taking over to a point where you couldn't stop it. I didn't get to see it, but they say your body was completely replaced with its form; it was just one step away from being released, and if it had been, you probably would have died, and the Kyuubi would be out in the world."

Naruto's throat constricted tightly. He remembered vividly how scary it had been to see Gaara transform almost entirely into his beast's form. That visceral, wild state was something he never wanted to experience.

"So, what happened?" he said, breathing shallow.

"Fortunately, the seal had a fail-safe," Kakashi said. "The Yondaime Hokage set it up so that the seal would reset itself if it was about to break. So in one sense, you don't have to worry. But I think you should at least be aware that you will have to face this someday. It's not just some vague possibility; it really happened. It will happen again, as long as you continue to fight. If you're too reckless and draw on the Kyuubi's power too much, it will try to control you. And I really can't say how things will work out if that happens too soon."

The door to the hospital room opened loudly and Sakura came in, looking cheerful. Naruto looked away from her and Kakashi stood to draw up a couple of chairs.

"Sit; I've got some things to go over with the two of you," he said, taking a seat himself and looking relaxed, as if they hadn't just been interrupted.

"Are you really going to tell us what you found out in the investigation?" Sakura said, surprised, sitting down slowly. "We thought it was going to stay a secret," she glanced at Naruto, who still wouldn't look at her.

"I still have to follow Hokage-sama's orders, which by extension are the wishes of the Council, but I'll tell you whatever I can get away with." They waited expectantly and Kakashi leaned forward, resting his elbows on his legs and lacing his fingers together. "We retraced Naruto's steps and ended up in the small farming settlement north of here where he first woke up. We didn't see anyone from Akatsuki there, but there was no doubt that they had been through. Maybe they were trying to find Naruto's trail, or something else, we don't know. But the villagers had been detained and questioned. They were all killed."

Sakura's eyes widened and she glanced at Naruto again. Resolved to hearing out the worst, he didn't say anything, but he clenched his fists. It felt like a clawed hand was squeezing his heart.

"I don't really feel like that's a good idea anymore," Kakashi said. "I still have to follow Hokage-sama's orders, which by extension are the wishes of the Council, but I'll tell you whatever I can get away with." They waited expectantly and Kakashi leaned forward, resting his elbows on his legs and lacing his fingers together. "We retraced Naruto's steps and ended up in the small farming settlement north of here where he first woke up. We didn't see anyone from Akatsuki there, but there was no doubt that they had been through. Maybe they were trying to find Naruto's trail, or something else, we don't know. But the villagers had been detained and questioned. They were all killed."

Sakura's eyes widened and she glanced at Naruto again. Resolved to hearing out the worst, he didn't say anything, but he clenched his fists. It felt like a clawed hand was squeezing his heart.

"What was most worrying about it, though, was the fact that bodies resembled those that were killed by Pein's Human Path Absorption Soul Technique. The autopsy also confirmed that. We didn't see anyone, but all the evidence points toward something that should be impossible; those villagers were killed by Pein's technique."

"Wait… no, he's… you said he was dead," Naruto burst out.
"So he is."

"The Edo Tensei," Sakura said grimly.

Kakashi nodded. "Judging by the fact that an apparently Reanimated Itachi showed up in the village, there is a good chance that Pein was also brought back with the Kuchiyose: Edo Tensei. Which means that someone is going around summoning dead Akatsuki members, and is using them as their puppets."

"What is it? This Edo Tensei?" Naruto said, determined to be on the same page as everyone else.

"A technique that was invented by the Nidaime Hokage, Senju Tobirama," Sakura explained. "It was stolen and perfected by Orochimaru. It allows the user to summon someone back from the dead in an immortal body and control them like pawns. That was how Orochimaru managed to kill the Sandaime."

"So Orochimaru is the one behind this?" Naruto said darkly. "Messing with the dead… that is really screwed up. So basically, he can just throw people that were already beaten back at us?"

"Yeah, but Orochimaru was also defeated," Kakashi said. "We know that his apprentice Kabuto has taken up his mantle, though, so it could be him. Not only that, but we also know that Kabuto recently joined forces with the remnants of the Akatsuki. What's more, we got a report last night from Anko's team that Kabuto suddenly left the enemy's hideout on his own and they lost track of him, despite having a Hyuuga and an Aburame on the team. He's definitely the most suspicious-looking in this case. And if he really has learned how to use Edo Tensei, the Allied Shinobi Force will need to step up their plans."

Naruto sat for a moment, letting all this information sink in.

"I can't believe he lasted longer than Orochimaru," he said finally. "He just seemed like a random lackey to me. A jerk and everything, yeah, but still. What happened to Orochimaru?"

"He was killed… by Sasuke," Kakashi said.

Naruto's mouth fell open, but Sakura glared at her teacher, saying sharply, "Kakashi-sensei!"

"But… no way," Naruto looked back and forth between the two of them. "I saw Orochimaru fight against Tsunade-baa-chan and Ero-sennin at the same time! And you say that Sasuke—and why? Wait, was it like, something to do with Itachi or something?"

Kakashi stared at him. "You have no idea whatsoever why he wouldn't like Orochimaru? I thought you would at least remember the Forest of Death and the tournament preliminaries. That was, what, just a couple of months ago for you?"

"Kakashi-sensei," Sakura hissed warningly.

"Um…" Naruto said, glancing at Sakura. "Obviously I remember Orochimaru attacking us. How could I forget something like that? And Sakura-chan had to stand guard over us because we both got knocked out. He scared and beat the crap out of all of us, though. I still don't get what you're trying to hint at."

"Huh," Kakashi said.

"What's the big deal anyway, Sakura-chan?" Naruto asked Sakura, who was still looking at Kakashi as if she wanted to shut him up quickly and violently. "I don't care if Sasuke killed Orochimaru. I
mean… it sounds crazy that he could, but I already heard that he killed Itachi, so if that is true I guess it isn’t too hard to believe. Except… arguh, that bastard! I still don’t know how strong my future self is, either!” he pulled at his hair in frustration.

"Sakura… I understand how you feel, but…” Kakashi started.

"What is it?" Naruto said impatiently. "You're both acting really weird. Look, even if something happened that I don't know about that made Sasuke want to kill Orochimaru, seriously, who cares? It's not like I like Orochimaru. Unless… I do?! Oh my god, no. N-no. Don't tell me… he's secretly my father or something?" he suddenly panicked.

Kakashi choked and laughed louder than Naruto had ever heard him laugh before.

"When you're acting like it's something really terrible—" Naruto started defensively.

"You dork," Sakura sighed. "It's not that. Geez. It's just…” she searched for words. Now that she had started to say something, she had no idea how to finish.

Kakashi saw her struggling, and decided to relent. "She's just afraid that hearing about how powerful Sasuke's grown will get you down, Naruto," he said. "We all know how much you compete against one another."

"Yeah…" Naruto said slowly. "But it's not like I didn't expect Sasuke would be really powerful by now. I get it if he's way above where I am, I mean, at my age. I would only care if my future self can keep up with him or not. I mean, Orochimaru is like… whoa. But I faced that Pein guy that destroyed the village, so it's pretty much even, right?"

Naruto frowned heavily when they just looked at each other instead of answering.

"You won't tell me how strong I am," he pointed at Sakura accusingly. "I'm really weak then, is that it? That's the real reason why I'm still a genin, isn't it?"

Sakura winced. On one level, she didn't want to let him have such a gross misconception, but the truth would be even worse.

"Of course not," Kakashi said. "Sakura, before this gets out of hand, I really think we should—"

"Just forget it, it doesn't matter!" Sakura said roughly. "Right now, we need to be worrying about Kabuto and the revived Akatsuki. So—was that all you had to tell us about them?"

Kakashi looked at her doubtfully, and Naruto scowled deeply at the ungraceful change of subject.

"Pretty much," Kakashi said. "Tsunade-sama will be reporting all this to the Allied Shinobi Force, so whatever happens next depends on what the Five Kage decide. We just have to wait and stay alert."

"If we catch him, we can get him to send me back, right?" Naruto said.

"Maybe, but there's no point in getting ahead of ourselves, since we don't really know anything," Kakashi shrugged. "Like I said, we just have to wait."

Naruto didn't protest, but his eyes narrowed, and the wheels in his head were chugging away. Kakashi's offhand explanation that Sakura didn't want him to know how strong Sasuke had grown wormed into his mind much deeper than the Copy-Nin had intended. He was certain now that something had happened; something that had changed his older self's relationship with his peers. He just couldn't figure out what it was, or whether or not it was something particular to Sasuke.
Everyone he had actually met respected him now, despite the fact that they all knew about the Kyuubi. That part was strange and amazing, but it seemed real. Fake respect out of fear felt completely different from real respect, so it wasn't that.

Was he really so weak in this time? If so, why and how? Naruto couldn't help but think of the terrible 'incident' that Kakashi was telling him about before Sakura came in the room. Was that the source of it? When the seal nearly broke, did it leave some sort of permanent damage on its owner? Just how recent was that incident? Quickly, he connected that suspicion to one of the few other things he knew: he was sent into hiding. Surely, if he really was super-powerful enough... strong enough to take on an Akatsuki member like Pein... they wouldn't whisk him off somewhere safe like they were talking about doing with his little 12-year-old self. For that matter, he was almost certain that he wouldn't let them send him into hiding, even if they wanted. It already rankled bad enough at his age, even when he knew he couldn't match the power of the enemies they were currently facing. And what if that was the real reason why Tsunade didn't want the two versions to meet? Was the affection and respect he'd been getting since arriving here just the result of everyone feeling sorry for him? What was the truth?

It wasn't a wonder that he was coming up with his own conclusions. He just put the clues together in his own way. It was true that there was that little bitty part of his heart that doubted himself occasionally. But above all, he was certain that if he was somehow weak now, it was through no fault of his own. Another thing he knew was that no matter what the trouble was, it could be fixed. It didn't matter if other people were hell bent on sparing his feelings 'for his own good'; he would get to the bottom of whatever the secret was, and do whatever it took to make it right.

It was just unfortunate that well-intentioned secrets rarely resolved themselves painlessly in the shinobi world. If the real Uchiha Itachi could have seen it, he would have shook his head.

On lockdown in the hospital with ANBU all around was not the most pleasant of experiences. The next three days were some of the most boring of Naruto's life, but it had its highlights, and he kept his eyes and ears wide open for clues the entire time.

He and Sai had visitors every day. After Konohamaru found out who the other genin had been, he came by immediately, showed off his improved Oiroke no Jutsu with gusto, and plotted ways to bust Naruto out of the hospital. He was delighted to be around a version of his mentor that was the same age as him, and "more fun" since they were nearly identical in size, power, and temperament. They were the only ones who found it so fun, though; it just made everyone else extremely nervous. It wasn't long before Sakura was the only medic brave enough to check on Sai when the two venerable, self-proclaimed future Hokage got together; she and Tsunade were the only medic-nin intimidating enough to be immune to their pranks.

Sakura also checked Naruto's chakra at the end of each day. The scans soon showed that the disruption of his chakra flow was completely gone, but the plant-like element remained. She theorized that it was just residue from the spores in his system and should probably fade out soon as well, but she still had every intention of asking Tsunade about it, especially if it didn't go away. It could be a serious problem if some of the parasitic spores were imbedded deeply somewhere in Naruto's system, or if something else bizarre was going on.

On the second day of his confinement, Naruto unexpectedly saw his future self for the first time.

It was after a failed escape attempt co-directed by the Konohamaru Corps sent the team home with a stern warning by the ANBU, and Naruto had nothing to do. He had started reading Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi, but it hadn't caught his attention just yet, since the book didn't particularly mean anything to him yet. He was halfway through the lengthy prologue, which waxed poetic about
the state of the shinobi world in flowery language and it seemed, frankly, boring to him. He planned
on sticking with it through the first chapter to see if it got interesting, but he didn't feel like slogging
through the rest of the prologue at that moment.

So, wishing that Sakura was around or Sai was awake so he'd have someone to talk to, Naruto went
flipping through Sai's sketchpad for lack of anything better to do. Most of the sketches and drawings
were abstract or still-life, but that was also where he found the missing pieces to his future team.

It was a rough, quick pencil sketch done landscape-wise, and it was split into four panels with faint
lines, to evenly divide each portrait with the same amount of space. Naruto's heart leapt when he
realized that he was looking at the grown-up Team 7, each of the now four members standing in a
panel with their hands linked together.

He stared at it for a long time, grinning, after he got over the initial shock of finally seeing his older
self. His eyes roved over each face eagerly. Most of the sketch looked unfinished, but all of their
faces were fully realized, as if Sai took special care to get their expressions right. Naruto's older self
was grinning right back at him, and Sasuke was on his right, looking peaceful. Sai and Sakura stood
at the ends. All four of them looked happy and at ease.

The young adult grinning brilliantly between the whisker marks on his face didn't look like someone
suffering and struggling; nor did he look monstrously powerful or awe-inspiring, but Naruto liked the
feeling it gave him. It was like his older self was laughing at him for worrying so much. Sasuke also
looked truly happy, though it was a muted happiness compared to his neighbor, and it suited him
even though Naruto had never seen him look like that in real life. Was it because he'd finally gotten
his wish? When would he get to meet the real thing? What was Sasuke doing right now?

Naruto could feel from the simple sketch that Sai really cared about his team, which made the odd
boy go up in his estimation. He eagerly flipped through the rest of the sketchbook to see if there were
any more portraits of the team, but there were none.

Later, he decided to see if Sakura would tell him anything more about Sai, since he still didn't really
understand him.

"You want to know about Sai?" Sakura asked, looking up from changing Sai's IV. "What brought
that on?"

"Nothing really," Naruto said. "I guess what I really want to know is what Root is supposed to be,
and what Sai has to do with it, and why Kakashi-sensei thought that would be a good disguise for
me. Everyone seems to know about it but me."

"Hm…" Sakura said skeptically, turning back to her work.

"He's in here because he took the attack meant for me," Naruto said, some of his frustration leaking
into his tone, even though he tried to hold it back. "I don't care if he's not supposed to be my friend
yet. It's too late for that, because he already is. And I wanna be able to help him when he wakes up."

Sakura gave him a small smile. "It's kind of funny; you used to hate him when you met the first time
around. If you make friends with him now, you might be disappointed if you make it back to the
past. You'll have to make friends with someone you can't stand."

"Eh, I'm used to that," Naruto shrugged. "So?"

"I don't suppose it could hurt anything," she said hesitantly, resting her hands on the guardrail of the
bed and looking down at Sai. "Even if you made it back, it's unlikely you'd ever see him before
when we met him originally, anyway."

"Yeah, okay, start with that," Naruto instructed. "How come we never met before even though he's the same age as us—you—whatever? He wasn't at the Academy with us, was he?"

"Right," Sakura nodded. "It's not all that complicated, really, at least not the basic facts of it. He wasn't in our class because he was in Root. Root was a secret training division of the ANBU black ops. Most of the kids in there were unclaimed or unwanted, and they went through some pretty terrible training in order to stunt their emotions. The theory behind it was that a lack of emotions made for a better shinobi.

"The man who founded it kept it up even after Sandaime-sama ordered that it be shut down, and it was unknown to almost everyone. It wasn't until recently, when the founder died, that it was really stopped. It's sad; many of the people who were in it have lost their purpose and don't know what to do with their lives. They were bound to Root in a lot of ways. Some of them even followed their old master in death."

"So who was—?"

"No one you know, and someone you're better off staying away from," she said sharply. "And if all the Hokage from the Sandaime to the Godaime couldn't sniff him out and stop him, there's nothing you can do. It all worked out… mostly."

"I wonder if that's the reason Sai didn't want to tell me about Root," Naruto mumbled. "he doesn't think I could help him, either."

"He knows you, and he knows Root," Sakura said. "I'd say he's the best judge of that. Besides, he just wants to put it behind him."

"How much longer do you think it will be until he wakes up?"

"Could be any time," Sakura put her hand on Sai's forehead and her hand glowed green for a moment. "The mental damage was minimal, and Tsunade-sama was able to treat it right away; it was good we were able to get him here so quickly. It's really just a matter of his body catching up, and he's been out for two days already. I would say another day at most, as long as he's stable like this."

"I wonder what he saw."

"Don't worry," Sakura reassured him. "I think there are only a couple of things that could really shake Sai, and since the Tsukuyomi was meant for you, I doubt any of those came up."

'Don't worry': that was the same thing Sai had told him when he'd briefly regained consciousness after the attack. Had he been trying to say not to worry about him, or not worry about what he saw?

"I wonder what it could have possibly been. It wasn't like Itachi knew me all that well. Or… if it was really Kabuto commanding him, would it be Kabuto making up whatever happened in the attack? How exactly does that work?"

"Either way, you're probably really lucky it missed," Sakura said darkly.

Whatever the case might be, it was hard to really feel glad that Sai was laying comatose in a hospital bed instead of him.

Sai finally woke up on the third day, at a time when the room was particularly crowded and noisy.
Team Gai (minus Gai) had come to visit him and Naruto, and most of the commotion was coming from Lee eagerly challenging Naruto to a battle right in the hospital room after gushing over Naruto's 'reclaimed youth'. Kakashi was also there, looking as if he wondered how he'd ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time; Neji, Tenten, and Sakura were respectively exasperated, amused, and irritated.

"This is a hospital room, not a playground!" Sakura roared as Lee hopped from one foot to another and tossed out a few warmup kicks, nearly knocking over a partition screen.

"Lee!" Tenten said exasperatedly. "Sakura's right. You can challenge whoever you want later. Right now, we need to consider Sai-san."

"Ah… you are right," Lee stopped kicking at the air and bowed his head apologetically. "Next time then, Naruto-kun."

"It looks like you bounced back from your injuries," Naruto said excitedly. "The last time I saw you, you were hurt pretty bad."

"That is all just a memory now, thanks to Tsunade-sama and Gai-sensei," Lee said.

"It's great to see all of you," Naruto looked over the whole of Team Gai. "Bushy Brow, I think you've changed the least out of anyone I've met so far. How're the rest of you getting along?"

"Keeping busy, as usual," Tenten said. "You know how it goes. Never a dull moment with this team."

"And, um, the last time I saw you, you were trying to beat me up," Naruto joked to Neji. Neji smiled faintly. "I hope you don't mind me saying that I remember it fondly."

"Just as long as you're not holding any grudges," Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "I guess you've probably figured out by now how I won. I didn't fully understand it at the time, myself."

Neji shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I deserved to lose for underestimating you, even if I was unaware of your power. Besides, it was the most profitable loss I've ever had."

"Since I barely won then, I'd probably get completely thrashed against you now. Same with Bushy-brow. Could be fun to try, though!" he badly wanted to ask them where his older self stood in relation to them, but he didn't want to bring it up with Sakura and Kakashi there.

"Yosh! Then I declare that we will all train together as soon as Naruto-kun is allowed to leave the hospital!" Lee said vigorously.

A quiet groan made them all stop and look toward the hospital bed. Sai's eyes opened slowly and he stared confusedly at all of them.

"Sai-kun!"

"Sai!"

They gathered around him and Sakura said. "Give him a little space!" before bending into his line of sight.

"Sakura," he said weakly. His eyes drifted to her side. "Naruto," then he looked around the room,
"there are a lot of people here."

"Not for long," Sakura said. "I'm sorry, but do you think you guys could come back later? It's probably best if there aren't so many visitors at one time, so it isn't too overwhelming for him."

"Ah, of course. We'll let his team visit first," Neji said. "Come on Lee, Tenten," and they left.

"Thank God," Kakashi sighed. "They're overwhelming at the best of times even without Gai, thanks to that mini-clone of his. Nice timing, Sai."

"How are you feeling?" Sakura asked. She drew a small flashlight from her pouch and used it to peer into each of his eyes.

"I'm fine, I think," Sai blinked when she put the flashlight away and tried to sit up. Sakura helped him by tucking some pillows behind his back. "I'm pretty hungry and thirsty, though."

"Ah, I remember that. Hope you like soup," Kakashi said lightly. "That's all they let me have for a while after I woke up from a Tsukuyomi-induced coma."

"Now that you're awake, your recovery should be relatively quick," Sakura said briskly. "You'll need a little more rest until you get your full strength back, though."

"What was it?" Naruto interjected anxiously. "What did you see?" he missed the glare Sakura threw at him.

Sai's gaze settled on him. Naruto saw with a rush of relief that his eyes weren't dull or uncomprehending this time, like he feared they would be. But there was something unreadable there.

"I can't," he said softly.

"Why? Is it just something else I'm not supposed to know—or…" it occurred to him too late that he might be acting extremely tactlessly. "Or… maybe you don't want to talk about it."

"No," Sai shook his head. "What I saw was not reality; nothing that has actually happened, so in that sense it wouldn't matter. But that attack had been molded for you, to destroy you. It would not be kind to tell you what I saw."

Naruto heard the heavy sadness in his voice and saw it in his expression, and believed him.

"Are… you sure you're all right?" he said guiltily.

"I'm fine. Illusions are just that. It will never happen," Sai looked at Sakura, whose mouth hardened into a thin line.

"What won't?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto, why don't you go down to the cafeteria and find some food that's not too solid for Sai to eat?" Sakura said.

"Ohhhh no," Naruto pointed accusingly from her to Kakashi. "You guys are going to talk behind my back again!"

"Naruto, go," Kakashi said, a warning in his voice. "Don't make me call Bull out to drag you down there as an escort."

Grumbling, but knowing they would never say whatever it was they were going to say with him in
the room, Naruto went out into the hall and slammed the door behind him. He had only given up so quickly in order to listen at the door, but then he saw that there was an ANBU guard posted right outside of it, ruining his master plan.

"I wonder if the ANBU know they're supposed to be guarding me, not hospital doors," he said petulantly (and loudly) to himself. "Well, see you later, I'm gonna go get myself kidnapped now."

The large boar-masked ANBU was completely unmoved by this declaration, and Naruto walked down to the cafeteria muttering expletives under his breath the entire way.

Inside the room, they were all silent for a while. Sai just looked straight ahead thoughtfully.

"How bad was it?" Sakura prompted quietly.

"Bad," Sai said finally. "It was… not easy to go through. But I… it was easier to stay grounded, to keep my head clear when I thought about Naruto being there instead of me, and what it could have done to him."

"Tell us about it, if you can," Kakashi said, moving to stand at his bedside.

"Unless it would be better to wait," Sakura added quickly. "Don't force it."

"No; the genjutsu itself didn't bother me nearly as much as knowing who it was for," Sai took a deep breath and shuddered slightly, and let the breath out again, "I saw Sasuke."

With that, Sakura's worst fears were confirmed. "Damn it."

"I couldn't get away, and I was forced to watch. He killed everyone in Konoha one by one. He kept saying that it was all because Naruto was too weak to stop him."

Sakura buried her face in her hands and Kakashi clenched the guardrail.

"That's the older Naruto's fear," Kakashi said. "The younger one wouldn't get the full meaning of it."

"Do you really think it wouldn't affect him just as much?" Sai asked placidly.

"I think that… that was a really close one," Kakashi said. "I think we need to tell him the truth about Sasuke now, before someone else does."

"No," Sakura said fiercely.

"Hearing about it first from the enemy, or even one of the other villages-particularly Kumo-would be doing him a disservice," Kakashi insisted. "If anyone said something to him, you know he would stand up for Sasuke first and ask questions later."

"It'll hurt no matter what," Sakura said. "It'll hurt even if he somehow makes it back without knowing, because he'll have to experience it the same way again. But right now, he's… he doesn't have that burden hanging over him. God, for once in my life I actually have the chance to protect him from that burden, instead of…" her breath caught. "Just… I'm not in any rush to see that weight put on him again."

"Kakashi-sensei," Sai said quietly. "I was inclined to agree with you before, but during those days I spent in the Tsukuyomi, and the days I spent afterward dreaming about it… all I could think about was how glad I was that it was me and not him. Perhaps I'm not the best judge right now, since I am still recovering; but I'm not yet ready to throw him into that hell, when I know he will have to live in
it every day of his life afterward."

"We just have to undo this as quickly as we can," Sakura said.

"And if it can't be undone?" Kakashi said. "And what if the one belonging to this time is gone?"

"Yamato-taichou and the others would have returned if that were true," Sakura said in a low voice.

Kakashi shrugged and let it drop. He didn’t exactly disagree with them. If he could have it his way, the entire fiasco with Sasuke would have never even happened to begin with. But it had happened, and it would happen, even if Naruto somehow never found out about it until he went back to his own time. Privately, he thought getting it out of the way now might actually save Naruto a few years of pain and uncertainty.

Kakashi sighed. "I guess we'll just have to see how it goes."

Tsunade returned to Konoha the next morning. She gave Sai a checkup and declared that he would be ready to leave the hospital very soon.

"Okay then," Naruto said, so impatient he was practically bouncing. "So what about me? I get to leave soon too, right? What did you guys decide at the meeting?" Tsunade had deferred all questions until after taking a look at Sai.

"I want to know too, Tsunade-sama," Sai said cheerfully, and Sakura nodded.

"Right," Tsunade said, handing Sai’s clipboard to a nurse, who excused herself with it. "After the meeting of the five Kage, it has been decided that you will be placed under the direct protection of the Kazekage."

"The Kazekage?" Naruto said nervously. He crossed his arms and tried hard to remember what he knew about the man.

"You will be perfectly safe with him," Tsunade said with a smile. "The Kazekage is a bit of a mother hen when it comes to you, Naruto."

Naruto imagined a faceless person in a Kazekage hat sitting on him, before he realized that he did know the foreign Kage—sort of.

"Wait," he said slowly. "Um, isn't he Gaara's father? You know, the one that tried to have his son assassinated numerous times?"

"No, that one died in your time, just before the Chuunin Exams, when Orochimaru stole his identity in order to incite Suna to help with his attack. It's someone else now."

"Don't worry, you'll like him," Sakura said brightly.

"Your team will set out as soon as Sai has recovered enough," Tsunade said. "A small group is faster and less noticeable. I need Kakashi to stay here, so I will be sending another jounin in his place—Hyuuga Neji."

"What—he's a jounin? He didn't tell me that!" Naruto broke in. Tsunade didn't humor this outburst.

"I'm sending him because aside from Kakashi, he's the jounin you know the best in Konoha, and that you'll be the most comfortable working with. His Byakugan should also be very helpful for making sure that you aren't being followed. I'm trying to keep things grounded with people you're familiar
with in your time, like I promised. Except for Sai—"

"No, it's cool," Naruto interrupted again. "Me and Sai are friends now. Well, he says he doesn't
know, but he's willing to go along with what I say, and I say we're friends."

"That was faster than last time," Tsunade said in surprise, looking at Sai and Sakura.

"Meh," Sakura waved a hand. "That's just because we had to break Sai in before he was nice to be
around."

"Sure, Sakura-chan," Naruto said. "From what I heard about how you acted back then, 'break' would
be the right word."

"Hey!" Sakura said, reddening slightly. "You were incredibly rude, too. All of us were."

"Not Yamato-taichou," Sai offered. "He treated us to a stay at the onsen, and even saved Naruto
from your violence."

"How so?" Sakura said suspiciously.

"I decline to answer that on the grounds that it might spur you to violence against the Naruto that is
with us."

"Wait, what?" Naruto gulped.

"Ahem," Tsunade said, "as I was saying, your team will meet the delegation from Suna at the border
between the Land of Wind and the Land of Rivers. From that point on, you will be traveling with the
Kazekage as your guard at all times when you're not in Sunagakure. Don't get the wrong idea; when
and where you go will still be mostly be up to him. Cheer up though, you should feel honored;
usually you'd have to have the status of a daimyo to have the privilege of a Kage as your personal
guard," she sounded amused.

"But then, why can't you just be my guard? I think I'd prefer that, if I have to have one," Naruto
wrinkled his nose.

"Tch! Listen to you. None of the Kage are actually available to look after you at all times. We're very
busy right now," Tsunade said, crossing her arms. "So you need one with a village you can stay in
that's actually defensible. Suna is heavily fortified and difficult to approach without being seen.
Besides, the Kazekage is better than I am at fighting while protecting others at the same time."

"If you say so," Naruto muttered. "Man, this sucks."

"Be ready to leave as soon as Sai recovers his strength," Tsunade ordered.

"I think I will be ready to travel by tomorrow," Sai said. "And I think I could be able to fight the by
the day after."

Tsunade nodded. "Normally I would advise against pushing yourself, but it's best if we get this done
soon as possible. Sakura will be with you; at any rate, you should be back up to speed by the time
you cross the border of the Fire Country. Any objections?"

"No, ma'am," Sai and Sakura said, but Naruto just muttered into the hand he was resting his chin on.

"Two more little things, Naruto," Tsunade added in a tone that was suddenly much more gentle. He
straightened up in surprise. "Tomorrow we are holding a memorial service for those that died in the
attack on the other village. You can go to it, if you want to."

"Oh," he said, feeling cold suddenly.

"Secondly, I wanted to let you know that I was able to check in with Gai's group," she continued, 
"They didn't know anything was going on. It seems that your older self is still with them, alive and 
well."
Tobi materialized in a dark, damp underground cavern. After spending so much time around that creepy snake-worshipping Kabuto ever since they first made their alliance, he started to chafe at his hideout's resemblance to the gloomy spaces Orochimaru always loved. At least he didn't have to stare at snakes built in to every pillar and candleholder here. His recent dealings with the snake-man made this sentiment even stronger.

"Did you find anything?" he asked, sitting down in a stone chair with an air of weary irritation.

"Nothing," Black Zetsu said. "By the time we got back to Orochimaru's hideout to look, Nagato and Itachi were already gone. We could not find them in Konoha, either. My other half is still trying to trace them, but it's most likely that they've either run off or gotten called back to the afterlife."

"Forget them, then. If they're still around, they won't stay hidden forever. Even if Orochimaru is lying about losing control over the Edo Tensei, we can always destroy them or him if either tries to get in the way of our plan."

"What exactly did he say?" Black Zetsu growled.

Tobi narrowed his eye. "Hmph."

Kabuto began his mad giggling again, dipping his head and nearly doubling over in mirth.

"Can't we just kill him?" Black Zetsu deadpanned.

Kabuto stilled himself again, and raised his head to crack a wide, mad grin at them. "Listen and I will tell you how. We will just make a new arrangement."

"What do you mean?"

He laughed once more, dragging it out into a long, unsettling performance of madness. As he did, his voice changed. It shifted from a high, insane giggle to a deep raspy chuckle that was at once unmistakable when it settled.

"I mean that things have changed," Kabuto said, only it wasn't Kabuto's voice coming out of his mouth anymore.

There was a pause.

"You are Orochimaru," Tobi realized.

"Very good!" Orochimaru said, taking off Kabuto's glasses and slipping them into his pocket. "I have finally succeeded in taking over, just as he feared that I would for so long. Of course, I'm not quite at full power. There's something else that I need before I can be entirely revived."

"And? What's your scheme?" Tobi demanded. "If you plan to get in my way--"

"We can still work together, if you want to," Orochimaru lifted his palms in a shrug, the ever-present smirk still plastered on his face. "To be honest, I'm just disgusted with Kabuto's shameless imitation of me. There's absolutely no fun in just watching that from some dark corner of his mind. If that is how it is going to be, I might as well act in the world myself. So, I am interested in your plans and..."
how they might make things move. I can help you by lending Edo Tensei soldiers for your war, just as Kabuto promised. In return, I want you to let me have my own fun."

"Do you mean all of this with the Kyuubi?" Tobi said. "You honestly expect me to pass up taking it, with an opportunity like this? And if you really plan on helping me by using the Edo Tensei as you claim, why did you use it to revive former members of the Akatsuki try to steal my prize?"

"Oh, that wasn't me," Orochimaru hissed slightly on the last syllable. "You see, up until now, I did not actually have control. I could only make... suggestions. It was necessary to revive Nagato in order to perform the Time Spanning Incarnation Technique. But then Kabuto got impatient and decided to summon more of them to steal Naruto-kun back after your associate snatched him from us... if it were me, I would have just let him go. I had to wrest control from Kabuto in order to make him lose control over the Edo Tensei, before careless Akatsuki members ruined all of my hard work."

"Then where are they now? Nagato and Itachi?"

"I do not know; I no longer have control over them. I hate to say that I can't undo their reincarnation, either. Only the one that used the jutsu can do that, and I have no intention of giving this body back for such a pointless reason."

"Zetsu, go back to Orochimaru's hideout. See if they are there," Tobi said.

"That just sounds like a convenient excuse. He's probably lying," Black Zetsu warned.

"Just go."

Zetsu sunk into the trunk of the tree they were standing on. Tobi watched him before turning back to Orochimaru.

"Edo Tensei aside, what do you plan to do with the Kyuubi?" he said, watching Orochimaru carefully. "For what purpose did you bring him here, if you don't want to hand him over to me?"

"The last time that I faced Naruto-kun directly, I was able to see him release four tails worth of power," Orochimaru's slitted eyes gleamed in the borrowed face. "He has interested me lately; but sadly, I have not been able to act on it, since my old body was destroyed. Kabuto didn't know it, but Naruto-kun was summoned from a very specific time for a reason. He is already stronger than the people around him realize, but he doesn't yet know much about me. It is very inconvenient to have an interest in someone that you can't even talk to without them flying into a tailed beast-induced rampage."

"That still doesn't answer what you intend to do with him," Tobi said coldly. "If he is the real thing, why should I just let you have him, when capturing him would make my goal that much easier to accomplish?"

"I'm not saying that you have to give up on the Kyuubi," Orochimaru said. "You can chase after the older one all you want; I have no interest in him, at least not for the purposes of my project. What interests me is the unrealized potential that the younger one has buried within him; not just potential that he already had, but the malleability of the form I have made for him. You can't extract his bijuu, not even with the Gedo Statue," He raised a hand and pointed at Tobi ominously. "I've made sure of that. I doubt even the real Uchiha Madara could reach the bijuu's chakra inside of him, because Senju Hashirama's power is holding it back, in addition to the original Eight Trigrams Seal. We embedded a little trap in his chakra network, you see. He will be able to draw on that power himself with some effort. But if an external force attempts to extract it against his will, the Kyuubi's chakra will
immediately be absorbed by Hashirama's cells, and poor Naruto-kun will probably turn into a very large tree."

"What have you done?" Tobi seethed. "That is why you stole one of the Zetsu, isn't it? You used it as the medium for the summoning. You specifically set everything up to thwart me, and yet you still claim to be on my side? What if I just decide to kill you now so that you won't have the chance to get in my way again?"

"Now, now, no need for all of that," Orochimaru chuckled. "I haven't done anything to harm you, Tobi-san; you're just back where you have been all along. Is that so bad?"

"Then I repeat once more: what do you plan to do with him, if not take the Kyuubi from him?"

"I am just interested in seeing where his path goes," Orochimaru said lightly. "I have been developing this jutsu for a long time, but I have yet to test it out. How does it compare to the Edo Tensei, or other mind-body transfer techniques? Unlike the dead, a living soul has the capacity to grow and change. And yet, though the act of summoning it, you can control the circumstances to take advantage of both its native attributes and any additions that you see fit, essentially creating an entirely new existence. What are the capacities of this new existence? That is what I am interested in."

"You are no longer interested in Sasuke's path, then?"

"Oh, yes, of course," Orochimaru licked his lips and gave him a patronizing look. "But I did say that I would cooperate with you. I'll go along with Kabuto's promise and not involve myself with Sasuke until after the war. Afterward, though… it's all free game."

"Fair enough," Tobi said. He didn't intend on there being an 'after'. "Let me guess, then; you want me to completely stay away from your pet project in return?"

"Not exactly," Orochimaru said nonchalantly. "I can't really do anything hands-on until I get my power back. In the meantime, I doubt that you will be able to reach him easily, and you can't send him back even if you wanted. You have no reason to concern yourself with him."

"And how would you do that?" Tobi asked suspiciously. "Send him back to his time."

Orochimaru considered that question for a while, his long tongue hanging out of his mouth and wagging thoughtfully.

"Like the Edo Tensei, you can get the one who did the summoning to reverse it," he said. "Unlike the Edo Tensei, killing the jutsu caster would also work."

Tobi stared at him for a long time, trying to discern his truthfulness.

"As a sign of goodwill," Orochimaru continued, "I will help you when the war begins, and help you get the Kyuubi and Hachibi. Until then, I am going to concentrate on being fully resurrected, which requires a few things. Play around with the Five Nations and Sasuke-kun all you want. It would be so much more interesting than everything staying still."

"What will you do once you are fully resurrected?"

"Oh, you really don't need to worry about that," Orochimaru said, and he vanished away before Tobi could question him anymore.
"How arrogant," Black Zetsu said. "If he's really so weak now, we have no reason to do what he says."

"He did seem very confident," Tobi said, resting his elbow on the arm of the chair and leaning on it contemplatively. "He is either sure that we won't ruin his experiment, or that we can't."

"He said it could be undone by killing the one who did the jutsu, but he didn't actually say who did it, did he?" Zetsu said, catching on quickly.

"No. Even if he is the one who planned it all, it could not have been him. He's been suppressed up until now," Tobi said. "By orchestrating his plot indirectly, he has made it almost impossible to unravel by force. At any rate, if what he said was true, we will not be able to use the younger Naruto for the Gedo Statue." He sighed. "Though it is unclear how much of what he is saying is the truth."

"Truth or not, we can attempt the extraction anyway. It's no loss to us if it doesn't work," Zetsu pointed out.

"That is true. We may be able to find a use for younger one, anyway. He could be a weak point we can use against the Allied Shinobi Forces. He makes them vulnerable, and they probably realize that. I don't doubt that they're handling him like he's made out of glass."

"So then?"

Tobi just smiled behind his mask and stood. He walked out of the room and down a flight of stairs, Zetsu following behind.

He opened a wooden door that creaked softly. This room was very dark, save for the glowing green light that came from dozens of lit tanks of fluid lining the walls. Each tank contained a floating, disembodied eyeball. A boy was sitting up on a raised platform, not facing them; not looking at anything. He couldn't, because he was blind.

"How much longer do I have to stay like this?" Sasuke said.

"A while yet," Tobi said. "How are you feeling today?"

"I'm fine. I'll be even better once I can leave here," a smile almost as mad as Orochimaru's spread below the bandages covering half of his face. "I have a promise to keep, after all."

That ill-fated farming community had been split up thanks to the majority of its citizens leaving to aid Konoha with the reconstruction, leaving only a handful to tend to crops. Because of that, the memorial for the twenty civilians killed was held in Konoha so that their friends and family could attend. The only people who were left to mourn were in Konoha.

Very few shinobi or citizens of the Hidden Leaf itself attended that memorial, but among the ones that did were Naruto, Sakura, Sai, and Kakashi; and the ANBU agents Boar, Raven, and Tiger, who went as guards for Naruto as well as to pay their respects personally.

The bodies were not to be interred at Konoha. By consensus of the remaining villagers, they would be taken back and privately buried in the local graveyard. They had every intention of returning to their homes and crops, even after what had happened, and they wanted their friends and neighbors to return home as well.

Naruto put Shinji's shoes in front of his photograph on the long table full of photographs, a long lineup of people that had once called him a hero. He wondered if other villagers were watching him.
He wondered if they knew. The guilt was like a cold, hard stone in his chest.

The Allied Shinobi Force had decreed that he would be sent to the Land of Wind and left under the protection of the Kazekage for an undetermined amount of time. There he would be hidden, there he would be safe; that's what they said… but that wasn't exactly the kind of assurance he cared about. That wasn't what he wanted at all.

*I'll fix it, I promise,* he vowed as he stood in front of the photographs. *I'll make sure you never have to die because of me.*

There were only two things he wanted: first, he wanted everyone to stop hiding things from him. The only way he was going to be able redo anything the right way was to know the truth. Second, he wanted to find Yakushi Kabuto and make him send him back to his own time.

At the moment though, he only had a few vague plans. Tsunade told him the night before that she had investigated the matter of Naruto-of-this-time and found out that he was still there. She said that she hadn't spoken to him at all though, or told the group about the appearance of his younger self in this time. Currently that team was at sea and would be continuing their original mission, and that was all she would say.

Older-Naruto was the first mystery he wanted to figure out. If his older self was still around, what did that mean? Shouldn't that be impossible? And why was he still taking it easy on a nice cruise when the Akatsuki were most likely after both of them? If he was really powerful, why was he even going along with it? Unless he wasn't really powerful, or there was something else younger-Naruto was missing about the situation. With any luck, the Suna shinobi would be less tight-lipped and he'd be able to put together a few more things while staying with them.

Naruto moved on, returning to his friends, who watched him with a pitying expression that he didn't like. It was like saying that they felt sorry because they knew it was his fault, not because twenty people had died for no reason.

"Are you alright?" Sakura asked softly.

"It doesn't really matter compared to how they're doing, does it?" Naruto said, indicating the villagers. They stood together in black-clad clusters, drifting, stopping in front of photographs, leaning on one another. The shinobi were a little bit apart from them and definitely stuck out, even while wearing black like everyone else, but no one asked why they were there.

"I guess you're right," Sakura said with a small, sad smile.

"When are you three leaving?" Kakashi said. "I'd like to go too, but they have gone and given me an important position in the Alliance for some reason."

"Early tomorrow morning, if I start resting in bed again as soon as this is over," Sai said.

"We're stuck at the hospital again tonight," Naruto grumbled. "Booooorring."

"We can play cards some more, if you like," Sai offered.

"No way. I keep losing against you."

"Your poker face is no match for his, Naruto," Sakura laughed.

"I bet not," Kakashi said. "Well, I'm sure some people could be persuaded to come by and keep you from getting bored, especially since you're leaving tomorrow. Since you can't go out, it would be the
next best thing."

"I would like that too," Sai said. "And I wouldn't even have to stop resting, either," he added quickly when Sakura glanced at him.

Naruto looked at Kakashi thoughtfully. He had mostly overlooked it in the surprise at how well people in general seemed to like him these days, but there was something subtly different about his sensei from what he remembered. Kakashi had always looked out for his team, even from the very beginning, but he seemed… more caring, somehow. It was barely noticeable because he was still late all the time, didn't always check in with them, and had no problem dumping his students at the hospital for a few days with little contact, but his concern leaked through more frequently than it had in the past. Or maybe he just acted that way more often with him. It was hard to put into words, but there had been some kind of change in how Kakashi acted toward him, just like everyone else.

"Are you ready to go back?" Kakashi asked, catching his look. "Or do you need more time?" His tone was genuine, not wry.

"I'm ready, I guess," Naruto said.

Sakura linked arms with him. "Hey, I'll play cards with you guys, too. And we should get a ramen delivery to the room tonight as a treat!" She put her other arm through Sai's and dragged them both along.

"Hey! I'm not gonna run away, so you don't have to pull me, Sakura-chan."

"Oh, I get it," Sai said from her other side. "Physical contact is often used to show support and provide comfort in stressful times. We can reinforce and display our camaraderie at the same time by walking arm-in-arm."

"It's good to have you back, Sai," Sakura said.

"Your formation is a little lopsided with the short one in there, though," Kakashi said, strolling behind them lazily.

"I take back everything I thought about you being sort of nice," Naruto growled under his breath.

As Naruto feared, that last day stuck in the hospital was agonizingly boring. Sai slept during much of it, and Kakashi had vanished, probably being smart enough not to subject himself to sticking around for the boring card games and Naruto's complaints. He perked up near evening, though, when Sakura left for a moment and came back saying that she had sent someone to get the ramen.

"Awesome! Finally! And it's your turn, Sakura-chan. Hurry up so I can go," Naruto said impatiently as Sakura returned to the game. They were playing on a rolling table that had been cleared of its instruments. Sai sat in the recliner, since it was the room's most comfortable chair. They were playing Crazy Eights with four players. Naruto insisted that more players made it more interesting, but the only other person they'd managed to rope into joining them was one of the 'invisible' ANBU guards.

"I choose hearts!" Naruto said triumphantly, laying down an eight.

"Thank you for that," Boar said, laying down his final card, a ten of hearts. "I win!"

"ARRGH! WHAT? You're not allowed to play anymore. Or at least take off your mask if you're going to play! It isn't fair."
"I could kick your ass with or without this mask, kid," Boar said smugly, gathering up all the cards into a deck. "You're just lucky we aren't playing Blackjack, or you'd end up running through town from here to the Nara river and back in nothing but your little nightcap."

"Yeah, right," Naruto scoffed, but he quickly dropped the subject.

"He keeps winning because you're too obvious," Sakura said. "You can't just think about your own hand, you have to watch everyone else and strategize."

"How are you supposed to strategize much when it's just luck?" Naruto said crossly. "You don't know what cards you're going to get. Besides, I was watching him. I thought for sure he had a diamond."

"Boar-san figured out that you had hearts left," Sai explained. "He used an eight to change it to diamonds on his last turn in order to divert us from figuring out his final card, since he knew you would likely change it to hearts for him if one of us didn't."

"A shinobi must be able to see through deception," Boar said sagely.

The door flew open with a loud bang, causing everyone but Boar to whip their heads in that direction. Boar kept calmly shuffling cards.

"Naruto-kun!" Lee waved enthusiastically with one arm. He carried a long box in his other hand.

"Oh, Lee-san!" Sakura stood up with a smile. "Just put those over there. Who else were you able to find?"

Sakura's question was answered for her when a whole crowd of chatting people filtered in through the door, some carrying takeout boxes, others bottles of tea and soda. Tenten and Neji came trailing behind their teammate, plus Ino, Shikamaru, Chouji, Hinata, Kiba, Shino, and at the end, Iruka.

"Iruka-sensei!" Naruto cried, jumping up from his chair and trotting over to him. "What's going on? What is all this?"

"Look at you; I really can't believe it," Iruka said, resting his hand on Naruto's head, which didn't aggravate him like it did when everyone else did that. "I'm sorry that I haven't been able to come see you before now. I've been mostly stuck down in the evacuation tunnels where most of the children are, and I didn't hear about you until recently."

"What? No one told you?" Naruto said indignantly.

"The powers-that-be have their hands a bit full right now, I think. The news spread pretty quickly once the general population was in on it," he smiled, but Naruto could tell that he was worried. If he had also heard about Itachi and the reason behind the morning's memorial service—and it was almost certain he had—it was no wonder he was worried.

"Naruto-kun! Allow me to explain the occasion!" Lee shouted from where they were unpacking food. "Sakura-san told us that you and Sai-kun still had to stay in the hospital even though you are leaving tomorrow, so you wouldn't be able to have any fun before going on your mission!"

"And since we were already going to drag Neji out to eat before the mission," Tenten added, "we decided to bring it all here."

"We brought Yakiniku Q takeout," Chouji said contentedly.
"And Ichiraku ramen, of course," Ino said with a wink, holding up a tall Ichiraku takeout box.

A warm, swooping sensation came rushing into Naruto's heart, making him laugh aloud with a mixture of surprise and happiness.

"Oh really? Is there even anything in that box, Ino?" he taunted, and she gave him a confused look that quickly fell into rage.

"Are you trying to call me fat, you little asswipe?"

Naruto snickered and Ino started stalking toward him. Fortunately, everyone was diverted when the door slammed open again.

"All right, everybody! I brought the sake!" Tsunade declared, holding up a couple of large bottles. Shizune was lurking behind her, looking harried.

"T-tsunade-sama…" Tenten said weakly.

"Shishou! This is a hospital!" Sakura scolded.

"Whaaaat? It's my hospital. Besides, it isn't fair you all get to have some fun and I don't. Make some space on that table. Ooh, what are we playing over here?" she spotted the cards.

"Just some Crazy Eights, Hokage-sama," Boar said, shuffling the deck with the quick finesse of an expert. "Though we were talking about starting up some Blackjack, if you're interested…" he let the sentence hang invitingly.

Tsunade just sat down opposite him with a cocky grin and a challenge in her eye.

The future had its good points too, Naruto mused as everyone crowded around getting food and chatting with one another. The four adults ended up in a gambling circle (two of them somewhat against their will) while Sakura found some more cards and another small cluster formed. He smiled when Neji brought a plate of barbecue over to Hinata, when Iruka politely insisted for the dozenth time that he didn't want to play another round, and when Sai inadvertently made Kiba so angry that he nearly flipped the card table over.

Naruto wished he could separate all the good things and the bad things in order to keep just the parts he wanted in the future. The first time these four teams had all been in the same place at the same time, it was during the Chuunin exams and everyone was an enemy. Now they made up a circle of friends bigger than he ever imagined having. It was like reaping the benefit of someone else's work, intruding in on something that didn't belong to him, at least not yet. It was strange, how terrible and wonderful the future turned out to be.

Gradually everyone left, wishing Naruto, Sai, Sakura, and Neji good luck on their voyage to Suna. Neji and Hinata made to leave, and they stopped at the door when Naruto jumped up to tell them goodbye.

"Baachan wants us to meet at her office early tomorrow morning, right?" Naruto said.

Neji looked to where Tsunade was threatening to take her losses out of Boar's mission pay, her face flushed with sake, while Shizune tried to hold her back, and Iruka was surreptitiously sidling sideways in his chair. It looked like he would make his escape soon.

"We'll see," Neji said.
"Good luck, Naruto-kun," Hinata said softly. "I hope that you find a way to make it back to the past."

"You think that I can?" Naruto said, slightly surprised. "Thanks!"
She nodded. "Um… when you do make it back to the past…" she trailed off.

"Yeah?" Naruto prompted.

Hinata lowered her head and reddened. "Ah… um. I just wanted you to know, I really appreciated it when you cheered for me… in the Exams, that is. I don't think I ever let it on well enough, so I'm sorry for that."

"Oh..." Naruto grinned. "I get it. So you're saying that when I get back I should make sure to cheer for you even more?"

"N-no! I didn't mean it like that!" Hinata's face was burning like a beacon. "I just meant… you're a really great person, Naruto-kun, even if it took a while for most people to realize that. If you make it back, reach out to others, and just do what you have always done. Don't try to take on all the responsibility for the future by yourself."

"Just don't try to be too friendly, too quickly," Neji added, looming over Naruto ominously. "Your level of tact always leaves much to be desired."

"Hah? Okay," Naruto scratched his cheek confusedly. "Well, see you guys."

"Looks like almost everyone is gone. I have to get going, too," Iruka said, walking up from behind him as the two Hyuuga left. "Have you got supplies for tomorrow?"

"I left everything in the past, so I'll have to get a whole new set of equipment before we leave," Naruto confessed. "I even left behind the hitai-ate you gave me. I'm sorry. I've taken it with me everywhere, ever since I first got it. I don't feel right without it." he touched his forehead gloomily.

Even before he finished speaking, Iruka was untying the hitai-ate from his head.

"I doubt that it will mean as much to you this time," he said, holding it out faceplate-side up. "But consider it a good-luck charm for your journey."

Naruto took it, a slow grin forming on his face. "Thanks, Iruka-sensei."

He looked at the Konoha symbol stamped into the headband for a moment and was struck with sudden inspiration. It was always possible he'd get the same roundabout answers he got from everyone else, but it would be worth a try. Iruka was the only person he had met so far that didn't seem any different toward him at all.

"How strong am I in this time, Iruka-sensei?" he asked, not looking up from the headband. "No one will tell me… so I am afraid something happened to make me even weaker than I am now, or something," he surprised himself by admitting the silly fear out loud.

Iruka put his hands on Naruto's shoulders and bent to speak directly to his face. "You are already one of the strongest shinobi that I have ever seen. You have never stopped growing stronger, and I don't think you ever will."

"Then why…"
"It is going to take a lot of hard work to get to where you are now, but I know that you are up to the task," Iruka said firmly. "In some ways, it doesn't matter about this time because you are not there yet. You can't afford to get complacent. You just have to keep going forward and giving it all you can."

"Am I stronger than Kakashi-sensei?" he asked conspiratorially.

"He said so himself," Iruka nodded.

"He did?" Naruto said gleefully. "No way!"

"Don't get complacent, I said," Iruka tapped the metal plate on the headband in Naruto's hand. "I can't even imagine the heights that you will reach someday. But as long as you aren't there yet, you still have a very long way to go. Measuring yourself against other people can be useful, but in the long run it's all about how much you can break your own limits."

"Alright," Naruto clenched the hitai-ate in his hand with a determined smirk. "Then from now on, I'll make it a goal to surpass myself."

"Get out of bed, Naruto! Geez, I don't understand how you ever managed to be on time for missions."

Naruto cracked his eyes open for the third time that morning as Sakura came around yet again to wake him up. This time, he pulled himself up from the warm embrace of sleep the best he could, sitting up slowly and blinking at his teammates, who were moving around fully clothed and ready to go.

He wasn't fully awake until he had showered and dressed and they were in Tsunade's temporary office hearing the mission briefing. Neji was already there, and Tsunade was drinking tea and reading papers. She looked up when they came in.

"Took you all long enough," Tsunade said briskly. "I have to hear a report on the reconstruction in half an hour, so let's get this over with."

"I'm surprised that you're not hungover," Naruto said with a yawn.

"Please," Tsunade scoffed. "I've been drinking for longer than you've been alive; and besides, I'm the greatest medical ninja in the entire world. I don't get hangovers unless I try to. Now, to business," she held out a scroll and Neji stepped forward to take it. "The four of you are to rendezvous with the delegation from Suna on the border between the Land of Rivers and the Land of Wind in two days' time. The coordinates are in your scroll. From there they will escort you across the desert into Suna. If for some reason you are delayed and will be unable to reach the meeting place in time, have Sai send a message ahead with an estimated time of arrival."

"Will the Kazekage be there personally, Tsunade-sama?" Neji asked.

"Maybe, maybe not," she said. "That was his intention, but it depends on what comes up for him between now and then. Regardless, whoever is sent will be more than qualified. Send word once you arrive in Suna, and wait there for further instructions. I will most likely need everyone except for Naruto to come back soon after, since able-bodied chuunin and jounin can't really be spared for long."

"When do I get to come back?" Naruto asked despondently.
"I don't know," Tsunade said. She rested her elbows on the desk and linked her hands. She sighed.

"It's time you should be made aware of something. The true leader of Akatsuki, who calls himself Uchiha Madara, has declared all-out war on the Allied Shinobi Force. That is, in fact, the real reason why our countries decided to ally in the first place. We aren't sure how he intends to do it, but knowing how powerful he is, and given the recent evidence that Kabuto intends to help him using the Edo Tensei... all of us are preparing for war. Where you go will depend on the enemy's movements, and how safe Suna can remain. It will help that you will not be in the village all of the time."

"What... war?" Naruto said, waking up very suddenly. "How can one guy declare war on entire countries? And who the hell is Uchiha Madara? I thought all the Uchiha were... you know."

"I'm sorry, I don't have time to go into the details right now; but your teammates will bring you up to speed about that on the way," she held up a hand when Sakura looked like she was about to protest. "No. This is necessary. Suna is in the midst of preparations just like everyone else, and keeping company with the Kazekage will make it impossible to hide the war any longer. Naruto, when you can come back to Konoha depends entirely on the war. You might not be able to come back even if Suna becomes unsafe, because it has already been decided that refugees from our small neighboring countries will be brought here when the fighting starts. Our broken-down village is of the least strategic importance right now, and it can only stay that way if you are somewhere else."

Naruto pressed his lips together tightly, fighting down the horror at what he was hearing. The storehouses stocked with supplies, the patrols, the cancellation of all regular missions, the Alliance... it all made sense now. He had thought it was a little unusual that regular missions had been stopped when the opposite had been the case after Orochimaru's attack in his time. Now he knew why. 'Oh by the way, Naruto, there is a war. We are only telling you because there's no way to hide it anymore.' Wonderful.

"You are right," he said finally. "It's probably better if I'm not here. But... there has to be something that I can do to help! I can't just hide behind people forever and let them be in danger for me, whether it's Suna or Konoha, or anyone!"

Tsunade chuckled darkly. "Oh, you don't have to tell me how you feel about it, Naruto. I know. You forget: I have been dealing with you for far longer than you have been dealing with me. But what do you want me to do? Even if the enemy hadn't specifically targeted you, do you really think that I'm going to send any 12-year-old genin out to war any sooner than absolutely necessary? Would you have me throw Konohamaru and all the others into it, too?" she looked at him over her clenched hands. Her eyes burned with a fierce fire, and Naruto remembered suddenly that her little brother had been killed in war... the same age as him. He swallowed.

"Well then... will you let... the older me fight, at least?" he said falteringly. "And let me try to find a way to get back to my own time."

"I'm sure he will end up in the battle sooner or later," Tsunade leaned back in her chair, relaxing. "My money is on that as an eventual outcome. For what it's worth, that is what I wanted to begin with, but I was outvoted by the other Kage. Try not to get into that topic with the Kazekage; he was one of the ones most strongly against it. As for finding your way back... first we have to confirm who did it and how, and then work from there. I don't know how much you will able to do personally. A lot of what you will be doing in the Land of Wind will be up to the Kazekage."

Naruto sighed heavily.

"Hey, it might be fun," Tsunade said. "I'm sure he'll put you to work if you want. Being the
Kazekage's lackey could be good for you, since you'll be able to see how a Kage does their work. Just try not to embarrass him in front of any dignitaries,” she grinned as if she thought the entire thing was extremely funny.

"Lackey…?"

"Are there any other pertinent questions about the mission?"

They all shook their heads. Sakura shoved down the urge to giggle at Naruto's expression.

"Alright then, you are all dismissed. Get Naruto some equipment from the armory and set out within the hour."

When they left, Shizune came in from the adjacent office, hands clasped in front of her.

"It'll be risky to go all the way to Suna with only three guards. I know that we can't spare any more jounin, but…"

"You know that they'll be more likely to go undetected if they're a smaller group. Suna is the Hidden Village farthest away from where the Allied Forces are congregating, so it's the best place to keep him far as possible from the war," Tsunade said. "All the Kage and daimyo have agreed on that."

"No, I agree it's the best place. And I know that it's probably better in this case to send a small group. It just makes me nervous, when I think about the fact that we sent two jounin and two experienced chunin to guard the older Naruto. Now we're so shorthanded that we can't give the younger one any better, despite the fact that he has almost no experience with Akatsuki."

"Well, that's why they're meeting them on the way," Tsunade said in a final tone. "Besides… you can't shortchange those three. All of them were near the top of their respective classes. And maybe even more importantly, their desire to protect their friend comes from something deeper than the 'village hero' bandwagon."

Since all Naruto had to wear was essentially a normal Konoha uniform – minus the flak vest – he tried to negotiate for a bright orange backpack, but was voted down on account of them not having the time to try to find one. Instead, he got a boring gray one, along with the tool pouches and supplies necessary for what would be in total a three day journey.

When they were all just outside of Konoha and able to see it from a distance, they all turned back to give it a last look.

"I can tell that a lot has been added, just in the time I've been here," Naruto said in awe.

"Yeah," Sakura said. "By the time we come back, it will be completely different again."

Naruto didn't know when he would see this Konoha again, or even if he would; not if he succeeded in getting back to the past. It was a strange thought.

"Someone's running after us," Sai commented, pointing.

"Where?"

"It's Konohamaru," Neji said, puzzled.

Sure enough, moments later Konohamaru skidded to a stop several meters away from them, panting.
"Aha! Thought you could just sneak away, kore?!” he shouted angrily.

"What are you doing, Konohamaru?” Sakura said. "Go back to the village."

"No!” Konohamaru cried. "As a ninja-no, as a man, there is something that I have to do first!” He pointed at Naruto. "Naruto-niichan! I challenge you right here and now!"

"Hah?” Naruto said. "Konohamaru, we're leaving on a mission right now… but we can compare our progress in perverted jutsu when I get back, ok?"

"Not that!” Konohamaru shook his head agitatedly. "I mean I want you to fight me! I don't really think that you'll be coming back. This could be my only chance."

"Only chance for what?” Neji said. "Spit it out. We're kind of on a tight schedule here, you know."

"I've always, always looked up to you, niichan," Konohamaru said directly to Naruto, ignoring everyone else. "But the way things are going, I feel like I'm gonna be behind you my entire life. Sometimes I wonder if I could really be your rival, with such a gap between us. But now I have the chance to fight against you when you were the same age as I am now. Don't you see? I can't let a chance like that go for anything!"

"Hah!” Naruto said, shedding his backpack and walking toward him, hands ready near the kunai strapped to his leg. "Now that you mention it, I completely agree!"

"Now what?” Sakura looked at Neji.

"Should we stand back?” Sai said.

Neji sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "It isn't like either of them will listen if we say no. Hey!” he called, and Naruto and Konohamaru looked at him. "You have ten minutes, then we're leaving. And try not to break anything, or Tsunade-sama will kill all of us. I can't believe we're already getting delayed and we haven't even started," he grumbled, picking up Naruto's pack and dragging it to the treeline. Sai sat down on a log and Sakura went up into a tree to watch.

"Osu!” Naruto said, then he turned to Konohamaru, cracking his knuckles with a grin. "Don't think I'll go easy on you."

"Hah! Pretty soon you'll be begging for me to go easy on you. Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Konohamaru yelled, and three copies of himself appeared in formation around him, each wielding a kunai.

"Pretty impressive, but you should know that all I have to do is cancel it out," Naruto raised his hands into his favorite seal, "Kage–"

His eyes widened as the real Konohamaru Body Flickered out of sight at the same time that the three clones ran at him. Naruto dived and rolled out of the way as a fistful of shuriken came from behind, whirling harmlessly through the space where he had been standing.

_Dang, he's really serious_, Naruto thought, crouching near to the ground after his roll and watching warily. _And he can already use the Body Flicker Technique; that's really good._

Konohamaru's three clones were still after him, giving him no more time to think. Naruto dispelled the first one that reached him with an uppercut, and he elbowed the second one in the face after it tackled him around the middle. He jumped back and drew a kunai, facing the last.
"Where did the real you go?" he said, eyes roving all over the area. He spotted Sakura standing beside Sai and threw the kunai at her.

"What the hell, Naruto?" Sakura screeched, barely managing to dodge. "Now you're gonna have to deal with me!" she started stalking toward him.

"Ha, nice try!" Naruto shouted. "But Sakura-chan wasn't standing there a second ago! That's just a disguise to distract me from… this–!" he whirled around and his fist met with a fully solid object—one that did not dispel.

Konohamaru grunted and flew back a small distance, not expecting the hit, and landed hard on the ground. The fake-Sakura poofed into nonexistence and Konohamaru cursed, pushing himself up on his hands and knees.

"Done already?" Naruto said.

"Far from it!" Konohamaru growled. He jumped up and crossed his fingers, producing two more clones.

"Okay, if that's how you want to play it…" Naruto imitated him. "Taijuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

Dozens upon dozens of Naruto clones appeared, fencing in Konohamaru, surrounding him and his clones on every side. The three Konohamarus quickly stood back-to-back with each other, facing the huge mob. The Naruto clones all grinned maliciously.

"Come and get me!"

"Over heeeeere."

"Take your best shot, Omago-sama!"

"I'm gonna kick your ass!" Konohamaru shrieked.

Naruto was just about to ask him whether he wanted to surrender, when suddenly Konohamaru shouted, "Scatter!" and one of the clones peeled off from the group and came running straight in the direction of the real Naruto. The other clone darted in another direction, and Konohamaru himself ran in the direction opposite from his foe.

Naruto drew another kunai and brought it up to defend himself with, until he noticed that the clone racing toward him had a paper bomb stuck to its chest.

"Shit!" Naruto flipped backward and brought his arms up as a shield just as the paper bomb exploded. He squeezed his eyes shut at the bright flash of light and heard the pops of dispelling clones accompanying the explosion. It wasn't enough to come close to dispelling them all, though. Naruto wrenched open his eyes and saw his clones already filling in the gaps.

In the meantime, the real Konohamaru climbed, punched, and elbowed his way through a thin spot he had noticed in the circle. Naruto saw him running up the trunk of a very tall tree. When he reached almost the very top, Konohamaru launched himself off of it, spinning around and forming handsigns.

"Katon: Haisekishou!"

He was poised exactly over the chaotic mob when he took a huge breath and spit out a rapidly spreading cloud of gray dust.
Not knowing what the mysterious cloud could do, and not particularly eager to find out, Naruto scrambled away from the edge of it. It wasn't a moment too soon. Konohamaru bit off the end of the cloud, flinting it with his teeth. The cloud of dust flashed red in an instant and went off with more energy than a paper bomb, incinerating everything contained in it. All of the clones clustered below went up in flame and died horrible burning deaths. There was a whoosh of flame and a chorus of popping sounds filled the air. Konohamaru dropped down into the thick smoke left over from the attack in order to conceal himself.

"Whoa, that was awesome!" Naruto called to him, walking closer while watching the place where he'd disappeared carefully. "I bet you had to use up a lot of chakra to do that, though. And even if you get rid of all of them once, there's always more where that came from!"

He froze in place when he saw a blue glow coming from inside the smoke. The harsh sound of rapidly swirling chakra met his ears.

"What?" Naruto gasped, and Konohamaru burst out of the smoke with his remaining clone by his side, the both of them working together to hold a small Rasengan. Naruto barely had time to register its existence before it was slammed into his abdomen.

Naruto flew back and rolled several times before stopping at the base of a tree. Konohamaru's clone dispelled and he wavered on his feet, before losing the fight against gravity and dropping to his rear end. He was panting heavily, but grinning.

"Dang, I never realized what that felt like," Naruto groaned, sitting up. Konohamaru's jaw fell open when he saw that he was moving again so quickly. Naruto pulled back the hand that was covering his abdomen, revealing a hole in his shirt and an angry-red, welted patch of skin underneath. "I'm really glad you didn't hit me with that full-power, or it could have been really bad."

"Awww!" Konohamaru slapped himself in the forehead. "I thought I at least made it stronger than that!"

"You idiot! What were you thinking?" Sakura jumped out of her tree and stomped over to Konohamaru, pulling him up from the ground by his collar. "What would possess you to use a move like that in a fight against your fellow genin?"

"Oh..." Konohamaru hung his head. "I guess I got carried away, I'm sorry."

"No, it's great!" Naruto stood slowly, grinning and propping himself on Sai's offered arm. "When did you learn how to do that, Konohamaru?"

"Eheh, a little while ago," Konohamaru smiled bashfully and rubbed his head. "You taught it to me."

Sakura let him down with a snort and gave him a cursory look over. "You're not suffering from chakra exhaustion. I would guess that since you didn't have the will to really hurt Naruto, your body did not push past its own limits and produce a powerful attack. Which is a good thing, by the way, or we'd probably be even more delayed and Tsunade-sama really would kill us," she turned and walked over to examine Naruto.

"It's alright, I'm fine. Well, my shirt isn't," Naruto said, looking woefully down at the hole in one of his only shirts.

"It is strange, though... it really does seem like it should have done more damage," Sakura mused, inspecting the injury. "It didn't even draw any blood, though it's pretty swollen."

"Well, it definitely hurts like I got kicked by a horse, or one of Baachan's high heels. I can feel it,
like, in my guts," he grimaced.

"So are you two done? Can we get going already?" Neji said.

"Yeah, I guess," Naruto said. He walked over to where Konohamaru was standing. "You were really awesome, Konohamaru! You already have a bunch of really neat ninjutsu that you can use. I'm kind of jealous; you know at least one that I don't."

"Uhhh," Konohamaru sighed. "Your amount of energy is just too crazy, niichan. How am I ever supposed to really beat you if I run out of power before you do?"

"You're pretty good at strategizing already," Sai said. "Sheer power isn't everything. Besides, you are really powerful, too. Many genin cannot use elemental ninjutsu, not to mention the Rasengan."

"Go for more spin next time," Naruto advised. "Well, not on me 'cause I don't want a hole to be put through me, but you know what I mean."

"Thanks guys. Good luck on your mission," he held out his hand to Naruto and looked stubbornly down at the ground.

"I wish I could stay and hang out with you more," Naruto said, shaking his hand. "It'll be fun when I go home, because I'll be the only one that knows what you can really do."

"You'll definitely make it back," Konohamaru sniffled. He scrubbed at his eyes with his arm and whirled around. "Bye everyone!" he gave a quick wave to the group and turned to jog back to the village.

"Hm," Sakura smiled and put a hand on her hip. "Well, if we're all ready, can we get going now?"

"Yes," Neji said. He tossed Naruto's backpack to him and led the way.

The days stuck inside the hospital made the freedom of running through the trees even more exhilarating than usual. The plan was to make to the border of the Land of Rivers before stopping for the night, therefore making the first leg of the trip the longest. Once they hit foreign territory, allied or not, they would be moving with a little more caution. They were to meet the group from Suna before sunset the next day, make camp early, and set out across the desert in the wee hours of the morning in order to miss the worst of the beating sun.

Since they were focused on covering as much ground as possible, no one talked much aside from Neji's periodic reports on their surroundings, and Sai's consultations of the map. They kept going for a while past nightfall, after a brief discussion where they all agreed that they could press on, in order to reach the edge of the Fire Country before making camp. The only way it was safe to continue in the dark was for Neji to use his eyes continuously and watch for every possible sign of an ambush.

When they finally reached the border, one of the many rivers that gave the Land of Rivers its name, everyone was strained and more than ready for a rest.

"How are you feeling?" Sakura asked Sai, handing him a cup of tea. He had settled down on his bedroll almost immediately after they set up camp.

"I'm a little sore from a day of running after the lack of exercise, but otherwise fine," he accepted the tea with a smile.

"How is your battle wound, Naruto?" she asked, turning to him.
"Let me see," Naruto pulled up the hole-less shirt he'd changed into. "Oh. Yep. Completely gone."
Sakura gave him a strange look and shook her head. "If it was anyone but you, I'd be freaked out."
Neji was sitting cross-legged in front of the fire, sipping his own cup of tea and looking over their map. Naruto walked over and plopped down next to him.
"How's our progress, Neji-taichou?" he asked pompously.
Neji gave an amused 'hmph'. Sakura came over to look at the map with them.
"We'll be able to go at a slightly easier pace tomorrow," Neji said. "But we'll have to be especially alert. In the current climate, we are required to report any of our own major military movements through an allied country. That would normally only apply to groups larger than a squad, but both Kage and Jinchuuriki fall into that category as well. We had no choice but to inform the local daimyo about our passage through. They weren't told our route or the coordinates of the rendezvous, but it is still more likely that, if anywhere, this is where we'll meet an ambush or enemy pursuit. We cannot be certain that there were no information leaks,"
Neji looked up at Sai. "If that happens, we are close enough now that it would be possible to request backup from the Kazekage or his representative, since they will already be heading in our direction by tomorrow. Send them an SOS immediately, without waiting to find out the enemy's intentions. Hopefully, there will be enough advance warning for you to send a message out before we make contact, but even if we are taken by surprise, make that your first priority."
"I will go ahead and write it now, so that all I have to do is add the coordinates," Sai said, reaching out to pull his bag toward him.
"Good idea," Neji agreed. "Unfortunately, we know that Madara has the ability to appear with no warning at all by using some type of teleportation jutsu. But, presumably, he would have to know exactly where we are in order to be able to land close enough to attack us without warning. Otherwise, whether he can teleport or not, he still has to find us first."
"Right, so, he's the leader of Akatsuki, and now I know he can teleport," Naruto said. "Baachan said you are supposed to tell me more about this guy, right?"
"Yeah," Neji crossed his arms. "And I think it's for the best. Tsunade-sama knew that there would be no way to hide the fact that we are about to be at war from you, not once you left the village. Maybe things would be different if we knew how to send you back right now. But as long as you are staying here, I think you need to know the situation."
"But I still don't really understand how we could be going to war against a single guy," Naruto said. He glanced at Sakura and Sai. They were looking at him, but they didn't seem upset that he was going to learn more about the future. They knew this was coming. Instead, they looked like they were watching his reaction.
"Well, as you said, Madara is the leader of Akatsuki," Neji said. "And just one member of Akatsuki, Pein, was able to destroy Konoha all by himself. The rest of them managed to capture nearly all the world's Jinchuuriki, despite the fact that all of them were extremely powerful. Just knowing that he is the commander of a group like that demands that we take him seriously. The Alliance came about right after he declared war on all of us. The Five Kage had called a summit in the Land of Iron, originally just to discuss Akatsuki and the Jinchuuriki abductions, but then Madara and some of his associates invaded it. It is plain from his actions how confident he is. He came right out and told the Five Kage what his plan was, and declared war when they did not agree to cooperate."
"And…? What is his plan?"

Silence reigned for a moment when no one answered, and they all just stared into the campfire. Everyone looked lost in their own thoughts.

"Come oooooon!" Naruto said. "You can't go so far and leave that part out."

"Madara is an Uchiha," Sakura said softly, watching the fire with her arms curled around her legs. "And he possesses the Mangekyo Sharingan, like Itachi; he can use the Tsukuyomi. He claims to be able to use the power of the bijuu to amplify his dōjutsu to the point where he can cast it on the moon, causing it to reflect back down on the world, trapping everyone in the world in an infinite Tsukuyomi. He calls it the Moon's Eye plan, Tsuki no Me."

Naruto stared at her with his mouth agape while what she said slowly sunk in.

"It was for that reason that he formed Akatsuki," Neji said. "Capturing all the Jinchuuriki and extracting their bijuu was the first step. He appealed to the Kage to give up the last of them and moved into open hostility when they refused. It's clear that he's gotten impatient… and maybe he has decided that it will be too difficult to get his hands on the last of the Jinchuuriki now that they are being protected by the Alliance."

"Okay…" Naruto said slowly, struggling to process all this new information. "I think I get what you're saying about his plan and the war and all. But… what the hell does all that have to do with Kabuto, and bringing me to the future? And…" he rubbed his hands through his hair in frustration. "I thought all the Uchiha were gone. Where did this guy come from, out of nowhere?"

"Kabuto and Madara have joined forces," Sai said. "I was on the team that was watching Kabuto's movements initially, but we were swapped out for another group better specialized for tracking. They observed Kabuto and Madara making an agreement with one another."

"Wait, wait; I remember," Naruto said quickly. "And Kakashi-sensei said that Kabuto gave them the slip on the same day that I came here, and that's why everyone thinks he's the one that did it, along with the fact that Orochimaru was the only one that knew how to use the dead-people move."

"An ineloquent way of putting it, but yes," Neji said.

"But, if they are in league with one another… it could have been Madara that brought me here, right? Even if it had to be Kabuto that resurrected Itachi and Pein, they could have been in on it together. And everyone thinks they did it because they thought I would be an easier target when I'm younger?"

"Probably," Neji gave a one-sided shrug. "It amounts to the same thing at this point. Whether it was Kabuto or Madara, it is clear that one of them did it, and it is also clear that they are actively trying to capture you. Now you should be able to understand what is at stake, and why we can't let that happen."

For the first time, the vague concept of the Akatsuki chasing after him coalesced into a sharp, fine end point; they would take away the power inside of him and use it to end the world. And just then Naruto felt true fear; not the fear of being captured or hurt or even killed, but the fear that something dark and ominous was going to swallow up the entire world, and his lack of strength would be the thing that caused it to happen. He drew up his knees and rested his forehead on them, trying to force the fear down. He didn't have the strength to go against these monsters, and he didn't have the time to get strong enough, not unless he could escape back in time.
"I have *have* to get out of here," he said through gritted teeth. "The only way that I can possibly help is by taking myself out of the equation. I can't take just sitting around, and if I can't fight, I'm not doing any good by being here."

"Easier said than done, though, isn't it?" Sai said in his calm, even way. "We'll have to stop the jutsu caster, or get him to reverse it."

"Ugh, I don't know," Naruto looked up. "If we could find out who did it and how, that would be something, right? If we run into one of them, we should try to get some information out of them."

"I'd rather not run into them," Neji pointed out.

"I'm just saying."

"We'll get you back where you belong," Sakura said. "I don't know how long it will take, but we aren't going to let them win anyway, so it really comes down to whether they want to send you back the easy way or the hard way."

"Hm…" Naruto picked up a small twig and absently broke it into smaller pieces.

*If it's just Kabuto, one-on-one,* he mused, *I could probably at least hold him off; maybe even enough to ask him some questions. I faced him once before, after all.* He threw the twig pieces into the fire. As long as he was here, he would fight. It didn't really matter how hopeless it seemed; there was nothing else to be done. Backing down was not something that he was fond of doing.

"Well," Neji said, standing up. "Everyone should turn in. We'll still be leaving fairly early in the morning."

Sakura stood up as well. "Shouldn't we take the guard in turns so that you don't have to overuse your eyes?"

"Aa," he agreed, rolling up the map. "I'll go first, then you, then Naruto, then Sai since Tsunade-sama recommended that he get at least one more full night of sleep. But if anyone notices anything suspicious, wake Sai first so that he can send the message."

"But wait, I had more questions about Madara…" Naruto craned his head to watch them walk back and forth, putting away scrolls and unrolling bedrolls.

"Get some sleep for now," Neji said. "We still have plenty of time to get into that, even after we get to Suna."

Naruto shrugged and stood up, dusting off his pants. He settled down at a comfortable distance from the fire and lay with his arms crossed under his head, looking up at the sky. The clearing they were in was very small – a little hollow barely safe to light a fire in – but there was a jagged hole in the canopy of trees where the stars peeked through. Several yards away, the river gurgled quietly. Naruto closed his eyes and basked in the nostalgic camp feeling. Though they hadn't yet left the Fire Country, and he was among friends, he still felt a little bit homesick. It was a *different* version of home he was thinking about.

The biggest consolation was knowing that whatever the Land of Wind held in store for them, anything that happened would be another piece to the puzzle that, if they could just see how it fit together, could be the key to undoing the bizarre situation that he found himself in.

He opened his eyes and raised his hand slowly, curling it around the moon like it was a jewel that he could pluck out of the sky. It was a waning moon, a sleepy eye on the verge of closing. Who knew
that such a peaceful thing could be dangerous? Was this the same moon that hung in his own sky? Was this even the same reality? If not, was there any way to be sure one had any bearing whatsoever on the other?

Trying to work that one out made his brain feel like someone was wringing it out, so he lowered his hand and closed his eyes again.

*Real or not, he thought, I have to try. I can't stop, or look back and doubt. This is enough.*
A/N: So here are some extra scenes from the Intro Arc. They're things I had ideas for but didn't write initially because I didn't think I could pull it off well or could replace easily with a summary. That, and I wanted to reduce the number of scenes from the POV of other characters in the intro part.

Read what you want, skip what you want. It's like that random roly cart in the grocery store with the extra baked goods. Mmm.

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The Beginning

[This extra is very skippable. When I first posted this fic, the part with Kabuto at the very beginning wasn't there. It started with Naruto and Teuchi. Later, with the help of the awesome Ser Serendipity, I revised it to be the way it is now by adding the part with Kabuto and trimming some of the meanwhile-in-the-past stuff. Below are the little sections that I changed the most. After the scene switches to Naruto waking up in the future, there is no change between the old and new versions.]

…..

The next three days were ones of adjusting to changes. The effects of everything that had taken place
since the start of the Exams were slowly filtering down now that things were mostly settled. There was no sign that something decidedly unsettling was rapidly closing in.

The day after meeting with Iruka, Naruto found out exactly what Konohamaru was so upset about, and how upset he really was. The crazy kid locked himself in the Hokage's study with an intricate series of booby traps to keep everyone out, and Naruto was occupied for the greater part of the day trying to coax him out.

He tried everything: threats, friendly words, ramen, even Oiroke no Jutsu, but to no avail. He didn't know what to do then. That was pretty much his entire arsenal. He had finally decided to resort to pulling out the Rasengan when Tsunade simply knocked him out of the way and went into the study, calmly grabbed a book, and left as if the traps weren't even there.

It took a while, but Konohamaru eventually managed to explain what was bothering him. He didn't like the idea of his grandfather being replaced so soon. He didn't understand complicated stuff about politics and keeping up a strong face to the rest of the world. Naruto couldn't blame him—he didn't really understand that stuff either.

Sasuke was finally released from the hospital, though he had to take at least a day's bed rest at home. Naruto and Sakura would have spent that whole day with him if they could, but they had been assigned several D-rank missions helping to clear the village of debris so that buildings could be rebuilt. That evening, though, they rushed over to his apartment to keep him company.

Sasuke was sitting up in bed and was awake most of the time, though he was still staring blankly into space a lot. The room was soothingly dim, and Naruto and Sakura tried to speak in soft voices. According to Tsunade, the psychological attack that Sasuke had suffered at the hands of his brother had been damaging on a very deep level, past the attack's usual potential, which was already formidable. The personal nature of the attack made it even worse than what Kakashi had faced. Essentially, they had to try to pull him back gently to the real world from a dream world of nightmares.

But Tsunade had also deemed him fit for release, which had to count for something. Though he sometimes seemed to drift off for no reason, most of the time he was able to respond to what he felt like responding to, and even had a touch of his old sarcasm.

After being good and following doctor's orders the whole day, he was even allowed to attend the inauguration the next day. Kakashi kept close by his side during it, keeping an eye on his young charge, though of course Naruto and Sakura were brimming with faith in their friend and were just glad to see him moving around again. Sasuke stood at the edge of the crowd, leaning against a tree, but his friends and classmates were in the thick of it when Tsunade declared herself the Fifth Hokage.

"Isn't Tsunade-sama amazing?" Sakura said, her eyes shining with awe as she and Naruto looked up at the Hokage Tower from below. "It's strange seeing her in the Hokage hat after seeing an old man wear it for so long."

... 

Since evening was gathering in the edges of the sky and he hadn't eaten since the morning, he decided to take advantage of all the restaurants being open and get something to eat. As an added bonus, many of them had brought their dishes out in the street to take advantage of the influx of traffic in front of the tower. It was almost like a festival. He wandered around, weaving in and out of the happily chatting groups of people that gathered at these places. It got somewhat boring after sampling enough here and there that he was too stuffed to eat much anymore. Without any of his
friends in sight, there was only so much fun to be had, but he didn't feel like leaving the energetic atmosphere for home either. He settled for people-watching on a wall while he slowly finished off some dango.

*I wonder how Gaara's doing,* he thought.

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**Sai's Tsukuyomi**

[Warning: This section is rated M to be safe. Some OOC due to, well… it not being real; gory violence; major character deaths, child deaths; angst. You can skip without missing anything if horrible mind torture is not your cup of tea. I sort of wanted to include this, but it wasn't really necessary and it's kind of a tone-breaker in terms of the rest of the story.]

Sai didn't think, he just reacted. It didn't matter how or why Uchiha Itachi was suddenly here, standing in the doorway of Naruto's room. All that mattered was that he was, and Naruto had locked eyes with him, and Itachi's eyes were shifting into the Mangekyou Sharingan.

Sai shoved Naruto out of the way and blocked the kunai Itachi aimed at his throat with his tantō. He couldn't help it. The moment he heard the sharp ping of metal on metal, Sai swiveled his head to face his enemy on instinct and got caught in the black sickles etched in Itachi's eyes.

Everything froze, and then turned black. Clouds moved in a jerky, fast motion over a red sky. Sai looked around. All the colors were inverted.

In front of him a young man stood, the Uchiha fan displayed prominently on his back.

"Sasuke?" Sai said.

Sasuke didn't look back at him. He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword and started walking without giving any sign that he'd heard at all. Sai followed him.

Misty shapes came rushing toward them in a blast of wind and Sai brought his arms up in defense. The wind blew ferociously, howling through his ears and hair and clothes before stopping abruptly. Sai looked up cautiously.

Their surroundings had changed from a blank, dark void to Konoha as it was before the destruction. They were standing in the main thoroughfare lined up with the Hokage monument in the back. Sasuke was walking toward it, heading deeper into town, undeterred by the strange transformation.

"It's him! Uchiha Sasuke!" a voice shouted. A group of four ninjas came running toward them, faces twisted in anger. Sasuke stopped walking. His hand clenched around the hilt of the sword.

The shinobi that had yelled dived at Sasuke with a kunai. Sasuke sidestepped casually and drew his sword too quickly for the eye to see. Sai was about to call out, but the words got stuck. Sasuke crouched down and stabbed his attacker through, aiming up between the ribs to the heart.

"Bastard!" the other three jumped at him.

"Get back! He's too strong for you!" Sai ran at them, but it was too late. They were systematically cut down and their bodies fell to the ground like useless wet rags. Their blood spread over the path, streaming into the spaces between the paving stones and creeping toward the edges into the grass.

"What are you doing, Sasuke?" Sai said angrily, walking up as close as he dared. He reached for his tantō, but it wasn't there.
Sasuke turned around. His expression was dark and stormy, and his eyes burned red.

"If you don't stop this right now, they won't just arrest you. They'll kill you on sight," Sai warned.

Sasuke didn't answer. In fact, it didn't look like he had even heard. He was looking through Sai as if he wasn't even there, staring at a point in the trees. Sai looked around. It hadn't taken long. ANBU masks were showing up in the trees and the bushes, surrounding them on all sides.

"Surrender, Uchiha Sasuke. This is as far as you go," a bird-masked ANBU stepped into the road and walked close to Sai. "If you come quietly, the Hokage promises to make your death a quick one. I think you should realize how generous an offer that is, considering what you've done."

Sasuke flicked the blood off of his sword and put it back in its sheath. He closed his eyes.

"He's going to use the Mangekyou Sharingan! Apprehend him now before–"

The bird-masked ANBU burst into black flames. He shrieked and fell to the ground, rolling and lashing out in agony. Sai ran over to him, but was at a loss as to what to do. He knew that touching the flames would cause them to spread to his body. He could only watch as the flames devoured the man's body, hand over his nose to block some of the stench of burning flesh. It was only a few seconds before he was reduced to a pile of ash. Sai turned around and saw Sasuke staring with wide, inverted eyes, wiping away the blood running down his cheek.

"Why are you doing this?" Sai asked coldly.

"It is my generosity that matters here, no one else's," Sasuke said in a strange, mad voice, "All the war, pain, and death all of you were spared thanks to my family's sacrifice – I intend to pay it back with interest."

"What are you talking about?"

But Sasuke continued to ignore him. He shifted his stance and glanced all around just as all the ANBU came bursting out of the woods at him. His body flared up with a purple aura and an ethereal-looking ribcage manifested around him, deflecting all their blows when they struck. Two skeletal-looking arms formed and grabbed ANBU members, crushing them. Three others burst into black flames.

Sai couldn't stand idly by anymore. Even if he was unarmed, he had to do something.

"Sasuke!" he cried out, running straight at him recklessly, "Stop and think for a minute! Maybe we can work this out!"

Sai fully expected Sasuke to shift his attention, hopefully giving the ANBU an opening to attack. However, he continued to act like he couldn't hear Sai at all. More of the ANBU were set on fire and the ones caught in the Susanoo's grip screamed as their spines cracked sickeningly. Sasuke threw their broken bodies down on the ground.

"If you want someone to blame for this," Sasuke said, "Blame Uzumaki Naruto."

Naruto? Sai felt confused for a moment. There was something very strange about all of this.

All of the ANBU on the scene were dead. Sasuke deactivated his Susano'o and continued walking methodically toward the center of town.

"Wait!" Sai called angrily. He went up to Sasuke and tried to grab his shoulder – but his hand passed
through. As if it was made of smoke or fog, it dispersed and disappeared and made no effect on Sasuke at all. Sai stared at his hand as it reformed.

"What is going on?" he whispered.

There was a civilian couple ahead on the street. Sasuke drew his sword again and they stopped and stared at him apprehensively.

"NO," Sai yelled, but of course it was no use. Sasuke cut both of them down in seconds and the contents of their market bags spilled out into the street. Oranges rolled forlornly into the gutter and white chrysanthemums were crushed and dyed red in the dusty street.

"SASUKE!" a voice screamed with a mixture of horror and anguish.

Both of them looked to see Sakura walking toward them with her fists clenched and her face set in a grimace. She was looking at the dead civilians and fighting back tears.

"No, Sakura, get back!" Sai said, "Go get help! You shouldn't be here. Let someone else–"

"Why them?" Sakura asked in a wavering voice, "If you wanted revenge, why would you go after people who aren't even shinobi? How many people have you killed already?"

Sasuke considered for a moment, "I believe that makes a dozen so far."

Sakura lowered her head. Her entire body was shaking.

"Why couldn't you just be patient?" she said quietly, "I told you that I'd come for you. Then we could have just settled it between us and no one else would have had to get involved."

"That's funny; I think I've heard that one before," Sasuke said, "I killed the last loser that said that, and that's why I'm here. If Naruto couldn't do it, what makes you think you stand a chance?"

"Don't you dare say his name! You don't have the right," Sakura said dangerously, her eyes blazing.

"I have to, in order let everyone know why they are dying; it's so they know their beloved hero failed to protect them. And you're next."

"No," Sakura said, drawing a kunai, "You are."

Sai stepped in between them, "Stop this!"

Sasuke ran right through him. Sai's body dissipated into vapor and for a brief moment, he couldn't see anything. He couldn't tell up from down and the clangs and shouts of battle met him in a confused jumble.

Wait, he thought, that's it. That should not happen. None of this should be happening.

He played everything that happened back in his mind. Naruto wasn't dead. He knew that for sure. That had to be wrong.

His body was reappearing. Sai shook his head to try to clear out some of the vagueness. Naruto wasn't dead. But he was in danger. Why? Sai struggled to remember.

The memory of Itachi's Mangekyou Sharingan came back to him but for a second that only served to confuse him more. What would Itachi have to do with it? But then he remembered that he had stopped Itachi from using the Tsukuyomi on Naruto. Which meant…
"It hit me," Sai said out loud.

Now it all made sense. If someone wanted to mentally torture Naruto, the worst thing they could do would be to show Sasuke attacking Konoha and rubbing it in that Naruto couldn't stop him. Sai looked at his ephemeral hand pensively. Was the intent to make the victim feel like a ghost?

A small cry brought his attention back to the battle and his eyes widened in horror.

Sasuke was standing behind Sakura with his sword pressed against her throat. He took the sharpest, cleanest part near the hilt and dragged it across her exposed neck. Her blood spewed out and Sasuke grabbed her by the hair and threw her down to the side carelessly like a thing of little consequence.

"Sakura!" Sai shouted, running to her side and kneeling down. He knew now that none of this was real, but he couldn't help it. It looked and felt real.

Sakura was clutching her throat, keeping the wound closed, blood seeping between her fingers. Her breathing was shallow and raspy. Her hands started glowing green. Sasuke took her right hand and laid it palm down on the ground beside her and stabbed it through with a kunai, causing her to gasp and shudder with pain. He grabbed her other hand and Sai tried to reach out to stop him, but of course it was no use. He placed that one next to the first, palm-up, curling Sakura onto her side in a semi-fetal position. Her still bleeding throat leaked onto the ground and stained her hair. He stabbed her hand through with a kunai again and this time the only response she could muster was gritted teeth.

"Sakura," Sai said, his voice cracking. He reached for her and his hand just dissolved into smoke.

"I'll be back later to see if you're still alive. Just stay there for a while," Sasuke said carelessly, and he started to walk away.

"I would rather," Sakura said very faintly, and Sasuke paused, "I would rather die by your hand than live seeing what you've become."

"Hmph," Sasuke laughed, and continued walking.

"Sakura," Sai said again, even knowing it would do no good, "I know that you're probably afraid of something like this really happening, too. You hide it most of the time, but I know you're afraid of it too. It won't happen. It won't. I promise. Naruto is stronger than that, and so are you. And we'll all work together. Because we are friends. And because we're Team 7," and he stood up and left her bleeding in the street, as difficult as it was, because it wasn't real and staying there was worse.

Already he felt drained. At one time, he had been very good at keeping his emotions in check. Most of the time, he didn't even need to try. But Danzo had been right about one thing for sure – having connections with other people made that task infinitely harder. But Sai knew just as well that it could be a source of strength.

Because after seeing Sakura like that, he was suddenly glad that he had been dragged into this dream world instead of Naruto. It made him feel cold inside to think about the fact that all of this had been intended for him. Sai doubted that Naruto would have ever realized that the entire thing was a genjutsu. Even if he could, it would still be too cruel.

Sai had no choice but to follow Sasuke around as he killed the citizens of Konoha one by one. He experimented by trying to go in a different direction than Sasuke, but when he got far enough away the surroundings would dissolve around him and he would end up back where Sasuke was. There were other aspects not true to reality. Word never seemed to spread that Sasuke was going around
killing everyone. People that saw him labeled him as a criminal and often attacked, but they always seemed ignorant of the other killings unless Sasuke killed someone right in front of them. He always told them that they should blame Naruto for their deaths.

After Sakura, Sai was able to keep his composure most of the time, bolstered with the resolve that it was better that he was the one here instead of Naruto. They were burned, stabbed, crushed, electrocuted, and forced to see their families and friends cut down in front of them, but Sai was able to distance himself from the horrifying images well enough.

This continued for 70 more hours.

Sai couldn't even see the blood as blood or the deaths as deaths anymore. He tried so hard to revert back to his emotionless state that he actually succeeded. After a while, he just felt bored.

A shinobi fell down at Sai's feet. He had a large diagonal slash across his front, and blood was rapidly soaking the flak vest.

"You can blame Uzumaki Naruto for your misfortune," Sasuke said calmly over the man's pained gasping.

The man's face twisted with pain and effort, and Sai watched interestedly as his mouth worked to form words.

"Never," he said.

"What was that?" Sasuke said.

"He has… been blamed for our misfortunes long enough," the shinobi said, "Kill everyone, but you won't convince anyone."

"Ha," Sasuke said, and he walked away.

Sai followed after him, feeling slightly more awake than he did a moment ago. He managed to feel a little bad for that last one.

He looked up at the place they had just arrived, and he woke from his stupor a little more. It was the Ninja Academy. Even though his body was partly incorporeal, he could suddenly feel his pulse ringing in the tips of his fingers. It was dread.

What was this feeling for? He had less of a connection to this place than almost anywhere else in Konoha. He hadn't been allowed anywhere near the place in his childhood. Even after becoming a regular shinobi, he hadn't been there but a couple of times in order to visit the assignments office. So why could he feel the smallest bit of emotion getting past his well-constructed mental wall?

They walked into the school. Classrooms murmured with shuffling and the drone of lectures, but Sasuke walked past several of them. Sai's sense of dread grew. He felt fully aware of what was going on for the first time in a while. There were students and teachers behind those doors, going about their business, inexplicably unaware of the killer walking past their doors. That killer wanted all of them to end. For the moment, though, he had a specific target.

Sasuke snapped the classroom door open. Everyone in the room turned and looked at him in surprise.

It was Iruka. Of course. Sai should have seen this one coming.
"Sasuke?" Iruka said in surprise. His surprise turned to anger very quickly – almost hatred.

"You must be wondering why I am here," Sasuke said, "But I promised Naruto that I would come visit you after I finished with him."

"You bastard," Iruka said in a seething voice, drawing a kunai. His face was shadowed with anger and he looked completely unconcerned for his own safety as he stalked forward.

"Stay where you are," Sasuke said, and he threw a fistful of shuriken into the room. They weren't aimed at Iruka, however. The metal stars landed among the students, landing next to arms leaned on desks or pinning clothing to chairs. No one was even scratched, but several students cried out in surprise or fear.

Iruka's expression changed immediately. He looked at his students and then back at Sasuke. Sasuke closed the classroom door behind him and smiled.

"Everyone, please keep your heads down behind your desks. Try to stay calm no matter what happens to me, and escape if you see an opening. Help one another," Iruka said. He moved in between Sasuke and the desks, "You will not harm any of these children."

The students all ducked down behind their desks with frightened murmurs.

"These children are only able to live in peace because the Uchiha clan paid for it in blood," Sasuke said, "Some of them may even owe their lives to the fact that their parents were not killed in a civil war. They're living on stolen time anyway."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Iruka demanded. Sai could tell he was trying to keep Sasuke talking so that he could think of something to do. But he was curious, too. He had heard Sasuke make a reference to citizens of Konoha owing their peace to the Uchiha clan, but he still had no idea what Sasuke meant by that.

"All of you are so ignorant," Sasuke said with a bitter laugh, "But Konoha doesn't seem to have a problem with sacrificing some children for the sake of others. They're nothing but a bunch of hypocrites, just like the other Hidden Villages."

Sai felt a pang, and he clenched his fists to try to push it down.

He's not talking about Root. This isn't your Tsukuyomi, Sai reminded himself. But it was no use. The dread was full-blown and nearing panic. He knew what it was. This school was something he never had, something that he could never relate to, but something that existed in part because it hadn't existed for him. He understood exactly what Sasuke meant. But the worst part wasn't that he could relate to what he was saying. It was that this place did have significance for Naruto, but he still would have been able to relate to what Sasuke was saying. That was part of the reason why the two had such a strong bond. They understood one another better than most other people understood them. This was where they had met and grown up together. And Sai could see why this part had been saved for the end. He knew what was going to happen, and there was nothing he could do to change it.

"Even if you are right, what can you hope to accomplish this way? If you hate us, that's fine, but do you really think that this will make you feel any better? What will you do after?" Iruka said. His personal anger seemed to have given way completely to concern for the safety of his students.

"I'm just keeping my word," Sasuke said, "I don't intend to be around for very long after."

He lifted his sword and it started crackling with electricity. Sai didn't have a lot of hope for this
confrontation. The end was already pre-determined. So far, no one had managed to do anything except get cut down right away.

He was right. Iruka moved to attack and Sasuke threw the sword at him. It pierced through his left shoulder and stuck him against the front row of desks. A couple of students hiding behind there shrieked.

It wasn't a fatal wound, but Iruka's body was paralyzed by the electric blade. He was half-standing, half-leaning against the small wall that made up part of the rise desks.

"You shouldn't bleed very much like that, but you won't be able to move," Sasuke said. He walked around to the front of the desks and his entire body started crackling with electricity.

"S-stop," Iruka said weakly, "Leave them alone. Kill me if you want, but don't…"

Sasuke leapt into the air and landed at the very back of the classroom, behind all the desks and the pathetic amount of protection they offered. Several of the kids screamed when they saw him.

"No!" Sai called out involuntarily.

"Chidori Senbon!"

Sai closed his eyes. He tried to cover his ears as well, but that seemed to do nothing to block the sound. Electricity crackled and young screams rent the air. They were deafening. Sai pressed his hands against his ears as hard as he could. The sound reminded him too much of children, friends, brothers killing one another. The years of watching it played out in each successive graduating class. How he was always so praised and favored because he could oversee it without batting an eye.

It's not real, he told himself over and over, it's not real it's not real it's not real it's not real it's not real.

Gradually the screams faded. Sai had somehow ended up on his hands and knees. His entire body was shaking. He wanted to throw up.

"No," he whispered, "This can't… it won't... it's not…"

Iruka was crying. He couldn't see anything either, but nor could he cover his ears.

"I'm so sorry, everyone," he choked out.

Sai didn't look up, but he heard the sharp crackle and sickening crunch that ended Iruka's life. His eyes were tightly screwed shut, but a few tears managed to escape and drip down onto the floor.

The darkness suddenly turned into agonizingly bright light. Sai was confused. He couldn't remember opening his eyes, nor could he understand why he was suddenly lying on his back instead of hunched on his knees.

A shadow hovered over his face. It was a hand. His eyes struggled to track its movement as it waved over him.

"Oh, crap," a familiar voice said from very far away, "don't tell me he did that… that thing…"

Was this real? Sai reached toward the hand and it stopped. Sai blinked to try to get his eyes into focus and he pushed the hand to one side. He was able to physically interact without dissolving. This was reality. Naruto was hovering over him, looking anxious.

"Don't worry," Sai said. It was very difficult to speak. His tongue felt heavy. Everything felt heavy.
He drifted back into the darkness again.

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**Tsunade Investigates Older-Naruto**

[I don't know the names of the two chuunin with Gai, Yamato, Aoba, and Naruto, so I am inventing names for them as needed. If anyone knows their real names, please correct me. "Tsugi" is the sensor-type that wears glasses, has short brown hair, and wears his headband like a bandana. It's not really important, but you may remember he was mentioned in the first chapter as the chuunin assigned to Shinji's village.]

Maito Gai, elite jounin of Konoha, was not feeling very well. Many days at sea had still not acclimated him to the boat's rocking and dipping, and tonight he was doing his best to keep watch while leaning his head over the deck's railing at the same time.

"Gai-san," Aoba called from behind him, "You should go on to bed. We'll be fine out here without you."

"No!" Gai lifted his head to demonstrate that he was perfectly fine, but a wave of nausea swept over him and he quickly had to lean back over the railing again.

"Geez," Yamato said, "I've never seen anyone continue to be seasick for so long."

"I'm keeping a watch out on the water," Gai hacked out, staring intensely out into the night, "If we come under attack, I'll be the first to know."

"Not if they attack the other side," Aoba sighed, "Tsugi-san should be able to sense someone coming before we are able to see them."

"It is possible that someone could fool my sensing abilities," Tsugi said modestly, "But if they went through the trouble of doing that, they'd probably hide their appearance as well."

"Right," Aoba said, "So, Gai-san, you really don't have to force yourself--"

"Wait," Tsugi said suddenly, standing up and looking out over the water, "I can sense someone. There are two, approaching rapidly."

"You have a bad sense of humor, Tsugi-san," Gai said sulkily, "I didn't know you were the kind of man to make fun of your comrades."

"No, I really do! They're getting closer. I am sure that they are headed for here!" Tsugi said. His eyes widened in alarm, "One of them – one of them is extremely powerful! At least Kage level!"

"What?" Yamato yelped.

They didn't have any more time to discuss it, because two figures leapt into the boat right after Yamato spoke. Gai gave a spirited battle cry and went at them with a Severe Leaf Hurricane, only he couldn't quite put enough energy into it and ended up flat on the deck after a heel to the face.

"Calm down, Gai!" Tsunade said, putting her foot down gracefully after the kick. Shizune was standing beside her.

"Tsunade-sama?" Yamato exclaimed, "What in the world are you doing here?"

Tsunade held a finger up to her lips, "Shh. I assume Naruto is sleeping right now?"
"Yes, but…" Aoba said, bewildered, "What is going on?"

"I don't want to wake him. He might get suspicious if he knows that I came here personally. Shizune and I are on our way to a meeting in Kumogakure to discuss preparations for the war. Have you not received the message we sent about Naruto?"

"No…" Yamato said, "Although we recently went through a dangerous passage that has been known to throw off messenger birds' sense of direction. It could have gone astray."

Tsunade and Shizune looked at one another disconcertedly.

"Is there something going on with my rival's young pupil?" Gai said, getting up from the deck in a wobbly kind of way.

"We assumed that he would still have to be here, since you would have come back or alerted us if he disappeared," Shizune said, "But have you noticed anything different or strange about him? Anything that might suggest that he's been replaced with an imposter?"

"An imposter?" Gai said loudly, and everyone shushed him.

"I don't believe so, Tsunade-sama," Yamato said, "I planted several tracking seeds on him so that he couldn't get away— I mean, so that we could always be sure of where he was. They're undetectable to anyone but me, so I don't see how any potential imposters would know about them."

"It looks like there really are two of them, then," Shizune said worriedly to Tsunade.

"Hm…"

"Tsunade-sama, if you could explain…?" Aoba said, "What has happened?"

"All right," Tsunade motioned them closer. Everyone huddled in and she recounted everything that happened in a low voice.

"It seems most likely that Yakushi Kabuto is the one behind it," she concluded in a low voice, "Anko's team reported that he suddenly left the hideout he was sharing with Madara shortly before all of this started. I haven't heard anything new from them yet, so his current location is unknown. We could assume that he was near Konoha that day since Naruto showed up near there, but that is only speculation. Frankly, he could be anywhere by now."

"This is…" Yamato shook his head in disbelief, "What are we going to do? It's good that they failed to capture him this time, but this is just another major thing to worry about."

"I'm going to bring it up at the meeting when I go," Tsunade said, "We'll have to figure out where to hide him. The other Kage are not going to like this either, but I don't think anyone will be surprised that the enemy is capable of doing this."

"I just hope they don't do it again," Tsugi said, "Do you think that they have the ability to control the people they summon, like with the Edo Tensei?"

"The Edo Tensei requires a tag to be planted in the victim's head in order to be able to control them," Tsunade said, "I can't deny that as a possibility for this technique as well, but with Naruto at least, everything seems fine. Well, almost everything," she looked at Yamato, "I tested his chakra and it had traces of Mokuton in it. I'm not sure why."

"If it's Kabuto, there are any number of reasons," Yamato said grimly.
"At any rate, keep an eye on him and make sure that there are no changes. But be careful not to tip him off that something is wrong. He might notice something eventually no matter what we do, because I'm not sure what kind of connection, if any, the two versions of him might have. But it'll be hard enough to keep him on the island even without all these other things."

"We'll do our best, Tsunade-sama," Gai promised.

"I need to see him before we leave," Tsunade said, heading for the cabin door, "I'd like to take a blood sample back for comparison."

Aoba followed after her with a lamp and they descended into the dark interior of the boat. Naruto's door creaked slightly as they opened it, and Aoba held up the lamp to let light in the room.

He was there snoring peacefully, back turned toward the door. Tsunade walked up to him quietly with a fond smile. Even while fast asleep, he suddenly seemed much bigger and grown up than Tsunade was used to. He had kicked off most of the covers and his mouth was open, giving him a dopey look that was very endearing in the eyes of an adoptive grandmother.

I really hope that all of this doesn't end badly, for either of you, Tsunade thought. She laid her hand on his head as if to ruffle his hair, but she was actually monitoring the flow of chakra in his brain so that he would not wake up. With a mental apology, she filled a capsule with blood from his arm and left the room feeling a little gloomy.

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A Dumb Self-Insert Omake Where Sasuke Is So Done With My Shit

(Warning: OOC, utter pointlessness?)

[Fanfiction author Blaizekit steps into a room full of eyeball tanks and closes the door. A young man blindfolded by bandages sits upon a table, staring at nothing.]

Blaize: Hiya, Sasuke! Long time no see! Ba dum tsst!

Sasuke: How much longer do I have to stay like this?

Blaize: Er….

Sasuke: I haven't appeared in the story since the FIRST CHAPTER and the best you can do is give me 79 words in between villain dialoguing and a funeral?

Blaize: Wow, you counted them? And hey look! I featured you in the extras, even though it was a nightmare version of you and not the real thing. Cool, yeah?

Sasuke: Cool is a word you could use for it. I can think of plenty of other ones.

Blaize: Oh.

Sasuke: Bullshit, for example.

Blaize: I make sure to mention you at least once in every chapter, isn't that good enough?

Sasuke: No. Just sitting here broodingly for weeks is getting old. When the hell are you going to let me actually be in the plot? The real me, not a genjutsu?

Blaize: C'mon, give me a break here. You can't just muscle your way into the story like Itachi did. All the action is happening elsewhere while you're stuck underground recovering from ninja surgery.
Sasuke: Uchiha can muscle their way into anything they want. And I follow that same tradition.

Blaize: Your babysitter isn't exactly going to let you leave to go be in the plot, you know.

Sasuke: Then bring the plot to me. I don't care how you do it. I'm sick of sitting here not looking at anything.

Blaize: I'll think about it… you know, I make Sasuke jokes from time to time, but I do actually like you, Sasuke.

Sasuke: No. Please don't.

Blaize: No – no, I didn't mean it like that. I like you in a "it's cool there's such a risky and conflicted-feelings-inducing character" kind of way.

Sasuke: Just figure out a way to get me into the next story arc, okay?

Blaize: Yessir!

Chapter End Notes

I would like to take the time to thank everyone that reviewed, followed, and favorited in the intro part! If I could, I would pull you all into the largest group hug imaginable. Look out for the next part of the story to begin on 1/11, and Happy New Year to all!
"There it is," Neji said, holding up his hand. The team stopped behind him, landing lightly on tree branches.

Beyond the edge of the trees was a long stretch of sandy grass that gradually shifted into pure sand, a gradient from vegetation to never-ending desert.

"We should be close to the rendezvous point now," Sai said.

Neji activated his Byakugan and looked down the treeline to the west.

"Well, do you see them?" Naruto asked, shifting impatiently on his tree branch.

Neji smiled. "Aa. And I think they see us, too."

"Huh?"

Neji pointed down. A small, strange floating orb circled around in the air below them. He jumped down from his tree and they all followed.

The floating orb whizzed around each of them in turn, and Naruto noticed when it paused near him that it was actually a floating eyeball.

"Hey," he said in surprise. "That's—"

They appeared in front of them in a whirl of sand. On the left, Kankuro stood with one hand on his hip and a cocky smile. On the right, Temari leaned against her fan; she looked relaxed, but was still cautious enough to have her weapon out. And in the middle, Gaara stood straight-backed with his arms folded, looking no more or less excited than usual. The two older siblings were dressed in dark blue and black tones, with light-colored neck wraps that draped down their front and back. Gaara was in red.

Anyone that didn't know him would have seen his indifferent posture and expression and get the impression of a bland, standoffish person. But to those that knew better, this seemingly impassive young man was practically beaming with joy compared to who he once was. Naruto wouldn't have needed Sakura's assurances to tell right away that Gaara's life situation had changed dramatically for the better.

"Gaara!" he called happily, starting forward.

"Hold on," Neji stuck his hand out to stop Naruto. He took out the mission scroll Tsunade gave them and tossed it onto the ground. It rolled open, revealing the text written on it. Gaara also took out a scroll and tossed it down. Gaara's scroll rolled open over theirs. There was a pop and a puff of smoke, and a pigeon came out of the crossed seals and zipped into the sky as if startled. Neji visibly relaxed and Temari snapped her fan into place on her back.

"I didn't know you guys were going to be the ones to meet us here!" Naruto said, trotting up to Gaara and looking around at the three siblings with a wide smile. He had to fight down the urge to hug his long-lost friend, since he wasn't sure whether Gaara had changed quite enough to be okay with random hugs. "I thought it was going to be a group of stiff, diplomatic types! Baachan said that the Kazekage was supposed to meet us here."
"Hah?" Temari put a hand on her hip. "Yeah. Gaara is the Kazekage."

Naruto's grin faded and he stared at her. He whirled around to look at his team quizzically.

"It's true!" Sakura said. "Told you you'd like the Kazekage!" she winked.

Naruto whirled back around to look at Gaara for confirmation.

"I don't have the hat with me, if that's what you're looking for," Gaara said, sounding quietly amused. "But it's true. Nobody mentioned it to you?"

"No," Naruto said loudly. "How did—I don't—this is awesome!"

Gaara smiled. *Smiled.*

"I can tell you a little about it later; but first, I have some news. There's been a slight change of plans," Gaara said, bending down and picking the scrolls up from the ground. He straightened and rolled up each of the scrolls neatly.

"Eh?" Sakura said.

"I know that we were going to camp here early and leave early in the morning," Gaara handed their scroll to Neji. "But something has come up and we need to get back sooner than planned. I'm afraid we'll have to leave right away, and travel through the night."

The happy-reunion atmosphere changed. Gaara's tone had stayed the same, but he suddenly seemed more serious.

"What happened?" Neji asked.

"A while after we left, we got a messenger hawk from the village council, saying that the Wind Daimyo had dropped by unexpectedly," Kankuro said. "He was expecting us to be there, even though he didn't warn us that he was going to visit. Like there's *nothing* else we could be doing. He wants to see us right away."

"At any rate, we have little choice but to change plans and return to the village soon. It'll be faster if we fly on my sand," Gaara said. "It might be a little crowded, but I want to make the platform small as possible."

"I can carry someone with my *Choujuu Giga*, if you like. I can make a bird large enough to hold two or three people," Sai offered.

Gaara nodded. "Good. We'll rest here a few minutes and start out soon."

Everyone put down their packs or weapons and sat in a loose circle on the grass. A few brought out energy bars or canteens.

"I don't get it; why does your daimyo want you to get back so badly, anyway?" Naruto asked. "It's his fault for showing up when you're gone, so why should you have to change your plans? Why does he even want to see you?"

"They didn't say," Gaara said.

"Ha!" Temari said haughtily. "All that any of the daimyo care about is what's going to happen to them in the war. Sometimes I think the Wind Daimyo believes our allegiance is supposed to be to *him* above everything, like in the old days; never mind Suna or the people of the Wind Country."

Neji gave a humorless smile. "The Fire Daimyo wanted members from all the noble clans of Konoha to supplement his personal guard during the war. I happened to be there when he mentioned it, so he made sure to add that a Branch House member like me wouldn't be needed. As if I was jumping at the chance, anyway. Tsunade-sama had to turn his request down, of course. It's ridiculous to think we would try to fight a war without some of our finest shinobi."

"He also has a knack for interrupting when she's in a meeting, which doesn't help," Sakura said.

"Things might be better if it was just a matter of Wind Daimyo Yamaguchi being self-absorbed," Gaara said, looking meditative sitting on the ground with his legs and arms folded. "But as it is, he likes to reaffirm his power so that Suna can't forget it. The war is, if anything, making that trait in him stronger."

"Why?" Naruto asked when it was clear that nobody else was particularly surprised about this. "What's the point?"

"Out of the Five Great Shinobi Countries, Wind has the least genial relations between its Hidden Village and the daimyo," Temari explained. "The previous daimyo mistrusted Suna to the point where he encouraged Wind citizens to patronize other Hidden Villages, Konoha especially. That was why it was so easy for Orochimaru to bait our father into backing his invasion of Konoha. Thanks to the previous rampages of Shukaku, our old daimyo was also horribly prejudiced against the Jinchuuriki. Needless to say, Gaara was not able to become Kazekage until after the daimyo was succeeded by his nephew, who rules now."

"The current daimyo thinks his uncle's policy of antagonizing his own Hidden Village was a recipe for our country falling to outsiders," Gaara said. "He still wants constant deference and obedience from Suna, he just doesn't believe that we should be gotten rid of. And he is generally more tolerant to Jinchuuriki than his predecessors."

"Yeah, or he hides it better," Kankuro said darkly. Temari snorted.

"You don't think me coming to Suna's going to cause a problem?" Naruto frowned.

"He likes the idea of Konoha being indebted to us, so it's unlikely he'll change his mind and make a fuss now. Anyway, though it would be better if he goes along with it, his dissent would not be enough to overturn the decision of the Allied Shinobi Force," Gaara stood up.

"Is it time to go?" Sakura asked.

"Yes, if you all are ready."

And so, after the too-short rest, they set out across the desert. Neji, Naruto, and Temari rode on a chunk of sand with Gaara, and Sakura and Kankuro rode with Sai on the back of his Beast Imitation. They rode without saying much for a while; they were going very fast and the wind whipping through them made it difficult to hear very far. The sun was setting in their faces, so Naruto sat on the edge of the platform of sand with his back turned to it. Its gaze on his back was warm, and a deep purple was creeping into the horizon opposite it. It was beautiful for a while, but hours of looking at the same sand dunes eventually became mind-numbing.

Now that he knew Gaara was the Kazekage, Naruto wanted to ask why Gaara didn't want his older self to fight in the war. But the wind was too loud, and Naruto didn't want to mess with Gaara's concentration. So he decided to file that question away in his mind for later instead. Maybe the answer would help him figure something out.
They were all trained to handle the delirium of sleeplessness and nonstop travel, but everyone was relieved when the entrance to Suna finally came into view. Naruto raised his head up from a slight doze and twisted around to look at the great terracing walls when they started slowing down.

"I think we can walk the rest of the way. We're practically there. It'll wake us all up," Temari said in a tone that invited no argument.

Gaara smiled faintly. He was the only one of them that didn't look tired at all, but he spread out his hands and lowered them all to the ground. Sai landed behind them and his *Chojuu Giga* disintegrated into ink.

It did feel good to stretch a little and get some blood flowing into their cold and stiff muscles. The sun had not yet risen and the night was chilly, especially while flying through it faster than most shinobi could run. Naruto had to keep stifling his yawns. He was walking in the middle of the group and everyone stood head and shoulders taller than him – even Gaara, who had previously been just as short as he was. Naruto sleepily watched the swaying of the gourd on Gaara's back as he walked directly behind him. Gaara was already taking his role as a bodyguard very seriously. Naruto didn't think that the sand drifting outside the perimeter of their little circle was a natural desert phenomenon.

They passed through a thin, ominously dark gap in the outer walls. Undoubtedly there were guards posted here, but Naruto could not see them. They didn't see anyone at all, in fact, until they reached the other side and they were officially in Sunagakure. A few older men dressed in Suna's standard long tunics and scarves were waiting at the entranceway.

"Gaara-sama, welcome back."

"Report," Gaara said. Their group didn't stop walking. Instead, the men walked alongside them.

"Yamaguchi-sama requested that you meet with him when he wakes up. According to his attendants, he usually rises around nine, so it will probably be several hours yet. He said on no account should he be disturbed from his sleep."

"Seriously?" Kankuro muttered.

"Did he say what he wanted to speak about?" Gaara asked.

"No, sir. He said that he would only talk about it to you directly."

"Fine," Gaara said. "We need to get everyone settled in, anyway. Please send for me when the Wind Daimyo wakes up."

"Sir."

Naruto watched Gaara interact with the important-looking Suna officials with a mixture of pride and awe. It was strange and even disorienting to see the deference that they gave him, but it was strange in a good way. The last time they'd seen each other, Gaara had had nothing but antipathy for his fellow Sand villagers, and even his own siblings were afraid of him. Naruto wanted to say something to him; something about how happy he was that things had turned out so well, how he knew it must have been difficult – but he couldn't think of the right thing to say just then. Would it even matter? It would be kind of silly for a kid like him to tell the Kazekage that he was proud of him.

The two men dismissed themselves, and the group made their way toward the center of town and Suna's main administrative building. Only a few people were out this early, but those that were watched them curiously.
"Fortunately, the rooms we prepared for you are underneath the administrative building, on the same level as the Puppet Corps' development workshops," Gaara said. "It's one of the most secure areas in the village, but hardly scenic enough to appeal to the daimyo."

"It really stinks that he acts like he can come in here and do whatever he wants just because of some past stuff," Naruto said obstinately. "It's not your fault your dad was a bad Kage."

"Naruto," Sakura hissed.

"What? He was awful to Gaara and partly why the Third died, so as far as I'm concerned--"

"You're right and everything, but don't go saying stuff like that where some of the Daimyo's people might hear," Kankuro said. "He's probably just here to remind us that we wouldn't be going to war if he hadn't agreed. Last chance to remind us before we go off to fight and all that."

"Sadly, it would be nice if that were actually true," Temari said.

They went into the administrative building and walked down a few flights of stairs to get to the floor where rooms had been made up for them. It gave Naruto a sinking feeling when he realized that this place was even more confined than the hospital in Konoha. It was dim and windowless, and very few people were allowed down there. As Gaara had promised, it was probably very secure, but it was still depressingly isolating.

"We're not going to have to stay down here all the time, are we?" Naruto said glumly.

"No," Gaara assured him. "You can go anywhere you want to in the village, as long as someone else is with you. You'll probably have to stick with me a lot when your team leaves, but you won't have to be down here any more than you want to."

He sounded apologetic. Naruto could tell that Gaara was doing the best he could, so he hid his foreboding feeling with a simple nod.

"Well," Kankuro said, opening one of the wooden doors lining the hallway they'd just arrived at. "You'll all have your own rooms here, anyway. And please, please don't go into any of the workshops. Most of our development team has been relocated to Allied Shinobi Forces HQ, but we still have some projects in the works that I don't want anyone touching."

"Osu," Naruto said. "Don't go in the creepy puppet rooms. Got it."

"I suggest getting some rest for right now," Temari said. "We won't be able to do anything as long as we're waiting for the Daimyo to tell us what he wants to tell us. I doubt it's anything to do with you guys, but you should get a little sleep while you can anyway. God, this is such a pain."

"Don't start with that, you sound like your boyfriend," Kankuro said.

"Shut the hell up, Kankuro."

"Ha."

"Hm," Sai said. "I wonder--"

"Whatever you're about to say, don't say it," Sakura held up her palm toward Sai in a 'stop' motion. "Thanks for your hospitality. Sleep does sound nice."

Naruto, halfway tuned out of everything, agreed that sleep did indeed sound nice. They had been on
the move for almost 24 hours now, and while they'd all gone longer without sleep before, it was starting to seem like a really good idea.

"Okay, wake me up if we're going to eat," he yawned and went in the room Kankuro had opened, which was closest at hand. They were probably all the same, so it didn't really matter who got what. He just wanted somewhere to lie down.

It was obvious that the room had only been recently been converted into a place for someone to stay in. It had a raised bed with a small set of drawers beside it on one end, and on the other end a corral of worktables had been completely cleared off and pushed back against the wall. Naruto put his backpack on one of them. The windowless room was completely dark when he switched the overhead light off, so he left the door open slightly. He wasn't afraid of the dark, but he was slightly claustrophobic. He took off his shoes and hitai-ate and flopped backward onto the bed with a sigh.

Before drifting off, the same thing that had been nagging him the whole way came back to him again. Even if Gaara wasn't going to make him stay in his room the whole time he was here, it didn't look like things were going to be much better than they were in Konoha. Everyone had outgrown him in this timeline. They were still his friends, definitely, but they had surpassed him enough to automatically assume that he couldn't do anything. He had just started getting people to acknowledge him in his own time. Being the kid behind everyone else again was really frustrating. The only thing that was really better was the fact that everyone liked him now.

He either had to get a lot stronger, or go home. And it looked like neither of those things would be happening as long as he had to be kept hidden or supervised at all times. What were they planning on doing, waiting until after the war? That was unacceptable. For all they knew, Kabuto was the only one who could undo it and send him home. If he was killed in the war, Naruto could very well be stuck in this timeline.

Assuming it could be undone in the first place. But what could he do? How was he supposed to get away from his friends, when the alternative was most likely capture at the hands of Akatsuki?

On the bright side, at least I'd be in a better position to take them down if they captured me, Naruto thought ironically before he drifted into sleep.

"Why is it so dark?" a confused voice asked.

Naruto's eyes flew open.

"Oh, the lights must be out. There's a door cracked open over there," the voice mumbled, as if talking to itself. It sounded like an elderly man, but Naruto couldn't see anyone in the meager light from the hall, and he couldn't hear the sound of another body shifting around.

"Are you a ghost?" Naruto whispered squeakily.

"Ah, Naruto-chan, is that you?"

It knows my name, Naruto thought, panicked. And there was only one person he could remember that had ever called him –chan, but that was many years ago.

"Sandaime jii-chan?" Naruto croaked, tears pricking the corners of his eyes.

"What are you going on about, boy? Are you still asleep? Sorry for waking you. Wouldn't've expected you to be sleeping in the middle of the day."
Naruto was about to answer, but then a squishy weight landed on his chest.

"Aha! There you are," the voice said from the lump on his chest.

Naruto shrieked and flailed his arms wildly, trying to brush the thing off. He started up from the bed but tripped and stumbled and fell into the floor.

"Hey, calm down!" the voice said. "You'll hurt yourself. Neither of us can tell which way is up in this darkness. Let me see if I can get the lights on…"

Naruto saw a black silhouette hop into the light coming through the cracked door, and then it disappeared again. The overhead light clicked on and he closed his eyes against the sudden brightness.

"There we go," the voice said. "That's better."

Naruto squinted. Sitting on the floor, on his eye level, was a small green figure dressed in a cloak, with thick gray eyebrows and a goatee.

He sat up quickly. "A toad?"

"That is right. Do you know who I am?"

"No… I'm sorry about trying to knock you off, though. You kinda surprised me." Naruto rubbed the back of his head with one hand.

"Ha ha! A little tadpole like you couldn't hurt me if you tried. You can call me Fukasaku. I was the one that taught Jiraiya-chan the Sage Arts."

"You taught Ero-sennin?" Naruto rubbed his eyes. "So what are you doing here? Did I accidentally summon you in my sleep or something?"

"No," Fukasaku said gravely. "We've actually been trying to find you for a little while. The Great Toad Sage had a very worrisome vision about you."

"Fukasaku-sama?" Sakura pushed open Naruto's door. "I knew I heard some kind of commotion. What's going on?"

"I found out from Tsunade that you were all here," Fukasaku said, turning to Sakura. "And she told me the details about Naruto-chan's situation. I need to speak with Gaara and the rest of you. Will it be possible to see him right now?"

"Maybe," Sakura said. "He's been stuck visiting with the Wind Daimyo, but his sister Temari-san told me they were done with their private meeting now."

"What the hell, Sakura-chan? I thought you were gonna wake me up," Naruto yawned.

"Well, we haven't gone to eat yet. Actually, we were going to wait to see if we could talk to Gaara, to find out if he would be allowed to tell us why we had to rush over here. We didn't want to go off on our own without knowing if some kind of national crisis was going on. I was about to come wake you so we could go up to the council room."

"The Wind Daimyo is here?" Fukasaku muttered. "What would that have to do with anything?"

"Do you think it could be related to the Great Toad Sage's vision?" Sakura asked.
Fukasaku shook his head. "Ahh, there's no point in speculating. Let's just go."

Naruto wasn't overly thrilled about going to see the daimyo. He'd met nobles before, and they were all essentially the same. He'd never met anyone as important as the daimyo of one of the Five Great Countries, but it wasn't likely that the grander title would be an improvement.

They met Temari, Sai, and Neji at the top of the stairs. Temari led the way to the council's meeting room, after deciding it would be best to get Fukasaku to talk with Gaara as soon as possible. Naruto was more curious about the toad's message than worried about a vision that some old toad had, but the others kept glancing at each other.

The meeting hall was an impressive structure. It seemed disproportionately tall, until you noticed the four giant statues built into the far wall, all looking very intimidating and important.

"Wow," Naruto said, craning his head up to look at their faces.

"Those are the previous Kazekage," Sai told him. "It's like our Hokage monument."

The round table in the middle of the hall currently resembled a buffet. It was piled with fresh platters of meat and rice and vegetables and local delicacies Naruto couldn't recognize, but they still looked delicious. A single look and whiff set his stomach to growling.

There were only a few people around the table; Gaara, two well-dressed civilians who were probably lower nobles, and a large, round man in flowing robes that could only be Wind Daimyo Yamaguchi himself. One of the nobles had been talking, but everyone got quiet and turned to look when they came in.

"Ah, here they are," Yamaguchi said. "Our visitors from Konoha. Come, sit down. No need for formality."

Gaara nodded at them, and they all settled down awkwardly around the table. This was a strange place to have a meal, but from the looks of it, only the Wind Daimyo was eating. Being such an important guest, he could probably dine whenever and wherever he wanted to.

"I trust you all have rested well after your journey?" Yamaguchi said. "Gaara tells me you traveled rather quickly to get here. I was well aware of the arrangement between Suna and Konoha, of course… I just didn't expect that the Kazekage would leave his village in a time of war in order to personally attend to the transportation of Konoha's Jinchuuriki."

It would have been difficult to say whose scowl was deeper, Temari's or Naruto's.

"Come on, don't look so tense, Naruto-kun," Yamaguchi's eyes were usually squinted, but he opened them to look at Naruto now. "It's nothing personal. I'm just thinking practically. It's everyone's duty to protect the interests of their own country before others."

"But I thought everyone was actually supposed to be looking out for each other in this war," Naruto retorted. "Besides, you can't tell Gaara what to--"

"Well," Sakura said brightly, pulling Naruto into a headlock. "I'm so sorry about him, Yamaguchi-sama. He often forgets his manners."

"Hm," Yamaguchi laughed lightly and took a sip of his tea.

"Sakura… chan… you're choking… me…"
She leaned over his head and murmured in his ear, so quietly that he barely heard it, "Don't let him get a rise out of you." Then she let him go. Naruto dropped back into his seat and looked disgruntled, but he held his tongue.

"Gaara," Temari said, motioning toward Fukasaku. "This is one of the elders from Mount Myoboku, Fukasaku. He said he needs to talk to you about something."

"You're one of the Toad Sages. I take it this has something to do with Naruto?" Gaara said, his brow scrunched in consternation.

Fukasaku looked uncomfortable. He looked at Naruto and then at the Wind Daimyo.

"Is this a conversation that I should not be present for?" Yamaguchi said, sounding amused.

"Ah… no, not at all," Fukasaku cleared his throat. "I am mainly here to talk to Naruto-chan, anyway; but when Tsunade told me about the situation, I knew the people responsible for his safety would have to be told about it, too."

"Told about what?" Naruto asked. "Do you know something about how I got here?"

"I'm afraid not," Fukasaku said. "We didn't know anything unusual was happening at all, until the Great Toad Sage had a vision about you. He said that in the vision, you were younger than you are now, but it was an event that had not happened yet. No one could understand what it meant. So we looked in the Great Sage's crystal ball, which uses Natural Energy to trace chakra patterns. I decided to go to Konoha when I saw that your chakra signature was appearing in two very different places. I've been trying to reverse-summon myself to your location all this time, but it was very difficult. Even though it's similar, something in your chakra signature has changed to the point where you are almost not recognized by the Summoning Contract anymore."

"What?" Naruto said in alarm. "I thought that was just a temporary thing. Was it that bad?" he looked at Sakura.

"We did notice that there was something interfering with his normal chakra signature," Sakura said. "But Tsunade-sama said from the results of the chakra scan that it was most likely outside interference, not a change in the nature of the chakra itself. I don't see how that could happen."

"Did you scan his blood? One of the reasons blood is used in the Summoning Contract is that it carries a much more accurate sampling of the user's natural chakra. It makes the contract much harder to fool."

"We did, but…" Sakura's eyes widened in realization. "We didn't stay around to see what the test said. Did you tell Tsunade-sama about this?"

"Yes. She gave the assistants at the lab an earful when she found out the sample was still in the queue. She will tell us the results when they come out, but it is safe to say that there is something wrong. The contract doesn't lie."

"But I'm me," Naruto said nervously. "Even if there is something weird going on… I'm not some kind of imposter."

"You're not the same either, though, because you can't be," the Wind Daimyo said unexpectedly. He leaned forward in his chair with a strange smirk on his face. "It's only logical, after all. The same person can't exist in the same way in more than one place at the same time. Even if you shinobi know how to make copies of yourselves. Otherwise, you would be nothing but a copy either, unable to act independently. There would be no meaning in even considering you as a separate being."
Everyone was silent for a while. Naruto could feel a brain-twisty headache coming on.

"That could be," Fukasaku said finally. "Whatever the case, I want to bring Naruto to Mount Myoboku to see the Great Toad Sage as soon as possible. Maybe the two of them together can figure out what the vision means, or maybe the Sage will be able to see something more clearly."

"What was it that he saw, Fukasaku-sama?" Sai asked.

"It was very vague. He said it was difficult to see because it's not a set path; it could change depending on what everyone involved does. He saw this Naruto-chan, the younger one, in a dark underground place. It was hard to see anything, but he says that he was on the ground in great pain, maybe seriously – maybe fatally wounded. Whatever we're doing so far to keep him away from the enemy seems like it will fail. That is why I had to let you know about it, Kazekage."

"But what are we doing wrong?" Temari sounded like she didn't really believe him. "What could we possibly do differently that would work any better?"

"Why should we even be worried about what some old geezer toad saw?" Naruto said. He was not interested in being subjected to even more bodyguarding. "Or maybe they're going to get me no matter what anyone does, so we shouldn't even worry about it."

"We have promised to keep Naruto-kun safe," Yamaguchi said. "If we cannot do it, it will reflect badly on us in the eyes of the entire Allied Shinobi Force. Maybe you all have been thinking about this the wrong way. No doubt the enemy expects him to be sheltered among shinobi, so all of the great Hidden Villages are bound to be targeted. What if I brought him back to the Wind Capital with me?"

The two men sitting between Gaara and the Wind Daimyo shifted in their seats slightly.

"Yamaguchi-sama," one said quietly, leaning in toward the daimyo. "Do you think it would be wise to bring a Jinchuuriki right into the heart of the Wind Country, especially one belonging to another country? Members of the court would protest. Remember that many of them feel the same way your uncle did when it comes to the hosts—"

"Enough," Yamaguchi said.

The noble that had spoken fell silent but he gave Naruto a look that he knew all too well. Disdain mixed with fear; a look that said he was mistrusted simply for existing. It was the first time someone had looked at him like that since arriving in the future, and he'd almost forgotten that some people hated him. Anger boiled deep down in the pit of his stomach and his mind tracked through various ways he could ruin the noble's immaculate silks without getting caught. Or not. It would be worth it.

"I also do not think it would be wise. It would be too dangerous; not because of Naruto," Gaara added coldly, "but because it would put civilians in danger if the enemy found him there."

"Mount Myoboku is a place that is difficult to reach even if someone knows where it is," Fukasaku put in. "And there, we can start training him in the Sage Arts."

"Um, I like that option, can we go with that?" Naruto said.

There was a pause.

"We are the ones that have been tasked by the Allied Shinobi Forces to protect him," Yamaguchi repeated. "Though I see nothing wrong with letting him go there to train at least, if it is a safe location."
"What would the effect be if he learns the Sage Arts sooner?" Neji wondered.

"Aw, who cares about that," Naruto said, waving his hand. "It can't hurt anything. Come on, you guys have got to let me train. Maybe, if I get stronger, you won't even have to worry about the Akatsuki anymore! Then me and aniki can both fight in the war, and it will be awesome."

"Aniki?" Sakura asked.

"Well, I have to call him something. Saying Older-Me would get confusing really fast."

"What are you, a gangster?"

Gaara rubbed his forehead with his hand. "Naruto, please try to take this more seriously. This war is to stop Madara and the Akatsuki, but it is also to protect the two of you and the Eight-Tails' Jinchuuriki. Their plot can only work if they get hold of you, so we are not going to send you out to war, even if you get stronger."

"Baachan said you were like this," Naruto crossed his arms. "So how come you can go if we can't? That isn't fair."

"I'm not a Jinchuuriki anymore."

Naruto had been expecting some kind of excuse, but this threw him for a loop. "What?"

"I was already captured by Akatsuki before," Gaara said. "And they took Shukaku from me. And I died."

"Er…?"

"The only reason why I'm here today is one of Suna's revered Elders, Chiyobaasama, used a life-transfer jutsu to bring me back. The extraction of the Tailed Beast has killed every Jinchuuriki that Akatsuki has captured so far. Had it not been for your future self and others from Konoha retrieving my body, or Chiyobaasama, I would have been just as dead as the rest of them."

Naruto uncrossed his arms slowly. "Gaara…"

"I can't say whether or not it would be good for you to fight in the war," Fukasaku said. "But if you train and become stronger, you can at least defend yourself better. The older you is also training right now, even though he is also in hiding."

"He is? Can I do what he's doing?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that. From what I understand, he is learning from the Eight-Tails' Jinchuuriki about using and controlling the bijuu's power. I doubt that anyone but another Jinchuuriki could help you with that, and the Eight-Tails is the only one left besides you."

"How to control it? I definitely want to learn how to do that."

"I don't think you could do that yet, even if you had someone to teach you," Sakura said. "Even aside from the fact that you'd be doing things out of order, I mean," she added when he scowled at her. "Your seal is going to start weakening gradually, and using the bijuu's power too much could cause it to completely break."

"Oh, right. So basically, I need to wait until after my seal is reset?"

"How did you know about that?" Sakura frowned.
"Um… Kakashi-sensei told me. But he was just telling me the same thing about not using it too much, so you don't need to get mad at him or anything."

"It is possible that we could look into that if you are still around after the war, Naruto-chan," Fukasaku said. "We may be able to tighten your seal enough that you can do that training without having to reset the seal completely. The key we would need for that is with the older you right now, but it doesn't matter since only the Eight-Tails' Jinchuuriki could teach you anyway. I can, however, train you in the Sage Arts."

"Ah, in that case, I guess I could settle for that then," Naruto said.

"Settle?" Fukasaku said indignantly. "On second thought, I don't know whether you're mature enough yet to handle the Sage training."

"No, wait! I am. I take it back. I would love to train with you, Sennin Jii-chan."

"Ha ha, good. That's more like it."

"So, can I go?" Naruto looked around at his teammates and Gaara.

"I think that you should go see the Great Toad Sage in order to find out more about his vision, if possible," Gaara said. "And it would probably be good for you to train. But when you are not training, I think you should stay here."

"Eh, that's fine I guess," Naruto leaned back casually with his hands laced together behind his head. "As long as I'm getting to do something, I don't really care one way or the other."

"I think this arrangement will work well for now," Yamaguchi said. "But we still need to consider what will happen during the war. Gaara will not be here, nor will most of Suna's forces in general."

"Nothing has to be decided right now," Fukasaku said. "We can just go see the Sage, and come back afterward."


Fukasaku bowed his head briefly in acknowledgement, then clapped his hands together.

They appeared on a long path that wound through large, brightly colored vegetation. The air was warm, almost tropical, and the smell of flowers and soil lay heavily on the air.

"Ah!" Naruto yelped, scrambling and falling after being moved from sitting on a chair to sitting on nothing. "What the hell?"

"I've summoned us to Mount Myoboku," Fukasaku explained. "We're going straight to the Great Toad Sage for now, but when you come back later I'll give you the full tour."

At the end of the path was a temple, with two large toad statues flanking the entrance. Everything was so large here that it made Naruto feel as if he had shrunk, which was odd considering that most of the toads he'd ever seen were smaller than him. But then again, he remembered, there were toads like Gamabunta as well.

"Whoa," he said, looking all around.

"Well then, shall we?" Fukasaku said with a smile. Naruto nodded and followed him down the path toward the temple.
"So, what kind of training is it, learning the Sage Arts?" he said, looking curiously around at the scenery as they walked.

"The Sage Arts involve sensing and then harnessing the Natural Energy of this world; taking it into your body and then molding it, along with your spiritual and physical energies. The senjutsu that results from this fusion of energies is consequently very powerful."

Naruto stared at him blankly. "Hah?"

"Don't worry if you don't understand it yet. I know that you can do it, since I taught it to you before. Actually, for some reason… you are already able to draw Natural Energy to you without trying. In theory, it should actually be easier for you this time around."

"What do you mean?"

"Like I said, Natural Energy is the energy of the world. It flows all around us; though very few are able to sense it. In order to gather it up for use, you must normally draw it to you through meditation, but I can feel the flow of Natural Energy shift and change around you; it gathers around you like it is just waiting for you to use it." Fukasaku swirled both of his froggy hands in circles in the air, trying to mime an invisible cloud. "I was finally able to summon myself to you by tracking the disturbance in the flow of Natural Energy, rather than following your chakra directly. It had been a whim, but I think now that it had worked so well because you were sleeping. You were in as much of a meditative state as you could be, and there was a lot of it gathered around you."

"Then it sounds like my training will be easy!"

"That, I don't know. The most important and hardest part of learning to mold Sage chakra is striking the right balance between all of the energies. Being saturated with Natural Energy is very dangerous, so it is good that you only attract it and don't absorb it unconsciously. You probably have significantly less experience in chakra control at your age. Delicate control has never been your strong suit, anyway. It may turn out to be harder for you, because of so much hanging around."

"I've done control training," Naruto objected. "I've done tree climbing and water walking—Ero-sennin even taught me the Rasengan! And he said that if I could do that, I could do anything. Oh," he tilted his head at a sudden thought. "Is Ero-sennin going to help me train this time? You said you taught him this same stuff, right? Wait… does he even know I'm here in this time?"

Fukasaku was silent for a moment. It was the kind of silence Naruto was learning to associate with people deciding whether to tell him the truth or not.

"Sennin Jii-chan?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this a second time," he said with difficulty, "but Jiraiya-chan is gone. He was killed fighting Pein."

Naruto stopped walking. Fukasaku stopped and looked back at him.

"That doesn't make any sense," Naruto said laughingly. "How could he possibly get killed fighting someone that I was able to beat? There is no way that he would."

"It was only thanks to the information Jiraiya-chan gathered that we were able to come up with a good strategy. Without that, we most likely would have lost. The enemy was beyond our capabilities... to be honest, we were lucky it worked out the way it did."

"Okay; but he came back along with everyone else though, right?"
Fukasaku grimaced and bowed his head.

Naruto crouched down to his level. "Tell me what happened to him."

"Well… he went to Amegakure to find information about Akatsuki, since he had a good hunch that their leader was there. He wasn't looking for a fight, but when confronted by Pein, he decided to try to take him down, and…" Fukasaku looked up at him concernedly. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," Naruto started walking again down the path toward the temple. "Where was I when all of that was happening?"

"Well, I'm not sure – I think you may have been hunting down another member of Akatsuki."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know. It didn't come up when we were training," Fukasaku hopped faster to catch up to Naruto's longer strides. "Are you sure you're alright? I know that it can be hard to accept, especially when it's so sudden—"

"There's nothing to accept. It won't happen, so it's not really real."

"What are you talking about?" Fukasaku asked, confused.

"When I go back home to the past, I'll be able to warn everyone about what Pein and Akatsuki are going to do," Naruto explained. "I'll be able to make it so no one has to die. If I can learn the Sage Arts and you tell me all about Pein, Ero-sennin won't have to go find out information about him. So, it won't really happen."

Naruto trotted up the stairs of the temple, seeming energetic enough, but with a definite stiffness to his shoulders and gait.

"Naruto-chan—"

"Come on, this is the place, right?" Naruto pushed open the door to the temple and looked back at him expectantly. He turned and went inside without waiting for an answer. Fukasaku followed after him quickly.

The Great Toad sage was basking in his pool, snoring slightly. His hat was tilted haphazardly to the side, but it somehow didn't fall off.

"Is this the Great Toad Sage?" Naruto wondered out loud.


"Eh, what?" the Great Sage lifted his head and peeled his eyes open to look down at them. "Who is that, now?"

"Uzumaki Naruto," Fukasaku repeated. "It's the younger version of him that you saw being attacked. Have you been able to see anything about it more clearly?"

"Ahh…" the Great Toad Sage blinked slowly and fixed his squinted gaze on Naruto. "Yes… it is very worrisome indeed."

"W-What?" Naruto asked.
"It is still hard to see... it seems it is in a very dark place. But I was recently able to see someone else. It was difficult to tell much about him... his face was covered. I saw Naruto-chan lying on the ground with his body surrounded with some kind of blue light."

"Is it Akatsuki?" Fukasaku asked quickly. "What can we do to change this path?"

"Hm..." the Great Toad Sage said. "It did change recently. The change was, I was able to see it more clearly. That means that something has brought that outcome even closer to being reality."

"What?" Naruto yelped. "You mean we made it worse somehow? What did we do?" he looked at Fukasaku.

"Maybe it is just that a decision hasn't been made yet about where you will be staying during the war," Fukasaku reasoned. "Your path hasn't been diverted yet, so it would naturally be closer."

"In any case, I believe that Naruto-chan's life will be in danger if something does not change," the Great Toad Sage rumbled definitively.

"Honorable Geezer, do you think it was the Tailed Beast extraction causing the light that you saw?"

"Eh?" the Great Toad Sage said. "What're you asking about, now?"

"The Tailed Beast extraction!" Fukasaku waved his arms. "Akatsuki! Naruto-chan being in danger!"

"Hm... eh, who is that again?"

Fukasaku sighed and shook his head. "I think that's all we're going to know for now."

"I don't get it... did we really do something to make it worse? I left Konoha because it was supposed to be safer than staying," Naruto said.

"I don't know. But it means that we're running out of time to figure it out."

"Do you think it could be because the Wind Daimyo is in Suna?" Naruto rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I mean, he dropped by sort of unexpectedly, so that could have changed things. He's the only thing making the situation at Suna different right now. And I don't think I really trust him."

"That probably is our best bet," Fukasaku said slowly. "Although, I'm not sure why he would want to do anything to betray the Allied Shinobi Force. Even if he had a reason to, it seems like it would be too risky, considering everyone knows what is at stake if Madara wins the war."

"I'll keep my eyes open for anything suspicious," Naruto said determinedly, feeling like he finally had an important role. "And we should start my training as soon as possible. Then I won't have to be there all the time! And I can be stronger."

"Alright," Fukasaku said. "One of the first things we will need to do is have you re-sign the summoning contract in blood. You don't have to have it for the Sage training, but I would like to know that we can reach you if you get into trouble. Technically, you need Gamabunta's approval before you can sign it, but I'm sure it won't be a problem."

"Will it work if I've already done it once, though?" Naruto scratched his head.

"I think so, although this is a unique situation, of course. The fact that it already works somewhat is confusing. But it might help."

"What would happen if I tried to summon one of you right now? Would you come to me or to aniki,
or would it just not work at all?"

"I don't know. But you can go back and tell everyone what little we were able learn from the
Honorable Geezer. Later tonight, you can test out summoning me to see if it works."

"Do I have to go back now?" Naruto said dejectedly. "Can't we go ahead and start my training?"

"I'll come visit you tomorrow if your summoning doesn't work. I wouldn't have a problem training
you now, but we told everyone that we would just be going to talk to the Great Sage. I understand
why they want to know where you are and what you are doing. This isn't exactly the time to be
doing whatever we want."

Naruto sighed. "This is almost exactly what Sakura-chan always said having parents was like."

"You're probably right," Fukasaku chuckled. "But the same thing that applies there applies here, too:
it's just because they love and care about you."

Naruto gave a small smile. "I know."

"I'll send you back to the meeting hall," Fukasaku said. He hopped directly in front of Naruto and
clapped his hands together.

A moment later, Naruto was standing in the empty meeting hall. He looked around, momentarily
disoriented and slightly surprised that no one was around. The meeting must have ended not long
after they left.

Aw man, I bet everyone went out to get lunch without me, Naruto thought, making his stomach
growl when he remembered he hadn't eaten anything since an energy bar before they started across
the desert. His last actual meal had been breakfast at camp the previous morning.

With this thought in mind, he trotted toward the door, ignoring the creepy stares from the gigantic
statues. The room was lit only with the light coming through the windows, so their faces were long
with eerie shadows.

"There you are, finally," someone said from behind him.

Naruto whirled around. A man in a high-collared coat and an orange mask was standing where there
had been nothing but empty space before.

"Who are you?" Naruto growled, positioning his hands near the weapon pouch on his leg.

The man dashed toward him and stretched out his arm. Naruto ducked to avoid it, but it wasn't a
strike—the man grabbed his right wrist, the hand with a fistful of shuriken ready to throw. Naruto tried
to pull away, but he couldn't move. The world around him stretched and twisted unnaturally,
converging on the black hole in the orange mask. He had no choice but to dive headfirst into it.

After the meeting adjourned, the Sand Siblings and Team 7 (plus Neji) had their own lunch in
Gaara's loft apartment on the top floor of the Administrative building. The panoramic view of the
village spread out below and the minimalist furnishing of the living room gave it a tranquil feel.

"Naruto's going to complain that we left him out," Sai said, breaking apart a bread roll.

"Especially if they try to feed him over there. He's told me the kind of things the Toads like to eat,"
Sakura laughed. "But we'll make it up to him. Are there any ramen places around here?" she asked
Gaara, who was sitting on a couch near the windows.

"Yes," Gaara said. "There's one near here he likes because they serve some local varieties that aren't available in Konoha."

"Hah? How do you know that?" Temari asked.

"Probably because ramen is one of Naruto's favorite conversation topics," Sakura guessed. "He would have to give the Kazekage his expert opinion on Suna's ramen stands."

Neji sighed. "Just what is Konoha going to become when that guy becomes Hokage?" his mouth twitched in a smile, but soon he turned serious. "Do you think you'll let him stay with the Toads once the war starts?"

"Under the circumstances, most likely," Gaara said, leaning back and looking out one of the long windows. "Although Yamaguchi-sama does not want me to."

"But why?" Sakura asked. "I mean, I'm not... entirely sure it's best to let him do his Sage training earlier, but at least it would keep him occupied. And Mount Myoboku is probably one of the safest places that he could be."

"The main problem is that we have no way of contacting that place unless one of them comes to us," Gaara said. "I trust the Toads, but if something did happen there, there is no way we could know about it until it was too late, most likely. And Yamaguchi-sama believes that Naruto would use it as an opportunity to escape the Land of Wind's custody."

"What?" Sakura bristled. "Excuse me, when the hell did Naruto become a prisoner of the Wind Country?"

Temari and Kankuro tensed at Sakura's belligerence and both glanced at Gaara. Old habits were hard to break, and it still made them slightly nervous whenever someone took a hostile tone with their brother.

Gaara turned from the window to look Sakura in the eyes seriously. "He is a fool," he said simply. "Prestige and political control are his only concerns. You don't need to worry. At least, not about that."

"Is there something else to worry about, then? Are you referring to what we had to hurry all this way for?" Sai asked. "Would it be alright for you to tell us about that?"

Gaara stood from the couch by the window and sat down on one of the empty cushions around the table. "Yamaguchi-sama, while better than the previous daimyo, still carries some of the ingrained prejudice against the Jinchuuriki that many in this country have. However, most of our nobility are even worse than he is."

"We noticed that," Sakura said dryly.

"The treatment of Jinchuuriki in this country has always been terrible," Gaara said softly. "But Yamaguchi-sama is too much of a pragmatist to let superstition dictate everything he does. He allowed me to become Kazekage even before I lost Shukaku, because he believed that I would be loyal to him. He assumed that I would want to distance myself from the previous Kazekage, the same way he wanted to from the previous Wind Daimyo. Did you know that the old daimyo was also assassinated, as our father was?" he inclined his head toward his siblings.

The Konoha shinobi all shook their heads.
"Do you think that the two assassinations were related somehow?" Sai asked.

"It didn't seem so," Gaara said. "They happened three years apart, and the assassin was caught. He claimed to be acting independently. I thought that at worst, it could have been someone secretly hired by Yamaguchi-sama to help him take power. But now it seems that it could have been a related incident, and Yamaguchi-sama is afraid that a plot against the Wind is happening, even now." He looked at Temari and she nodded.

"Right," she said. "When we were at the Five Kage Summit, the Tsuchikage graciously informed us that our country had used Akatsuki's services in the past. Of course, when we got home, we made sure to dig up as much as we could about it. I had to pay a lot of visits to the Wind Capital in order to coordinate the investigation there. Sure enough, we discovered that not only our father, but the previous daimyo had had dealings with them. Yamaguchi-sama hadn't known about it either, or so he claims, but he was more than happy to have more mud to smear on the old daimyo's reputation. We were able to confirm that the Akatsuki members involved were Sasori of the Red Sand… and Orochimaru."

"So… you're saying that Orochimaru had a connection to the Wind Country through Akatsuki?" Sakura said slowly. "That makes sense, but Orochimaru had left Akatsuki long before he made the deal with your father, hadn't he? So if Yamaguchi-sama is afraid of Akatsuki coming after him for some reason…"

"No. It has more to do with when Suna was tricked into participating in the Konoha invasion," Kankuro said. "It's like this. Orochimaru played the old Wind Daimyo and Kazekage against each other, which wasn't exactly hard to do because they already hated one another. Orochimaru used his past with Akatsuki to convince our father that the daimyo was going to do away with Suna entirely and leave our country's defense to Akatsuki. On the other hand, he convinced the daimyo that our father was planning on staging a coup against the Wind, which caused the daimyo to cut support for Suna even more, which made Suna even more willing to go along with Orochimaru. It was all a ploy so that he could gain military backing for his plan, and… argh," Kankuro rubbed his forehead with one hand.

"What?" Neji said.

"Long story short," Gaara said in a heavy voice, "Yamaguchi-sama has latched on to the fact that the younger version of Naruto comes from a time not long after Orochimaru's invasion of Konoha failed. He believes that Orochimaru is actually the one behind the younger Naruto's appearance here; and he is convinced that Naruto is a weapon planted by Orochimaru, to be used against us when everyone leaves to go fight in the war. That is why he wants to know where Naruto is at all times."

"That's…" Sakura stood up. "That's ridiculous! Orochimaru is dead! Where the hell did he get the crazy idea that Orochimaru is even alive, much less that he would care about the Wind anymore if he was?"

"That is why he fled here," Gaara said. "Apparently several residents at Yamaguchi-sama's castle were found dead, with their faces missing. It was the same technique that Orochimaru used back then to infiltrate the Exams and impersonate the Kazekage."
A/N: I’m updating this way early as compared to my posting schedule, but... I couldn’t help it. Today’s my birthday so I get to do whatever the hell I want.

Naruto stumbled, but didn’t fall. He was in a dark, round room that looked like it was carved out of rock. The only light came from an oil lamp hanging above a stone chair. As soon as he regained his bearings, Naruto turned around to punch the masked man. To his surprise, the punch sailed through the man’s head harmlessly.

What the —

The masked man grabbed Naruto's arm and twisted it around his back. He tried to wrench himself free, but in a matter of seconds Naruto's hands were tied together behind his back, and the man let him go. Naruto staggered from the sudden lack of resistance and walked sideways into the wall.

"Now you can't weave any signs," The masked man said calmly.

"Bastard," Naruto snarled, and he lunged at the man. Once again he didn't move, and once again Naruto was able to walk right through him.

"Your struggling is pointless. I suggest you listen quietly, rather than getting overexcited and using up all the air too quickly. This is a sealed room, and while I can escape it easily, you cannot."

Naruto turned and watched as the masked man sit down in his chair casually.

"Who are you?" Naruto demanded. "Where is this? You better let me go, or I'm gonna kick your ass."

"This room is part of an old lair of Orochimaru's. He and I are working together... for now. As for who I am, it doesn't really matter. The Allied Shinobi Forces know me as Uchiha Madara, but since I'm sure that name doesn't mean much to you, you can just call me Tobi."

"You're... Madara?"

"Hm? It seems you do know something, after all. Do not worry. I only brought you here to talk a little while. I will take you back after, if you still want to go back."

"Just want to talk? Yeah, right! Is that why you kidnapped me?" Naruto said. "I already know that you're after the Kyuubi. You'll have to kill me before I let that happen."

"If I killed you, I wouldn't be able to get the Kyuubi," Tobi said with a sigh. "And Orochimaru tells me I can't extract the Bijuu from you anyway, because he used a Zetsu clone as a base for constructing your body in this time. The cells will react if exposed to the immense yang energy of the Kyuubi, without it being guided by your will."

"I have no idea what you're talking about... but if you really aren't after the Kyuubi, why would you
"As I told you, I just want to talk. I have no reason or desire to harm you, but I can help you. And I think that you would be able to see things from my point of view if you knew the truth."

The Great Toad Sage's words were still fresh in Naruto's mind. Suddenly, the old toad's powers didn't seem so improbable anymore. And if they were real, that meant that he was in mortal danger, whatever Tobi said. But he hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

"You're out of your mind," Naruto scoffed, putting his back to the wall defensively, as far from Tobi as he could get. "What the hell makes you think I would ever want to 'see your point of view' about anything? You're trying to force the entire world into war!"

"You're in a position to understand me," Tobi inclined his head thoughtfully. "You're an outsider here. You're able to see the state of the world for what it really is. My attempt at negotiating with the Five Kage failed. I would also try to explain to your older self, but they have hidden him away and do not plan to allow him near the war at all."

"It's so you can't kidnap him too, obviously."

"Naturally. But they do not understand you at all, past or present. I doubt the older you knows anything about the war, because if he did know, he would have already tried to confront me himself. Since I have to go through them to reach you, they're needlessly throwing themselves into danger for your sake. Because of that, the desire to protect your friends in turn means that you will never listen to what I have to say. Yet I have no personal grudge against your friends or you. In fact, everyone will benefit from my plan. Do you see how much better it is, then, to be able to talk in person like this without interference?"

Naruto shifted and wiggled his hands experimentally behind his back. "How about you untie my hands, and then I'll listen to what you have to say."

"I'll pass on that one for now," Tobi said breezily. "There's nothing you can do to hurt me, but I don't want you trying to smash your way out of this room."

Naruto looked all around the room. There were no obvious exits. It was completely sealed off, like Tobi said. Was there still a way to avoid the fate that the Great Toad Sage had seen in his vision? No choice but to wait and try to think of a plan to escape.

"You know, that doesn't make it sound like you're really giving me a choice. But I agree that it'll make things a lot more simple. I'll listen," he said, sitting cross-legged on the ground. "But only listen. I think there's probably a hundred percent chance that you're full of crap though, so don't be too disappointed when I laugh in your face." He kept scanning the place with his eyes while speaking, even though he didn't move his head. He wasn't going to take Tobi's word for it that there was no way out.

"Hn," Tobi snorted. "You're confident. I suppose you've already been told at least a little about my plan already?"

"Well…"

Fukasaku was frantic. He looked around the empty council meeting room in dismay. He had hoped for the briefest moment that there was some kind of mistake, and he would find Gaara and the others around the meeting table, along with Naruto. But there was nothing here to prove to him that the worst hadn't happened.
"Help!" he cried, bursting out into the hallway. This wasn't the time to worry about propriety. "Someone! Anyone!"

A young man wearing a Suna hitai-ate looked up from the papers he was reading, startled.

"Please!" Fukasaku hopped up to him. "I'm the envoy from Mount Myoboku that was here earlier. I need to see the Kazekage and the team from Konoha right away!" he was relieved to have found a Suna shinobi so quickly. He didn't feel entirely comfortable with the Wind Daimyo or his entourage.

"K-kazekage-sama and his visitors are in his private apartments right now," the shinobi said, regaining his composure admirably well for someone who had never seen a Gama-nin before. "We've been instructed not to disturb them."

"It has to do with Naruto. They'll want to hear it."

"Ah—aa. Follow me," the Suna shinobi started walking, and Fukasaku hurried after him. The few minutes it took to climb the stairs and walk down the hall toward the Kazekage’s apartments grated on him. They were halted there by Suna ANBU standing outside of the hall, and Fukasaku wanted to yell at them. Fortunately, one of them recognized him.

"You're already back, Fukasaku-sama?" he said, bending down to his level. "Where is Naruto-kun?"

"He's in terrible danger," Fukasaku said desperately. "You have to let me see the Kazekage."

The ANBU stood up without a word and motioned for him to go in.

When he found them, everyone was chatting and laughing, but the mood changed quickly when he jumped over to them at desperate speed.

"Fukasaku-sama, what's wrong?" Sakura said, alarmed.

"Naruto-chan," he said, panting a little. "He hasn't come back here?"

"No… we thought he was still with you," Gaara said, standing from the couch he was sitting on.

"I sent him back to the meeting room a couple of hours ago," Fukasaku said. "The Great Toad Sage was suddenly able to see Naruto-chan captured by Madara very clearly. If you all were not in the meeting room when I sent him back, and you haven't seen him since, I believe that it could be happening right now!"

"Can you transport yourself to his location?" Gaara asked urgently.

Fukasaku shook his head. "I've been trying, but I can only barely sense my connection with him. I might be able to do it if he was unconscious. That was how I was able to do it before."

"We can't wait for that! He could be worse than unconscious by the time we found him!" Sakura said.

"I know. I am going to try meditating to see if I can strengthen the connection," Fukasaku sat down on the floor cross-legged. "I was not able to try this yet because I rushed over here as quickly as I could. If I use Sage Mode, I may be able to pull him from wherever he is and bring him here."

"Gather all of the most recent reports on Madara's most recent location, including the ones from Konoha," Gaara commanded the ANBU that had followed Fukasaku into the room. "We will split up and head for the most probable ones."
The ANBU bowed, but came out of it slowly and paused when he straightened back up. "Kazekage-sama," he said hesitantly. "If you leave the village right now, Yamaguchi-sama will not like—"

"I know, but I don't care," a miniscule strand of anger leaked into Gaara's voice, making the ANBU flinch. "Even he should be able to realize that we can't allow Naruto to fall in the hands of Akatsuki."

"I will come up with something to keep him distracted for a while," the ANBU promised, then he put his hand up in a half-ram seal and flickered away.

Aside from Fukasaku, who was busy concentrating, they all looked at one another in silent anxiety. It didn't seem possible that this could be happening, when things had been so peaceful and normal only moments ago.

"We shouldn't have let him go," Sakura whispered.

"We didn't do anything wrong," Sai said quietly, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Anyway, we don't know the details yet. If the Great Toad Sage sees things that haven't happened yet, then there may still be time, even if Madara did capture him."

"If anything happens to him… what will happen to the him of the present?" Neji said.

Gaara just stood silently facing the door, waiting for the ANBU to report back.

Kankuro and Temari watched from the edges of the room, outside of the immediate group, but still very somber. All of them periodically fixed their eyes on Fukasaku's still form.

"I didn't get this Tsuki no Me thing when they explained it to me before, and I still don't get it now. Making everyone live in an imaginary world without war wouldn't be real peace at all," Naruto said.

"You should be able to understand. Or maybe you don't, after all. You probably don't realize what the future holds for you, even though you're in it right now, because of how much information others are keeping from you."

Naruto frowned. "I know that they've kept stuff from me, but they are just doing what they think is right. As much as it annoys me sometimes, they're just trying to keep me from getting hurt, I guess."

"Yet, according to you, it's wrong for me to want to protect the world with a lie in the same way."

"That's different."

"You really can't say that, when you know nothing. You haven't seen the suffering that war causes. You have seen some of the suffering our so-called peace causes, though. And you will only see more of it in the years ahead of you. The peace of the Great Hidden Villages is often more destructive than their war. And Konoha is the worst of all of them in its sheer hypocrisy."

"What are you talking about?" Naruto was starting to get angry.

"Take the Jinchuuriki system, for example. You and the other Jinchuuriki had your lives sacrificed for the sake of peace. Most were not asked if they wanted this honor. They should be held up as the saviors of their villages, both because they hold back the Tailed Beasts, and because they help maintain a political balance between lands that reduces war. And yet, they are almost universally
Naruto looked down at his lap, gritting his teeth. He'd thought the same thing plenty of times since finding out that he was the container for the Kyuubi. But what gave someone like him the right to talk about that? That pissed him off.

"Of course, they all call you a hero now," Tobi continued. "They've suddenly changed their minds. You got rid of Pein for them. It was you who convinced him to betray me and bring all the villagers back to life. The truth is, though, you didn't entirely disagree with Pein's ideals. You must have identified with him on some level. That is the only way you would have been able to get him to turn his back on our plan. I knew him well enough to know that he truly desired peace. With the both of you having suffered for the sake of it, the only thing that surprises me about your alliance is that you both decided to use it to save Konoha."

"Liar," Naruto said quietly without raising his head.

"What?"

"I said you're a liar!" Naruto shouted. "I beat Pein and he had no choice but to bring everyone back. I would never agree with someone like him! He destroyed the village! He..." he choked slightly, "he killed Ero-sennin."

As soon as he said it, Naruto wished that he hadn't. He'd managed to push that thought down somewhere deep where it had no chance of hurting him—tried to convince himself that it was nothing but more motivation. But then he had to go and say it out loud. His throat worked and he squeezed his eyes shut to futilely try to push it all back down again.

"I'm impressed you know about that," Tobi said, unperturbed. "But maybe you should reconsider your simplistic view of things. Nagato—known as Pein to most of the world—Jiraiya of the Sannin, and you were all aligned in thinking. The only difference was that Nagato was more of a realist. Nagato's family was killed by Konoha shinobi during the second Great Shinobi War. Jiraiya could see the effects of the war and Konoha's participation in it. He took Nagato in just so he could ease his own feelings of guilt. He was like a second father to Nagato. So you really should not assume you know anything about what happened when Jiraiya died, or what took place when you met and spoke with Nagato."

Naruto drew up his knees and rested his forehead on them. "I don't understand any of this!"

"That is why I am here, trying to explain it to you. I want you to know the things that everyone else has been hiding from you. And you will hear it whether you like it or not. If you don't like the truth, that is all the more reason why you should understand that what I'm doing is the right thing."

"As if I can trust anything you say."

"Choosing to believe me or not is up to you, of course. But I have no reason to lie to you."

Naruto looked up and narrowed his eyes at him. "Oh yeah? If you really mean that, then tell me how I can get back to my own time."

Tobi seemed to contemplate a moment. It was impossible to see his expression behind the mask, but he crossed his arms and stared at Naruto for a while.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Naruto snorted. Tobi chuckled, making Naruto throw another completely ineffective glare his way. "What are you laughing at?"
"Nothing. You remind me of someone that died a long time ago. Alright; it doesn't matter to me whether you go back or not. Your time and this one are on separate tracks now. Nothing you do there could affect what is happening here."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that you can go back and change anything you want, but it won't do anything except change the future of your own timeline. A world for me and a world for you. That sounds fair, doesn't it?"

Naruto wanted to make a snappy retort but he was still confused, so he said, "You mean this isn't really my future? Does that mean I can't really know what's going to happen?"

"This is your future that would have been," Tobi said. "The only change will be you. But you will undoubtedly find out how much difference that can make. After all, you're interested in knowing what will happen because you want to change it. And you can change everything for all I care. I'll even help you by telling you what you want to know. All that matters to me is the world that I am about to create here. The rest can go to hell."

"Then how do I get back?"

"You'll need to undo the summoning jutsu keeping your spirit bound to that body. When that happens, you should return to your own body in your own time."

"What?" Naruto looked down at himself, startled. "You mean this isn't my body?"

"Moving bodies through space and time is something on a completely different level," Tobi said dismissively. "I'd be happy to explain it to you, but I doubt you could keep up. To put it very simply, Orochimaru used a concept similar to the Edo Tensei, except that both your soul and body are alive instead of dead. I doubt that either one are exactly normal, though. I am sure that Orochimaru looks forward to examining you eventually. It would be nice to know how this bastardized jutsu of his differs from the Edo and Rinne Tensei."

Naruto shivered. "I thought Orochimaru was dead. Everybody's been saying that Kabuto had to be the one that brought me here."

"He was presumed dead; though it won't take long for everyone to realize their mistake."

"So… that means I have to face Orochimaru in order to go back?" Naruto murmured.

"No," Tobi said. "It was Nagato that summoned you."

Naruto's head snapped up again. "You mean Pein? You said that was what his name was, right? I thought HE was dead too! Argh, I can't keep up with all this," he growled and shook his head.

"He is dead," Tobi assured him. "He was brought back with the Edo Tensei and forced to summon you. However, he and Uchiha Itachi escaped control and are currently missing. Before you can even think about going back, you have to find them. Orochimaru can't send you back even if he wanted to. And I doubt he wants to."

"Why did he want to bring me here in the first place?"

"Who knows?" Tobi said unconcernedly. "I'm not even entirely sure he has a reason. Sometimes, he likes to do things just because no one else has. He likes to take a path that would normally go one way and turn in the opposite direction just to see what happens, whether the result is good or bad. He
enjoys the chaos of the world. You could say we are opposites in that way."

There was a long stretch of silence. Naruto did not want to believe anything Tobi said, but if it was true that Naruto going back to his time would not affect him, it was likely true that he didn't have a reason to lie.

But just escaping back and writing this time off didn't feel right to Naruto. Even if he left and never saw this version of his friends again, they would still exist. Even if there wasn't much that he could do, he couldn't leave knowing what Tobi wanted to do with this world.

"Okay, so I have to find Pein—Nagato, whatever," Naruto said. "And get him to send me back. But first I am going to help everyone stop you. I'll have to deal with you in my own time if I go back anyway, so I might as well figure out how to do that first."

Tobi tilted his head curiously. "Didn't you understand what I said? This has nothing to do with you. Besides, this world is beyond help."

"Maybe this has nothing to do with me. But I can't just accept what you're trying to do here, either. I can't ignore what's happening right in front of me."

"This is getting us nowhere," Tobi sighed. He stood up and walked over, squatting down in front of Naruto so their faces were level. Naruto's heart jumped for a second when he saw the Sharingan burning through the mask at him. He'd momentarily forgotten that this man was an Uchiha. "To be perfectly honest with you, I would be grateful if you could help me find your older self and the Eight-tails so that I can complete my plan. But even if you don't want to help me, I genuinely think you're better off forgetting about this war and the people in it. I may be interested in using the Bijuu, but they are no different. At least I don't try to pretend otherwise. You're so obedient, wanting to defend your village even though they are the ones that made you into a monster. You're like a poor stupid dog that licks the boot that kicks it."

"Bastard—!" Naruto yelled, and he tried to headbutt Tobi, but missed. Instead of letting himself be phased through, Tobi danced nimbly out of reach with a strange laugh. Naruto got to his feet, red-faced with anger and embarrassment at being taunted.

"It's true, and you know it," Tobi said, getting serious again so quickly it was unnerving. "The only reason they treat you well now is that you're important. That doesn't change the fact that they see you as nothing more than a beast."

"You shut your mouth," Naruto glowered.

"You're just fortunate that the Godaime Hokage cares about you. That's more than could be said for the Yondaime, wouldn't you agree? He was coldhearted enough to seal the Kyuubi in a poor little infant."

Naruto knew he was being provoked, and he tried his best not to let it get to him. As much as he—sometimes, in the deepest and darkest part of his heart—hated what the Yondaime had done to him, he still acknowledged his greatness and strove to surpass him. Tobi was trying to twist all of that around.

"He did what he had to do to protect the village," Naruto said in a low voice, trying to keep his temper down as much as possible. "He gave his life to keep the Kyuubi from killing anyone else."

"I'll let you in on a secret," Tobi said, putting one hand on his hip matter-of-factly. "There is plenty about what happened that night that you know nothing about. It's just one of the many things that
have been kept from you. I can tell you about it, if you like."

His words had a familiar ring to them. Naruto was suddenly reminded very powerfully of the time Mizuki told him about being the Kyuubi's container. Tobi had the same mocking, self-assured attitude. He wasn't bluffing. And the only reason why Naruto hadn't realized that yet was that Iruka wasn't here to try to stop the masked man from doing something that couldn't be undone. He had the same uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that told him something terrible was about to happen.

"N-no," he said, gritting his teeth and turning his head to the side to avoid looking at him. "I do want to know, but—not—not like this. This is wrong. There had to be a reason why they didn't tell me about it."

"Yes. You are right about that," Tobi walked back over to him, leaning in so closely that he couldn't be ignored. "I can easily understand why they wouldn't want to tarnish the beloved Yondaime's memory by letting it be known that he made his own son a Jinchuuriki."

Naruto felt winded. The room tilted for a second and he had to lean back against the wall to steady himself.

"What did you say?" he whispered.

Tobi made to put his hand on Naruto's shoulder but Naruto jerked back, shouting, "Get away from me!" and tried to roll away to the side. He bumped into the wall, stumbled, and fell. He lay there, not bothering to get back up.

"You're a liar," he mumbled. "A liar… a liar…"

"You've gone back to that one, then?" Tobi snorted. "I guess that's to be expected. Sasuke was never as loyal to Konoha as you, and he still had a hard time accepting the truth about them."

Naruto didn't answer.

"I suppose you don't know anything about that either, or you would have asked me where he was right from the start."

"What are you talking about?" Naruto said in a flat voice. It didn't even sound like a question.

"Jiraiya's death. The destruction of the village. The loss of your family and friends," Tobi crouched down beside him on the floor. "And Sasuke, now an internationally wanted missing-nin who has vowed to kill everyone in Konoha, starting with you. All of this is reality. That is the reality that you would spend so much of your time and energy mindlessly defending."

All of the vague answers about Sasuke, all the hints, and all the anxious looks came flooding back in Naruto's memory. He didn't want to believe. He wanted to continue thinking there was nothing wrong, and that he would always be aware if something was. He wanted to believe that they wouldn't keep anything from him that really mattered. But that confidence was shattered beyond repair now. No matter how much he wanted to believe, he couldn't.

"Even… if it's all true," he said into the dirt, his voice breaking. "I can go back and keep it from happening. If it all went wrong, I can change it. I can make it right."

"Let me ask you, in all seriousness," Tobi said coolly. "Do you honestly think that that is any different from what I am trying to do?"

"You are a liar," Naruto said again.
Tobi sighed. "Fine, then. I suppose I have to prove that what I'm saying is true. Though, I doubt that he is much in the mood for visitors right now."

He took hold of Naruto's arm. Naruto tried to roll out of reach again, but his body was frozen, the way it had been when Tobi captured him earlier. He found himself being pulled through the black vortex once more.

When they reappeared, they were in a dark stone cavern inadequately lit with the greenish glow of dozens of glass tanks set into the wall. After getting his bearings and looking around, Naruto felt a lurch of nausea as he realized that each of the small tanks contained a real, floating eyeball.

"What do you want?" a voice asked harshly.

He was sitting facing the tanks as if watching them, but the entire upper half of his face was covered with bandages, concealing his eyes.

"Sasuke?" Naruto said—or tried to say. His mouth formed the word, but very little sound came out.

"As you can tell, this is where he is staying these days," Tobi said. "I am sure you would like to think that he's being kept prisoner here against his will, but that just isn't the case. Ne, Sasuke?"

"Who are you talking to?" Sasuke demanded, standing, his posture defensive.

"Just an old friend of yours; though he seems to be a little lost for words right now. You see, Naruto, Sasuke decided to join up with Akatsuki for a little while in order to—"

"Naruto?" Sasuke interrupted. He gave a quick, unamused laugh. "Quit joking around. Are you trying to get on my nerves?"

"Originally, he only decided to leave Konoha in order to chase after his brother," Tobi said, ignoring him. "But that became full-blown hatred against the village after he came to understand that they were truly the ones responsible for the demise of the Uchiha."

"Whatever you're trying to play at, Tobi, you're really starting to piss me off," Sasuke growled. His right hand twitched and a single strand of electricity wound its way up his arm and then over his chest before disappearing.

Naruto was staring at Sasuke wide-eyed, his mind unable to comprehend or explain his presence here, if Tobi was not telling the truth. Accepting it and not accepting it seemed equally impossible.

Tobi stood behind Naruto and put both of his hands on his shoulders. "He promised to take revenge on Konoha, after finding out too late that Itachi had been acting under orders from the Hokage and the higher ups. It's tragic, wouldn't you say? He killed his own brother over a misunderstanding."

"Shut up about Itachi," Sasuke hissed, walking forward, lightning elemental energy bursting from his hand and enveloping his arm. "Don't talk about him in front of me!" Sasuke snarled at Tobi and lunged with his Chidori strike, even if he didn't really expect it to do anything. He didn't care that Tobi was intentionally angering him, either. No one talked about Itachi like that around him.

Naruto couldn't really comprehend anything beyond the immediate. The deafening chirp of a thousand birds wiped out all other sounds, and his eyes tracked the speeding death rushing toward him. His instinct told him to shout out, but by the time the instruction went from thought to action, it was too late.

All he felt was a heavy, slightly painful feeling in his chest. Maybe it was the shock of the electricity,
or the disbelief, but the pain was almost completely numbed. Naruto looked down and saw his best friend's arm, the pale white wraps darkening rapidly with blood. There was so much of it. The bright blue light crackled, throwing the angles of Sasuke's face into sharp relief at intervals, the corners of his lips turned down in confusion.

"Sasu..." Naruto began, but the blood rose in his throat and he choked on it. Flecks of blood landed on Sasuke's face and he started as if he had been struck. Tears stung Naruto's eyes. Blood was running out between his lips and he couldn't get them to form any words.

Sasuke stepped back, removing his arm with a quick motion that made Naruto give a strangled cry. Naruto sank down to his knees and then painfully onto his side, sputtering and curling around the gaping wound in his chest as he struggled to draw breath. Light blue electricity crackled around his body in spasms.

"What is this?" Sasuke demanded, holding out his hand and looking down at it as if he could actually see it. "What is going on?"

"That is your best friend's blood on your hands, I believe," Tobi said with a chilling calm, rematerializing where he had disappeared before. "Getting started on your promise already?"

Naruto was choking and stuttering out indistinct sounds; the cries were distorted by pain but the voice was unmistakably his.

"I don't understand; how is he here?" Sasuke knelt down and reached out with trembling hands. His face twisted with confusion and shock, he felt Naruto's shoulder, his chest, and the wound pouring his lifeblood all over the floor. "No—it's a trick. It's impossible."

"What's the matter? I thought this was what you wanted."

Sasuke stood and walked backward until he reached the tanks, bracing himself against them like he was off balance, leaving bloody handprints on the glass. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. It—this doesn't make any sense. It doesn't make any sense. You're trying to play games with me, aren't you? I'll kill you!"

Naruto wrenched his eyes open. He saw Sasuke through a vague mist, shouting at Tobi. He tried to move his arms, but they were still tied behind his back. Sounds came to him in heavy, rolling bursts that made no sense.

Sasuke...

Strength was draining from him at an alarming rate. He felt so sleepy. He tried to keep his eyes open but they refused to cooperate. He fell asleep to the sound of his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

Fukasaku’s eyes snapped open and he gasped.

"What is it?" they all gathered around him anxiously.

"He's here!" he jumped up. "Naruto-chan is in this building!"

"What?" Sakura asked, intensely relieved. "You were able to pull him back?"

"I can feel him down below. Let's hurry," Fukasaku dived for the door and they followed after him quickly. "I'm not sure," he continued as they flew into the hall. "I kept trying to bring him to our exact location. It didn't feel like he came back from my pulling, but it is possible that I did manage to
do something. I don't know what happened, he just appeared. I can barely feel him, though. He feels very weak."

"Everyone stay on your guard," Gaara said, taking the lead behind Fukasaku. "It might be a trap."

They ran through the halls and down the stairs. People in the hallway retreated to the edges in order to let them through, wondering aloud what was going on. Most of them had never seen the Kazekage even remotely worked up before, much less looking as stressed as he did now. He looked more worried than the time Akatsuki had attacked Suna directly. They knew something very serious was going on.

"It's down here," Fukasaku said, turning and going down the set of stairs that led to the Puppet Corps workshop and the Konoha team's rooms. "This floor feels completely deserted. As far as I can tell, there's no one down here but Naruto-chan."

"Which way?" Neji asked.

"Toward the end of the hall, in one of the workshops."

"I'll check," Neji activated his bloodline limit and stared ahead as they approached closer and closer, through the walls of the rooms that separated them.

"It's this one, here," Fukasaku stopped in front of one of the doors and looked back at them.

"Well?" Gaara asked Neji.

"There is no one else in there," Neji said. "He's lying on the floor behind one of the work tables. He's—" Neji's eyes widened, and he didn't finish his sentence. He opened the door and rushed into the room without wasting any more time on words.

They all moved in, trying to be as vigilant for traps as they possibly could under the circumstances. Kankuro flicked on the overhead light. Gaara, Temari, Sai, Neji, and Sakura pushed through the chaotic cluster of stools and half-built puppet bodies hanging off the tables and the walls, not caring what they knocked to the floor in their haste. Naruto was lying on his side on the dusty floor behind one of the worktables in the back, as Neji had said—and the reason for his alarm was immediately apparent as they saw the gaping hole in Naruto's body, and the blood soaking his entire front.

"No—"

"Naruto!"

"Naruto-chan!"

"Move!" Sakura commanded, and she pushed through everyone and knelt down beside him, trying to force back her tears so that she could see what she was doing. She put her glowing hands on him to assess the damage and try to stop the bleeding.

One of his lungs was mostly destroyed; it couldn't be saved. The other was filling with blood. He was well on his way to drowning in it. He was not conscious. He was no longer breathing. Sakura took in these facts with the speed of an accomplished Medical Nin. Her feelings couldn't be as detached as her mind, however. Her body started to tremble as she continued to pump as much medical chakra into her friend as she could.

Sai had noticed that Naruto's hands were tied behind his back and he untied them carefully. His arms and wrists were only mildly scuffed—insignificant damage compared to his chest—but a rare anger
latched itself around Sai's heart, and he glared fiercely at the offending marks.

*What did they do to him?* he wondered. This was nothing like what could be expected from the Tailed Beast extraction. He looked up and watched Sakura's face as she worked on him, looking for some kind of sign. She looked strained, but composed… for a while. Gradually her head lowered until her bangs were covering her face.

"I'll—I'll go tell the medical team to bring a stretcher," Kankuro said. The silence was getting to him. Gaara nodded in agreement and he left quickly, relieved to have a task.

"This… is just like before," Sakura whispered. "Except it's worse—the amount of power put into it last time doesn't even compare. And I'm not Tsunade-sama. I..."

"What is it, Sakura?" Sai asked softly.

She turned her head away, but with her hands occupied, she couldn't turn far enough to completely conceal the tears starting to roll down her face.

"Chidori," she forced out through clenched teeth.

His senses came back to him slowly, one at a time. Naruto opened his eyes in a careless, sleepy kind of way. He felt very comfortable. Unfortunately, that lasted only for the few moments it took for him to remember everything that had happened.

The memories hit him like a freight train. His eyes widened and he sat up sharply, looking down and patting at his chest. He noticed for the first time that he was wearing hospital clothes. That wasn't terribly surprising. What was surprising was what he discovered from the cursory inspection of his body, which was… nothing. No gaping hole. No blood. Everything looked and felt completely normal.

Had it all been a dream? But it had been far too real to be a dream...

"Naruto?" someone said gently.

He turned his head to the side and saw Sakura sitting by his bed, wearing a small, tentative smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" she asked in the same gentle tone, like someone talking to a frightened animal.

The way she was acting was freaking him out. If it was meant to be reassuring, it was doing the exact opposite.

"Sakura-chan? What happened to me?" he asked confusedly. "I thought I..." He put his hands up to his chest again. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Only a couple of hours," Sakura said. Her eyes lingered on him strangely, like she was scrutinizing him. "You were hurt pretty badly. We thought you were going to die. I couldn't get the bleeding to stop," her voice faded to a constricted whisper.

Naruto let his hands fall to his sides on the bed. "But I feel perfectly fine."

"I know," Sakura said. "One moment you were dying, then suddenly your body started regenerating... healing itself. You were able to regrow entire organs in minutes. Naruto, even for
you, it wasn't normal."

Naruto felt sick and afraid. Their eyes met and the air between them hung as heavily as a funeral, but far more delicate. Naruto's mouth felt very dry and he swallowed.

"Sakura-chan, my… my memory might be really messed up or something, but for some reason I remember it was Sasuke."

He had hoped beyond hope that she would react with surprise. Confusion. Even derision. But no. The grief etched across her face and the silence told him that it was all real.

"What…" he didn't even know where to begin.

Sakura stood up and put her hand over his. "Hold on a minute. I have to let the others know that you are awake. Let the Suna medics take a look at you, okay? Please," she gripped his hand tightly. "Please hold on just a moment."

Naruto looked down at her hand and then back up at her as she gave a final painful smile and pulled the screen open to the rest of the room.

"Uzumaki-san?" one of the Suna medics stepped up. He didn't seem as strange as Sakura, but he still seemed very tentative, as if Naruto had woken up in a world on the verge of exploding. "I'm just going to check your pulse and listen to your heart and lungs, to make sure that everything is working fine now. Is that alright?"

Naruto wasn't really listening. It was all real. It was real. Somehow, he had missed every single thing that was most important. And they had known. They had all known that Sasuke was with Akatsuki. That he had left Konoha. He was gone. Out there, and no one was doing anything about it.

Sasuke—in Akatsuki. He was part of the group trying to find and kill his older self. He was a traitor. But Tobi had said he just wanted revenge because Itachi acted on orders… that it was the Hokage that had told him to do it… did they know that too? What the Hokage had done? What the village had done?

And the Yondaime…

Brushing against that thought was like touching a white-hot knife. He whimpered and clutched the sides of his head and curled up, chin on his knees. He tried to shut out the stabbing voice in his memory, but it refused to stop.

The truth is, though, you didn't entirely disagree with Pein's ideals. You must have identified with him on some level.

The only change will be you. But you will undoubtedly find out how much difference that can make.

"Uzumaki-san? What's wrong?" the medic asked him urgently.

All of this is reality. That is the reality that you would spend so much of your time and energy mindlessly defending.

Do you honestly think that that is any different from what I am trying to do?

The medic reached out to touch Naruto's arm, but jerked back when he saw a wisp of red flicker over it like a flame. Naruto shuddered. Bubbling, agitated red energy started seeping from his tenketsu. It ran over his spine and spread down his arms to the tips of his fingers, nails lengthening
into sharp points.

"What's going on?" a couple of other medics had rushed over.

"It's the Bijuu! It's—he's starting to lose control!"

*You're so obedient, wanting to defend your village even though they are the ones that made you into a monster.*

*The only reason they treat you well now is that you're important. That doesn't change the fact that they see you as nothing more than a beast.*

He dug his long fingernails into the mattress and his back arched as his muscles and bones shifted around into a more animalistic configuration.

"Oh my god!"

"W-What do we do?"

"Someone go get Gaara-sama right now!"

*It's tragic, wouldn't you say?*

His body was burning. His skin was cracking and peeling. Everyone around him was yelling in panic and confusion. Their fear made the hard wedge of grief and anger dig even deeper into his heart. More and more demonic chakra bubbled and frothed around him—and the more of it there was, the stranger his transformation became. Something was happening that had never happened before.

When the second tail of the chakra cloak was almost formed, strange knobs growing along his skeletal structure burst into twisted, lethal-looking spikes along his spine, shoulders, and collarbone. The ever-increasing outpouring of energy only made them grow larger and deadlier. They weren't made of bone. They were made of wood—a dark, almost black wood corrupted from feeding off of toxic chakra. The more energy that seeped from his tenketsu, the larger they grew.

Something dark streaked its way across the room and wrapped around Naruto tightly. He looked up through hazy eyes to see Sai painting across a scroll with frantic speed. Long ink snakes jumped off the paper and launched themselves at him.

Naruto gave an inhuman roar—a screech that chilled everyone present. The energy grew and burst the ink constructions holding him down. Snarling, he swiped his hand at the offender and dark vines broke out from under his skin and rushed toward him. Sai's eyes widened.

The vines were knocked to the side by a cluster of sand, and before his simplified reasoning could grasp what had happened, Naruto saw and felt a wave of sand slithering up his body and holding him fast. He snarled in frustration and struggled, but every movement he made added another layer of sand around him. It just kept piling on and on until his entire body was encased in it, up to his neck. He couldn't move. Screaming out angrily, he bared his teeth at his assailant – and saw Gaara.

Gaara stared back, hands raised, ready to manipulate his sand at a second's notice. He jumped down in front of Naruto and knelt to his face-level.

Naruto looked stunned. His teeth were still long and bared, but he was more gaping than snarling. His eyes were a very deep, dark red and the lines on his cheeks had lengthened into three long bars on each side that ran under his eyes and converged in a circle in the middle of his forehead. Suddenly
recognizing Gaara, he wore an expression haunted with horror, pain, and darkness.

"Naruto..." Gaara said. "You are the last person I ever wanted to see with those eyes."

He put his hand on the sand encasing him and seal lines appeared from the point and stretched all around. The bubbling started to die down and Naruto cried out in pain as the shards of wood shrank back into his body. The lines on his face faded and his eyes melded back into blue. The sand loosened and fell from around him in a softly hissing stream. Drained and weak, Naruto slumped forward and Gaara caught and steadied him.

"Gaara," Naruto choked out weakly, and he gripped the front of Gaara's shirt and dug his face into it. Gaara froze for a moment from the unaccustomed contact, but then put his arms around his friend and held him. As he started sobbing into Gaara's chest, he suddenly seemed incredibly young.

Tears were also swimming in Sakura's eyes. She climbed up beside them and hugged them too. Sai joined in on the other side. Neji let out a long breath that he had been holding and put his hand comfortingly on top of Naruto's head. Fukasaku was too small to join in the embrace, but he put his webbed hand on Naruto's back.

"Everyone, leave us for a moment," Gaara said, looking over his shoulder at the crowd of medics, ANBU, and random shinobi that had heard the commotion and rushed to investigate.

"But—Kazekage-sama!"

"Leave. I'll be out soon."

"Sir," they all bowed and left reluctantly, looking back at the huddled group and murmuring amongst themselves.

They stayed like that for a while, Naruto's body shaking and heaving with sobs while his friends clung to him. He cried as he hadn't cried since he was very small. He felt angry at everyone—he wanted to push all of them away. But for the moment, though he hated his own weakness, he couldn't reject the physical comfort of five pairs of hands holding him steady in the chaotic hurricane of his memory. For once, there were people willing to take the pain spilling out of him and hold it close, and he had never needed that more in his life.

"And that's how it is. He might survive, he might not. At any rate, it's between him and Orochimaru now," Tobi said while Sasuke stood silently at the lab's deep sink, washing his hands and arms. The bloodstained wraps lay in a pile beside the sink.

"How is Orochimaru even still around?" Sasuke demanded, forcefully turning off the spigots and drying his hands on the hanging towel as if he had a grudge against his own hands. "Itachi sealed him with the Sword of Totsuka."

"He has a way of escaping through the smallest opening. Very snake-like, wouldn't you say?"

"And why did you bring him here?" Sasuke said, turning to him angrily. "What is Orochimaru trying to do?"

"Why do you care?"

"I don't," Sasuke said. "I want to know why Orochimaru is trying to interfere in everything. And why you're going along with it. You planned all of this. You wanted us to meet."
"I'm also curious," Black Zetsu said from above them. He was sticking out of the ceiling. "I thought the point was to separate him from his friends so Orochimaru could get him. Why did you take him back?"

"Well, I told him that I would take him back."

Sasuke's lip curled in derision.

Tobi shrugged. "All Orochimaru wanted was for me to tell him the truth about Konoha, and let him make the decision about whether to leave them or not. I thought seeing you might give him more motivation. After all, choosing to leave of your own will is almost a driving force in itself, wouldn't you agree, Sasuke?"

Sasuke didn't answer.

"He didn't seem very happy about all of it. If he does leave them, what will you do?"

"Even if it's really him—which I'm not saying I really believe—he's just an unimportant weakling," Sasuke said. "If he's able to distract Konoha, all the better. But I would like to have a talk with Orochimaru."

"You'll probably have to wait for that," Tobi said. "In exchange for my help, he's going to carry out Kabuto's plan for strengthening the Zetsu. The war will be starting very soon. But when the time comes, I'm sure you'll be able to make your mark."

Sasuke clenched his fists. He already understood very well that Tobi had just been using him from the moment he first got involved with Akatsuki. But to be used so blatantly; to be complicit in whatever game Orochimaru was playing now… that pissed him off. As soon as he could use his eyes, he would make his mark—though not necessarily the way anyone else wanted him to.

"Whatever it was you were trying to pull with that—I don't care if you were just going along with what Orochimaru wanted, or whatever," he said. "I won't forget it. I'm sick of dealing with you guys. As soon as I can, I'm going to go my own way."

"Ohhhh," White Zetsu said in a stage whisper. "Sasuke-kun is mad at us now."

"That is fine," Tobi said. "I'm sure you will be able to think of plenty of things to do on your own. For now, just concentrate on taking good care of those eyes of yours." He turned and headed for the door. Zetsu melted into the ceiling and disappeared.

Sasuke bundled the bloodstained bandages and shoved them into the trash can by the sink. He was angry, but he was also formulating plans for when he would be able to see again. That was pretty much all he did these days. But now he had a better idea of what was happening outside. He would definitely be paying a visit to Orochimaru as soon as possible.

Baki was relieved to be back in Suna, even if it was only temporary. He was glad for the alliance and proud to see shinobi of different nationalities working together, but still, nothing beat home sweet home for him.

He first realized that something out of the ordinary was going on when he went to go report to the Kazekage and saw ANBU guards in plain sight—as well as samurai wearing green, high-collared desert tunics with red silk sashes embroidered with the kanji for 'kaze': the personal guard of the Wind Daimyo.
As he approached Gaara's office, walking without challenge past the guards, he saw that the door was slightly ajar. Someone was talking.

"It is a curious transformation. Isn't it true that Konoha has a shinobi that can use the Shodai Hokage's mokuton no jutsu? Maybe we could get his opinion on it, or try to determine if Naruto-kun has the ability to use it too—"

"Yamaguchi-sama, I object! We absolutely cannot allow the boy to keep running wild and putting our citizens in danger! It's well enough for Konoha to shove off their problems on us—"

"Did you just interrupt me, Ishida?" the first voice said in a steely tone.

"Ah—ah—I'm sorry, I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me," the second voice said, cowed.

Baki felt something crunch under his feet when he approached the door. He looked down and saw sand lightly scattered in the hallway.

"Come in," he heard Gaara call from in the room. He sounded tired.

"Excuse me," Baki said, pushing the door open and walking in. "I don't mean to intrude. I did not realize that you were here, Yamaguchi-sama," he bowed at the Wind Daimyo, who was sitting down on a richly draped couch that had not been there before.

"It is fine," Gaara said. "Go ahead and report."

"Aa," Baki cleared his throat and looked at Yamaguchi and his cousin Ishida, a lower member of the royal house, and then back at Gaara. He wanted to know what was going on, but he put it in the back of his mind for the moment. "It looks like all of the forces are officially assembling now. Anyone going that is still here should leave very soon. The Raikage suggests that we have the entire force together at least once so that we can get a clear picture of what the divisions all look like. Each of the division commanders will be formally introduced at that time."

"It's finally happened, then," Ishida sniffed. "Everyone is leaving and we'll still be stuck with that beast, completely defenseless."

"As pathetic as my cousin's whining sounds," Yamaguchi started, making Ishida look affronted, "he does have a point. The Jinchuuriki is from Konoha. It is all but confirmed that the one behind his appearance here is Orochimaru, who, although he is a missing-nin, is also from Konoha. As a foreign power and former enemy, can we really be completely sure that Konoha's intentions toward us are pure? Had you not gotten there so quickly, Kazekage-dono, I am almost certain that the boy would have killed everyone there and continued his rampage until someone put him down. I hear that he even tried to attack one of his own comrades. You of all people should be able to understand why we need to seriously consider the wisdom of keeping him here with little to no defense for our people."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Ishida insisted. "What we need to do is call in our best sealing masters to put him up for the duration of the war, then he'll be Konoha's to deal with again. I don't understand why we had to agree to this in the first place."

Gaara was rubbing his forehead with one hand. Baki got the feeling that he had been doing that a lot in the last few hours.

"I think getting the mokuton user to come here is a good idea, if it's possible," Gaara said. "Right now he is helping to guard the older Naruto, but it would probably be good to get his take on this. And if it turns out that Naruto can use that power, maybe Yamato-san can help him figure out how
to use it to suppress or control the Kyuubi."

"Very well," Yamaguchi said. "Just so long as he can stay under control somehow. We absolutely cannot have a repeat of the earlier incident while everyone is gone."

"Yamaguchi-sama," Gaara said with a deceptive calm. "If you're worried about Suna being destroyed by Naruto, why don't you just go back home to the capital?"

"Ah, I may," Yamaguchi said breezily. "But traveling across the desert is so tedious. I think I'll wait to see if anything else interesting happens around here first."

Chapter End Notes

Hey, you know what else is cool, Gaara’s birthday is Jan 19 and Minato’s is Jan 25. /makes a giant ninja-themed cake for the three of us to share/  
Wow, I get the feeling I am going to be embarrassed by this later. Oh well.  
Oh yes, the next chapter is scheduled to be posted on Feb 22. It may be posted sooner, but you can at least be assured that it will not be posted any later than that. Until next time!
Yamato was enjoying a rare nap. Ever since Naruto gained the ability to use the Kyuubi Chakra Mode and stay stable while doing it, his job had been relatively easy (though not boring—it was never boring with two loud and enthusiastic Jinchuuriki around). The downside to that progress, however, was that it would undoubtedly get harder from here on out to convince Naruto to stay hidden within the great turtle's shell. Fortunately, for the time being, Killer Bee was keeping him busy with control exercises using the giant clawed hands he could form out of chakra now at will.

Yamato suddenly received a very rude awakening when something slammed hard into the wooden couch he was reclining on. The couch flipped backward, dumping him to the floor and landing over him like a wooden tent. The wood immediately began to sprout and grow, entangling him.

"Ah—! Sorry, Yamato-taichou!" Naruto peered through the triangular hole created by the couch and the floor. "You were behind a thing I was trying to pick up, and… well, I missed."

"It's fine, but turn that off, you're making it worse!" Yamato said exasperatedly as the wood started growing roots into the floor.

"Whoops," Naruto said, and he snuffed out the golden aura surrounding his body. "Are you stuck?"

"I got it," Yamato sighed. He sunk up through the wood and climbed out of the top of it, then hopped down to the floor.

"I think I was about to run out anyway," Naruto said with a tinge of disappointment. "I really wanna make it so that the Mode lasts longer… guess I just need to keep practicing with it."

"If you keep on trying, I'm sure you'll get it," Bee said, joining them. "But if you and Kyuubi never get along, you'll never really hit it. Yeah."

"It can't be helped. I'll just make do with what I've got. Yooosh!" Naruto clapped his hands together and the golden aura flared up around him again, but only briefly—it sputtered and went out shortly afterward, and he leaned over with his hands on his knees, winded.

"You've been at it all day. You should rest for a little while, at least," Yamato suggested.

Naruto sighed and flopped down on the floor, leaning his back against the overturned couch. "Where did Huge Eyebrows-sensei and those other guys go off too?"

"I'll go see. You just take a breather there. I'll be right back."

"I want to try with the Bijuudama again a little later," Naruto said to Bee as Yamato left. "I still need to figure out the chakra proportion… thing. Whatever."

"It'll take a while to learn it," Bee said, crossing his arms critically. "You gotta feel it for yourself, or your game's weak. But every time you try it, you get beat. Don't worry about the Bijuudama, it'll sink in. You've got other powers to help you win, baka yarou."

"Yeah, but I almost got it last time," Naruto yawned. "It's the ultimate move of a Jinchuuriki, I want to be able to do it too."

"Heh. 'Tebayo brat," Bee quirked a smile. "All right! keeping up the momentum is what we do best. Don't fall asleep now, we're not done yet. Enjoy your rest 'cause when you're ready to go, I got
another test. YAHOO!

"Really? What is it?" Naruto asked excitedly.

Yamato walked out of the blank white room, past the headless statues, and into the sun, shielding his eyes from the sudden glare.

"Ah, Yamato-san," Motoi said, trotting up to him. "Nice timing. We were just trying to think of a way to get you that wouldn't look suspicious."

"Why? What's going on?" Yamato looked around and saw a Suna shinobi coming over to them, flanked by Aoba and Tsugi. Yamato vaguely remembered him from the Exams as the former instructor to Gaara and his siblings—and as someone who currently held a significant position on Suna's council.

"Baki-san, isn't it?" Yamato said, shaking his hand.

"Aa," Baki said. "I'm sorry to be so abrupt, but the Kazekage has requested that you come to Suna right away. The Hokage has been informed about the situation and she orders it, as well."

"To Suna?" Yamato asked, bewildered. "Why?"

"It's the younger Naruto-kun," Aoba said. "Apparently he was sent to Suna in order to be protected, but unfortunately…"

"There has been some kind of problem, of course," Yamato sighed.

"To say the least," Baki said grimly. "I'm not even sure how to explain it all. Well…" he paused, a disconcerted expression on his face. "No one knows exactly what's going on, but it seems that this younger Naruto has at least a portion of Senju Hashirama's power. He lost control of his bijuu a few days ago, and when that happened, it seems that he also manifested some form of mokuton—whether it is the real thing or not, we don't know. And since we don't know how he got here in the first place or why, there's no telling what it could be if it isn't that."

"What... in the world...? Tsunade-sama told me they had found some traces in a scan, but actually being able to use the power..."

"It might not do any good, but we want you to see him and give your opinion on the matter. There's something else you should know, too... if all this wasn't enough, the Wind Daimyo is in Suna at the moment, and he is highly suspicious of this little Naruto. I'm afraid that he's making matters worse for the boy by creating a mood where people fear that he could lose control at any moment, the way Gaara-sama was when he was that age. Even though all of Suna supports Naruto-kun in our time, some are starting to doubt whether the younger version of him is worth the same trust. They just can't forget the way things used to be. The daimyo says he won't consider letting him train or do anything until you come along, since you're more proficient at suppressing the Bijuu's chakra than our own sealers. Not that it matters, with the way he is right now… at any rate, you'll just have to come see."

"The way he is right now? What do you mean by that?"

"I don't—want to go into all the details right now," Baki said hesitantly. "It's best if Gaara-sama and the other Konoha nin explain it to you."

"What a situation to pop up right as we're about to go to war," Yamato said, scratching his head. "Well, I think that our Naruto can get along without me for now, especially with Bee-san here. But what are we going to tell him?"
"Just tell him that since he's learned how to control the Bijuu's chakra himself, you've been called back for the reconstruction," Aoba suggested.

"Has he shown any sign that he is aware there is a younger version of himself running around?" Baki asked.

"None," Yamato crossed his arms. "I've been watching him, but honestly I think that if he did have the slightest clue, he would say something about it. He isn't exactly one for subtlety."

"I wonder what it could mean," Tsugi said. "It doesn't seem like his younger self has given him any memories from all of this."

"Maybe he loses his memory of it after the fact," Aoba said. "Or maybe... he isn't really..."

Yamato nodded solemnly. "We know with almost complete certainty that his older self is the real thing. We shouldn't try to jump to conclusions on anything beyond that."

"I hate to interrupt, but I really need to be going now," Baki said. "I have to report to the Raikage concerning the mobilization of the last of Suna's forces still at home. I won't be able to go with you to Suna this time, but I'll be returning later in order to act as administrator in the Kazekage's absence. Please get to the village as soon as possible. They'll be watching for you."

"Right," Yamato returned the slight bow and watched him leave, a foreboding feeling creeping in on him.

"That aside, what are we supposed to do if the older one does figure it out?" Aoba wondered out loud. "At least when it comes to the war, we know that we just to keep him from going outside. With this, we have no idea if he could remember or sense something at any moment, even if he is under the turtle's shell. This is a completely unprecedented situation, after all."

"Tsunade-sama was going to send Iruka-san and some others as backup soon," Yamato said. "All of you will just have to do the best you can. We still have the barrier team as a last resort. We can only hope it doesn't come to that. Has Gai-san found any trace of that shark-summoner from Akatsuki yet?"

"No..." Tsugi said. "No sign that he escaped or that he is even alive, even though Gai keeps insisting that something doesn't feel right."

Yamato nodded thoughtfully. They had discovered the Akatsuki spy in their midst the first time Naruto had used his Bijuu Chakra Mode and sensed him hiding inside of Samehada, the sword Bee had adopted for his own. After a long and arduous fight, the strange fish-like man had encased himself in a water prison jutsu and proceeded to be torn apart by his own shark summons... or so it appeared. When the jutsu broke, it had all dissolved into water. There was no body, not even a trace of blood. Gai had a 'funny feeling' about it, considering the man had faked his own death once already, and he had gone out to search for any possible traces of escape.

"We've already changed course," Motoi said. "Just to be on the safe side, we're moving the island to another location."

Yamato nodded. "Right. Let me know if anything turns up."

He walked back into the cool shade of the cave-like temple, past the headless statues once again, toward the blank white room. When he stuck his head in the lock in order to open the door, he heard a sudden loud crash from inside. He jumped and hit his head on the inside of the lock and cursed. He backpedaled quickly, rubbing the back of his head and muttering as the door slid open.
"Ha! Did you see that?" Naruto said exuberantly. Yamato walked in to see that his couch had been ripped out of the floor, roots and all, and tossed across the room. It now resembled nothing more than a strange rectangular bush. Little pink flowers were starting to bloom on it.

"Naruto," Yamato called, beckoning. "Come over here for a minute."

Naruto stopped his celebrating and looked over to him, turning off the Bijuu Chakra Mode again and trotting over.

"What is it, Yamato-taichou? Are we going to eat soon? I'm starving."

"No. Well, maybe. I mean—that's not it," Yamato shook his head to clear it. "I'm being called back to Konoha. Since you have gotten the hang of the Bijuu Chakra Mode, Tsunade-sama wants me to come back in order to help with the reconstruction. But even though I'm leaving, you should be getting some reinforcements soon for your mission here."

"Oh, right," Naruto scratched his head. "I kinda got distracted from my mission. I guess it's about time I get back to it—"

"No, your training is important too," Yamato interrupted. "There's no rush. This is a big opportunity for you, and don't forget that Konoha will also benefit from having a fully trained Jinchuuriki. that is why Tsunade-sama is sending a backup team to help with your mission."

"If you say so," Naruto said doubtfully. "Well, when they get here, I'll definitely lend them a hand. This mission was my responsibility, after all."

Yamato just nodded. He didn't want to press the topic too much. Iruka and the others would just have to come up with something on their own.

"Good luck, Naruto. I hope everything turns out well," he said with such sincerity that Naruto gave him a strange look.

"Thanks... you too. Get the village put back together for me," Naruto said with a confident grin and a thumbs-up.

Yamato left as soon as he packed his bag and gave everyone a final farewell. He set out for the Wind Country with trepidation nicking at him. This was definitely not the first time he had been reassigned on short notice with very few details—and he knew it probably wouldn't be the last. But it definitely had to be one of the most bizarre reassignments he'd ever received. He was switching to the literal younger version of the very same person he'd been looking after in the first place. Yamato was far more familiar with the older Naruto, even though his ANBU duties had occasionally put him into contact with the boy in the past. Most of what he knew was told to him by Kakashi. From what he remembered, there had never been any problems with him the same as Suna had with Gaara at that age. The seal was solid. Unless something had changed, their fears were completely unfounded.

He had no idea what to make of everything Baki had told him about the situation in Suna—or the things he hadn't told him.

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Naruto the younger was released from the hospital the same day he had been admitted. Physically, he was completely healthy. But he was far from being alright. After the surge of anger and sadness ran out of him, it was like there was nothing left to fill the void. He just lay in his room, in the darkness unless someone turned on the light. He slept a lot. When he was awake, his eyes stayed half-lidded and they rarely focused on anything in particular. They hadn't...
gotten much of an answer out of him so far as to what had happened. It worried his friends particularly, because their time remaining in Suna was quickly running out. Whether he recovered or not, and despite what they wanted, they were going to have to leave soon to join the other troops in the Lighting Country. The only people remaining here for him would be strangers. After they left, Yamato, Baki, and the Wind Daimyo would be the ones in charge of him.

Sai sat down in the chair beside Sakura quietly. She glanced at him from her book and attempted a smile, but it never fully formed. She looked tired. Naruto was asleep on his back in his bed, head turned away from them.

"Has he woken up even once today?" Sai asked.

Sakura shook her head, biting her lower lip in worry.

Sai frowned. He hesitated to say what he was thinking, even though he was sure that the same thought had probably already crossed Sakura's mind. It was difficult to say aloud, because the mere thought gave him an internal shiver.

"Do you think that..." he started falteringly, "it could be possible that Madara used the Tsukuyomi on him?"

Sakura grimaced. She shut her book and gripped the edges of it with white knuckles.

"I don't know," she finally said in a low voice. "He is showing many of the symptoms of it, but part of what normally makes the recovery process so long is the physical damage to the chakra pathways in the brain caused by a heavy genjutsu like that. If he had any damage, it's gone along with all the rest of his wounds. But that could explain why he's been able to regain consciousness as often as he has, even if it's not much. I could believe it, considering that was the first thing they tried to do when they tried capturing him before..." She flinched. "But we can't forget, it's... undeniable that he was hit with Sasuke's Chidori. It may be that Naruto has just shut down because of that."

"It may not have really been him," Sai said bracingly, "Maybe that was part of Madara's illusion, too. He could have done it himself and used his genjutsu to make it seem like it was Sasuke. Even if Sasuke did say he would fight Naruto to the death, do you really think he'd even bother with the younger version? It wouldn't be a challenge for him."

"You're right about that..." Sakura said slowly. "But I'm not even sure whether or not I should be relieved if it wasn't really him. The Tsukuyomi... I understand why they would use Sasuke in it both times, but why would Madara bother using it at all if he already had Naruto in his clutches? Why would he go through the trouble of traumatizing and then punching a hole through him if he's only interested in the Kyuubi?"

"I have no idea... until Naruto tells us what happened, all we can do is guess."

Sakura buried her face in her hands. "Kakashi-sensei was right. We should have just gone ahead and told him. It still would have been bad, but... we have no idea what he saw, and now... if it was anything like what you did..."

Sai tried to block out the memories rising in his mind, but it was difficult. The images had been haunting him again ever since the first time Naruto woke after Gaara sealed him, looking past them with uncomprehending, foggy eyes. That was the really dangerous part of the jutsu: the effects lasted much longer than the time it took to heal from it physically. And the victim did most of the work.

"Finding out this way was so much worse," Sakura continued in a muffled voice. "They don't care at
all; they'll use anything and everything to their advantage."

"We did make a terrible error," Sai admitted. "We should have realized after the first time that it
would be better to tell him. It was naive to think that the chances of the enemy reaching him were so
low that it was acceptable to put it off. We let our feelings cloud our judgement."

Sakura lowered her hands and curled them into fists on her lap. "Never again. It may be too late
now, but… if he asks me anything, from now on I'll answer as honestly as I can…"

Naruto's eyes, turned toward the wall, opened just a sliver.

"And if I ever get my hands on Madara…"

"Hm," Sai laughed lightly. "Well, I'm sure we'll get the chance for that when the war starts." he
stood up from his chair.

"What're Neji and Gaara doing?" Sakura asked him, turning in her chair to watch as he went toward
the door.

"Negotiating, as usual," Sai said. "Yamaguchi's cousin Ishida still wants to put suppression seals on
Naruto until Yamato-taichou gets here."

Sakura stood up, fury radiating off her form.

"Aha," Sai said nervously. "You know he can't really do anything. No one ever listens to him, not
even the Daimyo."

"I really hope all of them decide to tuck their tails and get out of here when all the strong shinobi
leave," Sakura said furiously. "I don't even want to think about leaving Naruto here alone with those
guys around."

Sai knew that Sakura knew that they didn't really have a say in whether the Wind Daimyo and his
entourage stayed in Suna or not, but he guessed rightly that she was just eager for something to direct
her ire toward. He followed her out and turned off the light, closing the door behind them softly.

Naruto opened his eyes a little more.

He wasn't completely unconscious as often as they supposed, but he had been drifting in a half-
asleep torpor most of the times he wasn't. Sometimes the conversations going on around him
reached, like now, and other times they did not. He heard snatches of the outside world as if from far
away. Sometimes he felt a hand on his forehead or pushing a stray lock of hair from his face.
Sometimes he heard people saying his name, which was usually soft and friendly, but other times
heard him in a low, sinister whisper. It was difficult to tell what was real and what was not. He had
to untangle the knots his mind carefully and slowly. If he thought too hard about anything or
examined his feelings too closely, the hissing, stabbing voice would come back and threaten to
rush over him, spilling boiling anger and helplessness into his veins. After a while he realized that it
wasn't Madara's voice tormenting him anymore, but another.

"The way things are going, they'll lock you up the moment they get the chance. Are you just
going to lay here and let that happen?"

He never answered it, normally. He was afraid to, after what had happened before. But the voice
would not leave him alone. It had been trying to get his attention for over a day now.

Naruto closed his eyes and slowly opened them again on the other side of the enormous barred gates,
looking up with tired eyes at the vast silhouette vaguely outlined in the dim light.

"If they want to do it, they will," he said wearily. "There's nothing I can do. If I try to fight, it'll just make things worse. They already think I could be some kind of lab experiment put here to mess things up in the war… and I don't know if they're even wrong."

The red eyes high up above him narrowed and bent down closer to him.

"If they're going to think that anyway, why not fight? We'll be stuck in this annoying world if you don't do something, idiot brat."

"I told you, we're in the future. It's not my fault you've been taking a nap this whole time, or whatever it is you've been doing."

A deep, low growl started up from deep in the darkness. Small ripples spread from the edges of the bars and washed over Naruto's feet. He watched the water lap over his toes impassively and then raised his head back up.

"What's the point of even going back, anyway?" he said in a barely audible voice. "I... I don't know what I'm supposed to do. If I try to go back and make everything how I want, I'd be doing the exact same thing as him. But I can't just go back and let everything happen right in front of me, either. Besides, there are some things—things I couldn't, no matter how much I wanted to—"

"I feel like this container is going to suffocate me," the Kyuubi hissed. "I haven't even been able to think clearly since we got here! If I stay in this prison, I feel like it is going to eat me alive! I could give a damn whatever else you do, we are going to leave this crappy future, no matter who we have to claw through to do it." 

"It won't work!" Naruto shouted back, clenching his fists. "No one's going to just let us go looking for the way home. And if I try to use your power, someone will get hurt, and that wouldn't solve anything. Not to mention Kakashi-sensei told me the seal nearly breaks in the future because I used it too much."

"Then go ahead and break it yourself," the Kyuubi growled so low that Naruto felt the vibrations in his chest. "If you do, you won't have to think anymore. You won't have to worry about anything. You can even get everyone back for lying to you all this time."

Naruto took a step backward. Frothing, malicious chakra crept over the surface of the water toward him. It rolled and built up and formed itself into the giant head of the demon fox, bearing its teeth at him. Small tendrils of acidic energy wound up his legs and arms like steam, stinging the skin. Naruto stared into its eyes, his mind starting to go blissfully blank. The fox's head grinned, front legs forming, with claws ready to sink into their victim.

"NO!" Naruto shouted suddenly, pushing against the encroaching ill intent with all the force he could muster. It was surprisingly effective. The chakra construct in front of him exploded and melted into formless gunk that sank into the water and withdrew quickly behind the bars. The Kyuubi gave an unexpected, earsplitting roar of rage and pain.

Naruto gasped and splashed over to the bars to look in. The Kyuubi was writhing, agitating the water as it twisted and nipped at the dark black vines growing at an unbelievable rate, wrapping themselves around it and tightening painfully. Thorns sprouted and dug into his skin, eliciting more enraged roars.

"What is happening?!" Naruto said, panicked. As his fear spiked, the vines aggressively pulled the
"You're the one controlling these things!" Kyuubi spat out, pulling at the vines around its neck with its claws. "If you don't calm down, this place really will eat me."

Naruto watched, mouth slightly open, as the vines cruelly subdued his long-time cellmate, and—in spite of himself—his fear melted into mingling sympathy and guilt. He had assumed that the fox’s complaints were just another ploy for control, but it looked as if he was actually telling the truth.

"W-what should I do?" he asked hesitantly. It felt strange to be intentionally cooperating with his lifelong tormenter.

"Your body is a low-quality clone of the Shodai Hokage," the Kyuubi said, continuing to snarl and struggle with the plants. "It only attacks me when you resist the flow of my power. If you don't, it simply feeds off of the energy, like earlier."

"So you're saying to not resist when you try to take me over? Yeah, I'd bet you like that," Naruto snorted, forgetting his sympathy for a moment.

"Argh! Just—shut up and relax before I rip you into shreds!"

"You're not being very convincing, you know..." nevertheless, Naruto took several deep breaths and tried to relax his mind. It was difficult, with the fox's agitated energy swirling in the air—waiting, perhaps, for him to drop his guard so that it could try to consume him again. But even though he was frightened of that, of the Kyuubi's power, the talk about his body being some kind of freakish plant clone disturbed him even more. When he had been laying half-asleep in his room these past few days, he had heard the disquieted murmurs and speculations. He and everyone else knew something wasn't right. And what if it was true? What if he really was some kind of... creation? Madara had practically said as much. Most of all, they were concerned about the possibility that he could be controlled, the way that the Edo Tensei puppets could be. Madara letting him return to his friends alive was just too suspicious...

A particularly vicious snarl from the Kyuubi brought his attention back to the task at hand. His efforts to clear his mind were proving utterly futile. Concentration had never been a particularly strong point for him, and the jumbled thoughts and stresses within and without were making it nearly impossible.

He growled in frustration, a sound much less intimidating than the loud sounds of struggle still coming from behind the bars, and opened his eyes. There was definitely no love lost between them, but Naruto didn't even want to think about what would happen if the fox got... eaten... by those things. So since the relaxation idea didn't seem to be working out, he did what he did best, and rushed headlong into the situation without a defined plan.

Giving barely a pause at the edge of the bars, Naruto ran through them into the fox's cell and grabbed one of the thick, thorn-ridden vines. He tugged on it experimentally, but had to jump back in order to avoid an angrily thrashing claw.

"What do you think you're doing, idiot brat? Do you ever listen to anything?"

"Your plan wasn't working out, so I had to try something else!" Naruto shouted. "Taijuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

He remembered belatedly that he had no idea if jutsu would even work in this place, since it was some kind of weird space that only seemed to exist in his mind. To his relief, however, a battalion of
shadow clones appeared and swarmed all over the fox.

"Ugh!" Naruto grunted, tugging on the thickest vines around the Kyuubi's neck. They were keeping it tethered to the ground like a collar. "If these things really are made by me, then why can't I make them go away?"

"You're sitting on my head!" the Kyuubi growled in rage. "You should consider yourself fortunate that I can't move, or I'd snap your little body in half."

"Just shut up already! I'm trying to help," he drew a kunai from the pouch on his leg and tried to cut the vine, which was starting to solidify into a curved, root-like structure. Naruto paused in his hacking and drew his hands away when he realized that it was his touch that was causing the living vine to grow inanimate and solid. Seeing that his kunai had actually managed to slice into it, he dug the blade into the cut with renewed determination.

"Guys! Touch the vines! If they stop moving, I think you can cut through them!" he called excitedly to his clones.

"Osu!"

"Okay, boss!"

"Hey, I think it's working!"

As the binds holding him down started to crack and break, the Kyuubi stood up and shook himself, snapping the brittle wooden chains and shaking off the hoards of bunshin.

"Whoa—!" Naruto pitched forward and rolled down the fox's shoulder, landing ungracefully on the floor with a splash. He looked up from where he lay on his back, and the air whooshed out of him when the Kyuubi pressed its huge, clawed, hand-like paw on top of him. He was pinned helplessly, completely unable to move under its great weight. The fox lowered its bared teeth and turned one huge red eye to stare down at its host.

It occurred to Naruto for the first time that coming into the Kyuubi's cage was possibly a little reckless. The few times they had met one another so far, their interactions had been punctuated with a heavy, threatening sense of urgency. There was usually no time to be afraid until after the fact, when everything had settled down and there was enough space to sift through the blurred, frantic memories. That had been the case this time, as well. He had simply acted, forgetting how small and weak he was compared with the vast powers of the Nine-Tailed Demon Fox—who, in fact, hated him.

However, there must have been something severely wrong with his sense of self-preservation, because suddenly all he could think of was the same great and powerful Kyuubi yelling at him for sitting on its head, and scolding him for not listening, and a bubbling feeling of laughter welled up in his chest at the absurdity of it all. He would have covered his mouth, but he couldn't move his arms. His face worked and tears pricked the corners of his eyes as the exaggeratedly menacing expression on the fox's face threatened to push him over the edge. He just couldn't help it. The laughter burst out of him all at once, sounding high-pitched and giddy.

"What are you laughing at?" the Kyuubi snarled incredulously, looking at him like he had a screw loose.

"I—I don't know!" Naruto gasped out as the pressure weighing him down increased, the laughs still spilling out of him in a strange staccato. "I guess I just... ha, ha... I think I'm relieved. I know we
don't exactly like each other, but you're the only other person from my time around, and I forgot that you were here, too."

The fox paused, and lifted up his paw. Naruto blinked up at him in surprise.

"Listen well, brat," he rumbled. "I have no intention of being stuck in this time, especially if it means being manipulated by the likes of Uchiha Madara," he spat the name out as if it was a curse. "I don't believe for a second that he's given up on using us, even if this body prevents him from drawing me out. You need to hurry up and get whoever you need to to undo the jutsu and send us back. It seems like I am not going to be able to do it for you." His voice was bitter. It was a humiliating position to be in, to say the least. He hadn't expected the attempt to take over the brat's body to fail so spectacularly. There was literally no other choice but to convince the boy to do what was necessary through coercion rather than force. He would relish the opportunity to sink his claws into whoever had put him in this ridiculous situation.

"But..." Naruto said slowly, getting to his feet. "Supposedly, the person I would need for that is the Edo Tensei-zombie-whatever version of the guy that destroyed the entire village, and—and killed Ero-sennin. He sounds insanely powerful, and I really doubt that I could just go up to him and ask for his help. Besides that, I have no idea what he looks like, and even Madara doesn't know where he is now. I don't even know where to start. Besides, I can't leave this place knowing what Madara's up to."

The Kyuubi gave a frustrated sigh. "Forget about Madara! Do you really think there is anything you can do to stop him? If you really care about it so much, the best thing you can do is go back and tell the people in our own time what he's planning. Leave things here to your older self and the others."

"My older self..." Naruto said, eyes wide with sudden realization. "Kyuubi! If there's an older version of me here, does that mean there's an older version of you here, too?"

"Obviously; though four years hardly counts as 'older' for me. You're pretty slow, aren't you?"

Naruto reddened slightly, but continued. "Well, I knew that, I just didn't think about it in terms of there being two of you, the same way there's two of me. With different memories and stuff, I mean. I mean, you're from my time and you don't get what's going on in this time any better than I do."

"What's your point?"

"So... is there any way that you could... I don't know, help me find aniki and your older self? Sniff them out or something? We already know they're in the Lightning Country somewhere, so finding them might be easier than looking for some dead guy I don't know. Plus, they might have a better idea of how to find him and how to fight him, if it comes to that. I'm sure they'd be willing to help, too," but Naruto said the last part a little more slowly, with a small frown.

"You don't look sure," the Kyuubi noted. "And to answer your question, I can feel the presence of my other self, but I can't feel clearly where it is coming from. I think that wherever they are, it must be somewhere that completely masks their chakra. It is only because of our special connection that I can feel them at all."

"So, can they feel us?"

"I don't know—a little, maybe. The same way I can. The barrier may block sensing in both
directions. If they were to leave it, though, their location would be like a beacon to me, and vice versa. But..." he snorted. "I repeat, are you really sure your older self is going to be any help to us? For all that people like to insist you're something great now, I sure haven't seen anything to back that up. It looks like he's just off twiddling his thumbs somewhere, when a war's about to start. He doesn't even seem to care that your little Uchiha friend has decided to join his ancestor's deranged club of pseudo-humans."

Naruto stiffened and glared up at the fox. "There has to be more to it than that. I would never let Sasuke go along with people like them, even... if he had a reason for doing it."

"Aa, I'm sure there is more to it than that," the Kyuubi agreed patronizingly. "I suppose it's always possible the older you is being completely led on by everyone, too, or maybe he's just too afraid to to face him. I wouldn't blame him, after seeing what the kid did to you."

Naruto turned around sharply and walked back out between the bars. "You know, the next time you think about talking to me, don't."

"Hey!" the Kyuubi slammed against the gate, making it rattle. "You might think it's harmless to stick around here worrying about things that have nothing to do with you, but never forget how we got here in the first place. Everything has consequences, including—believe it or not—dangerous jutsu being used on you by your enemy."

Naruto cut off the conversation with the mental equivalent of a door slam and opened his eyes in reality.

He made a face at the ceiling and sat up in bed. A quick glance around the room showed that there was no one around—no one visible, anyway, he amended. He really didn't know how much of the Wind Daimyo's paranoia had carried over into actual practice over the past few days.

He let out an annoyed grumble and rubbed his eyes. Even after laying around with nothing to do but think, he still felt like there were so many things whirling around in his head that it would burst. This complicated situation was a lot harder to figure out than anything in his previous life, where he at least knew what a friend was and what an enemy was. Naruto and the Kyuubi had never had a real conversation before. It was different from what he would have expected. He never thought about the fox seeing and commenting on things in his life, or having any kind of personality at all beyond the scary-evil-demon-ness.

The Kyuubi had been right on at least one point, though—nothing good would come of just laying around. Naruto threw back his covers and got out of bed. He stood there indecisively, staring at the faint outline of the doorway in the darkness.

How was he supposed to face his friends? He didn't know what to feel about them. And they were probably going to ask him about what happened. He didn't want to lie about it... but he didn't want to tell them everything Madara had told him, either. He didn't really want to talk about it at all. But how else was he supposed to know if Madara had been telling the truth, if he didn't ask?

I'll worry about that later, he thought, shaking his head. He pulled on his shoes and peeked out into the hallway. He had no idea what time of day it was, since this floor was underground and lit dimly with lamps, but everything seemed quiet.

The quiet was, of course, nothing but an illusion. He only made it a few steps toward the stairs before a man appeared in front of him, a chakra sword drawn and glowing with energy but lowered, not directly pointing at him. He didn't seem like a Suna shinobi. Instead of a Suna hitai-ate, his
allegiance was pronounced by a red sash tied about his waist with the kanji for 'wind' embroidered on it.

"Going somewhere, Nine-tails?" he challenged.

"My name is Uzumaki Naruto," Naruto answered with a glare, his body tensing up for a fight. "And? Gaara told me I could go anywhere I want."

"If the Kazekage were a little less blinded by sentiment, he'd—"

"Enough, that will do," a voice said from behind the swordsman. They both turned and shifted their attention to the round, plump figure of the Wind Daimyo walking toward them, flanked from behind by two other guards.

Naruto's heart leapt into his throat at the sight of him, more so than when he'd been stopped by the guard. He took a step backward, suddenly feeling very claustrophobic in the narrow hallway. He had no idea why he suddenly felt so uncomfortable, except for the fact that the man's appearance in the hall now, when everyone else was off trying to placate his cousin, made no sense whatsoever.

"What are you doing down here?" he said, trying to not sound too rude, but failing miserably. The samurai that had first confronted him noticed, and pointed the chakra-laden sword at him. But Yamaguchi just chuckled and walked closer, holding up his hand to stay the guard. The swordsman relunctantly sheathed his sword and stepped to the side, but his hand stayed resting near the hilt and his suspicious gaze never left Naruto for an instant.

"There is no need to be alarmed, Naruto-kun," Yamaguchi said with a smile that crinkled the edges of his squinted eyes. "I have actually been down here once a day since you passed out after that unfortunate incident, but you just never noticed. I came to see how you were recovering. It is a pleasant surprise to see you out of bed, I must say."

"But why?" Naruto said, narrowing his eyes. "Why would the most important person in the Wind Country bother to come see me?" I thought you hate me, he added in his mind. He didn't say it out loud, but his scowl clearly displayed his feelings.

"You underestimate your own importance," Yamaguchi replied in a kind but slightly condescending way, as if trying to soothe his self-esteem. "After all, I would have to do a great deal more than simply exist in order to instigate a world war."

Naruto didn't really know what to say to that, so he didn't answer at all.

"I take it you were looking for your friends? I can show you where they are. They will be relieved to see that you are awake." he gestured toward the stairs invitingly.

Naruto felt uneasy again. He did want to go find them, but now that the daimyo suggested it himself, it was a slightly less appealing idea. He looked up at Yamaguchi with a scowl. "And you don't mind hanging out with me with no one else around? No offense, but I doubt three of your guards would be much help if I decided to go all Kyuubi-berserk on you."

The guards tensed, and the original one stepped defiantly in between Naruto and the daimyo, but the daimyo himself just laughed as if he'd heard a particularly witty joke.

"Tell me, Naruto-kun," he said, brushing the guard off to the side casually and stepping right up to him, dominating Naruto's field of vision with his wide frame. He looked down into his face seriously. "Are you hungry?"
"I—what?" Naruto blinked. The question was so completely out of nowhere that he wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

"I said, are you hungry? From what I understand, you haven't eaten anything since arriving in Suna, and that was a week ago."

"Well, yeah, I am, now that you mention it," Naruto said slowly, confused. Actually, he realized, although he did feel pretty famished, he probably did not feel nearly as hungry as he ought to have.

"Interesting. I wonder if that is a phantom response generated by your mind, or if the adaptive abilities of the plant cells extend all the way to imitating usual physiological functions. It has been made more than clear that you at least have normal-appearing organs, whether their function is necessary or not… and your heart still pumps blood." he pressed the pad of his thumb into the crook of Naruto's elbow from where blood was usually drawn. Naruto pulled away as if he'd been burned, glaring incredulously at the older man and wondering how severe the penalties might be if he decided to punch the Wind Daimyo in the face.

"I wonder…” he continued softly. "How much damage it would take to detach your soul from that body, or if you would just keep coming back."

"Are you threatening me?" Naruto guessed. He fervently hoped so, because otherwise this conversation had gone in a very unexpected and disturbing direction.

Yamaguchi just looked down at him and smiled. It was not a smile that he liked at all.

"I heard your friends saying that they would take you to eat as much ramen as you wanted when you woke up. Let's go tell them the good news." He turned and walked unhurriedly toward the stairs.

"Er, okay," Naruto said, following awkwardly. He glanced uneasily back and forth as the guards surrounded the two of them, clearly as tense as he felt. He felt bad for them. He would definitely hate his job if he had to hang around this strange man all the time.

"So…” Yamaguchi started, and Naruto glanced sideways at him. He'd hoped that Yamaguchi had finished trying to carry on a conversation with him, because it was just confusing and creepy. "Everyone brought you here to Suna under the assumption that Uchiha Madara was after you in order to steal your Tailed Beast. It's odd that Madara actually succeeded in capturing you, but left the Tailed Beast intact. Isn't it? What exactly did he want with you?"

Naruto felt a pang of anxiety. He wasn't ready for these questions just yet. He especially didn't feel like going into the topic with this particular person. But he couldn't outright refuse to say anything.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "He just said that he couldn't get it from me."

"Oh? Was there anything else you two talked about?"

Naruto shrugged vaguely.

"And I hear you also had a run-in with Uchiha Sasuke."

Naruto tensed, and a strange mixture of sadness, anger and apprehension welled up in his gut. What did Yamaguchi want from him?

"Yeah," he forced out after a long pause.

"You know…” Yamaguchi said, so quietly he could have almost been talking to himself. "They've
all secretly convinced themselves that Madara used genjutsu on you, and nothing else happened. They believe Madara just wanted to torment you before you died, and that their toad sage friend saved you from certain peril. It probably wouldn't require much to keep them believing that. If, on the other hand, it's thought you may have learned about any of Konoha's darker secrets— the reason behind Uchiha Sasuke's defection, for example— you might find yourself so restrained that you never stand a chance of returning to your time."

Naruto's head snapped up, and he looked at the Wind Daimyo in shock.

"Aren't you the one that's making it so that I can't even leave my room without people following me?" he said angrily. "And what do you know about Sasuke, anyway? I seriously doubt that you would know more about him than anyone from my village."

"People expect a certain kind of behavior from me," Yamaguchi said smoothly, unperturbed. "And I'm not claiming to know anything about Uchiha Sasuke. But I do understand a lot about how hidden villages work. Considering how slow Konoha has been to send hunters or even officially acknowledge his status as a missing-nin, there is more to his situation than meets the eye. He even assassinated an elder on Konoha's village council, and they haven't arrested him yet? Clearly there is something."

"He did what?" Naruto said numbly.

"My point is, if they thought that you didn't really meet Sasuke—in other words, if it was all genjutsu, and you didn't really know if it was true—do you think they'd tell you it was? If you firmly believed it was a lie made up by Madara, do you think they would correct you?"

"Yes," Naruto said, stating it strongly to try to wipe the smirk off Yamaguchi's face. "They're done trying to hide things from me. They wouldn't do that."

"Well, it wouldn't be hiding so much as allowing you to carry on with a false belief, after all. Are you sure you aren't the least bit curious?"

"I don't like you," Naruto announced. "I don't care if you are the Wind Daimyo."

"Good, you're finally being smart," he gestured mockingly toward an open archway that led to a sparsely furnished sitting room. Sai, Sakura, and Neji were in there sitting around a low square table with teacups, but they didn't seem to be socializing. They all looked preoccupied with their own thoughts. But when Naruto and his escorts walked in, they all looked up quickly.

"Naruto! You're up!"

Before he knew it he was pulled into Sakura's embrace, her pink hair tickling his cheek and nose. In another situation he might have blushed, but he felt too stressed at the moment.

"You really had us worried," she said, pulling back to search his face and peer critically into his eyes. "How do you feel?"

"I..." how did he feel? Honestly, he had no idea. "I don't know. A little weirded out, I guess." it sounded dumb, but it was the truth.

"He was leaving his room when I met him," Yamaguchi said. "He has seemed a little dazed and confused."

Naruto looked back at him over his shoulder with a frown. Yamaguchi's expression was a perfectly diplomatic shade of concern. Sakura frowned as well, but for a different reason. She pulled a pen
light from her medic pouch and clicked it on, shining it into each of Naruto's eyes briefly.

"Hey! Warn me before you're gonna do that," he grumbled, blinking and rubbing his eyes. She had already put the pen light away and straightened up to her full height.

"Naruto," she said gently, putting her hands on his shoulders. "I don't want to ask this, but since your healing ability makes it impossible to tell through normal ways—do you remember if Madara used a genjutsu on you?"

"Um… I'm—I'm not sure," he hedged, looking back nervously at Yamaguchi, and then back at her.

"Did you see his Sharingan?"

"Well… yeah..." he remembered the red eye burning through the singular hole in the mask and felt uncertain for a moment. Was he actually completely certain that it hadn't been used on him? But what Yamaguchi had said confirmed that Sasuke's defection was real. And—the rest of it had felt completely real, too. It had none of the strange or dream-like qualities genjutsu was supposed to have. Madara wouldn't need to use it in order to tell him all of those secrets, anyway. "But I don't think he used it. It—it all felt completely real to me."

Sakura's eyes darkened and she dropped her gaze. "Sorry about all of this," she said quietly. "We can talk more about it later, if you'd like. You're safe now, and that's what matters."

Naruto wanted to ask her right then. He wanted to look her in the eyes and demand to know everything that had happened to Sasuke. He wanted to know if the Third had really and truly ordered Itachi to kill the Uchiha clan. But it all got stuck in the back of his throat. It was too unbelievable, and how would he know if the answer was the truth or a lie? She had promised, but… no. Trusting in his friends was the one thing he would always do. But the prospect of being proven wrong on that point was frightening. He had never envisioned a situation where believing in one of his friends would conflict with believing in the others.

"No," he said quietly, stepping back away from her grasp. "I want to know about it now. Madara said Sasuke was there of his own free will, but all of you said that he was just off on a mission somewhere. You're the ones who should know if it was a genjutsu or not. So, which is it? Where is Sasuke?"

Sakura froze, her eyes wide and her hands trembling, still poised in the air.

"Where is Sasuke?" he repeated a little louder.

"Naruto…" Neji stood up and walked toward them. He held his palms open, beseeching. "A lot of things happened, it's hard to just—"

"How could you just leave him there? We're a team, we're supposed to look out for one another!"

Naruto was nearly yelling. He hadn't meant to start. He had been completely ready to say yes, he wanted to wait, he wanted to put the conversation off for later, anything to avoid it. But when he actually opened his mouth, it was like a pressure valve opened up and he couldn't hold it back. "Why didn't I stop him? Why am I off doing something else like I don't even care? Does my older self even know that he is gone, or has everyone been lying to him, too? You, baachan, the older me, Kakashi-sensei—has everyone just decided to let Sasuke join Madara's side and get himself killed fighting the entire rest of the world?"

"No," Sakura choked. "We have tried for so long… Sasuke… he's not the same person anymore. He's done too much now. The last thing we want is for him to be our enemy, but…"
"Naruto," Sai said seriously, touching Sakura briefly on the shoulder to interrupt her. "Sasuke is an internationally wanted criminal. He tried to abduct the Raikage's younger brother, the Eight-tails Jinchuuriki. We had no choice but to join everyone else in condemning Akatsuki, or we would be inherently responsible for Sasuke's actions, and risk war with Kumo as a result. It's out of our hands now."

"Does aniki know about this?" Naruto said stubbornly.

They looked at one another, clearly trying to figure out the best way to get him to calm down. The guard behind him was getting restless; they obviously feared him going out of control. Naruto knew it was foolish to make a scene now in front of the people who already wanted to lock him up, but the anger was overriding his sense.

"He does," Sakura said softly, hoping to get him to tone down by using a low tone herself. "He's training and getting stronger right now so that he can save Sasuke. He refuses to give up on him."

_Is that true or a lie?_ Naruto thought instantly, out of nowhere. Then he felt disgusted with himself for doubting. Then he just felt really tired. He heard the swordsmen behind him shifting uncomfortably and realized that there was no point in continuing to demand the truth if he couldn't even let himself believe the answers.

"I guess I just really don't understand, after all," he mumbled. "I don't understand how this could have happened."

Looking relieved and pained at the same time, Sakura said, "None of us do."

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Hoshigake Kisame was not fond of losing, and he wasn't overly fond of sneaky tricks in battle, either. Leave the fine-tuned deception and manipulation to people like Itachi. Give him a straight-up, beat-down brawl any day. Yet he knew how to deceive with the best of them. It had been part of his job, after all. Though never particularly charismatic or personable, no one back in Kiri had ever expected it when he was the one to kill them to keep village secrets from falling into the hands of the enemy.

And now, for the _second_ time in just a matter of weeks, he had escaped death by faking it.

He was currently laying on his stomach in a shallow cave on the sea, on the coast of the Land of Lightning. Though he was alive, he was not in very good shape. His last battle with the strange green beast of Konoha and the others had left him completely drained. What was worse, he had lost his sword, so he couldn't recover his chakra quite as quickly as he might have been able to otherwise.

He had been fully prepared to die in that battle. Akatsuki was all he had left to be loyal to, after all… or at least that was what he had thought.

He finished writing the scroll laying out in front of him, and he rolled it up and secured it with a bit of twine. It was a second draft. The first had been sent out when he was still fighting against the team from Konoha. After escaping, he'd called his summon back and set about replacing that scroll with a new one. This new scroll still relayed to the higher-ups that he didn't think he was going to survive the battle. But the accurate, in-depth information on Kumo and the Nine-tails Jinchuuriki, he'd decided to edit out.

He stretched his long arm out to the edge of the water and put the scroll in the little shark's mouth. It swam away dutifully and Kisame gave a small, sharp-toothed smile.

"It will be a pleasure to work with you again, Itachi-san," he said.
Sasuke woke unexpectedly. He was by no means a sensor-type—compared to someone like Karin, he was a total novice in that department—but he suddenly felt there was a heavy, cold presence nearby. As he lay in his bed listening, keeping his breathing even, sleep slowly lifted from his mind and he cast out his senses as far as they would go. It soon became plain that he could detect the large, cold chakra because the person was making no effort whatsoever to mask it. He knew that presence. That chakra was almost as familiar to him as his own—it had been part of his own for four years.

Orochimaru.

Sasuke threw back the covers and put his feet on the cold stone floor. He made his way carefully out of the bedroom and into the adjacent lab where the Sharingan eyes were stored. He had never seen his room or the lab before, but he still knew them like the back of his hand. There had been plenty of time to become acquainted with his surroundings after he and Tobi had fled to this hideout after the Land of Iron.

Sasuke paused in the back of the lab, near where several large shelves stood. He could hear voices coming from up ahead, around the tanks. He had no idea if he could be seen where he was standing, but it didn't matter. He wasn't trying to hide.

"No one among the Wind Daimyo's group knows where he is. Only the Kazekage himself and a select few others are privy to that information," he heard Orochimaru say smoothly. "But you can probably use your Sharingan to get the information out of my other little experiment."

"Kisame's information was not very precise," Tobi said thoughtfully. There was a rustle of paper. "He must have been under quite a bit of pressure before dying, if the scattered nature of his message is any indication."

"That's neither here nor there to me," Orochimaru started, but then he paused. Sasuke stiffened. He could tell that he had been noticed. But instead of commenting on his presence, Orochimaru simply continued. "As long as you make sure to draw attention away from Suna and Konoha, I don't care if you go after him now or later."

"Don't get carried away. After improving the Zetsu, I still need you to revive the Jinchuuriki."

"Oh? So you have recovered it then? The Rinnegan?"

"Orochimaru," Sasuke said, walking toward their voices, tired of being ignored. "What are you doing here?"

"My sympathies," Orochimaru said in a conversational tone, as if he hadn't been interrupted. "You've probably come to realize how impetuous he can be sometimes. I personally find it an endearing trait."

"Aa. As for the Rinnegan, I haven't retrieved it yet. The Allied Shinobi Forces are gathering near Kumogakure, so I am going to concentrate on launching the Zetsu first. I will go after it very soon, though."

"How did you survive?" Sasuke demanded, stepping closer to where, by his best judgement, Orochimaru stood. "Itachi had sealed you away with the Sword of Totsuka."

"Oh, Sasuke-kun. You may be blind, but I know that you are not stupid." Orochimaru finally turned
"That time, you saw for yourself that I'm never really gone, as long as a part of me exists somewhere. I need to conclude my business here quickly, so unless you have something worthwhile to contribute…"

"Tobi told me that you're helping him in exchange for his cooperation with this ridiculous thing you're planning with a younger Naruto. What are you trying to do with him?"

"You don't have to be jealous," Orochimaru responded soothingly. "Just because I decided to make a little side project, it doesn't mean I'm no longer interested in you. There was a jutsu I managed to complete after a long time, so of course I had to test it out right away."

"It's not that," Sasuke said. "I don't want you interfering with my revenge against Konoha."

"Oh, you are going after them now? I suppose that means you know the truth about Itachi, then. I'm not terribly concerned with Konoha at the moment. I will be more than happy to sit back and watch what you do instead, Sasuke-kun."

Sasuke paused. "You knew?"

"Of course. Is that a surprise?"

He couldn't see his expression, but he could imagine the snake's knowing smirk. Sasuke stamped down his temper. He knew it wouldn't do any good to fly into a rage against Orochimaru in his weakened state; not to mention he was a little wary now of attacking blindly. But it was difficult not to throw out the obvious accusation: Orochimaru had known, yet allowed and even assisted him in throwing years of his life away in pursuit of killing the one person he had love left in his heart for.

"No, it's not a surprise at all," Sasuke said with a bitter smile.

"Hm," Orochimaru laughed lightly. "If you want to get back at me now, you'll have to destroy my new project. Though, it probably wouldn't be easy. That child holds one of the most intriguing possibilities for immortality I've seen in a while."

"Orochimaru," Tobi interrupted, "shouldn't you be getting back before someone notices that you're gone? The last thing we need is more reasons for the Kazekage to delay his departure."

"Aa," Orochimaru agreed. His voice changed, becoming deeper and smoother, yet maintaining his underlying tone of mocking amusement. "Until next time, Sasuke-kun."

He looked so small and young that it was almost funny. Of course, Yamato knew full well there were plenty of shinobi his age and younger—hell, he had been one of them. What made it humorous was the less-than-intimidating glare the miniature version of his subordinate was currently giving him.

"You smell like an old guy, worse than Kakashi-sensei," he said obstinately. "Are you really the one who's supposed to be my bodyguard when everyone leaves?"

Yamato fought down the urge to use his intimidation tactics to get some respect out of the little brat. From what he had heard, the younger Naruto had had a very traumatic experience recently. He deserved a little benefit of the doubt.

"Yes, I am. You can call me Yamato. As you've probably heard, I am the captain of Team Kakashi whenever Kakashi-senpai is on another mission, or gets himself laid up in the hospital. I was just overseeing your older self's training. I guess that's what I'm going to be helping you with too, to
make sure nothing strange happens while you are training with the Toads. Especially with that unusual body you seem to have." He cleared his throat. "By the way, I am actually younger than Kakashi-senpai."

"You were just with aniki?" Naruto said, lowering his crossed arms.

Yamato looked quizzically at the rest of his team. Sakura and Sai were there to help with the introductions, though it wasn't proving too successful so far.

"That's what he calls his older self," Sai explained.

"Oh. Er... yes," Yamato told him awkwardly. "And I have to say, it's pretty strange to see you after that! You sure did hit a growth spurt at some point." He held his hand out at the approximate height of the older Naruto.

Naruto jumped up from where he had been sitting on the edge of his bed. "I don't need someone like you to help me with my training! I know you're really here to keep me from getting away, or going out of control while everyone's gone. Just like with aniki, right? What kinds of lies did you tell him to keep him holed up somewhere, huh?"

"Naruto!" Sakura exclaimed.

"Hey, just calm down." Yamato made to touch his shoulder but Naruto Substituted himself with a flower vase from the bedside table, which fell and broke on the floor, soaking Yamato's shoes. He hopped down from the bedside table and dashed for the door, only stopping when Sai caught him by the wrist.

"Let me go!" Naruto growled, pulling out of Sai's grip. "You... you fake! You're not my teammate or my friend! You're not Sasuke!"

Sai's eyes widened. He was caught off guard enough to just stand there as Naruto turned and ran out.

"And here I was thinking he might be the easier of the two to deal with," Yamato sighed, carefully picking up the broken shards of the vase off the floor. "He seems to know a lot about what's going on."

"Yes," Sakura said guiltily. "I'm not sure exactly what Madara was trying to do, but if his goal was to upset Naruto, he did a good job. We were getting along well until all this happened."

"Aa, that may have been his goal, if he was telling the truth about not being able to use him for the Tsuki no Me plan," Yamato said darkly, depositing the ceramic pieces onto the bedside table. Yamato was one of the few people aware of the alleged 'real' reason why Sasuke had not returned home. He had been there when Madara told them the story of Itachi's mission. While he didn't think that Madara had told the younger Naruto the same story, he understood better than most Madara's talent for turning people's inner darkness against them to suit his own needs. "Is it alright for Naruto to go storming off like that?"

"He won't be left unfollowed, but we should make sure he doesn't do anything crazy, like pick a fight with the Suna ANBU or the Daimyo's guard," Sakura said. "He didn't mean it," she added to Sai.

Sai nodded. "I know. I suppose it was inevitable, once he was made aware of the truth."

A rare break in the rain illuminated the tips of Amegakure's famous skyscrapers with warm evening
light. The city sprawled out below where the young woman stood at a breathtaking height, wind flapping and tossing her black coat emblazoned with red clouds. Its vastness was lonely sometimes, but this was her favorite view of the city, nevertheless.

Today, the pause in the rain was a simple gift from nature. The discarded rain drops dripped from balconies and overhangs, glimmering in faceted colors when they met the sun. It was a good omen.

*It's just about that time,* Konan thought, a smile curling her lips. She turned and walked back inside, pulling the flapping edges of the coat around her.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"

Naruto slammed his hand down on the stucco roof of Suna's administration building, but nothing happened. He sighed and walked over to the edge of the roof to sit down. It was worth a try. His chakra and blood had changed just enough to disrupt his connection with the Summoning Contract, so he hadn't entirely expected it to work.

"No good, huh?"

Naruto looked up with a scowl that faded into surprise when he saw Gaara standing beside him. Naruto whirled his head back to glance behind Gaara, but was surprised to see that no one else had followed him. He turned back to the desert horizon and curled his arms around his knees.

"I don't think they're going to come after me again," Naruto mumbled. "So I don't really need someone to guard me anymore."

"What makes you say that?" Gaara asked quietly, sitting down beside him.

"Well, it's true, isn't it? They had me, and let me go. Guarding me isn't about protecting me anymore, it's about protecting other people from me, in case I'm working with the enemy. I mean, I don't blame you, I guess it's for the best; but if everyone is going to be suspicious of me, then I at least wish they wouldn't be so nice. It makes things harder. It makes it harder to be mad at them."

Gaara was about to answer, but suddenly a loud 'POOF!' sounded and a cloud of smoke appeared on Naruto's other side. Almost instantly, thick tendrils of sand hovered protectively all around Naruto, daring any threat to try and pass them.

"Hey! Did you happen to call, little bro?"

Naruto blinked at the sight of the red-and-blue toad sitting beside him, holding his webbed hand up in greeting.

"G-Gamakichi? Is that you?" Naruto got to his feet. Standing up, the toad was taller than he was.

"Wow, you got big! Does this mean my summoning worked?"

"Hm, not exactly," Gamakichi said. "I just kind of got a funny feeling in my stomach a minute ago, and I heard about the trouble Fukasaku-sama had getting in touch with you before. So I just decided to follow my funny feeling, and here I am."

The sand floating around Naruto pulled back and retreated into Gaara's gourd. Naruto had no doubt that the sand could reappear to protect him nearly as quickly as it could for Gaara himself.

"So, what's up?" Gamakichi prompted.
"Oh, right," Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "I wanted to ask Sennin Jii-chan if I could start training soon. There is this old guy Yamato that's supposed to watch over my training and he finally got here, so I want to start as soon as possible."

"Should be fine on our end," Gamakichi said. "But are they really gonna let you go the mountain after what happened before?" he looked curiously at Gaara.

"As long as Yamato-san is able to go along as well, yes," Gaara said.

"Oho! Awesome! You know, even the old man was saying we probably lost the chance to hang out with you. I'll go let everyone know! What time should we come pick you up?" Gamakichi sounded excited. They both looked at Gaara. Naruto had the most beseeching, puppy-eyed look he could muster.

"You can start tomorrow," Gaara began. Naruto let out a whoop and jumped up and down and gave Gamakichi a high five, grinning all the while. Not even the current situation could dampen his excitement over new training.

Gaara cleared his throat. "You will not be staying there, though. You can train there in the day, as long as you come back to Suna every evening."

"Awww, what?" Naruto whined. "But if that Moku-oji is going to be with me, why do I have to come back here? It's boring here." He didn't mention how much he would prefer to not have any more chances to be alone with the creepy Wind Daimyo again.

"Yamato-san has to come back here to make regular reports. That is the order of the Hokage. She wants to be kept informed of your progress. And it is for the best anyway; everyone will worry less if you come back here often."

"I understand, I guess," Naruto grumbled.

"Shima-obaa-san is gonna be so excited when she hears," Gamakichi said. "I'm going to go tell everyone. I'll see you tomorrow, little bro!" he clapped his hands together and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Naruto stretched. "Well, I guess it could be worse. If I'm training, at least I'm doing something!"

He knew that if Gaara wanted, he could have refused to let him go to Mount Myoboku. Many other Kage in this situation would have done just that. And Naruto didn't know how well his training would work out. But it was something. It was a start.

Two weeks passed. As Naruto began his training, signs of the upcoming war became more and more apparent. Most of the troops had already left before the Konoha group had even arrived in Suna, but soon the final wave would depart for the Allied Shinobi Force headquarters, leaving the minimum behind necessary for Suna's defense. The tools and supplies they were taking with them were sent ahead, and now that almost all of it had arrived safely, the only thing that remained was for the shinobi themselves to leave.

All this happened on the periphery of his awareness. Naruto spent the maximum amount of time allowed at Mount Myoboku once his training began. Training gave him a sense of purpose, even though he still didn't really know what he was going to do in the end. Being stronger would help no matter what happened, and being able to take a new power home with him when he went back to the past was a really exciting prospect too. This also had the effect of keeping him from seeing his friends very often. They always ate together in the evening; sometimes with one of the Sand Siblings
in their own apartments, sometimes out on the town as a group of just Konoha-nin. Naruto was glad for any meal that offered more edible fare than Shima's home cooking, but it was somewhat awkward. He was stuck between being angry with them and wanting to accept some—any justification they had for betraying his trust. Turning his back on them altogether would be inconceivable no matter what they did. He knew they hadn't meant to hurt him. But it didn't change the fact that they were wrong. At night he mostly stayed in his room, in order to avoid the equally tempting prospects of starting another fight, or forgiving everything.

Things on Mount Myoboku were a lot simpler and happier. They alternated between Sage training and the basics of Frog Kata, the taijutsu form specialized for Sage Mode. Unfortunately, they could only talk about the more advanced moves in theory, because many of them were physically impossible in his normal state. But since he was never all that great with learning things from theory, that progress wouldn't get very far until he could actually use Sage Mode.

Naruto sat in the shade of a gigantic leaf, meditating, trying his best to master 'stillness'. Yamato sat on the grass nearby, leaning back against the stalk of a freakishly large fern. Fukasaku stood ready with his stick beside Naruto. So far there hadn't been any signs of a transformation, whether good or bad, and it was getting harder and harder for him to sit still without complaint. Perhaps it was to be expected, but the first step was already taking longer than it had for his older self.

Naruto's eyes snapped open and he flopped backwards onto the grass with a very loud and frustrated groan. "I know I can do this. Are you sure I can't just copy what you said aniki did? I think we should try some of that toad oil stuff, at least."

"I told you that it's too risky, Naruto-chan," Fukasaku said. "The purpose of the oil is to draw Natural Energy to you, so that you can sense and take it in more easily. But you are attracting a lot of energy already. Any more would be dangerous. It might even be too much for you to handle as it is, once you first start using it."

"Hm…" Naruto sat up and crossed his arms. "I still don't really understand. How am I supposed to use it even if I was able to sense it? Do I just… take a big breath and hope it goes in through my nose, or what?"

"Ahh…" Fukasaku scratched his head with a sigh and then put his hands in a ram seal. "You learned about advanced chakra manipulation with the Rasengan, right? You already know not only how to focus your chakra to a specific point, but also how to control other variables like power level and rotation. If I remember correctly, you also already learned how to mix Wind Element energy in with all of that."

"Eh?"

"Not yet," Yamato interjected from where he sat, shaking his head. "He had only learned how to use Fuuton a short time before his original Sage training. That was also the first time he used the Kage Bunshin to accelerate training."

"Hmm," Fukasaku mumbled. "You have even less experience than I thought. Nevertheless, as I explained at the beginning, the point is that you need to combine the Natural Energy with your normal physical and spiritual energies. It's much like other types of chakra manipulation, except that part of what you are using comes from outside of yourself, rather than from inside."

"Wait wait wait wait," Naruto waved his arms. "Back up a minute. I can use Fuuton? Can you guys teach me how to do that, too?"

"You should concentrate on learning Sage Mode first this time," Yamato said. "The final jutsu you
were able to create from adding Fuuton to your Rasengan ended up being unsafe to use without Sage Mode. And besides that, it is relatively easy to find someone to teach you how to use your element. If we have time after you get the hang of it, I can get you started on chakra nature manipulation."

"Yatta! I misjudged you, Moku-oji. You are alright!"

So it was with that added incentive that Naruto settled back into his meditation pose.

Yamato watched him thoughtfully. This version of Naruto was every bit as enthusiastic and dedicated to his training as the older one was, but in most other situations, the two were more different than he expected. Instead of the bright, loud, unfailingly confident shinobi he had come to know, the younger Naruto pulled pranks with bitter bravado and sulked in his room whenever he was made to go back to Suna. But Yamato could tell that the boy was struggling to accept the way things were in this time, and tried covering up his sense of hurt and betrayal with impudent behavior. It was immature, certainly, but it was undoubtedly a pattern he'd learned to revert back to in order to protect himself. It was usually during moments like this, when Naruto's thoughts were wholly concerned with training, that he forgot the act and seemed a little more like the young man he would become.

That was why he regretted it later that evening when he had to remind Naruto that they had to go back. Yamato stood up from the grass and lightly brushed off his pants. He walked silently over to where Naruto was sitting, his face scrunched with a look of utmost concentration. He was sitting so still it could have almost been a miracle, considering he had been doing nothing but meditation all day and was clearly sick of it by now. Yamato was about to speak up softly to break him out of it, but he stopped when he noticed that something was finally happening.

A bright orange pigment brushed over Naruto's closed eyelids as if painted on by an invisible hand, and Yamato held his breath. Fukasaku stared at him intently, stick at the ready. Naruto frowned, his lower lip sticking out slightly as he struggled. Suddenly his cheeks and hands started poofing out rapidly, expanding to a comical, unnatural size in the span of a single blink.

"Ack—!" Naruto cried as he faceplanted to the ground, courtesy of a hard thwack to the back of the head from the training stick. He sat up quickly, rubbing the back of his head. "Owww! What the hell, Sennin jii-chan? I think I finally felt something that time!"

"Yes," Fukasaku said, smiling widely. "It seems you were finally able to tap into the Natural Energy that time, even though it overwhelmed you very quickly. I'm proud of you, Naruto-chan."

"Congratulations," Yamato added with a warm smile.

Naruto rubbed the back of his head again, flushed with success, looking more sheepish and happy than pained this time. "I felt it! I don't know what happened, but… what you said about the Rasengan reminded me of what Ero-sennin taught me about concentration. I think I finally get what you were saying before about having to balance the energies. It's really hard, but I know what to expect now. Yosh! I'm ready to start training with Kage Bunshin so I can speed up my progress!"

"Alright," Fukasaku conceded, "but we'll start off with just one. As I suspected, it seems the Natural Energy overwhelms you more quickly than normal once you lose the balance. We have to be careful."

Predictably enough, Naruto started to complain, but Yamato interjected before he could get too far. "Oi, Naruto! Sorry to interrupt, but I was about to tell you right before all that— we need to go back to Suna now."
"Whaaat?" Naruto scowled without missing a beat. "I just started to get the hang of this Natural Energy thing! Why can't we stay a little longer today? It's not even the time we usually leave yet!"

"That is true, but we have to return a little early today." Yamato sighed. This was probably going to be difficult. "Everyone is leaving, and we need to head back now if you want to see them before they're gone."

Naruto stared at him wide-eyed. "What? What do you mean, leaving? Leaving for good?"

"Try to stay calm," Yamato continued. "This has been the scheduled day of departure for a little while. There were some people who thought it would be better if you didn't know until after the fact, but we negotiated that you would at least be able to see everyone off. You do want to, don't you?"

Naruto stood up. "Of course," he said roughly. "It won't make everything completely alright again, but I can't just let them leave without saying goodbye."

They had waited until nearly the last possible moment to catch everyone leaving Suna. Team 7, Neji, and the Sand siblings all lingered at the back a large group of shinobi just outside of Suna's great entranceway. Everyone else was chatting, reading maps, hydrating, or checking their equipment one last time before the start.

Gaara was the first to notice them. He turned away from the conversation of the others to turn and watch as Yamato and Naruto approached. The rest stopped talking to follow his line of sight. They all looked relieved.

"Naruto!" Sakura trotted up to him. He was surprised when she swept him into a hug, but she let go before he had a chance to respond. "I'm sorry we had to wait to tell you when we were leaving. The Council and the Daimyo didn't want want it at all, but we all knew it'd be worse if we just left without saying goodbye, so Gaara put his foot down."

"I'm sorry, too," he mumbled. He looked from face to face. Sakura, Sai, and Neji were all wearing Konoha flak vests. It made them look so serious and official, and he felt the gap between them even more acutely. He was always terrible with goodbyes, but this was probably the worst one he'd ever faced so far. It wasn't like when he made new friends on missions and had to say goodbye to go back to Konoha. His friends were going to war, and he had to stay behind. Yeah, he had been mad at them. But they could die. They could die and leave him alone and he could be stuck in this terrible future for all anyone knew, and—

"Don't worry about us," Sakura said, correctly interpreting his silence. "We won't go down so easily. More importantly, keep yourself safe, all right?"

"It isn't right! Everyone going off to fight while I just sit back here. You know I can't—"

"Aa, I know."

And that was all they could really say. It wasn't like they hadn't already gone over the same subject a million times already.

"Naruto, take this." Sai stepped forward and held out a small green scroll toward him.

"Eh?" he took the scroll and unrolled it a little. It was completely blank. "Uhh… thanks?"

"If you hold this scroll out to one of my Chojuu Giga, the ink will display whatever was sent with it. Usually I need to have at least some idea of where I am sending a message, but the seal at the center
of this scroll is imbued with my chakra, and they should be able to seek it out. That way, they could find you even on Mount Myoboku. I can send you reports as often as you want. Although, you won't be able to answer…"

"Thanks, Sai," Naruto said awkwardly, putting the scroll in his tool pouch. "For the record, I'm… sorry I said you weren't my friend. And for ignoring you and everyone else. You're kind of a weird guy, but you're nice, in your own way."

"Don't worry," Sai said. "We'll finish the war before your pea-brained older self can get out and ruin everything. And maybe by the time we come back, you'll have grown a little taller."

"Hey—!" Naruto scowled. "Don't mess it up now."

Sai just laughed. It was hard to tell sometimes if he was completely serious, or if he just had a strange sense of humor.

"Neji," Naruto said, turning to him. "Go out there and show them what a Branch House member can do."

"Of course," Neji answered with a confident smirk.

"Gaara…" he felt more awkward than ever, but it wasn't the time to think about how ridiculous he sounded, even to his own ears. He plowed on ahead. "I didn't say it before, but I was really happy to see that you became the Kazekage. I mean, seeing where you came from and all... even though I can't imagine what you had to go through after that, just to reach where you are… I know it must have been really—"

Gaara held out his hand, smiling faintly. Naruto blinked.

"I know: you're not really good with this kind of stuff, right?" he said.


"Try not to give Baki-sensei too many headaches while we're gone." Temari smirked and leaned forward conspiratorially. "But between you and me, you can feel free to use your natural powers of annoyance on anyone trying to butt in on Suna's governance."

"Osu!" Naruto saluted, grinning. "Good luck everyone! All of you better come back alive, or I'll beat the crap out of you when I go back to the past, and make you train with me every day so you don't do anything stupid like that again."

They all agreed, and whether it was only to humor him or not, Naruto didn't care. He wholeheartedly meant it.

When they were done saying their goodbyes, Gaara and his siblings made their way to the front of the group and led them away. Yamato and Naruto stood behind and watched until the group had disappeared completely behind the horizon.

The next day was gloomy, figuratively and literally. Rare rainclouds hung over Suna from early in the morning, hovering ominously and blocking out much of the usual sun that baked the clay streets during the day. Even though the final parting group hadn't been all that large, the town felt strange and almost empty with most of the shinobi gone. As usual while in Suna, Naruto was withdrawn and antsy to leave. Yamato brought him out for breakfast at the local ramen place to try cheering him up a little, despite Naruto's protests that he wanted to get back to training as soon as possible.
"Moku-oji, you know I don't even need to eat anyway, because of this weird plant body of mine… what's more important is the fact that I finally made some progress in my training yesterday!"

"There's still plenty of time before Fukasaku-sama is supposed to come get us," Yamato said, steering him inside the ramen bar. "Honestly, do I really have to ask if you'd rather eat ramen, or hang out in the Administration building with the Daimyo's Guard hanging over you?"

Naruto mumbled his assent. By now, of course, most of Suna's civilians were aware of the presence of Konoha's Jinchuuriki in their midst. Torn between the gratitude they felt toward his older self, and a fear driven by associating him with a younger Gaara, they were wary but tentatively friendly. The ramen place the Konoha group had started frequenting wasn't as nice as Ichiraku's, but it made up for that with interesting varieties and warm service. The old lady that ran the shop was even friendlier than most of the population, since she had gotten to know the Naruto of this timeline, and was very fond of him.

"Good morning Naruto-chan, Yamato-san," she greeted as they stepped in. "Is it just you two today?"

"Yes," Yamato said as they settled in at the bar. "The rest of our group left for the Lightning Country yesterday evening."

"Oh dear, that is right. I suppose there really is no stopping this war, now… I had hoped that I would never live to see Suna involved in another war."

"Yes... only this time, the countries of the world are allies. If anything good can come out of this, it would be the strengthening of our ties and hope for everyone to get along better in the future."

"True, true."

Naruto didn't say anything. He just put his elbow on the bar and his cheek in his hand, tracing imaginary spirals on the counter with his other hand.

"How is your training going, Naruto-chan?" the proprietress asked kindly.

"Good," he sat up a little more, and a spark finally appeared in his eye. "Actually, I took a huge step forward yesterday right before we came back! In fact, I'm sure that I would have mastered it by now if Moku-oji would let me stay longer."

"Well, if you do your best, I'm sure you will get it very soon, even with your time constraints."

"Hah! You said it; a little thing like that isn't about to hold me back! Ah, now then... hm... I want to get... hey, Moku-oji, is it alright if I get the deluxe with the tempura desert radish and..." Naruto broke off when he noticed that Yamato was turned around on his stool and looking out into the street. "Moku-oji?"

Yamato stood and lifted the curtain in the entranceway out of his line of sight so that he could see. Naruto got up and stood beside him to see what he was looking at.

A group of five Suna shinobi were walking down the street, heading toward the Administration building. That alone would have been slightly unusual, considering most of the few shinobi left behind were tasked with guarding the village's perimeter and entryways, and were under strict orders to keep to their posts. They looked distinctly uncomfortable and kept glancing at one another, and at a woman in the center of the group, who they seemed to be escorting. Her hands were tied behind her back and another kunoichi walked close behind her, pointing a kunai at the back of her neck.
"What is going on?" Naruto asked.

"An intruder?" Yamato wondered out loud, eyes narrowed. "No... the situation looks too quiet for that..."

The woman wore the wide light-colored wrap typical of Suna, and it draped down her front and back the way Temari often wore it—but it couldn't be clearer that she was an outsider. Underneath the wrap she wore a form-fitting purple top with mesh sleeves that ended at her elbows, black shorts, and tall purple boots. Her hair was a paler shade of lavender, tied on top of her head in a little bun, and adorned with a delicately folded paper rose.

As if sensing their gaze, she turned her head to look at them. Her golden-amber eyes rested on Naruto for just long enough not to be incidental before looking away again. Despite being restrained, she looked completely calm.

"It looks like they are taking her to Baki-san," Yamato said. "We should go, too. I get the feeling we'll be called in to vouch for her soon, anyway."

"What... why, do you know who that is?" Naruto asked curiously.

"I've never met her in person, so I didn't recognize her at first, but I've seen her file. That's the current leader of Amegakure, S-rank kunoichi and former member of Akatsuki, Konan."

"...What?"

By the time they reached the office where Baki carried out his duties as the stand-in leader of Suna, all but two of the escorts had been dismissed to go back to their posts. All that remained was the kunoichi holding Konan at knife-point, and another shinobi standing on her other side. Baki was sitting behind the desk, looking tense, and Yamaguchi was watching the scene from the sidelines with his beady eyes fully open.

"Intel from Konoha does suggest that you are indeed the leader of Ame, but it also indicates that you and your Hidden Village were formerly affiliated with Akatsuki. It would just be sheer idiocy to allow your people to watch after him... and the Allied Shinobi Forces have already agreed that this is the best place. I'm sorry, but it is completely out of the question," Baki said.

"Excuse us," Yamato said to get their attention. "What is going on?"

"Yamato-san," Baki said, looking disconcerted. "I am not fully up on Konoha's alliances with smaller countries. Maybe you will have a better idea than I as to why Ame would feel comfortable coming here to offer a hiding place for Konoha's Jinchuuriki."

"What was that?" Yamato said.

Konan turned around as much as she could and inclined her head in a small, polite bow, "It is as he says. I have heard about the situation here with Naruto, including his recent capture at the hands of Uchiha Madara. As you can imagine, I have been monitoring Madara's activities very closely ever since I assumed leadership of Amegakure. I believe that Naruto would be safer in Ame than in Suna. Our forces are powerful, and more importantly, they are all at home instead of at war. It has also been a well-known fact for generations that no one can enter Ame undetected. Madara most of all."

"Why would you offer something like this?" Yamato asked. "Ame is neutral, not part of the Alliance. You aren't even officially friends with Konoha, even though we have a non-aggression agreement."
"Ame *does* have an allegiance—not with Konoha, but with Uzumaki Naruto, himself," Konan explained calmly.

"Eh?" Naruto was terribly confused.

"It is strange that the leader of a Hidden Village would come by themselves to make a visit like this, leaving their village unattended," Yamaguchi put in. "I am sure that many small countries would do anything to get their hands on a Bijuu, but to go this far?"

Konan examined him coolly. "Ame will get along without me for a few days. I do not plan on staying away long."

They stared at one another for an uncomfortably long time. Naruto had the distinct feeling that something was going on above his head here.

"No matter what you say, we can't let Naruto-kun go with you," Baki said. "We have the situation under control here already, and he has his training."

"And if he wanted to come to Ame, instead?" Konan asked. "Would it be so unthinkable to ask his opinion on it?"

Everyone turned reflexively to look at Naruto.

"Uh… hold on a minute," he said, holding up his hands. "I guess I know you in this time or something, but right now I have no idea who you are. Moku-oji said you used to be in Akatsuki, so… I don't even really understand how you can be here without being arrested. The boss toad of Mount Myoboku told me that Amegakure was where Akatsuki's leader lived."

"Yes," Konan said. "Akatsuki was originally ours, but it got corrupted by Madara. *Our* loyalty was always to what it originally represented: a new era of peace for Ame and the world. We lost our way, it is true. But it was your older self that helped us remember our original ideals—an ideal that has been entrusted to you, Naruto. You also convinced the Hokage to absolve Ame of its previous connections to Akatsuki. Even Madara would tell you that Nagato and I betrayed him."

Nagato. That name struck a chord in his memory. Madara *had* said they had similar ideals. That was the person he was supposed to find. If she knew him… maybe she knew where he could be found? Naruto didn't want to ask her in front of everyone else.

"Well, if the older me accepts that Ame isn't on Madara's side, that is good enough for me too," he said. "And I don't have to be here to do my training, anyway. I think it would be fun to go."

"What—hold on a minute!" Yamato spluttered. "Tsunade-sama has ordered you to stay here. You can't go off somewhere else just because it 'sounds fun'."

"Well then, ask her if I can go. It shouldn't be a problem then."

"That's not the real issue here…"

"Then what is?"

"Naruto," Baki growled, rubbing his forehead. "You and Yamato-san are meeting with Fukasaku-sama soon, aren't you? Why don't you go ahead and start your training for the day, and let us talk about this some more?"

"What, so I don't get any say in it at all?" Naruto asked stubbornly, voice rising. The more Baki
seemed to resist the idea, the more he found himself wanting to go along with it.

"You go on ahead, Naruto," Konan said calmly. "Don't worry, I'll still be here when you get back." Even though she was speaking to him, she was looking at the Wind Daimyo again with a polite smile. Yamaguchi looked back at her searchingly.

"...Okay," Naruto said. He turned to leave, only pausing once at the door to look back at them. Yamato sighed in relief and followed after him.

His concentration was shot. There was practically nothing to show for the previous day's progress.

"Naruto-chan, you're lacking focus," Fukasaku said, tapping the training stick against his own shoulder. "Hm... maybe it's time to move on to balancing on the precipices to improve your stillness..."

"Well, you're only letting me train with one Kage Bunshin," Naruto countered irritably. "Maybe if you'd let me use more, like aniki..."

"Increasing the number of beings that cannot sit still will do nothing. What's the matter? You seem agitated today."

"Say, Sennin-jiichan," Naruto said suddenly, opening his eyes to stare at Fukasaku. "If I were to go to another village, I'd still be able to come here to do my training, right?"

"Eh?"

"It turns out, I was offered a place to stay in Amegakure," Naruto explained. "So if I go there, I wouldn't have to stay in Suna with people hanging over me all the time anymore."

"A-Amegakure?!" Fukasaku spluttered. "Why in the world would you want to go there? After what I told you about Jiraiya-chan—"

"I didn't forget," Naruto said quietly. "I just feel like... everyone is going off to war. There is no one left in Suna that I care about staying for. I don't like being around the Wind Daimyo, and most of the people in Suna are halfway afraid of me. And I get the feeling that in Ame, I can find more clues as to how to get back to my own time."

"Eh? How do you figure that?"

"Well...it's just a gut feeling I have."

Ame may have been the place where Jiraiya had died, but it was also the place where Pein had lived. If there was anywhere he would be able to find traces of where the resurrected Nagato might be, it was Ame. And he couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, Konan knew what he was looking for.

Of course, Naruto couldn't explain his reasoning without revealing that Madara told him everything about who Nagato was, and about how to undo the jutsu keeping him in this timeline. Everyone thought that the only thing Madara had told him about was Sasuke.

"I can see why staying in Suna may be somewhat uncomfortable for you," Yamato commented. "But going to Ame would be too risky. It is very secure against outsiders, true—but that includes the Allied Shinobi Force as well as Akatsuki."

"Good. The only thing I can do at this point is search for a way back home. The Alliance has enough
on its hands with the war, so it's better if they don't have to keep up with me."

Yamato sighed. He didn't completely disagree with Naruto, but he knew that the chances of the Allied Shinobi Force agreeing to this were very small. He wondered what Tsunade would say. She was the only one besides the older Naruto who had met the leader of Ame in person before this, and the two S-ranked kunoichi had corresponded in the past for the sake of working out a non-aggression agreement between their lands.

"Depending on the circumstances, I could actually see Tsunade-sama allowing it," Yamato said. "But I wouldn't get my hopes up. We already have things worked out with Suna, so it is unlikely that anyone will find it necessary or appropriate to change plans."

Naruto wasn't listening. He was already animatedly discussing possibilities for continuing his Sage training in Amegakure with Fukasaku.

The leader of Ame was out, and Tobi noticed right away. It was a logical sequence of events, really. He had intended on hunting the Rinnegan after setting the Zetsu army loose on the world, but this was too good of an opportunity to pass up. With the bothersome woman out of the way, he would be free to search for it without a hindrance. And if all went well, Orochimaru would be using Hashirama's cells to improve the Zetsu by the time he got back from Ame.

But now, something didn't seem right. After just a little bit of searching, he had found what he was looking for. Even though Konan was away, he hadn't expected to reach the place with no resistance whatsoever. It was… too easy.

Tobi cast his eye warily around the magnificent tomb, scanning the shadows that crept in all around the resting place of the two former Akatsuki leaders.

The perfectly preserved bodies of Nagato and Yahiko lay side-by-side on a vast bed of paper roses, overlooked by angels carved into the marble wall behind them. He scoffed at such an extravagant display of mourning. Because of her misplaced loyalty to these two, Konan had followed Nagato's example in defying him. Why couldn't she understand that assisting with Tsuki no Me would enable her to see them alive again?

Tobi jumped and landed in between the two bodies, tense and alert for any traps. He crouched down beside Nagato and scanned over him carefully. There didn't seem to be anything. No wires, no paper bombs, no illusions, no substitution. It was his real corpse. Tobi moved his hand over Nagato's peacefully smiling face.

Ah. Of course.

The eyes were missing. The sunken eyelids gave the white-haired, skeletal-looking body an even more ghastly appearance.

"You won't find them in Ame," someone said calmly.

Tobi quickly jumped back off the shrine and looked around for the speaker. They stepped out from behind a marble pillar and gave him a smile that mimicked the one on the corpse.

His face was fuller, younger-looking, and his hair was flaming red instead of a dead white. His purple eyes etched with bizarre black rings were a reflection of the very eyes Tobi was searching for.

"I knew you would come for them, so I took and hid them somewhere," Nagato continued. "I am the only one that knows where they are now."
Tobi stood stiffly, appraising him. He narrowed his one visible eye. "I suppose I just have to make you tell me, then."

"You can try," Nagato's smile widened slowly. "Genjutsu won't work—even the shadow of a Rinnegan I have now would render it useless. I am Edo Tensei, so you can't kill or hurt me, and even if you could, I still wouldn't tell. You're much better off giving up."

"We will definitely see you on the battlefield later, Madara." Another voice came from behind him, and Tobi whirled around. It couldn't be—it was. He had figured it out from the moment Nagato appeared. The Edo Tensei Itachi was also here in Amegakure.

"For now, however, it is in your best interests to leave this village in peace. Wouldn't you agree?" Itachi said.

Tobi cursed internally. Without the power of the Rinnegan, he knew that he would not fare well against Nagato and Itachi at the same time; especially not now that they were Edo Tensei and had bodies that could not tire or die. Even with the Rinnegan, it would be a challenge. And if it wasn't even here in the first place… but then, how would he ever be able to find it?

There was only one choice. Nagato and Itachi would have to be put out of the way first. He would have to get Orochimaru to seal them, or bring them back under his control.

"Tch," Tobi said. "It's just one thing after another."

There was another option, actually. He knew where Konan was, and where Sasuke was. And both of them had bodies that could die. He had already asked Orochimaru to capture Konan if possible, while he was going after the Wood-element user.

But it seemed as though Nagato and Itachi were willing to let him go. Why would they, knowing Konan was out there alone; knowing Sasuke was already in his grasp? It was even possible they knew that Orochimaru was in Suna.

His whole body was tense, ready to move at the slightest sign of attack. Tobi moved his eye back and forth between Nagato and Itachi.

What to do?

Sasuke slashed out with his sword, feeling the impact as each stroke went smoothly through a training dummy. He paused, listening. One, two, three, four, five. Each of the dummies fell neatly where he cut them. Sasuke stood from his stance and sheathed his sword. He had hit all five without missing this time.

"Oh? You're not going to fry them all to finish it off?" he heard White Zetsu's perpetually amused voice.

"What do you want?" Sasuke said, annoyed.

"Nothing," White Zetsu said in a singsong tone. "Just thought you might be interested in hearing something."

Sasuke frowned. Something about Zetsu felt different from normal. "Where is your other half? What is going on?"

"You noticed, huh? You are improving; I guess doing without your eyes for a while had an upside.
Well, you'll be glad to know that that's almost over. Your eyes should be mostly healed by now.
Tobi has gone to fetch the Rinnegan, and Orochimaru will be back here soon to upgrade my clones,
and everyone's getting ready to start the war~! I'm just supposed to watch over you until you can fly
by yourself, little bird." Zetsu never tired of teasing Sasuke about comparing himself to a hawk.

Sasuke thought for a moment, head tilted slightly to one side.

"So, you're saying that we are the only ones here right now?" he asked slowly. "And I can finally
use my eyes again?"

"Eh… well…" Zetsu blinked in confusion as Sasuke gave a wicked smile and tugged off the
bandages blindfolding him.

Sasuke slowly opened his eyes. He had wasted no time in activating his new Eternal Mangekyo
Sharingan, and it spun and glowed red through the gloom.

"What are you—"

Amaterasu!

Naruto stared at the ceiling of his room so hard it was almost as if he hoped to burn a hole through it.
Konan had, as she'd promised, been there when they returned for the day from Mount Myoboku.
However, he still hadn't had the chance to speak with her alone. Konan, for her part, hadn't seemed
very concerned about the fact that the Wind Daimyo and Baki had all but flatly shot down her
invitation for Naruto to come to Ame. As long as they deferred a real answer, she continued to
persist, exchanging polite courtesies and trading the occasional concealed barb with Yamaguchi.
Naruto couldn't be nearly as patient. He wanted to ask her what the plan was; why she had come all
this way for something that seemed like it had such a small chance of working out. There was more.
He just knew it.

What would happen if he went to Konan and said he'd come along, no matter what anyone else said?
Naruto bit his lip. It would be a very reckless thing to do, depending on how well the Alliance would
react to him going off on his own without permission. Not to mention it was reckless in another way.
It really could be dangerous to go to a place he'd never been with someone he didn't know,
especially when said someone was unambiguously a former enemy, and the place was where his
teacher had died. If the idea had been suggested before he'd been captured by Madara, Naruto
probably wouldn't have even considered it. Now, though... it was clear that being careful wasn't
going to get him any closer to getting home. It wasn't even certain that he was any safer in Suna than
in Ame. Being careful hadn't really helped him that much so far.

Naruto let out a long, slow breath and got out of bed. He made a Kage Bunshin and had it crawl
under the covers and pretend to be asleep. This time, when he snuck out of his room, he used a
Henge to make himself look like one of the many Suna chuunin he had seen running errands around
the Administration building. It wasn't a very sophisticated disguise, but hopefully it would be enough
to get him out to the upper floors without being challenged.

The hallway was dark. Ever since the others had left, it was just him and Yamato on this floor, but
that was hardly a cause for relief. Naruto knew that the other Konoha nin was the biggest obstacle to
him sneaking around. He usually left Naruto alone in the evenings, which meant the Kage Bunshin
ploy probably wouldn't be discovered, but the downside was that Naruto didn't know what Yamato
did with his free time. He had no idea if the man would be in his own room, somewhere else in the
Administration building, or in town.
Keeping all of his senses fully alert, Naruto crept up the staircase that led to the upper floors. Either Yamato wasn't down here, or completely missed Naruto sneaking out, because he scaled the stairs and ended up in one of the building's curved hallways without a problem. It wasn't as dark here as down below, but things were still very quiet. Naruto started walking briskly, as if he had somewhere particular to be, just in case someone spotted him.

Another problem occurred to him now that he'd already made it further than expected. He didn't actually know where Konan was staying. Seeing as how she wasn't exactly a welcome guest, there was a good chance that she wasn't even in this building. It would make more sense for her to be at one of the inns in town.

_It doesn't matter_, he thought, clenching his hands to stave off the rising sense of frustration. He couldn't give up now. If he found out Konan wasn't here, he would figure out what to do after that.

Naruto climbed another set of stairs, heading vaguely in the direction of Gaara's apartment and the fanciest guest rooms. If she wasn't there, it was most likely that she wasn't in this building at all.

He tensed up when he saw a member of the Daimyo's guard walking in the other direction. Naruto glanced at him but quickly looked away, trying his best to look natural. The guard looked at him but didn't pass comment.

That was another thing: the Wind Daimyo was staying up here, too. Technically Naruto could go where he wanted, but it would be really hard to explain why he was sneaking around in disguise near the Daimyo's suite at night. The closer he got to the guest rooms, the higher the chance was of running into one of his entourage.

Paradoxically, the first thing Naruto noticed when he reached the top floor was how deserted it looked. The silence lay heavily in the hall like cold, dead air. He stood still for a moment and closed his eyes, tentatively trying to reach for any energy external to himself, the way Fukasaku taught him. He couldn't feel anything, but that could just be because he was still bad at sensing Natural Energy. Naruto continued on, walking with his back pressed to the wall.

He heard a soft thump from up ahead and froze, searching up and down with his eyes to figure out where the sound had come from.

A door was slightly ajar, and he knew that had to be it. He wanted to investigate, but… this was increasingly feeling like a bad idea. Thinking about it realistically, there was really no reason why this floor would be completely empty. This was starting to feel like a late-night horror flick he'd watched one time. That experience told him he shouldn't go near slightly-open doors to check out mysterious noises, but run as fast as possible in the other direction instead.

...No. He was a shinobi. If something strange was going on, and there was a possibility of Suna or the Wind Daimyo being in danger because of it, he had to do something about it. Naruto walked toward the door slowly and pushed it open with a trembling hand.

The first thing he saw was the body of the Wind Daimyo, splayed out right inside the doorway. The space from his chest up to his head was nothing more than a messy, gaping hole, as if something had crawled out from inside his body and left the dead shell behind. His fine silk robes were soaked with blood. Naruto clamped his hands over his mouth to fight against the urge to scream or vomit. Further back, the room held clear signs of a struggle. There were overturned pieces of furniture, kunai stuck in the ceiling and walls, and seemingly random twisted bits of wood laying around.

But the worst of it was the sight of the familiar black-haired shinobi in front of him. Orochimaru turned around leisurely. Naruto’s eyes darted from the snake man's face down to his feet, where
Yamato lay. The Wood-style user looked very pale, and his eyes were closed. A gigantic snake wrapped all around his body with its fangs dug deeply into his neck.

"Oh?" Orochimaru said in his dry, raspy voice. "So there was a little rat snooping around, was there?"

The Killing Intent in the room spiked, and Naruto winced. This was just like that time in the Forest of Death. He lost control of his Henge and felt his knees shaking violently, but he managed to keep standing.

"Let him go," Naruto said roughly. He pulled out a kunai and got into a defensive stance.

Orochimaru chuckled. "You still know how to make a nuisance out of yourself, don't you? I was going to let you stay free a bit longer, but then you had to go and see something you shouldn't have."

Snakes crawled out of Orochimaru's sleeves and uncoiled on the floor, hissing lightly. Yamato's eyes wrenched open and he looked at Naruto blearily. He lifted his head, a movement that seemed to be costing him quite a bit of effort. The snake's venom was taking a heavy toll on him.

"Naruto… run," he whispered weakly.
To explain how Yamato ended up on the floor of the daimyo's suite requires backing up a little bit to the hours previous. Konan's arrival brought to a head many issues that were already bubbling below the surface. Whatever thoughts Baki and the others had about Yamaguchi and his delegation, they would no longer have the luxury of 'wait and see' after that.

To put it simply, her showing up out of nowhere meant that if there were spies among the Daimyo's ranks, they would probably take action soon in order to head off the possibility of Naruto going with her.

The strange circumstances of the Wind Daimyo and his company coming to Suna had not gone unexamined by their shinobi counterparts, of course. It was always possible that "fleeing from Orochimaru" was a cover for working with Orochimaru. The problem was that without any solid evidence, the best they could do was remain extra-vigilant.

Then Naruto's kidnap by Madara happened, and made it a near certainty that there was a spy in their ranks. There was no way that Madara would have been able to find him during such a small window of opportunity unless someone tipped him off.

They started to suspect Yamaguchi’s younger cousin, Ishida. He was the one that had subtly nudged the meeting to a close, making it so the meeting room was vacated by the time Naruto returned from Mount Myoboku. He was the one that had done the most to spread paranoia among Suna's citizens about Naruto's stability. It fit with the theory that Orochimaru and Madara were trying to drive a wedge between the younger Naruto and everyone else. There was even a plausible motive for Ishida to be working with Orochimaru. He was the late Wind Daimyo's son, but he had been passed over for the position in favor of his cousin because he was an illegitimate child. Whether it was to gain power by discrediting Suna and Yamaguchi, or simple blind revenge, he had more than enough reason to make a deal with Orochimaru.

Even so, the evidence against him was nothing but circumstantial, so they couldn't arrest or interrogate him. Nothing short of undisputable facts would make it acceptable to lay hands on a family member of the Daimyo. But they did monitor him very closely after that. They no longer let him get near Naruto, under the pretense that they couldn't be sure how well he could control the Kyuubi. Since it was Ishida himself that had been making that complaint all along, he could not argue. And then Gaara allowed Naruto to start training on Mount Myoboku so that his time in Suna would be reduced as much as possible.

If their mistake could be distilled down to a simple statement, it was that they lowered their guard just enough for Orochimaru to wiggle in. With him, it didn't take very much at all. Even if they knew intellectually that assumptions were dangerous, the fact that Ishida and Yamaguchi consistently butted heads on issues pertaining to Naruto made it easy to hone in on Ishida as the spy. Maybe too easy. Had they overheard Yamaguchi’s conversation with Naruto when the latter first woke up, they might have reconsidered their assumptions. Unfortunately, things like that were best seen in hindsight.

Yamato was seeing it now.

When he had first been fetched to go see the daimyo, he had felt nothing more than annoyance. It was after almost everyone else had gone to bed, and he suspected that Yamaguchi was going to try to wheedle him about Konan without Baki there to act the diplomat. Regardless of the Alliance, the final decision would be Konoha's, and the daimyo knew that. The worst that Yamato was expecting
was an underhanded bribe or bargain.

Then everything went terribly, terribly awry.

"Naruto, run," Yamato whispered.

Naruto's arms and legs were trembling, but he stood his ground, holding a kunai up in front of him in a defensive posture. Ashw as he was in Orochimaru's Killing Intent, it was a wonder that he could move at all. Frantic memories played in the back of his mind: the Forest of Death and Orochimaru's wide, pale smile; Sasuke hunched over in pain; the older Sasuke's look of shock, hands covered in Naruto's blood; a glowing red eye peering out from a spiral mask. They all melded together in a confused sequence. Just like the last time he had directly faced Orochimaru, the sheer weight of that Killing Intent made it difficult to string coherent thoughts together.

What was the point in fighting, anyway? Death was inevitable. If it was sooner rather than later, at least the awful feeling would stop. In fact, it would be a relief...

"Hm..." Orochimaru purred leisurely, breaking through his rapidly spiraling thoughts, "what to do about this little situation? I was hoping to travel lightly, but I can't just let you go, either."

Naruto glanced down at Yamato's strained face, still fixed on him like he wanted to shout out, but couldn't. Freeing Yamato would have to come first if either of them were going to get out of this.

"What do you want with Moku-oji?" Naruto tried to say strongly, but it came out as more of a croak. "It's me you're after, isn't it? So just leave him out of it."

"They're always so self-centered at this age," Orochimaru chuckled. "Not everything has to be about you, Naruto-kun. You are still just a diversion for the time being."

"Why did you bring me here?" Naruto demanded. He felt a stirring of anger in the pit of his stomach and immediately tried to grab on to it. Anything to chase out the heavy cold of Orochimaru's presence. "Mada ra told me. You came up with the time-travel jutsu and made this Nagato guy the one that actually did it, so if it was dangerous it wouldn't hurt you. But I don't understand why you wanted to do that! Even Madara said he didn't know."

"It's just an experiment, nothing more than that. I wanted to know what would happen if I took an imprint of a living soul and put it into a new vessel," Orochimaru lifted his palms in a shrug. "Would the mind stay the same? Would the memories be intact? Would it start to diverge after a time? I am very interested in those questions. There is a chance I could even re-create the same person, and set them along different paths to see how their souls change as a result. This isn't the same thing as genetic cloning, you understand," Orochimaru continued as Naruto looked increasingly blank-faced. "In fact, it is the opposite. Instead of the body being duplicated, it is the mind; the mental and spiritual energies that make up part of a person's chakra. You are just the first trial, of course," Orochimaru pulled out a kunai with a paper tag attached to it and twirled it lazily. "There are many kekkei genkai—most dōjutsu, for example—that require the right 'body' in order to use them to their full potential. It's also a fact that some bloodlines make for better Jinchuuriki than others. Taking your situation as an example: I was able to create an even better container for you and the Kyuubi than the already formidable one you were born with."

Naruto didn't have to try to reach for his anger anymore as he glared at the snake, his fear receding. He only barely understood most of what Orochimaru was saying, but he was completely familiar with the attitude.
"Just what is a person to you?" he growled low. He glanced from the kunai in Orochimaru's hand down to Yamato's face. "Just what do you think a life is?!" he shouted, and he dived under Orochimaru's guard just as the snake Sannin threw the kunai at his head.

Naruto ducked, and the kunai whizzed past sharply, sticking into the floor behind him. The tag didn’t explode the way he had expected it to, but there was no time to wonder about that. He skidded down beside Yamato and started stabbing the glistening coils wrapped around the older nin's prone body, trying to get the giant snake to release him. It was disgusting, but he forced himself to not stop. He tried to stab the snake in the head, but was so worried the knife might miss and hit Yamato that he didn't put in enough force, and merely scratched its scales instead.

Yamato grunted in pain as the snake removed its fangs from his neck and spat at Naruto angrily. His efforts were working; the snake writhed in agony, bleeding from multiple wounds in its body. Its grip on Yamato loosened, and it tossed its head back and forth in confusion. Naruto tugged on Yamato's arm. "Come on, Moku-oji! you have to—"

A hard kick caught him in the side, and Naruto flew into the room's stucco wall hard enough to put a web of deep cracks in it. He rolled on to all fours, coughing. A barrage of smaller snakes came after him and started to wrap around his arms and legs, but Naruto quickly scrambled to his feet and flung most of them off. A stinging pain registered in his mind and he saw that a small one had dug its fangs into his left hand and wouldn't let go. He took a deep breath and pulled it out roughly with his other hand, flinging the snake back across the room in the direction of its master. He took just a second to examine the small oozing holes in his hand, worriedly noting that they weren't healing up as quickly as they should have been.

"Why are you just laying around, Moku-oji?" Naruto yelled. Yamato didn't respond. That was not a good sign. "Damn it! Taijuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

He filled the room with as many clones as possible, to make a buffer between himself and Orochimaru. It wasn't a permanent solution, but hopefully they could buy him a little bit of time. If Yamato was unable to move, the only other option was to cause enough commotion to make other people come running. Punching a hole through one of the most important buildings in the village with a big, flashy attack would most likely do the trick.

Naruto turned back to the crack in the wall and held out his uninjured hand to one of his clones. Bright, swirling chakra started whirling in his hand just as he heard dozens of clones popping behind him, yelling and cursing as they went down.

"Rasengan!"

The wall exploded outward, just as loud and attention-grabbing as he had hoped. Naruto wasted no time in jumping down to the street. His plan hinged on Orochimaru following him instead of staying with Yamato, which was risky, but it was the only way he could get Yamato out of danger without facing Orochimaru directly. He could only bank on the fact that the old snake had already said he couldn't let him go after seeing his true identity. If that wasn't enough, Naruto had a plan to make sure he would follow him.

"Attack! Attack!" Naruto yelled, running around the perimeter of the Administration building, where he was sure there would be guards. "Sound the alarm! Orochimaru of the Sannin is attacking the village! Creepy old snake guy at large! HEYYY!"

"Oi, what's all that noise down there?!

"What is that brat yelling about—"
"There's been an explosion! The Administration building!"

"Get the captain! We're under attack!"

Snickering and satisfied with his work for the time being, Naruto skidded to a stop in the shadow of a nearby tower that was made in the same curved style as the rest of the buildings in the village. He examined his hand once again, and found that the holes were still there. The area around the bite was numb and discolored. Naruto drew another kunai and paused. The only way he knew of to get rid of poison was the rather inelegant method of making a gaping, bleeding wound to flush it out, and Kakashi-sensei had told him not to do that again. Still, with his healing ability and weird body, it probably wouldn't be dangerous.

"You're persistent, I'll give you that," a silky voice said. Naruto jumped back when Orochimaru emerged from the shadows. "But you're giving me more trouble than I have time for right now."

Snakes shot out of Orochimaru's sleeves toward Naruto and he ducked underneath them, crouched down and—

A sick, burning feeling washed over him, leaving an uncomfortable pins-and-needles prickling behind. Naruto's legs wobbled and as he tried to stand back up, he lost his balance and fell face first onto the dusty street.

Get back up! he ordered himself, and tried to move his arms. They moved sluggishly, inching up in small twitches as if only half-listening to the commands from his brain. He tried pushing himself up off the ground, but his unstable arms couldn't take the weight and they dropped him back down onto the sandy ground.

"You were able to resist the poison for longer than I expected," he heard Orochimaru's pleased voice coming closer. He heard the snake Sannin's sandals skritch in the sand beside his head, and he lifted his face to try to glare at him. "I suppose it shouldn't really be a surprise, though, since you have the Kyuubi. I can't fully take the credit for this one. This is a poison Kabuto discovered that suppresses the Shodai's cells. Don't worry; it will wear off after a little while."

Naruto turned his head as far as he could and saw Orochimaru looming over him with another tagged kunai in his hand.

"I don't have the time to take you back with me now, but I'll call for you after everything calms down," Orochimaru said. Naruto tensed as the creepy old snake pushed the kunai into his head, right above the ear. He expected to feel excruciating pain, but whether it was the poison or for some other reason, he felt nothing. Naruto cried out in protest anyway and unsuccessfully tried to roll away. Whatever that kunai was supposed to do, it couldn't be anything good.

He was right.

"This command tag will allow me to override your consciousness and control you completely, like the Edo Tensei summons," Orochimaru informed him calmly. "If you don't want that to happen, you should make sure that you come right away when I call you so I don't have to resort to that."

The roiling anger in his stomach felt like it was spreading through his veins, down to the tips of his fingers and toes. Naruto willed it to burn away all the poison so that he could at least get in one good punch to the bastard's smirking face.

"That is a nice look in your eyes," Orochimaru chuckled. "Nurture that hate inside of you, and maybe one day you'll become worth my trouble." He stood from his crouched position and started
walking away, impervious to the glare boring into his back.

A cold silence filled the cavernous room as Tobi quickly assessed the situation he was in. It was a tense stalemate, with Itachi on the left and Nagato on the right. But there was nothing else keeping him in this room except for physical stone walls, which could easily be passed through. Not to mention if it came down to it, he could always teleport away on the spot. Therefore, there was enough leeway for him to prod around a bit more.

"I'm surprised," he said carefully. "You knew I would eventually come here, yet you chose to confront me directly, instead of trying to catch me in a trap."

"Who said this isn't a trap?" Itachi asked calmly.

Tobi tensed and swept his Sharingan around the room again. He still couldn't sense anything, not even a genjutsu. He narrowed his eye at Itachi. "You want to face me right now, then?"

"Only if necessary," Itachi said. "We had to confront you directly, so that you would not try to ransack Ame in search of the Rinnegan. If you do anything to threaten the village, we will stop you."

"I see now," Tobi said. "You know that you can't beat me here without risking extensive damage to the village above us. That is why you're willing to let me go, even though many more people will die in the war I'm about to start. Pathetic."

"We've lost the right to weigh lives and say one loss is more acceptable than another," Nagato said with a faint smile. "We proved ourselves failures in that area long ago. Ne, Itachi?"

"You are wrong in thinking that stopping you would stop the war, at any rate," Itachi said. "Even though his end goals are different, I'm sure that Orochimaru would find a use for the army you handed over to him."

"You..." Tobi growled. "How much have the two of you figured out about our plans?"

They didn't answer; not that he had expected them to. They weren't the taunting types, and of course they wouldn't actually say. They would give away nothing.

"Well, never mind. I can guess that you already know a lot, and that hiding the Rinnegan is only part of your interfering. But I have cards in my hand, too. Sasuke. The little Naruto. And now, Konan," he turned back to examine Nagato. "Do you really want to tell me that there aren't lives you would be willing to weigh against the Rinnegan?"

Tobi knew very well that Nagato's weakness was his susceptibility to manipulation, especially when it came to people he cared about. But when neither of them even flinched, he realized that they had been expecting him to make this move. Nagato didn't appear to be fazed at all by the threat. He just smiled contentedly and said, "You underestimate them."

Kisame peered down into the massive hole in the ground that contained the (now completely dismantled) gigantic skeleton of some poor creature from ages past. Black fire was spreading over the bones, enhancing the sinister look of the whole scene. His suspicions about their source were confirmed when Sasuke jumped away from the rubble and up out of the hole, straightening his stance and sheathing his sword. Even from this distance, where Kisame crouched hidden in a tree, he could see the Eternal Mangekyo gleaming in his eyes. The kid had really gone through with it, just as Itachi had predicted he would.
Well, it didn't much look like he was needed here. Sasuke had busted himself out just fine, and Itachi had specifically said not to approach unless he needed any help. For some reason, he was set on avoiding Sasuke for as long as possible. Giving a mental shrug, Kisame decided to shadow him for just a little longer to see where he was going.

Orochimaru was walking back toward Suna's Administration building. Naruto didn't know why the snake Sannin was so determined to go after Yamato of all people, but he was going to get away with it at this rate.

"Wait!" Naruto mouthed, but all that came out was a strained-sounding breath. His fingertips twitched as he made an effort to reach out.

"Naruto! Are you alright? What happened?" he heard Baki's gruff voice close by, and a cluster of other voices further back, speculating and passing out orders. Reinforcements. It was about time!

"Orochi...maru," Naruto whispered hoarsely. He couldn't point, but there was no need. Just as he'd started to say it, Baki spotted Orochimaru walking calmly away.

"Stop right there, Orochimaru!" Baki barked, standing from where he'd crouched beside Naruto. Orochimaru stopped and turned, face pulled into a feral smile.

"Things aren't going as quietly as I had hoped, are they?" he mused. "Well, it can't be helped. Suna won't be able to react quickly without a head." he turned to them and bent his neck backward, inhaling deeply.

Oi, Kyuubi, Naruto thought experimentally, uncertain as to how to ‘talk’ in his head. Isn't there anything you can do about this poison?

He wasn't sure if the thought reached or not. There was no response.

Orochimaru tossed his head back down with a wet snarl and a blade shot from his mouth. It shot with shocking speed toward Baki, who tried to dodge, but Orochimaru followed the movement with his head and buried the sword deep into his stomach.

"Baki-occhan!" Naruto cried faintly.

"Taichou!"

"Why you—"

The other shinobi started throwing jutsu and shuriken at Orochimaru, but the old snake jumped up into the air while withdrawing the sword. He spun gracefully and with the momentum flung a barrage of snakes at them from his shirt sleeves.

Suddenly there was a hurricane of fluttering white.

A great burst of wind went through them, stirring up a cloud of dust and sending a wall of flat paper slips through their group without nicking a single person. The paper squares folded themselves into shuriken and whirled into the snake barrage, exploding whenever their sharp edges dug into scaly flesh. Everyone took a step back and threw up their arms to guard their faces. A reddish-brown smoke bloomed from the impact and momentarily blanketed the area, the work of several tossed-in smoke bombs. Ripped-up shreds of reptilian flesh rained to the ground.
Naruto felt a soft hand on his arm, pulling him up into a sitting position.

"Sorry I'm late," Konan said, her voice barely discernible over the continuing explosions. "Can you stand?"

"I... don't know..." Naruto tried to move his arms and legs some more, but they were still very sluggish. He braced his hands against the ground in order to stay upright. "Orochimaru got me with some kind of poison. I think I can stay sitting up like this, though." it was a relief to not be in the dirt anymore, at least.

"We need to get away from here quickly, then," Konan's sharp golden eyes flickered toward Orochimaru.

"No," Naruto tried to say it loudly for emphasis, but his body still wasn't up for shouting. "I'll be fine, he said it would wear off before long. He's trying to go after Moku-oji, so worry about that first. Go to the top floor, in the Daimyo's room."

Konan turned her head toward where a medic-nin hunched beside Baki, palms glowing green over the wound in his stomach. Baki was conscious, though his face was twisted up in pain, and his breath came out in sharp gasps.

"Can you send some people to retrieve Yamato-san? I can hold Orochimaru here for some time," Konan said.

Baki turned his head toward her and nodded slowly.

"What—no, you should go get him," Naruto protested. "That's where Orochimaru is going! If he gives you the slip—"

"I can't leave you behind here," Konan said with finality. "I understand your concern for Yamato-san, but my top priority is your safety. I am sure that he would agree with that, as well."

"Send three of the men to search for Yamato," Baki said to a shinobi kneeling by his head. "Look out for the Guard. It's possible they're on the other side, and they already have him."

Naruto felt a jolt. Why hadn't he told them right away? "Baki-occhan! Orochimaru was pretending to be—"

"We know," Konan said. She gave a small smile. "We were busy putting our theories together when he decided to make his move."

"Go ahead and go! The smoke is clearing!" Baki growled, waving a dismissive hand toward his shinobi. They snapped to attention and the chosen three disappeared without argument.

"In all honesty, there's a good chance that Orochimaru has gotten away by now," Konan warned, walking forward and positioning herself in front of Naruto, Baki, and the handful of Suna shinobi that were left.

The brown haze was clearing. They could just see the faint outline of something huge before it lunged at them. Konan burst into a swirl of paper as the giant snake's nose hit the ground where she had been standing. Its tongue flicked out angrily and it snapped at the fluttering leaves of paper floating higher and higher, swaying drunkenly in its attempts to see or smell the enemy.

Konan half-formed in the sky, paper wings rearing up from her back in a way that looked more threatening than angelic. Sharp paper knives shot from them and stabbed the snake's eyes. Its head
thrashed wildly, mouth open, revealing rows of sharp fangs.

"I don't see him near the summon!" one of the Suna shinobi yelled. "Look around! He must have run off!"

It had to be true. Orochimaru himself was nowhere to be seen. The snake he summoned spat angrily at Konan and struck out at her, crashing into a building when it missed.

"Taichou, if this keeps up, the village itself will be at risk," the same shinobi said tersely. "We don't have the forces to repel an internal attack."

There was another huge explosion overhead, and a strange, piercing shriek from the snake summon. Blood and debris fell down, littering the surrounding area. The great snake fell back, brushed against another building, and rolled off its rounded surface to fall into the street, dead.

Konan materialized and landed lightly in front of them. "Bad news," she said grimly. "There are more summons spread throughout the village. I could see at least three when I was up there, and there could be even more. Orochimaru wants to cover his escape by giving us bigger things to worry about. He's going for the village's infrastructure."

Baki tried to sit up, but the pain made him wince.

"Lay back, taichou," the medic-nin said urgently, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I've managed to stop the bleeding, but you need to go to the hospital. You'll bleed to death if your wound re-opens."

"We need to evacuate!" Baki commanded. "Sound the evacuation siren and have all the able-bodied civilians assist the weaker ones. Find some volunteers to man the gates and perimeter posts. Give them flares. Round up all the shinobi and have them organize a counterattack against the summons!"

"Sir!" they said, and all left except for the one medic-nin.

"Orochimaru..." Naruto growled thickly, clenching his fists against the sand; hating the snake Sannin, hating his own powerlessness.

Baki looked at him, then he looked up at Konan. "Get him out of here."

Naruto looked up as quickly as he could and nearly lost his balance. "What?"

"Are you sure about this?" Konan asked. "The Hokage hasn't had time to answer our request."

"I'll send word that he is with you," Baki said. "It's better than the alternative, and we can't be certain that Orochimaru won't be back for him."

Konan nodded and pulled a scroll out of the tool pouch she wore. She unrolled it and held it out, and a paper plane large enough to ride on poofed into existence, hovering in the air. Naruto barely had time to marvel at it before Konan's thin, wiry arms scooped him up behind his shoulders and under his knees.

"W-wait! Oi!" Naruto said as loudly as he could, partly embarrassed at being carried by a girl, partly mad at being told to leave. "But what about the village? And Moku-oji? I can still—"

"Even if you weren't currently paralyzed by the poison, you would not be able to face Orochimaru yourself," Konan said. "Not without using the Kyuubi; and even then he would probably still kill you. You need to face facts. It's better that we leave, so that he has less of a reason to stick around. That is the best way you can help the village right now."
"But..." he trailed off. There was nothing he could say that would be able to convince her. He still
couldn't even move.

*Hey, fuzzy bastard!* Naruto called in his head as Konan hopped onto the paper plane with him in her
arms and set him down securely in the deep middle crease. *Couldn't give me a hand back there,
could you? You could at least try to get rid of the poison. Are you even listening? OI!*

*Shut up,* came the growling reply, surprising him. *I don't bow to you. Besides, the girl is right. You
can’t go against Orochimaru without my power, and I have no desire to risk being absorbed over
something so stupid.*

*S-stupid?!*

*Aa. I'm only interested in getting us back to our own time. Now we have a free pass to Ame,
which is our only lead right now toward finding a way. Idiot.*

"We're going to move now, so hold on," Konan said, sitting down in front of him.

"Er, okay." Naruto lifted his hands with difficulty and held on to the crease corners. He felt a
sensation like his stomach dropping down to his feet as the paper plane lifted straight up vertically
without any headwind, moving fast, but not fast enough to dislodge them.

The village was dark, but more and more lights were winking on in homes and buildings as the
population woke from its slumber to find danger. Naruto felt like he was leaving part of himself
behind down there, too, as they rose higher and higher in the air. Running away at a time like this
went against everything he believed in.

"I promised myself I would never run away, not even if my life was in danger," he said in a subdued
voice.

Konan looked back at him sympathetically. "There are times when retreating shows more wisdom
and courage than staying to fight. Unlike here, if Orochimaru decides to come after you in Ame,
we'll be ready for him."

The village was shrinking rapidly underneath them, but they could still see the three or four giant
snakes rampaging through the streets. The plane stopped rising smoothly and started moving
horizontally.

"The thing is, I don't think he will," Naruto said, bringing up one heavy, unsteady hand to his head.

"What do you mean?"

"He put a... kunai in my head. It had a tag on it like a paper bomb, only it must have been a seal or
something, because it didn't explode." It was a bizarre thing to say, even though it was the truth. "He
said it would let him control me if I didn't come to him when he called for me. I know that when he
brings people back with the Edo Tensei, they don't have control over themselves. Whatever he did to
me is supposed to be like that."

Konan cursed and turned all the way around to face him. "We thought it was possible the jutsu that
brought you here was based off of the Edo Tensei, but I didn't realize it would be to this extent."

"What do we do?" Naruto asked, a tinge of his anger at Orochimaru coming back. "I don't want to
be controlled like one of his zombies!"

"The upside is that Orochimaru is not the one in a contract with you." Konan tilted her head to one
side thoughtfully. "I think that we should be able to overwrite the control tag. Don't worry."

Naruto wasn't completely convinced. "He was confident enough to just leave me there. What if he starts controlling me, and makes me attack you or something?"

"I can probably take you on," she said with a touch of amusement. "So can the others. All the more reason to leave Suna; Orochimaru probably expected Baki-san to refuse to let you come with me. He didn't know that we were negotiating behind his back."

"The others?" Naruto asked. He had been so focused on getting to Ame that he hadn't given a lot of thought to what he would be doing there, beyond a vague notion of investigating Pein.

"Yes," Konan said. She looked out for a moment at Suna, getting farther and farther away on the horizon. "Itachi and Nagato."

"Itachi and…" Naruto's eyes widened. "But—that means—you mean we're going to see Nagato? He's just there? That means—he can send me back to my own time! He's the one with the Summoning Contract, right? So he should be able to undo the jutsu that's keeping me here!"

Konan looked very serious and lowered her eyes regretfully. "No."

"No? What do you mean, no?" Naruto demanded. "That's what Madara told me. Was he lying? That bastard!"

"No, he wasn't lying. Orochimaru set it up through a chain of commands in order to make the whole thing difficult to figure out, much less undo. He had Kabuto resurrect Nagato, who in turn summoned you. We are fairly certain that he is indeed the contract holder."

"Then what's the problem?"

Konan sighed and shook her head. "Unfortunately, Nagato was being entirely controlled when he summoned you. He has no idea how to release it... he doesn't remember how it was done in the first place. It's probably just a sequence of hand seals, but we don't know which ones, how many, or in what order. Most likely, only Orochimaru knows."

Naruto felt what little strength he had drain out of him, and he slumped in his seat. "So then... we're going to have to face him before I can go back, after all."

"Maybe... but it's also possible that we can figure out what the seals are on our own," Konan said gently. "Although, the process of figuring out the counter is often more complicated than inventing the jutsu in the first place, especially since we don't have the seal or formula that was used to initiate it. I would almost venture to say that defeating Orochimaru and putting him under genjutsu to find it out would be easier."

"Ugh," Naruto hung his head. "Just when I thought I was about to go home…"

"You will go home," Konan assured him. "We'll figure it out, one way or another. You have us on your side."

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For a while, no one moved or said anything. Tobi's mind cycled through his options again. The frustration and tension growing almost to the snapping point, but he tried to keep his cool. An aggressive move here would not work. He couldn't beat them two-on-one, and that was what he was facing if he tried to attack either of them, or the village itself. His attempts at blackmailing them had no effect, implying that there was something they knew that he didn't.
He hated to admit it, but retreat seemed the only thing to could do at the moment. Without the Rinnegan, their plans fell apart like a fragile house of cards. Being very careful with the likes of Itachi and Nagato was the only way to go. Separate them, capture Nagato and rewrite his control tag, or use a genjutsu powerful enough to get him to reveal the Rinnegan's location...

The air in the room shifted and everyone's attention snapped sharply to the floor next to Tobi, where a blob was emerging. It stretched and grew and molded itself into Black Zetsu.

"What is taking so long here?" he said, seething with anger. "You need to get back. Sasuke has—"

A red-hot burst of fire sizzled the air and Tobi twisted out of the way. Black Zetsu sunk back into the ground and the stone floor burned and charred, cracking under the heat. Itachi was running through another set of hand seals too quickly to see and sent a burst of smaller, homing balls of flame where Black Zetsu had reappeared on the angel carvings.

Sensing his one opportunity, Tobi dashed toward the distracted Nagato and made his mask intangible for long enough to breathe out a large fireball of his own. He was counting on Nagato to react to the ninjutsu by absorbing rather than dodging it, and that was exactly what happened. Nagato put up his hands and absorbed the fire easily, but the moment it blinked out of existence, Tobi grabbed his outstretched arm.

The space between them bent and crumpled for a fraction of a second after Nagato's purple eyes locked with his one visible Sharingan. Nagato's normally peaceful face pulled into a snarl.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Being completely solid while trying to pull Nagato into the other dimension, Tobi was hit with the full force of the attack and went flying backward into the bed of paper roses. He looked up in time to see Nagato leaping toward him, a mechanical arm bursting from his shoulder. Nagato landed in a low crouch at his feet and took aim at him with a glowing cannon attached to the end of his robotic arm. A high-pitched whine came from the device as it steadily grew brighter.

Tobi took that as his cue to leave. He'd missed the chance, and they would be on their guard now. He sunk down through the crumpled roses and didn't return.

Nagato stood up straight with a sigh and his extra arm shrank back down smoothly into his body. "He fled."

"The other one, too," Itachi said, walking back over to the memorial. "Hopefully we were able to stall them long enough for Kisame and Sasuke to leave without much trouble."

"It sounds like your otouto did something," Nagato chuckled. He jumped down to the floor lightly. "Should we go above? There might be a message from Konan by now."

The stars looked so close. They were finally getting out of the desert, flying a little lower now that there were more clouds to get in their way. Konan had flown them at least three times higher off the ground than Gaara had. They could see the lights from Suna all the way to the edge of the desert. But even though they had dropped down a little, the clear sky made it seem like the stars were right on top of them.

"Konan-nee?"

"Yes?"
"Will the Land of Wind be alright? I mean, Orochimaru killed their daimyo and attacked Suna. And Gaara and all the others… what are they going to do? I mean, the war hasn't even started yet and they've already lost so much."

"Gaara-dono is Regimental Commander of the Allied Shinobi Force," Konan said in her quiet, steady voice. "The people of Suna are very strong. They will do what they need to in order to see this war to its completion. And it has already started. It began when Madara attacked the Five Kage Summit. Maybe even before." She saw Naruto shiver. "Are you cold?"

"Um, a little," he said. He extended and moved his arms experimentally. "I think the poison is finally wearing off."

Konan unrolled a scroll. There was a small puff of smoke, and a beige-colored cloak appeared. It was made of heavy, slick material, and it had a hood.

"I brought this along for you to wear, since I suspected you wouldn't have brought rain gear with you to the desert," she said. "It's pretty warm. You'll need to put it on before we get there, anyway. It's a bit rainy where we're going."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Naruto said, unsure if she was trying to joke or not. He gave a weak laugh anyway, just to be on the safe side. He pulled the rain cloak around his shoulders and snapped the buttons that kept it closed in the front. It had a high collar, providing a double layer against the wind and rain whenever the hood was pulled up.

He saw Konan standing up in his peripheral vision, and nearly choked when he saw she was pulling on a very familiar black coat patterned with blood-red clouds.

"K-Konan-nee?!"

"What?" she said, startled by his tone, and she looked behind her as if checking for embarrassing stains or toilet-paper foot.

"I thought you said you weren't in Akatsuki anymore!" Naruto yelled.

"Oh," she paused, then knelt to pack away the wrap she had worn in Suna into her scroll. "Sorry for startling you. I usually wear this all the time, but it would have been too warm in the desert… not to mention it probably would not have helped me with Suna's council very much."

"So… you're not still in Akatsuki, right?" Naruto ventured.

"As I told you before, Akatsuki was originally ours," she said firmly, rolling up the scroll and tucking it back in the pouch underneath her coat. She sat back down, facing him. "Madara may have twisted it for his own purposes, but to me it will always be the embodiment of our dreams. Akatsuki, 'dawn', was supposed to represent a dawn of peace for Amegakure; and also, the world. Though, I spend most of my time on Ame these days. It's best to start small." she gave him an open-mouthed smile, the first he'd seen from her. "Protecting you is the best thing I can do for the world, anyway."

"I have no doubt."

Greatly mollified, Naruto's eyes sparkled with interest. "So, I get that Madara made Akatsuki into something bad, but I still don't really understand how I play into all of this. I already know that Nagato was Pein, and that you and him decided to go against Madara in the end. But if he was
turning it into something you didn't approve of, why did you go along with it? I'm having a really hard time putting the Akatsuki you're telling me about with the things I've heard about Pein."

Konan looked out at the passing landscape, looking troubled. She stayed that way for so long that Naruto started thinking he'd brought up something he shouldn't have.

"He destroyed my village, and killed my teacher," Naruto felt the need to justify himself. "It's not that I don't want to understand, I just… don't."

"No, it's true," Konan said. "By all rights, you should hate us. Even if we were manipulated by Madara, it doesn't change what we did. The older you has already heard the story, but maybe it's time you heard it, as well."

"You'll tell me everything, right? No taking that back."

"On my honor," she said solemnly. "No take-backs."

She started to tell him the story of how she, Yahiko, and Nagato found each other in the war-torn country around Amegakure. How they came to be trained under Jiraiya, and how they started defending Ame under the banner of Akatsuki. Naruto made comments, and asked her questions about their training days and the missions they went on together in Akatsuki, but he got very quiet when she told how Yahiko died and Nagato became confined to a support apparatus.

"Everything changed after that, of course," she said softly. "With Yahiko dead, we made easy prey for Madara. Nagato had kept in contact with him for time to time without telling us. Even though he could see in the beginning that Madara was evil, his heart so desperately wished for an end to war that he started fooling himself into thinking Madara's answer was the right one. He never fully abandoned Yahiko's ideals either; they just got twisted around like everything else."

"And you?" Naruto asked.

Konan looked down and to the side, curling her arms around herself. "At first it was just loyalty to Nagato that made me support Madara's plan. But I really started to believe in it, too. I was tired; tired of fighting and grieving. He offered an easy way out. To make it even better, it was a solution that included everyone else in the world, too. All that would have to be sacrificed were the Jinchuuriki, a miniscule subset of the population. And if anyone got in our way, they were too foolish to live in the world we were going to create anyway."

She looked at Naruto, gauging his reaction. His eyes were dark, and he looked uncharacteristically grim.

"Like I said, you have every reason to hate us," Konan said. "We were wrong."

"Yeah. But… I understand it."

"What you're doing is... understandable."

Despite herself, Konan gave a small smile. "Should I go on?"

He nodded.

Konan continued telling their story, up until they were in the outskirts of Ame. She warned Naruto about the incoming wall of rain, and he quickly pulled up his hood.

"Can you stand now? Rain will start collecting, and it won't be fun to sit in."
She offered her hand and Naruto pulled himself up shakily. He still felt weak, as if suffering from chakra exhaustion after a long day's training, but he could stand. He leaned backward slightly, stretching his back, which felt very nice after sitting for so long. He looked out for his first view of Ame.

They sailed over choppy waves at a breathtaking height, level with some of the highest towers in the city. He had never seen anything like it in his life. The tall, slim towers pierced the bottom of the low clouds with their sharp points, indistinguishable from the blackness of the night sky except for the lights that shone through windows.

"Whoa," Naruto said. "I've never seen buildings this tall before!"

"There are very few places like it in the world," Konan said with a tinge of pride in her voice. "Much of the land around here is not suitable for building on. You can find smaller settlements in the surrounding areas, but this was mostly built on a platform over the water. Building up instead of out was the best way."

"I remember there being some Ame guys in the Chuunin exams, but going by their outfits I would have guessed they lived underwater. Then again, you practically do."

Drips of rain had been falling on them for a while, but it got heavier the closer to the village they got. It fell thick and fast, and would have soaked him in an instant if he wasn't wearing the cloak, but it wasn't as cold as he had been expecting.

"I think I know the diving suit look you're talking about," Konan said amusedly. "It isn't because of the rain. Facemasks were in vogue for a long time around here because of the extensive use of poison gas during the wars. Even well after the last war, people were cautious. Not to mention, poison was a favorite tactic of Hanzo's."

As they flew closer, Naruto could see more signs of habitation. The pillars holding up the city had ladder rungs in them that led down to floating docks and small fishing boats. Buoys with little lights on them bobbed up and down, and Naruto thought he could see larger boats nesting underneath the platform. If there was anyone out on the water at this late hour, he couldn't see them because it was too dark.

It was clear now that their destination was a certain tower in the heart of the city. They flew in between buildings and rose even higher to meet a wide, covered balcony that jutted out of it. The space between the balcony's roof and its rails was roomy enough for them to fly under, even while standing. They landed smoothly on the balcony, and Konan dismissed the paper plane with a poof of white smoke.

"What is this place?" Naruto asked, craning his head to look at the gracefully carved rafters of the balcony's covering. It resembled an elaborate gazebo suspended from the side of the tower more than anything.

"This was once Hanzo's home," Konan said. "It was abandoned for a while after his death, but... I had it repaired and started living here myself. Hanzo hated for anything to go to waste, so I would like to think he'd approve. And a lot of the security measures he put into it are still intact, which makes me rest easier."

Naruto pushed his hood down and yawned. It was probably near morning already, and the excitement of traveling and of Orochimaru's attack was giving way to sleepiness. "I really wanna look around, but I'm tired."
"Same."

"Welcome back."

They turned to look at who had spoken. The sliding paper door that led inside was open and a man with medium-length red hair stepped out. Hair covered half of his face, but Naruto immediately noticed the man's purple, ringed eye. It made his otherwise harmless-looking appearance a little frightening. He was exactly like Konan had described. Naruto glanced over at her nervously.

"I'm home," she said calmly. "Was there any trouble?"

"Aa, a little bit of trouble, but nothing too serious." He looked at Naruto and smiled. "Hello there, Naruto—or maybe I should say, nice to meet you."

"You're… Nagato?"

Nagato nodded and smiled a little bit awkwardly. He didn't try to approach; he just stood there shifting in one spot uncertainly, like someone afraid to do anything lest they bungle their first impression.

Naruto didn't know what he had expected to feel, finally meeting him face-to-face. Since the very start of his trip to the future, he had heard about the things Pein had done, heard about his own future self's heroic victory against him. Up until very recently, he had taken it for granted that getting Nagato's help would involve defeating him again. The person in front of him… didn't seem like that at all. Naruto thought he'd feel the same anger or fear he felt toward Orochimaru when meeting him, but he didn't. Even after hearing the story from Konan, he still had a hard time believing this was the same person that had caused so much destruction.

"Where is Itachi?" Konan asked Nagato.

"He said that he did not want to startle Naruto by showing up too suddenly," Nagato said. "Apparently, they have a bad habit of meeting that way."

"Well…" Naruto laughed, scratching the back of his head. "Yeah. I think I'm fine now. This is probably the weirdest thing I've done since coming to the future, but I'm already here, so I might as well dive in. Let's go say hi to Itachi!"

Dawn was just barely breaking in the sky on the first day of the war, and Gaara was already feeling the strain under a stream of messengers and reports.

These were the facts. Suna had been attacked by Orochimaru, who had been impersonating the Wind Daimyo, most likely since before he left the capital. The attack damaged several buildings, but overall the structural damage was small. There had been a dozen casualties: three dead and nine wounded, and none of the deaths had been civilians. It really seemed that Orochimaru had been more intent on covering his escape than actively harming the village. The other Kage kept asking if he intended on sending troops back to Suna, but all the Suna shinobi he talked to, while worried for their home, insisted on staying. Baki was also adamant about Suna remaining in the war, since it seemed Orochimaru wouldn't be coming back now that he got what he wanted. Opinions were mixed about the younger Naruto seeking shelter in Ame. The Raikage was, in fact, vehemently opposed to it, but there was not much that any of them could do about it now, short of sending someone after Naruto. And if they did, where else could they put him?

Then, there were the circumstances over here. Orochimaru taking Yamato had initially been a confusing move, but they were quickly realizing that it was directly related to the war. In fact, that
was the whole reason why today, *this* day, was going to be the first day of it.

The sensors had discovered the huge army of plant-like clones moving beneath the ground that were similar in composition to the one they had faced at the Five Kage Summit. It did not take much speculation to figure out why Yamato had been taken. To make things worse, they were also sensing the presence of ever-increasing numbers of Edo Tensei zombies. Only a few had been identified so far, as they were still so far away, but it seemed certain that they were all powerful shinobi from throughout history.

The Company Captains had been roused from their beds not very long ago. The Kage had been awake before that. Now the entire Allied Shinobi Forces were gathering into their companies for a final address before heading off to start the war.

"Gaara-sama," Mabui poked her head into the room. "All the troops have lined up. The Captains are all heading down there now, too."

"Understood." Gaara got up and followed her, running over what he wanted to say in his mind.

*Three times… we've fought world wars for our own nations, our own villages. We've hurt one another. We've hated one another. That hatred created a lust for power, and that lust for power created me.*

It was finally beginning.

---

16-year-old Naruto lay spread-eagled on his back in the blank room full of swirling colors, looking up at nothing with a grumpy look on his face.

"Naruto, lazing around, so slow. Face looking like my Bruzza's at a enka show. What's the matter?"

"You know, Bee-occhan… there's something that has been bothering me for a while." Naruto sat up cross-legged with a huff and frowned thoughtfully, his head tilted to one side.

"What?" Bee asked.

"Hmm... I'm not sure how to describe it," Naruto said slowly. "A while back, I thought I sensed the Kyuubi. Outside of me, I mean. It wasn't for very long, though, so I thought maybe I just imagined it."

*Shit, did he sense his other self?* Gyuuki muttered to Bee.

"You probably did imagine it," Bee said. "Keep focused on your training and you'll stay on track. Ain't no one out there with the Kyuubi but you, that's a fact."

*Technically, that's true,* Gyuuki commented dryly.

"I know, but..." Naruto scratched his head. "I can't stop thinking about it for some reason. It feels like something I should know about but I just forgot, like a thing I learned in school years ago." he paused. "Are you sure that there's nothing I could be feeling the Kyuubi's chakra coming from out there?"

"Not these days. Long ago, there was Kumo's Kinkaku and Ginkaku. They had its chakra too, that is true, but not like you. They're a special case, they got ate and ended up as waste."

"Huh?"
"Ah... nevermind." Bee took out his notebook and scribbled in it, muttering to himself in displeasure.

Naruto shrugged. "Anyway, I think I'm going to take a break for a while. I've pretty much got the hang of the Kyuubi Chakra Mode, so I'm going to see if the others have gotten here yet." He stood up and tapped on the floor in the spot to open the door and left without waiting for an answer. Bee was still writing in his notebook.

**Bee!**

"Hm?"

**Naruto's about to go outside!**

"He's right though, there's not much else I can teach 'im."

**That's not the problem...**

"No," Bee closed his notebook and frowned. "It is. He is ready, okay?"

That's not the problem...?

Naruto walked through the statue room, eyeing the two Akimichi guards standing at the waterfall exit skeptically. When they saw him, they tensed and glanced at each other nervously. That was strange. And why were they guarding the exit, anyway?

"Have Iruka-sensei and the others gotten here yet?" he asked them in a would-be casual voice, but it somehow sounded less like a question and more like an accusation.

"Um," the one on the right said, biting his lip and glancing at his brother.

"W-we're not sure," he stumbled out. "We haven't looked."

"Well, that's fine," Naruto said. "I'll just go look for myself."

"No, you can't!" the first Akimichi burst out.

"Why?" Naruto crossed his arms stubbornly.

"No, you can't!" the first Akimichi burst out.

"Why?" Naruto crossed his arms stubbornly.

"You don't have to go through the trouble of doing that. I'll—I'll go check."

"Oh, it's fine, really. I was wanting to get some fresh air, anyway." Naruto started walking between them and they both lowered their sticks, barring his path.

They stared at each other for several seconds.

Naruto narrowed his eyes at them. Now he knew there was definitely something going on here. "Let me through."

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"We can't tell you."

"Idiot! Don't say that!" the left Akimichi hissed at his brother.

"Idiot! Don't say that!" the left Akimichi hissed at his brother.

"This is getting us nowhere!" Naruto shifted into a battle-ready stance. "I don't have anything against you guys, but I'm going outside right now. If you don't move, then I'm gonna have to move you."
With every person suddenly living in fear of their closest neighbors and comrades, something was going to have to give, very soon.

They had expected the fight against Madara and Orochimaru to be a tough one, but no one could have predicted that the eerie plant clones would start transforming themselves into allies, sneaking into their ranks and killing unsuspecting shinobi when their backs were turned.

Sakura was currently elbow-deep in the stomach of one of the strange white things, sweat beading on her brow under the harsh overhead light in the medical tent. At least, she was digging around the area where the thing's stomach would be—but its anatomy was proving to be nothing like a human's at all. It was made up of a dense, white, slightly pliable tissue and not much else. Nevertheless, she cut out a small portion of the inner tissue for examining, just in case it turned out to be different in any way from what they'd scraped from the surface of the creature's skin.

After setting that aside, Sakura gave an exhausted sigh and peeled off her gloves, tossing them in a bin before slumping down into a chair. She took a few long gulps of water from her canteen, blinking tiredly around at the room after focusing on the washed-out looking body for fruitless hours looking for a clue.

"Sakura," Shizune said softly, sitting down with her and spreading out several charts and notes. "I finished the rest of the scans. Biologically, it's an exact match. The cells are absolutely identical. The one difference is the chakra reading, and we already know that they have the ability to steal and imitate anyone's chakra perfectly—"

"These white creatures don't bleed," Sakura said quietly with an edge to her voice, bangs concealing her eyes. "They don't have flesh, blood, organs, brains, anything inside of them. They don't have the ability to remember things only that person would know."

"Just because they haven't shown the ability to do that yet in this war, it doesn't mean that they can't. You have to accept the possibility that—"

The empty canteen in Sakura's hand crumpled and folded as if it was nothing but a thin soda can. Shizune stared at it for several moments.

"Let's just get back to work learning this thing's secrets, so that maybe we can get back to treating our actual patients," Sakura said roughly, tossing the canteen in the bin alongside the used gloves.

Naruto sped across an open field, body aflame with the fox's chakra. Bee wasn't far behind him. He could tell they were nearing one of the battlefields. He could sense a lot of negative energy nearby. But the thing that felt like the Kyuubi's chakra outside of him didn't seem to be there.

'Kyuubi! Can you sense that thing that felt like you out here? Is it close by?'

"Somewhat. It is far away."

Naruto frowned. It was odd; he had been able to feel it somewhat while meditating, but now that he was out, he couldn't feel it. Though, that probably had a lot to do with the fact that there was a lot of
interference out here.

When he had muscled his way past the Akimichi guards using Sage Mode, not only had he been able to sense the war, but he had been able to sense that energy, proving that it existed somewhere outside of himself.

"I'll just have to meet up with some of the others and see if anyone knows," he said aloud. "Right as soon as I finish up with this!"

They had found the first cluster of Zetsu clones disguised as shinobi. Naruto held up his hand, chakra cloak extending into a claw, and summoned a small orbit of Rasengans with a wild grin.

"Is that..." one of the real shinobi gasped.

Naruto jumped into the air and slammed each of the swirling balls of energy into one of the impostors with chakra hands. He reveled in the power and the satisfying feeling of tearing through the enemy's strategy. He would make a difference in this war, starting right now.

When the younger Naruto woke to a slight chill in the air and the rush of rainfall out his window, he was confused for a moment—until he remembered where he was. He took a deep, slow breath, breathing in the rain's atmospheric smell. He hadn't even realized how accustomed he had gotten to the dryness of the desert, until he ended up in a place that was its complete opposite.

Something cold and wet nudged his chin, and Naruto's eyes flew open. There was a calico cat staring him right in the face. When it saw that he was awake, it started purring very loudly and rolled over, splaying its body lengthwise across his face.

"Oi," Naruto said flatly, his voice muffled by the fluffy weight. The cat sniffed at his hair and then started batting playfully at the spiky yellow locks. "OI." He sat up and pried the furry thing off his face, and it bounded off the bed. Naruto saw that the sliding paper door of his room was open just enough for the cat to slip in.

"What the hell?" he yawned, not fully awake yet. Why was there a cat in his room? When he got out of bed, it paced back and forth, looking up at him and mewling insistently. "Argh, what do you want? I don't have any food for you, if that's what you're looking for."

He padded toward the door and the cat trotted eagerly in front of him, its tail held high, bent at the end in a question mark. Naruto followed after it, thinking vaguely that if the cat lived here, someone probably kept food for it in the kitchen or something. Besides, breakfast didn't seem like a bad prospect for himself, either.

Hanzo's old home was dark and mostly empty. A tower built to accommodate who-knew-how-many people was currently inhabited by only four—and a cat, apparently. However, despite the gloomy surroundings, Naruto could feel his spirits lift as he walked toward the kitchen. He never preferred solitude, not at all, but this new freedom was refreshing. Thanks to Nagato's jutsu, that allowed him to know the instant any outsiders entered the village, there was no need for anyone to guard him in Amegakure. He could go anywhere or do anything he wanted. To make things even better, his new hosts seemed to have no qualms about answering any of his questions.

Of course, he still missed and worried for his friends. Things between them had not been completely patched up before they left for the war, but that didn't change the fact that thinking about them fighting and dying out there made him feel sick.

Last night, Itachi and Nagato had gotten him up to speed about their side of things: how they had
suddenly regained their consciousness, free from Kabuto's control. They'd made their way to Ame, all the while gathering information on Tobi and Orochimaru's activities, and those of the Five Great Shinobi Countries. After Naruto got captured by Tobi, that was when they had come up with the plan to bring him to Ame. Realizing that Orochimaru would be coming after him soon, they sought to prevent that... and barely made it on time.

At around that time in the conversation, Naruto gave a huge yawn, and all the others ushered him to bed. He still had a lot of questions about what their plans were for Orochimaru and Tobi, and for getting him back to the past, but he went on to sleep. The small delay didn't bother him much. For the first time, Naruto felt really confident about his progress getting back to the past.

When he stepped into the spacious kitchen, he froze at the sight of Itachi standing across the room with his back turned. The cat immediately bounded forward and started rubbing against Itachi's legs, meowing plaintively. That was when Naruto noticed Itachi had a square carton of cat food in his hand and was just about to refill the bowl sitting on the floor.

"There you are," Itachi said warmly, crouching down to pet the cat behind the ears. He gave a soft 'yosh, yosh' as he filled the cat's bowl and gave it a few pets before standing up and putting the carton on a shelf. "She acts like we don't feed her. Did she wake you? She's learned how to open the sliding doors." Itachi turned and gave a small smile, but didn't move any further. Like Nagato, he didn't make any sudden movements around Naruto, to try to make him more at ease in this odd situation. Even though they had seen each other last night, that had been with Nagato and Konan around, and they hadn't really talked directly. Catching Itachi alone was slightly awkward and unnerving. At least he didn't have his Sharingan activated.

Naruto played off his momentary paralysis with a laugh. "You like cats? Somehow that doesn't fit your image."

"Yes, but this one isn't mine," Itachi said. "It either belonged to Hanzo or someone else that lived here, and survived on mice and scraps until Konan moved in here."

"What's her name?" Naruto walked over and pet the cat's soft fur, stubbornly ignoring the way his instincts railed at him for showing his back to Itachi.

"Nibbles."

"What? That's it?" Naruto laughed.

"Don't look at me. It was Konan's doing."

Naruto felt some of the tension leave him as Nibbles started purring under his touch, though she kept chowing down on the food like there was no tomorrow. The poor thing probably had gone hungry a time or two after Hanzo died.

"So!" Naruto said matter-of-factly, standing up and pulling out a chair for himself at the kitchen table. "What's the big plan? Are we gonna help out in the war? Go after Orochimaru? Defeat Madara and save the world? You guys will let me fight, right?"

Itachi tilted his head slightly. "I thought going back to the past would be your top priority."

"Well, it is, in a way," Naruto admitted. "But we have to beat Orochimaru to do that, right?"

"Hm..."

"Or—Konan said you guys might be able to figure out the seals to release the jutsu without
Orochimaru's help. Do you think you can?"

"Maybe, but there may be yet another way. We were talking about it last night, after you went to bed," Itachi sat down at the table across from him.

"Ehhh? Really?"

Itachi nodded seriously. "Since the jutsu is essentially a Summoning Contract between you and Nagato, it is possible that if anything happened to him, the jutsu would automatically come undone. He can't die, but he can be sealed. It wouldn't be that difficult."

Naruto was taken aback at the suggestion. Logically, he knew Nagato was already dead. He also knew, even from the small amount of time they'd spent together, that his sibling disciple would willingly give up the small semblance of life he had now without a second thought if it meant giving him a way home. Did that make Nagato's life any less valuable? No. Not to Naruto. It was the same feeling he'd gotten from Konan when they first met in Suna. A feeling like, even though it was his future self that knew them, he still had a connection to them.

"Nagato already sacrificed himself because of me. Why not seal me instead? Wouldn't that work?" he looked at Itachi pleadingly.

"It might," Itachi said, leveling a solemn gaze back at him, letting him know his concern was being taken seriously. "The problem is that while we're fairly sure that Edo Tensei souls go back to the afterlife when they are sealed, there is no way to be sure that you would go back where you came from. Sealing you might just trap your soul in this plane instead. Since we know so little about it, sealing Nagato would be safer."

"I guess…"

"He does not regret it, Naruto. He and I will have to go back to the afterlife sooner or later. But, ultimately, it is your decision. We can try sealing you instead, or we can wait and force Orochimaru to tell us how to undo it."

"You mean I get to choose?" Naruto echoed.

"It's your timeline. Your life."

Naruto thought for a long moment. "I… want to help fight in the war, and against Orochimaru. Even if there's not much I can do. If I can go back whenever, will you guys let me help you? I pretty much can't be hurt with physical attacks, and if it looks like Orochimaru or Madara is going to capture me again, you can send me back by sealing Nagato. Just… as a last resort, okay?"

"Alright."

"Oh yeah, and do you think there's anything you can do about this mind-control-tag thing Orochimaru put in my head?" Naruto pointed at his head with a scowl.

"I'm not sure we could remove it without splitting your head open. But... I can probably negate its control over you using my Sharingan," Itachi said hesitantly.

He had heard of Naruto's predicament from Konan, and already thought of a solution. The problem was that... well... the solution required putting Naruto under a genjutsu, which ran counter to Itachi's attempts to be unalarming as possible. He had obviously noticed the way the boy acted so jumpy around him. Judging by the way Naruto suddenly paled, the thought of willingly being subjected to Itachi's Sharingan was definitely alarming.
"Oh yeah, that totally makes sense," Naruto said in a would-be casual voice, except for the slight squeaky tremor at the end.

"It doesn't have to be right now," Itachi was quick to assure him. "If Orochimaru tries to make you do anything, we will be able to stop you. And there is no way for you to leave the city without us knowing, so he can't make you run away, either. I understand if you… don't quite trust me yet."

"I trust you," Naruto said stubbornly. "I've already seen too many weird things in this time to doubt you. Everything's been pretty much turned upside down from what I knew, after all. If it wasn't for the fact that everyone here seems to remember the same things I do…"

Itachi lowered his head slightly. "I'm sorry that I was unable to stop Kabuto from making me use the Tsukuyomi on you. I tried to fight his control; tried to reach out to you inside the illusion, but I'm not sure if it worked. I don't remember it very well."

"Well… thanks, but you didn't hit me with it… my friend Sai jumped in front of me and got caught in it instead."

"Ah." Itachi paused. "No wonder you can tolerate being around me so easily. But I am sorry about your friend."

"Why? What was it? Sai wouldn't tell me."

Itachi's dark eyes glazed over and he looked away. "I'm sorry, Naruto. You're better off not knowing the details. It was a vision of what Sasuke could be if he continues the path that he is currently on. I imagine your friends didn't tell you because they didn't want to remind you of what he has become in this time."

"I didn't even know what had happened to Sasuke back then," Naruto said, hitting his palm down on the table in anger. Bringing up Sasuke brought back some feelings that he hadn't completely resolved yet. "I didn't know anything until that guy Madara-Tobi whatever kidnapped me and tricked Sasuke into stabbing me with his Chidori—"

"What?" Itachi barely raised his voice, but temperature in the room suddenly seemed to drop by several degrees.

Naruto faltered, wincing reflexively. "I thought you guys already knew what happened. Madara started talking about you and Sasuke got upset and just struck out blindly… his eyes were bandaged up. It turned out alright because my body healed, but he… well, that's how I found out about him." Naruto said bluntly. "What Madara did was really messed up. The stuff with Sasuke, and everything else he told me… and then he just takes me back, making everyone think I had to be some kind of trap planted by Orochimaru… and they weren't even wrong, were they?" Naruto buried his face in his hands, shoulders hunched. "That is exactly what I am, whether I want to be or not."

"What did Madara tell you?" Itachi turned to look back at him again, eyes narrowed, but the chill around him was gone.

Naruto lowered his hands, uncovering a hesitant frown. "A lot of things. I don't really like to think about it. I haven't even told anyone else about it. It's just… really hard to accept that—" his voice got stuck in his throat. "I mean, I'm afraid that if I talk or think about it, I'll hear his voice in my memory again, and… I don't agree with what he's doing at all, but it's just… confusing, I guess." He rubbed his hands through his hair with an irritated groan.

"I understand that you don't want to talk about it," Itachi said slowly, trying to decipher Naruto's
ramblings. "But if we know what he told you, we might be able to figure out more about his motivations. Things like what he has to do with Orochimaru, or why he decided to contact you in the first place. And besides, it may help you to talk about it."

Naruto gave a half-shrug. "He said he was helping Orochimaru in exchange for help in the war. I don't know why they're working together, but Madara acted like he couldn't care less about me unless I was willing to join his side. He even told me I could go home if Nagato undid the jutsu."

"Did he tell you anything else about the jutsu?"

"Um," Naruto scrunched his face up as he tried to remember. Honestly, he had been too distracted by other things to care much about that. But he was relieved that Itachi was steering away from the more uncomfortable topics, so he did his best to remember. "Well, Madara is the one that first told me Orochimaru summoned me here into some kind of fake body. He didn't know why, but Orochimaru told me it was to… see how living people can change? It sounded like a bunch of crap to me." Naruto scratched his head. "The only thing I really understand is that he purposely summoned me in a body that would make it hard for me to use the Kyuubi, and impossible for it to be pulled out of me for Madara's plan. But I don't get why Orochimaru wants to help Madara at all. They don't really seem to be on the same side."

"Most likely, he has something to gain from participating in the war," Itachi said. "He wouldn't be interested in it for political reasons, and I doubt he wishes to see Madara's plan succeed."

"So…"

Itachi thought for a long moment, before finally shaking his head. "We don't have enough information to make a good guess. What we do have is this: our enemies most likely have conflicting goals. Do you see how this can help us, Naruto?"

"Of course!" Naruto said confidently. "It's like… er? And…"

"They will eventually turn on one another. If we have the opportunity, we can use their mutual distrust to our advantage."

"I know that, duh!" Naruto said loudly, crossing his arms. "I was going to say that, but you didn't give me enough time!" Then he remembered who he was yelling at and rubbed the back of his head, laughing nervously.


"Well…" Naruto mumbled awkwardly. "So, are we gonna go directly after them, or wait and jump in when they're going against each other?"

"Madara will be occupied for a while by the missing Rinnegan, so we should focus on Orochimaru first," Itachi said. "He is the one truly leading the war right now, and we have to get to him in order to send you back—and stop his Edo Tensei from being used against the Allied Shinobi Force."

"Okay." Naruto took a deep breath. "Then do what you have to do to cancel out his control tag thing. If we're going after Orochimaru, I don't want you guys to have to worry about me."

"Are you sure?"

Naruto nodded firmly.

"Alright," Itachi said softly. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again they were
Sharingan red, with three tomoe marks that spun briefly before stopping.

Naruto gripped the edges of his chair, pushing down the impending anxiety. What was wrong with him? He had seen it plenty of times on Kakashi-sensei, and Sasuke, too—though that last thought was not exactly comforting when he associated it with this time's Sasuke, his eyes all bandaged up.

He had decided to trust this Itachi. It would be pointless to go back on that now.

"Okay, go for it. Get that snake bastard outta my head," Naruto said with more bravado than he felt. He forced himself to meet the gaze of the Sharingan and not look away. He had a brief, crazy thought—the expression his time's Sasuke would have if he could see all of this—before the darkness consumed him.

Itachi opened his eyes and looked around, frowning. He was standing in a large, dimly-lit room with deep shadows obscuring the ceiling, suggesting its great height. It smelled damp and musky here, and a malevolent energy drifted through the air. With his Sharingan still activated, he could see the tendrils of overwhelming red chakra swirling around.

"Uchiha."

Itachi turned around and calmly studied the large gold gates, the intricate carvings around the frame, the slip of paper reading 'seal' locking it all in place… and, of course, the beast behind the bars.

"It figures that you would be able to come here. Damn you and your entire godforsaken clan," the Kyuubi growled, leaning his head down near the bars, face level with where Itachi stood.

The Kyuubi was used to people either cowering before him, or (particularly in the case of Uchihas) trying to use him for something, but this particular Uchiha looked neither hostile nor afraid. He just looked up at him interestingly with those accursed eyes, taking in his massive form radiating with energy.

"Kyuubi," Itachi stated simply. "I would recognize this chakra anywhere, though I was very young the last time I felt it. I'm surprised that I ended up here. I thought you were sealed away from anyone's reach, thanks to this body."

The great fox bared its teeth at him. "Get out. Now."

"As you may have seen, I am only trying to help," Itachi said steadily. "Do you know where I can find Orochimaru's seal?"

"No, I don't," Kyuubi snorted. "It isn't here. But since the snake bastard put it in the boy's head, I suggest you check there."

"That was what I tried to do, but I came here instead. I'm not sure how I should try to find it from here."

The faint tinge of blue chakra lurking behind the gate's seal pulsed, catching Itachi's attention. It grew brighter for just a second; the energy inside it growing stronger in intensity in that moment. It was different from the limited amount of chakra a normal seal held. It seemed almost self-aware. Alive. And the energy it held was familiar.

"Yondaime Hokage-sama?" Itachi murmured, staring up at it in slight awe. That he had been able to include part of his own consciousness in the seal, even after being claimed by the Shinigami, was
truly amazing. It glowed softly when Itachi spoke, an action that would be undetectable with a
normal eye. Did the part of Minato encased in the seal know that he was here, somehow?

"Are you able to see everything that is going on?" Itachi asked the seal directly. The Kyuubi
narrowed its eyes at him suspiciously, but chose not to comment. The energy emanating from
the seal grew the brightest it had been yet in response.

Itachi's eyes widened. Most likely, he would not be able to speak with the fragment of Minato
without breaking the seal—which he could not do in the first place, even if he wanted to—but that
little bit of consciousness was definitely alive and aware.

"So that is what it looks like when someone stores a piece of themselves in someone else," Itachi
mused. "I understand. Thank you, Hokage-sama. I know what to look for now."

He turned around and examined the seemingly endless black shadow that occupied the back of the
room. There was no way to tell where it ended. Itachi started walking toward it.

"And where do you think you're going?"

"I don't know," Itachi said simply, without turning around.

He walked for what felt like a very long time. It was too dark for even his eyes to see anything, but
he was able to keep himself oriented by stretching out his arm to touch the wall. He kept his guard
up. With all of Orochimaru's interference, there was no way to predict where this would lead, or
what the darkness would contain.

The darkness was starting to get dimmer. He still couldn't see anything, but instead of being pitch-
black, it was turning brown. Gradually that brown got lighter and had a reddish tinge to it. Itachi was
starting to be able to see the walls and floor again.

He stepped out of the shadows and paused. Well, this was odd. He was in the same place as before.

The same darkness concealing the ceiling and passage behind him. The Kyuubi lifted its head to
stare at him, its gleaming eyes narrowed.

Yet—one thing was very noticeably different. The cage barring the tailed beast was red, not gold.
And there was no paper tag or residual energy covering the gates' lock. Itachi walked closer with
cautions.

"Where the hell did you come from?" the Kyuubi asked rudely, butting in on his observations.
"Don't tell me this has to do with that crow of yours."

This place did feel subtly different. And the beast mentioned his crow… the crow that he left with
Naruto, containing Shisui's Sharingan.

"You're the other one," Itachi said. "The one from this time."

The great fox stared at him for several moments. Then it lifted its head and growled, deep and low,
"Naruto."

Itachi looked up curiously when he heard Naruto's voice echo around the room. "I told you, I don't
have time to talk right now. I'm going to help out the war, and I don't care if you think it's stupid! We
can talk later."

"It's not that!" the Kyuubi barked. "We have a guest."
Naruto, the older Naruto, appeared beside Itachi suddenly, his arms crossed and a stubborn look on
his face.

"What are you talking about—eh?! Itachi? What are you doing here? You're—" he must have
noticed Itachi's eyes and the fine cracks in his face just then, because he jumped back with his arms
thrown up defensively, looking nervous. "You're like those other zombie guys. How the hell did you
get in here?"

"Yes, I am an Edo Tensei summon. But do not worry, I am no longer under anyone's control. I'm not
sure how I got here," Itachi quickly answered all of his questions. "It seems the two of you are
connected somehow. I came from the other side." He motioned toward the expanse of darkness
behind him.

"The other side?" Naruto echoed, squinting into the darkness. "I never noticed that there before…
what is going on, Itachi?"

"It's the other me," the Kyuubi growled, its tails waving behind it agitatedly. "It is as the Uchiha
says—we must be connected. I've been able to feel his power coming from there more strongly
than I can feel it outside."

Naruto looked up at the fox in surprise. "I guess that would explain why I was able to feel it more
easily when I was meditating, too, but… are you seriously saying you think that there's a whole other
you out there?"

"It isn't just the Kyuubi, Naruto," Itachi said, looking at him seriously. "There is another you, as
well."

"Another… me?" Naruto said uneasily. He wasn't strictly surprised. He had felt... something. It was
a nostalgic kind of feeling, tugging at him somewhere in the back of his mind like a forgotten
thought. But he didn't understand what it meant, or how it was even possible.

"Yes. It was part of Orochimaru's plan; though we don't know what, if anything, it has to do with
him choosing to participate in this war. He manipulated his subordinate into summoning a version of
your soul from four years ago, attaching it to a body that effectively seals the Kyuubi to the point
where no one can draw it out."

"Wait! Hold on a minute!" Naruto said, rubbing his hands through his hair in a small fit. "I thought
Orochimaru was dead! Not to mention all this other crazy stuff you're saying. And I still don't even
understand how you got in here!"

"Sorry, it is a long story," Itachi admitted. "It would take quite a while to explain it all. But as for
what I am doing in here—Orochimaru is able to control his Edo Tensei summons using special seals.
Apparently, he is able to do the same thing with the younger you, as well. He planted a control tag in
him, and I am trying to find and stop it. I was not trying to, nor did I expect to end up in the Kyuubi's
seal. From there, I walked to here through the darkness. The two are connected."

"Of course we are," the Kyuubi growled. "All of the beasts and Jinchuuriki are connected on
some level. Levels even you wouldn't be able to reach, Uchiha. This may be slightly different,
but it doesn't surprise me at all."

"Say... what do you mean by, 'all the Jinchuuriki are connected', Kyuubi?" Naruto asked, putting his
hands in a 'time out' motion.

"Hmmph... you may have gained more of my power, but you're still an idiot."
"What?! Say that again."

"Nevertheless," Itachi interjected, "the younger you is in Amegakure right now. I suppose you haven't heard anything about it at all, but he was put into hiding, the same as you were. To make a long story very short, Konan has brought him into the protection of Ame for the time being. Nagato and I escaped control, and we are also there."

"Konan, huh?" Naruto said, face softening into a smile. "It's good to know that she and Ame are doing well. And with you and Nagato there, too, I know there won't be anything to worry about. Even though I don't like this Edo Tensei stuff, I'm glad they got to see each other again." Suddenly his head shot up. "Wait... that's right! I have some things I need to ask you, Itachi. Madara told me the truth about what you did. It is true, isn't it?"

"Both of you, then?" Itachi gave a small sigh. "Damn him."

"You're not denying it," Naruto observed, walking over to him and examining his face closely. "Sasuke knows about it, too. You need to go talk to him! He decided to go completely against your will—he wants to destroy Konoha! Maybe you can do something—"

"No," Itachi said abruptly.


"I already tried to determine Sasuke's path for him. I failed miserably. I never changed; never learned how to just trust and leave things to him, even right up to the time of my death. I even intended to use you to trigger a certain jutsu against him—the Kotoamatsukami, to make him think how I wanted him to, whether he wanted it or not. The only good thing I can do for Sasuke now is to get the other you back where he belongs. The Sasuke in his time will need him. And I would like to destroy the Sharingan I gave you before you meet up with Sasuke again. Let us meet up in the real world soon."

Itachi turned to walk back into the shadowy passage at the back of the room.

"Wait!" Naruto trotted up to the edge of the darkness and squinted into it suspiciously. "You said that the other me is on the other side of this? I want to come along, too."

Itachi stopped and turned to him. "I don't know if that is a good idea. It could be dangerous. There is no telling what Orochimaru has done, or how he may have altered the seal."

"Ha, I'm not afraid of the dark, or Orochimaru," Naruto said, punching one hand with the other. The bright chakra cloak flickered into life around his body, making him glow like a miniature sun. "I can see whether it's safe to go through from right here."

He held up a yellow hand, and a brightly-glowing claw made of chakra shot out and dived into the impenetrable darkness. Naruto watched carefully as the light from the chakra flames illuminated the hallway.

"Man, how far does this thing go?" he wondered aloud, narrowing his eyes in an effort to see farther. "I can't even see the end of it—"

Naruto's eyes widened suddenly and he gasped. Long, sharp-looking vines shot out of the darkness, crawling up the chakra arm and coming right after his main body. He stepped back, but the vines hungrily wrapped around him from his feet up, and around his outstretched arm. The bright flames around his body flickered and snuffed out.

"Gah—! It's... absorbing the Kyuubi Mode!" he shouted, struggling against the vines.
"Get away from there, idiot brat!" the fox called out in warning.

Naruto felt himself being grabbed under the arms and pulled out of the vines' toothy grasp just as they started to wind around his chest. Itachi pulled him as far away from the darkness as possible, setting him down at the base of the fox's red gate. The lingering vines burst into black flames, writhed around as if in agony, and slunk back into the darkness again.

In the outside world, Naruto opened his eyes with a gasp. His Chakra Mode had been extinguished out here, too. He also noticed that he was now sitting on the ground, when he had been standing a moment ago.

"Naruto-san! Are you alright?" one of the shinobi he'd saved asked urgently.

Naruto shook his head to clear it. "Damn. That was weird." He carefully got to his feet.

"Finished already?" Bee asked, crossing his arms. "We haven't even reached the real fight yet, baka yarou."

"It's nothing. Let's go!" Naruto clapped his hands together and his body was engulfed in the flames of the Kyuubi Chakra Mode once more.

Bee looked at him. It was hard to tell what the Hachibi Jinchuuriki was thinking behind those dark shades. Most likely, he could sense that something unusual had happened, too. But he chose not to comment on it.

"Then, to the battlefield!" he declared, throwing one of his swords up in the air and catching it with ease, holding it up in a dramatic pose. "No piss breaks! And don't pout. We're goin' full throttle from here on out. WHEE!"

"Yossha!" Naruto agreed enthusiastically, and the two blew out of there like the forces of nature they were.

They left the small group of Allied shinobi behind them, staring in their wake amid the new trees that had just sprouted here.

"I'd always heard the stories, but... Jinchuuriki really are eccentric people..."

Naruto and Bee had made their escape from the island too quickly for anyone to really stop them, but news of the breakout got back to Headquarters shortly after the preliminary report from the Medical Corps on the autopsy findings. The confusion, discussion, and outright argument caused by the report delayed their response to the escapees ever so slightly, but nevertheless, it still didn’t take long for the Hokage and Raikage to go after their Jinchuuriki to try to stop them.

The two Kage found and confronted them. Ay and Naruto bickered for a while on the necessity of them going to war and how valuable it was for them to go fight, or to stay hidden instead. Neither of them touched on the other recent issue—at least, not until Ay tried appealing to Tsunade to talk some sense into the Kyuubi Jinchuuriki.

"Hokage! You say something, too!" Ay barked, turning to his mostly-silent companion. "It's bad enough we let a spy slip right through our fingers! For all we know, the enemy may have already gotten their hands on some of the Nine-Tails' chakra from that little fake of theirs! The last thing we need is for the real one to go roaming free as well."
"Fake?" Naruto demanded, gesturing. "Wait... are you talking about the other me? Why did you guys keep me in the dark about all of this, and the war? I can help! And what makes you say that that other me is a spy, anyway? Wasn't he brought here by Orochimaru?"

"Exactly!" Ay said, pointing at Naruto forcefully. "You've already seen by now the destruction caused by those plant creatures and their ability to imitate people on our side. We just got the report not long ago that the so-called 'younger version' of you had the same body composition and underlying chakra as those creatures. Everyone, including your Hokage here, the medical genius, was fooled by it—because we had never seen anything like it before. But it was brought to Konoha early on to serve as a distraction and as a spy. Now that we know what those things are capable of, there is no doubt about it."

"What?" Naruto cried. "I just found out that there was another me, and now you're telling me that it was a fake all along?"

"We don't know that for sure," Tsunade said, stepping forward for the first time. "Much of the evidence points that way, it's true, but there are other things about it that just don't add up. All of the other copies imitate the person exactly as they are at the time their chakra is taken—not as years younger. I doubt they would even be capable of that. And their disguise is weak. A good solid hit makes them reveal their true form."

"Naturally!" the Raikage growled scornfully, turning to Tsunade. "When they are produced en masse like this, they are bound to be weaker individually. That brat not only survived, but almost instantly healed after being punched through. That's not normal, even for a Jinchuuriki. If anything, it proves even more that he isn't human. Time-travel! I thought it sounded ridiculous, even the first time I heard about it."

"He had Naruto and the Kyuubi's chakra, exactly as they were at that point in time, not as he is now. How could they do that?" Tsunade argued. "He knew about and remembered things that only the real Naruto would know. The personality was right. He was completely devastated after learning about Sasuke. Why would a spy do that? It would have been easier to pretend he didn't know anything about it."

"Oi!" Naruto said loudly. "When exactly is this other me supposed to be from? What happened with Sasuke?"

"Even if they could have perfectly imitated Naruto's appearance, chakra, and memories from that time," Tsunade continued, ignoring him, "he also had my grandfather's necklace. That may not seem like much to you, but it shouldn't be taken lightly. That crystal would be impossible for anyone to replicate flawlessly."

"And how exactly did you find out about the other you, kid?" Ay asked Naruto with his eyes narrowed in suspicion, ignoring Tsunade in turn.

"Hm..." Naruto crossed his arms and tilted his head. "I don't mind telling you, but it's kind of weird. I guess basically you could say that me and... the other me, we're connected. And somehow, Itachi genjutsu'd himself through that connection and told me about it."

They stared at him. Naruto scratched his cheek. He wasn't all that great at explaining things, especially when he didn't fully understand those things himself.

"Did you say Itachi?" Tsunade stumped up to him with a fierce look that nearly made him flinch. "Are you telling me that Itachi is with the younger you right now? Naruto, he was trying to kidnap your younger self when he first got here! I thought he was supposed to be safe in Amegakure!" She
grabbed Naruto by the collar and started shaking him.

"Wait wait wait—! It isn't like that, baachan!" Naruto said, wiggling in her grasp. "Itachi escaped whatever control was over him, so he's helping out now. He and Konan are keeping the little me safe in Ame. Nagato is there, too."

"Naruto..." Tsunade was shaking. Naruto wondered if she was about to explode. "I know that Konan is supposed to have reformed, and Nagato as well before he died, but you do realize this means that your younger self is currently in the hands of some of the most dangerous members Akatsuki ever had?"

"Hmph," Ay said. "See? If you need any further proof that they are actually working together, I don't know what to tell you."

"Look, you're wrong, okay?" Naruto said, frustrated, backing away from Tsunade. "It's stupid to fight about this, anyway! I can sense those white things even when they are disguised. They have something about them that I don't think can be found in any normal test or scan. If the younger me is on the wrong side, I'll be able to tell. I'll just go see for myself! And while I'm at it, I'll sniff out all the other white things pretending to be our shinobi."

"There is a problem with that plan," Ay said, moving in front of him. "You're not getting past here. Not unless you're planning to beat my speed, and I doubt you're up to the task."

Naruto narrowed his eyes as a blue, crackling aura appeared around the Raikage, making the beefy man's hair stand on end. It looked like there was no choice for him to try to make a run for it past the Raikage. No matter how fast he claimed to be, Naruto had plenty of confidence in his own speed. He reached up and tightened his headband with a cocky smile.

All the way back in Ame, the younger Naruto regained consciousness with a start. The first thing he saw was Itachi's Sharingan, but it quickly faded into black, just a shade lighter than the black sclera that marked him as an Edo Tensei zombie.

"What happened?" Naruto asked, feeling woozy.

"I was not able to find the actual seal that Orochimaru planted," Itachi said, standing up and getting Naruto a glass of water. "However, I did set up a genjutsu to trigger should he try to initiate control. It will make you unable to move for a little while—hopefully long enough for us to keep you from running off or doing anything else."

"Ugh," Naruto took a gulp of water and felt marginally refreshed. "I don't understand—why weren't you able to do it, if you and Nagato managed to break control?"

"We didn't break it, we merely escaped," Itachi explained, sitting back down at the table. "It was Kabuto that summoned us, and he's currently being suppressed by Orochimaru. Orochimaru can't control us unless he rewrites our tags, but if Kabuto came back, it's possible he could still control us."

Naruto took an overlarge gulp of water and started coughing. "What? You mean you guys could basically turn back into normal zombies at any time?"

"I don't see Orochimaru giving Kabuto his body back anytime soon. It wouldn't be worth it to him for just us two, especially when he has already started resurrecting people himself for the war. But there is a way that I can break myself out of it for good, at least. For that, we need to go see your older self."
"G-go see aniki?!" Naruto shot up out of his chair, excited. "Are you serious? When are we gonna go?"

"We should go soon," they heard Nagato's deep voice from the doorway and looked up. Nagato and Konan came in, the hems of their coats dripping water onto the stone floor. The cat, which had been napping in some corner of the kitchen, ran up to Konan and rubbed against her leg.

"Apparently, he and the Hachibi's Jinchuuriki have escaped from their hiding place," Konan said. "And also... the war has fully started now. The Zetsu clones have been causing mass chaos. And, as we expected, Orochimaru has already started resurrecting many more people."

"I was able to intercept several messages being sent through the sensor-types at the Force's headquarters," Nagato said solemnly. "I heard them mention the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, as well as several old Kage. There's no telling how many others."

"Have you been able to find out what Madara is doing?" Itachi asked.

Nagato shook his head. "Kisame hasn't seen anything, and we weren't able to find any trace of him, either. We can assume that he will try to make another move soon, though. He won't stay quiet, not when we're the only ones who know where the eyes are."

"Right. Well, Naruto has decided to stay here and help with the war for the time being." He smiled, and Naruto grinned back. "We need to go after Orochimaru to stop his Edo Tensei anyway, so we can try to get him to send Naruto back home while we are at it."

"Nagato," Naruto said strongly, holding his fist up in determination. "They need you here. I don't want you to disappear already, just for my sake. If it absolutely comes down to it, do what you have to do, but in the meantime, I don't mind waiting to go home for a little bit longer."

Nagato looked mildly surprised for a moment, but then his lips curled into a smile. "Thank you, Naruto."

"We'll gather a bit more information before leaving Ame," Itachi said. "It would be a good idea to have at least an inkling of where Madara is and what he is doing right now."

"I am heading out again, after I rest for a little while," Konan agreed with a nod.

"Okay then, I'm not just gonna sit around, either," Naruto said determinedly. "Is there somewhere in this place I can train?"

Several hours later, two figures raced through the Rain countryside, creating small splashes as their swift footfalls beat into the sopping ground. They wore identical dark cloaks, and both of them had faces that looked like cracked porcelain. One of them was tall and had spiky orange hair. The other was shorter, with a wild tangle of black hair that fell messily over his face in the wind, for lack of a headband.

"Oi, Carrot-top," he said, pushing his hair out of his face for the hundredth time, even as his legs disobeyed his every order to stop moving. "Do you have any idea where we're going? We've been running for a while now."

"Things are starting to look more familiar around here," the orange-haired man said grimly. "It looks like whoever called us back to this world is leading us right to Amegakure. I have a really bad feeling about this..."
It didn't take long for them to reach the city, running at top speed in their tireless bodies. They didn't make it very far, though, once they got past its outer buildings.

"Stop!" Konan called in a strong, authoritative voice, materializing on a nearby roof. "State your purpose here. Intruders will not be..." she trailed off when the man standing on the street below looked up at her. It felt like all the wind had been knocked out of her body with that one look.

No. They had gone too far this time.

"Ya-Yahiko..." she whispered, horrified.

Yahiko looked up at her with a mixture of surprise and confusion. Recognition gleamed for just a second before his eyes widened in fear.

"Konan, look out!" he shouted in panic.

Konan hadn't even noticed the man beside Yahiko vanishing. His speed was unreal. She whirled around, but all she managed to take in was the sight of a gleaming tanto and red eyes before everything went dark.

Naruto sat in the dojo Hanzo's house had, meditating. He still wasn't making any real progress with the Sage training, but that didn't stop him from trying. No matter how long it took, he was determined to get the hang of it before he went back to the past.

He heard someone slide open the rice-paper door and his concentration wavered instantly. His arms, legs, and face started puffing up at an alarmingly quick rate.

"Ahhh! Help!" he shrieked, waving his webbed hands.

"Naruto!"

Someone hit him in the back, hard, making him fall forward and faceplant into the mat. The hand rested on his back and… felt like it was pulling all the energy out of him?

Naruto sat up and saw that Nagato's arm was turning into stone. He shrieked again.

"Relax, it's alright," Nagato said. He coated his other hand in sharp-looking chakra and cut his arm off before the energy could spread to the rest of his body. The arm fell to the floor and crumbled. Shortly after that, Nagato rolled his shoulder a few times and twitched, and a new hand appeared from his sleeve. He flexed it experimentally and Naruto screeched a third time.

"It looks like that one isn't coming back," Nagato mused. "It's a good thing I have a few spares."

"W-what are you, anyway?" Naruto accused, pointing at him.

"Your anideshi," Nagato patted him on the head with his creepy new hand. "I didn't realize you were doing the Sage training already. It's dangerous, you know. Not even Jiraiya-sensei was able to master it completely. Then again, your older self did, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised." he glanced at the floor suddenly. "What is that?"

Naruto looked down and saw a small black creature near his foot. It looked like a mouse, except that it was completely black and looked oddly two-dimensional. It looked sort of like...

"Oh! It is one of Sai's ink animal things!" Naruto took the scroll Sai had given him out of his tool pouch. "I guess I'm supposed to hold this thing out?" He unrolled the scroll a little bit and held it
"What is this?" Nagato asked curiously, looking at the scroll.

"It's my friend, Sai. He has the ability to send messages to people like this. I wonder what he wants to tell me..." Naruto bent over the scroll and started to read it.

_Naruto,_

_The idiot older you escaped, and managed to convince everyone to let him fight in the war. He has been asking about you incessantly, so I told him about the scroll I gave you. I hope you still have it. Anyway, he said he wanted to write to you, so expect another message shortly after this one._

_Sai_

Naruto drew in a sharp breath, his heart thudding all of a sudden. A message... from his older self? He caught motion out of the corner of his eye and saw a black ink snake coming toward him this time. He held the scroll out to it with shaking hands, and the snake flattened itself out on the paper.

He almost felt too nervous to read the message. He still knew almost nothing about his older self, after all. What would he be like? What would he say? Naruto took a deep breath and looked down at it. He felt an odd twinge at the sight of his own sprawling handwriting on the paper, alternated with neat, perfect lines from Sai's hand. Their handwriting was as different as night and day.

'Um... what do I write?'

'I don't know. This was your idea, dickless.'

'Uh... hey little bro, how's it going 'ttebayo?'

'You know he can't answer you back, right?'

'Shut up! I'm trying to think of what to say. This is really strange.'

(There were several unintelligible, crossed out lines.)

'Hey, little bro. I've heard that when you were brought here, it was in some kind of weird body that keeps Madara from trying to use you for his stupid moon plan. I'm glad about that. But some other people don't feel that way. They want to try to argue that just because the enemy brought you here, you must be on their side. I know, it sounds really dumb, right? If I know you as well as I think I do, you're trying to think of a way right now to come and help out the war. I'll be waiting for you. Give 'em hell!

#1 Hokage Candidate, Uzumaki Naruto

P.S. that's my special signature. You're not allowed to use it until you get back to your own time, sorry.'

By the time he finished the message, Naruto was grinning so widely that his face started to hurt, but he didn't care. He hurriedly wiped away the bothersome tears that had somehow crept into his eyes, and started laughing.

"Well?" Nagato said with a smile.

"He said... he's waiting for me to come fight in the war!" Naruto gave Nagato a Nice Guy thumbs-up and laughed again. His older self wasn't like the others at all. He seemed awesome.
"Well, it shouldn't be long now," Nagato said. "We just have to…" he trailed off, frowning suddenly. The way he paused looked like he was trying to hear something.

"What's wrong?"

Nagato stood abruptly and ran out the door. Naruto was caught off guard by the sudden exit, but he quickly collected his things and ran after the redhead. He was a little way ahead, but Naruto still saw when Itachi came running out a side hall and matched Nagato's stride.

"Intruders," Nagato said in a clipped voice. "They got up here so quickly, they must have known exactly where they were going."

"If this place is their target, it must be Madara, or Orochimaru."

"Aa. They're on the balcony at the end of this level. I can feel… Konan. And…"

Nagato stopped suddenly. Naruto ran faster, trying to catch up with them.

"No," Nagato whispered. "No, they wouldn't dare…" his face pulled into an ugly snarl that didn't suit him, but looked no less scary for that fact. He started off running again, much faster than this time, desperation driving him so much that even Itachi had a hard time keeping up with him.

They reached the end of the hall and the balcony in almost no time, and Naruto arrived shortly after, bursting into the falling rain with a kunai already in his hand, looking around wildly for the danger.

His eyes widened and he stared at the scene in front of him, frozen in place as effectively as his companions were.

First, he saw Konan. She was unconscious, and leaning back against a man with spiky orange hair, held up by one of his arms wrapped around her. His other hand held a kunai that was pressed against her throat.

"Wake up, Konan! You have to save yourself!" the man shouted in a trembling voice. "Please wake up, Konan, please, open your eyes!"

"Yahiko…" Nagato choked out.

The man looked up and noticed them. His eyes latched onto Nagato, his face torn between hope and anxiety.

"Nagato! I can't move—someone is making me do this! Konan was knocked out—please, get her away from me, you can't let me kill her!"

Yahiko stiffened and he cried out, tilting his head back. His eyes changed to a blank white and his emotion-filled face suddenly became blank.

"Now, not so fast," he said, only it wasn't Yahiko's deep, sonorous voice they heard coming from his mouth. "It's troublesome dealing with a group made up almost entirely of people I can't kill, so naturally I would go for the one that I can. All of you were even warned. It's pathetic, really." He tapped the flat edge of the kunai against Konan's neck. "Now then, tell me where you have hidden the Rinnegan, unless you want to see this woman killed by her dear friend."

Nagato didn't seem to take in the words. He was breathing heavily, his eyes even wider than Naruto's. He didn't answer– all he could do was stare. It was like his mind was shutting down.
Itachi saw, and realized that Nagato would not be able to respond in time, nor would he be able to respond the right way. In the worst-case scenario, he would start going on a rampage, and then all of them would be dead. He started toward the pair, but someone dropped down right into his path and slashed at him with a short sword, forcing Itachi to block the strike with a kunai.

"Sorry about this, cousin," the newcomer said, his eyes blazing Sharingan red. "Guess you're gonna have to deal with my company for a little bit."

"Shisui," Itachi breathed, his own eyes activated as they pushed against one another in a standstill.

"This is not the time to be getting sentimental," Shisui said. "These guys have decided to go after Sasuke, as well. He's another one they plan to use if this little stunt doesn't work."

"Sasuke is safe," Itachi said. He knew that his brother was strong. And even though Sasuke didn't know it, he also had Kisame watching after him. Itachi didn't want that information getting back to the enemy, though, so he didn't say it.

"There's more at stake here than his physical well-being, bro," Shisui said. "The rumor mill says that little Sasuke-chan is about two steps away from going off the deep end, and I'm not sure if what these guys are planning is going to help with that very much."

"What do you mean?"

"The clan." Shisui scowled. "That creepy snake-loving bastard somehow got his hands on almost all of them. And I don't think he intends to use them to give Sasuke a happy family reunion. Oh yeah, and one other thing." The balance of colors in his eyes started to shift into a different pattern, melding into the shape of his Mangekyou. "I'm pretty sure he's going to do whatever it takes to get the truth out of you about the Rinnegan, whether you want to cooperate or not."

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I'm back. Like many on this site, I had a very busy April/ start of May with school, so I was not able (and not willing) to do any other serious writing during that time. Bear with me as I get back into the swing of things. I did do a lot of plotting in the meantime for the remainder of the story, and I'm pretty excited about some of the ideas I got! Please check my profile for posting updates.

Till next time!
Extra: Meanwhile, In the Past & Reader-imagined scenes

Chapter Notes

(Posted 5/29/14)

An oddly placed extras chapter, I know, but this extra is a little different. Unlike the first, it isn't extra scenes from the previous story arc. Instead, there are two reader-imagined scenes and a scene written by me that shows what's happening in the past where younger!Naru came from.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Contents:

Meanwhile, In the Past... (by me. obvs.)
Crossover Omake of Chapter 12 by PyrothTenka
Reader imagined/alternate ending by Abdullahsaurus

Meanwhile, in the past...

[I have had this written for a long time, actually, because I needed to figure out early on what was happening in the past after the little Naruto came to the future. Some people have wondered about it, however, and the further in the story we get, the more people wonder. This information is supposed to be revealed sometime later in the story, BUT when it is, it won't be done with this kind of scene; meaning it won't be happening from the point of view of someone still in the past. But it does answer the question of 'so what is going on in the past?', so if you don't want to know yet, don't read.]

Kakashi arrived at the training ground where he had instructed his team to gather and paused. He'd hoped that his team would maybe re-bond a little bit while he was gone on his solo mission, but those hopes flew away quickly as he observed the scene in front of him.

Sasuke was sitting underneath a tree, arms crossed and face like a steel door, glaring in the other direction. Sakura sat near him, but not so near it would force him to move. When she saw Kakashi, she stood up, dusting grass off of her shorts. The third and loudest member of his team was nowhere to be seen, which was somehow the most conspicuous part of all of it.

"Kakashi-sensei, you're late," Sakura said, though without the indignation she usually put into it. She looked pleadingly at him and then looked back at Sasuke.

Kakashi sighed. Rather than reconnecting with one another, the rapport with his team seemed even worse than before. He had only been gone for a day and a night; had they managed to have a big falling out while he was gone?

He looked at Sasuke, who stoically ignored him. The young Uchiha hadn't been the same since the reunion with Itachi, and his subsequent hospitalization. Even though Tsunade had deemed him physically fit enough to be released from the hospital, she had suspended Team 7 from doing
missions until Kakashi could evaluate their readiness to return to action.

Which is what he was supposed to be doing today. The problem was, it would be difficult to asses his team with only one and a half of his team members present. (Sasuke honestly didn't look entirely there.)

"Yo," he said with practiced laziness. "Where's Naruto? You three didn't have a fight, did you?"

"No, sensei," Sakura said, sounding confused. "I haven't seen Naruto since we said goodbye after Tsunade-sama's inauguration. Have you, Sasuke-kun?"

"No," Sasuke said shortly. "Knowing him, he probably mistook the place. Or the day."

Kakashi frowned. Tsunade's inauguration had been the night before last. "Neither of you saw him yesterday, at all? Even though all three of you had the day off?"

"It is kind of strange," Sakura said. "He's an idiot sometimes, but I don't think he's ever been later than you for one of our meetings, right, sensei?"

"Hm..." Kakashi considered. "I'll go check at his house. If it takes me longer than half an hour for me to drag him back here, you're both dismissed, but expect to hear from me again sometime today."

"Yes, sensei," Sakura said, while Sasuke gave an eloquent snort.

Kakashi set off toward Naruto's apartment, silver brows knotted together in consternation. It really wasn't like the knucklehead to skip a team meeting, especially when he knew their fitness for active duty was going to be assessed. He knew better than anyone that Naruto was eager to get back to doing missions to help Konoha out while their forces were still strained after Orochimaru's attack.

In a matter of minutes he was at Naruto's front door, tapping languidly. He jabbed at the doorbell a couple of times, hearing it buzz within the apartment. He waited a few minutes, but there was no response.

Okay then. He was starting to seriously doubt that his student was at home, but Kakashi decided to go check at the bedroom window anyway. If something had happened he didn't know about, it was possible that Naruto could be refusing to answer the door out of sheer stubbornness.

Kakashi crawled around the side of the building to the balcony off of Naruto's room and peered into the bedroom window only to find, to his slight confusion, that Naruto was simply laying in bed. He was sprawled out with half of his bedcovers in the floor in his usual chaotic way, but his face was relaxed and blank. He wasn't snoring or twitching or generally being the bundle of energy that he was at all times, even while sleeping. Was he sick?

"Oi, Naruto," Kakashi said, sliding his window open and hopping down to the floor. "Rise and shine."

Nothing. Even when Kakashi closed the window behind him with a snap and kicked the bedcovers the rest of the way off of him, Naruto didn't wake. Not a twitch, not a grumble. His eyes didn't even move under his eyelids.

"Naruto?" Kakashi called, a tinge of worry leaking into his voice against his will. Was this some kind of prank? But even he knew that this wasn't the kind of pranking Naruto liked to do. He didn't make others worry for his safety intentionally. He cherished the care of others too much to abuse it like that.
"Naruto," Kakashi said a bit more forcefully, shaking his shoulder. Naruto's head rolled back and forth but his expression didn't shift in the slightest. He couldn't fake this level of insensibility if he tried, Kakashi realized. Something was definitely wrong. He felt Naruto's forehead and the sides of his face. They weren't overheated, flushed with fever. They were icy cold.

"No--" the word slipped from his mouth before he even realized it. Kakashi felt like all the air in the room had suddenly vanished, the constricting in his chest making it difficult to breathe as fear flooded him.

He leaned to poise his ear over Naruto's face. He couldn't hear him breathing.

He pressed his ear over Naruto's heart. He couldn't hear it beating.

Kakashi's thoughts were running all over one another, but he forced himself to try to calm down and block out everything and listen with all of his might.

Nothing. No. Why was this – no. There was something. It was very faint, but he thought he could hear a heartbeat. It lobbed frighteningly slowly. But Naruto was alive.

Barely.

Without wasting any more time, Kakashi scooped up his student's small body and left via the nearest exit, the window. He wasn't going to the hospital. Protocol be damned, he would see the newly instated Godaime Hokage right now, and no one was going to get in his way.

......

Tsunade looked up sharply when someone barged into her office without knocking, half-prepared to give them a tongue-lashing, but the words died in her throat when she saw the usually unruffled Kakashi out of breath with and a look of desperation plain even on his masked face.

She stood up and walked around her desk toward him. "Kakashi, what--" her eyes jumped to the preteen gathered in his arms and she felt her stomach drop down to her shoes. Naruto looked so pale. Still. Dead.

Tsunade could feel the room around her getting farther away; everything felt strange and distant. She dimly saw a pair of trembling hands that looked like her own touch the icy skin of his face, tracing the whisker marks.

She was cursing herself, but numbly, in the back of her mind. She should have never given him the necklace. Never should have formed an attachment to another all-too-mortal being. Fate just loved to spit on her, didn't it? How stupid, to be lured into a false sense of security again.

"He's alive, Tsunade-sama," Kakashi said urgently, pulling her back to reality. "Please, you have to do something or..."

Suddenly Tsunade could feel the ground underneath her feet again. If there was a chance, she would not fail. Not this time.

She put her glowing palms over Naruto's chest and discovered the weak, sluggish heartbeat. She moved her hands over him, checking the other organs and his chakra system.

"There is no physical damage," she said in a clipped voice. "but his chakra system is almost entirely empty. His levels are so dangerously low that he can't wake. He barely has enough energy to keep his vital organs functioning. And... I can't feel the Kyuubi at all."
"Then..."

"How long has he been like this?"

"I don't know. The last time Sakura and Sasuke saw him was the night before last. It could be over twenty-four hours."

"We're taking him to the hospital before we make any conclusions," Tsunade growled. "Shizune! Go find out where Jiraiya is and send him a message to report back here immediately. I want to know what he has found out about Akatsuki's movements. Kakashi, follow me."

Kakashi followed after her, keeping silent, but he could tell that they were thinking the same thing.

When they made it to the hospital, Kakashi laid Naruto gently down on the hospital bed and backed up as Tsunade barked orders at the several nurses that were milling around. No one told him to leave, so he just faded back quietly into the background. It was highly improbable that a guard was necessary at this point. If someone had managed to extract the bijuu from Naruto - never mind how, that was a question that would come later - they most likely didn't care whether the boy lived or died. Without the Kyuubi, he had no political or military value. Yet Kakashi stayed anyway, suspended in a state of morbid fascination as the medic-nin fought to save his student's life.

He knew, and Tsunade knew, that no one in history had ever survived having their Tailed Beast removed from them. Ever. Yet they had to try, even if the most they could do was delay the inevitable. This was the first time that someone in his life had died slowly enough for him to contemplate the process. Kakashi couldn't say if that was an improvement.

He lost track of exactly how much time passed, but it was enough for several ANBU to come looking for Tsunade (who had, after all, skipped out on her work without warning). After berating the first two mercilessly for interrupting her, she posted them outside of the hospital door to tell others that there was a medical emergency and she was not to be disturbed.

Kakashi didn't move from his position leaning on the wall until all the other medical personnel were allowed to leave and Tsunade flopped down into a bedside chair. He came forward and stood there silently, waiting for the verdict. Naruto had on a breathing mask and was hooked up to so many other machines that he couldn't figure out what all of them were for. But the steady sound of his pulse on the heart monitor was reassuring.

"He is stable," Tsunade said tiredly, reading Kakashi's silence. "There is no telling when or even if he'll regain consciousness, but his life isn't in danger as long as his body keeps doing its job. Him surviving this long without any support at all is, frankly, miraculous."

"What exactly is wrong with him?"

Tsunade got out of her chair heavily. "Being perfectly honest, the only thing I know of that could cause this is exactly what you are thinking... the Kyuubi is gone, and all but the bare minimum of Naruto's life energy is gone with it. Having the Tailed Beast taken... he should be dead already, but it seems he has his mother's resilience."

Kakashi narrowed his eye. "It had to be Akatsuki."

"Most likely. I hope that finding Jiraiya will enable us to piece together what happened. He's supposed to be monitoring their movements right now. To think that they could get into the village and take the bijuu undetected..."

"What do you think the chances are that Naruto will survive?" Kakashi asked, ignoring the vice-like
squeezing in his chest.

Tsunade closed her eyes briefly before answering. "The life support will not work indefinitely, and he will not be able to simply recover. His body is essentially an empty shell. The only thing that might work is to recover the Kyuubi and re-seal it inside of him."

"Then we have to take the offensive against Akatsuki as soon as possible."

"Yes," Tsunade said, low-burning fury creeping into her tone. She turned and marched toward the door. "Now that I've done all I can do here, it is time to get back to work." she paused with her hand on the door handle and said softly, "You should inform the rest of your team."

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Omake - Crossover with Minato's: The Art of Being Dead, by PyrothTenka

[This will make more sense if you have read Py's fanfiction, Minato's: TAoBD. Which you should do, anyway. But the short explanation is that her Minato and Kushina show up in chapter 12 when Itachi goes to investigate the seal. The omake breaks in seamlessly to the chapter, so I've included some of my original below for context. It happened this way because Py reads my WIPs and this was where I left off one time, so she thought to continue it...]

"Are you able to see everything that is going on?" Itachi asked the seal directly. The Kyuubi narrowed its eyes at him suspiciously but chose not to comment. The energy emanating from the seal grew the brightest it had been yet in response.

Itachi's eyes widened. Most likely, he would not be able to speak with the fragment of Minato without breaking the seal-- which he could not do in the first place, even if he wanted to-- but that little bit of consciousness was definitely alive and aware.

"So that is what it looks like when someone stores a piece of themselves in someone else," Itachi mused. "I understand. Thank you, Hokage-sama. I know what to look for now."

... 

"You're welcome!" a cheerful voice spoke up from behind, making the Uchiha whirl around in surprise. Well, as surprised as Uchiha Itachi ever got, anyway.

He blinked at the image of the blue-eyed blond in front of him. "Yondaime-sama?"

"Yep."

"You're able to manifest yourself?" the brunette asked curiously.

"Uh, not that version of me, I don't think," Minato replied, frowning uncertainly as he folded his arms across his chest. "Actually, I'm not really sure what's going on. Are there supposed to be two of me?"

"I am not certain-"

"ITACHI-CHAN!" another feminine voice called out, loudly, right in his ear as he was enthusiastically tackled from behind. "Look how big you got! Mikoto would be so proud!"

"Uzumaki-san?"

"The one and only! Well, besides Naruto, of course," Kushina verified, not loosening her grip in the
slightest. "How'd you get in here?"

Itachi, still standing in spite of being tackled and latched onto by an older kunoichi because of his amazing awesome ninja balancing skills, tried to pry her off; or at least shift her to a more comfortable speaking position, but she wasn't having it so he gave up. "Sharingan."

"Tch. Figures. Is there anything that magical pink-eye can't do?" Kushina muttered, rolling her eyes. Then stopped and glanced back at the seal where the huge demon was watching everything in silence. "Hey, wait, is that what that guy did to free fuzzy-face over there?"

That elicited a snarl from the fox as it reared itself up to its full height. "I AM THE GREAT KYUUBI NO YOUKO! You will not address me as 'Fuzzy-face'!"

Kushina snorted. "You killed me! I'll call you whatever the heck I want, Furball!"

"WHY YOU MISERABLE LITTLE INSECT! I COULD CRUSH YOU WITH ONE CLAW! Oh, wait. I did."

"Oh, yeah? Well it took childbirth and a demon being ripped from my stomach before I went down, what's your excuse?!"

While his wife picked a fight with a demon about fifty times her size, Minato tried to have a conversation with the man she was currently clinging to. "Excuse me, Itachi-san, but why are you here? What's going on with my son?"

"-and don't even get me started on th-! Oh, wait, Naruto? We're talking about Naruto now?" his wife cut off mid taunt.

"Did someone say my name?"

A blond-haired blue-eyed child stepped into the room instantly grabbing everyone's attention. "Woah, Itachi, where'd these people come from?"

"NARUTO!"

Itachi refrained from sighing in relief as the redhead of questionable sanity released him in favor of tackling her offspring to the ground instead. It was short lived, however, when she merely dragged the small blond over so she could hug them both at the same time.

"Naruto, this is Itachi. Because of an unofficial agreement I made with his mother before you were born, he is now your big brother. You have to listen to him now, okay?"

"Wha-... what's going on? Who are you, Crazy Lady?"

"I'm your mother!"

Itachi turned away before he could get lost in the Uzumaki insanity. He turned instead to the ex-Hokage to answer his question. "I am here to find and deal with a fragment of Orochimaru that was left here by him to control Naruto."

It was only a single sentence, but Itachi doubted he could have said anything more to drop the emotional atmosphere any lower or quicker.

"What." The frost in Kushina's voice could have frozen a volcano.

"Yes, please do explain," the Yondaime added, his voice equally chilly.
Unnerved, Itachi regarded the child beside him. "Would you like to explain?"

"I don't understand what's going on!" Naruto replied, gaze up turned to the ceiling with his arms slightly extended as if pleading for the world to make sense again.

Again, Itachi did not sigh as he turned back to the Yondaime. "How much do you know about the current situation?"

Minato shook his head. "Not much. I just got here."

"Then I will try to be short," the Uchiha spoke with a nod. "Your son was sent forward in time by Orochimaru into an experimental body. He then placed a control tag inside Naruto's head for purposes we do not know. I am currently attempting to locate and neutralize that control tag."

"Not alone, you aren't," Kushina growled. "If Snake-face is in here somewhere, I'm gonna hunt him down and skin him alive."

"... 'your son'?" Naruto's gaze traveled between the brunette and the older blond.

Itachi gave the ex-hokage a pointed look that specifically meant 'You're explaining this one. I've already filled up my spoken word quota for the day'. Or something similar.

The Yondaime didn't even attempt to conceal his sigh. "Just a moment, please."

He placed a hand on the wall and concentrated for a moment. "Found him. Orochimaru's chakra is this way." He waved them toward the exit, letting Itachi take the lead so he could fall back with the rest of his family. "Naruto, I'm not quite sure the best way to tell you-"

"We're your parents, dattebane!" Kushina interrupted, throwing her arms around the boy again. Minato gave her a dry look to which she raised a challenging eyebrow to. "What? We'd be here all day if we had to wait for you to eventually get around to getting to the point. I'm not willing to wait that long when we don't even know how much time we'll have."

The Yondaime sighed again. "Yes, well... what your mother said."

If Kushina hadn't had her arm around him and was pushing him along, Naruto would have stopped in his tracks to digest that information. As it was, he merely stumbled and his mother carried him for a few steps, ignoring his falter.

"Indeed!" Kushina agreed nodding. "Now we go snake hunting, dattebane! I hear snake meat tastes pretty good."

"She's joking," Minato quickly explained at their son's alarmed face. Then glanced sideways at his wife before amending, "Probably."

Naruto glanced between them like they were crazy before squirming free of the redhead's grip. He quickly caught up to Itachi as they reached a crossroad. "Are they really my parents?"

The Uchiha inclined his head slightly. "Yes." Then he turned to regard the elder blond. "Yondaime-sama?"

Minato needed no further explanation before placing a hand on the wall. "Right."

Nodding, the brunette took the right path. Naruto stared at his 'father'.

"Ah! You are the Yondaime!" he exclaimed, pointing accusingly.
"...yes. I would have thought that would have been obvious." Minato frowned in what was definitely not a pout as he turned to Kushina. "Do I not look like a Hokage or something?"

Kushina bared her teeth in what could only be a predatory smile and opened her mouth, but the older blond rolled his eyes and waved a hand dismissively. "Nevermind, don't answer that. I already know your answer. Unreliable sissy, was it?"

"You said it, not me," his wife replied, positively glowing with suppressed mirth. "Nice to know you're owning up to it, though."

The Yondaime sighed and shook his head. "I did leave myself open to that, didn't I?"

The redhead burst out laughing as she slung a cheerful arm around his shoulders. "Yes, you did. But I love you anyway."

Then they did that weird couple thing where they stared into each other's faces and it kinda made Naruto want to hurl. Except he wasn't entirely sure what that would do in their current location. "Ewww! No mushy stuff inside my head... seal... thing! You guys are weird!"

He threw up his hands and hurried to catch up to Itachi before they could get even more sickening.

Minato fought the urge to facepalm as he could almost hear grin forming on Kushina's face. One did not run away from a stalking cat. It only incited them to chase you. And now that she knew what would get a reaction out of the boy... well... he was doomed.

She darted after him. "But, Naruto! Mommy wuvs you!"

Itachi, taking one look behind him, quickly took several steps away from Naruto in the interest of self preservation. He felt a mild sense of guilt at sacrificing his newly adopted otouto in such a manner, but it was for a good cause. He needed to focus on finding and removing Orochimaru, and he couldn't do that if the redhead wrapped him up into... whatever it was she was currently doing to the small blond. Attempting to kill him with affection, it looked like.

"I just wanna hug and cuddle you, and pinch your widdle cheeks, and smother you in kisses!" She then promptly did just that.

With his wife distracted torturing their son, who looked utterly bewildered, Minato stepped forward past Itachi and took the lead. They would make much better time that way.

And so they did. It was only a matter of minutes before the dank hallways they'd been walking through opened up into a vast room. Inky black lines of complicated characters spiderwebbed across the surfaces of the walls, all of which converged in the center of the room on a single kunai floating almost innocuously about four feet off the ground.

"That's the knife he stuck in my head!" Naruto exclaimed pointing. He was about to step forward, but three hands reached out and snatched him back.

"Lesson one of seals: don't touch one if you don't know exactly what it does, dattebane!" Kushina scolded, smacking him lightly over the head.

Minato and Itachi scanned the seal from their spot in the doorway. It was... complicated. Which was an understatement in Minato's opinion. It took him a minute, but he figured out that moving into the room probably wasn't going to trigger a trap. Probably. So he stepped forward.

Itachi followed behind warily. He wasn't a seal master like the Yondaime, so his understanding of
the black markings around them was extremely limited. Still, he would do what he could to help free Naruto of Orochimaru's control.

The blond circled around the hovering kunai, frowning in thought as he tried to pick apart the exact purpose of the seal and the best way to remove it. Ideas flickered by only to be discarded... he had a few maybe ideas, but needed more information before he could be certain. Information that would take time to get. He wasn't sure they had that kind of time.

"So, Naru-chan," Kushina spoke, pulling her son closer so they could talk in false privacy. It was obvious Minato and Itachi could still hear them, but neither were the type to spill secrets so it hardly mattered. "How old are you? Do you have a girlfriend? A best friend? Have you made chuunin yet? How's Kakashi-kun? Does he have a girlfriend?"

Naruto blinked at all her rapid fire questions. His mother knew Kakashi-sensei? No, now wasn't the time to think about that, he still didn't know how to respond to this whole... parents thing. He might break down crying and that would just be embarrassing. Instead he turned and focused on what the other two were doing. "Shouldn't we be helping them, dattebayo?"

He was surprised when the redhead tackled him in another hug. "That's so cute, dattebane! You say it too!" She didn't release him as she went on to answer his question. "Hmm, I'm waiting for Minato to figure out the obvious solution, or realize the fuuinjutsu prodigy of the Uzumaki fuuinjutsu clan is standing right here and may have solved it already."

The older blond sighed and palmed his face. "Kushina... you could have said something."

"Awww, but I like watching you try to figure out seals until you realize I'm better than you and should be asking me for advice," she replied teasingly.

The Yondaime lifted his head and raised an eyebrow as if to say, 'Oh, really?'. "Hiraishin."

"Shut up, Namikaze!" the redhead exploded. Her grip tightened almost painfully on her son as she threw one arm out to point challengingly at her husband. "That is a fluke and I will figure it out eventually, dattebane!"

"I have no doubt that you will," Minato replied with a smile, only serving to make her seethe further. His grin faded when he had an idea of what she might have thought up for a solution. "You're not talking about the Uzumaki Fuuin, are you? Kushina, you don't have enough chakra. If you try, the seal will fail and you'll... disappear."

There was pain and a bit of fear in that last word, but Kushina brushed it off.

"That's why I'm not going to be the one doing it, duh."

"Uh, I don't have enough chakra either."

"Not you!" she scolded. "No, Naruto's gonna do it 'ttebane."

All eyes turned to blink at her, though it didn't take long for Minato to finish following her thought process. Itachi was not quite so practiced at Kushina deciphering and Naruto didn't understand half of what they were talking about.

"Oh. Huh. That... that could work."

"Damn right it'll work, dattebane!" Kushina said indignantly. Then she turned to her son, pulling a kunai from her weapon pouch. "Naru-chan, mommy needs your blood."
Naruto's eyes went wide and tried to distance himself, but his mother had a surprisingly strong grip on him. Itachi appeared beside him.

"Perhaps I could do it? Then blood would not be necessary, correct?"

Kushina narrowed her eyes. "For a non-Uzumaki, you sure know a lot about the Uzumaki Fuuin."

Itachi tilted his head to the side slightly. "I saw you use it once. It did not require blood. I suspect you need the blood to write out the seal and make up for your son's lack of expertise in the technique. With the Sharingan I should be able to learn in it minutes."

"Tch, you're even smarter than I remember. Anyway, hell no, dattebane. I love you like a son, Itachan, but the Uzumaki Fuuin is for Uzumaki only. Minato doesn't even know it," she replied firmly. "Besides, you don't have the right chakra for it. I'm not sure it'd work for you, or if it won't kill you if you even try 'ttebane."

"It could kill me, dattebayo?!" Naruto asked, not liking this plan at all.

"No it- just trust me, dattebane!" Kushina growled. "I need your blood to make the seal, now quit being such a wuss about it!"

She pulled an ink vial out of her pouch and offered it to him with the kunai. "Here, just put a bit. Mostly it's so it'll react to your chakra, I'll be writing it out so it does all the work for you. It's not normally done this way, but I'm going to make it work."

Naruto took the tools warily, before stabbing the knife into his palm lightly and letting the blood dribble into the ink. Kushina flashed him a grin as she took it back. "Now don't ever do that for anyone you don't trust completely. Just like it makes the seal easier for you to use, it'll make it easier for a seal to be used against you."

"What?" Naruto asked. "You can use that to... curse me or something?!

"Oh I can do terrible things with an enemy's blood. Terrible things...," Kushina mused, making everyone else shift uncomfortably. Naruto looked as if he was seriously contemplating taking the vial back. "Good thing you're my son and not my enemy, dattebane."

Minato stepped in to reassure his son while his wife went on to mark up the room with a new layer of ink. It took a while, and she muttered curses and semi-incoherent gibberish under her breath a lot, but when she was done, Naruto thought it just looked like a bunch of scribbles.

"That's supposed to help? Are you sure you aren't just making it worse, 'ttebayo?"

She smacked him lightly on the head again. "Yes, don't question your mother, dattebane! Stick your hand right here-," she pointed to a small circular patch of symbols in front of them, "-and channel chakra into it. A lot of chakra. Like... all of the chakra you can without passing out."

"Okay, yeesh, are mothers always so bossy?"

"Yes," the three other occupants of the room answered simultaneously. His parents glanced at Itachi curiously and he merely blinked back. Which was Itachi-speak for 'What? It's true.'

Naruto shook his head and placed his hand as directed. When he urged chakra out through it, the black characters around his hand lit up blue in an outward spiral. Then the blue light spilled out of the ink and began to run together as the seal pulled insistently on his energy reserves.
"More chakra, dattebane!"

Uneasily, Naruto complied, and the gushing became a torrent as the blue energy came to life around him like water and began to flow. By this time, Kushina had retreated to the safety of the wall, where the others had joined her. Which was good because the flood of chakra quickly covered the entire floor and started to move in a spiral. A whirlpool, Naruto realized, like its name had suggested. And it quickly grabbed up the black spidery lines of Orochimaru's control seal, washing them away.

That was when the giant snake appeared.

Huge, white, and with jaws that could easily swallow a dozen Narutos whole. The teen knew this because that was the first thing he saw as the beast's gaping maw rushed toward him.

There was a glint of light off of metal as the sound of shuriken and kunai impacting wall filled the room. Instantly Itachi was in front of him, a sword wreathed in black flame poised to intercept the large reptile. His parents were beside him just as quickly, all three balanced expertly on the web of ninja wire that was now suspended above the torrent of chakra to provide footing.

"Tch, damn lack of chakra," Kushina muttered. Minato grimaced in agreement. They didn't say it, but silently they knew they'd sacrifice themselves to save their son if Itachi couldn't handle it. Just like they'd done before.

But it proved unnecessary, the ex-Akatsuki member slammed his burning sword into the beast, setting it on fire and relentlessly slashed at it until it was little more than a smoldering corpse. Which was caught in the whirlpool seal and swept away with the rest.

Soon the flow began to lessen as everything drained into the small circle under Naruto's hand. When it finally ended, there was only a single set of marks left. A small black spiral reminiscent of the whirlpool, and a few other marks that looked like squiggles to Naruto.

"That was awesome, dattebayo!" the small blond cheered energetically. "What was that and can I learn to do it all the time?"

Minato and Itachi blinked at him, wondering how the kid could be standing after using so much chakra. Kushina just grinned and tackled her son in a hug.

"I know right, dattebane? I'll teach you it whenever you want!"

And so they celebrated and had a party and they all ate cake.

The End.

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**Reader imagined/alternate ending by Abdullahsaurus**

[Note that this was previously placed at the end of ch 11 because I wasn't originally planning on having an extras this round. I moved it to here so that all the extras would be in the same place. It's the same text as before.]

Naruto teleported behind Obito and rammed a rasengan into his back only to miss him by inches.

"Damn."

Obito phased through Naruto and molded his spheres into a blade.
"Good bye Naruto. See you in the afterlife!"

Naruto felt searing pain in his back side before the clone dispersed with a decisive pop.

Somewhere far away a boy screamed "Hiraishin".

Naruto felt disoriented going through the space-time continuum. While reaching his destination he prepared a bijju dama.

Obito sensed that the battle wasn't over.

*The young one still hasn't been defeated and the current one still hasn't been found.....*

Obito didn't see the black beam coming, but then, no one sees death coming.

Naruto formed a Sword using his bijju's chakra and stabbed Obito to make sure he was dead.

"I did it."

Naruto (Future) came running to the battle field with Killer Bee by his side

"What did I miss?"

He then noticed Obito lying on the floor and a tiny version of him standing there looking dazed, so as a precaution he slipped into Bijju Mode.

"Who are you?"

"I am you. Hasn't anyone told you that there was a mini-you running around?" Naruto said with a grin.

"I don't believe you, but if you let me take you back to Konoha I might."

Naruto nods and then Naruto (Future) comes closer and touches him.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" screamed Naruto while wood was pouring out of his wounds and mouth.

"What the....." he came closer to Naruto but Bee stopped him

"Don't touch him you fool, what if you turn into a tree like him, wouldn't be cool."

Naruto's eyelids shoot wide open and he stared at his ceiling.

"Kurama ? Where are we?"

"From what I can gather it looks like we came back to our timeline."

Naruto grinned "At least this time we are prepared."

Chapter End Notes
I hope this makes ya'll excited for things to come. You'll have to wait to find out the rest~

Until next time!
Shinobi World War: Part II

Chapter Notes

A/N: Since I know the war timeline can be confusing, especially now that I've meddled with it, bear in mind that everyone still calls Obito 'Madara' at this point.

"Oh yeah, and one other thing." The balance of colors in Shisui's eyes started to shift into a different pattern, melding into the shape of his Mangekyo. "I'm pretty sure he's going to do whatever it takes to get the truth out of you about the Rinnegan, whether you want to cooperate or not."

Itachi knew what Shisui meant instantly. The enemy was going to threaten their last remaining loved ones, and, failing that, they would simply try to force the truth out of them using Shisui's Kotoamatsukami. Itachi glanced over to the others.

"I know you're probably worried about those guys, but listen to me for a minute while Snake-face is distracted over there," Shisui said seriously.

Meanwhile, Naruto was standing frozen in the rain, staring at Nagato in front of him, and Yahiko and Konan near the edge of the balcony. Everything seemed to have gone completely still except for the falling rain. Naruto had just heard their story the night before. All of the details were still fresh in his mind, including the choice they had been forced to make, and Yahiko's death. The anger at Orochimaru bubbled up to the surface again and Naruto clenched his fists. His fear was slowly receding, making way for fury and determination.

"Taking the worst thing that ever happened to them, and throwing it back in their faces—that is beyond low," Naruto growled, stepping up beside Nagato. The redhead looked down at him quickly, seeming to wake a little from the paralysis that had come over him.

"Naruto—" he started, but Naruto started charging toward Orochimaru-Yahiko, letting out a long battle cry.

"Not so fast," Orochimaru's voice hissed from the orange-haired man. He held the edge of the kunai back up to Konan's throat. "Would you throw this woman's life away so easily? I'm surprised at you, Naruto-kun."

Naruto stopped in his tracks, grimacing, frustrated with the entire situation. He glared fiercely at Orochimaru-Yahiko and then looked back down at Konan. "Oi! Konan-neechan! Wake up!" he shouted. "You're not just gonna let him do this, are you? Yahiko and Nagato need your help right now!"


Konan's golden eyes opened a little.

"You're the one who's backward—or more like twisted around," Naruto retorted furiously. "You don't even care about the Rinnegan, so why would you go this far? Why are you even helping that guy, when you know what he is trying to do?"

"That is the question, isn't it? But that's not something that really concerns you." Orochimaru looked
up at Nagato, who still seemed very tense. "What will it be, then? It isn't as though you need it anymore. Surely it isn't worth more to you than this woman's life—"

"Don't you dare," Konan said quietly, cutting off his words. The unnaturally wide smirk dropped from Yahiko's face.

"Konan!"

"Konan-nee-chan!"

Yahiko-Orochimaru hissed and made to slice her throat, but the knife only cut into paper. There was a split second when his borrowed eyes widened, before a powerful explosion tore through the small space between them. A wave of light and sound flung sharp raindrops into Nagato and Naruto's faces, and they threw up their hands against it reflexively. The balcony under their feet gave a crack that was nearly loud as the explosion itself.

There were too many sensations to take in at once during that moment, when everything came to a crawl. Naruto felt the skin on his arms burning and peeling away. Turning his face away from the blast, he could see Itachi and Shisui. A large, ghostly skeletal figure hovered around Itachi, and Shisui jumped back, his eyes burning in their sockets with black flame. All sounds became muffled, save for a ringing in his ears. Naruto felt a terrible pain in his head, and he only vaguely noticed the balcony crumbling and shifting under his feet. He felt detached from himself, like in a dream.

Turning his eyes up again, he saw Nagato yelling something, with his hand extended out toward him. Naruto wanted to reach out and take his hand, but it was as if the strings connecting his mind to his body had been cut. He couldn't move. He realized he was falling, but it didn't feel real somehow.

The only thing that stood out from the fuzziness was a feeling like Orochimaru's sharp yellow eyes, staring through him.

*Now what?* was all he had time to think before blacking out.

Naruto didn't think that he had been unconscious for long. To his mind, it felt like it was only a second ago that he had been there beside everyone else, fighting against Orochimaru. But for some reason, his body felt so heavy, like he had been sleeping for years, or worked his muscles to their limits in a fight. It was also difficult to breathe. The air he pulled in tickled his lungs, and Naruto fought the urge to cough.

He opened his eyes blearily. No wonder—there was some kind of breathing mask over his nose and mouth. Naruto tried to reach up and take it off, but his arms still weren't cooperating. He looked up and around, taking in the surroundings.

It looked like he was back in the hospital again. Naruto's heart sank. Again, he had failed to help when it really mattered. What had happened? Where were Itachi and Nagato, and Konan? Were they able to beat Orochimaru?

He moved his eyes to the side, trying to see more of the room, but blinked in surprise when he saw a pair of light green eyes staring at him.

*Sakura-chan!* he wanted to shout, but it came out as more of a dry croak. "Sak…"

Sakura screamed, and there was a loud clatter as her chair fell to the floor. Her voice seemed weirdly high-pitched.
"T-Tsunade-sama!" she shouted, turning and running to the door, sandals slapping against the linoleum. She had already made it to the door and out into the hall before Naruto realized what exactly was wrong with this scenario.

*Sakura-chan!* he tried again, but it didn't work any better than before. Everything was gradually becoming fuzzy and distorted again. Naruto struggled to stay awake—with a great effort, he barely managed to raise one of his hands and curl it around the bed's railing. But it was no use. His consciousness was being pulled back out by some irresistible force.

"…Naruto, can you hear me?"

Naruto blinked in the rain; his eyes were already open when he came to. Nagato and Konan were hovering over him. Konan's hair was unkempt, the paper flower she usually kept in it drooping, and her face was scuffed. She was singed, but alive.

"I went back to the past!" Naruto gasped, jolting up. He looked around wildly and saw that half the balcony was missing. One of them must have caught him while he was unconscious. The clash between the two different realities was disorienting.

"What?" Nagato's one visible eye widened. "Are you sure, Naruto? What did you see?"

"I saw Sakura-chan… I was in the hospital—"

Naruto didn't get the chance to finish. The Edo Tensei body of Yahiko finished re-forming from pieces scattered by the explosion and rushed them in a last-ditch effort. Naruto caught sight of the movement and shouted out, making Nagato and Konan turn around quickly. Yahiko-Orochimaru threw a kunai at Nagato's head that was dodged—Konan stood from where she crouched beside Naruto—Nagato grabbed his best friend's arms, stilling his advance. Strong cables shot out of Nagato's sleeves and wound tightly around the Edo Tensei body. At the same time, Konan's slips of paper rushed around fiercely and lay themselves flat all over him like scales, leaving only the face visible. The Reanimation was effectively trapped in place.

"You surprised me," Orochimaru's voice came chuckling from Yahiko's mouth, the perversely pleased expression looking all wrong on his features. "To think you had the nerve to destroy someone you cherish so deeply. It seems even now I should be careful not to underestimate Akatsuki."

Nagato and Konan glared, a cold, sinister fury radiating off both of them. As Naruto looked up at their backs, he was able for the first time to appreciate—really appreciate—that these were S-class ninjas. They had been so nice to him that it had been hard from the very beginning to think of them as former enemies, no matter what anyone said. But the sense of power and anger they could give off without any effort was chilling. Naruto was glad they were on his side now.

"I'm not the same as I was back then," Konan said coolly. "I'd rather die than be used as a bargaining chip again. We won't forget this, Orochimaru."

"Of course," he said enigmatically, and his gaze flickered past Nagato and Konan, to Naruto. They made eye contact and Orochimaru-Yahiko gave a knowing, self-satisfied smirk. Nagato put a hand on the Edo Tensei summons' chest and pulled back with a shimmery, ghostly-looking form attached. Even as Yahiko's eyes started to shift from white back to brown, they remained fixed on Naruto. That smirk pissed him off. It wasn't the expression of someone who had just lost the fight.

"What did you do?" Naruto demanded, getting up from the ground and stepping between Nagato
and Konan. "You know what happened, don't you? Tell me how I can get back home, you bastard!"
He reached out to grab Orochimaru-Yahiko by the collar, but Konan laid a hand on his arm.

"He's already gone," she said heavily.

The Edo Tensei was starting to crumble as Nagato pulled Yahiko's soul out of the summon body. But in the brief moment right before it withered away completely, Yahiko was back in control of himself again.

"I knew you could do it—Konan, Nagato…" he rumbled slowly. Nagato and Konan didn't say anything. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that they couldn't.

"Hey, don't make faces like that," Yahiko said, flashing a pale grin. "You two will have to be tougher than this if you want to win a war against dead-raising psychos. I can't look out for you anymore, you know."

"We—" Nagato started, struggle evident in his voice, "I'm sor—"

"If you think there's something you have to feel guilty for, forget it," Yahiko cut in impatiently. "Damn, it would be just like you to waste your resurrection moping about old things."

"Yahiko," Konan said in a slightly reproachful tone, but she was smiling through the tears gleaming in her eyes.

"Just don't be in a rush to follow after me, alright?" Yahiko added in a more serious tone. "Take care of yourselves. We'll all be home together again before you know it."

"And Jiraiya-sensei will be there, too," Konan said softly.

A silence fell, heavy and sad. The three of them stood huddled together there while Yahiko slowly crumbled and faded away. Nagato seemed reluctant to speed up the process, but in the end it was inevitable. Yahiko's features peeled off and vanished, leaving behind the corpse of a nameless man; probably someone who had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Nagato and Konan released their respective binding jutsus and stood there staring at the corpse left behind by the Edo Tensei. Naruto stepped in between them to look.

"What is going on?" Naruto asked in a low voice, face pulling a disgusted look. "This isn't Yahiko?"

"...No," Nagato said after a while. "The Edo Tensei requires a body to resurrect the deceased person in. The soul is bound to the body with the summoning seal. Breaking the soul's bond with the body seems to be the best way to stop the jutsu."

"Oh, right. That's like with me." At least Naruto knew he wasn't occupying someone else's corpse. That would have made his situation even more disturbing.

Nagato looked to the side and Naruto followed his gaze to Itachi, walking toward them. The red skeletal-looking entity slowly faded away.

"Itachi! What happened to that—that other guy?" Naruto asked hesitantly.

"I tried to seal Shisui, but Orochimaru caught on to what I was doing and called him back," Itachi said, bending down and picking up the kunai that Yahiko-Orochimaru had thrown at Nagato. It had a paper tag attached to it. "It's no wonder, since I used the same method of sealing on Orochimaru
before, and he knew what would happen."

"Part of why he came here must have been bring us back under control, after all." Nagato said, noticing the kunai that Itachi held. The paper tag on it was one used to control the Edo Tensei.

"Aa. He must have known that there was no way to win through sheer force, so he probably hoped to create an opening through emotional manipulation. Shisui tried to get me with one as well, though the aim was sloppy. Orochimaru's control seemed to waver for a moment, for some reason."

"Itachi," Naruto said urgently. "That genjutsu you put on me—is there any way at all it would make my soul or whatever leave this body and go back to my real one, in the past?"

"I do not think so," Itachi said, tilting his head to the side slightly. "Why do you ask, Naruto?" The others also turned around to look at him in curiosity and concern.

Naruto shook his head. "I don't know. Something… something weird happened when there was that explosion. I could feel Orochimaru, but then I suddenly couldn't move. At first I thought he had tried to take over me, and your genjutsu stopped him—like you said it would, you know? But then I passed out and woke up again in the past! I was in my real body, I was in the hospital… I saw Sakura-chan—she was my age again." His eyes widened as it gradually sunk in more and more. Up until now, Naruto hadn't really given a lot of thought as to what things were like back at home. He had just sort of assumed that everything would be exactly as it was when he left. That no time would have passed once he finally made it back. But that didn't seem to be the case.

"Are you sure that's what really happened?" Konan asked. "It could have been an illusion, or…"

"No, whatever it was, it wasn't an illusion," Nagato interjected, shaking his head. "I saw. His life energy nearly disappeared. The damage his body sustained from the blast should not have been enough to cause it, either."

Remembering, Naruto looked at his arms. They showed no sign of burns from the explosion, but what had been there definitely wasn't enough to explain his soul leaving his body. He'd already suffered a lot more damage without that happening.

"It was Orochimaru's fault," Naruto said with conviction. He didn't have any proof beyond gut instinct, but he didn't feel less sure for that. "I have no idea how it could have been him, but… I just know it was."

"It makes as much sense as any other possibility," Konan said. "He is always sneaking around, doing something behind the scenes that no one else knows about." She grimaced and put her hand to her throat, where there was a thin line of blood. She had barely managed to escape in time. "I'm alright," she added heavily at their concerned looks. "I should never have allowed that to happen."

"You're the only one of us that's normal, Konan-nee," Naruto pointed out unnecessarily, crossing his arms with a nod. "We gotta remember you're not a zombie."

"What should we do now?" Itachi asked quietly. "Naruto, you said that you woke up in the hospital?"

Naruto's face turned stormy and he slowly uncrossed his arms. "Yeah. And Sakura-chan was there, but she acted shocked that I was awake. She ran to go get Tsunade-baachan."

"Then, it seems that time is still flowing there while you are here."

Naruto frowned and stared down at the ground, fists clenched as his sides. "That means… they're
probably worried about me. And if I'm not there, does that mean I've already started changing stuff in the past, without meaning to?"

'The only change will be you. But you will undoubtedly find out how much difference that can make.' That was what Madara had told him.

"What am I supposed to be doing in my time right now?" Naruto asked Itachi. "Will it mess things up if I'm just laying around in the hospital?"

"From what you have told me…” Itachi said slowly, "this is right around the time that Sasuke leaves Konoha to go join Orochimaru. You and a group of other genin go after him, but in the end you fail. You didn't see Sasuke when you were there just now?"

"No, but—that could have just been a coincidence! There might still be enough time to…” to what? Just because he knew what was going to happen, did that mean that he would be able to stop it?

No. The 'how' didn't matter. He would stop it, and that's all there was to it.

"Have you changed your mind about going back later?" Nagato asked. "We can try to send you back now, if you want. If I'm sealed, the contract should be nullified."

"I…” Naruto had no idea what to do. It wouldn't feel right to leave this time now, before he had the chance to meet his older self or help out in the war. But every minute he spent here increased the chance it was too late to stop Sasuke from leaving the village in his own time. Naruto had witnessed first-hand where that path led for his best friend. If it was only his life at stake… that was what made him hesitate. Could he essentially sacrifice what remained of Nagato's life, especially after hearing Yahiko tell him to keep living while he could?

"Think carefully about it," Itachi said. "Right now, you are worried about what you 'should' be doing in your time. But the world doesn't really work that way. In life, there are no right or wrong answers, just different choices. Nothing you do is more or less valid than what the Naruto of this time has done. It is only different. Don't make the mistake of thinking that failing to follow the same path will inevitably lead to disaster."

"…” Naruto was still unsure. This wasn't the kind of choice he wanted to have to make.

"Think about it this way, then. You said you were sure it was Orochimaru's fault that it happened, right?"

"Yeah?" Naruto said hesitantly.

"Then you should be all the more careful about basing your most important decisions off it."

Silence fell for a moment. Naruto was seriously getting a headache from trying to think about all the 'what-ifs' at once. This was why he normally just acted on gut instinct—things usually came out okay, and it was a lot simpler.

"Let's just get in out of the rain for now," Konan said softly. She extended a hand out and paper sheets wrapped around the body left behind by the Edo Tensei. Naruto felt slightly ill again at the sight of the nameless victim of Orochimaru's jutsu.

He was sure it had been Orochimaru, yes… what else could that feeling mean? But that still left the question of why.
Sasuke walked through the deceptively peaceful-looking forest, the sun through the leaves casting dappled light over his clothes and skin. Even though he had only a vague idea of where he was going, he walked with purpose. His intent was to investigate the war he had heard about, and find the rest of Taka—and not necessarily in that order. As far as he was concerned, the war was only a small diversion. More than anything else, what he wanted to see with his new eyes was the destruction of Konoha.

He heard rushing water nearby and, deciding that he had traveled far enough from the ruined lair to stop and decide on the next course of action, stepped out of the tree line. The location was pretty but unremarkable; a small waterfall spilled into a clear, shallow pool with white gravel in the bottom of it. Sasuke barely had time to notice the place's natural beauty, though—he froze in his tracks at the sight of at least fifty people resting casually in the open space, sitting on the grass and the sandy boulders scattered around. His black eyes widened and shifted almost immediately into the Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan. There was something very off about this scene. The people were of varying ages, and their clothing was a mix of different styles from different time periods. But almost all of them wore the Uchiha crest.

Sasuke put his hand on the hilt of his sword, eyes darting from one face to another, as more and more turned toward him. Their faces were cracked; their eyes entirely black in most cases. The ones that weren't black-on-black were red-on-black—the Sharingan.

"Sasuke!"

A voice called out and a soft weight ran into him, wrapping him up in an embrace. Sasuke's hand slipped off the hilt of the sword and fell to his side numbly. His heart was starting to pound furiously. Confusion, panic—was this real?

"Kaa-san?" Sasuke whispered with the very small amount of breath he had left.

He pushed himself away from her grasp jerkily, eyes wide, almost fearful. Glancing behind her, he saw what he'd already half-expected to see—his father, standing there with his arms crossed and his typical grim expression on. Sasuke, with Itachi's eyes newly implanted, was looking at his parents through the eyes of both sons.

"Orochimaru brought us back," Mikoto said softly, understanding his expression. "...You've gotten so tall."

Anger.

Anger—yes, that was something familiar, comfortable. Sasuke latched onto that burning flame the moment he felt it flicker within him. It kept everything else under control a little better.

"Why did he do this?" he demanded, looking around at all the Uchiha assembled there. The rest of them continued to watch silently, as if waiting to see what would unfold. Now that he understood what was happening, Sasuke was able to pick out a few other faces that he vaguely recognized. But most of them were unfamiliar. "He still wants the Uchiha's power?"

Well, he had it now. Had Orochimaru always been planning to do this? Why now? Was it to get to him, somehow?

"Apparently, there is a war he wants us to fight," Fugaku spoke up with distaste. It was clear that he loathed being under control like this. "We were not told why we had to come here and sit around. We have a very limited control over our own actions."
Sasuke stared at his father. Though angry, the Uchiha clan head was composed and already seemed to be in charge—at least, as much as was possible in these circumstances. That was so much like him, to be standing there in front of the son he hadn't seen in eight years, and stick to making a simple report of their situation. But that—that was easier to handle. It made Sasuke feel less like screaming and crying. He still had a hard time looking at his mother directly, like she was a scorching bright light. The problem was that if he lost his composure now, he wasn't sure he could get it back.

"We heard that Itachi was resurrected, too. But we haven't seen him," Mikoto said hesitantly.

Sasuke did look at her this time. She didn't try to hug him again, but stood there with her hands clasped in front of her patiently.

"He's back, too…?" face darkening, Sasuke clenched his fists down by his sides and narrowed his eyes at his parents. "I heard something about him a little while ago. That he was acting under orders when he killed everyone in the clan. That the Uchiha were plotting a coup d'état. Is that true?"

Mikoto's small smile faded, and her eyebrows drew together in concern. Fugaku stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "How did Itachi die?"

"I'm the one asking questions!" Sasuke said roughly, giving a large, aggravated motion. "Is it true, or not?"

Fugaku closed his eyes and sighed. "You were very young at the time, so you wouldn't understand. Even if we were destined to fail, we had to try. In the same way, Itachi had to be the one to stop it. All of us were following our convictions like true Uchiha. We do not blame Itachi for what he had to do. Going on about it now won't change anything."

Sasuke's throat worked. "Is that all you can say? I was left alone without knowing anything—I spent half of my life believing a lie, and you still want to talk down to me like a child? What am I supposed to do now?" He took a step toward his father. "I should have died along with you."

"The Uchiha are finished," Fugaku said dismissively. "Just live according to your convictions. That is the best way you can honor us now."

Sasuke could only scoff at what, to him, was still a woefully inadequate response. Then again, making up for everything was probably a task far beyond words now. Maybe his father was right, and going on about it now really wouldn't change anything.

"Sasuke-chan," Mikoto said, causing a sharp pain to go through his chest. "I know it's hard, but please, try to live. I know how strong you are. There is still a chance for you."

It was much harder to disagree with her. Sasuke found himself even wishing that he could tell her what she wanted to hear, and let her believe that he grew up with a happy little life in Konoha.

"It's too late for that," he murmured. "They won't accept me anymore, not after all the things I've done. And I wouldn't want them to, anyway. I don't care anything about the future. It ended with all of you! The villages are nothing but a corrupt system that forced the Uchiha to serve or die. And now I know that it's all true… it makes me hate them all the more." He still wanted to talk to Itachi himself, if he really was revived, too. In fact, finding him would now take priority over everything else. He had to hear the truth directly from him. Only then would it be starkly, undeniably real.

"You have the Mangekyo Sharingan," Fugaku commented.

"Eternal Mangekyo," Sasuke amended. "These are Itachi's eyes."
His father turned around and started walking away without a word.

"Tou-san!"

Fugaku continued walking on, and the other Uchiha got to their feet silently and started following after him. Mikoto started following him, as well.

"Where are you going?" Sasuke demanded.

"It seems it's time for us to be put to whatever use Orochimaru brought us here for," Fugaku said without turning around. "Maybe we'll finally get to see what's happening. Waiting around here was getting tiresome, anyway."

Sasuke grit his teeth and stepped in among them, ignoring the looks the others were giving him. It was a strange sensation, fitting in so well among the dead. There were Uchiha symbols everywhere he looked. He wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't finished talking to his parents—but Itachi was out there somewhere.

And his clan was being used like pawns for this war. It burned like acid on his tongue to see them filing away like obedient troops to wherever Orochimaru was sending them. He had gone too far this time. But staying here wasn't going to stop it from happening. Sasuke had to find Orochimaru and make sure that the snake Sannin stayed dead this time.

"You have no idea where Itachi is, at all? What about Orochimaru?" he said, taking several large strides to catch up to his parents.

They didn't answer. Their eyes had gone blank-white, and their expressions showed no indication that they had even heard. Sasuke looked around and saw that all the other Uchiha were in the same state.

Cursing to himself, Sasuke kept up with the group as they entered a wide field and started to run. Wherever they were going, it was probably one of the battlefields of the war, which was exactly where Orochimaru was not likely to be. He doubted that he would find Itachi out there in the middle of everything, either. But he kept on following the group anyway, just because it was impossible to leave them alone. He had no idea where to start looking for Itachi and Orochimaru, anyway.

They had been running for half an hour before suddenly the group started to split. Sasuke noticed it when the Uchihas on either side of him veered away from one another. Halting to watch, he saw the group segment into three different parts, heading off in different directions. For a moment, he stood there uncertainly. But then he spotted both of his parents continuing forward with the middle group, so he started up again with them. The entire time, he kept a sharp look out for whatever enemy they would be facing.

Even after running all this way, he still didn't have a solid plan in mind. What would happen when they got there? He would be dragged into it. He had no desire to fight in the war, especially a war his clansmen were being forced to participate in. No doubt this entire thing would increase the stigma of the Uchiha even more. Damn Orochimaru!

Difficult as it was, he had to leave them if he wanted to stop this. Halting in place, Sasuke watched as the group, taking no notice of him whatsoever, continued running on. His eyes locked on to his father's back as they got further and further away.

Why was Itachi separated from the rest of them? Had he been ordered to do a different task?

"Looks like you finally did the smart thing, ne."
Sasuke's eyes narrowed and he turned around, hand going to his sword hilt once again. He had no idea why the Akatsuki member was following him, but he was glad that the shark-man had finally decided to step forward.

"You again," he growled, leveling his Sharingan at Kisame. "Why are you following me?"

"It's definitely a pain in the ass to have to look after you like this," Kisame said, crossing his arms. Sasuke noticed that he was no longer wearing the black coat of Akatsuki. "But it's been a little bit interesting, anyway… and besides, Itachi-san asked me to."

"Itachi…?" Sasuke took a step forward and spat out, "I know that's a lie. Itachi is trapped by the Edo Tensei, just like the rest of them. And you're with Akatsuki, so that means you're part of all this too."

"Nope, both wrong. Not anymore." Kisame shook his head. "You don't have to believe me if you don't wanna, but I know where Itachi-san is right now, if you're curious."

Sasuke weighed what Kisame was saying. He thought it was much more likely that Tobi had finally caught up to him after he left and destroyed much of the hideout. The masked man had already given him the ominous warning that he wouldn't be allowed to leave Akatsuki until he fulfilled his part of the agreement. Taka's failure to capture the Eight-Tails meant that they weren't off the hook just yet.

Yet, he knew that Kisame was loyal to Itachi, even in situations where that loyalty put him at odds with Akatsuki. The fact that he had stopped anyone from interfering with Itachi and Sasuke's fight was proof of that.

"Fine. I will listen."

"If Orochimaru succeeds in capturing Naruto, or separates him from us for any length of time, he will most likely try to bring him under his control," Itachi said. "The same thing with Madara—if he captures Naruto again, he will not let him go this time. If either of those things happen, we will seal Nagato right away. Do you agree, Naruto?"

"Yeah." Naruto nodded.

He had decided to stay in this time for now, at least until they found out more about the enemy's plans. That was what they agreed. However, for him, it had more to do with the fact that he hated to leave this place while everything was going on. Naruto hoped that nothing would happen to dramatically alter the past while he was gone.

"According to Shisui, Madara and Orochimaru seem to be working independently of one another right now," Itachi continued. "He said that Orochimaru summoned people and made plans to direct them on his own. I'm not even sure how serious Orochimaru was about finding the Rinnegan."

"Meanwhile, we still don't know where Madara is," Konan mused. "And we do not know how much he is involved in the war at this time."

"There is one last loose end on the enemy's side," Nagato said. "Black Zetsu."

"True."

"Can we go now?" Naruto said impatiently with his hands behind his head, his voice just approaching a whine. "I wanna hurry and find older-me and Sasuke and start helping everyone out! We already decided what to do if I get in trouble, so we've got no reason to hold back anymore."
He was excited. Even though he couldn't quite fight on the level of the enemies they were facing, he felt almost immortal. His new body could take an incredible amount of damage, and they even had a contingency plan for if he got separated from the others and captured. To him, there was no reason to wait any longer, especially when he was also worried about what was happening in the past.

"Naruto, it is best if we avoid the main portion of the enemy’s forces, as well as the Allied Shinobi Force," Itachi said.

"Whaaaat? Why?" he wanted to be involved! "Ne, Itachi, you're not trying to shelter me like everyone else, are you?"

"That's not it," Itachi shook his head. "If we get involved with the Allied Shinobi Force, we will no longer be able to work as freely. It would take a lot of explanation just to convince them that we're on their side. If you want to go back to them, of course, you may. But we cannot follow, and it is very likely that they will try to put you into hiding again."

"Oh." Itachi was right. "Then what are we gonna do? And how am I supposed to see aniki?"

"Our main goals are to find Orochimaru to stop the Edo Tensei, and find Madara," Itachi said. "Orochimaru is our priority for now, since he is actively participating in the war. We may also be able to get him to speak about why he's doing this. It is almost certain that he has a motive beyond helping Madara. In fact, that is probably the least of his considerations."

Naruto frowned down at the floor. "…What about Sasuke?"

There was a long pause. All of them were thinking it, but they hadn't said it yet. Shisui had delivered the news that the Uchiha clan was revived, and that they would most likely be confronting Sasuke.

"Kisame is watching over him," Itachi finally said. "I doubt that Orochimaru will actually attack Sasuke with them physically. What is more troubling is the fact that he probably intends to use the clan for war."

"We should go find Sasuke, so you can talk to him!" Naruto said. "The last time I saw him, he was really in trouble. I'm sure that if you just talked to him, everything would be okay!"

Itachi tilted his head with a small smile, getting a strong sense of déjà vu. The older version of Naruto had told him the same thing, mere hours ago. They were both so terribly optimistic. "No, it would not. Someone like me, who only ever lied to Sasuke, could never truly reach him. I leave that task up to your older self—to you, Naruto. The one thing that makes me glad about you being here, is that maybe you will figure out a way to help him sooner."

Naruto felt someone put their hand on his head, and turned to look up at Nagato.

"You and I are connected in more ways than you realize, Naruto," Nagato murmured. "Once we head out, we most likely won't have the chance to talk together like this again. So let me give you my parting words now, in case anything happens."

"Nagato…" Naruto hated goodbyes, especially when they weren't really saying goodbye yet. But Nagato did have a point.

"When you go back home, we will be mortal enemies," Nagato continued. "Do not make the mistake of expecting any mercy from me, just because you are used to the way I am now. I will be trying to capture and kill you with all my being. You need to fight back just as hard."

"But—" Naruto broke in, "there has to be a way to stop you before things get to that point, right? I
mean, at home, you're still alive. And Itachi—you're alive, too!" he turned back toward Itachi. "What's the point of knowing what's going to happen in the future if you have to die all over again?"

"If I die, that is fine," Nagato said. "The only thing I would ever ask of you is, if it is possible… stop me from killing Jiraiya-sensei. I know I don't have the right to ask. But don't let him come here. I've already told you how my abilities work, so there is no need for him to give up his life. After his death, I… I became even worse. I tried to smother my own grief, the horror of what I had done. You have to understand; even with everything else I had done up until that point, it took destroying someone I had truly loved to kill the last of my humanity. I never realized that until it was too late. In the end, you were the one to make me realize that, Naruto."

"I'm not gonna let Ero-sennin die," Naruto said firmly, ignoring the stinging at the corners of his eyes that started when Nagato was talking about Jiraiya. "But I don't want you to die, either. I—I don't care if that makes me no better than Madara." The voice of the masked man still haunted Naruto, challenging him to come up with a reason why his desire to change things was any better than Madara's Tsuki no Me project. "I can't let people die in front of me, knowing that it's going to happen. I can't. And that includes you and Itachi, too. I'll find a way. I'll stop you and save Ero-sennin, and everybody else."

"If anyone can do it, it's you," Konan said, looking down at him seriously, tawny eyes lit with an unreadable emotion. "But when it comes down to it, protect your comrades first, and worry about saving us last."

"Sure," Naruto said obstinately. "It makes no difference anyway, since I'll do both."

Itachi was still watching with a faint smile. "We need to avoid facing any other Edo Tensei summons as much as possible; especially once we decide how the group is going to be split up. I think it's best if I go after Orochimaru. Someone else needs to go with Naruto to wherever he wants to go, and we also need to find Madara."

"I will hunt down Madara," Konan said, her expression like steel. If Itachi was going after Orochimaru, she wanted to confront the one that had manipulated Nagato and the rest of Akatsuki, and tried to sneak into Ame when she was away in Suna.

"Konan…" Nagato started. "He wants to find the Rinnegan more than anyone—"

"And he will not be able to learn it from me. You two are the only ones that know where it is. The entire point of keeping its location a secret from me was so that the enemy could not find it out through genjutsu. I will be staying out of the war, but I can at least hunt him from here."

"Both of you can go," Naruto said strongly. "I'll be fine, especially once I meet up with aniki. The two of us should be able to handle anything!"

Itachi sighed. "This will be easier to figure out once we know more about the situation on the ground. The Rinnegan is safe, so we can worry about Madara after Orochimaru, if necessary."

"How are you so sure that it's safe, anyway?" Naruto asked. "I mean—you guys are awesome and everything, and I'm sure you found a good hiding place, but is it really okay to let Madara keep searching around for it?"

"It would be destroyed before he ever had the chance to get his hands on it," Itachi said, with no shade of doubt in his voice. "What's important is to keep him thinking that there's a chance to get it, so that he's too distracted to join in the war. Finishing the enemy off one at a time will be easier than facing them both together. We're just lucky that they don't seem to be all that united to begin with."
The three of them jumped into the void, finally making their way toward the battlefield.

The older Naruto's arrival couldn't have been better timed for the Allied Shinobi Forces, even if some among them would have had a hard time admitting it. With his ability to sense malicious intent and send clones to every front to weed out the impostors, things were starting to take a more positive turn.

That was, until some very disturbing news started to reach the front lines, gradually trickling down to HQ and then back out again—the famous Uchiha clan had been resurrected. Though the ASF had dealt with patches of Edo Tensei soldiers here and there already, this was the first time they were facing them on such a large scale.

The Uchiha first appeared in the forest, creating a wave of backup for the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist, who were being dealt with at the time. In a scene that resembled something from the Warring Clans era, a line of Uchiha drove into the battles taking place in the forest, catching the Allied commando units off guard, forcing some to retreat and some to be caught fatally in between two powerful groups of enemies.

When the older Naruto arrived to back up Sai, Kakashi, Lee, and the others, a large number of their people were already killed. Kakashi looked beaten and ragged, Sai looked tense, and Sakura was biting her lip as she struggled to save as many people as she possibly could.

"What is going on here, Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto shouted, pushing the two Uchiha that Kakashi was holding back away from him with a clawed, ephemeral hand.

"It's about time you got here," Kakashi said in an attempt at his usual impassive tone, but the tension underlying it was evident. "We were fighting the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist. We managed to seal some of them, but then a whole bunch of dead Uchihas showed up. Hey—pay attention!" Kakashi dodged as a huge blade whistled through the air, aiming at decapitating the both of them. Naruto jumped up and kicked the Edo-Zabuza in the head, sending him into the ground.

He was feeling increasingly disturbed by all of this. He had heard that a lot of people had been resurrected, but this was just so wrong. He and Kakashi landed back-to-back. Kakashi had taken the opening Naruto had presented, and took possession of the oversized Executioner's Blade.

"Gai and some of the others were forced in the other direction, into the woods," Kakashi said. "Go find them. We're not doing so well here, but they are even more outnumbered than we are."

"..." Naruto didn't want to leave them here when they were in such an obviously bad state, but if the others were doing even worse, they definitely needed help. "I could send another bunshin here… but I'd have to dispel myself to get the message through to Boss." That wasn't really an acceptable measure at this point. Who knew how long it would take to send two more clones this way?

"We have a radio," Kakashi said. "We can send the message through Headquarters. Now go!"

"I promise, I'll be—" Naruto started, but he and Kakashi were halted in their conversation when the movements of their enemies suddenly completely changed. The Uchiha that were left with their group—there looked to be about half a dozen of them—suddenly backed away from their opponents and fled away.

The other Edo Tensei zombies, however, stayed. Kakashi jumped in front of Naruto and blocked Zabuza's kunai with the sword while Naruto was distracted with watching the Uchiha's retreat.

"Shit! I don't know if they heard what I was saying, or what—but that's the direction the others were
heading in!" Kakashi grunted, pushing his opponent back. "You need to follow them, now!"

"R-Right!" Naruto turned and followed after the retreating Uchiha. They were fast, and moved smoothly as a single cohesive unit, but Naruto was still faster. He spotted them ahead, jumping through the treetops, and jumped up in pursuit.

"Ugh!" Naruto went to jump to the next branch, but something grabbed his ankle, causing him to trip. Pitching forward, he flipped over and landed more-or-less gracefully on his feet to avoid getting dispelled. "What the hell?" He looked up at the offending branch, but didn't see anything.

Warily, the bunshin jumped back up into the trees and continued chasing after the Edo-Uchihas, who were further ahead of him now. Something strange was going on, he could sense it. There were plant clones around—in the trees? He looked down at his feet whenever landing to make sure he didn't get snagged again.

Looking back up, he saw that the group of Uchiha had suddenly stopped and were facing him. Caught in midair, Naruto decided to land on a branch right in front of them, but something hit him in the back, followed by many more impacts as he was tackled bodily by a swarm of those white creatures. They reacted instantly to his Kyuubi Chakra Mode, sprouting into trees and entangling him.

"H-hey!" the bunshin shouted, but he only had time to struggle for a moment before gravity took its toll and he hit the ground, vanishing in a puff of smoke, stabbed through with sharp roots.

Naruto blinked as yet another clone's memories hit him. It was a lot like the others. Every time one of them showed up in a battle, they were either lured away and dispelled, or attacked right on the spot. Any of those white-plant-creatures in that area would throw themselves at him as if they had a death wish. The enemy was targeting him first the moment he appeared anywhere. Now that he knew that, it was possible to adjust his strategy and avoid having his clones dispelled, but that meant having to send a completely fresh wave of clones out, and a lot of the places he'd visited were in serious trouble. No doubt Orochimaru was trying to slow him down.

Cursing to himself, Naruto put his fingers in the cross-sign to summon more Kage Bunshin.

"Oi, Naruto. You sure you wanna do that?" Bee commented, seeing what he was about to do. "Remember what I told you 'bout the Kyuubi Chakra Mode, baka yarou."

Naruto knew. While he was in the Kyuubi Chakra Mode and using the fox's chakra, the fox was able to steal his in return. That effect was multiplied whenever he summoned more bunshin.

"Hmph. The Kyuubi stopped taking my chakra a while ago," Naruto said with a determined grin. "He's just taking a nap or something, I guess."

Instead of rambling on like an idiot, maybe you should pay more attention to your surroundings, the fox snapped at him. Don't you sense them, heading this way?

Naruto closed his eyes briefly before they flew open again.

"Nice timing, dattebayo!" he said exuberantly, punching the air. "I bet they might know something about all this crazy stuff going on with the Uchiha clan! Plus, there's one other thing I can clear up for everyone. Bee-occhan," he added, looking over at the Kumo nin, "can you cover for me? I'm gonna go make a quick visit that I don't want anyone to know about just yet." He knew that things would be less complicated if he went by himself. With everyone being suspicious of his younger self
and the others, it would be better to talk to them first, before anyone else got involved.

"Eh… sure," Bee said, nonplussed.

"I'll try to hurry. We have to get help to Kakashi-sensei and the others." Naruto turned and launched himself away from the course he and Bee were just on. Putting on an extra burst of speed, he went hurling toward the direction where he could feel that nostalgic energy that was so similar to his.

The three of them had made it out of the Land of Rain, but they were still a good distance from where the fighting was taking place. No enemies had appeared in front of them yet. All they really had to do in the meantime was discuss plans—and so they had been trying to piece together the details as they went along. The biggest hindrance was the fact that they didn't know exactly where Orochimaru or Madara were. Nagato had tried to trace Orochimaru's energy from the Edo Tensei, but it hadn't worked because they were no longer under control, and therefore not receiving any orders that could be traced back to the source.

They had reached a wide, open lake. The rag-tag group halted when a flash of flaming orange appeared up ahead, vaulted over a few tree branches, and landed smoothly down in front of them.

"Yo!" the older Naruto said cheerfully, putting two fingers to his temple and saluting. He had a wide grin on his face.

The younger Naruto stared at his older counterpart for several moments. He could barely recognize himself at first glance. The most obvious difference was that he was glowing, flames licking his entire body, giving off warmth and golden light like the sun. Looking beyond that, there were other differences, too. He was taller, with broader shoulders and a more angular face. His eyes were yellow instead of a clear blue, but it didn't look menacing. Instead, it looked… almost comforting, somehow.

"W-what?" the elder said with a nervous laugh, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly.

"Ahhhh, so cool!" the younger enthused, stepping closer and looking his counterpart up and down eagerly. "How are you on fire? Can you teach me how to do that? How did you find us? Where've you been this whole time? Can you show me a cool jutsu?"

"Eheheh…" the elder scratched his cheek, looking flattered. "Um… let's see… this is what it looks like when I'm in Kyuubi Chakra Mode… I don't know if I could teach you, there's some kind of waterfall test thing you have to pass first. I found you because I can sense you—the Kyuubi says there's some kind of connection with Jinchuurikis, so I guess that includes you, too. Plus, I can find just about anyone I want using Sage Mode. I was in a weird forest on the back of a giant turtle training to use the Kyuubi's chakra. And…"

Something cool? That was an easy one. The older Naruto held out his hand. Little chakra claws came sprouting from the bright aura around him and waved around his hand, molding the chakra that he started releasing from his palm. First it started out as a small, familiar ball of whirling energy—the Rasengan. Still, the younger Naruto watched intently, waiting for something to happen.

It didn't take long. A sharp, metallic whine started up as tendrils of white swirled around the Rasengan, growing larger and larger, swirling around it in the form of spinning white blades. He raised it up above his head and the blades got longer and longer, the spinning generating a wind that picked up dust and tossed his hair around.

"Fuuton: Rasen-Shuriken!"
He turned and launched the Rasen-Shuriken at the lake. It moved with incredible speed—but only for a split second. Before it hit the water, there was a splash as Nagato skidded out over the lake's surface and held up his hands, right in the path of the Rasen-Shuriken. When it hit him, it wobbled, unraveled, and finally dissipated into nothing.

"Ne, Nagatooooo!" the older Naruto complained, waving his arms. "You ruined it! It's not like it was gonna hit anything!"

The younger Naruto wasn't sure which was more amazing—the Rasen-Shuriken, or the fact that Nagato had stopped it with his bare hands. Or the fact that his older self didn't seem the least bit surprised when he did. For the first time ever, he felt like the most ordinary person in a group.

"I'm sorry, Naruto, but we're trying to be inconspicuous right now," Nagato said, walking over the water back to them. "If that had hit the water, there would have been a splash big enough to show over the tops of the trees. And if it missed, you would have cleared out a good number of the trees."

"Aw c'mon, I wasn't going to miss…"

"So coooool!" the younger Naruto shrilled again, hopping from one foot to another in excitement.

"Right? Right?" the elder turned back to him again. "And there's this other thing I've been working on recently—I don't have it completely down yet, 'cause I have to learn how to balance the red and blue energies, or something like that, but it should be really awesome—"

"I know you're both very excited to finally meet," Itachi interjected, not very loudly, but it still caught their attention. "However, we are in the middle of a war right now. We need to find Orochimaru as soon as possible, and stop the Edo Tensei."

Face turning serious, the older Naruto nodded. "There are Edo Tensei zombies everywhere, plus those white things. And—!" remembering suddenly, he turned to give Itachi his full attention. "Itachi, what's going on with the Uchiha clan? They just started showing up all over the place! They've been working together to get rid of any Kage Bunshin that I send to the battlefield. I have to do it, though, because I'm the only one who can tell the white-plant-things apart from real allies when they transform! I think I can dodge them, now that I know they're going after my bunshin, but it's going to take some time to send them back out. I won't be able to hold the Kyuubi Chakra Mode for much longer…"

"The White Zetsu?" Itachi asked, tilting his head slightly. "What you are saying is that they can transform into allies, and only you can tell them apart from the real thing?"

"Yeah, like I said! You mean you didn't know about that?"

"We have been out of the loop somewhat," Itachi said. "Most of our information about the status of the war has come from intercepting messages being sent to Allied Shinobi Forces HQ."

The younger Naruto felt a creeping sense of foreboding at this revelation. It was bad enough that he knew that Orochimaru had intentionally brought him here… for some reason.

"Does that mean I'm a fake, too?" he burst out anxiously, surprising the others. "This body is made out of those plant-things. How do I know I'm not just like them?" He felt real, sure. Most of the time there was no difference. He probably wouldn't even care so much about being real or not, if it wasn't for the fact that the Zetsu were on the enemy's side. It was the same old fear, the fear that he could lose his free will at any time and turn on everyone.

His older self looked at him silently for a moment. Then he crouched down in front of him, making
"You're not fake," the elder said. "I can tell you have the same soul as me. And tou-chan and kaa-chan, I can feel them watching over you, too. You'll get to meet them someday, you know. And there'll be a lot of really hard and painful things along the way, but you can do it. I believe in you. You're gonna show everyone what we can do."

He held up a golden fist, and the younger looked at it in confusion until he realized the other wanted him to fist bump. A slow smile growing on his face, stretching out the whisker marks etched on his cheeks, the younger Naruto put up his fist and went to bump it against that of his older counterpart. Right before they touched, however, the golden flames surrounding the elder's body dissolved, leaving behind his normal skin tone and clothes. The younger Naruto's eyes widened as their fists met.

"I told ya it wasn't going to last much longer," the elder said. "We should probably try not to touch when I'm in that form, anyway. I don't know if it would happen, but those white Zetsu things turn into trees when I do that." He closed his eyes for a moment, before nodding decisively to himself. "Yep! There's no doubt about it! Ne, Kyuubi?"

_You've gotten way too cheerful, brat_, the younger heard the voice echo through his head. _What happened to all that hatred of yours?_

The older Naruto opened his eyes slightly, eyes on his other self, where the seal was. "You'll find out."

_Hmph. He's annoying, but he really gets under your skin, this one._

This time, the voice came from without, but also from within, in a way. The younger Naruto realized it was the _other_ Kyuubi he was hearing.

The older Naruto stood and gave a thumbs-up. "Yosh! As soon as I can use the Kyuubi Chakra Mode again, I'll send more bunshin out to the battlefields. In the meantime, I need to meet back up again with Bee-occhan and help out Kakashi-sensei and the others. What are you guys gonna do?"

"I'm going with you, of course!" the younger said excitedly. "But first, we have to think of what people should call us when we're in the same place. It could be confusing if we're in a fight and someone tries to call us." He crossed his arms and nodded his head importantly.

"Ehhhhhh," the elder said dubiously. "Well, I'm oldest, so I should be the one to keep my name. You can be, uh… Shorty."

"What?!" the younger Naruto pointed at the other accusingly. "You just called yourself short, you know that?"

"C'mon, gimme a break here…"
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It seemed that no enemies had noticed the small stunt with the Rasen-Shuriken, and their group was able to start toward the battlefield without any problems. They brought each other up to speed about what had happened so far in the war and in Ame, while they ran and waited for Naruto to be able to use the Kyuubi Chakra Mode again.

Itachi, Nagato, and the younger Naruto wanted to avoid major conflict with the enemy and involvement with the Allied Shinobi Force. Their highest priority in this war was finding Orochimaru and stopping the Edo Tensei. But when the older Naruto explained to them about the Edo-Uchiha and the trouble they were causing for the units on the field, they decided to go with him to assist Kakashi's group first.

"So, Konan decided to stay in Amegakure?" Naruto asked as they ran. The older one. He and his younger counterpart still hadn't settled on who should be allowed to go by their own name.

"Yes," Nagato said. "She still wants our village to remain neutral in the war. Sending the leader of a Hidden Village out to a war they are supposedly not participating in would not be good. And it can't be ruled out that Madara will show up there again. He must be growing desperate by now, given Orochimaru's failure to get information out of us through emotional manipulation."

"Are you sure that it will be alright?" Itachi said. "As Naru-chan put it, she still has a mortal body. They could try to go after her again."

"NO," the younger Naruto said very loudly. "You guys are NOT gonna call me that. Aniki, how could you betray yourself like this?" he whined. What made it worse was that Nagato and Itachi went along with the dumb nickname, in complete seriousness. They were just as bad as his older self for coming up with it.

"Sorry, it was just a joke. A joke," the older Naruto insisted, but ruined his already lackluster apology by laughing. "Don't take it so seriously, Naru-chan~."

The younger growled and went to tackle his older self from behind, but when he made impact, the elder vanished in a puff of smoke. A bunshin. "What? When did you—hey! Where did you go?"

"In the end, it's her decision," Nagato answered Itachi, unfazed by the other two. It was amazing how they had just met, and they already acted like older and younger siblings. Maybe it was simply a way for them to process such an unusual situation, but their combined energy was impossible to keep under control. But as long as they didn't degenerate into large, flashy attacks that could give them away, there was no point in trying to tell them to calm down. "Konan will do whatever it takes to protect the village, and keep herself from being used by the enemy."

That made the younger Naruto forget about attacking his older counterpart for a moment, and look over at Nagato. Originally, it made sense to him that the non-zombie member of their group would stay back, away from the war. He didn't think about the fact that staying back might be more dangerous than coming along with everyone else.

"She'll be fine! You saw the way she completely blew Orochimaru's plans up in his face," he said, pouring as much gusto into it as he could. "And we'll give them so much to worry about out here, they won't even think about going near Ame again. They won't know what hit them!"

"Y'know, it's kind of weird that you know these guys already," older Naruto said, dropping down in
front of them after his brief disappearance. "No one's told me about what's happened since you got here. It's like, you've done stuff I don't know about, even though you're me."

The younger caught up to him, running along in his stride. "You want to know about stuff that I've done? I've been wondering about you since I first got here! And I really want you to teach me how to use the Kyuubi's chakra. Please, aniki! You know things would be a lot better if I could do it now instead of later!"

"Yeah, but…" The elder frowned, trying to remember. "Like I said, there's this waterfall test thing you have to do before you can start. I didn't get why at first, either, but I understood it after I started working on separating the Kyuubi's chakra from its evil intent. And I can't really tell you how to do it, because it doesn't work unless you figure it out on your own. Besides, for all we know, it'll be different for you than it was for me."

"So, I'll just do the test on my own, no problem! That doesn't seem too hard."

The elder kept looking on ahead, looking unusually serious. Younger Naruto wondered if the test was really something terrible.

"Anikiiiiiiiiii-ttebayo!"

"I can tell that you're definitely not the same as those creepy white things," he murmured. "But you're still a long way from letting go of hatred."

His words and heavy tone brought the younger to surprised silence for a moment. He looked at Itachi and Nagato, and they seemed just as serious. Their expressions had none of the confusion he felt. "…Huh? What does that mean?"

"This is not the right time to be worrying about training, anyway," Nagato said tactfully. "You two can discuss it after the current battle settles down."

"Right!" the older Naruto nodded, his serious demeanor melting away rapidly, as if it had never been there. He flashed a large grin at his younger counterpart. "I'll tell you everything I can, little bro. But we gotta help everyone against those white creatures, first."

"Yeah!"

They were now close enough to the nearest battlefield to see the occasional flash of light or smoke from an attack. The days had already started to turn cooler, but the grass and trees stretched out far below them were still green. It was sunny and clear out-it would be a beautiful day, if not for the war.

They went down a slight hill toward a shadier tree line, and the atmosphere around them suddenly shifted into something ominous as they entered the forest. They were within range of the battlefield now. Hidden enemies could be anywhere, lurking among the trees. Naruto was a little bit nervous, but his older self seemed unaffected.

"Wait 'till they see what kind of help I brought," the elder said excitedly, jumping up and vaulting over some tree branches. "Kakashi-sensei and the others are just up ahead, you guys! Come on!"

"Everyone stay on guard," Itachi warned, moving to run by the younger's other side. "With the enemy's Edo Tensei, the situation could always change in an instant. Younger Naruto, I think you should try to avoid them and concentrate on taking the Zetsu clones, instead. They may be slower to attack you at first, since you seem like one of them in disguise. But do not count on it. You should have a strength advantage over them, anyway."
"O-Okay."

Maybe it was because he had been protected and pushed back over and over since arriving in the future, but Naruto hadn't expected to plunge straight into battle this soon. He knew that it was dangerous, and even running into shinobi from their own side was a problem all on its own. But still, the prospect of helping out with something real made much of his apprehension go away. He could feel the excitement, the rush of battle bubbling up within him for the first time in far too long.

They dropped down into the clearing, attracting the attention of the Sealing Corps standing near the edge, near a collection of sealed bodies. Much worse were the few *unsealed* bodies strewn haphazardly across the large clearing, which were simply dead—people from their own side. Their losses looked fewer, but it was completely different to lose real, live people in exchange for an Edo Tensei zombie or Zetsu clone. How many were already lost, here and on the other battlefields?

The older Naruto jumped down in front of the Sealing Corps, the bright flames of the Kyuubi Chakra Mode enveloping his body once again. "Don't go after these guys, they're alright!" he said immediately, indicating Itachi, Nagato, and his younger self. "It's kind of hard to explain, but they're here to help, so don't try to seal them."

"Hurry and find the impostors!" A member of the Sealing Corps urged. "We can't move from our spots until you do, and Kakashi-san needs help."

"Yosh! Those two over there," Naruto pointed at a pair of Iwa shinobi near the treeline, "that guy with the bandana hitai-ate right behind all of you… and there's another small group coming this way that are *all* those white things. They should be here in just a few minutes." He whirled around and jumped toward where the battle with the Edo Tensei summons was taking place. Itachi and Nagato followed him.

The younger Naruto stood in front of the Sealing Corps by himself, attracting confused looks that quickly shifted toward the impostor in their midst. The fake Konoha-nin glowered at them and started taking a couple of steps back as they advanced on him.

It looked like they had that situation under control. Naruto turned around and saw the two Iwa-nin impostors trying to sink back into the tree line. This was it. A chance to fight. He tightened the headband that future-Iruka had given him, a fierce grin on his face.

"Alright, here we go!"

He rushed toward the retreating figures, calling into existence a mini battalion of Kage Bunshin. Some jumped up, trying to land on and knock them over. Others swarmed around them from below. They ran in with fury and shouting; not very organized, but overwhelming enough both in energy and numbers to bring the impostors some unexpected pain.

The Zetsu clones were not particularly skilled, but they were resilient. The two Naruto attacked growled and stabbed at his bunshin, after a moment of being off guard. He couldn't tell if they really had mistook him for one of their own, but they clearly hadn't expected such an attack, anyway. Dozens of fists wailed on them with enthusiasm, and they whirled around searching for the real thing in vain, yelling and slashing around in frustration.

It continued on for a while like that, with each bunshin taking whatever chance it could to land a hit on the enemy. It was a free-for-all. The Iwa impostors couldn't get away with so many bunshin surrounding them, and they weren't fighting back very well amid the confusion. They scraped and fought and yelled until the Zetsu clones were looking beat up and hopeless. Many of his bunshin had already been dispelled in return, but the real Naruto jumped out of the group and landed a good solid
hit on one of the impostors' jaw. They both landed hard on the ground, Naruto holding it down with his weight. That was when the thing underneath him suddenly changed. The borrowed features of the Iwa-nin melted away, leaving behind a blank white face with creepy eyes. So this was what these things really looked like?

Naruto saw something out of the corner of his eye and jumped up as the other impostor slashed at him with a sword. But his reaction was slightly too slow, having been too busy looking at the Zetsu creature. He was not able to get completely out of range, and he threw his arms up against the attack without thinking. The remaining bunshin tackled the swordsman immediately after, but Naruto felt the cold sting as the blade scraped across his skin.

Cursing loudly, he stumbled back and looked to make sure that his bunshin had completely dogpiled the enemy before giving a quick look at his injury. The slash was long, but not very deep, and it was sealing up right before his eyes. But even more strangely, it was not bleeding. It was a thin line lighter in color than his skin, without even a hint of red.

"What the…?"

That didn't make any sense. He had definitely been able to bleed before. Maybe it was just a fluke; a special sword technique, or something. Maybe the cut was simply too shallow. Either way, there wasn't time to worry about it now. Naruto felt along the rapidly vanishing injury, but soon turned his attention back to the fake shinobi splayed on the ground, pressed under the pile of his remaining bunshin. It was also transforming from a human into one of those plant-creatures. It looked like his bunshin had been able to finish it off.

"Alright, everyone!" Naruto said, throwing a fist up in the air. "Aniki said that more will be here any second, so let's be there to meet them when they do."

It felt just like commanding troops in battle. His bunshin roared and chattered in agreement, and the original turned around to face the incoming threat when it arrived. He cracked his knuckles with a grin. Things were just getting started. Naruto felt like he could take on any number of the enemy's white pawns right then.

Suigetsu gave an exaggerated cough as a dust cloud went up in his face. He batted away the offending clouds with a deep frown on his face, one snaggled tooth poking out from his lip. "Man, this place is even creepier with no one in it."

"Are you sure that your sword would be in a place like this?" Juugo asked, ducking into the dark and dusty room Suigetsu had just entered. "It doesn't look like anyone has been here in ages. Not down here, at least."

"Are you just gonna complain, or are you going to help me look?" Suigetsu said crossly, digging around in seemingly random places inside the room. "If you want us to go find Sasuke, we have to find my sword first. He can wait a little while, anyway, after ditching us at the Summit. Serves him right."

Juugo obligingly walked into the old storeroom, though he didn't see much point in searching here. Orochimaru's hideout was huge, and this was just one of them. Fortunately, most of them were abandoned now. He and Suigetsu certainly weren't the only test subjects that had managed to escape since the time of Orochimaru's original downfall. And because he was rumored to be dead, many of his own subordinates had even drifted away, moving on to other ventures.

"Ohoho! What is this?" Suigetsu said, and Juugo turned around to see what he found. There wasn't a
sword anywhere in sight, but Suigetsu had a dusty-looking scroll in his hands and was intently reading its contents. Juugo walked over to look without bothering to verbalize his curiosity. It was quicker just to see what the fuss was about.

"Hm?" he towered over Suigetsu's shoulder to look down at the scroll. "This looks like…"

Suigetsu gave a low cackle and rolled the scroll back up. "It looks like we found something nice to bring to Sasuke, anyway. He should find this pretty interesting." He tucked the scroll into the front of his coat. "Alright now, let's keep looking."

Tobi walked out into the cheery bright sunlight, a scene that did not match his mood at all. His gaze traveled up one of the large, ancient bones that framed the cave's entrance. A Mist shinobi he didn't recognize was crouched there as if waiting. As Tobi stepped into the sun, the stranger hopped down and started walking toward him. When the man got in close, he could see the cracked features and black sclera that marked him as an Edo Tensei summon.

"I am beginning to seriously question if you are just wasting my time for the sake of your own personal amusement," Tobi said, cool on the surface, but roiling with anger underneath. "I kept up my end of the bargain. If you aren't going to be of any use to me, then stay out of my way."

"What, you don't think I tried hard enough to find the Rinnegan for you?" Orochimaru said through the body of the random Mist shinobi, his tone light and unconcerned. Apparently, he was too busy with his own business to bother meeting in person. "Or are you just frustrated at your own incompetence? You do realize that they could have long since destroyed it by now? They could be leading you on a fruitless chase just to stall for time, and here you are dancing right along. Your desperation is only too obvious. How pathetic."

"Be quiet," Tobi said harshly, turning to pace restlessly toward the cave so they could discuss things out of sight. Orochimaru's puppet followed him, wearing a smirk as they ducked in out of the sunlight.

It was true that Tobi's impatience was showing through more than it should have. But he was at the crux of the plan; everything that happened in the next few days would likely determine its success or failure. Their many years of preparation could disappear in an instant.

"They won't destroy it; at least, not until they're certain it is going to fall into my hands," he continued. "I don't doubt that they have guessed by now the importance it has to my plans. But this 'fruitless chase', as you call it, is keeping me away from the war. They will need to keep it, to drag it out as bait in the event that I start making a move toward the Allied Shinobi Force. They have likely set some kind of trap that will destroy it if I get too close, but they don't know the extent of my power. I can get around anything that they have set up to stop me."

"Oh, is that so?" Orochimaru rasped, with an undertone of amusement. "Then, do you intend to call their bluff? Or will you continue to run around frantically, searching wherever crosses your mind first?"

Tobi hated being condescended to constantly by the Sannin, but it was completely out of his reach to do anything about it right now. He considered taking it out on the Edo Tensei zombie that Orochimaru was currently using as a mouthpiece, but reigned in the impulse.

"Hasn't your pet army of Uchiha found anything? I'm sure that you brought back the former clan head and his wife, as well. Don't they know where their son would hide something?"
"Itachi has always been inscrutable—to his parents more than anyone," Orochimaru said. "Nevertheless, whatever you might say, I have done what I promised to do. You are on your own after this. I am just about to get my true form back, and then my real work can begin."

"Your true form?" Tobi demanded. "You mean that you are already doing more than just directing the war? What are you planning?"

"Don't worry about me. I would say that you have plenty to keep yourself occupied already."

It seemed that Orochimaru had decided to end the conversation. A long wooden coffin materialized behind the revived shinobi, landing with a loud clap that made Tobi turn around quickly. He snarled under the mask, but it was too late to get the last word in for himself. The Edo Tensei summon was gone. He pulled the mask off and let the frustration show as a shadow came out of hiding.

"We need Madara," Black Zetsu said in its gravelly voice, watching from the wall as Obito stalked agitatedly around the underground hall, maskless. "At this rate, we're never going to capture the Eight and Nine-tails. And I don't like what Orochimaru is doing. What will you do if he decides to take the Bijuu for himself?"

"We can't revive Madara without the Rinnegan," Obito said tersely, turning around to the Black Zetsu. "I can still summon the Gedo statue without it, so we can still capture the Bijuu. For now, Orochimaru is doing a good job of keeping the Allied Shinobi Force busy. He's not interested in the Bijuu—all he wants is to gather enough samples for his little pet project."

"And you would stake your life on that? We need Madara. What about the Edo Tensei?"

Obito paused. The plan was not to revive Madara using the Edo Tensei. He wanted to be fully alive again when he came back, not some pale imitation of it. The old Uchiha had made that very clear before his death. Doubtless, he would complain if they used that method. Still, it was an appealing option. It meant they wouldn't have to wait to find the Rinnegan to bring him back. And more importantly, it meant that Obito wouldn't have to sacrifice his life to use the Rinne Tensei.

"He wouldn't be happy about that, or the state of our plans right now," Obito admitted. "Though I can't deny it would help move things along faster. We can't rely on Orochimaru anymore. I doubt he's even using the full strength of his Edo Tensei summons to defeat the Allied Shinobi Force. Ultimately, it doesn't matter to him if they win or not. Unfortunately, however, we have to convince Orochimaru to resurrect Madara, or force him to reveal the method."

"Negotiating with him has the potential to be really annoying," Black Zetsu said. "But if necessary, we will overwhelm him with numbers and use genjutsu to get it out of him."

Neither of them knew how to use the Edo Tensei—it was such a heavily-guarded secret that only the Nidaime Hokage, Orochimaru, and Kabuto had learned how to do it. Curse everything! They should have forced the secret out of Kabuto when they had the chance. He would have been easier to handle. But now, no matter what they did, they would have to deal with the Snake Sannin.

Unless…

"He said that he was going to regain his own form," Obito said, turning to Black Zetsu. "Then, Orochimaru won't be sharing a body with Kabuto anymore. Once he gets his own form back, he won't need to anymore. If he lives through it, Kabuto should be weak after the transfer happens, as well. Especially if Orochimaru intends to take back all the power he originally absorbed from him."

"That one can summon Madara, and he may be able to control Itachi and Nagato as well," Black
Zetsu said, catching on quickly. "Good. And Kabuto's body already contains the spores we need to track him. Will you go after him before the bijuu, then?"

"Whichever comes first." Obito put the mask back on and his voice changed back from his normal one to that of his 'Madara' disguise. "We'll focus on what we can do, especially while Orochimaru's pawns and the Allied Shinobi Force are busy tearing each other apart. We don't know how long he will continue to fight them, or exactly when he will be getting his own body. We will confront Kabuto after he becomes conscious again."

He didn't know if Orochimaru intended to use Kabuto to assist with his project, or if the Snake Sannin would simply toss him aside as something with no further value. The way things were going, Obito didn't think it mattered either way. Kabuto would be weak enough for them to simply take everything he knew, and then continue the war on their own terms. When they had Madara and the Rinnegan, everything would finally turn around in their favor.

"As for capturing the Bijuu… we already have some of the Eight-Tail's chakra, from the piece of it that Sasuke brought us," Obito added. "And the younger Naruto may still be with his Edo Tensei bodyguards. I am done with trying to cooperate with Orochimaru. Even if the Kyuubi is sealed tightly within the younger brat's body, he can still be consumed whole by the Gedo statue. It and the boy's body both come from the Tree. It could very well be enough for it to absorb the Kyuubi's chakra along with that body. And if not, it's no loss to us."

"Good," Black Zetsu said, gradually sinking back into the floor. "If we can gain control over the ones protecting him, it should be a simple task. And once we have Madara, it won't matter what Orochimaru wants."

Obito watched the Black Zetsu leave. No doubt, he was already intending to follow the spores embedded in Kabuto's body, in order to be there the moment Orochimaru left. That meant he had time to search for a little longer before everything started. Obito walked back toward the entrance to the cave feeling determined, and calmer than he had in days.

The battle with Kakashi's group and the sealers seemed to be finally be going their way. The Sealing Corps, after taking care of the impostor in their midst, had managed to put down almost all of the enemy's Edo Tensei summons on the field.

Younger Naruto was breathing hard, and his clothes showed a few slashes and scrapes, but he straightened up and wiped the sweat off his brow with a victorious grin. His few remaining Bunshin (he had summoned several more rounds during the fight, but they had still been mostly wiped out) all flopped to the ground. The group of Zetsu creatures, as Itachi had called them, was extinguished. And the best part was, everyone else here had been too busy fighting the revived Uchiha and the other zombies. It took more effort than he'd expected, but he took them all down on his own. It felt good to play a part in the action again.

That taken care of, Naruto stepped over a Zetsu that had a large crater in its body from his Rasengan, the multiple remaining bunshin behind him vanishing with puffs of smoke. He had to go see what the status was on the other side of the field.

It looked like they were just finishing up on their side, as well. They were standing near the row of sealed bodies, everyone looking exhausted and battered.

"I'm gonna send out another wave of bunshin before the Mode wears off again," the older Naruto said. The younger watched in awe as he called up a few flaming-gold copies that jumped up into the air and sped away at incredible speed. It made him glad that he'd dispelled his own tired-looking,
"Can you fill us in on what's happenng on the other battlefields? What about the revived Uchiha?" a Suna kunoichi from the Sealing Corps said.

The younger Naruto didn't pay much attention to their conversation, not being terribly interested in a rehashing of their journey to here. Up until they ran into his older self, it hadn't been that eventful. He noticed there was one body still being wrapped up among the busted-up rocks and torn earth of the battlefield. A sealer was there, and Kakashi was standing over the body, holding his wrist and looking down at the process.

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto hopped over beside him. "What is it—" he saw what his sensei was looking down at, and his mouth changed into a surprised 'oh'. He recognized the cracked and peeling face belonging to the body on the ground, a face that was soon completely covered in a white wrap at the hands of the sealer. "H-Haku!"

"Zabuza was here, too," Kakashi said, moving to lower his headband back over his eye. "Sorry you missed them. They probably would have found it interesting to see you, too, since they remember you just as you are."

It shouldn't have been much of a surprise. Naruto had already seen the way Orochimaru liked to use the Edo Tensei to throw familiar faces into battle. He suddenly wondered if Sasuke had seen the Uchiha clan yet, or what else he could be doing right now. In the excitement of everything else going on, Naruto had momentarily forgotten about Shisui's warning. Orochimaru was probably going to force the clan into a confrontation with Sasuke at some point.

"I heard you had a hard time of things in Suna," Kakashi said. "We found out you had managed to escape to Amegakure after Orochimaru's attack, but everyone was worried. You're probably the first Konoha shinobi to visit there and leave alive in at least twenty years."

"Huh? Oh." Right. Naruto somehow kept forgetting that his new friends were considered to be extremely dangerous criminals. But his older self seemed just as comfortable around them as he felt, and that was all the assurance he needed. "You didn't have to worry about me, Kakashi-sensei! Not even Orochimaru can stand up to Itachi and Nagato and Konan. And they're going to help me get back to the past, too."

Two of the three he just mentioned came walking up to them, Naruto's older self in tow. They had finished briefing the Sealing Corps about the Edo Tensei situation.

"It's been a while, Kakashi-senpai," Itachi said with an open smile, an unexpected action that made him look even younger than when he was still alive. It was certainly a change from the last time they had met.


Itachi nodded. "The Sealing Corps contacted Allied Shinobi Force headquarters. They have developed a strategy to counteract the enemy constantly targeting older Naruto's Kyuubi Chakra Mode clones."

"Nobody can do much 'till all the fakes are gone," the older Naruto said, punching one hand with the other. "But once we do that, we'll be having Orochimaru on the run! And we can finish mopping up all the battlefields with his Edo Tensei zombies."

"Excuse me," the Suna kunoichi that had spoken up before came up to their group. She was holding
one of the radio receivers. "I am supposed to tell you all a message from HQ—the Hokage and Raikage are demanding that the younger Naruto get off of the battlefield. I have only heard the basics, but I must say that I agree. It's bad enough with the older one being here, but at least we still need him to find the impostors."

"Whaat?" "Blehhh." Both Narutos voiced their opinion at the same time.

"Even if you vouch that he's not an impostor like the others, he still shouldn't be here. It isn't safe for him to be out here in the open, where the enemy can find him."

"We have learned where a couple of large groups of revived Uchiha have appeared," Nagato said. "Naruto can come with us to investigate. We will be staying away from the main battle after this."

"You can just tell Baachan that I'm safer with these guys than anywhere else," the younger Naruto said, fuming. "We've already worked it out. They can send me back home if I get in trouble."

"Is that really true?" the kunoichi said, looking back from Naruto to Nagato.

"We cannot be certain beyond any doubt that it will work," Nagato admitted. "But we do have a plan. And we have no intention of letting the enemy capture him again, at any rate. Hopefully, it won't have to come to that."

"I'll go along, too," the older Naruto said. "I'm supposed to meet back up with Bee-occhan, but I can leave when he's just about to get there. I can get anywhere I need to be really quickly. We haven't had enough time to hang out together yet."

She listened at the receiver for a moment as a voice they could recognize as Tsunade's came through, though her exact words were not clear. The Suna kunoichi looked back at them and handed the receiver and battery pack over to the older Naruto. "Hokage-sama says that you should take a radio with you, if you decide to go with them. It's so you can report on anything you find out about the Uchiha, and so HQ can call you to anywhere you're needed right away."

"Um… okay," Naruto said. He took the battery pack and receiver, putting the pack on his back after awkwardly fitting the receiver back on its holster. It looked strange on his back, with the bright golden chakra enveloping his body.

"Don't stay away for too long," Kakashi cautioned. "I know the two of you probably have a lot more catching up to do, but we haven't won the war yet. Even though we've managed to turn the tide for now, it could always change. You need to stay on your guard. You two, especially. You're the enemy's goal."

"Osu, Kakashi-sensei!" the older Naruto said with a salute, and the younger soon copied him precisely, with a cheeky grin.

But as they started off toward the last place where a large group of Edo-Uchiha had been seen, the younger Naruto realized that the time he and his older self had together would always be limited by the war. And by the time it was over, he hoped to be back home where he belonged. There were still so many things he wanted to ask his older self, so many things he wanted to talk about.

"Ne, so have you guys really figured out a way for you to be able to go back?" the older Naruto said, falling in beside him. He'd probably had the same thought. The two of them were following behind Itachi and Nagato.

"Yeah!" the younger said, latching onto the topic eagerly. "Nagato is the one that summoned me here. Even though he doesn't remember how he did it, he and Itachi think I'll be sent back if he gets
sealed. It'll cancel out the jutsu. So I agreed if I get in any trouble, they could do that. Orochimaru put some kind of tag in my head, but if he tries to use it to control me, Itachi put a genjutsu on me that will stop me from moving."

"Wow," the elder laughed. "It sounds like you've had a crazy time here, little bro! When exactly d'you come from, anyway?"

"Baachan was just made Hokage the day that I left," he said, but then grew quieter. "But… I went back to the past again, for just a minute… we don't really know why. When I was there, I could tell that time had passed. That means it's probably still going on while I'm here. I… kinda think I could already be changing stuff in the past, without even meaning to."

He looked up at his older self, failing, for some reason, to say what he really wanted to say. He wanted to know if it would be too late to stop Sasuke. But they hadn't touched on that topic yet. The younger Naruto still didn't understand why Sasuke was out there alone and in pain, especially seeing how strong his older self was. He was afraid of finding out that he—that his older self didn't care anymore. That would mean he had turned into someone that could no longer live by the nindo, 'never go back on your word, and never give up'. The thought of that was hard to accept. But at the same time, he had to know now. Naruto didn't know if there would be any chance besides this to ask. And knowing meant that he could change it. So he plowed on through.

"Why…" the younger Naruto started. His older self looked at him when he spoke up, but didn't interrupt. It looked like he knew what the younger was going to say. "Why weren't we able to stop Sasuke? Why is he still in trouble now? I heard he left right after the time I did. It could have already happened, and I wouldn't know."

The elder let out a long breath. For a moment, everything was silent except for the rustling of the wind through the tress, and their footfalls lightly hitting the ground.

"I couldn't stop him because I was too weak," he said finally. "I didn't fully understand it at the time, but strength is the only thing that Sasuke will pay attention to. He's always looked for more power, but we didn't see back then that he cared about that more than anything else. More than bonds, and definitely more than the village."

The younger felt a lump rising in his throat. Nothing could have been more obvious than seeing Sasuke in person, but hearing the truth about it from his older self really drove it home.

"But…" the elder trailed off.

The younger looked up. But?

"When he left, and we fought… even if it was just for a little while, we understood one another. Sasuke called me his friend. He said it, right to my face." The elder gave him a wide, brilliant grin that the younger couldn't help but return, albeit hesitantly. "Even if you ended up missing him say it, it's still true. He acknowledged us before anyone else. So no matter what happens, I will save him and protect Konoha. It isn't a matter of choosing one or the other."

His older self hadn't given up. Naruto felt relieved, but also anxious. Things wouldn't be the same for him—it was already not the same. "But what if I am too late? Then he won't know that I would have tried to stop him… we wouldn't be understanding each other, like you said. What would he do? Do you think he would have left the village if something bad happened to me? I was in the hospital when I woke up in the past. I didn't see him, but… I wasn't there for long, either."

"Hmmm…" the elder crossed his arms, giving it some thought. "I really… don't think it would stop
him. I have no idea how things would go. We sent a team to go find him, but I had to push everyone
to make that happen in the first place. And everyone got hurt really bad… if the same people went
after him without me, I don't know what would happen then, either. We all barely made it as it was.
Sasuke went to go train with Orochimaru, and he had sent some powerful people to come get him.”

Orochimaru. No matter what, it always seemed to come down to him. The younger Naruto had more
of an understanding now as to why Sasuke had attempted to kill the old snake.

"But then… why is the Orochimaru of this time so interested in me? Even though he said more than
once that I was just an experiment to him. Why isn't he trying to go after Sasuke anymore, either?"

"It isn't difficult to see why he would have chosen you, given your impressive potential," Itachi said
unexpectedly from up ahead. He turned around to look at them. "Sasuke is, of course, extremely
talented. But I think it's possible you might be even greater than him in terms of 'hidden potential'. If
that is what he is most interested in with this experiment, it would make sense. Though you and
Sasuke are both remarkable in that area, you are someone he overlooked at a younger age, a missed
opportunity at a time when he was busy trying to lure Sasuke with promises of power. And I'm sure
that even he realizes how much you and Sasuke's paths are intertwined."

"So then, do you think he'll try to bring Sasuke into the future, just like me? Or could he even try it
with someone else?" the younger asked. How could he have not thought of that possibility before? If
it had happened once, it only made sense that it might happen again. The war had proved that even
something as powerful as the Edo Tensei could be done many times.

"I don't like the sound of that," the older Naruto said with a heavy frown. "How would we be able to
fight against our friends when they're still alive?"

"Unfortunately, I think it's very likely that Orochimaru is interested in replicating his experiment at
some point." Itachi said. "This could be some kind of trial run for him. But I doubt that he would be
able to use it recklessly. Given the complicated circumstances he put into motion in order to do it the
first time, it must carry a great amount of risk."

"He no longer has me to use as his test dummy," Nagato added with a hint of dry humor. "From
what we know about the way he arranged everything, it probably requires a high-level doujutsu to
perform it. Perhaps there are some within the Uchiha clan that could do it. That could be one reason
for him to summon so many of them."

"And it would be all the more reason to find and stop him," the older Naruto said, looking
determined. Having just his younger self here didn't seem that bad. But if there was the possibility of
more to follow, it could be worse than the Zetsu impostors.

The forest got thicker and darker as Sasuke ran further away from civilization. He was heading
toward a place where most people never went, if they were lucky. It was Orochimaru's main hideout
in Oto.

The last he had heard, Karin was a prisoner in Konoha. If he managed to find the other members of
Taka here, they would journey there next to retrieve her. The fact that he already wanted to see the
supposed destruction of Konoha for himself was an added bonus.

After discovering that Kisame was following him, Sasuke learned from him that Itachi was the first
of the clan to be resurrected, and that he had managed to escape control somehow. Apparently, the
last time that Kisame had heard from his older brother, Itachi was in Amegakure planning to help the
former leaders of Akatsuki send the younger Naruto back to the past.
Itachi hadn't even tried to see him. Instead, he was off somewhere trying to help that… whatever it was. Instead, he sent someone else to find out what Sasuke was doing. Why? Did he not care about seeing him? Or, at the very least, was he not angry that their clansmen were being used as puppets?

Sasuke decided that if his brother didn't care about meeting him, he would use Taka to track him down once more. Because if Itachi was still in Amegakure, it could be tricky to find him, not to mention dangerous. It was well-known that people who entered there had a habit of never coming back out. And if he wasn't there, they would just have to keep looking until they found him. Itachi was, after all, an Edo Tensei. He could disappear at any time, leaving the multitude of questions that haunted Sasuke unanswered. That was an unacceptable outcome.

Sasuke slowed his pace as he got close to the hideout, all senses on alert. Even though most of the hideouts were vacant these days, they still had functioning traps.

The entryway was shady and quiet, a discreet staircase that lead into one of the hideout's many underground hallways. By this point, the security seals surrounding this place should have detected him. Sasuke glanced back and forth before descending the stairs, one hand creeping up to rest on the sword strapped behind him. His passage through should be allowed without any threat; if nothing had been changed since the last time he was here. He could not be certain that Orochimaru hadn't returned here yet.

All remained silent as Sasuke went down into the near-suffocating darkness. The hall smelled cold and earthy, as usual, but without the charred scent offered by the many torches that lined the walls. It had been a long time since they were lit. It seemed even less likely that there was anyone here at all.

But, if Suigetsu and Juugo were here, where would they be? He didn't have the patience for a long search just now. He only chose this particular place because it was relatively close and seemed likely.

Navigating in the dark here was not a challenge for Sasuke. He knew the place very, very well. Nevertheless, he activated his Sharingan after entering the first large underground chamber. If his allies were anywhere nearby, he would probably hear them before anything else, given Suigetsu's apparent fondness for listening to his own voice—but if there was any living thing within range, he would be able to detect its chakra.

Looking around as he walked, Sasuke saw several very small glowing patches of chakra moving along the walls. Just some rats. Nothing remarkable there. But just as his attention was about to move on to something else, he noticed something odd about the way the rats were moving. They scurried —no, fled, all going in the same direction. They were getting away from this room as quickly as possible, as if their lives depended on it.

It was then that Sasuke felt something brush against his senses, like a cold blast of air on the back of his neck. He whirled around, sword in his hand quickly and instinctively to cleave through the thick mass of flesh and scales reared up behind him.

The snake, now in two parts, fell to the ground with a wet flop accompanied by agonized hissing. It continued to writhe for several seconds before it gradually slowed, and then lay still.

"Come out, Orochimaru!" Sasuke said sharply, flicking the grime off his sword. He felt the fury all the way down to his fingertips. "I'm not in the mood for games right now."

"It seems your reflexes have only gotten better since implanting Itachi's eyes," Orochimaru's raspy voice came in low from the left hall. Sasuke turned and saw him walking up at an unhurried pace, a torch in his hand. He used it to light a few of the other torches hanging around the room, unafraid to turn his back to Sasuke to do so. Sasuke watched him carefully, a heavy frown pulling on his
"Why did you use the Edo Tensei to revive the Uchiha?" he demanded, suppressed anger filling every syllable of his words.

"Is it really beyond your understanding, Sasuke-kun? You know I don't like to be asked unnecessary questions. It seems you Uchiha have an affinity for doing that. But your clan is also known for being the very best at war. I would have thought that the reason is obvious."

"That can't be the only reason," Sasuke growled. "As if you care about the war any more than I do! You've always wanted to have the power of the Uchiha at your disposal. Having a war to fight is just an excuse."

"Well… yes. But we're just at a difference in semantics at this point, aren't we?" Orochimaru gave an amused 'hmph' and smiled. "Aren't you happy to have the chance to see your parents and older brother again?"

"Not as mindless slaves to your jutsu!" Sasuke's eyes shifted into the Eternal Mangekyou Sharingan before he consciously willed it. As angry as he was, he wanted to know what Orochimaru was plotting, including the reason why he had appeared in front of Sasuke now, knowing he would be incensed over the way his clan was being used. Was the snake trying to provoke him?

"You know better than to attack recklessly now, do you?" Orochimaru said with a dry chuckle. "I am impressed. Temperance is something I'm afraid you've been lacking more in recent years, rather than less."

"You're stronger than you were before," Sasuke said. He observed Orochimaru's chakra and found it to be a far cry from being in the sickly, weakened state it was when he'd tried to kill him, or when Itachi had sealed him. "You've changed bodies."

"Very good, Sasuke-kun. I don't know if you heard anything about it from that masked relative of yours, but I had taken over Kabuto after he injected part of myself into his veins. But now I am completely myself again, with the help of another one of my old protégés. I thought you might want to know that Kabuto is also back to himself again."

"Why would I want to know that?" Sasuke asked, impatient fingers tapping on the hilt of his sword. "Because Itachi escaped the Edo Tensei only because I was suppressing Kabuto, the one who summoned him. I imagine that by now, Itachi will have felt the shift and started rushing as fast as possible to stop Kabuto. He just might make it there, too. Kabuto is very weak right now, and it will take him a while to recover."

Sasuke stared at Orochimaru for a second, eyes slightly widened. Then his face twisted into a harsh scowl. "Where is Kabuto?"

"At the lab closest on this side to the border of the Lightning Country," Orochimaru said smoothly. Sasuke stood in indecision, hand gripping the hilt of his sword tightly. What if this was some kind of trick?

"Will you still be here by the time I come back?" he asked.

"No, but you will be able to find me if you go to Konoha. Suigetsu and Juugo are near there. If you are going to go meet Itachi, you should hurry. I think your friend 'Madara' has a vested interest in preventing that from happening."
Sasuke wasn't through talking to Orochimaru, but the pull of possibly seeing Itachi was too great. He turned and started running back the way he came before he could second-guess anymore.

Orochimaru watched him leave with a satisfied smirk.

*Now then... we'll see which way the wind blows.*

"And then, Yamato-taichou took us to a hot spring resort. The food was *incredible* 'ttebayo! But he did it because he was suspicious of Sai, and wanted to put a tracking seed in his food. He made me and Sakura-chan take one later on. He's stricter than Kakashi-sensei."

"Really? I'm used to calling him Moku-oji, and getting him to buy ramen for me."

"Ch! I guess you haven't seen how scary he can be yet," older Naruto said with a shudder. "And I can't believe you already like Sai. I wanted to pummel him the first time we met. But, I guess he has changed a lot since then. He was only a jerk because of Danzo and Root."

"AHA! That! Tell me about that!" the younger demanded, jabbing a finger at his older self dramatically. He was sick of people casually mentioning Root with no explanation, as if everybody just knew what it was. Even his older self!

"Y'mean no one's told you about that yet? Well, it's a—"

The elder was cut off when Itachi and Nagato stopped very suddenly in front of them. Both Narutos skidded and nearly slammed into them.

"Hey! Why did you guys just—"

"You felt that, didn't you?" Itachi asked tensely.

"Aa," Nagato said, sounding grim.

"Guys? Itachi—"

Itachi closed his eyes, and there was a shift in the energy of the air, like the atmosphere before a storm. Both Narutos felt it, though the older was more attuned to it by being in the Kyuubi Chakra Mode. He took a step backward, while the younger looked between them all in confusion.

Itachi's closed eyes started dripping blood. The large, ethereal form of his Susano'o shimmered into view, rapidly growing skeletal arms. One of these shot a giant hand toward Nagato, slamming into his body hard enough to lift him off the ground, dangling in its deathly grip.

"Can you trace it?" Itachi asked him, having to call over the startled cries of the other two.

"At 12—no, 1 o'clock from here, approximately thirteen kilometers," Nagato said, looking in the direction he had indicated. His arms were pinned down to his sides by the large hand, unable to so much as wiggle in the Susanoo's grasp. But it didn't look like he was surprised by the attack, or even trying to escape.

"Oi!" the younger Naruto shrilled, waving his arms in a fit of aggravation. "What's happening?"

"Kabuto has been released," Itachi answered, finally turning to them. He turned his Mangekyou Sharingan toward the older Naruto. They could feel the heavy, atmospheric shift in energy happening again.
Suddenly, the elder started choking. He grasped at his throat with his hands and gave a few hacking, half-formed gags.

"Stop it, Itachi! What are you doing?" the younger yelled. He wanted to go to help his older self, but knew that he couldn't touch him while he was covered in the Kyuubi's chakra.

Something was emerging from the older Naruto's mouth. A sharp black beak, then a head, then an entire *crow* came shifting and struggling out of his mouth. It flapped its wings as soon as it was free enough to, tossing its head back and forth. One of its eye sockets contained a Sharingan.

"Good," Itachi said to himself.

"What the hell is that? Would someone tell me what's going on!" the younger pointed at the squawking crow as it circled, going around in the air a few times before settling down on the elder Naruto's shoulder. The latter wiped his mouth with a stifled cough, a few tears leaking out of his eyes.

"That is my crow," Itachi said, walking closer to them. The Susano'o moved along with him, Nagato's body still clutched in its fist. "It contains Shisui's Sharingan. I told you before about the ability his Sharingan has, the Kotoamatsukami. The one in that crow was set to emerge and cast a genjutsu whenever my Mangekyou was aimed at this Naruto. I originally placed it there to be used against Sasuke, who I knew would implant my eyes."

"Wh-what?" the older Naruto croaked, expressing his younger self's thoughts exactly.

"In other words..." Itachi's gaze shifted back to his Susano'o and Nagato, "it has given me a command that should override the control tag placed in me. As I said, Kabuto has been freed from Orochimaru. But now, he can no longer control me. I told the older Naruto that I wanted to do this, the time we met up within his mindscape."

"This will not hold me for long if he decides to take control, Itachi," Nagato warned. "We need to hurry and stop the Edo Tensei, before he can try to use me."

"W-wait!" the younger Naruto cried, face scrunched with the extreme effort it took to keep up in this conversation. "So, what you're saying is that Kabuto is back—and he could be taking control over Nagato any minute? But you—you *can't* undo the Edo Tensei! If Nagato disappears, then I will too, isn't that what you said? I'm not ready to go back home yet!"

"We need you guys to stay here!" the elder chimed in, motioning enthusiastically as his younger self did. "We need someone to go after Orochimaru and stop him from controlling Edo Tensei zombies in the war! Isn't there some other way you can break Kabuto's hold over Nagato?"

"I'm sorry, Naruto. The safest thing to do would be to seal Nagato right now, before Kabuto has a chance to use him. I could start running to where Kabuto is this moment, and either get him to undo the Edo Tensei, or try to stop him some other way. But if I did that, I might not make it in time. I wouldn't be able to restrain Nagato for long."

"But—there *has* to be another way! Ne, Nagato?" the younger Naruto tried appealing to the redhead, looking up at where he hung above the ground.

"I have no doubt that Itachi could keep Kabuto suspended in a genjutsu for as long as we need," Nagato admitted. "It would be extremely risky to try, however. And we don't have a lot of time to debate it, either way."

"Okay, okay, what about this?" the older Naruto cut in. "Itachi can go try to stop Kabuto, and *we'll*
take Nagato back to the Sealing Corps. If it looks like he's going to start losing control, we can stop him. That way, Kabuto can't use him against you, but we'll still have a way of sealing him."

"Are the two of you sure about this?" Itachi looked at them very seriously. "If Kabuto manages to take control of Nagato, there is a good chance he would try to capture one or both of you."

"I can keep the younger me safe, no problem!" the elder said, bumping a fist to his chest.

Itachi sighed. It was clear he thought this was a terrible idea. The hand of his Susano'o loosened, and Nagato dropped lightly down to the ground.

"I think it's best if I stay away from the two of you altogether," Nagato said seriously. "I will head toward some other battlefield where there are sealers. I would rather risk being turned into a war pawn, than endanger either of you. And I do not want to be used against Itachi when he goes to face Kabuto, either."

"Alright," Itachi said. He aimed his Mangekyou Sharingan at the crow again. It burst into a plume of jet-black flames.

"Ahh!" the older Naruto cried, backing away quickly from the bird that was quickly being consumed by the flames of Amaterasu. "What now?"

"Shisui's Kotoamatsukami won't be usable for another ten years," Itachi explained. "It is better for it to be destroyed now, instead of it falling into the wrong hands later."

"Warn someone next time," older Naruto grumbled.

"Now, it's time to go. Everyone, move as far from here and each other as you can."

"Ready," Nagato said.

"Scatter!"

Itachi, Nagato, and the two Narutos jumped away and started running in opposite directions at the same time. The older Naruto started leading his younger self toward the place where the medical tents had been set up. If all the Kage as well as Itachi and Nagato wanted the younger to stay away from the battlefield, it was the only place he could think of.

No one was entirely satisfied with this plan. While Itachi and Nagato worried about what could happen if Itachi didn't get there in time, Naruto the younger and older worried that it might soon be time to say goodbye for good. Even though they knew it had to happen eventually—even soon—it gave them a bitter feeling. The younger Naruto's journey aside, who would stop Orochimaru if Itachi and Nagato disappeared?

"They should be here, very soon," Kabuto said softly to himself as he padded through the dim lab. He was, indeed, very weak from the complete removal of Orochimaru's power from his body. In a way, that power had become a sustaining part of his being. Without it, he hardly even looked like himself anymore. He was draped in a light-colored robe, body thin enough to easily see the bones underneath his skin. His hair hung in cropped strands around his face. He couldn't remember when he'd started wearing it down.

Was this what dying felt like?

With trembling hands, Kabuto picked up the round glasses that lay on a steel examining table and put
them on his face. He pushed them up his nose with one finger.

But really, there was no meaning in thinking he did or did not look like himself. That was a superfluous observation at best, when his existence amounted to a great Nothing; nothing but nothing.

"Isn't that right, Orochimaru-sama?"
"Nii-san!"

It was really him. It had to be him.

"Nii-san, wait!"

Tree branches slapped Sasuke's face and hands as he ran desperately toward the figure up ahead. This was just like one of the reoccurring dreams he'd had as a young, ambitious child. Itachi in sight, right in front of him like this, but forever out of his reach. He had always been better and did more at a younger age than him. Those dreams had continued even after the Massacre, taking on a nightmarish, murderous quality instead of a simple desire for attention. But this wasn't a dream, was it? Couldn't Itachi hear his brother calling out to him?

Gritting his teeth, Sasuke's eyes melded into the inverted colors of his Eternal Mangekyou Sharingan. A large violet arm materialized beside him and reached out toward Itachi. But before it could make it all the way, a similar red hand formed and slapped it away. Itachi didn't so much as slow down or look back. Sasuke withdrew the hand with a stunned expression. There was no way it wasn't true. That was Itachi's Susano'o.

"Why?" Sasuke demanded, in a shout that came from the depths of the many years he'd wanted to ask that question. "Why won't you stop? Listen to me!"

"I'm sorry, Sasuke," Itachi said finally, but without relenting his pace. "I don't have time to talk right now."

"I know what you're doing," Sasuke said, putting on an extra burst of speed to get closer to his brother. "You're trying to get to Kabuto before he can recover enough to bring you back under his control. Isn't that right?"

Itachi didn't answer for a moment. He clearly hadn't expected Sasuke to be so aware about his situation. The only part that was mistaken about his guess, was that Kabuto could still control him. And after all, no one besides himself and the people he told about it could have known. Did that mean that Sasuke had learned about all this from Orochimaru? That was the only other person that could have known so quickly that Kabuto had returned. Either way, it was best for the time being to let Sasuke believe that. If he knew that there was no longer any danger of Itachi being controlled, it would make things more complicated.

"If you know that much, then you understand why it's better for you to stay away from me. We can talk later."

"Forget it!" Sasuke said, gesturing angrily. "You can't treat me like when I was a child and just say 'some other time, Sasuke'—I'm not going to let you continue with your own things while I'm left in the dark! I want some answers, and I'm not leaving until I get them."

Itachi knew that his brother was incredibly stubborn by nature. It didn't matter to him how poor the timing was, he would continue to follow until he had what he was looking for. Itachi gave a sigh. At the very least—maybe—Sasuke would be willing to put off his questioning until the situation with Kabuto was resolved.

"Then come along, if you want to. But I really do have to take care of things before there will be any time to talk. I hope you understand."
"Tch… fine." That was good enough for Sasuke, at least for the time being. He didn't want Itachi to be taken over like all the others, either. That would only delay him getting answers even more.

They were getting close to the lab where Kabuto supposedly was, and Itachi slowed down some, making it easier for Sasuke to finally catch up to him. All he knew was the distance and general direction of their target's whereabouts, so from here he had to be careful not to miss it. Sasuke noticed this, and sped forward to pass Itachi, advancing toward where he knew the hidden entrance to the lab was.

"Oi—Sasuke! Don't run ahead!" Itachi called. His brother turned halfway toward him with a triumphant smirk, before disappearing into a cleverly hidden trap door behind a boulder. He was able to lead them the right way well before anyone—even Itachi—could have found it on their own. Resigned to the truth of the matter, Itachi followed after his brother quickly, but cautiously.

"Sasuke," he called in a low tone after they made it inside the hidden passageway. "How did you know I would be coming here? Did Orochimaru tell you where he left Kabuto?"

"Yes," Sasuke said, letting Itachi match his pace to walk beside him. "He knew that you would come here to try to undo the Edo Tensei. He also knew that I would be interested in hearing about that."

"Sasuke—" Itachi started, but Sasuke cut him off.

"I'm not a child anymore, nii-san. I know that he only told me because he wanted me to come here. But I don't care. I had to see you again, to ask you about all the things I've learned since you died."

Itachi ignored that opening. It was still not the time to address that. "Do you know why he did, then?"

"Hn," Sasuke gave an unamused snort. "Isn't it obvious? He doesn't want Kabuto's Edo Tensei to end. He wants me to stop you, or get in your way long enough that you fall back under Kabuto's control."

The passageway was dark and narrow, but not very long. It descended underground in the short time they were talking, and now they reached the end of it.

"No," Itachi said, putting his hand on Sasuke's wrist just as he was about to turn the handle of a door at the end of the passage. Presumably, it led into the building itself. "If that were the case, why didn't he just kill Kabuto himself? That would make the Edo Tensei continue on indefinitely without any worries. Why would he endanger his plans based on what you might or might not do?"

The more he thought about it, the more concerned Itachi felt. Kabuto would be a loose end for Orochimaru—one that he couldn't afford to leave laying around, much less intentionally direct someone like Sasuke toward. It would be much, much smarter for the Sannin to kill him, so that Itachi and Nagato wouldn't be able to leave that way.

And now that he thought of it, wouldn't it make even more sense for Orochimaru to not kill him, but force Kabuto into taking control of them as quickly as possible? Then, they couldn't be acting on their own, or get away by asking others to seal them. Why did he seem content to let Itachi and Nagato roam free, with so much at stake?

"I don't know what he's planning," Sasuke said, pulling his hand away. "But if he's set a trap for us here, I'm sure the two of us can handle it."

Itachi had already warned the younger Naruto not to make hasty decisions based on impressions he got from Orochimaru. Was Itachi about to do that very same thing, himself? Yet, they could not
allow Kabuto to regain control, no matter what. They couldn't leave him alone just because Orochimaru seemed to want them here, could they?

"I thought you were in a hurry," Sasuke said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Itachi said, hand dropping down by his side. "Do you know where Kabuto will be?"

"All that's here is a single lab, with a few smaller rooms to live in. We'll look in the lab first."

Itachi nodded, and stepped aside to let Sasuke lead the way. The gears in his mind were still turning as they walked through the sterile white hallway, but he felt stuck. What purpose, what gain would the snake possibly get out of them coming here? What could be worth the risk of them forcing Kabuto to undo the Edo Tensei, which would in turn send the younger Naruto back home? Did he want him to go back home? As unlikely as that seemed, they couldn't rule anything out. But yet again, if that were the case, Orochimaru could have made Kabuto do it himself to ensure things went the way he wanted. Nothing made sense.

The entrance to the lab had a pair of swinging aluminum doors with long, skinny windows in them. A small hole in the floor made it possible to lock the doors with a sliding bolt. But they were not locked right now.

"Let me go in first," Itachi said softly, putting a hand on the door, ready to push it open. His eyes were already shifting into the Sharingan.

Sasuke gave a disgusted frown, but he didn't protest. If anything happened, he would make sure to be part of it. It didn't matter who walked in first.

Itachi pushed the door open slowly and walked in, Sasuke shadowing him. Both brothers were on the highest alert for danger.

It was dark. The lab had large, round overhead lights, but they were currently shut off. The only light came from a multitude of steel work tables that were lit with low-hanging ceiling lamps, lined up in rows near the front of the lab. Itachi looked around and saw a set of switches on the wall. He put a hand on one that was down, hesitated for just a moment, and then flipped it up.

The overhead lights came on, flooding the room with harsh artificial light. There was a crash from within the depths of the lab, and small creak immediately afterward, as if from a door. Itachi and Sasuke locked their eyes in the direction of the sound and made their way cautiously toward it.

"We know that you're there, so make this simpler for everyone and come out now," Sasuke commanded. "Kabuto."

A nondescript door on the left wall swung slowly open with a creak. A large burgundy creature emerged from it in a slithery kind of way, stepping out gradually into the light with uncertain movements. It was a man, swallowed up inside an oversized burgundy cloak. A thin hand appeared from one of the sleeves and pulled the large hood further down. It had a pattern on it that looked like a snake's eyes.

"Ahh, did you have to turn on the lights?" Kabuto's familiar voice came from underneath the hood. "That was mean of you. My poor eyes can't take it."
Sasuke's Sharingan started to meld and change, and Itachi felt the shift in the air that meant his brother was about to use Amaterasu.

"Sasuke, stop!" he said sharply.

Sasuke glared at him. The energy spike faded away, but he didn't put away the Mangekyou.

"Don't kill him," Itachi said, walking in front of Sasuke to partially block his view. "We need any information he can give us about Orochimaru's plans."

"But if he dies, then you'll be able to stay here for as long as you want," Sasuke protested, gritting his teeth. "You said that you would talk to me about everything. How are you going to do that if he takes over you again?"

"That's very rude, you know—Itachi, Sasuke-kun. I'm right here," Kabuto said lightly. "You two aren't being very good guests."

"Kabuto, why did Orochimaru decide to leave you here, considering the state you're in?" Itachi asked, continuing to hold his arm out slightly toward Sasuke. "It seems counter-productive to his plans. As weak as you are right now, it would be easy for me to overpower you and make you send Naruto back to the past. Of course, that wouldn't happen if I let Sasuke kill you before then. But even so, there would be ways around it. Someone from our side could simply seal Nagato, and undo the jutsu that way. Isn't that so? So why, then, did he set all of this up?"

Kabuto raised his head up slightly. He was frowning within the depths of his hood.

"I am here because I am a failure that Orochimaru-sama no longer wanted to keep around. I thought that I could find out who I was by seeking perfection. And now, I am even less than I was to begin with. He has no need for someone like me anymore."

"Then, we should just put you out of your misery," Sasuke said. He made to walk forward, but Itachi stopped him again.

"It's true, the answer I chose was the wrong one," Kabuto kept speaking morosely, as if he hadn't been interrupted. He put his face in his hands, voice gradually rising in pitch as he continued. "I failed to discover who I was, and lost what little I had in the effort. Now I am nothing—nothing—I am going to die as nothing, for no reason. Damn this pointless existence!" he swung a hand out suddenly, knocking glassware from the nearby table to the floor. The empty, sterile-clean beakers broke and scattered pieces of broken glass across the floor.

However, even that action seemed to have cost him a bit of effort. Kabuto leaned against the table after his outburst, breathing heavily. It was hard to tell if he was overcome with emotion, or if the small amount of physical exertion had made him lose his breath.

Itachi observed him for a moment longer, watching the faint amount of chakra present in Kabuto's body. Maybe Orochimaru didn't have to bother about killing him. After losing his body to the bit of power he'd put into his veins, only to be suddenly left without that power anymore, it looked like he was already dying.

"You can't do it, can you?" Itachi said quietly. "It's all you can do just to stand up. You can't control anyone anymore, or send Naruto home. That's why you're not a threat to his plans."

Kabuto looked up at him, and there was a brief glint when his wire-rimmed glasses caught the light.

"What right do you have to pity me?" he said venomously. "You've always had something to go
by... a village, a clan... even your own skill. You've never had to struggle with something as fundamental as who you are in the first place!

"No, you're wrong," Itachi said, lifting his hand again to hold Sasuke back as he tried to step forward. "I know what it's like better than you think. All that I knew were the things other people saw me as. A member of my clan, a citizen of Konoha... unfortunately, there came a time when two could no longer coexist. It was no longer possible for me to be what I thought I was. And I had to kill the illusion of one identity to keep the other. In the end, I lost even that."

"But you didn't have a choice!" Sasuke broke in, unable to keep quiet any longer. "I heard about what really happened. Those Konoha bastards had pushed the Uchiha to become what they were. Then they ordered you to kill them—"

"There is always a choice," Itachi said, still looking at Kabuto. "A choice always has to be made, whether we want to do it or not. Ultimately, that is what makes up your identity as a person. But it doesn't mean that the choice is always free. When none of the options are what you really want, that is when the struggle for who you are arises. That's when it becomes easy to lose everything you thought you knew about yourself."

"What is wrong with trying take matters into my own hands?" Kabuto said harshly, still bent and leaning over the table. "All I wanted was to get closer to perfection; to follow the one path that had finally managed to capture my imagination. I wanted my ultimate pursuit to be the same as his, so that I could have the same presence, the same greatness. That's why I took Orochimaru-sama's power for my own! He may not have been revived if I hadn't done it. And yet, he looks down on me—all of you do!"

"There is nothing wrong with emulating someone else that you see as praiseworthy. That's how we all learn, starting out. But trying to become someone else won't help you find out who you are."

"Nii-san, why are you bothering to try to talk to him? Just get the information you want out of him, already!" Sasuke said impatiently.

Itachi's mouth pressed into a thin line, but he said, "Do you know why Orochimaru wanted us to meet here? Do you know what his plans are for Naruto?"

Kabuto backed away from the table and looked at them. "The enemy knows how to find me, and they will do anything to get their hands on the Rinnegan. Maybe Orochimaru-sama hopes that both sides will be able to damage each other. As for Sasuke-kun," his voice regained some of its former smoothness, "I don't know why he is here. Perhaps for the sake of a long-awaited family reunion."

The hood of the burgundy cloak burst into black flames, and Kabuto jerked backward with a cry. Itachi moved quickly to pull the coat up over Kabuto's head and throw it down several feet away on the pristine tile, where it was soon completely engulfed in the otherworldly fire. Kabuto stumbled into the side of the table and fell onto his hands and knees, glasses falling down onto the floor in front of him. Uncovered, it was easier to see how the various transformations had affected his physical state. Kabuto looked very different from the last time anyone had seen him. He no longer had the scaly skin from Orochimaru's possession, but he looked almost as pale. His arms and legs were very thin, and his cropped hair fell limply around his face. Without his glasses, it possible to see the dark bags under his eyes.

"He isn't going to tell us what he knows. He's just here to waste our time, so that Orochimaru can do whatever he's doing without interference. If we want to get any real answers, without going in circles like this, he'll have to be put under a genjutsu," Sasuke said coldly.
"Why don't you just kill me, instead?" Kabuto said, sounding surprisingly calm. He reached out to pick up his glasses. One of the lenses had a crack in it near the edge, but he put them back on anyway. He looked up at Sasuke. His face may have been thinner and gaunt now, but the glare was recognizable.

"I do not know if his body could withstand a genjutsu now. It very likely would kill him," Itachi warned. "Don't do it, Sasuke. This is also a choice. And every choice has its own consequence."

"Why should we leave him alive? He isn't going to last for much longer, anyway," Sasuke looked down at Kabuto with his face wrinkled in contempt. "Orochimaru is next. And then, the village of Konoha. All of them who think they can use our clan and then throw them away like trash will suffer."

"The clan isn't everything. Clinging to it will only keep you chained to the past."

Sasuke looked back at Itachi, but didn't respond. He hadn't expected nearly the same thing to be said by the revived souls of both his father and brother—those two, of all people, agreeing on the same thing. But… he didn't want to accept it. All of it had happened before he could do anything. Something that affected him so deeply happened without his input at all. It was easy for them to say it was all over. He didn't see the future anymore. He only saw the past.

Maybe Sasuke's thoughts showed on his face, or maybe Itachi just knew him that well. He said, "It might have been a mistake to hide everything from you. I didn't think there was anything you could do to change it, and knowing would have only put you in danger. I thought that, later on, not knowing would even allow you to be happy staying in the village. But now I think that maybe, I should have just told you everything. Perhaps you could have convinced Father and Mother… and changed the Uchiha."

Kabuto started to chuckle. He slowly climbed to his feet, holding on to a stool, and then the edge of the work table in order to prop himself up.

"Oh, this is so, so very touching," he said with malicious mockery. "The long-estranged brothers, making up after everything they have lost. Just keep telling each other pretty lies to make yourselves feel better."

Sasuke snarled and made to step forward again, but soon stopped. It wasn't even Itachi that had stopped him this time. He saw the disruption in his former ally's chakra, perhaps even before Kabuto felt it. Something inky and vile suddenly bloomed in his chest, consuming the faint energy still remaining inside him. Kabuto flinched just a second later, letting out an agonized cry as he grasped at the invading presence in his chest.

"What's happening?" Sasuke demanded, glancing over at Itachi quickly. He could see very clearly that this was not some bizarre act of Kabuto's.

"Zetsu," Itachi said. His eyes started to shift into the Mangekyou, as well.

Black, vein-like lines sprouted and grew from above Kabuto's heart to across his chest, down his left arm, showing in places where the robe he wore exposed bare skin. It crawled up his face until half of it was covered in an inky-black mask. A round eye glowered at them, and Kabuto's face cracked into a grin to rival that of Orochimaru.

"You shouldn't have shown us your trump card so early, Kabuto," Black Zetsu's harsh voice came
from the dark mass clinging to his body. Kabuto's arm started to raise up into the air.

"Don't move!" Itachi commanded, but Zetsu slammed Kabuto's hand down to the ground. An array of black lines and seal marks splayed out onto the floor from his touch, right before Kabuto's body was tackled and pinned to the floor by the hand of Itachi's Susanō'o. Sasuke stepped around his brother's reach and called forth his own glowing violet Susanō'o, a crossbow materializing in its hands, aimed at the man and creature on the floor.

"What did he do?" Sasuke asked tensely. "Did the summoning fail? Nothing appeared."

"No, whatever it was, it could have been summoned elsewhere," Itachi said, walking closer to Kabuto's prone body. He made sure to remain under the protection of the Susanō'o's ribs as he got closer, not knowing what Zetsu might do. Apprehension was creeping in on him. When Kabuto had said that the enemy could find him, he didn't realize it meant that Zetsu had embedded tracking spores in Kabuto's body. Now Itachi fully understood why Orochimaru would abandon him here. He had shed his former assistant like a skin, and made himself untraceable.

"It seems that everyone underestimated you, Itachi," Zetsu said. "You've managed to escape control, which means I can't do anything with you now. That makes this a little more difficult. I'll have to finish up quickly."

"You can't make hand signs anymore, now that Kabuto is pinned down," Itachi said. "There's nothing more you can do. Release him."

"I just used the up the last of his dwindling life energy. If I release him now, he will die. Though, it is surprising that a hypocrite like you cares. Ah… but it seems he doesn't know where Orochimaru went off to."

Kabuto's uncovered eye was open just a little bit, curved into a grimace, as if he was in pain. "Damn every… one of you…" his eye roved around aimlessly for a moment, before focusing on Itachi's face. "Kill me… if you don't want them to know everything. Now they have the real Mada—"

Kabuto gasped and choked, as if all the air had suddenly been stolen from his lungs. His head fell back and his visible eye widened. Itachi could see the life-sustaining energy in his body being blacked out, consumed from the inside by a parasitic monster.

Sasuke's arrow landed in between the fingers of the large hand holding Kabuto's body to the ground. It stuck into the infected arm and burst into flames. Itachi quickly withdrew the hand and ran forward to catch the dark, wriggling creature retreating from Kabuto's body. He trapped it under the hand again as it tried to slide away, but it bent and twisted and squeezed out through the smallest opening. Another arrow whisked through the air where it emerged, and it sank back down again. Itachi closed the Susanō'o's hand as closely around it as possible, so that it couldn't get away.

"Now, Sasuke!"

Sasuke ran forward and leapt onto the back of the giant hand, drawing his sword swiftly. He stabbed down through the smallest of spaces in between the skeletal fingers, and sent bright, high-pitched electric chakra down into the blade and the space underneath. He stayed there for several minutes, pouring electricity into the sword until the floor tile started cracking, and he was sure that nothing could have survived. Then he jumped backward, sheathing his sword and landing lightly beside his brother.

Itachi carefully relaxed the hand—it was difficult to control it with such fine precision. The white tile underneath it was now charred and shattered into many sharp pieces. But the pitch-black mass was nowhere to be seen.
"Did it work?" Sasuke asked.

Itachi cursed softly to himself. He had a bad feeling that it hadn't worked, and their enemy had somehow managed to escape. His Susan'o slowly dissolved away, and his eyes changed back to normal. He turned and stepped toward where Kabuto still lay on the floor. Itachi looked down at him.

The presence of Black Zetsu invading his body didn't leave any outward marks. The only thing that remained was a hole burned through his sleeve, and a red, shining burn on his arm. Itachi looked curiously at Sasuke—he must have extinguished the flames himself, in order for Kabuto to be hit with the Ameterasu arrow and only suffer a small burn.

"He's already dead," Sasuke said, coming up beside Itachi.

"Aa."

They fell silent, and the soft hum of the overhead lights asserted itself again in the empty space.

They have the real… Madara?

"Sasuke," Itachi started, very quietly, "There's something I still have to do. It involves the Allied Shinobi Force. You can follow if you want, but I have to go soon."

"Hn," Sasuke scoffed. "I shouldn't be surprised that you want to put things off more." He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, they were back to normal. "I meant what I said before. I'm going after Orochimaru for using our clan, and then I'm going after Konoha. Don't you care at all that members of our clan have been pulled out of their resting place and forced to fight? Even our parents." Sasuke looked at him, his face looking more unguarded and young than it had in a long time.

"Going after Orochimaru by yourself is not wise. And the clan can still be put to rest, the same way as the other Edo Tensei."

"Why do you want to help Konoha and the rest of the Alliance so much? Haven't you already done enough?" Anger was starting to creep into Sasuke's voice. He paused, however, seeing that a crow had suddenly materialized and was now perched on Itachi's shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Sending a message to Kisame," Itachi said, pulling a small scroll out of his bag. "You are right; I should not be here. I doubt the Alliance would even accept it, if I offered to help them directly. But that isn't what I want to do. My real concern is to help the younger Naruto get back to his own time. Even if it has nothing to do with me… there are people there that need him to return."

He finished writing his message, and handed it to the crow. The bird took the scroll in its sharp beak, and then vanished in a burst of black feathers.

Sasuke suspected that Itachi meant him. His younger self. He thought it would help a Sasuke that he would never see or meet, if Orochimaru's strange science project went back where it came from.

"How will I find you again?" Sasuke said, frustrated. He didn't want to follow along, but he knew that Itachi would not stop until he did what he wanted to do.

"I can tell you where the last reported sighting of a large regiment of Uchiha was," Itachi said. "Some people may be fighting them, but if you go, you might be able to insure that more of them get sealed. Whether they are still there or not, I will meet you there after I do what I need to do."

"I understand," Sasuke said, standing up. "I will follow if you want me to."

"Fine," Itachi said, "Let's go."
"And what are you doing, exactly?"

"I have to convince Naruto to go home. There may not be anywhere in the world that is safe for him now."

The younger Naruto slumped in his chair, arms crossed. His deep scowl seemed to have no effect whatsoever on Shizune, who continued giving bright reassurances to her patient. Naruto's eyes tracked the man as he thanked Shizune and left, hopping slightly with a damaged foot. Shizune hummed as she started organizing medical supplies on a tray.

"When is someone going to come tell us what's going on out there?" he burst out, unable to contain himself any longer.

"You just have to be patient, Naruto-kun!" Shizune said, wagging a finger at him. "We'll get a message as soon as Headquarters hears anything."

Naruto groaned and stamped his feet a few times in frustration. How had things ended up like this? Everything had been going so well. True, Itachi and Nagato had promised to keep him away from the fighting after that one battle, but at least he still would have been out there. Now their group was split up, and he was under the watch of the Allied Shinobi Force again. And that meant staying in the medical camp until some vague, indefinite moment when they figured out what to do with him.

Naruto felt slightly betrayed by his older self, even though the elder had just been following Itachi's directions. Once he left the younger there under Shizune and Sakura's watch, he'd rushed off to go meet the Eight-Tail's Jinchuuriki. No doubt, they were going to see all kinds of action, while the younger was left sitting in a chair under the supervision of some medic-nin.

"Shizune-nee-chan, why can't I fight?" Naruto whined, knowing that it was useless. "I already proved I could do it. I can take on those white things, no problem!"

"Yes, well, it was just a miracle nothing bad happened because of that," Shizune said, putting her hands on her hips. "I don't know what the older you was thinking, letting you go anywhere near the battlefield. Then again, he isn't much better…” degenerating into grumbles, Shizune continued organizing with a bit more force than earlier.

"Aww, c'mon! You're just saying that because you don't like that Itachi and Nagato were the ones looking after me." Naruto propped his feet up on a short stool and leaned back in the chair, balancing it on two legs. "Kakashi-sensei told me some people were upset about that."

Shizune slammed an instrument down onto the metal try with a loud clatter that nearly made Naruto lose his balance. He waved his arms around frantically for a second, teetering, before landing the chair back on four legs again.

"You don't know anything about the terror and suffering our village went through because of them!" Shizune said. Her face was turning red, but she remained standing where she was. She gripped the edges of the metal tray. Naruto noticed her arms shaking.

He stood up out of the chair, taken aback. "S-Shizune-nee-chan…"

She stared down at the tray for a few seconds, then turned away to walk out of the tent's flap. "Excuse me."

Sakura came into the tent, walking around Shizune and watching the other kunoichi walk away. She put down a box of what looked like bandages and turned back to Naruto, confused.
"What was that about?"

"I don't know," Naruto said, flopping back down into the chair. He felt a little bit guilty, but he wasn't sure why. "She didn't like me talking about Itachi and Nagato, I guess. Was she really that worried about me?"

Sakura's eyes darkened. She started unpacking the box, turned partly away from him. "We all were. First Orochimaru comes after you in Suna, and then you disappear into Amegakure where no one can contact you? All we had was Sai's scroll, and that only goes one way."

"I guess… I didn't really think of it like that," Naruto admitted. He felt deflated. It seemed like his older self was the only one from this time that knew those guys weren't actually bad.

"Shizune had it pretty rough during the attack," Sakura added softly. "I mean, a lot of people did. Nagato's Paths tore through the village, trying to get anyone to tell him where you were. He eventually found out that you weren't in the village, and that's why he went ahead and destroyed the whole thing. But Shizune was the one he found that out from. One of his Paths had the ability to extract any information from a person, but it killed them in the process. Shizune died. And he was the one that killed her."

Sakura looked over at Naruto, slightly pitying. She knew he hadn't meant to upset anyone. But if he was going to know the truth, it was best to know both sides of it. She knew very well how much Naruto tended to see the good in people.

Naruto had finally stopped fidgeting and moving, but now he was sitting with shoulders slumped and eyes downcast, without any retorts to make. It wasn't like he'd forgotten about the village's destruction, or who had done it, but there was such a gap between what he felt and what he knew. There was still something missing, something he didn't understand. And he was running out of time to figure it out. How much longer was he going to be able to stay here, after all? If Naruto didn't figure it out soon, how was he supposed to help everyone back in his own time?

Sakura sighed. "Naruto, I'm sorry, but—"

"Nah, why would you be sorry? You guys had to protect everyone while the older me was gone," Naruto said, putting his hands behind his head with a grin. "But I promise, I won't let it happen again! I'll find a way to stop Akatsuki before any of that happens, and save them, too."

Sakura shook her head with an exasperated smile. She thought he was setting himself up for something truly impossible—but then, he always did that. It was nothing new.

"You probably don't want to stay here in the medic camp, do you? I heard that you got to fight a little bit."

"You can say that again," Naruto grumbled. But her words reminded him of something. He put his arms down and looked at his hands. "It was kind of weird… I've known for a while now that this isn't my real body, but it was always easy to forget. But when I start to think about it—I haven't eaten anything since the day you guys left for war, and Moku-oji treated me to ramen. And since I left Ame, I haven't even felt hungry or thirsty or had to use the toilet at all. And when I was fighting and I got cut by a sword, I didn't bleed, either."

While he was talking, Sakura sat down in a stool, listening with concern. She had done several autopsies on the white creatures that were supposedly kin to the body Naruto was in now. While they were proficient in taking on any person's appearance and chakra, on the inside they had nothing that could be considered human. Yet, that hadn't been the case with Naruto. She knew that for a fact.
She was right there with him when his lungs were filling up with blood, and it looked like he was going to die.

"Maybe it changed because your perspective changed," Sakura suggested. "Maybe, when you believed you were in your real body, it transformed to match what you thought. Then, when you started accepting the truth, it slowly changed."

"I guess that makes sense," Naruto said reluctantly. He vaguely remembered that Orochimaru—when he was disguised as the Wind Daimyo—had seemed surprised and curious when he said that he was hungry.

"There you are 'ttebayo!"

Naruto looked up to see his older self grinning at him from the tent door. He wasn't in the Kyuubi Chakra Mode.

"Aniki!" he hopped out of the chair. "What are you doing here? Weren't you s'posed to go meet up with the Eight-Tails' Jinchuuriki? Kira—um, Ki…"

"Killer Bee," his older self said with a nod. "I did, but I decided to send a clone back to stay with you. I know it sucks to have to stay in one place. Plus, if anything happens, Boss'll know about it right away. Hey—Sakura-chan, where are you going?"

"I am getting out of here while I still can," she said, looking back after pushing open the tent door. "You two have fun, but try not to explode anything."

"Suit yourself," the older Naruto said, plopping down on the stool she left.

"Have you heard anything about what happened to Itachi and Nagato?" the younger said immediately. He suddenly didn't mind being here as much.

"I think they must have made it in time to stop Kabuto from doing anything, so they're probably on their way back to here. Do you know what you're going to do?"

"No," the younger admitted, rubbing a hand through his blond spikes. "I don't want to leave while everything's still going on here... but..."

"I heard what you guys were talking about, before I came in," the elder said, crossing his arms and looking at him seriously. "How is the Kyuubi doing?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, that body you're in is supposed to keep it locked up extra-tight, right? Have you seen if it's still doing okay in there?"

"I—no." It wasn't like he made it a habit to talk to the Kyuubi that often, anyway, but it did seem like he hadn't heard from it in a while. Especially since it seemed they were talking on a semi-regular basis by the end of his time in Suna. "You think I should check? Is that what you're saying?"

His older self nodded.

"O-Okay..."

He had only done this a few times already, but gave it a willing try. The younger sat back down and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate inwardly. He subconsciously went through the same process as
when he tried meditating for Sage Mode. He sat very still, relaxing and trying to create a mental image of what he wanted to do. He could faintly feel the presence of Natural Energy hovering around him like it always did… but he didn't try to reach out to it right now. He still hadn't mastered it, after all. Instead, he tried to reach inward, within this strange body.

It was more difficult than he expected. For a while, it felt like he was swimming in a dark void. He realized after a second with sudden, stark clarity that he was no longer sitting, but standing in ankle-deep water. Naruto opened his eyes, and it was a little lighter—but not by much. The thin lights that lined the walls were still visible, but their light had dimmed considerably since the last time he was here. He looked up at the massive barred door in front of him, its height lost in the darkness.

"Kyuubi?" Naruto said, walking up to the bars and looking in. "Hey—Kyuubi! Are you taking a nap or something?"

He stared hard into the darkness inside the cage, trying to see an eye, a silhouette—anything. Once he listened, he thought he could hear something very large breathing. Did the Kyuubi even have to breathe? Regardless, he took it as a relatively good sign. Naruto looked down at the water and then slowly and cautiously sidled through the bars.

Hoping that the Kyuubi wouldn't be in a head-ripping mood if he woke him up, Naruto walked carefully toward the sound he heard. A great dark outline soon loomed in front of him, and when he reached out his hands, he could feel warm fur.

"H-Hey!" he called, trying to shake the hopelessly small patch of fur that he could reach. His eyes were starting to adjust a little better to the gloom, and he was fairly certain that he was standing beside one of the Kyuubi's gigantic paws. He saw the outline of a sharp claw, and backed up several paces.

"H-Hey, wake up!" Naruto cupped his hands over his mouth as he walked backward toward the bars, just in case. "You big, stinky, ugly old fox! Heyyyyyyyyyyyyy! I bet you can't get me! Nyeeeeehhhhh!"

Nothing changed. There wasn't as much as a growl or a twitch of an ear. Naruto bumped into the bars and turned to walk out of them. He looked back into the cage for a few minutes longer, however, hoping that *something* would happen. But nothing did. The fox was unconscious, and didn't seem to be waking up anytime soon.

Was it because of this body? Was it slowly suffocating him, as the Kyuubi himself had said? Naruto clenched his fists. It upset him, for some reason… he didn't like the fox, but… it was something that had always been there. And what was worse, Naruto didn't know what happen if it disappeared.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "Maybe I should have listened to you sooner. I want to talk to the older me a little more, but… I promise we'll go home soon."

Naruto opened his eyes and saw the bunshin of his older self looking at him intently.

"Well?"

"It's really not good," Naruto said unhappily. "The Kyuubi is still there, but it won't wake up no matter how much I shout. I think the plant body is taking all of its energy, or something like that."

"That doesn't sound good," his older self crossed his arms and tilted his head in a thinking pose. "Hmmm… ah!" he hit a fist in his palm. "Itachi and Nagato are heading this way, right? We should sneak out and meet up with them."
"Eh? How come?" the younger Naruto asked eagerly, sensing an adventure.

"Well, for starters, they're the ones that can send you back home, right? And Itachi might have an idea of what's going on with the Kyuubi. And besides..." he looked around, then said conspiratorially, "If you decide to stay longer, you can be with them, instead of being here."

"Awright!" the younger hopped up, feeling rejuvenated. "Let's go!"

"Hm?" Kisame turned to look as a large black crow flapped down from the sky, cawing. A message from Itachi?

He held out his arm and let the bird land on it. He picked the very small scroll out of its beak and unrolled it. There were just a few words written there: 'Get rid of it now.'

"Something must have happened," Kisame murmured. "After all the work I put in, too. You're merciless, Itachi-san."

Kisame reached inside his coat, but suddenly he looked up, sensing something. His mouth grew into a sharp-toothed grin. It was too bad he'd lost Samehada, or he might have noticed it before now.

"Pretty sneaky to use that crow to find me, ne," he said, turning toward the masked figure that materialized behind him.

"So you were alive, after all," Tobi said, stalking toward him and stopping just out of reach. "I'll be taking that now." He held out a hand toward Kisame, noticing the way he had reached into his coat.

But Kisame just kept grinning. This was going to be done in a bit rougher way than he'd hoped, but it couldn't be helped.

Tobi's eyes narrowed underneath the mask as a globe of water suddenly erupted around Kisame. Now he understood. In his former life, Kisame had been tasked with protecting important information no matter what the cost. He acted unhesitatingly, and had never once failed to rob the enemy of whatever they were trying to get. However...

Tobi's one uncovered Sharingan tracked Kisame's movement inside the bubble, spotting the sealing scroll in his hand. He rushed toward it, but it was too late. Several small sharks appeared and destroyed everything within. The water became dark and stained with blood.

...And then it was clear again. Kisame was whole again, he was about to summon the sharks—but Tobi kept moving and phased his hand through the place where he knew the sealing scroll to be. He came through the other side just before the ancient creatures started roiling around hungrily in the water.

Obito straightened up from his stance and took off the mask. The one hidden eye faded from the Sharingan into a blank, dead white. He looked at the scroll. It was wet with water, but otherwise unscathed.

Sacrificing his borrowed left eye to finally get his hands on two that were much greater was not a bad trade at all.

At the Allied Shinobi Force Headquarters, powerful sensor-types from every country in the Alliance monitored the status of the war. At the command desk was Ay, the Raikage; Tsunade, the Hokage; Nara Shikaku, the lead strategist; and Mabui, the personal assistant to the Raikage. The Mizukage...
was off helping to protect the Daimyo of their lands, including the newly appointed Daimyo of the Wind. The Tsuchikage had left a while ago, in order to assist the Kazekage against several Reincarnated Kage on the desert front.

"The battle is turning on all fronts," Shikaku said, looking down at the map that they had spread on the table. "Naruto has been a big help, flushing out the imposters among our ranks. We've finally been able to move again. Everyone has prioritized protecting his bunshin so that the Uchiha can't dispel them before he's had a chance, and it's working."

"And the Uchiha situation near the sea front? When are we going to be able to send help there?" Ay said, tapping a finger on the table.

So far, they had figured out that Orochimaru had split his Edo-Uchiha army into several parts. Most of them were providing support at the major battlefields, working together very effectively to interfere with their attempts to flush out the Zetsu clones. Their fame in the arena of war throughout history was apparently well justified. The only thing that had worked so far to counter them was for the Alliance to focus all their energy on defense, keeping Naruto's bunshin around long enough to find the imposters. Fortunately, they were finally gaining some ground with their efforts.

On the other hand, there was another group—the largest Edo Tensei-only unit on the field so far. It was composed of around twenty Uchihas, including the last Clan Head and his wife, and many well-known warriors from previous eras. They were clearly a very dangerous force, but the odd thing was that they had not yet joined any of the battles. Their actual destination was unknown, but a few of their own shinobi had managed to catch them near the sea front battle, to stall them as much as possible until backup could arrive.

"The ones facing the Uchiha-only unit are those from Kakashi's group that got separated from the rest, along with a few others. It's a small group containing shinobi from a few different units, which managed to regroup and chase after them. It's unlikely they will be able to hold out for an extended battle."

"What about Naruto? Has he managed to send any help to them?" Tsunade asked.

"At the last report, no," Shikaku said. "It was just like everywhere else. The moment his bunshin showed up, the Uchiha all went after it—and there weren't enough of our own people there to defend it. The Uchiha are able to attack very quickly, leaving little room for a counterattack."

"So? What do we do, then? We can't let them escape, to accomplish whatever it is they are trying to accomplish," Ay growled. He looked across at Tsunade. "If only Konoha's clans weren't so lax about protecting the remains of their best warriors, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Tsunade gave an angry sort of 'tsk' and looked away, toward the large globe of water in the center of the room. "As if the village ever had a say in what the Uchiha chose to do. The bigger concern is that Orochimaru managed to collect so many of them. Despite what you think, it couldn't have been easy."

"This isn't the time to be talking about whose fault it is," Shikaku said impatiently. "Now… we could just let them go, for the time being—that is an option. Or we can take some troops from where they are now and move them to there, which could make progress at the other battlefields even slower. However, they are fairly close to the sea front battle. If they can hold on long enough for things there to be decided, backup can come to them quickly from that area."

Ay gave a dubious hum. Tsunade crossed her arms, not convinced.
"It depends on how much longer it takes. If it looks like the sea front battle isn't going to be won very soon, we should have them stop fighting the Uchiha and track their movements, instead," she said. "If everyone gets killed, the Uchiha will escape anyway. Following them without attacking could be another way to buy time."

"That could be just as risky as letting them go outright, Tsunade-sama. We don't know what their objective is," Shikaku said. "Still... every other option risks losing the people that are there now. We'll ask them how much longer they think they can hold on, then decide from there which course of action to take."

"There's no doubt that they won't be able to keep up for much longer, without help," Ay said. "But with all our forces tied up in other battles, who else can give it to them?"

Sasuke made his way toward the location Itachi had told him about, jumping forcefully from tree branch to tree branch, as if he had a personal vendetta against them. He had too many things to think about, and none of them he actually wanted to.

One of those things was what he was doing at this very moment. He had to trust that Itachi would keep his word and meet him at the specified place, after he went to the medical camp of the Allied Shinobi Force. That was the problem. He should never have let Itachi out of his sights after finally finding him.

Sasuke told himself that going there would have been more trouble than it was worth, and that he would simply go after Itachi again if he ended up running late. But the truth was comprised of two mildly disturbing things—he did trust Itachi, and he did not want to see the supposed 'younger Naruto'. But if it did all happen to be true, then... what? What did it matter?

It didn't. The younger Naruto had nothing to do with him. It would just be too much of a hassle to get close to the Allied Shinobi Force right now. He still had his other goals, and they were far away from the battlefield. As soon as he was satisfied that Itachi had told him everything there was to know, he would be making his way toward Konoha. Seeing his clansmen being used as puppets again would only strengthen his resolve all the more.

At least, that was what Sasuke kept telling himself. He wanted to believe that Itachi's attitude toward the clan and village had no effect on his own opinions. But looking up to and idolizing someone was a tough habit to break.

He was getting close now to the place Itachi had told him about. This was where, as of several hours ago at least, a large group of Edo Tensei Uchiha had been spotted. Sasuke jumped down from the trees and started walking at a slower pace, keeping all his senses alert. He couldn't hear anything going on in this immediate area. Was this the right place? Sasuke narrowed his eyes and kept walking toward a break in the trees.

There was a sizable field here, a mix of rocky ground and grass. Sasuke bent down to pull out a kunai that was wedged deep in the soil. There were several of them lined up right here, and when he looked up, he saw more scattered throughout the field. So the Edo-Uchiha had been here... and it looked like they had a run-in with the Allied Shinobi Force. But then what?

Sasuke didn't want to wander too far from the place where he was supposed to meet Itachi, but he decided to keep going a little longer. If they were close, there might still be time to catch up. He went as quickly as possible, while still keeping a look out for any traps or people. As he went along, the signs of fighting got more intense, and he even found a couple of dead shinobi along the way. And then, he finally heard the clash of weapons and people calling instructions to one another up ahead.
Sasuke kept himself hidden and looked out of the trees.

The Edo-Uchiha were there, and so were some live shinobi, fighting against them. There were a couple of Iwa-nin trying to block their way with tall walls of earth, and a handful of others trying to coordinate attacks. He saw one with a radio, and three nearby that seemed to be working together to try to separate and seal some of the Uchiha.

The pale one, he remembered seeing before. That was the one that had come along with Naruto and Sakura when they came to find him. The one with the ink creatures. The other was slightly more familiar, a Suna shinobi they had taken the Exams with. The last, he did not know, but he was swordsman wearing a typical Kumo uniform. Even though Sasuke didn't know him, there was a good chance the Kumo-nin already considered him a mortal enemy, given the Raikage's feelings about him.

From a glance, it was easy to see that the Alliance's troops were outnumbered. Unlucky for them: it would be a tough battle even if they had equal numbers. The way things were now, they were likely to get slaughtered.

Sasuke stepped out into the open. It didn't take long before the three near him took notice.

"Sasuke!" the pale one said—Sai, that was what they had called him. The other two whirled around, on guard immediately.

"What are you doing here?" the Kumo-nin asked, putting a hand to his sword and narrowing his eyes.

All these other people being here could get annoying really quickly. But until Itachi finally arrived, the extra fighting power would probably be necessary.

"I want to help," Sasuke said. "You're working on sealing them, right?"

They looked at him like he had grown a second head. Sasuke felt his impatience growing—there was not any time for this. Couldn't they understand that he hated to see his clansmen being used this way? Sasuke looked over and saw that the one with the radio, a Konoha-nin he didn't recognize, was staring at him. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before everyone noticed him, and wasted their time gawking instead of fighting. The Konoha-nin fumbled around for a moment with the receiver in his hands for a moment, then started frantically speaking into it.

"HQ, do you copy? Yes, I know. No, it isn't that, it's Uchiha—"

The radio and battery pack strapped to the man's back was suddenly crushed, stabbed through with the sharp, skeletal fingertips of Sasuke's Susano'o. The Konoha-nin dropped the pack immediately and put some distance between himself and the outreaching arm very quickly.

"I don't need them interfering with what I'm doing. I'm not here to fight against the Allied Shinobi Force." Not yet, anyway, he added in his mind. He couldn't quite take on the Five Great Shinobi Nations just yet, especially not alone. For now, Konoha was all he was after.

"Yeah, they're your clan, so that makes sense and all," the Suna puppet master said—Kankuro. That was right. The Kazekage's brother. He had also been at the Five Kage summit. "But do you really think you can just show up here and join up with us because it suits your needs at the time? And what are we supposed to do now that you've destroyed our radio? If the fight moves again, we won't be able to tell HQ."

Sasuke just kept looking around at the battlefield while he talked, examining the situation. Why did it
have to be this particular group of people? They all had a reason to dislike him. Then again, it could have been worse.

"From here, it doesn't look like you're in a position to refuse. Those walls won't slow them down for long. And while we're standing here talking, your allies over there are even more outnumbered than they were before. Do you have any sealers?"

"I'm the only one here," Sai said. He was propping up a very large scroll—Sasuke assumed he used that for the sealing. "But we haven't managed to restrain any of them long enough for me to seal them. It takes a little bit of time."

"Hn. Fine. We will have to make do with that until my brother gets here. You other two, concentrate on protecting him. I will take over your places in the fight."

The swordsman from Kumo gave him a hard glare, clenching his teeth around the small lollipop in his mouth. Kankuro looked even more irritated that Sasuke was trying to take command. They knew that they were in desperate need of help. It was just difficult to stomach this turn of events.

Sasuke didn't wait for them to make up their minds. He just jumped into the battle right away, keeping his Susano'o up as a shield. Sai put his scroll down on the ground and rolled it out anyway, prepared to start sealing whenever possible.

"That arrogant bastard," Kankuro growled. "If there is anyone that can restrain our targets, it's me. Omoi, can you stay here and protect Sai?"

Omoi looked down at Sai, and then back at Kankuro, and sighed. A million things that could go wrong with him defending their only sealer came to mind, but he kept them to himself. "I'll do my best. But what do you think he meant by, 'until his brother gets here'?"

"It's been said that Uchiha Itachi is one of the ones that has been protecting the younger Naruto, ever since he left after Suna Orochimaru's attack." Sai said. "He was also brought back by the Edo Tensei, but managed to escape control somehow."

"I guess if he's really coming here, it would be useful to have one of the Edo Tensei on our own side. That is, as long as he doesn't turn into a mindless zombie like the rest of them and try to kill us," Omoi said.

"We'll have to just worry about that later." Kankuro pulled a scroll out of the holster on his back. "For now, let's just focus on all the annoying Uchiha we already have in front of us."

"Saaakura-chaaan!"

Sakura looked up to see the older Naruto's Kage Bunshin waving at her cheerily. He was walking through the camp toward the row of open-air sinks, where she was. Sakura turned on a faucet with the side of her hand, and put her soapy hands under the flow.

"Hey, Naruto. What's up? I thought you would still be with the little you right now."

"Eh? Well, I had to leave to go meet up with Bee-occhan, remember?" the bunshin scratched its head, looking perplexed. "But, I decided to send a bunshin back here to spend some time with the younger me, since I don't know how long it'll be before he has to go home. D'you know where he is?"

Sakura stared at the bunshin, letting the faucet water continue to run. Her eyes slowly widened as the
seconds ticked by.

"Sakura… chan? What's wrong?"

"You mean, you didn't send a bunshin here earlier today?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Sakura didn't take the time to give him an answer. She forcefully turned off the spigots and started running toward the row of tents, heart pounding. *No, not again.* Naruto had scanned this place just a few hours ago. It couldn't be!

"Hey—hey!" terribly confused, the bunshin started running after her.

Sakura dashed all the way to the examining room where she had left the younger Naruto alone, prepared to knock some heads the second she went in. The canvas door flew open, flapping loudly and pulling against the tent's metal frame, causing the whole structure to sway.

It was empty. They were already gone.
"Ne, aniki. Are you sure we're going the right way?" the younger Naruto asked, looking around as he and his older self's bunshin jumped through the trees. They were still in the same forested area that covered this entire region, but Naruto didn't really recognize where they were. It wasn't the same way they had traveled to go to the medical camp.

"Yeah. Going this way will keep us from getting too close to where the other battles are. I mean, we'll be in trouble if anybody catches us sneaking out, right?"

The younger Naruto snickered gleefully at that response. He'd been wanting to sneak away from his constant supervision since the moment he got to the future, but not knowing what could happen always made it difficult. Being somewhat free from everyone's overbearing protection in Ame had reminded him all the more how much it stifled him to have to sit still in one place for very long. But his *older self* being the one to bust him out was just the icing on the cake. If they ran into any trouble, Naruto was sure that they would be able to take care of it.

"I'm glad I finally get to do what I want for a little while! And I do want to hear about what happened with Kabuto, too. But I guess when we meet up with Itachi and Nagato again, they're gonna want to send me home," Naruto admitted, his grin fading a bit. "I mean, given that it could've been a disaster if Kabuto had managed to get control of them. They probably don't want to take a chance of anything else bad happening, so..."

"Why do you say it like that? Don't you want to go home?" his older self asked, looking over at him.

"Well, yeah—I mean, of course I do. That's what I've been trying to do this whole time, after all. And I know that there's not really much of anything I can do to help in the war. It's just... that's just it."

Naruto looked down at his feet, concentrating on each jump and landing from branch to branch. He was trying to sort out his exact reasoning, which wasn't easy to do. He usually followed his gut instincts, but he wasn't so good at explaining them.

"It's just, I don't want to leave while we're in the middle of a war. What if something happens after I leave, and I completely miss hearing about it?" It wasn't until he articulated this worry that the younger Naruto realized it was the underlying, *real* reason why he kept putting his return off. It was impossible to ignore the fact that people he knew were out there fighting. "I know about the war, but I won't know how it ends if I leave now. What if everyone ends up dying? How can I stop it if I don't know? And I mean, I'm obviously gonna try to keep it from happening in the first place, but what if it does anyway? I won't know how we're supposed to win it."

"So you still want to try to save everyone, even though they've been keeping secrets from you the entire time you've been here?" his older self's bunshin said it so quietly that at first, Naruto thought he had misheard. But, no—a few seconds lapsed, and the meaning of what his older self said didn't change in the slightest, no matter how he rolled it over in his mind.

"Of course I do! Why would you ask something like that?" he said angrily. "Wouldn't you do the exact same thing, aniki? You said before that you were never going to give up on saving Sasuke, even after all this time, right? Isn't this the same thing?"

"Yeah! Don't worry. I'm just glad that you feel the same way, too." The bunshin flashed him a grin. "After all, you *have* been through a lot since you got here. I just wanted to see if that had made you
"Oh," Naruto said, relieved, but feeling a little bit affronted at the same time. "Come on, you should know I'm not gonna give up that easily! It doesn't matter how much I'm able to find out. I can't just sit back and do nothing, not when I know what's going to happen. Even though..." he frowned at the memory of the masked man, and the confrontation they'd had. He'd actually forgotten it for a little while, or at least pushed it to the back of his mind. It wasn't something he liked to remember. "When Madara captured me... he said that our goals were exactly the same. And... he's kind of right, isn't he? He wants to erase all the bad things that have happened in this world, and replace them with something he thinks is better. Like he has the right to just control everything and make it how he wants."

Naruto would never have admitted this line of thought to anyone but his older self. He hated to admit it even now: the fact that the things Madara said affected him. But it was difficult to shake off the feeling it gave him... even though he knew that was probably exactly what the masked man wanted.

"I don't think it's the same," his older self said, and Naruto looked over at him hopefully. "Bad things will always happen. That is the way of the world. Everything changes, and those who don't adapt to change, die. Our enemy is trying to keep the world from changing, but it has been a long time since the moment he wants to preserve has passed. On the other hand, what you want to change are things that haven't happened yet, at least in your time. It's actually very different when you think about it. Adapting based on new knowledge, seeing out knowledge for that very reason. It's how all things survive and evolve."

Naruto crossed his arms and frowned confusedly. He didn't like those words. Even though it seemed like a compliment, it was not something he would have expected his older self to say. There was something slightly cold about that way of thinking. He watched his older self out of the corner of his eye. "Ne, you'll have to slow down some, aniki. I don't get what you're talking about. Are you saying I should go back and change things, so that people don't die?"

"Not necessarily. There is still a lot of work to be done here."

"Eh? What do you mean by..."

Naruto trailed off when he heard a sharp sound, and looked down to see a length of thin wire suddenly looping around him. It tightened up around his chest painfully, and he fell out of the air mid-jump and landed hard on the ground with a loud grunt. Naruto rolled over and scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could with his arms trapped down by his sides. His eyes darted around in search of who had attacked him, dread quickly growing at the thought that he already knew.

That was when his older self dropped down from the trees above and started walking toward him, a smirk on his face. It didn't look right—it wasn't the bright grin he usually had, or even the sly sort of smile he would get while pulling a prank. This smile didn't look pleasant at all, and it cast a shadow over his normally open face.

"Wh-what the hell is going on, aniki?" Naruto shouted out, stepping backwards. His back hit against a tree.

"I am not your older self," the—fake—bunshin said. "You still have a lot to learn. I thought you would have grown wiser after I fooled you back in Suna. Then again, I suppose it's not a fair shot if I pretend to be someone you actually trust."

"Orochimaru!" Naruto narrowed his eyes and widened his stance.
"Not exactly," the fake said, still speaking in his older self's voice. It was very eerie. He stepped closer slowly, unconcerned. "This is a Zetsu clone embedded with a control tag that I made. It works well, doesn't it? I would say I've managed to improve the concept quite a bit.

"I will spare you the necessity of asking why I came to see you, since I am rather busy at the moment. The vessel you are in right now is corrupt, incomplete. Impressive for a first attempt, certainly, but it will not do for much longer. My connection with you is eroding, as is your connection with the Kyuubi. Not only that, but when the power leaks out of you, it causes your body to react. That was made very clear to me when you lost control in Suna. I would like for you to be able to access the bijuu's chakra more easily, but I would rather see you die than have it stolen from you for their plan. Some adjustments will need to be made, until I can create a better vessel for you."

Naruto looked up and to either side, trying to come up with an escape plan. However, he was only given a scant couple of seconds to think about it before Orochimaru attacked. He looked back and saw the clone-fake right in front of him, reaching its hand back with blue flames at each of its fingertips. It reached back and slammed the hand into Naruto's stomach.

There was pain, but it was a strange kind of pain; it was an uncomfortable mixture of burning and nausea in his stomach. Naruto bent double and fell down to his knees as the vertigo washed over him, feeling like he might throw up, but not knowing if it was even possible anymore. Orochimaru had done something like this to him once already, in the other timeline. It was just as unpleasant the second time around.

"As you may already know, your seal is designed to gradually mix yours and the Kyuubi's chakra. I've created a barrier that will block the interchange between them for a while. Hopefully, it will slow the process of the bijuu's chakra being leeched away. Not to worry, though. When the time comes, we will—"

The fake's words were cut off very suddenly. Naruto heard and felt a powerful gust, and got up on his knees quickly enough to see large chunks of the clone's body flying through the air, slapping against tree trunks and bushes, completely torn to shreds. Scrambling to his feet again, he turned toward the source of the razor-sharp wind and saw—Nagato?

"Nagato!" Naruto called out, but hesitantly. Not only was he unsure about assuming anyone's identity, after what had just happened, but Nagato's expression was stormy. Intimidating. The little bit of Killing Intent streaming from him was heavy, almost suffocating. It was very different from what Naruto was used to—just like the time they had fought Orochimaru in Ame. It was like it belonged to a different person altogether.

Nagato seemed to notice this. He stopped looking at the decimated remains of the clone and came toward him, face softening. The stormy feeling in the air dissolved, like the sun after a rain. He saw the wire, and drew a kunai out to cut it.

"Are you alright, Naruto? What happened?" he asked quietly, hands moving quickly in their work, wire snapping and unraveling at Naruto's feet.

Naruto still felt shocked from the very brief incident. It had all happened so quickly that he hadn't had time to get geared up for a fight. At least Orochimaru hadn't actually been here—or, that's how it seemed. Otherwise, that thing probably would have put up more of a struggle.

"Orochimaru sent that clone-thing to the medic camp, pretending to be the older me. We snuck out," Naruto admitted sheepishly. He looked up and saw that Itachi had now entered the clearing, following slowly behind while scanning the surrounding area. "Itachi!!"
"Orochimaru knew that we would run to find Kabuto right away," Itachi said, looking over at the destroyed clone as he walked. "He went around us, rather than facing us directly this time. I wonder how long he was planning something like this?"

"Well, what happened with you guys?" Naruto blurted out, remembering. He wrestled the cut wire off of himself and looked back at Nagato. "And how did you know that was a fake so easily?"

"The Zetsu copies are usually undetectable, except by your older self. But I couldn't see any hint of the Kyuubi's chakra in the fake. That is one thing they are not able to replicate."

"You can see it?" that creeped Naruto out slightly. He was familiar with the idea of doujutsu and people that could see chakra, of course. He just wasn't sure how many people could see the beast sealed inside of him. No one had ever mentioned anything like that before.

"Aa." Nagato's eyes shifted to his stomach. "What did he do to the seal?"

"Um, well…" Naruto lifted up his shirt to look at it. He didn't have that sick, burning feeling anymore, but he could see that a different seal had been superimposed on his own. Both seals were already fading out of sight. "He said that… it was to keep the Kyuubi's chakra from leaking out, since this body is trying to absorb it. And he said he's going to make a body that will be able to hold it better." That creeped Naruto out even worse. He dropped his shirt and made an exaggerated gagging sound. "I don't want to be like him, and just go around pulling my face off, or stick my neck out, or all the other weird stuff he does!"

"I think it's pretty clear that he will try to take you away again sometime soon, presumably once this new body is finished," Itachi said. "I don't know what he has in mind for that, but we need to get you back home as soon as possible, before he has a chance."

Naruto knew this part was coming. And he knew that they were right, too, but… that didn't make it feel any less like he was running away from this fight.

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "I guess it's about time for me to be going home. I know I'll only keep everybody worried if I stay here. I've already found out a lot of stuff, so… I'll just try to get stronger as quickly as I can once I get back. It'll be a while before the war starts, and I can try to come up with a way to stop it before then."

"You did very well the first time around, with no prior warning at all. Just do your best, and don't try to take on everything by yourself," Nagato said, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"That is right," Itachi agreed. "I think what you will most have to learn in the coming years, Naruto, is to not let your desire to protect everyone keep you from relying on them. When you gain power, it is easy to become arrogant, and eventually distant from the people around you. That is what happened to me, and I failed in the end. You will fail, too, if you allow what you know to keep you from trusting in your friends. Knowing the future is its own kind of power, and it can lead you astray just as any other."

"But, Sasuke…" Naruto cast his eyes downward. "I have no idea what I should do to help him, even after being here a while. I don't want him to end up like he is in this time, but I don't think I can catch up to him now, if he's already gone. It's not like everything else, where I have years to figure out what to do."

"I have faith in your older self. You should, too." Itachi tilted his head with a faint smile. "It may be too late to stop Sasuke from leaving the village, but if you just continue to do what you have always done, you will be able to succeed eventually. It may not seem like it from your perspective, but
Sasuke is still very young. We are older and have done even worse things than him, so far. When you compare that, it isn't too late for him in the long run."

"I guess you're right… you guys are like, Kakashi-sensei old."

"No, Itachi is only twenty-one. And I would have turned thirty-six last month," Nagato said.

"Whaaaaaat?" Naruto put his hands on his cheeks as he drew the word out in a low scream.
"Wait, does that mean—Konan-nee is—"

"Konan is older than me by several months."

"But—no way! I mean, how?"

Itachi shook his head amusedly. "Speaking of Sasuke, I saw him not that long ago. I can't stay around here much longer. I promised I would go with him to help with the Edo-Uchiha."

"Wait!" Naruto cried as Itachi made to turn. "How did you see Sasuke? I thought you had gone to stop Kabuto! You guys still haven't told me what happened."

"I lost consciousness for a moment, but it was not long. Kabuto was too weak for it to hold," Nagato said. "It wasn't long enough for me to cause any trouble. I started toward the place he was after the connection was completely cut off. That's when I met up with Itachi. It turned out that Kabuto had died."

"He died…?" Naruto looked at Itachi, wide-eyed.

Itachi nodded. "Sasuke had heard about it from Orochimaru, and he went there to try to find me. Kabuto was already dying by the time we got there. The transformation he went through was too complete to be reversible. Once Orochimaru left his body, it could no longer survive without the presence of his cells. I think the amount of time he managed to hold on was impressive in itself… but then, he was an accomplished medical-nin who was very familiar with the process. He must have known what would happen."

"But why would Orochimaru do that?" Naruto demanded, clenching his fists. "I thought they were friends! Or—at least, on the same side. Haven't they been working together for years?" That was one thing he could never, ever accept. No matter how bad someone was, turning your back on a comrade was the lowest thing possible to him.

"It seemed like he had lost integrity in Orochimaru's eyes, for going such lengths to emulate him," Itachi murmured. "It was cruel, but unavoidable, perhaps. Without outside help, Orochimaru had to sacrifice his subordinate in order to fully return. He was also trying to slip away from the spores implanted on Kabuto by Zetsu. Black Zetsu appeared while we were there, trying to use Kabuto to find out information, and to control us. In the end, that was what killed him."

"Black Zetsu…?" Naruto was surprised to find himself feeling kind of sorry for Kabuto. It was because of him that Naruto had been thrown into this dangerous future in the first place, but… it was sad to die like that, abandoned by the one he served for so long. It reminded Naruto of the way Haku had died. He wondered if, deep down, Orochimaru felt sad about it at all, the way Zabuza had. Was there any room for remorse in his heart, at all?

"I should leave now," Itachi said after a pause. "You can go back to the medical camp if you want to say goodbye, but I don't think you should wait around for anyone that isn't there. We don't know
what Orochimaru will try next to get past your guard. For all we know, he may try to interfere with us sending you back somehow."

"A-Alright." Naruto hated saying goodbye, and this occasion was even worse than usual. But he had to go back, right? He didn't belong here. And even if he never saw this version of his friends again, he would be with something just like them in four years' time.

"Come on," Nagato said softly, motioning for Naruto to travel along beside him. "I came back at the start of all this, too, remember? We'll go home together."

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Even with the addition of Sasuke, things on the Uchiha front were not coming along easily. With him, Kankuro, and the others doing everything they could to detain the Edo-Uchihas, they had still only managed to seal a few of them. A slight improvement, but not the kind of success that Sasuke had hoped to bring to their efforts.

The problem was that this group of Uchiha did not seem particularly interested in fighting them head on. They were bent with a single-minded focus on escaping by any means necessary, and so it took a lot of effort and energy just to keep them all contained within one area. They blocked and dodged and jumped around them with tireless bodies, seemingly content to drag out the stalemate until their living opponents got tired. And they wouldn't have much longer to wait, either. The Iwa-nin were running out of chakra from continually blocking them with walls of earth, and the others were low on weapons and stamina. The only ones still fighting decently were Sasuke and Kankuro. Omoi and Sai stayed back from the main fighting, ready to help seal on a moment's notice.

A pair of sword-wielding Uchiha ran and vaulted over the most recent earth wall, acting as if it wasn't even there. Instead of trying to run away this time, however, they jumped down on the other side and drew their swords in a flash. They descended toward the exposed necks of the exhausted Iwa-nin. One of them looked up in time to see that their enemy was actually attacking, shouted "Look out!" and tried pushing the other one out of the way. The two would have almost certainly been beheaded, except that just as the Edo-Uchiha bore down on them, a long violet arm reached out and grabbed the Uchiha mid-flight. Sasuke hurled them toward Omoi, who lined up with the incoming enemies and gave a long, graceful slice. The swords of the Uchiha clattered to the ground as their arms were disconnected, ash-like pieces flying through the air. The Uchiha themselves fell to the ground shortly after, bodies rapidly regenerating.

"Now, Sai!" Omoi yelled.

"Right!" Sai quickly scrawled ink with an expert hand over the large blank scroll in front of him. Two tigers roared into life from the surface of the paper and pounced on the Uchiha, digging in teeth and claws to drag their stolen souls into the seal.

"At this rate, we're not even going to be able to contain them," Sasuke said, looking around at the remaining fighters, all of whom were reaching their limits. "If they start fighting back when people get sloppy, none of you will have a chance. Anyone who will not be of use in this fight should leave now."

"Oi! Sasuke! You're not the one that gets to make that call!" Kankuro shouted from where he was locked in a stalemate with several Uchiha.

Sasuke ignored him and swept his eyes over the battlefield, trying to locate his parents again. He knew they were here; he had caught a glimpse of them just a moment ago, before he'd turned to help with the ones that jumped over the wall.
"Sorry I'm late," he heard a familiar voice beside him, and turned to see that his brother had finally arrived.

"Itachi! It's about time!" Sasuke sounded angry at the delay, but also a little bit surprised that he had actually shown up.

"This isn't a battle that can be won with the small amount of troops here," Itachi said, looking around. "If I'm not mistaken, this is the Alliance's ambush unit. They aren't meant for an extended battle."

"Forget them; they won't listen to what we have to say, anyway. The two of us can just—" Sasuke stopped talking when he finally caught sight of his father again. He started moving that way, but suddenly the movement of all the controlled Edo-Uchiha changed.

It was as if each one of them decided at the same time to group up with one or two of the ones closest to them, and make one more good run for it. They put on bursts of speed, plowing through the weakening defenses of the Allied Shinobi Force and heading off, all in different directions. Sasuke cursed and started running after his parents again. The two of them had grouped together, and they broke through like all the rest.

"Sasuke!" Itachi called, but he followed after his brother, knowing there was no way he would turn around now.

It wasn't lost on Itachi that the Uchiha's attack pattern suddenly changed when he arrived. He had heard from the report with Kakashi's group that this particular batch of Edo Tensei summons seemed to have a specific goal, separate from their relatives on the other battlefields. If they had only been humoring the ASF unit that had caught up to them, it was possible that Itachi's presence would be too troublesome for them to continue the fight any longer. If the group split, he and Sasuke couldn't follow them all… so of course their parents would be included as a ready-made distraction to free up all the rest.

If Sasuke realized this, he didn't seem to care. He gave a glance back and, seeing that his brother was following, turned and continued the pursuit of their parents with all his will.

"We still haven't been able to contact the Uchiha front," Inoichi said. "Judging by the way they were cut off, either their radio was destroyed, or no one there is able to use it right now. Either way, they could be in trouble. We may have waited too long in getting them to retreat."

"Damn it!" Tsunade stood up abruptly from the table and started pacing restlessly. After a few seconds, she stopped and turned toward the sensors sitting around the giant globe of water. "Inoichi, can you get Naruto to send a bunshin over there to see what's going on?"

"Yes. Understood." Inoichi put his hand into a half-ram sign and went quiet for a moment. They all waited and watched for several minutes as he delivered the message.

"What?" Inoichi gasped suddenly.

"What is it?" Shikaku asked, realizing instantly from his friend's tone that something was very wrong.

"Tsunade-sama! Naruto says that his younger self is missing!" Inoichi reported. "He had sent a bunshin back to the medical camp to keep him company. But when he got there, they realized that someone had sent an impostor bunshin to the camp first. The impostor and the younger Naruto are both gone. No doubt, the impostor was able to talk the younger Naruto into leaving. No one knows
"Just one thing after another!" Ay boomed, standing up from the table as well. "We can't afford to be looking for lost children on the battlefield! This is exactly the kind of thing we have been working all this time to prevent!"

"Tell him to send some more bunshin to the medical camp, and start searching from there. He should be able to sense and find his younger self." Tsunade said. "But we still need someone to check out the situation at the Uchiha front, so have him go there as well."

"Y-Yes," Inoichi agreed. He didn't say what Tsunade was probably thinking. It was doubtful that Naruto would be satisfied with continuing on with everything else while his younger self was missing. At least, if it became clear that he was in serious danger. Naruto might even insist on searching for his younger self in person, which could put them both in harm's way. This really was getting out of hand.

A few more moments of silence, and Inoichi sighed.

"He said that he already did that, and he was able to sense his younger self. Maybe this won't be too much of a fiasco."

"Have them update the moment they find out anything," Ay said. "Even if the enemy claims that they can't use him for the Kyuubi, we can't afford to take any risks."

Just then, the large globe of water showed several visible ripples. Everyone stopped to watch the disturbance.

"Something new has appeared near the desert front," Ao said, concentrating. "They had all the Kage sealed, but—there's still an enemy there. Someone powerful. And there's something else... the masked man is on the move, with some others in tow."

"Who?" Tsunade asked.

"Have there been sightings reported on either of the disturbances?" Shikaku added.

"Nothing yet. They just appeared..." Inoichi said.

"No, wait." Ao lifted his head up, expression tense. "Hold on... the one with the masked man is Yondaime Mizukage-sama! And the others... they are all former Jinchuuriki, as well."

"And in the desert?" Ay demanded. "Has anyone seen what appeared there?"

"Not yet..."

The scorching bright sunlight reflected off the nearly white sands, accentuating the desolate feel of this place. This was a rather unusual location to end up in, wasn't it? And that wasn't all.

Uchiha Madara looked down at his gloved hands, uncurling them slowly. Something didn't feel quite right. He was no longer an old man, barely clinging to life by siphoning energy from the tree he'd cultivated using Hashirama's cells. That much, at least, was certain. But he wasn't truly alive, either. The fiery chakra he took such pride in still burned underneath his fingertips—but it didn't heat his blood, he couldn't feel it in his veins the way he used to. Was this the Edo Tensei? Something must have gone wrong along the way after his death.
And where was this? Nowhere close to where the Gedo Mazou was stored underground, that was for sure. Somewhere within the Land of Wind? Madara started walking, feet sinking slightly in the crystalline sand. If this was the result of someone using the Edo Tensei, who was it? And where were they? He couldn't feel any chakra trying to impose its will on his own—not that it would work in any case, but still. In fact, there didn't seem to be anyone around here at all.

No. That wasn't true. Madara paused, listening to his senses. No… this place was far from deserted, actually. He felt the presence of enough people to form several armies, and they were just over that ridge. He continued walking to the edge, where the wind had blown most of the sand off, revealing the baked-clay earth.

Below, the sun cast long shadows through the natural rock formations of this valley. And there, down in between them, was the great force that he'd felt. An army much larger than what they would have seen back in the Warring Clans Era was assembled there.

Their headbands all simply said, 'Shinobi'. Yet, he could see that they wore clothing and gear from all five of the Great Shinobi Countries. That meant this had something to do with the Hidden Villages. Down there was where he would find answers. But also… Madara cracked a sly smile. It was nice to be able to move freely again. It might be a perfect chance to see what this Edo Tensei body could do.

"There is no doubt that the others have escaped by now," Itachi said, running along beside Sasuke.

"I don't care," Sasuke said in a hard tone. "Orochimaru was never going to let us capture all of them. They would have just started picking off everyone one by one if you hadn't showed up."

So he had realized what was happening. It seemed that, at least, some of Sasuke's naïveté had worn off these past few years—he was starting to have a sense for when he was being manipulated. Still, his temper often left him falling into it anyway.

"Will you be going after him, after we seal Mother and Father?"

"Aa," Sasuke said. "He wants to meet up with me near Konoha. Depending on his explanation, I will continue to there alone to take care of the rest of them. I can't just follow in your footsteps when it comes to the village, nii-san." He glanced over at his brother. As usual, Itachi seemed quiet on the topic of his ambitions. They clearly went against what Itachi himself wanted and believed, but he never said anything against it. He didn't express his opinion of the matter at all.

"Why did you leave me alive?" Sasuke continued in frustrated anguish. "If what you decided meant that everyone had to die, why was I the exception? Dying would have been easier." He felt that, either way, his life had ended that night. It would have been better not to be conscious in the silence, to be awake to see and feel everything that came after.

"I told you. I thought that you might still have a chance to live a good life," Itachi said quietly. "You didn't know anything. Killing you would have been nothing but more senseless slaughter."

"Was that all?"

"…No." As counteractive as it could be, he knew being honest was the best thing right now. "I was able to secure your safety by agreeing to take the mission myself. I knew it was what needed to be done for the village, but… I wanted you to be protected."

Sasuke looked away, wrestling with the growing turmoil. It was just as Tobi had said: Itachi had cared more for his life than the entire village. He had resolved to do the same, and destroy the place
that had used and put his brother through hell. Still, though, he didn't understand it.

"You knew that the ones handing down that order were corrupt, but you followed it anyway. What is so important about the village, that you would betray your own clan?"

"I can't make you see it. All I can do for you now is try to answer your questions honestly."

Sasuke looked back at Itachi with a frown. Their perspectives were wildly different, of course, but he had hoped for a more satisfying answer than that. Village, family, clan… what did those things really mean? How could anyone view them clearly enough to weigh them next to each other on a scale? There was still more to find out here.

Both brothers halted when they looked ahead and saw that their parents had stopped up ahead and were now turned to face them.

"Are they going to fight?" Sasuke wondered out loud, but his question was quickly answered when their eyes suddenly flared red. Fugaku bent forward and a fierce stream of flame burst out of his mouth toward them. Mikoto jumped up behind him and hurled a giant windmill shuriken at them directly afterward. Sasuke and Itachi dodged away from each other, but as the hot flame shot toward them, eagerly devouring the air, shuriken hidden in the flames spun out in many directions. Thin, red-hot, and deadly, the brothers both activated their eyes to avoid the projectiles. Just then, Mikoto pulled on a wire attached to the first shuriken, and it broke apart into pieces that flew behind the others in a way that made the entire thing very difficult to dodge. It was a double bluff. Itachi skidded to a halt beside Sasuke after jumping and twisting to avoid it—a habit, despite the fact that he couldn't truly be hurt by it. Sasuke had thrown the path of the projectiles off with lightning before any could hit him.

"As expected, their combination is a good one," Sasuke said after Itachi landed beside him. "But they're still being completely controlled, like all the others… you can seal them, can't you?"

"Yes," Itachi said. His eyes shifted, and the ghostly red form of his Susano'o materialized into view around him. Sasuke followed suit and called his out again, just in case he had to hold them still. Even if they couldn't stop the whole clan right now, they could at least keep Orochimaru from manipulating their parents anymore. It was such a deliberate provocation, but something had to be done.

Itachi traced Fugaku and Mikoto's movements, the Sword of Totsuka at the ready. Back when he had still been alive, using the Mangekyou Sharingan so many times within the span of a few hours would have certainly left him bedridden for days. It made him all the more aware of Sasuke's undeniable potential.

Their parents' movements became easier to track using the Mangekyou, a process made even simpler by the total control imposed on them. They weren't as quick or smooth in executing their attacks as they would have been. Capitalizing on an opening should be easy… but the memories etched into those eyes were distracting. The images of his parents' faces from that night kept superimposing over the blank, uncaring ones they wore now.

Back then, no explanation had been necessary. They had known from the moment Itachi showed up in his ANBU uniform. They knew… that time, they knew that fighting or struggling would be pointless. Instead, they decided to leave the world with dignity, staying true to what they believed. Despite their differences, they still regarded him with love and respect.

"Our suffering will be over in an instant."
"You truly are…"

"Nii-san! What are you doing? Pay attention!" Sasuke called out, deflecting another volley of red-hot shuriken.

Itachi broke himself out of the memories, trying hard to concentrate. He wouldn't have thought this would be so challenging. Compared to that night, of course, it was nothing… but the past and present were blending together too much. It was best to end this as soon as possible.

Fugaku and Mikoto were getting into position to make another combination attack. Sasuke flanked them, ready to draw their fire if necessary. He glanced back at Itachi, who nodded. He was ready. He turned his eyes back to them, looking for that small moment of opportunity, the weak point in their attack. The Sword of Totsuka flared brightly and shot forward in a long thrust, timed at the exact moment when the two Edo Tensei bodies were in align. It pierced through them both, causing ash-like particles to fly through the air as they silently recoiled. Itachi bit his lip, again forcing down the memories that tried to assault him. This was far, far more difficult than he'd bargained for.

They were finally still. Their faces cracked even more, little pieces falling and dissolving into the air. Itachi walked closer, making sure his Susano'o kept a firm grip on the sword. Sasuke had stopped moving, as well—he stopped once he saw that there was no way their parents would be able to escape. His expression was unguarded again, making him look like the child he had once been.

Their parents' eyes were changing from red to black. The white that indicated that they were being fully controlled wasn't there. They were coming back to themselves as their souls were starting to lose connection with the Edo Tensei bodies.

"You did it… Itachi," Mikoto said faintly, hands clutching the glowing sword that pierced through her and her husband. "Well done, son."

"Kaa-san…" Sasuke stepped forward, dropping his own Susano'o and Sharingan. It made him look even more like his younger self.

"Sasuke… well, look at the two of you," Mikoto said, giving him a bright, but strained smile. "There is some good in all of this, after all. I'm glad I finally get to see… you boys fighting side-by-side."

Fugaku was standing behind her, and it looked like he had also regained consciousness. But he just looked at them enigmatically without commenting.

"Tou-san," Sasuke came closer and looked at him, as well. "I can't just do what you said before. I can't just forget about the clan and move on. That was what you and kaa-san gave your lives for, isn't it? You know what those Konoha bastards made Itachi do. How could I just forget about all of that?"

Fugaku gave an inaudible sigh. Just like Mikoto, his form was crumbling quickly. They wouldn't last much longer.

"It is no longer our place to tell you what you should do. You are old enough now to choose your own path. What I would have done, what your mother or Itachi would have done—that doesn't matter now. Whatever you choose, as long as you stay resolute in your beliefs… I will continue to take pride in calling you my child."

Sasuke's eyes widened; he looked like he had been struck.

"You don't have to bear the burden of what we did for the rest of your life. Just live," Mikoto whispered, reaching out toward him. Sasuke took her hand in his, face twisted with grief.
"No, you didn't... they were the ones who..."

Sasuke's protest never fully formed. A soft glow surrounded both of his parents as an otherworldly breeze lifted the ends of their hair.

"Sasuke."

Itachi was beside him now. Sasuke's eyes widened when he turned to look at him—his brother was also starting to crumble.

"W-What's going on?" he demanded, taking one hand off his mother's so that he could face Itachi more fully. "I—I thought that you would be able to stay."

"I'm sorry, Sasuke," Itachi murmured the familiar phrase that Sasuke always hated to hear. He started to slowly reach a cracking hand toward him. "It turns out that this is the last time. I have nothing left to do here, and it's time for me to move on, too."

Sasuke stood frozen in place as Itachi inched closer. Mikoto squeezed his hand once, before she and Fugaku faded away entirely. The shell of their images shattered and slipped free of the bodies tethering them here, debris falling down to the ground. Itachi's Susano'o faded away as well, as he too started to become unbound. Sasuke stayed unmoving through all of it, until Itachi leaned in and touched their foreheads together. Sasuke blinked.

"But you don't have to forgive me this time," Itachi said. "No matter what you choose to do from now on, I... we will always love you."

The last thread holding him broke, and Itachi's soul followed their parents. Sasuke looked up as he was leaving, visible for only a moment before the glowing, translucent form disappeared. The body left behind disintegrated.

Sasuke was left behind with the corpses and ash. He stayed standing in that spot for a long time, staring down at the remnants.

The short trip back to the medical camp was uneventful, fortunately, but the younger Naruto still had plenty to worry about.

"I hope Sakura-chan or Shizune-neechan don't try to murder me for sneaking off like that," he muttered as he and Nagato neared the walled-in area where the medical tents were set up. "They can't blame me for wanting to get out and do something, right?"

"AHA! There you are!" the older Naruto's bunshin came popping out of the bushes, making the younger screech loudly and stumble backwards. "Heh, that was actually really easy!"

"Calm down, Naruto. It's the real thing. A real bunshin, anyway," Nagato said, catching the younger Naruto's arm before he stumbled into a prickly bush.

"Damn it, aniki! Don't scare me like that!" the younger shouted, recovering himself quickly and dusting leaves off his pants.

"Oi! That's my line, don't you think?" the bunshin said with a scowl. "I guess you wandered off with a fake me or something, like you couldn't even tell the difference!"

"Hey! I'm you, so that means that you would have done the same thing, idiot!" the younger pointed at the elder stubbornly.
"Don't call your older self an idiot! Idiot!"

"Naruto, did you see if there were any sealers at the medical camp?" Nagato said, once again deflecting them with an interruption. He seemed very patient with their energy and constant antics.

"Hm? Oh, right… they said there weren't any right now, but they were going to call someone to come here so that the little me wouldn't be out close to the battlefields again." The older Naruto scratched the back of his head.

"Alright, then. We'll stay here to wait."

"Okay—er, what happened, anyway? Everyone was really worried that you were going to be captured again, little bro," the bunshin said as they started toward the entrance to the medical camp. "But you just showed up again before we even had time to go look for you. I could sense you guys coming this way. I guess Nagato was able to find you before anything bad happened?"

"Uh… kind of," the younger said.

There were guards at the entryway. They, too, looked surprised to see all of them back so soon, and more than a little wary. Sakura appeared behind them, craning her neck to look.

"And who are you?" one of the guards asked Nagato suspiciously, holding on tightly to the long pole he held. He was from Konoha, and while he didn't recognize the pale man with red hair, those eyes made him instantly wary.

"He's with us, it's fine. It's a long story, so don't worry about it," the bunshin said, waving one hand casually.

The guard frowned at such a carefree response, but Sakura pushed past them before he could respond. "Naruto! What were you thinking, going off on your own like that? Didn't you learn your lesson the first time? I swear…"

"C'mon, it wasn't my fault!" Naruto grumbled. "And it all worked out, so there's no reason to rub it in."

The guards each shook their heads at that, and Sakura sighed.

"Well, you'd better come this way, anyway. It's a relief to see you didn't get hurt."

"I guess this means you're going back home, huh?" the bunshin said, looking at his younger self as they walked into the camp. There weren't many people there, but the ones that were all stopped to look when they passed. They did make a rather odd group, after all. No doubt, someone had already reported into Headquarters about this.

"Yeah," the younger said. He looked from his older self, to Sakura. "We can't really wait anymore. I guess Sai, Neji and everyone else are all off fighting, right?"

Sakura nodded, then cast him a sympathetic look. "I'm afraid so. We were all put into different units once we got to Kumo."

"Well, we already said goodbye when everyone left Suna, and everyone back in the village when we left there. It would be a pain to do that over again, anyway," Naruto mumbled, scuffing the ground with his foot. "Is there anything you guys want me to pass along when I get back home?"

He jumped when Sakura suddenly wrapped her arms around him in a hug. His older self jumped
back as well, screeching in shock.

"That is from me to you," Sakura said, backing up and looking at him and smiling. "Make sure I train hard with Tsunade-shishou, and don't let me give you a difficult time. I always hated being so far behind you guys, so use that if it seems like I'm trying to give up."

"I-I'll make sure you don't give up!" Naruto assured, trying to hide the red on his face. "If we have to, we'll find Sasuke, together."

His older self laughed, and walked over to ruffle his hair. "Now you're talking! Just say hello to everyone for me, even Itachi and Nagato when you get the chance… but, y'know… that doesn't mean you have to go easy on them." The bunshin grinned at Nagato, who shook his head with an amused huff.

"I told you this before, but… I don't care what you do regarding me. Just try to save Jiraiya-sensei, if you can," Nagato said seriously, after Naruto turned to him.

"Oh, yeah. Ero-sennin can be kind of weird sometimes, but listen to what he has to say in training, even if it seems pointless," his older self interjected. "Uh… I'm not completely sure if *everything* had a point, but I think that most of it did."

"Isn't there any way I can stop you without Konoha being destroyed, or you having to die?" Naruto asked with a frown.

"I really don't know." Nagato closed his eyes regretfully. "The village's destruction was more than simple revenge. I had grown mostly indifferent to the personal circumstances between Konoha and myself, at least in terms of feeling any real emotion toward it. It was mainly done to initiate the final phase of the plan, to intimidate *all* the Great Shinobi Countries. But at the time, I had not been fully aware that Madara's intentions lay elsewhere. I wanted to achieve peace in the *real* world, even though, as you rightly pointed out when you faced me, order through fear is not exactly real. I didn't know what his actual plans were. But I *did* figure out, through all the years, that he was most likely using us to further his own ends. That is why, when I realized that you had what it took to find a better answer, I betrayed him. We were never true allies. I disliked the way he viewed myself, Konan, and Akatsuki."

"So, if you didn't know… then you think you'd betray him again, if I told you the truth about what he was planning?" Naruto asked eagerly. That seemed like a good start!

"I wouldn't recommend it," Nagato murmured. "I know you have the ability to convince me, but the problem is ending up in a situation where you have that chance… it's too dangerous. You won't be able to reach my tower undetected, and then you would be captured."

"But all the Jinchuuriki were taken alive, right?" Naruto put a hand on his chin thoughtfully.

"You are *not* going to let yourself get captured, Naruto!" Sakura said, incensed. "If you try that, I'll come back in time *myself* and give you the knock in the head you obviously need! Idiot!"

"S-Sakura-chan," the older Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "If it's Nagato and not one of the others, maybe there *is* a chance there would be enough time to—! Hey! I'm a bunshin, remember?" He put his arms up defensively as she bared a fist at him.

"I understand that you want to keep your village from being destroyed," Nagato said. "But if you get captured, it's unlikely that Konoha will simply sit by and do nothing. If they try to make an assault on Amegakure, it will only lead to them being destroyed sooner. It could even start a war like this one."
"Oh. Right." Naruto looked down at his feet, thinking, then looked back up. "Well, I'll think of something. I'm not going to let any of that happen!"

"Don't worry too much about what path to take. Just stay alive. That is the best thing you can possibly do for your village," Nagato said softly.

Someone was approaching their group, and Sakura turned her head to look at them. The others followed suit. It was a nervous-looking sealer from Suna, carrying a large roll of cloth in his arms.

"Sorry, it took a while to get here," he said. "Are you the ones that Headquarters wanted me to meet?"

"Yes," Nagato said. "You can seal me at any time."

"Wait, wait!" the younger Naruto said hastily. He turned back to his older self. "Aniki… there was something you said earlier, when we first met." He clenched his fists tightly. It was time to ask now, before he lost his nerve. "You said you could feel our—our parents watching over me. I guess that means… you know who they are?"

Naruto looked up to stare his older self in the eye, curious, but a little bit afraid. If what the masked man had said was true, then that meant… his father was the one that had sealed the Kyuubi into him. The Yondaime Hokage. It sounded too crazy to be true, and yet he couldn't shake the feeling… a feeling like he already knew it was, somehow.

His older self stared back silently for a while, then the corners of his lips curled upward.

"I'm sure they want to tell you the full story themselves. It would take a while to explain it all, anyway. I'm not sure I can do it justice." He rubbed under his nose with a smirk. "But Mom and Dad… they were heroes that saved the village. They loved us a lot, you know? And they would have wanted to stay and be there for us every day, but they had to give up their lives to save the village from the Kyuubi. That's just the kind of people they were. We're a family of proud shinobi that will do anything to protect the people we love! That's what I learned when I finally got to meet them. You will sometime, too, and then you'll understand."

"But… how?" Naruto asked, voice cracking. "If they're dead… how will I get to see them?"

"I—" he stumbled out. It was finally happening. Naruto scrunched his face up against the tears, but it was no good. They started rolling down his cheeks in a steady stream, and he scrubbed an arm across his face to try to get rid of them.
time’ll pass before you know it! And you'll do great. Everyone here believes in you.”

His older self’s statement of confidence really didn’t help much in the way of stopping the flow of his tears—if anything, hearing that they truly believed in him made his throat close up even more. But Naruto turned around to where Nagato and the sealer from Suna were standing anyway. He gave them a nod, dropping his hands down by his sides and trying to compose himself. This was why he hated goodbyes so much.

"I'm starting now," the sealer said. He unrolled a length of cloth and draped it over his arm, looking at them for confirmation. Nagato inclined his head, and the older Naruto gave a thumbs up. The younger clenched his fists and relaxed them several more times, nervousness impeding slightly on his other emotions.

The sealer made a hand sign and the cloth sprang to life, rushing forward and steadily wrapping around Nagato's body, efficiently covering him from the feet up.

"Thank you, Naruto, for everything you have done..." Nagato smiled, face starting to peel and crack, "...and for everything that you will do."

The cloth finished covering him, and seal lines appeared, scrawling down and over each side of the cloth. The sealer let out a breath that he had been holding and eased the sealed body down to the ground. He and everyone else turned to look at Naruto expectantly.

Bothersome tears still blurring his eyes, Naruto looked down at himself, increasingly nervous. He was afraid for a moment that all their guessing had been wrong—they never knew for sure that it would work, after all. But it was only a few seconds later that cracks and lines started to appear on his skin. The lines deepened, becoming three-dimensional, and the sections between where the lines met began peeling and drifting into the air. Naruto looked back up at the people looking at him, an odd sense of unreality coming over him. It was the same disconnectedness he had felt when he had slipped into the past momentarily. The bond between his soul and this body was weakening.

I promise, he said with his mind, no longer able to say it out loud.

Naruto felt himself floating up and away. He was able to look down and see everyone growing smaller for just a second, until everything was awash in white. It was a lot like falling asleep. His eyes might have been open, or closed—he couldn't tell. But then, that concept probably had no meaning without a body. Naruto didn't see it, exactly—but he got the impression of someone beside him. It was a tall young man with dark hair and calm, but amused eyes. He had never seen this person before, but something about him felt warm and familiar, like a face or smell from a long time ago. His clothing was odd, impossible to connect to any village that Naruto knew.

Who are you?

The image faded, drowned out in white, but there were others, increasingly difficult to see. The silhouette of a long white coat. A glimmer of red. A blast of hot air on his face. And then, an acidic, inky blackness. But all of those went too quickly to get anything of substance out of them.

He started falling. It would have been terrifying, if it was possible to see anything. But the world dimmed from muffled gray into black, and he lost consciousness until suddenly, he could feel things again. His entire being felt jolted by the sudden transition.

Naruto's eyes flew open, heart thumping. It was difficult to breathe, and he nearly panicked—but he forced himself to look around without making any sudden movements.
Warm evening light from the window showed him the familiar greenish walls of the hospital. The one that no longer existed in the future. He was laying down in bed again, a breathing mask on his face and all kinds of things stuck to him. Naruto looked beside the bed, but the chair was empty. No one was here right now.

Lifting a hand to curl around the bed's railing, Naruto pulled himself up very slowly. He felt much, much more awake this time, but his body hurt all over. It was not easy to move. He looked over at the window, trying to get a good look at the buildings outside. He noticed a table with his old hitai-ate sitting on it, and a vase with a single cut daffodil in it. It looked fresh. Naruto reached out as far as he could and touched his fingertips to the headband's metal faceplate, with all its nicks and scratches from long use.

He shifted around to try to get out of bed, but he was hooked up to so many machines that doing so pulled painfully in several places. But even from here, he could see that the skyline outside his window was the same one that he had grown up with.

He was finally home.
Extra: Meanwhile, In The Past II

Chapter Notes

Surprise! The last time I did this, a lot of people said they wanted to know more about what happened in the past immediately following Naruto's departure. So this time, I decided to do a continuation of that. This picks up right where the extra in ch 13 left off.

I would also like to take this time to give a big 'thank you' to everyone that read, commented, or bookmarked in the SWW Arc! I've learned a lot and talked with many of you along the way, and it's generally been helpful and fun. You all are great. Hopefully this little extra will help some what in tiding over to the next arc!

Meanwhile, In the Past II

Kakashi stood in the hospital room a bit longer after Tsunade left, telling him that they had done all they could for now and instructing him to tell the rest of his team what had happened. He didn't know how he was supposed to even begin. For one thing, it was still illegal to reveal Naruto's status as a Jinchuuriki to the younger generation. He didn't know if Tsunade intended on lifting that ban now that it seemed someone had stolen the Kyuubi from him—it was probably too early to even speculate. First they had to find out if that was really what had happened, and if so, how. Yet, Kakashi wasn't sure how to get across to his team how serious this was without revealing that. For the time being, he supposed, they would just have to deal with partial information.

The whole time he was thinking about this, Kakashi kept looking at Naruto's unnaturally still form on the hospital bed, covered with support and monitoring devices. The only sign that he was still alive was the slow but rhythmic beeps from the heart monitor. Kakashi rested a hand on top of Naruto's head briefly, ruffling his student's blond hair, before turning to leave. He blinked upon stepping out of the hospital's front doors. It was later in the evening than he'd thought, and the sky was already dark.

Even with Tsunade there, it had taken the medics a while to get Naruto to a point where his life wasn't in danger. For now. It was almost certain that he would never be able to wake until they sealed the Kyuubi back in him. Until then, they just had to hope that their medical expertise and Naruto's natural toughness would be enough to keep him alive.

Everything was business as usual in town as Kakashi loped down the street, though one could still feel the bright atmosphere of optimism left over from the instating of a new Hōgake. There were still more people out than usual, meeting with each other and chatting over good food. No one was yet aware that the village might have been infiltrated and their bijuu stolen. The peace that they had gained after Orochimaru's attack could be shattered at any moment if the perpetrators decided to unleash the Kyuubi on the village once again. If that happened now, while their forces were still spread thin trying to keep up with missions… it could very well be a disaster worse than the one that had ended the Yondaime's life.

When Kakashi reached the place where he'd told his team to meet, no one was there. Not surprising, considering he'd told them to go home to wait for him if he took longer than half an hour. He hadn't
really expected them to be there—maybe he was just stalling, trying to formulate what to say. He considered going to the memorial tablet to mull things over for a bit longer, but then decided against it. It wouldn't do to conflate the past and present any more than he already had. It was hard not to, with the persistent image of his young student laying there as if dead.

Kakashi started toward the nearest house, the Haruno residence. He only had to tap on the door a couple of times before Haruno Mebuki opened the door, warm light from inside falling out onto the doorstep.

"Oh, Kakashi-san! Sakura had just about given up on you. Sakura!" she called back into the house.

"I said I'll do it in a minute, Mom!" Sakura yelled back from somewhere upstairs.

Mebuki gave an aggravated sigh and turned around fully to call up the stairs. "Not that, you silly girl! Kakashi-san is here!"

"Eh?!"

"Aa… sorry I'm so late," Kakashi said, scratching the back of his head. "This shouldn't take long."

Sakura came thumping down the stairs, and Mebuki left the front step to let her pass by. She stepped out onto the porch and closed the front door most of the way behind her. Kakashi still didn't know exactly how he was going to explain everything, so it was just as well that Sakura spoke up first.

"Kakashi-sensei! Where have you been? We waited for you a while… then Sasuke-kun said he was going to go train since we weren't getting a mission… I went by Naruto's apartment, too, but neither of you were there."

"Right," Kakashi said, shifting his weight and putting his hands in his pockets. "Sakura… something's happened to Naruto. He's in the hospital now. It may be a while before our team is returned to active duty."

"Huh?" Sakura looked extremely confused for a moment, but then her pink brows scrunched together. "Was it Uchiha Itachi again? After Sasuke-kun just got out of the hospital?"

"No… well, we don't know." Kakashi amended. For all they knew, it was Itachi. Who else could sneak in here completely undetected, after all? And Jiraiya had already thwarted one attempt by Itachi to capture him. "I found Naruto unconscious in his own bed. But so far, there have been no eyewitnesses to help us determine who attacked him, or when. None of the neighbors saw or heard anything unusual, and the barrier corps didn't detect any intruders entering or leaving the village."

"But… he'll be okay in a few days, won't he? Just like with Sasuke-kun?" Sakura frowned up at him. He could see the gears in her mind working, trying to figure out why an attack like this would fall on Naruto, of all people.

"No, Sakura. It's something much more serious than that. I hate to say it, but… there's a very real chance he might never wake up." Even saying it like that was putting it mildly. Naruto wouldn't ever wake up, not until the bijuu was returned to him. That was an irreversible fact.

"Huh?" Sakura was clearly thrown by Kakashi's words and deathly serious tone. "But—wait, Kakashi-sensei! What are you talking about? He was just… he was perfectly fine just a couple of
days ago! How could he possibly be in that bad of shape now? What could do that to him?"

"We have some ideas, but I can't say anything about that just yet. For starters, nothing's been outright confirmed," Kakashi said. "You and Sasuke can visit him tomorrow. Tsunade-sama wants to monitor him overnight to make sure he's stable enough, before allowing anyone to visit."

"O-Okay," Sakura said uncertainly. "What did Sasuke-kun say about all this?"

"I still have to tell him," Kakashi turned to leave. "I'll keep the two of you posted on our team's status, as well. Later." He held up a hand in a light wave as he stepped down onto the street. He didn't look behind him as he started off toward Sasuke's apartment, but the fact that he didn't hear a door closing meant Sakura must have stayed standing there for a while after he left.

It was getting to be even later now, and Kakashi considered waiting until morning to visit Sasuke. He probably wouldn't appreciate an intrusion this late, but even more than that, Kakashi had no idea how the young Uchiha would react. He had been especially closed-off lately, and Kakashi knew, perhaps better than anyone, what had been going through his mind ever since Itachi appeared again. He had seen it so many times—shinobi who gave themselves over to revenge to the point where nothing else mattered.

He did a good job of hiding it, but Sasuke's attitude toward Naruto in particular had undergone a change. First, everything in the Exams, including the incident with the Ichibi Jinchuuriki, showed just how much the former dead-last had improved in a short amount of time. But what was possibly even worse, Jiraiya told them about how Itachi had brushed Sasuke off for the sake of hunting Naruto. It was a twisted kind of jealousy, to be sure, but understandable. Having planned his moment of revenge for years, only to be ignored in favor of Naruto for a reason he didn't know… how would Sasuke feel about losing his teammate to those same mysterious circumstances?

Before he knew it, Kakashi's feet had led him to the front door of Sasuke's apartment. He sighed. Might as well get this over with.

"Oi, Sasuke, it's me. Sorry I'm late," Kakashi called, knocking on the door.

There was no response at first. Maybe Sasuke had gone to sleep already? Kakashi was just about to try again, without very much enthusiasm, when the door creaked open. At first, all he could see was a bright red Sharingan eye glaring out of the darkness. But then the door opened wider, and Sasuke's glare smoothed into a neutral expression, eyes changing back to normal. Kakashi quickly noted the kunai he held behind his back, as well as a few small bruises and scratches on his arms.

"What happened? Did you get into a fight?" Kakashi asked, looking down at him sharply.

"It's nothing." Sasuke sounded tired. "Are we returning to missions soon, or not?"

"You might not like this," Kakashi cautioned. "Our team has been suspended for an undetermined amount of time. Though, given the state of things right now, it probably won't take long before we're given new assignments to fit our reduced firepower."

"What are you talking about?" Sasuke started angrily. "I'm—"

"It's not you," Kakashi broke in. "Naruto's been attacked. He's in the hospital now. I can't give you the details about it just yet, but you and Sakura will be able to visit him starting tomorrow, if you want. It might be quite a while before he can recover."

Sasuke's fists clenched. Just like with Sakura, Kakashi could see the young Uchiha's mind working, trying to comprehend the reason someone would go after Naruto. His students were all so easy to
read, still—how could he know their thoughts, yet remain unable to do a single thing to help them?

"Why..." Sasuke started in a low voice. "Why him? What has he got to do with anything? Tell me what happened."

"I'm sorry, I can't," Kakashi said. "We don't know all of the details yet. But we're doing everything we can to find out what happened and who was responsible. For now, you'll just have to accept that."

Kakashi knew that telling Sasuke to accept something was about as futile as trying to stop the sun from rising, but at least he knew enough to piece the truth together himself, more or less. The bigger concern is what he would do after figuring out that this was probably the work of Akatsuki. Sasuke was glaring up at Kakashi again, although he didn't go so far as to activate the Sharingan this time.

"You said it might be a while before he can recover. What do you mean by that? What's wrong with him?"

Kakashi sighed. "To put it very simply, Naruto's life energy and chakra have been almost completely removed from him, leaving his body an empty shell. He has just enough to stay alive, but he probably wouldn't last long without support. And before you ask how it happened, that's exactly what we would like to know, too."

Sasuke just stared. It seemed he was having a hard time processing all of this. It was very sudden, after all. But Kakashi wondered if there was more to it than just that.

"You can see for yourself tomorrow. Tsunade-sama wants to give you a final checkup, anyway. Our team has been unlucky lately, hasn't it?"

"...Aa."

"Well," Kakashi took a step to the side, turning to leave. "I'll see you then. And I'll let you guys know about missions when I hear anything."

Sasuke remained silent as he left. Kakashi didn't believe for a second that the boy was satisfied with his mediocre explanations. But he certainly understood the most important part—Naruto could easily die, and there was very little any of them could do about it now.

Their most hyperactive team member was sometimes idiotic and often annoying, but he had always been a constant. For all of them.

There were no guards posted at the hospital—but then, who would bother to come after a half-dead kid now, when there had already been plenty of opportunity to finish him off? It was easy for Sasuke to sneak onto the grounds and find the long-term care room where Naruto was being held.

There was a medic in the room when he arrived, checking all the data on the machines and jotting it down. Sasuke waited until they replaced the bed's clipboard and left before quietly opening the window and stepping down into the room.

Kakashi hadn't been exaggerating. Even if the severity of Naruto's condition wasn't made completely obvious by all the machines and monitors he was connected to, the Sharingan could see just how faint and weak his teammate's energy was. Normally he was brimming with it—now, as Sasuke could clearly see, he could barely be considered alive at all. He stepped closer and looked down at Naruto's unusually pale, still form.
It wasn't fair.

Sasuke still didn't know which of them was stronger. He didn't know what the strange power Naruto had was, and he didn't know why his brother came to the village specifically to seek it out. He had just begun to realize that he'd misjudged some things, and now he'd lost the chance to find out for sure. It was the only thing left to do before leaving.

Someone had taken that chance away, and he didn't know why, and it angered him. Everything about it angered him. But what was the worst of all, was wasting time here right now instead of going to meet the guides that would take him to Ototakure. They wouldn't wait forever, and forever was how long it might be before he ever got the chance to find out the truth about Naruto, after all.

But Sasuke told himself that the true reason for coming here was far more practical. Even if it meant he would never know the truth, there was still one thing left to be gained from their friendship. He gripped the wrapped handle of the kunai in his hand tightly. No more stalling. He needed those eyes… and if Naruto was done for anyway, why not put what remained of his life to good use?

Sasuke poised the knife over his friend's body, the carefully maintained metal shining as it hovered near several vital organs. It would be so easy. There was no one around, and Naruto was completely defenseless. He wouldn't even feel it. There was no better time than now.

He could almost hear Itachi's voice in his ear, egging him on. *There's no reason to hesitate. Without eyes like mine, you'll never be strong enough.*

*You won't even stand a chance.*

*You're weak.*

Hatred surged in Sasuke's veins so powerfully that the knife shook. He wanted to rip apart the very image of Itachi inside his mind. How satisfying would it be to kill him using the power that he told Sasuke to gain himself? Even if he won, it would still be losing, in a way. Was that why he had suggested it? Had he known it would ruin Sasuke's desire to gain that power at all?

It didn't matter. When the time came, he would be strong enough. It wasn't necessary to follow along with everything Itachi said. He would gain power in his own way, to *prove* without a doubt that he was the stronger one. Sasuke put the kunai back into the holster strapped to his leg. He took a few steps backward before leaving soundlessly, sparing no glance behind as he went out into the night.

It was early morning. Kakashi stood in front of yet another door; this time, the one leading to the office of the Hogake.

"Come in," he heard Tsunade say after he knocked on the door.

Kakashi entered the office and saw Tsunade standing near the windows. Jiraiya was beside her.

"Kakashi!" Jiraiya greeted in his usual jovial tone, but it was with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Kakashi recognized that look. It was the same one he wore when Minato and Kushina died. Tsunade had obviously already informed him about everything that happened.

"Jiraiya-sama," Kakashi inclined his head. "It didn't take you long to make it back here."

"Actually, I was already on the way back," Jiraiya said, crossing his arms. "I finished tying up some loose ends, and started back here so that I could train Naruto. Or at least, that was the plan."
"Wait, so…"

"He hasn't heard anything about Akatsuki capturing the Kyuubi," Tsunade said with a frown. "Not a single clue to connect it to them, aside from the fact that they have the motivation."

"From what I can tell, they're still just taking bounties and doing mercenary work for whoever will hire them," Jiraiya added. "There hasn't been a peep out of them since Itachi showed up. I had even come to the conclusion that they wouldn't be making any big moves for a few more years. That's why I came back."

"But, who else could it be?" Kakashi reasoned. "They're the only ones we know of that would even be capable of taking it right out from under our nose like that."

"I don't know. Their lack of activity right now could very well be a front for something else," Jiraiya said. "All we can do is keep investigating. We can't afford to waste any time. How long do we have?" he asked Tsunade.

"I can't really say," Tsunade said softly, eyes downcast. "The way things are right now, his death won't happen suddenly. He might be able to last for years like that, as long as we can keep his body functioning. It's more likely that he'll become too weak to fend off disease or infection, and succumb to one of them."

Jiraiya put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll save him, Hime. You'll see—before you know it, he'll be awake and complaining about all the time he has to spend in the hospital before we can start training."

Sakura sat next to the hospital bed with her hands folded neatly in her lap, watching the ever-so-faint rise and fall of Naruto's chest as he breathed. She looked at the clock sitting on the bedside table. Where was Sasuke? He had yet to come visit, unless he had stopped by earlier on. Sakura chewed on her lower lip, an ominous feeling twisting her stomach. That's what it always felt like when she thought of Sasuke these days. Ever since he'd gotten that strange bruise on his neck. Was he out training again? Did he not care if Naruto was in the hospital?

Sakura heard the door open and she looked that way quickly, half expecting to see their other teammate standing there. But no. Tsunade walked in and picked up the clipboard hanging at the foot of the bed, reading over its contents.

"Tsunade-sama…" Sakura started.

"Hm?" Tsunade spared a moment to look up at her.

"Have you… seen Sasuke-kun at all today? I thought Kakashi-sensei said he'd have to come back one more time for a checkup."

"No." Tsunade carried the clipboard over to one of the machines and started jotting down a few notes. "If he doesn't want to show, that's fine; it was only as an extra precaution, anyway."

"Oh."

Tsunade looked up from her work and saw Sakura staring down at her hands in her lap, shoulders slumped. The poor kid—Tsunade hadn't considered how hard this must be on her, as well.

"Why don't you take a break for a little while?" she suggested. "Maybe go to his house and see if you can't get him to come visit Naruto, at least. Tell him he doesn't have to talk to me or anyone else
if he doesn't want to."

"Mn. Okay," Sakura nodded and stood up to go. But she didn't leave right away. She looked down at Naruto one more time before turning to Tsunade again. "Tsunade-sama, why can't Naruto wake up? Kakashi-sensei didn't really explain it to me, but... but, everyone says you're the best medic-nin in the entire world. So, if you can't make him better, then..."

Tsunade closed her eyes briefly before looking at Sakura again. No doubt, she was further out of the loop than any of them. "Most of his life energy is gone. Even if he's healthy otherwise, he can't wake up unless it comes back."

Sakura looked confused. "But how could it just go missing like that?"

"An enemy's jutsu, most likely. That's why we have to find out who is responsible and get them to reverse it." It was more or less true.

"So... isn't there anything we can do? The rest of our team, I mean." Sakura rubbed the elbow of her other arm with her hand.

"Hm. I don't know." Tsunade gave a small smile. "For now, why don't you just work on getting the whole team on board with supporting him, alright? We'll see what follows from there."

"Alright. I'll be back soon!" she left the room. At least it seemed like she had cheered up some. Tsunade hoped things really would turn out okay.

It was evening. They weren't any closer to figuring out who had attacked Naruto, why, or even how. There were still no clues to indicate that an outside party was responsible. It was as if the Kyuubi really had just... disappeared, and Naruto's essence along with it. Jiraiya decided to leave once again to further his investigation. As they had no other suspects, all he could really do was try to check up on Akatsuki again.

Kakashi's mind was numb from the constant speculation, as well as a lack of sleep. He decided to stroll downtown to the dango shop to take a break.

"Kakashi-sensei!"

He turned around to see Sakura jogging toward him, looking upset. Or maybe frightened would have been more accurate.

"Sakura? What's wrong?" Kakashi asked urgently as she paused, leaning on her knees to catch her breath.

"I went to Sasuke-kun's house, to see if he would come with me to the hospital," Sakura said, voice pinched with worry. "But he never answered! I waited and waited... even if he didn't want to go, I don't think he would just... I looked around at all the training fields, too, but I could never find him. Kakashi-sensei—about that wound on his neck, and what Orochimaru said—"

Kakashi cursed colorfully. It was one thing after another. He had a bad feeling that Sakura's suspicions were true. He had wondered how Sasuke would react to all this—but he hadn't quite expected him to go forward with pursuing Orochimaru's offer so soon.

"Hurry, run and go tell Tsunade-sama about this," he instructed. "I'll go check at his apartment again, just to make sure."
"We can't let him go to Orochimaru!" Sakura cried. "Someone has to go stop him!"

"I understand. I know." Kakashi was hardly even aware of what he was saying. "Just go find her. We might not be too late."

Sakura had tears budding in her eyes, but she nodded and ran off toward the Hokage tower. Kakashi rushed even faster toward Sasuke's place, feeling like he was chasing after a cobweb-thin thread flapping in the wind.

Of course it was too late. It always was.
Naruto just sat and stared out the window for a while, an excited, hopeful feeling slowly welling up in his chest. They really did it. He was home. *Home!* Some of the sadness he felt at leaving the future version of his friends behind still lingered, but it was quickly fading away. As familiar as it was there, it wasn't the same as home, after all.

He looked down at his hands, and then the rest of his body. It was nice to be at home in his own body, too, even though it seemed like it hadn't fared very well without him. That meant he would probably have to stay in the hospital for a little while, but hopefully a few good meals would get everything back to normal. How long had he been gone? It had been a couple months in the future. Was it the same amount of time here?

Naruto started carefully—and painfully—pulling out the numerous things stuck in and on him. It probably wasn't the best idea, but he wanted to get out of bed and walk over to the window. Several minutes later, he held on tightly to the bed's rail and lowered his feet down onto the linoleum floor. The process made limbs shake with the effort. His usual remedy of food and a good night's sleep might not work for this, after all.

"Ow… damn it," Naruto grumbled, managing to stand, but not sure how he was supposed to make it from the bed rail to the window without falling down. All the time he spent thinking about going home, and it never occurred to him that he might be left in such a bad state. How was he supposed to get a head start on preventing the war if he couldn't even *walk* anymore?

"N-Naruto-chan!"

Naruto jumped, swayed, and nearly fell when someone suddenly called him. He slowly turned around, holding on to the railing. At first he didn't see anything, but then Fukasaku jumped onto his bed, staring at him with his wide mouth agape.

"Sennin jii-chan…?" Naruto was confused. Why was the sage toad here? He'd gone back in time to before they ever met, right?

"You're awake!" Fukasaku exclaimed, too excited to question Naruto's reaction to him. "I need to let Jiraiya-chan know about this right away!"

That jump-started Naruto's brain. He leaned forward, heart racing again. His hands clutched the railing tightly enough to show his slightly protruding knuckles. "Ero-sennin? Where is he? Is he here?"

"Oh, excuse me. I got carried away and forgot to introduce myself. My name is Fukasaku, one of the toads of Mount Myoboku. I am the one that taught Jiraiya-chan everything he knows about the Sage Arts. We have all been taking turns monitoring your condition."

"But where is he? He's not here, right?" Naruto pressed. He wouldn't be able to relax, not until he saw Jiraiya for himself.

"Ah, no," Fukasaku said, looking puzzled at Naruto's insistent behavior. "He has been to visit a few times, but things have been busy since you were hospitalized. Right now, he's investigating Akatsuki."

Naruto's eyes widened and a frozen feeling of panic washed over him, rooting him to the floor.
"No. He can't!" Naruto shifted closer to the toad. He hadn't thought very much about other people's reactions when he disappeared. What if it caused Jiraiya to go to Amegakure sooner than he had before? Naruto started to feel light-headed. This couldn't be. It couldn't. "He has to stay away from Amegakure! I can tell him whatever he needs to know—I-I can explain everything, but you can't let him go after Akatsuki! Please, Sennin jii-chan, you have to stop him right now!"

"Naruto-chan, calm down," Fukasaku hopped closer and put a froggy hand on his arm, concerned and alarmed. "What happened to you? We thought it would be impossible for you to wake up, after —"

"Forget about that right now!" Naruto said impatiently. Couldn't he tell this was important? "Just find him and make him come back here, okay? I promise that I can explain what happened later, but just do it."

"Alright." Fukasaku backed up and looked into his face, eyebrows scrunched. "I'll go, but you need to make sure that you rest. You shouldn't be trying to walk around. I'll go right now, if you get back into bed and let me fetch a medic."

Naruto ground his teeth together, but he did as the toad said and crawled back up into the bed. His breathing was growing labored now, and his body felt weighed down with tiredness. Had the simple act of standing done all that? Or was it something else?

Fukasaku saw to it that he had laid back down, and then put his hands together in a seal. The toad vanished in a plume of vapor.

Naruto lay on his back, staring at the ceiling as he struggled to breathe deeply and stay awake. One hand tightly grasped the fabric of the plain hospital shirt they put him in. He didn't want to see a medic—he wanted to see Jiraiya, alive and unhurt. He'd made a promise to Nagato that it wouldn't happen again. He'd promised everyone else that no one would die this time. He couldn't be failing them already, not this early. If only he could get up out of this bed, he could start making sure everything turned out alright!

Naruto had a million new things he wanted to ask, now that there was no one around to answer. He wanted to know what had happened to their team after he left. He had to stay awake until someone came back. He'd been sleeping long enough already, now wasn't the time to…

Why was it so hard to breathe? Was he passing out? Why did it feel like… why did it feel like before, when his soul was pulled away seconds after arriving? The tiredness made closing his eyes seem like an increasingly good idea.

"No!" Naruto growled. He squeezed his hands into fists in an attempt to keep his senses awake. He could feel that inky, sticky presence he caught a brief glance of again. What was it? It didn't feel comfortable and right like the other things from that space-in-between. "Let… go of me…" his eyelids drooped. "I can't—I have to…" He could barely feel the nails digging into his palms. If only someone was here, he could at least tell them, warn them about what was happening. Naruto couldn't see or hear anyone around, but he started talking anyway. Maybe it could help him stay awake, and if there was any chance of being heard by someone, he wanted to take it.

"Akatsuki didn't do it. It was Orochimaru! He pulled my soul into a different body in another time somehow; I don't really know how, but... The masked guy is the one controlling Akatsuki, and he's going to start a war. They're all being used by Madara, so go after him." There were just too many things to try to spit out at once. Naruto's words turned into mumbles, and then into whispers as his strength continued to fade. "Pein is going to destroy the village, but you don't have to kill him, I can stop him. Just wait for me to get better, I can do it… just wait…"
"Kyuubi... what's happening? Is it..."

"The Time-Spanning Incarnation Jutsu? What the hell does that even mean?"

Naruto suddenly heard the grumbling voice very clearly, a contrast to the fogginess that had been taking over him just a second ago. At least, it felt like just a second. After the cold, blank darkness took over his mind, who was to say how long it really was? And yet, despite the fact that he blacked out from some dark and suffocating force, he suddenly felt good. Really good. He was no longer tired or in pain at all.

"And all I've got is this random blond kid for company... I really hope he isn't dead, though," the grumbling continued. "That's just what I need right now, to get cursed by the ghost of some—"

Naruto sat up suddenly, causing the person who had spoken to scream. He looked around and saw a boy around his age with spiky black hair, standing there with his hands thrown up defensively and a terrified look on his face.

"I'm not dead, idiot!" Naruto said irritably, but his annoyance wore off quickly when he saw where they were. He was sitting up in bed again, but this was most definitely not the hospital. It was a windowless, drab room with beds for the two of them, and very little else. The only visible exit was a heavy-looking metal door with a thin slot in it above the center. A prison cell?

Naruto got up out of the bed quickly, staring with wide eyes around at everything. His body moved with total ease, the weakness and soreness from earlier completely gone. "Where are we?" he demanded. He hoped this was just a bad dream. This wasn't supposed to happen. He was at home now, that was it! They won fair and square.

"Hey! You can't call me an idiot when you don't even know that much!" the other boy insisted. He scratched the back of his head. "Even though... I don't really know, either. I just kind of woke up here, too. But you've been asleep for a while since I woke up. If only I could figure out what that snake bastard is up to..."

"Snake...?" Naruto slumped back onto the edge of the bed, staring out in disbelief. "Orochimaru is behind this?"

If that was the case... did that mean he was back in the future? That would explain why he didn't feel tired anymore. But then, how did he get here? They had sealed Nagato, and both of their bodies had disintegrated. That was supposed to put everything back to the way it was. Naruto looked down at his hands, mind numbly running in the same loop without any answers.

"Hm?" the boy said. "Yeah, that bastard came here talking a bunch of crap about Incarnation jutsus or whatever... and who the hell are you, anyway? I don't think I've ever seen you before, but you do seem kinda familiar somehow, in a weird way..." the boy put a hand on his hip and looked at Naruto skeptically.

"Uzumaki Naruto," Naruto said, without the vigor he usually put into it. He was still trying to figure out what happened. Itachi had said that Orochimaru could possibly do it again, but it would be hard to pull off because he needed someone with a strong enough doujutsu... did that mean that he'd figured out a way?

"Uzumaki?" The black-haired boy crossed his arms thoughtfully. "So, are you related to Kushina-san? But you don't really look like her... come to think of it, you actually look a lot more like Minato-sensei."
"Well, who are you supposed to be?" Naruto hurled back, pointing at the boy. "You're the same age as me, and you're wearing a Konoha headband, but I've never seen you before."

"Hey, don't act like I'm the one that looks fishy in these circumstances," the boy said haughtily. He turned around and pointed at the fan-shaped crest on his jacket. "Uchiha Obito. I'm from one of Konoha's founding clans, and I'm the man who will become Hokage someday. So what've you got?"

"Heh, yeah right! If you wanna be Hokage, first you'll have to go through me—wait… Uchiha?" Naruto's eyes fixed on the familiar crest, that soon disappeared as Obito turned back around. "If you're an Uchiha, then that means… you're one of Orochimaru's Edo Tensei zombies!" he jumped up again, readiness himself for a fight.

"Huh? You mean like those guys with the creepy eyes guarding this place? They told me about it," Obito pointed his thumb at the door over his shoulder. "But—hey, isn't that where dead people are brought back to life? Now who is accusing someone of being dead, idiot!" He pointed at Naruto, looking very insulted.

Naruto scratched his head. "Well… it's true you don't look like them, but… what else could it be? All the Uchiha are dead."

"Oi, what kind of messed up joke is that?" Obito said, frowning. "Are you looking for a fight?"

None of this made sense. Obito knew who Orochimaru was, and he didn't look like an Edo Tensei zombie… but he also didn't know about Naruto, or the Uchiha Clan's downfall.

"Um… I guess you could be like me, and be brought here from the past, but that would mean that you'd still have to be alive in this future time." Naruto gave a frown. He wished Itachi, Nagato, or his older self were here to help him figure this out.

"What do you mean?" Obito asked, dark eyes narrowing. "The guards were actually saying something like that. About going through time. But how can that be possible? The only space-time ninjutsu I've ever seen is Minato-sensei's Hiraishin no Jutsu, and this thing sounds way more advanced than that." The clear implication in Obito's tone was that if it was too advanced for his sensei, it probably didn't exist.

"This masked jerk tried to explain part of it to me once, but it was hard to understand," Naruto admitted. "But, uh… basically, I at least know that it doesn't make all of you travel through time, just your spirit, or something like that. So if you're like me, then that means your real body is back in your own time, and the one you're in now is something Orochimaru made up. And there should be an older version of you running around somewhere in this time, because I think it only works on living people."

Obito just looked at him like he had a screw loose. "…Riiight. Guess I'll just have to ask the guards about what's going on again, see if they'll tell me anything useful." He walked over to the steel door and started banging on it with his fist. "Oi, you creepy-eyed freak! Are you still out there?"

"Hey—listen to what I'm saying, Uchiha-jerk!" Naruto fumed. And an Uchiha couldn't really call someone else's eyes creepy, right? "Maybe I don't know all the details, but I've been like this longer than you! I just went back home… and now I'm back in this time again for some reason."

"Oh, yeah?" Obito turned back toward him. "So how am I supposed to know if that's what happened to me? And why would Orochimaru want to bring me here in the first place? Unless, maybe I did become Hokage in the future? I must be a really important person now, come to think of it..." Obito
rubbed his chin, a spark in his eyes.

"Uhhh… I've never heard of you, sorry." Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "And I know you gotta come from before when I do, because almost all the Uchiha are dead in my time. Plus, my older self here is only four years older than me."

Obito let his hand drop. "Are you saying that really wasn't a joke? What happened to the Uchiha? How could they all just die like that? Wait—and the village? What happened to the village? Was it because of the war?" He grabbed Naruto by the front of his shirt, orange goggles pressed up close to his face.

"Let me go!" Naruto said with a grunt, wrenching himself out of Obito's grasp. He could understand Obito's reaction, since he'd been like that himself. But still. "First of all, I don't even know what time you come from! As for the Uchiha… it wasn't because of a war or anything." Naruto cast his eyes down. He wasn't sure how to even begin revealing things to Obito. He definitely wasn't the right person to go about explaining the murder of the Uchihas. But Obito had a right to know, didn't he? It wasn't like Naruto wanted to keep the truth from him, not when he knew exactly how he felt.

"Actually, I was pretty little when it happened, so I never knew that much about it. There was a lot of political stuff involved, but basically, almost all of them were killed in a single night by someone named Uchiha Itachi."

"Itachi…?" Obito's eyebrows scrunched beneath his goggles. "I think that might be the name of the Clan Head's son, but he's just a little squirt."

"But it's probably him," Naruto said seriously. "You and me come from different times. So if he's a little kid from how you remember him, that means the you in this time is probably a lot older than the me from this time."

"Damn…" Obito crossed his arms with a frown. "You don't seem like a liar, but all this is really hard to believe. How am I supposed to know for sure?"

"Maybe, if we could figure out where the older you is—" Naruto began excitedly, but stopped himself when he realized once again where they were. His shoulders slumped. "But we're stuck in here… and I bet our older selves don't know where we are."

"So, have you seen your older self?" Obito asked him skeptically.

"Yeah. And I bet that I can find a way to let him know I'm still here!"

Obito watched as Naruto sat down on his bed with his legs crossed, getting into a meditative stance. "Hah? What are you doing?"

"The older me can sense people from a long way off, so I think I might be able to contact him," Naruto explained determinedly. He closed his eyes and started concentrating.

Obito gave a hum, not sounding very impressed. "Well, good luck with that." He went over to the door, probably trying to come up with his own escape scheme. He stood up on tip-toes, trying to peer through the slot in the door.

Naruto was a little irked by Obito's obvious doubt, but he wasn't going to let it ruin his concentration. He stubbornly continued meditating, ignoring the other boy's continued mutterings. Even if Obito hadn't fully accepted yet that they were in the future, Naruto knew that was the only thing it could be. That meant Orochimaru had brought him back somehow, and that meant getting back home for good was going to be a lot harder than they'd thought. He hoped that, at the very least, Fukasaku was
able to find Jiraiya and convince him to come back home.

It went a little more quickly this time. Naruto ended up in the room with the tall barred gate. He looked up and saw a gigantic pair of red eyes looking down at him.

"Kyuubi! You're awake!" he cried, stepping forward. At least there was one good thing going on right now. "Are you alright? You looked almost dead the last time I saw you!"

The great fox narrowed his eyes and leaned down to get closer to Naruto's level. "I started to wake up right after Orochimaru placed this seal. But it is still in effect, even now that we've been summoned into a different body. That seal came back with us to the past."

"What?" Naruto gasped. The fox's voice was muffled and distorted, and now that he was paying attention, Naruto could see a slight haze covering the bars. The barrier was, as he said, still there. "I guess my original seal has traveled with me this whole time, so it's the same thing… but you said we're in a new body now, so does that mean we really have been brought back?"

"Aa. But this vessel feels more stable than the last one. Orochimaru is probably keeping the seal on here only to stop you from using my power to escape. Never mind that, though; this jutsu," he pointed a long claw at Naruto. "Once you left this world, it should have been impossible for him to call back this exact version of yourself from among all the infinite possibilities. You were tricked. The tag he gave you was to attach part of himself to you, so that there would always be an anchor to find you again. Once he tested it, and was sure it would work, he had no reason to stop you from going home. Maybe, that was even what he wanted."

Naruto's mouth fell open and he took a couple of steps back. Legs weakening, he sat down on the ground abruptly with a small splash.

"No way…"

He thought, for once, that they had won. That they had finally gotten themselves one step ahead of Orochimaru and sent him home. And yet—he had told Orochimaru that they were about to send him back, and the snake hadn't done anything to stop it. He didn't even try. All he did was talk about this new body, which… Naruto obviously had to be taken out of the old one in order to get into. And there was only one way to do that, wasn't there?

"I had to go back home, in order to be summoned all over again into the new body," Naruto whispered, eyes wide with realization. "But he couldn't send me back himself, because he had no way to control Nagato. We did exactly what he wanted us to do."

"I am impressed; it seems you understand," the Kyuubi growled. "You learn pretty quickly, for a human brat."

Naruto kept staring down at the floor. He'd only figured out that much because it was just like everything else that had happened up until now—the way they always seemed to play right into the enemy's hands. It felt like his brain was stuck, reeling from the fact that they'd all missed it. If Orochimaru had been serious about capturing him, wouldn't he have just shown up himself to do it? Instead he sent a fake, and did just enough to make sure they sent Naruto back as soon as possible.

The whole time Naruto was trying to grapple with this new information, the fox continued to study him. Neither the younger nor the older Naruto knew it, but the two versions of the great Nine-Tailed Demon Fox had passed information between each other the time when the two Naruto fists met. The Kurama from this time knew that his counterpart would want answers, after seeing the older Naruto using his power freely. The him of this time shared memories, impressions. And above all, the recent
developments that led to Naruto taking and using his power.

The Kurama of the past still wasn’t completely convinced that Naruto was really like the old man. But it was enough to start watching the boy with a little more interest. Sure, he showed spirit and guts from time to time, but he’d never acted that differently toward the fox than any other human. Only thinking about how their arrangement inconvenienced him, yet turning right around at every turn to demand the use of the fox’s immense power. To think that this same boy would someday claim he could confront Kurama’s hatred all on his own. Completely ridiculous.

Yet, things had undeniably shifted between them ever since this little adventure started. Maybe it was only because they were in the same boat and forced to rely on each other, but something had changed. It was absurd, but Naruto had seemed genuinely concerned about him just a moment ago.

"So you do understand what else this means, don't you, Naruto?" the fox lowered his claw until it scratched against the translucent surface of the barrier. "We have to find a way out of this ourselves. Stand up. I'm going to tell you some of what I know."

"Huh?" Naruto looked up at the fox, looking back at him. He slowly got to his feet. "What do you mean?"

"Just listen. The one good thing about the situation we're in right now is that this body is more stable. That gives us more time to figure out a plan without worrying. Second, both of us are still connected very faintly to your body in the past. It's a good thing, too, or you'd have ended up in a coffin by now instead of a hospital bed. So all we really have to worry about now is how long your real body can hold out. Luckily, you have that Slug Princess on your side."

"Wait, if you can still feel the connection with my real body… does that mean you can find out what's happening there right now? Could you possess me enough to listen or talk to someone?" Naruto asked eagerly.

But the fox was already shaking his head before Naruto even finished speaking. "It's nothing but residual energy. You and I are bound to this time by the Summoning Contract. Someone might be able to undo it from that end if they figured out what it was, but I doubt that will happen. No one knows about this jutsu."

Naruto gritted his teeth in frustration. Wasn't there anything else? "Okay, if we can't contact anyone in the past, what about in this time? Your other self should be able to sense you, right?"

"I can't sense him," the Kyuubi said, and his many tails started writhing around in the darkness slowly, catching Naruto's eye. It was like he was agitated about being unable to sense his other self. "Orochimaru's seal might have something to do with that… and I don't doubt he has put up a barrier around this place, as well. Although, that passage is still there. I just can't feel anything from it." One long, sharp claw pointed over Naruto's head. He turned around to look, and saw the outline of a gaping, dark entrance to a hall he never noticed before.

"What is that?" Naruto looked quickly from the entrance back to the fox. "Has that always been there?"

"That is the passage Itachi used to talk to your older self when we were in Ame. But I doubt that would work now."

"Have you got any better ideas, then?" Naruto said impatiently.

"Try it, if you want. Who knows, maybe Orochimaru overlooked something. But no matter what, the
first thing we need to do is escape from wherever he's holding us right now."

"That goes without saying!" Naruto punched a hand with his fist determinedly. "Me and Obito will find a way out of here, no problem!"

"Use that boy to help you if necessary, but ditch him if it comes down to it. I don't like him, and on top of that, he's an Uchiha."

"So what? I'm sure he wants to get back to his time just as much as I do. Maybe, if he learns enough about what happened, he could stop them all from getting killed in his timeline. I want to help him."

"As for undoing the jutsu this time around," the Kyuubi continued, completely ignoring him, "We'll have to kill Orochimaru or force him to undo it, after he removes the anchor tag. But it's probably impossible for you without my help, so concentrate on escaping first."

"Sure, sure. I was planning on doing that, anyway." Naruto had already turned to walk toward the dark hallway, and he waved a hand carelessly back toward the fox. All he got in return was a low growl.

Naruto walked resolutely toward the back of the room, where the light grew more and more dim. As he did, everything became silent. He couldn't even hear the breathing and shifting movements of gigantic creature behind him, past the barrier and the barred gate. Naruto tried squinting into the darkness when he reached the entrance to the hallway, but it did no good. He couldn't hear or feel anything coming from in there, either. The only way to know for sure was to check it out.

Naruto kept his hand touching the wall as he walked. Since it was pointless trying to see, he closed his eyes and tried to extend his senses out, the way that the old Toad Sage had taught him. But he couldn't really feel anything, either. It was as if he'd stepped into a completely blank void.

He walked for what felt like several minutes with no change whatsoever. But then, there was something small… no more than an impression, a feeling that something was different. Naruto stopped walking and slowly opened his eyes. He couldn't see it, but there was definitely something in front of him right now. He reached out and felt thick metal wires woven together, sort of like… no, exactly like an ordinary chain-link fence. It was weird to find something so normal in a place like this, but Naruto guessed this must be the 'barrier' that the Kyuubi had talked about.

"Aniki!" he called, looping his fingers through the links. His voice echoed, continuing on… but that was all he heard. There was no answer. "Heyyyyy!" Naruto put his other hand through and tried shaking the fence, but it didn't bend or budge at all. "What the hell is this, anyway? Aniki! Other-Kyuubi! Can you hear me? Oiiiii!"

Muttering to himself when nothing at all happened, Naruto wondered if it would be possible to climb over the fence. Most likely not, since it wasn't like something in the real world… but it could be worth a try? He started banging his fists on it. "Hey, damn it! Why won't anything—"

But then finally, something did happen. Naruto slammed his fists down on the fence with an extra burst of strength, and the place where it impacted created a sudden flash of white light. It was silent and without heat, but Naruto felt a shockwave of energy that knocked him backwards, completely off his feet.

He fell hard onto the cold concrete floor. Opening his eyes, he saw that he was back in the real world, in the room where Orochimaru was holding them.

"I dare you to say that to my face, you creepy-eyed bastard!" he heard Obito shouting.
"Why can't you just stay quiet for once?"

Naruto sat up to see someone peering through the slot in the door from the outside. A pair of green eyes with black sclera—one of Orochimaru’s Edo Tensei summons! Naruto climbed to his feet. The person at the door glanced at him briefly before turning their attention back to Obito.

"I told you to be patient. Orochimaru-sama is only holding you here in this room for the time being. You will be released when he is ready for you to be."

"And how are we supposed to believe that?" Naruto said, chiming in beside Obito as he walked toward the door. The two of them had just met, but they were already on the same page when it came to staying in this cell. They weren't going to wait around quietly for whatever Orochimaru had planned.

"It doesn't matter what you believe. If you wait, you'll see soon enough. It appears you are as impatient as ever, Naruto," the guard said.

"Uh… do I know you?" Naruto asked with a frown, side-stepping away from Obito, who was looking around at the edges of the door.

"In this timeline, yes." The young man's placid voice and what little Naruto could see of his face were not familiar at all. "We met right around the age you are now, as a matter of fact. When I was still alive, I worked for Orochimaru-sama. And now that I have been resurrected, I can continue to help him, without any of the physical shortcomings I had in life. A low-level Katon jutsu will not be enough to melt through this door," he added, eyes flickering back to Obito.

Obito clearly didn't care. He finished the sequence of hand signs and took a step back, chest expanding as he took a deep breath. Naruto stepped even further out of the way as the guard's face moved away from the little window and out of sight. With any luck, this could create an opening.

Naruto summoned a bunshin, elated that their jutsu seemed to be working.

Obito spit out a long stream of fire at the door, hitting the center of it at first, making flames shoot out of the slot and into the space beyond. He didn't let up in just a few seconds, either. He drew out the assault as long as he could, moving from the middle to all around the edges, searing the metal. Like the guard said, it didn't seem to be melting. But maybe, if it could be weakened enough… Naruto held out his hand to the waiting bunshin. Using his chakra felt slightly slippery, just like the first time he'd come here, but it was barely noticeable. His body was practically buzzing with energy. Was this what the Kyuubi had meant by a more stable vessel?

Pouring more and more chakra into it, Naruto tried to make the Rasengan as dense and tightly wound as he possibly could. There was always a limit where he couldn't keep the rapidly spinning energy together anymore, and this time he stretched that limit as far as possible, concentrating hard on his chakra control like the Toad Sage had taught him. The Rasengan was growing increasingly large and heavy in his grip, and the bunshin kept both hands around it to contain it.

The stream of flame slowly dwindled and died out, and Naruto was just half a step behind when it did. Obito stepped back, panting and holding the back of his hand to his seared lips, while Naruto and his bunshin dived forward with a battle cry. He shoved the dense ball of energy into the door as hard as he could, forcing himself to hold strong and not let it unravel away. The door buckled with a piercing whine, folding out to create a gap at the top large enough to crawl through.

"Let's go!" Naruto shouted back at Obito. He climbed onto his bunshin’s cupped hands to get a clear boost up and through the opening.
Obito didn't waste any time taking his advice. He ran at the bunshin and let it toss him up, too, but his goggles were fogged and that threw off his balance for just a second. He instinctively braced his hands against the metal, and cried out in pain when the red-hot surface seared his skin.

"Are you okay?" the real Naruto pulled him the rest of the way through from the outside, yanking at his sleeves. They both tumbled to the ground when Obito fell out clumsily.

"Forget it, we have to move!" Obito tried to growl out, though his voice was higher pitched than normal from the pain. He shoved against Naruto as he got to his feet, disentangling them.

Naruto glanced back quickly at the destroyed door hanging bent halfway into the hall. Their guard was still there, standing further back, watching them. He didn't waste time looking for long, though. He and Obito made a run for it in the opposite direction.

"Your wounds should heal up pretty quickly," Naruto said as they sprinted down the dim, gloomy hall with no sense of direction whatsoever. "Orochimaru summoned us into these fake bodies. They might look like us, but they're not. They are these plant-clone things with incredible healing powers."

Obito rubbed his goggles with a sleeve and then looked down at his hands, watching the burned flesh and skin heal right before his eyes. He touched his lips and found that they were completely healed, too.

"If that's the case, we can fight without holding back! I don't care what happens to a fake body." Obito looked over at Naruto. "So, you've been here longer, right? Where are we going?"

"I didn't mean in this place exactly, just in the future. But we're bound to end up somewhere if we just keep going, right?" Naruto said, sounding stressed. They had no plan, and no idea of where they were going. But it was too late to worry about that now.

Naruto felt something whiz by his cheek, leaving a long, bloodless cut. He looked over his shoulder and screeched when he saw their prison guard in close pursuit. The white-haired young man held his hands out toward them, and some sort of small, round nubs shot out of the end of his fingers toward them. Obito was so busy looking behind them that he bumped into Naruto while trying to dodge the bizarre projectiles.

"Oi, be careful!" Naruto pushed back against him, but didn't stop running. "Argh, damn it! Taijuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!"

The hall instantly became filled with Naruto's copies, blocking the path and view of their pursuer. Naruto pushed Obito down an intersecting hall, and the other boy caught on quickly, regaining his balance and putting on an extra boost of speed to put some distance between them and the guard.

"You're pretty good," Obito panted as they rounded another corner, trying everything they could to cover their tracks. "With that, and whatever you hit that door with. But if neither of us know where we're going, then how're we supposed to escape?"

"You're not bad, either," Naruto said with a grin. "We just have to find a way to the outside, then maybe I can contact someone. You got any better ideas?"

"No, but if we get out, I'm not gonna be waiting around for that guy with the weird fingers to catch up. So unless you can—" suddenly Obito screamed and halted, violently shaking his foot. Naruto saw a small snake fly against the wall, and from there he looked down at the floor to see a stream of the things winding toward them.

"Crap! Keep running!" Naruto yelled, and the two boys stumbled and kept on running. What else
could they do?

"I guess this means Orochimaru's caught up to us, huh?" Obito called, jumping over a bundle of snakes with a disgusted look on his face.

"Whatever you do, don't let them bite you!" Naruto swerved around a snake in his path and ran sideways along the wall for a piece before hopping back down to the floor. "There's a good chance that these have a kind of venom that's made to paralyze our bodies. Orochimaru got me with it a few weeks ago."

"But there's so many of them! How're we supposed to do that?"

Naruto crossed his fingers over each other to create another barrage of kage bunshin. Not to be outdone, Obito jumped up and attached himself to the ceiling. Running through a quick series of hand signs, a large stream of fire came out of his mouth once again, torching the snakes writhing around on the floor. Naruto had to jump up beside him to dodge.

"Hey! You'll hit my bunshin!"

And it did, at least a few of them—but most of them were able to get out of the way, yelling and stomping down the hall to try to delay the snakes further back. Obito and Naruto jumped back down to the floor, now completely cleared out. They looked down the hall where the bunshin were still struggling, one popping right after the other.

"And what're we going to do if Orochimaru shows up himself?" Obito continued, looking back at them.

"Ugh, it's too late to worry about that."

Ultimately, all their maneuver with the bunshin did was delay the snakes chasing them. A sudden, huge wave of them suddenly burst through the barrage, their glistening bodies slipping over each other in a large, unbroken mass. The two preteens shrieked, holding onto each other's arms, then promptly made a break for it again without having to discuss it.

"What—the—hell?" Naruto couldn't have summed it up better himself. Their bodies were strong, but not completely tireless. How long could they continue running around aimlessly like this, avoiding the snakes' fangs?

As it turned out, not very long. After making another turn, they found themselves trapped at a dead end. Naruto and Obito turned around at the same time when they saw the blank wall blocking their path. All it took was that small pause. The barrage of snakes, which appeared to have only grown bigger the longer they ran, rolled over and through them like in a hissing, squirming tidal wave.

"Obito—" Naruto tried to say through gritted teeth, but as the snakes retreated, he could easily see for himself that the same thing had happened to him. Obito fell down to his knees, arms and legs jerking awkwardly as he tried and failed to make his body move. Naruto also slumped down to the ground when his legs gave up on functioning.

"Hmph."

Naruto looked up to see the Edo Tensei guard walking toward them calmly, a strange, pure-white
sword in his hand. It looked very sharp.

"I told you that all you had to do was wait there quietly. Did you really think that it would be that easy to get away?"

"That's enough, Kimimaro," a familiar raspy voice piped up, sounding amused. Naruto's gaze slipped past Kimimaro. A few loose snakes slithered over to Orochimaru and hid themselves in the loose sleeves of his shirt.

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama," Kimimaro said, stepping aside to let him approach the escapees. Naruto glared at him, feeling the unique combination of anger and hopelessness that only Orochimaru could instill in him rise up again. He almost imagined that that self-satisfied smirk was meant just for him—mocking him for believing that going home had been his choice alone.

"You two certainly have a lot of spirit," Orochimaru chuckled, looking down at them. "But as Kimimaro said, all you had to do was practice a little bit of patience, and then you will understand everything. I didn't bring you here just to keep you locked in a cell, after all."

"I always knew there was something suspicious about you," Obito snarled, voice strained from the effort it took to speak. "You're not going to get away with this! We'll see if you're still smiling once Sandaime-sama or Minato-sensei get a hold of you—"

He was cut off by Orochimaru's laughter as it echoed through the hall; sounding not mocking, but genuinely amused, as if he was delighted by Obito's threats. Naruto had a sinking feeling he knew why, considering Obito's mention of the Third.

"I'm afraid you're a little behind the times there, Obito-kun. Both of our senseis are dead. We actually have a lot more in common when it comes to that—but that's a story for another time. Kimimaro, go ahead and take them to their new room. They won't be able to move for a while with as much of the new formula they took in."

"Dead?" Obito whispered as Kimimaro stepped up and Orochimaru started to walk away. He looked over at Naruto, who was still laying there with his teeth gritted in frustration. Neither of them were able to do a thing as Kimimaro scooped them up and carried them under each arm.

He carried them all the way back from where they came, past the crumpled door of their cell and up a flight of stairs. Naruto couldn't so much as twitch his little finger.

"Why are you keeping us here?" he said, voice sounding strained and weak.

"Still trying to get information out of me, huh? You're certainly a tenacious one. Of course, that's part of what makes you so intriguing. I think you already know the answer to that one, Naruto. Hasn't Orochimaru-sama already told you multiple times?"

"Yeah, but in what world is that a good enough ans—"

"You'll just have to wait here for a bit. Someone will be along after a while with the antidote."

Kimimaro had brought them to a room that looked like it was forged out of a natural cave. Unlike the last room, it felt more like a permanent residence. The furnishings were nicer, and it was more spacious. There were still no windows, so they were probably still underground, but the door was completely normal. No bars or locks to be seen. Kimimaro put them each down on one of the beds on either side of the room.

"We're not going to just stay here, you know," Obito said scornfully.
"Yes, you are," Kimimaro said. Then he simply left, closing the door behind him as he went out.

Still, neither of them could move. Once again, Naruto was stuck staring up at the ceiling waiting around for whatever it was the snake was going to do. His soul was quite literally under Orochimaru's control. He might not have tried controlling him directly like one of the Edo Tensei summons—yet—but he had the power to drag Naruto (and presumably Obito) back and forth from the past as much as he liked. How were they going to fight against that kind of power?

"Hey, Naruto."

"What?"

"What that bastard said about the Sandaime, and my sensei… is it true?"

"Probably, yeah," Naruto said heavily. "I don't know about your sensei, but the Sandaime was killed by Orochimaru. It happened in my time. Orochimaru attacked the village."

"It figures he would do something underhanded like that. But how could you possibly not know who my sensei is? I figured he'd be the Hokage by now! If it's not me, I mean." If he could move, Obito would have been staring at Naruto incredulously. "Are you seriously saying you don't know Konoha's Yellow Flash, Namikaze Minato? He's a jounin, and really powerful, and he kinda looks a lot like you, except way cooler."

"No, I'd remember it if I saw someone like that!" Naruto said crossly. Although, the name did seem kind of familiar, somehow. "I think I've heard his name before, but…"

Naruto had never really paid much attention at the Academy, but he felt like that was where he'd heard it before. And not just one time, either. Maybe it was like Obito said, and he was one of the old Hokage.

Wait. Naruto remembered what the masked man had said. The Yondaime, his father, who sealed the Kyuubi into him. He remembered what his older self had said—died protecting the village. What he'd always been told his whole life, that his parents died in the Kyuubi attack. The whole picture was starting to come together. His eyes widened, and he would have jumped up from the bed at the electric shock that went through him, if it were possible.

"I think… I think he was my dad."

"Huh? You think?" Obito said with unabashed confusion. "You don't know your own dad's name?"

"No one ever told it to me," Naruto said, frustration coming through again. "I just know he died defending the village from the Nine-Tailed Demon Fox."

That's what he said, but it still felt unbelievable. But then, just as quickly, he was struck with another realization—there was someone else he could ask, someone that had been there and seen the entire thing. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

Kyuubi… is it really true? Was it him?

Either the fox didn't hear his question, or didn't feel like answering. All he heard for a few seconds was silence, until Obito spoke up again.

"I can't believe Sensei is dead… and he never got to meet his own son? That's messed up."

"You mean you believe me?" That was kind of surprising.
"Yeah."

Naruto turned his head what little he could, but all he could see was Obito in the same state as him, laying on his back facing the ceiling. Obito knew his dad, so did that mean he knew his mom, too? And Obito’s dazed inability to accept how things had changed in this time reminded Naruto of himself when he’d first arrived in the future. In a way, he was glad that he wasn’t facing all of this alone. Maybe together, they could find a way out of this mess.

"Ne, Obito, you know? That's in this time. It hasn't happened yet where you come from, right? That means you can stop it from happening. We just have to figure out how to get back. My shishou is dead in this time, too. But I'm going to go back to save him. I can't save my mom and dad, but... you can. And then maybe I can grow up knowing them somewhere."

"I guess you really are related to Kushina-san," Obito said gloomily. "But yeah... you're right. Hey, wait. If you're Minato-sensei's son, how come we've never met before? And how come you never knew who he was? I would have definitely told you! Hell, I bet I would have even taken you in if no one else was gonna do it!"

"Really?" That was a good question. Why hadn't they met before? "I've... I don't think I've ever known anyone who knew him that well." Except, wasn't it said that Jiraiya also taught the Yondaime? And if the Yondaime was his father, then shouldn't Jiraiya have known plenty of things about him?

"Well, what about Kakashi?" Obito said, sounding annoyed.

"Ka—Kakashi? You mean Kakashi-sensei? He's my team's jounin instructor! You're saying he knew my dad?"

"Knew him—of course he knew him!" Obito burst out, managing to lift his head up a few inches before it fell back down again. "That jerk is on a team with me and Minato-sensei and Rin! He never told you stories about us when you were little, or anything?"

"I heard he was in the ANBU when I was a kid," Naruto said. It was odd to imagine Kakashi reaching out to him when he was little, like Obito seemed to think he should have. It was odd just knowing he might have had a reason to in the first place. "I only met him after I became a genin."

"Figures he would," Obito muttered. "I guess that's to be expected from an elite prodigy like him. Okay, but what about Rin? I know she wouldn't let something like that slide."

"Nope, I don't know her."

"What the hell? This doesn't make any sense! I dunno, maybe we come from places that are completely different. You know? Like some of the names would be the same, but everything else is some kind of weird other-thing. Then again, if Sensei died and it's just Kakashi around, and not me and Rin, could that mean... could we have eloped?" Obito's voice turned into a mumble around then, and Naruto couldn't hear his exact words, but it sounded like he having an intense debate with himself.

"Um... I don't know, but... I say we should find out about what happened, and then send you back so that you can stop my mom and dad from dying in the Kyuubi's attack," Naruto said determinedly. "And I'm going back home, too. I can't just wait around in a place like this."

They both fell silent when they heard the door open again. Naruto didn't see anyone at first. He had to turn his head further to the side to catch sight of their small visitor. It was a boy younger than them
with silver hair and dark, intelligent eyes that watched them from beneath his wire-rimmed glasses. He paused for a moment at the door before walking over to Naruto's bedside, carrying a small metal tray with various syringes on it.

"What is that for?" Naruto asked in a high-pitched voice. He hated shots, and he definitely didn't trust any coming from this place.

"Don't worry, it's just an antidote for the venom. Please hold still," the boy said, putting down the tray and lifting one of the needles. Naruto thought his soul might leave his body right then, making it no longer necessary to find a way back home, but he was distracted from his panic by getting a good look at the boy's face as he stuck the needle into his arm. A numb sort of confusion replaced the fear, but it made Naruto feel like he'd just been bitten by a snake again. The boy's face, adorned with those round glasses that seemed too big for him, looked horribly familiar.

"Kabuto?"

There was no way.

"Eh? How do you know my name?" the boy asked cautiously, looking up at Naruto and pushing the edge of his glasses back.

"B-But they said you were dead, I don't—are you an Edo Tensei?"

"Ah… it's possible that the poison has caused you some confusion. Please try not to push yourself," Kabuto said in a politely medical tone. He removed the needle, now empty, and placed it back on the tray.

"What's with you and thinking everybody's dead?" Obito put in from across the room. "Do you know this kid or something, Naruto?"

"Ah, no, I'm afraid your friend is mistaken," Kabuto said, turning to walk to Obito's bedside with the tray. "I don't know how he knows my name, but we've never met before."

"I know Kabuto from my time!" Naruto said loudly. "And this time, too… he's the one that brought me into the future to begin with! But he's older than me…"

"So what, you think Orochimaru brought in a younger version of him, too?" Obito lifted his head to try to look at Naruto, but caught sight of the new needle Kabuto was wielding. "W-What are you going to do with that?"

"There's no need to be afraid, it won't hurt."

It had to be that, didn't it? It was the only thing that made sense, and yet… it didn't, because Kabuto was dead. But this one didn't look like an Edo Tensei—and anyway, wasn't the whole point of why Orochimaru liked his new jutsu that he could call someone from different points of their life? He couldn't do that with the Edo Tensei, right?

"Why are you here?" Naruto demanded, aggravated by Kabuto's complete calmness. Some feeling was starting to come back into his limbs, and he flexed a hand slowly. "Why aren't you a prisoner like we are? Are you working for Orochimaru?"

"Please rest and take it easy. It will take a while for the poison in your system to clear," Kabuto came back over to him, sounding genuinely concerned. "Yes. I was brought here to work for Orochimars-sama, so that my orphanage can receive the funding it needs. I was also told to reassure you that you aren't prisoners. You're only being held here for right now."
"Huh?" Naruto was still confused, but he felt a little less numb now, so he shakily sat up. "Okay, but why? And if we're not prisoners, then what exactly do you call holding us here against our will?"

Kabuto hung his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, that's all I was told. In any case, there is no way for you to get out of here before Orochimaru-sama is ready to release you. You will only get hurt if you try."

"You want to bet on that?" Naruto moved—slowly and jerkily, but he moved—pushing his feet to the edge of the bed and over. He was confident this wasn't as bad as the state his real body was in back home. The same weakness may have been there, but not the pain.

"Naruto-san please, you shouldn't try to get out of bed yet," Kabuto's silver brows scrunched together worriedly as he watched him.

"C'mon, Obito. See if you can move around some. We're going to slip out again while they're not expecting it."

"Yeah!"

"That is really not a good idea," Kabuto said, hanging along beside Naruto uncertainly. Naruto held onto the edge of the bed as his legs wobbled and threatened to give out on him. "If you try to do that, you'll just be knocked out and brought back again."

"Maybe so, but... that'd be the case if we waited, too, and right now I bet they don't think we'd already be going for it again," Naruto said determinedly. He pushed off from the side of the bed and held his arms out, swaying from side to side for a second before regaining his balance. He turned around, one little step at a time, and took a few slow, heavy steps toward Obito, who was trying to sit up in the meantime.

"Please don't do this, you'll get us all in trouble!" Kabuto said, following him. "And then I'll be sent back, and Mother will have to earn my share too..."

Naruto wasn't paying attention to his soft-spoken pleas. "Obito, see if you can stand up. Hold on to something if you have to."

"Ugh... I don't know if I can, but I'll try. It feels like I can barely even move."

"Stop it," Kabuto said a little more strongly. "I-If you don't, I... I'll run out right now and tell them what you're planning!"

"Huh?" Naruto turned his head to look over his shoulder. "Wha... ahh!" the act of twisting his head back in a different direction from his body made him lose balance, and he stumbled to the ground with a pained grunt.

"Are you alright?" Kabuto knelt down by his side and put a hand on his shoulder. "You see, you can't make it very far like this. Just go lay down for a while, until the poison is gone."

"We're not..." Naruto wrenched himself up off the floor enough to rest on his hands and knees. "We're not just going to cooperate with whatever they're keeping us here for. I don't care if it seems pointless, impossible, or whatever. Even if everything we do is somehow part of it, and it looks like we can't win, we won't know if we just lay down and do nothing." He turned his head to glare sidelong at the child version of Kabuto, who flinched and scooted backward. "Are you happy staying here, Kabuto? That's what you should really be worried about. Don't you want to go home at all?"

Kabuto folded his hands in his lap and looked down. "I do miss Mother... and my friends. But I
can't go back to the orphanage now. They depend on funding from Konoha to keep going. The village needed an orphan to come work for them and become a shinobi, so I volunteered to go. If I go back, they'll just take someone else, or worse—Mother will have to carry the entire burden by herself."

"Do you really think all this is Konoha's doing?" Obito asked from where he was sitting on the edge of his bed. He'd finally managed to pull himself up. "It's Orochimaru. And he's probably not even the Orochimaru you know. He brought us all here for some kind of experiment. Naruto says you're older than him in this time, so you're probably the same as us and brought here from the past. How're you going to help your Mother or whoever when you're not even in the same world anymore?"

"What are you talking about?" Kabuto stared at Obito wide-eyed and got to his feet.

"Ugh… there's not really any time to explain it right now. Just… we're going to stop this jutsu somehow, and then you'll be able to go home, too." Naruto pulled one of his knees up, braced his hands against the floor, and began working on using his legs to lift himself off the ground. It was an agonizingly slow process. "So don't worry… 'cause we'll make sure to put an end to it. Just stay here and we'll definitely… huh?" Naruto glanced up when he felt Kabuto's hand on his shoulder again. He felt a pinch on his arm, and looked over at it to see Kabuto injecting him with another syringe. "Wha—wait! What is that?"

"Another dose of the antidote," Kabuto said, pushing up his glasses. "You're not going to be able to make it out of here without getting caught. But at least with this, you'll be able to move a little bit better."

"Kabuto," Naruto said, stunned. The feeling in his arm was rapidly coming back, and that was spreading to the rest of his body. There was a small glint of determination in the boy's dark eyes, and Naruto remembered what Orochimaru said the first time he'd been immobilized by the poison.

I can't fully take the credit for this one. This is a poison Kabuto discovered that suppresses the Shodai's cells.

Despite what happened to Kabuto's older self in the end, Orochimaru still acknowledged him on some level. That was why he was here. Hadn't Itachi said that Orochimaru was fascinated by potential?

So then, did that explain why Obito was here, too?

"Heh. Now you're talking," Naruto grinned. He pushed himself to his feet slowly and carefully. The extra antidote was helping, but it would still take a few minutes to really work. "Okay, now get some more to Obito, and we'll be ready to try again!"
Time Spanning Incarnation: Part II

It was surprisingly quiet in the hideout. Naruto and Obito crept slowly from one hall to the other, unable to flat out run yet. It would definitely be a problem if someone caught them. Obito was recovering from the poison more slowly than Naruto, and he had to hold onto the wall with both hands for support while they walked.

"I know we said we'd find the way out and everything, but how're we supposed to do that without running into anybody? It's not like we can fight them right now," Obito grumbled, quietly in case there was anyone nearby.

"That might not happen if we don't do anything too loud," Naruto said, looking up and down the halls as they met a corner. He motioned for Obito to keep following. "You remember what Kabuto told us right before we left. Orochimaru is still busy directing stuff in the war, so he's probably not gonna worry about us too much right now. And if there's only five guards for this whole place, we can definitely avoid them."

"Maybe in here, but what about when we find a way out?"

The younger Kabuto had given them what information he could, yet still insisted they wouldn't make it out without being caught. Only he and Kimimaro were helping Orochimaru inside the base, but the other four guards were outside, keeping anyone from getting out or in. It would take a lot of luck to get by them without being noticed. But at least that explained why they weren't bothering to keep Naruto and Obito locked up anymore. They were that confident the two wouldn't be able to make it past the guards.

"Heh! I've been sneaking around the ANBU since I was a little kid. This won't even be a challenge," Naruto said, a touch arrogantly.

Obito raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying the showboating. Probably because he was a master of it, himself. "So what you're saying is, you don't have a plan. Are you sure you're Minato-sensei's kid?"

"Uh, no, not a hundred percent. I told you that already." Naruto scowled. "What has that got to do with anything, anyway? We can't make a plan yet if we don't know what we're up against. That's why we have to face them head-on now. If we don't make it, then we'll at least have something to go by for the next time. It's a win-win."

"Sounds like you just made that up."

"Hey, shut up! I don't see you coming up with any better plans."

"I've got one right now. I say if we do get caught this time, we should cause enough damage that Orochimaru is forced to show up again," Obito said, shifting his body so that he only leaned on the wall with one hand, testing out more weight on his legs. "We're going to have to fight anyway if the guards catch us, right? So we'd get to see what we're up against, like you said, but we might also be able to find out more about what's really going on here. I wanna talk to Orochimaru himself and get some answers."

"Yeah..." Naruto had to admit that was a good idea. "I guess he hasn't been around because of the war, but... I wonder why he's still bothering with it, anyway. I thought he didn't really care about it."

"What war? You guys keep talking about the war, but in my time there was also a the war, and I'm
really hoping it's not the same one."

"Nah, this one's new," Naruto said, frowning. He paused to look and make sure their way was clear before they turned another corner. "It's... kind of a weird war. It's not the different countries fighting against one another. It's just everybody against this one guy, with Orochimaru helping him."

"...Huh? How is that even considered a war? That sounds kind of dumb. No offense."

"Ugh, there's more to it than that, alright? They're the ones behind everything, but they actually have a ton of people—er, things on their side. For one thing, Orochimaru summoned a whole bunch of Uchiha as zombies to fight in the war. And the Edo Tensei guys, they can't be hurt or killed. It's really bad. On top of that, they have those clone-plant things. And the one behind it all is supposed to be Uchiha Madara."

"Madara? Like my ancestor, Madara? Hasn't he been dead for a long time?"

"I don't know. Things with the war have been so weird and messed up. One thing I've learned since I got here is that it doesn't matter how unlikely you think something is, it can still happen. But I actually talked with Madara one time. He told me about the jutsu that Orochimaru used to bring us here, and... some other things..."

Naruto paused, and changed track. That was not something he wanted to get into right now. "Anyway, the important thing is, he is trying to gain enough power to cast a genjutsu over the entire world. He wants to make everyone live in a dream controlled by it."

"Sounds like someone who just wants to have control over everyone," Obito scoffed.

Naruto wasn't so sure. He had thought the same thing when he first heard about the enemy's plan, but after talking to him... Naruto got the feeling that the masked man's claimed motives were genuine. But it was hard to explain that without going into way more detail about the meeting than he wanted.

"And that's why everyone's fighting. All the Kage made an alliance with each other, and they're probably still out there right now, trying to stop Madara. The older me is with them, too. He could probably help us, but now I'm thinking it's better I can't contact him, anyway. The people of this time need his help in the war."

"So the older you is pretty strong?" Obito asked, curious in spite of himself. "Did you grow up to be cool like Minato-sensei?"

"Hah! The older me is definitely cool! And strong! And badass, and completely awesome! ...Wait, are you trying to say I'm not cool now?"

"Aw, man... I wish I could find out what my older self is like. I bet he's even cooler than yours, since I'm older than you and all. Are you sure you don't know anything?" Obito sounded really disappointed.

"There's no way your older self is more awesome than mine. But maybe you've been on some kind of top-secret spy mission in a foreign country since I was little," Naruto guessed.

"Hm... that does seem very fitting for a man like me. I bet once I awakened my Sharingan, I had no trouble rising through the ranks. I probably even made jounin before Kakashi! Oh hey, stop. Look down there," Obito said suddenly, voice changing to a whisper. He leaned his shoulder against the wall and peered down a hall that they were just about to walk past. "Don't you think it looks different down that way than what we've been seeing?"
"Different how?" Naruto stopped and looked down the hall as well. Just like everywhere else, the passage was lit with eerie torches in the shape of open-mouthed snakes. It was long, and ended with a wide stone staircase lit from above.

"You see how the floor goes from wood to stone at the end? And it's wider through here, too. I bet this leads to somewhere."

Naruto squinted, trying to see the far end where the light came from. It almost looked like sunlight streaming down onto the first few stairs, and now that he was paying attention, there was a noticeable flow of air coming from that way as well.

"It's the way out!" Naruto hissed, seizing Obito's arm. "Come on, you have to move faster!"

"Don't pull me! Besides, what if this is another trap?" Obito edged along the wall, staring down the path as they crept a little closer.

"Even if it is, the worst that could happen is that we'll get chased by snakes again."

"Great."

Obito pushed off the wall to test his balance, then started walking toward the end of the hall alongside Naruto. Both of them were a lot steadier on their feet now, and Naruto was confident they could make a run for it if they found themselves outside. He looked behind them when they reached the foot of the stairs, then turned back to look up and saw sunlight and trees. But he didn't see anyone else around besides the two of them.

"I'll go up there to look around first," Naruto whispered.

"Wait, shouldn't you send a bunshin or something instead?" Obito glanced over at him.

"Right, okay." Naruto was impatient, but that probably was the best thing to do. He crossed his fingers over each other and called up two Kage Bunshin.

"What's the other one for?"

"He's gonna go back and stand at the end of the hall, in case anyone comes this way while we're waiting here," Naruto said as that one saluted them importantly, then trotted off down the hall. The other bunshin sidled up the stairs, stopping at the top with half of its body above ground and half below.

"Hey, do you see anything?" Obito asked in a carrying whisper.

"Purple stuff," the bunshin said.

"Huh?" Obito looked at the original as if asking for a translation.

"Could you be a little more specific?" Naruto called/whispered with his hands cupped around his mouth.

"Just come on and look. I don't see anybody." The bunshin motioned for them to come closer.

They looked at each other briefly, then climbed the stairs. They soon emerged out into a green and lush forest, the kind that felt like home. Did that mean they were in the Land of Fire?

Sure enough, there didn't appear to be anyone else around. But when they looked up and through the trees, they could clearly see a huge, translucent purple wall enclosing the entire area.
"I get it now. This must be the only way in or out of the base," Obito said. "Okay, so all we have to do is bust through that barrier."

"Ha, good luck with that one, kid. Unless you think you can break through a barrier strong enough to hold a Kage."

The voice came from behind them. The three whirled around to see a girl sitting on the ground behind the entrance to the base. The purple walls came together at a 90 degree angle and it was this corner she sat in, leering at them through the sheen of purple that encased her.

"I was wondering when you kids were finally gonna show up. It's been so boring here with nothing to watch but the squirrels and birds." The girl inside the barrier smirked at them. Her eyes were mostly black—another Edo Tensei.

"Oi, what happened to you not seeing anyone up here?" Obito shot accusingly at Naruto's bunshin.

"What? She was hiding over there! But see, there's purple stuff, just like I said."

"Notice what's actually important next time, idiot!" Naruto said, grabbing his bunshin by the collar.

"Well I'm you, so what does that say about you?"

"That's it, you're out!"

"Hey! Stop ignoring me, you damn brats!" the girl snarled. They all looked over. The bunshin in Naruto's grip stuck its tongue out and poofed out of existence.

"Yeah, who are you, anyway? What is this?" Obito commanded.

"Hn. It's about time. My name is Tayuya of the North Gate. And you kids should be glad that I can't move from this spot. Just looking at your idiotic faces makes me want to kick both your asses into next week. I can't believe Orochimaru-sama wants us to keep this barrier up for a couple of pansy-ass genin."

"I am not a genin," Obito growled. "I'm a chuunin, and one who's gonna be promoted to jounin really soon!"

"Really? They must have been willing to promote anyone back during the war days."

Obito's face was heating up with anger, and he stomped over to where Tayuya was sitting and kicked the barrier surrounding her. "Come out here and fight me, then! I'll show you!"

"Hey! Get your dirty foot away from me! I'm seriously thinking about breaking this barrier to teach you a lesson, you little shit."

"Tayuya, you do that and you'll have more to worry about than just these kids," Kimimaro's voice came from the entrance to the base, and they all turned. Naruto, who was closest, got into a fighting stance. Obito stopped kicking and turned around.

Only Tayuya seemed unfazed. "Relax, it's not like I was actually gonna do it, pretty boy."

"What happened to the bunshin I had watching the hallway?" Naruto demanded. He knew from the time spent training at Mount Myoboku that his bunshin should have transferred its memories to him if it had been dispelled. How did he not know someone was coming?

Kirimaro sighed. "I'm surprised you thought something like that would be difficult to get around.
Not even your clones are very attentive. Now if you don't mind, I'd like the two of you to come back with me. You've wandered far enough."

Naruto looked back at Obito, who gave a small nod. They didn't stand a chance right now, but what did it matter?

The bunshin Naruto had left in the hall suddenly jump-tackled Kimimaro from behind, wrapping its arms around his neck. Naruto took advantage of the distraction to create more clones, but even though he was aiming for at least fifty to swarm the area with, only about a dozen appeared. Before he even had a chance to rally the troops, Kimimaro appeared right in front of him, moving incredibly fast. Naruto caught sight of his green eyes standing out starkly against the black Edo Tensei sclera just before Kimimaro kicked him hard in the chest. Air rushed out of him and he flew backward, slammed hard into the barrier, then slid to the ground. His clones instantly took the opportunity to attack Kimimaro once again.

"Are you okay, Naruto?" Obito knelt down beside him as Naruto slowly started to pick himself up off the ground.

"Do something to keep that guy occupied," Naruto grunted as he got into a sitting position. "I'm going to try going into Sage Mode. It's the only thing that might stand a chance of breaking through this barrier."

"You're gonna what?"

"Just do it, okay? I need you to buy me enough time to sit still for a while and gather energy."

"Sure, if you say so... but whatever you're going to do, try to make it quick." Obito stood and ran into the fight along with Naruto's clones.

Naruto closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. It was completely against his instinct at the moment, which was to be up and fighting like Obito was, but it was the only thing he could think of. Nevermind the fact that he hadn't once pulled this off successfully yet—he knew it was possible if he just kept trying. He could do anything his older self could do.

_Sense the Natural Energy in the air. Feel it flowing through everything around you, touching and connecting everything in existence._

He could feel it. As usual, it felt heavy, almost overwhelming—Fukasaku had said that it seemed drawn to him. The danger was trying to control that energy once he drew it in. The few times Naruto had managed tap into the Natural Energy, it had always been far too much, tipping the balance out of control in an instant. But was like he'd been told by Jiraiya, and Iruka before that: the key to making something like this work was focus.

Of course, he'd never tried to do this in the middle of a fight, with the yells and shuffling as Obito tried to buy some time. Memories from a dispelled bunshin interrupted him every few seconds. Focusing was proving to be very difficult.

_Focus, focus!_ Naruto commanded himself desperately. It was just like with the Rasengan. The right amount, the right balance, except with the energy from outside thrown into the mix. Simple.

He could feel the energy prickling the surface of his skin, embracing him like a friend. It started to mix in with his own energy very gradually—he was being as careful as he could. Naruto fought to ignore the excitement clawing at him as the energy started to combine with his own. Almost there. Just a few more seconds, and there would be enough to—
"Oi, Kimimaro! Stop daydreaming and get over here. This kid is doing something." Tayuya's voice cut through his concentration from very close by. He was still sitting near the barrier.

Naruto frowned—an involuntary movement as he tried to quickly regain focus. He opened his eyes, showing elongated pupils for a flash of a second, but it wasn't enough. He went tumbling backwards once again as Kimimaro kicked him, rolling for a second before ending up flat on his back, all the energy he'd gathered completely dissipated.

Kimimaro loomed over him. "It's clear that the two of you still have a lot to learn."

He stepped on Naruto's chest and raised two long, sharp blades, then brought them down to stab into the palm of each of the unfortunate boy's hands, resting open on the ground beside him. Naruto yelled out in pain and made to kick his attacker, only for his strike to be blocked by sharp spikes that suddenly burst out from Kimimaro's body. Obito ran up and tried to throw a punch at him, but Kimimaro captured Obito's arm in the crook of his elbow and more spikes burst out, digging into Obito's trapped arm. Obito screamed and tried to pull away, but the action drew the spikes into deep gashes, tearing the sleeve of his coat and into the skin underneath. He jumped back holding his arm, blood pouring from the tattered sleeve in thin rivulets.

"As you may have realized by now, I am able to transform the bones in my body at will to use both in offense and defense. You should give up trying to land a hit on me."

Naruto looked at the strange white swords stuck into his hands. Though it hurt, the pristine material was completely unstained.

"Obito! Don't forget that's not your real body! Whatever he does to you, you can make it go away in a few seconds just by thinking about it!" Naruto called. He closed his eyes and grit his teeth, then sat up, yanking his hands as hard as he could to free them. The sharp edges slicing through his hands stung terribly even though it didn't bleed, but he ignored that and kept going. Kimimaro's eyes widened in surprise as Naruto lunged toward him.

Kimimaro's ribcage shot out in an instant to block the strike that Naruto and a couple of his remaining bunshin aimed at his chest. Naruto's foot ended up trapped, and alarm bells in his mind went off as he realized the same thing that happened to Obito was probably imminent.

"This is completely futile." Kimimaro swiped his spiked fists at the two bunshin, dispelling them. Then he shoved Naruto backward, and the latter lost his balance and fell on his back again, deep, bloodless lines scraping painfully into his leg.

"You're forgetting something very crucial in this fight. I am Edo Tensei. We can tear each other apart all day long, but unlike the two of you, I will never tire or run out of chakra. I am surprised that you are managing this well so soon after being paralyzed by the venom, but this is inevitably a losing battle for you."

"What, it's over already? What a ripoff," Tayuya complained from the corner.

Naruto stared up at the purple ceiling of the barrier high above their heads, desperately trying to think of what to do next. They hadn't even managed to stir up enough trouble to bring Orochimaru out.

**Undo the seal. Use my power. Orochimaru's seal will be destroyed then, too. We can get rid of his hold over you and escape from here.**

Naruto screwed his eyes nearly shut, squinting as he considered what the Kyuubi said. Maybe it would work... maybe it was the only thing that would work. But what if it was a trick? What the fox
was saying sounded too much like how he would try to persuade Naruto in the past.

*I want to go back too, remember?* The Kyuubi roared.

But that wasn't the only thing. He'd already seen what happened when some of the fox's power leaked out and reacted with the strange cells that made up the plant bodies.

*What would happen if all of it came out at once?* Naruto demanded. *And how am I supposed to get past Orochimaru's seal to reach it, anyway?*

The Kyuubi didn't answer. He seemed to be considering Naruto's thoughts, like what he said made something else occur to him.

Orbito landed beside Naruto with a thump and a grunt. All of Naruto's clones were dispelled, and the two boys left weren't in great shape. It was just as Kimimaro said: they had no chance of winning this right now.

"If you two want so badly to fight, you'll get the chance soon," Kimimaro said, staring down at them coldly as all the bone spikes sank back into his body. "It is surprising that you managed to use your jutsu, though. I wonder if perhaps you were given a higher dosage of the antidote than you were meant to be."

"No, we're just good at surprising people," Naruto said stubbornly.

"How should we know, anyway?" Obito retorted.

"You two are going back to your room, and you will stay underground from now on. You're free to move around the base, but come here again and you will be locked away in a cell."

Obito was mumbling curses under his breath as Kimimaro pulled them to their feet and dragged them back into the hall, continually pushing until they started walking on their own.

*...Even though this body is more stable, he thinks it will still react if you were to let my power out completely. That would ruin everything for him. That's why the seal is still there, even now, the Kyuubi spoke up again.*

'Huh?' Naruto wondered, confused by the sudden intrusion.

*The only thing he has left to test is where that line is.*

'Would you start making sense, already? What are you talking about?'

Orochimaru is going to force you to use my power. He wants to see how much this new body can withstand before it starts corrupting, like before.

'What?' Naruto abruptly stopped walking, earning him another shove in the back from Kimimaro. 'But that... how do you know?'

You remember what he said earlier. He wants you to be able to use my power, but this jutsu is one that has never been done before by anyone. You, as a Jinchuuriki, bring extra complication into it. It makes sense that he would summon a few more test subjects. But if he wants you to have access to it, why keep the seal on?

'You said earlier that it was so I couldn't escape.'

There is more. He doesn't want you to get desperate and try using it to escape, because he doesn't
know how much you can withstand now. If the plant body starts transforming out of control and absorbs all of my chakra, we will both die. Orochimaru has already invested so much time into this particular version of you that he doesn't want to risk it. You've become valuable to him.

'So what's your point? I don't want to die, either!' 

We can use that against him. He will have to loosen or remove his seal in order to do a test like that. And since you're valuable to him, if we can escape in that moment, we will have some leverage to work with.

'I don't really get what you're saying, but... if you really think he's going to take that seal off soon, I definitely think we should try to escape then!'

They had arrived back at the room. Kimimaro gave them one last push into it, warned them again about going above-ground, then left. He closed the door behind him, but though Naruto listened, he didn't hear a lock being turned.

"Are you alright? You were kinda spacing out there," Obito said, sinking down glumly onto his bed. 

"Y-yeah," Naruto said, caught off guard by the comment. "I was just trying to think of a way we can get out of here."

"Yeah, me too. How are we supposed to get past that stupid barrier with Orochimaru and that creepy bone-guy around?"

Naruto wasn't sure what to say. He wanted to share the possible opening for escape the Kyuubi had seen, but that would mean he'd have to explain his Jinchuuriki status to someone he'd just met. But it was probably going to be hard to avoid it forever, especially if he ended up explaining more about the war.

"Um... hey, Obito."

"Huh?" Obito looked at him and blinked, thrown by the sudden seriousness in Naruto's tone.

"You remember how I said my... parents died fighting against the Kyuubi no Youko?"

"Yeah?"

_Don't tell him about me, idiot brat! He's an Uchiha!_

"Well... there was a little more to it than that. I didn't really know much about how it happened before I got here, but my dad didn't just make the Kyuubi go away. He... well, he sealed it. Inside of me. I'm what they call a Jinchuuriki."

Obito's mouth fell open, and Naruto hurried to say more, seized with a sort of mild panic. "Like I said, I'm not completely sure how it happened, and I just learned really recently who my dad was, but the older me said that he did it to save the village. That I'd understand it someday—and I don't, but yeah, that's basically it."

"I can't believe he would do that," Obito said, frowning, and the relief Naruto felt from that one statement was both strong and unexpected. "I know it's after my time and everything, but I can't imagine him doing that to his own son." He stayed silent for several seconds, then looked up at Naruto again, examining his face like he was looking for something. "Is that what this...?" he touched his own unblemished cheeks.
"Probably, yeah."

Obito crossed his arms and seemed to consider it a little more. After a minute of silence, he started speaking again in a gruff tone.

"I guess I don't really know, either... but I do know that Minato-sensei would do anything for the people he cares about. He's one of the nicest people I know, but also one of the smartest. It's almost scary sometimes, how good he is at planning ahead. There have been times during missions when he would ask us to do something, and we wouldn't understand it at all—not even that smart-ass Kakashi—but we would do it anyway, because we knew he was always looking out for us. And every single time, it turned out that he was brilliant and had seen something that no one else had seen. This is probably like that, too."

Obito's attempt to comfort him was even more unexpected than him just accepting. Naruto kind of wanted to cry again, but that was embarrassing, so he forcefully pushed the urge back. He cleared his throat and continued on with what he wanted to say.

"Anyway... that's one of the reasons why Orochimaru brought me here to this time. But the Kyuubi says that—"

"Whoa, wait, you can talk to it?" Obito asked, leaning forward interestedly. "Has it said anything about me?"

Naruto, the fox growled.

"He keeps yelling at me for telling you stuff, 'cause he doesn't like the Uchiha." Naruto sat down on his own bed and casually stretched out. "But listen..."

Naruto explained everything the Kyuubi had told him about his theory, about the seal that Orochimaru had placed, and the possibility of him loosening it as a test. That inevitably led to him explaining more about the war, how Madara had stolen almost all the bijuu for his plan, and what Naruto had been doing in the future up until the point when he thought he'd found a way home.

They talked for a long while, taking stock of the situation. After learning how both the younger and older Naruto were connected with the war and Orochimaru's own stock in it, Obito only had one question still left unanswered.

"So then, why me?"

"Don't worry, we're going to find out. Even if we have to beat an answer out of him," Naruto said determinedly, punching one hand with his fist.

They passed the next day without any incident, which was in itself remarkable. At least, it might have been a day: it was from the time they woke up until the time they went to sleep again. It was impossible to tell time accurately inside the underground lair. The only other person they saw was Kabuto, who came back to check up on them again. They tried persuading him to come along with them on their next escape attempt, but he declined. It seemed he was determined to remain on Orochimaru's good side, all for the sake of his mother and friends. As frustrating as it was, though, they could hardly fault him for that.

It didn't matter, anyway. They were going to find a way to save themselves and him. If they could undo the jutsu, then they could all go home.

Thinking they might be able to find scrolls or other hints about the jutsu around the base, and having
nothing better to do, Naruto and Obito spent a lot of time exploring. Because they never went above-ground where the barrier was, neither Kimimaro nor anyone else ever showed up. It was eerie, traveling the halls in the semidarkness and silence. They filled up the time with chatter and joking to dispel the creepy atmosphere.

Orochimaru had to be somewhere inside the base—how else could he direct the war while keeping an eye on them? But despite the hours they spent scouring the place, they never caught sight of him. It wasn't until the next day, when they stumbled upon a room they hadn't seen before, that they finally found out why he'd taken the trouble to imprison them together for all that time.

"I can't believe we missed something this big before. What do you suppose this room is for?" Naruto asked, leaning over the railing to look down into the large, circular, arena-like room. It reminded him of the place where they'd had the Chuunin Exam preliminaries, except that it was round and lined with mysterious doors. They were standing on the balcony overhead, looking into the dim and empty room.

"There has to be something down here. I mean, look at this place!" Obito pushed his goggles up to get a good look around. "Those doors all lead to something. Let's go check it out." He braced his hands on the railing and vaulted over it, landing smoothly down below. Naruto quickly followed suit. There was no other visible way to get down to the bottom.

"Okay, let's just start with this one and work our way around," Naruto said, motioning to the door nearest to him. He turned and reached out for the door handle—only to drop his hand down to his side when he realized it was missing. "Hey! That's annoying... there's no doorknob!"

"There's not one on any of these," Obito said, looking around at all the doors. "Guess we'll just have to break in?"

"You shouldn't do that. I'd rather you stay put in here just a bit longer."

The two boys snapped their heads up toward the balcony, from where the familiar dry, rasping voice had come. Orochimaru looked down at them, grinning widely. Kimimaro stood by his side and a respectful step back.

"It's about time you showed your stupid, ugly face again!" Obito yelled, snapping his goggles back over his eyes as if preparing to fight.

"Aha! So there is something here you don't want us to see, is that it?" Naruto pointed at Orochimaru dramatically.

"Oh, you're not here to do any sightseeing, I'm afraid. I'm sorry if it's been boring for you while I've been busy with other things. I promise that right now, you have my full attention."

A crawling, prickling feeling worked its way up Naruto's arms at the statement. He didn't like the sound of that. He now had the feeling it wasn't just a coincidence that they ended up here.

"Whatever you're planning to do, we deserve some answers," Naruto said, glaring up at him with fists clenched. "Obito—"

"I know that you have told him everything, and that you've figured out part of why I brought you here now," Orochimaru interrupted, looking pleased. "Though I'm sure you had the Kyuubi's help... I may not be able to see what goes on in your mind, but with my control tag, I can see through your eyes and hear through your ears."
"Huh... how? What?" Naruto’s thoughts were derailed, going from defiant to extremely confused. Orochimaru could see and hear everything he did? Was that literal? There didn't seem to be any other way of interpreting it. "Since when? The control tag... you mean, since Suna?"

Orochimaru just smiled. He seemed content to let him figure it out himself.

A cold feeling swept over Naruto as he stared up into Orochimaru's eyes—those sinister yellow eyes he often felt watching in the space between consciousness and unconsciousness. It shouldn't have been much of a surprise, given that the Kyuubi had already told him that Orochimaru used the control tag as an anchor to drag him back from the past. But the snake had never used it to control him, so it seemed so benign. So easy to forget about, with everything else going on.

Orochimaru started laughing, first as a low chuckle, growing into a full-bodied laugh that echoed all around the empty room. That laugh Naruto despised, the one that could have his anger boiling in a matter of seconds.

"I was around them all that time... I put everyone in danger!" Naruto snarled, glaring as if he hoped that his own clear blue eyes could burn the smile off Orochimaru's face. Why did it always turn out like this? Always?

"You've done a good job of nurturing that hatred like I asked you to." Orochimaru gestured toward him. "I hope we'll soon be able to see results that merit so much effort."

He disappeared. Naruto took a step backward, putting his fists up. He knew what was coming a split second before it happened. Orochimaru slammed his hand into the seal blocking the one placed by the Yondaime, making Naruto give a pained grunt and slump over.

"Hey, what did you do to him?" Obito demanded, taking a swing at Orochimaru, who simply stepped away just as he'd come in, landing back on the balcony.

"Worry more about yourself, Obito-kun. This show is just as much for you as it is for me."

"What the hell does that mean? Oi, Naruto, are you okay?" Obito shook his shoulder.

"I'm fine, he just—just took off that seal blocking the Kyuubi's chakra," Naruto wheezed, using Obito’s arm to pull himself up. An uncomfortable pins-and-needles feeling was starting in each of his limbs, as if his whole body had to adjust to the circulation of the new chakra. "You—wait... Obito, you have to get away from here!"

"I'm not leaving, are you stupid?" Obito shook him again, this time out of frustration. "You wanted his seal to be gone, right? You'll be fine. We should both just run away while we've got the chance!"

"No, it isn't that... he's about to..." Naruto's voice turned gravelly as he leaned over, holding the seal like he had a bad stomachache. He couldn't speak anymore. He wanted to keep telling Obito to run away, but it was getting harder and harder to move his mouth.

"You're right, you deserve at least a little bit of clarification for all your hard work," Orochimaru said calmly. Obito looked back up at him, and noticed that his hand was held up in a half-ram seal. "Yes, Suna is where everything changed. After I suppressed Kabuto, I wanted to bring you under contract with me as soon as possible, since Itachi and Nagato were left as loose ends. I couldn't let you slip away so easily because of them. My control tag did exactly that—and I used the opportunity in Ame to test it out where I could watch the results from the outside. You might have been thinking that this time, I tricked you into being sent back home because I couldn't do it myself. In reality, sending you back by sealing Nagato stopped being a possibility before you even met him. You've been under
contract with me since Suna. I could have sent you back whenever I wanted."

Naruto was still hunched over, clutching the seal that steadily burned. He couldn't stand up, because something heavy was holding him down. It was power, energy—it smouldered and stung, but it also felt good. It was an answer for the hopelessness that tried to gnaw at him. The frustration and the anger.

_Naruto. He's choosing to tell you this now for a reason. He expects you to react emotionally. Get a hold of yourself!_ the Kyuubi growled. The fox could hardly believe what he was doing, warning Naruto when this could be such a good opportunity for him to go on a rampage. But it wasn't just because his opinion on Naruto had changed a bit. He didn't like the way Orochimaru was trying to use them. All this so that the insolent snake could have a pet Jinchuuriki of his own?

"But I had no reason to do that, after all. I wanted you to spend more time with your friends, and I wanted them to continue believing they had a way to send you back. Since I could see and hear everything you could, I knew exactly when they were going to try. I released the jutsu when Nagato was sealed, so that they would believe they had done it even after you were gone. I needed to send you home anyway, in order to summon you back using this new body. Let's see... did I leave anything out? Oh, yes. The reason you can't move right now is because I am controlling your movements. Can't have you trying to escape now just because you can use the Kyuubi again."

Naruto tried to look up at Orochimaru, to move his head, to do _anything_, but it was no use. He really didn't have control over his own body. Even though he could feel the power coursing through him, he wasn't directing it. The desire he had just a little while ago, to use the Kyuubi's power, started fading quickly once this sunk in. The fox was right. To Orochimaru, he was nothing but another lab specimen to be used.

"I won't... do something just because you want me to!" Naruto growled in a low tone with all the effort he could muster, unable to speak any louder. His anger was settling down into a dull roar, no longer all-encompassing. But the burning feeling throughout his whole body did not stop. Stuck halfway hunched on the ground, Naruto could see the nails on his hands lengthening into sharp claws.

"Stop... whatever it is you're doing! Let Naruto go!" Obito shouted at Orochimaru, positioned defensively beside his new friend with no idea of how to help. Even though they were technically the same age, this was his sensei's son, after all. All of the times Minato been there for Obito and the others, teaching them, talking to them—those were all things his son should have had, too, but never got the chance.

It was all because of the Kyuubi, and all the people like Orochimaru who wanted to use it for their own selfish goals. Obito didn't understand why he hadn't been around to be the kind of mentor to Naruto that Minato was to him, but now was the perfect time to correct it. Or at least it would be, if only he could figure out how to help Naruto break free from Orochimaru's control.

"Come on, stand up," Obito said, pulling on Naruto's arm. "We'll just have to bust through one of those doors, and figure the rest out from—what?" He let go and took a step backward when he realized that Naruto's eyes had changed from blue to a dark red, with angry-looking slitted pupils. The whisker marks on his face thickened, and a bubbling aura of energy materialized around his entire body.

Naruto finally climbed to his feet, slowly, turning around to face Obito just as a single tail-like formation grew out from the aura. He remained slightly hunched, hands low.

"The form is still stable at one tail," Orochimaru said smoothly. "Now, what about two?"
Obito looked up at him and then back at Naruto, eyes widening when he saw a second tail beginning to form. He wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it couldn't be anything good. Glancing back from Naruto to Orochimaru again, he quickly came to a decision about what to do. The only way to stop this was at the source. Obito dashed to the edge of the room and jumped onto the wall, running up until he was on level with the balcony, then he pushed off and launched toward Orochimaru.

But his target didn't make a single move in defense, and neither did Kimimaro, who was still watching from further back. Instead, as Obito shot toward Orochimaru, he felt something wrap around his leg and pull him down hard to the ground. Intense pain unlike anything he'd ever felt before shot through the affected limb, and he gave an agonized cry while trying to roll out of the thing's reach. It was like someone had applied a hot iron directly to his skin. Obito saw a huge, ephemeral claw draw back and rejoin with the aura surrounding Naruto, which had grown even bigger, and—did it have three tails now? He looked down and saw that the aura had burned through his pants leg, leaving welts on his skin that were a very dark red, almost black. He spend a couple of seconds trying to think them away, just like all of his injuries before, but they still remained.

"Interesting. So that's how the Kyuubi's chakra reacts with those cells in its corrosive form," Orochimaru said, leaning over the rail to get a better look. "We'll have to take extra care that it doesn't damage his own vessel. The fourth tail is when it became damaging to him in a human form, so perhaps we will keep it below that number until we see whether or not Obito-kun's injuries heal."

"Isn't it true that the four-tailed cloak causes damage over the entire body? A much larger scale," Kimimaro said. "A small mark on the leg isn't enough to make any conclusions."

"Yes, very true. Perhaps there should be a bit more."

"What?" Obito gasped as Naruto started stalking toward him slowly, crawling on all fours now like a feral beast. His face was pulled into a snarl, showing pointed teeth, and his eyes were unfocused. It was like he didn't recognize Obito at all.

"N-Naruto—" Obito tried scrambling to his feet, but putting weight on the injured leg sent another wave of agonizing pain through it. He cursed loudly and moved back and sideways out of Naruto's direct line of sight, hopping slightly as he went. He was breathing heavily after the pain and struggle to run. "Naruto, you have to snap out of it! Please!"

Naruto's head turned toward him slowly, and then he gave a loud cry that was halfway between a screech and a roar. The bubbling energy around him formed into a gigantic claw again and shot toward Obito. He managed to throw himself to the side to avoid it, and the claw went crashing through the wall, creating a hole the width of several doors. Dust and shattered pieces of brick flew everywhere, and Obito put his arms over his head to block the sharp projectiles. It felt like the entire place might come crashing down soon.

Naruto screeched again, a haunting, terrifying sound. The three tails elongated and swung around wildly, and the concrete underneath his feet cracked. Obito squinted up at him through the debris, mouth dry and fear gripping him at the sheer power he could feel coming from the Nine-Tails' chakra. There was so much noise and destruction that he might be able to get away through the hole in the wall, even with an injured leg, but... he couldn't just run away and abandon Naruto to this cruel treatment. It couldn't be described any other way. Neither of them had any control over what was happening, and their tormentors just stood and watched with calm smiles and academic words.

How far was Orochimaru willing to go for this? Would he let Obito die? Was he really just an expendable extra to him, put here for the sake of this one experiment?

Obito got to his feet again. He would not die. He would save Naruto, and they were both going to
make it the hell out of here and back home. But how?

How?

Against his better judgment, Obito ran in closer instead of away, jaw clenched and eyes frantically darting, watching for the next move Naruto would make. The animalistic features made him barely recognizable, but the most disturbing part was how blank Naruto’s expression was. Was he even aware of what was happening? Obito crouched down as one of the tails whipped out and tried to knock his head off. He thought himself lucky to have avoided it. The colors surrounding his friend had grown even more vibrant—the immense power almost hurt to look at. As he ducked down, pain shot through him again, causing him to lose his balance and roll over onto his back. Naruto jumped over him and gave another ear-splitting wail, raising a clawed hand up high.

Obito flinched at the swift movement, throwing his hands up defensively. It was too late. He closed his eyes... and then opened them again, squinting at the figure above him when nothing happened after a beat.

The great claw made out of chakra hovered right above his chest, sharp points aimed to rip him into shreds at the slightest movement. He locked eyes with Naruto—or Orochimaru through Naruto, if that’s what it was. The claw started to retract, and the corrosive energy roiled and sank back down into Naruto’s body. Obito sat up quickly, staring in disbelief as Naruto’s eyes faded back into blue and the claws and teeth grew back to normal. Naruto’s eyes closed, and he slumped down to the ground in a dead weight.

"Naruto!" Obito pushed himself up and hobbled to him, turning Naruto over. He just looked unconscious. The corrosive energy hadn’t put a scratch on him anywhere. "What did you do?" he demanded of Orochimaru, who was still watching them from above with a self-satisfied smile.

"Ngh..." Naruto stirred slightly. So, he hadn’t lost consciousness.

Obito looked back down at him and tried shaking him more awake. "Naruto, can you hear me? Are you alright?"

"Ugh... huh? Obito?" Naruto looked like himself again, no longer blank or frightening. He looked up and around at the destruction of the room, then at Obito’s battered state. "What happened—w-whoa!" he exclaimed suddenly after looking at him, jerking back a bit in surprise. "Obito, your eyes! I thought you said you didn't have the Sharingan!"

"I—what?" Obito yelled. He quickly took off his goggles, but there was nothing reflective that he could look into. He tugged his hitai-ate loose and squinted into it, hoping to see something in its polished metal surface. Everything in it just looked like blobs, but... there were red blobs where his eyes were! He was sure of it!

Obito was excited about it for about five seconds, before he remembered. Kyuubi-cloaked Naruto had turned back into regular Naruto after seeing his eyes.

"You're going to regret this." He turned to glare up at Orochimaru with his new eyes. "You can't just keep using us like this! We're not your toys, or your minions! I guess all that was just supposed to scare me, huh?"

"Not entirely," Orochimaru said. "You're much more useful to me with that Sharingan of yours. Without it, you might as well be ripped apart by the Kyuubi. I'd say we accomplished a lot today."

"He..." Naruto grabbed Obito's arm. "What happened? I remember that I couldn't move... and then
I..." a terrible expression came over his face and he let go, staring around at the destruction of the room like he couldn't believe the evidence in front of him.

Obito hated to admit it, but he would've been glad even for Kakashi's help right now. He was good at planning, good at figuring things out in stressful situations.

"Let's just try to make it out through that hole in the wall, alright?" Obito hissed quietly to Naruto, trying to bring his attention back to the matter at hand. "First we have to get away, then we can worry about all the other stuff."

There was a sudden loud crash from the vicinity of the damaged wall, and a telltale shriek of lightning jutsu. Obito spun around wildly, eyes widened in disbelief. He already half-expected to see Kakashi wielding his chakra blade, charged with lightning. There was another crash, and more of the brick wall exploded outward.

"K-Kakashi?" Obito wondered out loud, coughing in the dust that was kicked up by this new explosion. Someone stepped out of the dust—but it wasn't Kakashi. Obito didn't know who it was, but it was obvious from a glance that he was an Uchiha. If his face and hair weren't clue enough, his eyes definitely had the Sharingan, though it was a pattern Obito had never seen before.

"Sasuke!" Naruto coughed. The dust had gotten to him, too. Obito looked at him and then back at the Uchiha. That was Sasuke? The one on Naruto's team? But he didn't look like—wait, that was right. It was the older version of Naruto's teammate.

"I see you made it here," Orochimaru said. "I didn't think Kabuto would actually convince you to wait, but you got down here sooner than I expected. Did you fetch Karin first, then?"

"No. Suigetsu has been to this base before," Sasuke said. "Why weren't you at the place we agreed to meet?"

"My apologies, Sasuke-kun, but you were taking a very long time, and it couldn't wait. I could have explained it to you when you got there, if you hadn't killed the snake-bunshin I left for you."

Obito had no idea who these people were, what they were talking about, or what was going on. He saw a tall, broad-shouldered man behind Sasuke on one side, and a shifty-looking guy with white hair on the other. But neither Sasuke's group nor Orochimaru were paying attention to them right now. This was the perfect chance.

"Come on," he murmured, pulling on Naruto's arm. "Hurry up, while they're distracted!"

Naruto seemed to wake up. He looked at Obito, then glanced at the yawning gap where the wall had once been. "You go ahead and go. I need to talk to Sasuke!"

"What? This isn't the time for that!" Obito pulled more insistently as Naruto tried to turn away. "Talk to him some other time, when Orochimaru isn't over there ready to control you, or put that seal back on, or whatever else!"

"Obito, just get out, you don't have to be caught up in—"

"I'm not going to leave you behind! Even if you are a dumbass!"

Their squabbling made Orochimaru's yellow eyes flicker over to them for a second. Obito practically dragged Naruto in the direction of the opening.

"Ugh—" Naruto flinched. He was no longer resisting, but he slowed down, his free hand going to
his stomach again. "It... burns."

"Shit!" This wasn't going to work if Orochimaru took over Naruto again! Obito had no idea if getting them out of this room would help at all, but it was the only thing he could think of.

"Kimimaro, make sure our little mice don't scurry away. I'll give Sasuke-kun the chat he wants," Orochimaru said. Kimimaro jumped down to the floor gracefully. Cursing under his breath even more, Obito hobbled and pulled Naruto away as quickly as he could. The wall was crumbling—it didn't exactly look safe, but it was the only way out.

He looked back over his shoulder. Kimimaro had paused for some reason. Obito couldn't see or hear what was going on very well, but for some reason the tall man beside Sasuke had called out to Kimimaro, interrupting his steps. That was all Obito needed. He turned back and drove forward with his mouth set in a grim line. He was worried about Naruto. That aura of corrosive chakra hadn't reappeared yet, but his skin was burning. It prickled uncomfortably at Obito's hands and the back of his neck as he pulled Naruto's arm over his shoulders. That energy was truly like a sentient being all on its own.

They reached the crumbling opening, and someone called at them from in the room. Obito hurried to climb through dragging Naruto, his grip tightening in panic. There was a loud crash from overhead. Was someone attacking? There were more shouts. It was completely dark in the hall. Would this even work? The barrier outside was probably still up, right?

Another crack directly above them; this one went on for several seconds before something heavy fell down right in their path. Obito backpedaled as quickly as he could, swearing up a storm. The entire hall was caving in! Stepping backward, his heel caught on a chunk of debris in the darkness, causing them both to lose their balance and fall. He bumped his elbow painfully, but worst of all was the split-second realization that falling pieces were spilling down from above ever closer, and—

"Kirimaro," Juugo said with his eyes wide. The shock of seeing him here so suddenly left him completely stunned. He forgot about why they were there, or the order Orochimaru had given Kimimaro just now, the one he was interrupting by talking to him.

Kimimaro stood up from the crouch he'd landed in from up above, and paused before turning to Juugo.

"It is good to see you again," he said with a small, but genuine smile. "We can catch up after I take care of this."

"Juugo, focus on Orochimaru," Sasuke said.

The command made Kimimaro frown. "I don't want to fight with any of you, but if you plan to move against Orochimaru-sama, I will have to." He looked from Sasuke to Juugo, who was still staring, taken completely off guard. This was a problem he never could have foreseen. He had no idea what to do. Suigetsu started edging away from all of them, in case things turned ugly.

"Don't worry about this group," Orochimaru said from above them. "Just bring back the other two. We can resume the test after Kabuto takes care of their wounds."

"Understood," Kimimaro said with a nod. He turned away from them and started toward the other side of the room, where Obito was climbing through the destroyed wall. "Stop!"

"Are you sure it's alright, Sasuke?" Suigetsu muttered, sidling up beside him. "That was the younger version of your old teammate, right? From what we heard, wasn't he supposed to have been sent
All of them turned around as a loud series of crashes shook the entire room. Kimimaro stopped, then rushed forward into the cloud of dust that rushed out from the hole.

"Do we have to have a chat here? This whole place is falling down!" Suigetsu shouted, looking up at the ceiling warily.

All of this noise, plus the stress from earlier was too much for Juugo. His body started melting into gray. With a wild yell of his own, he started to punch the wall, destroying even more of it.

"Okay, that isn't going to help! Sasuke!" Suigetsu turned to him, sounding annoyed, but also melting a little bit around the edges from all the chaos.

Sasuke could see that the collapse had distracted Orochimaru, as well. Judging by the way he leaned over the rail and looked to where Kimimaro had gone, this was not something that had been within the snake's calculations. He almost looked ready to jump down there himself.

"What is it?" he called as Kimimaro came back out a few minutes after he went in, completely empty-handed.

Kimimaro climbed all the way out and looked up, brows knit in consternation. "We should clear out everything to make completely sure, but... they aren't there. The hallway was blocked ahead, and they weren't under the piece that fell close to the entrance. They disappeared."

Naruto opened his eyes a slit. He was laying on a hard, cool surface, face pressed down by a weight on the back of his head. He knew he had been drifting in and out for a while, ever since Orochimaru started controlling him. But now, that heavy, oppressive feeling was gone.

Naruto braced his hands against the floor and pushed himself up, moving out from under Obito's arm, which had been the thing pushing his face down. Everything was dead quiet here, but... where were they now? When he found himself laying on a concrete floor, he at first thought that they must be locked in a cell again. But as he looked around, he realized this place was too big for that. It was so large that he couldn't see the walls or the ceiling. Was it even indoors, or outdoors? All Naruto saw was a bizarre expanse made of white blocks and square columns of varying heights. There was enough light to see everything, but no hint as to where it came from. It just gradually got darker further and further away, until nothing in the distance could be seen.

"Hey, Obito, wake up." Naruto tried to shake Obito awake, but he just rolled over with the push and didn't move. The young Uchiha's face looked very pale. Was there something wrong with him? "Hey! Heyyyyy. What happened? Oi!"

That was worrying. Just as soon as Naruto felt in control of himself again, Obito had to go passing out. What if Orochimaru and the others were nearby? ...Yet, it didn't seem like they were. No matter how much he listened, he couldn't hear anything. And they had no reason to hide.

Naruto stood up to increase his line of sight, but it didn't really help. Surely if there was anyone else here, they'd stand out against all these white blocks, right?

"Sasuke? ...Anyone?"

Nothing changed, no matter how much he called. There was just silence, and the strange geometric landscape that stretched off into infinity.
"Where the hell are we?"
A single bead of sweat forming on Orochimaru's brow was the only sign that something had just happened that he had not accounted for. Never did he expect that Obito would be able to use his Sharingan's special ability so soon after awakening it. Had coming into contact with the Kyuubi's chakra had an effect on him? Or was it simply due to the extra resilience given to him by the Zetsu body? Orochimaru had found out quite a lot about this time's Obito, and knew that half of his body being replaced by the Shodai's cells was what allowed him to use one of Madara's Rinnegan and control multiple revived Jinchuuriki at one time. Who knew what this version would be capable of, given time?

And there was more. If all that wasn't intriguing enough, he could no longer see through Naruto's eyes using the control tag. In fact, he couldn't sense Naruto at all. Even when the young Jinchuuriki had gone back to the past, that had been possible. That meant they were somewhere else, somewhere entirely insulated against outside interference. Orochimaru was grinning. There was so much about dimensional jutsu he still didn't know.

He lowered his hand from the half-ram seal and shifted his attention back to everyone below. Failing to find their escapees, Kimimaro had gone to calm Juugo down before he added even more holes in the wall. Sasuke was still looking up, watching Orochimaru with narrowed eyes, and Suigetsu stood behind him.

"What now, Sasuke-kun?" Orochimaru asked. "You followed me here, even after all the trouble you had to go through. I assume it's because of the scroll... unless there is more?"

"Aren't you going to go chasing after them?" Sasuke said, voice flat.

"No. There's no use. They're out of my reach now. I was going to release them before too long, anyway." He paused. "In fact, I am glad that you came here. What I am most interested in now is helping you along whatever path you choose to take next—"

"Stop lying and tell me what it is you're really trying to do." Sasuke's voice cut harshly through the end of Orochimaru's statement. "Why would you still be participating in the war, unless you had something you still wanted to get out of it?"

Orochimaru sighed. "Sasuke-kun... what do I need to do to make you believe me? I'll follow whatever it is you want to do. You have my word. Would you like to go to Konoha?"

"Release the Edo Tensei."

Even Kimimaro and Juugo turned to look at him then. Sasuke's mouth was set in a grim smirk. He knew there was no way Orochimaru would give up his precious Uchiha army, especially while the war was still going on. When he didn't, he would be forced to reveal his true purpose or fight them.

"What I want is for all their souls to return where they belong," Sasuke continued. "They aren't pawns to be used for your scheme."

"Things with Itachi must have gone well."

Sasuke just waited.

"Ah, well. It can't be helped."
Without any further stalling, Orochimaru ran through the signs, not bothering to hide them from Sasuke's carefully watching eyes. He held the last one for a second longer than the rest, then dropped his hands down by his sides.

Everyone turned and watched in disbelief as Kimimaro started glowing, a halo of light surrounding his body. Fine lines appeared and cracked open all over him. Even he seemed surprised, looking down at his own disintegrating hands as if he could hardly believe it. He looked at Juugo and smiled as if saying goodbye. And very shortly, he was gone. A pile of ash and a corpse were all that he left behind.

Sasuke watched with all the rest, but then he turned back to Orochimaru without missing a beat. "How do I know you didn't just send him back, and not the others?"

"If you go above ground, you'll find that our guards have also disappeared, and the barrier is gone," Orochimaru said, lifting his palms in a careless gesture. "I suppose you can't verify for the rest without going back to the battlefield... but I promise they've all been sent back. Is there anything else?"

"Why did you summon them in the first place?" Sasuke asked after a pause. "The real reason this time. And what is it that you want from me, and the war?"

"They were helping me with my project by keeping the Allied Shinobi Force distracted while my Zetsu clones collected living samples. The Zetsu are perfectly adapted for that task, and I didn't want them to be wiped out too quickly. And, I admit, I didn't want you to get here too soon, either. I still had one or two tests to finish on the Time-Spanning Incarnation jutsu before it could be considered complete."

"So do you plan to use that jutsu on me, as well? Or have you done it already?" Sasuke asked coldly, eyes narrowing.

"No, I won't. Not this time."

"What do you mean, this time?"

"If I am right, this jutsu will allow me to reach into as many times and dimensions as I want. To see into them, to influence them. And eventually, to travel to them myself. But that is something for much later. I will be staying right here in this one a while, and for that, the path of the Sasuke right in front of me is much more appealing than reliving the old days when I trained you. I am much more interested in seeing where you will go from here—the future, unfortunately, is something I can only view second by second as it happens."

"What about Kabuto?" Juugo asked, walking up beside Sasuke to look at Orochimaru. "Sasuke said you let him get killed. But we saw the younger version of him just a little while ago. Does that mean you want to relive training him? And what about the rest of us?"

"No, I have no intention of things with him going the same as they did before. He was just a test to see what would happen if a person's soul went to the Pure World after I made a copy of it. I thought there was a chance that dying meant all forms of a person in the same plane would be negated. As you saw, that didn't happen. Once brought into existence, one is completely independent from the other. That is, in fact, the most valuable thing about this jutsu."

"You let him die for that," Juugo said, frowning.

"There's no need to be so disapproving. It was something that had to be verified, and the least
wasteful way was to use someone that was already going to die. His involvement with the war and the ones scheming behind it made it impossible for me to move freely while still being trapped within him. The separation would kill him one way or the other. There was another way it could have been done, one that wouldn't have required him to give up so much of his own life energy, but it was impossible without outside help."


"Sometimes getting rid of the old, dead skin is necessary," Orochimaru mused. "That is why I want to stay here for the time being. After being trapped within Kabuto, I realized something. He imitated the way I lived and tried to possess everything, and failed. So now, I'm just curious about the different path Sasuke has chosen. Unlike Kabuto, Sasuke didn't copy me. That is why his future comes before anyone else's."

Sasuke considered this for a moment. Then he reached into his sleeve and pulled out the scroll Suigetsu and Juugo found. "Alright then. I will decide where I will go from here, after I can talk to them."

Naruto wandered around for a while, trying to figure out where he and Obito had ended up—or at the very least, figure out whether they were still in danger or not. It was kind of impossible to tell at the moment. On the one hand, no one else seemed to be here, and nothing was happening. On the other, there didn't seem any end to or any escape from this dim, eerie place. And Obito was still unconscious. Naruto was fairly certain he was still alive. It was hard to be sure with the plant bodies, but he got the feeling that if Obito was dead, it would turn back into its original form, like the transformed Zetsus Naruto had defeated on the battlefield.

Naruto didn't wander too far, however. He was afraid of getting lost in this place where everything looked the same, and most of all, he didn't want to get separated from Obito at a time like this. After walking around several times in a circle with his friend's prone form at the center, Naruto came back and plopped down with a sigh. He crossed his arms and legs and leaned backward, trying to think of a way out of this.

Naruto.

"Ah! Huh?" Naruto jumped and lost his balance, wheeled his arms around, and nearly fell before righting himself. "Kyuubi! You scared me!"

Don't talk to me out loud. You don't know who could be around here."

"Huh? Oh, right." Naruto crossed his arms again and tried thinking what he wanted to say, the way he did before. 'So, do you know where this place is?'

We're in another dimension. I can't feel Orochimaru's connection with us anymore. I knew there had to be some reason why he bothered summoning that Uchiha brat. He wants the boy's Sharingan ability.

'Wait, so you're saying... Obito is the one that brought us here?' Naruto asked, looking down at Obito, sprawled out on the floor. 'Yeah... that makes sense. If he had some kind of special power, of course Orochimaru would want in on it. But doesn't that mean we're stuck until Obito wakes up?'

Yes.

It seemed like the fox wanted to say more, but he paused. Naruto tilted his head to the side. That
definitely wasn't like him. But before Naruto could ask the Kyuubi what he was thinking, he continued.

We might be in as much danger as we were before. I think this kid is Madara.

"What?" Naruto said loudly, before he could catch himself. 'Do you have a screw loose or something? Madara is supposed to be a geezer even older than the village, right? Obito knows my dad! He was on a team with Kakashi-sensei.'

I don't mean the real Uchiha Madara. I mean the one that's been going around calling himself by that name, hiding under a mask so no one can see what he really looks like.

'What are you talking about?'

I knew Madara. The person we met had something reminiscent of him, but he also felt different. And his teleportation jutsu felt exactly like the one that brought us to this space. The Madara I knew couldn't do anything like that, even though he must have known all about the Nidaime Hokage's space-time jutsu.

'Just because you never saw him do it, it doesn't mean—'

The masked man is a fake. And he's the older version of this kid.

'You must be sleep talking or something, because Obito would never grow up to be that awful guy!' Naruto fumed mentally. 'If he really did bring us here, that means he just saved our lives, right? Even if it's somehow the same ability... for all we know, Madara stole Obito's power for himself, just like Orochimaru is trying to do. I can see why they'd want it. But if that's the case, we need to hurry up and find out what happened, so that we can save him from Madara in his own time. Now be quiet and let me concentrate.'

Inside the cage formed by the seal, Kurama lay down with his front legs crossed, silently affronted. He was actually trying to be helpful to the boy for once, against all natural inclination, but Naruto simply brushed his centuries of experience aside and refused to listen. Not very promising. The fox wondered if this Naruto could really be counted on to go the same way as with his other self.

Admittedly, there was some chance that Naruto was right about the reasons for the two instances feeling the same. Eye-stealing for the sake of gaining new abilities wasn't exactly uncommon among that clan. But Kurama wasn't entirely convinced. The Uchiha boy's chakra, his smell... he wasn't exactly the same as the masked man, but any similarity at all was enough to be suspect.

So what are you going to do?

'Well, you said that no one can reach us here from the outside, right?' Naruto shifted and settled down as comfortably as possible, sitting in a meditative position. 'But maybe there's a chance we can call out instead. I'm going to try going into Sage Mode one more time, and see if I can call one of the Toads. There's nothing else we can do until Obito wakes up, anyway.'

Naruto lightly touched his hands together in his lap and closed his eyes. One advantage to being stuck in this place, at least, was its total silence and stillness. It was almost the perfect place to try to focus on meditating.

The downside, of course, was that there was no one here to save him if it went all wrong and he started turning into stone.

But that just meant he'd have to get it right this time, didn't it?
Naruto took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to activate his senses to detect the presence of Natural Energy. It never took long to get that part of it, these days, but right now even that first step didn't seem to be working out very well. He could sense some of it, but it was very faint, not anything like what he usually felt.

But maybe... that was because of where they were? Wouldn't it make sense for less of it floating around in a place where it didn't look like any living thing was? It didn't feel like he'd have to worry getting overwhelmed with the energy too quickly, but what if it ended up being the opposite problem instead?

Naruto sat there collecting energy gradually, trying to mold it together with his own the way the Toads had taught him. Though that part of it was much easier than usual, trying to get enough to balance with his own large energy was taking a long time. It was like trying to fill a tub of water from a dipping faucet. If he got impatient or let his mind wander off track, it could throw everything off. Not to mention, he had to maintain complete stillness the entire time.

But gradually, it was working. At least, Naruto hoped that it was. The energy was moving, circulating along with his own. He was making more progress than he ever had before. It was like the one time he had come close to it, when Yamato and Fukasaku were there to watch over him.

He could feel his features starting to transform like they did then, but he kept concentrating hard in order to stop the fear of losing control to overtake him. No one could save him here. He had to do this right.

Naruto slowly opened his eyes and saw that his hands had turned webbed, and his toes also looked comically frog-like. He slowly felt of his face and could tell that his cheeks and nose were pudged out, and warts grew on his skin. But at least it didn't seem to be getting any worse? The energy inside of him was stable, more or less. It wasn't as refined as what Fukasaku said his older self could do, but it was something. This could work!

"This is it 'ttebayo," Naruto mumbled to himself. "Now then—"

"WhaaAAAH!"

Naruto jumped up before he even realized consciously that he was moving, pushing up off the ground with one hand and landing smoothly a few feet away. All the space around him was an extension of himself. He could feel it when Obito moved, when he sat up, and was already lifting himself up and out of the way when his confused peer swung a leg out at him.

"Obito, it's just me!" Naruto said, standing up. "You passed out—oh yeah, and we're in some kind of other dimension or something, and the Kyuubi thinks it was you who did it."

"What the hell?" Obito demanded. "And what happened to your face?"

"Oh, right. I should hurry up before it goes away." Naruto bit his thumb and ran through the hand signs. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"

He slammed his hand down on the ground, face scrunched in concentration. There was a puff of smoke, then an old toad appeared, fast asleep under an equally tiny blanket.

"Sennin jii-chan!" Naruto said in surprise; partly because it had worked, and partly because he'd actually managed to get the toad he wanted to get, even in this place.

"A toad?" Obito wondered, clamoring to his feet.
"...Huh? Wassat?" Fukasaku sat up slowly and blinked, then jumped up in a panic. "What? Naruto-chan? Ah—wait, am I dreaming?" He stopped jumping and pinched his arm.

"No, Sennin-ji," Naruto said excitedly, bending down. "Sorry for ruining your nap, but I summoned you here! And I used Sage Mode—look!" He held up his hands to show them, but they were back to normal. "Oh. I guess I used it up. But still, I did it! You can ask Obito."

"Was that why your face was all weird and puffed up? I thought you just got stung by something," Obito said.

"Oi! If that's what you thought, then why did you try to kick me?"

"I thought I was dreaming, too. I'm still not sure I'm not."

"Naruto-chan, I thought you went back to the past," Fukasaku interrupted, jumping in front of Naruto to get his attention. "Why are you here? And where is here?"

Naruto took a deep breath, then launched into it, talking very fast and making huge gestures the whole time. "Well, it's kind of a long story. First I went back to the past, and then I saw you, which was really weird, 'cause we didn't know each other back then. But you said that everyone was taking turns watching me, and that Ero-sennin was trying to find out what happened. And argh, what I should have done right then was tell you what happened, but I thought there'd be time for that later, you know? Anyway, I could feel something pulling me and before I knew it, I was back in the future again, and Orochimaru had captured me and Obito. Obito's like me, he's from the past too. So Orochimaru used the stupid tag he had in me to take over my body and try to fight Obito to make him get his Sharingan—oh yeah, he's an Uchiha. Obito, I mean. And he did, and the Kyuubi thinks that Obito brought us here into a separate dimension with his new eye powers."

"Um—" Obito started.

"What?" Fukasaku cried. "You were captured by Orochimaru? But how?"

"I don't know, he said he was able to track me—but we escaped, so now we need to figure out how to undo the jutsu in a way where he can't do that again—"

"Can we just back up a second here?" Obito broke in, waving for the conversation to halt. "You keep saying I brought us here, but I don't even know where this is! What happened?"

"We can go into all that later," Naruto said, waving a hand impatiently. "So, Sennin-ji, do you think you can get us out of here?"

"Well, I... maybe," Fukasaku said, perplexed. "I could try leaving here and bringing you two along... you say that you used Sage Mode to summon me? Does this young man not know how to get us out?"

"I don't know where this is, or how we got here," Obito admitted. "I was trying to drag Naruto away, and I really wanted to get us both out... I guess it could have been me, but I don't know how to undo it. Why does the Kyuubi think it was me?" he asked Naruto curiously.

"Ah... you know, he's just really old and knows a lot of stuff. Plus, I was kind of out of it at the time, but I guess he could still see what happened," Naruto said. He didn't want to bring up the fox's accusations about Obito's identity just yet. He didn't know how to approach the topic, and it didn't really matter while they were stuck in here, anyway. "But you having some kind of special ability would explain why Orochimaru decided to bring you here. It's the only thing that makes sense."
"You know..." Fukasaku said slowly, looking at Obito. "I feel like I've seen you somewhere before."

"Huh? Well, I know all the elderly people in Konoha, but I don't remember you, old man toad. Sorry. Oh! Minato-sensei had toad summons, maybe he called you on a mission sometime."

"Ah! That's right! You were on Minato-chan's team!" Fukasaku clapped a fist in his palm. But then his wide smile of realization faded, and he looked deeply confused and concerned. "But wait, that doesn't seem right... I could have sworn..."

"What? What is it?" Obito asked, crouching down quickly to stare at Fukasaku. "Do you know something about me?"

"Well... I thought..." the toad looked at Naruto, who was watching nervously. They could all sense that there was some kind of mystery surrounding Obito, whatever it might be. "My memory could be going here, but I thought that you had died a good time ago. He didn't show it much, but we could tell Minato took it hard after that, his team all fell apart."

"But—what?" Obito stood up, rubbing his hands through his hair in frustration. "I'm not dead! Orochimaru basically confirmed I wasn't like one of those Edo Tensei zombies! What happened to me?" he demanded.

"Was it the Uchiha Massacre?" Naruto put in, hovering intently over the toad.

"I'm sorry, I never knew much about it," Fukasaku said, disconcerted. "Minato-chan and I never worked together much. I only remember seeing his team once, and he came to visit Mount Myoboku shortly after the—well, they thought you had died at least, I know that much for sure. It couldn't have been the Massacre, because that happened after Minato-chan died."

"None of this makes any sense!" Obito muttered.

"Well... when I first came here, there was a lot of confusing stuff that I didn't understand, either," Naruto told him. "I eventually figured it out, more or less. And we'll figure this out, too. We just need to get out of this place and find Kakashi-sensei. If anyone can tell us about what happened, it's him. And if it turns out you really had died back then... maybe it means Orochimaru found a way to bring you here without using the Edo Tensei. But if that's true, we still need to find out what happened, so you can stop whatever it was when you get back. No matter what, you can't give up, not as long as you have the chance to change things."

"Yeah," Obito agreed, clenching his fists. "So... Sennin-jii, would you be able to get us out of here? I don't really know how to do it."

"I'm pretty sure I can get myself out, but I don't know about the two of you. I doubt I could sense you if I left, so I have to transport us all at once. It may not work. But, I'll do what Naruto-chan did, and try it with Sage Mode."

Obito and Naruto swapped looks as Fukasaku settled down to try to help them escape from here. Naruto was glad that his idea had at least a chance of working, but he could tell that Obito was still worried. Who could blame him? Once they made it out, they would have to get to the bottom of what happened with Obito, and why he no longer seemed to be around.

They appeared in a forest of brightly-colored stalks on Mount Myoboku, bursting with vibrancy and life. The contrast to the pale, dead world they'd come from was almost as disorienting as the trip itself. Obito and Naruto both lost their balance upon arriving, and Fukasaku completely flopped over, breathing heavily.
"Are you alright, Sennin-ji?" Obito asked, helping him sit up.

"Thank you... that was harder than I thought it would be. I doubt any of the younger ones could have done it," Fukasaku said wearily.

"This isn't anywhere near the battlefield!" Naruto said, leaning on a stalk to regain his balance. "How are we supposed to catch up with everything that's going on in the war? Plus, we need to find Kakashi-sensei and talk to him."

"It had to be here, otherwise it wouldn't have worked," Fukasaku said, a rare note of aggravation leaking into his tone. "Besides, I don't think it's a good idea for you two to go anywhere near the battlefield. From what we've heard, things have gotten extremely dangerous out there. No one will be able to protect you, and I doubt anyone has time to talk. I am sorry, but... maybe it's best for you to stay here until it's all over."

"J-just hold on a second," Naruto pushed off from the stalk and bent down to Fukasaku's height. "Me and Obito don't have time to wait around 'till the war is over! And I bet we can handle ourselves just as well as lots of those shinobi out there. We're strong, and our new bodies are practically indestructible! Plus, I can use Sage Mode now."

Suddenly, a small toad wearing goggles and a harness jumped down between them. It croaked loudly, inflating its neck in a way that seemed... urgent.

"Oh? What is this?" Fukasaku took the scroll from the harness the messenger toad was wearing, and it saluted and disappeared. He unrolled the scroll and skimmed over its contents quickly, eyes widening. "I— I can't believe it. The Edo Tensei has been undone! All the Edo-Uchiha and the others are gone!"

He and Naruto both turned to look at Obito, who was just as surprised as them. "I guess that proves that... I'm really not one of them?"

"It seems that way. But I don't understand how this could have happened out of nowhere... unless you boys' escape from Orochimaru had something to do with it?"

"It was Sasuke," Naruto said resolutely. "He showed up right before we left. I bet he beat up Orochimaru and made him undo the Edo Tensei!"

"Ah... hm," Fukasaku cleared his throat. "I don't know if that's the case or not, but either way, the disappearance of all the Edo Tensei should be a great help to the Allied Shinobi Force."

"That's even more reason to let us go out there! Besides, even if you say no, we'll find a way to leave this mountain ourselves. Right?" Naruto appealed to Obito.

"You can try leaving if you want to. It'll take you months to get there, even if you figure out the right way to go," Fukasaku said.

"Sennin-ji, we can handle it," Obito chimed in. "Listen, if I'm going to die or whatever when I get back home, I need to find out how and when. And Naruto says that our real bodies are still back where we came from, and he was put up in the hospital when he went back. There's a good chance we might die anyway if we don't make it home in time!"

"Hmm." Fukasaku crossed his arms. "That may be true... alright. I'll take you there... if Naruto-chan shows me that he can consistently enter Sage Mode."

"Haha, yes!" Naruto jumped up and punched the air. "This should be a piece of cake!"
Only it wasn't. To Naruto's immense frustration and disappointment, going into Sage Mode in the regular world was a lot harder than it had been in Obito's dimension. He wanted to hurry up and get past this so they could leave—but his impatience only made things worse. It was not something that could be forced or rushed. He hated that they had run into yet another roadblock, and he hated that his older self had mastered this in a fraction of the time.

He could do the first step perfectly on every attempt, but it was still very hard to control the massive amount of energy that was drawn toward him. He could tell it would make him very powerful once he got a hold of it. The problem was getting there.

It didn't take long before Obito got bored of watching Naruto and Fukasaku train (they were just meditating, after all), and decided to do some training of his own while they were stuck here. He was eager to test out his new Sharingan, and he wanted to figure out how to reach that other-space whenever he wanted. And after hearing that he was Minato's student, the Toads were happy to spar with him.

Naruto and Obito both thought they would be leaving the mountain quickly, but because Fukasaku refused to take them until Naruto mastered Sage Mode, they ended up staying and training until the shadows started to grow long.

"Y'know, Gamaden, this is actually pretty fun," Obito said, flopping backward onto the grass. They had been sparring for so long that he'd long since discarded his jacket, but he stubbornly kept the goggles on, no matter how much they made his face sweat. "When I get back home, I think I'm going to try convincing Minato-sensei to let me join the contract for the Toads. What do you think?"

"Well, that would be up to him and the Boss," Gamaden said, leaning back under the shade of a leaf. "Minato was good though, really impressive for a human. We all watched his fight with the Kyuubi —Boss was in that fight too, so we all wanted to see what would happen. If you plan on trying to save him, you've got my vote."

Obito sat up, face set in determination. "I will. Even if I can't think of any way to stop it, I'm sure he'll know what to do once I warn him about it. The same goes for if, somehow, I never figure out what happened to me... I guess you don't know anything about it either, do you?"

"No, I don't. Sorry, kid."

Obito leaned back again with a sigh, putting his hands behind his head and frowning up at the strangely colorful sky hanging over the mountain.

Unfortunately, it was night before they knew it. Naruto was tired, and the back of his head, neck and shoulders were sore from all the times he got smacked with a stick. But he'd recently managed to persuade Fukasaku to let him use clones to speed up the training, and it was helping. He was only maintaining two at a time, but each time one got popped, Naruto got a better feel for what to do and what not to do. Each one sharpened his sense of balance and control.

He was almost there. It was just like the way the Mode had extended his senses within the other dimension, except that this world was much wider and fuller. Even though his eyes were closed, he could feel everything going on around him. Naruto extended his senses out a little further, brows furrowed as he concentrated. The first significant thing he sensed was a strange trail of energy that led exactly to where he was sitting, like an invisible thread that stretched on and on for miles. Frowning, Naruto reached his hand out half-consciously, curling it around the small current.
White light flashed behind his eyes like the bright flash of a camera, paralyzing his entire body. He felt a looming pair of yellow eyes staring at him and wanted to cry out in surprise, but everything was frozen during that split second. Then it was gone, and he was pitching forward from a hard smack in the back of the head.

"Owww! Hey, I had it that time!" Naruto grumbled, rubbing the back of his head. He looked up; all the Natural Energy had been knocked out of him, and he couldn't sense the thread anymore.

"It looked like the balance shifted for a second. I thought you were going to lose control of the energy," Fukasaku said. He looked tired, as well. "Sorry about that."

Naruto leaned back on his hands, stretching his legs out for a moment. Was it Orochimaru? He could still have a connection from the control tag now that they were back in the regular world, and if that was true, did that mean he could still see and hear everything Naruto did? But he'd also said that he couldn't read Naruto's thoughts. So, he might not know for sure that Naruto was on to him, unless he said something out loud. And he wouldn't know what the Kyuubi had said about Obito.

"Naruto-chan, do you need to take a break?"

"No! I've definitely got it now!" Naruto brushed off his hands and got back into stance. "At least one more try... I'm almost there."

It came to him just a little more quickly this time. The sense of everything around him came back slowly, like a picture that gradually got clearer and clearer. He could feel the thread again. But this time, instead of trying to touch it, he reached along it with his senses and remained unmoving. It went on a long way before curving off, going through objects and living things as if they weren't even there. If they wanted to, they could trace their way back to Orochimaru's location using this!

Taking his attention away from the thread for now, Naruto extended his senses out all around, excited to see how far they could go. It was as if each thing led to the next with almost no effort. He caught strange, miscolored visions of everything his senses touched. His sight flowed with the movement of the world's energy.

There was a far-off irregularity, something that twisted the ebb and flow around itself. Something huge. Immense. Completely incomprehensible in scale. The second Naruto caught sight of it, he almost lost the balance again, but he brought it back under control before the stick came flying at him again.

What was that thing?

Naruto tried honing his focus, a strange sort of fear creeping into him. This wasn't like the many times he'd feared for his life or the life of someone else. It was an almost detached sort of dread—he knew that that thing, whatever it was, was as vast and uncaring as the sun or the ocean.

*I recognize that energy. It's the Juubi!* the fox within him growled, fur bristling in response to the same immense pressure Naruto felt.

Naruto put off asking about that just for the moment, even though he sorely wanted to, doing his best to avoid getting distracted so he could look around some more. It was really difficult in this hurricane of chaotic energy. He wouldn't be able to keep up the Mode for much longer.

A whiskered face flickered into his vision. It was his older self! He wasn't in his Kyuubi Chakra or even Sage Mode. In fact, he didn't appear to be doing anything at all. He was just staring up with a horrified look on his face. Confused, Naruto tried casting around so he could figure out what was
wrong. He noticed his older self was holding onto someone. He hadn't seen it at first because they
didn't have any life energy inside of them.

They were dead.

Limbs starting to tremble imperceptibly, Naruto struggled to focus on the person's face. This... this
wasn't a dream, was it?

"Neji, go out there and show them what a Branch House member can do."

"Of course."

"All of you better come back alive, or I'll beat the crap out of you when I go back to the past, and
make you train with me every day so you don't do anything stupid like that again!"

Despite his wavering control, for a moment, Naruto could see everything so clearly that it was almost
like being there. Someone was talking. He could hear them, just as easily as if he was sitting in the
same spot as his older self and Neji.

"Those words... I'll never let my comrades die. Now look around you, and say it again!"

Silence. But Naruto's older self looked slowly around, and the younger did the same. The battlefield
was littered with bodies. Many of them were impaled with sharp roots, others were crushed. The
feeling of death was everywhere.

"I told you to say it again! As the bodies of your comrades grow cold in your arms, take in their
deaths! This will continue... and all your flippant words and ideology shall become lies. This is the
end result of hope and ideals. This is reality!"

Was it? It felt more like a dream. Everything grew increasingly confusing. The words being shouted
out now mixed together with impressions and memories Naruto had tried to forget. All the threads of
energy were twisting together around the mass of incalculable power nearby, making them hard to
distinguish from one another.

"You haven't seen the suffering that war causes. You have seen some of the suffering our so-called
peace causes, though. And you will only see more of it in the years ahead of you."

"Naruto... what is there for you in this reality? Your mother and father are gone, as well as your
master, Jiraiya. And if you keep standing against us, you'll continue to lose your friends one by one."

"Jiraiya's death. The destruction of the village. The loss of your family and friends... and Sasuke,
now an internationally wanted missing-nin who has vowed to kill everyone in Konoha, starting with
you. All of this is reality."

"Why must you cling to reality? Enough of this... now come join us, Naruto!"

"Do you honestly think that that is any different from what I am trying to do?"

It was **him**.

The voice sounded different, but Naruto was certain of it. Madara was doing to his older self exactly
the same thing he did to him! The same words... the way he tried to shock and hurt him using their
friends... what was going on suddenly became clear, and rage chased out the floundering confusion
that clouded Naruto's vision.
'Don't listen to him! He tried to get to me, too!' Naruto tried to shout at his older self, but it didn't work. He swiveled his sight around, tracing the gaze of his older self to locate the speaker.

The massive thing he had felt was there. Naruto quickly tried to not focus on it—it was like a void that distorted everything when he looked at it. He dragged his gaze up further, where two figures stood atop the thing's back. There was a man wearing old-fashioned armor who looked like an Edo Tensei—weren't they all supposed to be gone?—but he was standing a little further back. The one he was searching for was standing closer, and staring fiercely down at him... at his older self.

It was him. He wasn't wearing the mask, but...

But...

That face didn't look exactly the same. Half of it, the half with the Sharingan, looked squashed and wrinkled. The other eye held a Rinnegan. And the look he had—the hard, scathing look he had was definitely not the same. But it was the same face. And the same energy.

"Obito," Naruto whispered out loud, voice wavering.

"What?" the younger Obito's voice cut through his shock, and Naruto heard him plop down on the ground beside him.

Naruto's eyes flew open, and his long-reaching senses dissolved. He was limited to the five he already had once again.

All of that death. The Juubi. The hopeless look on his older self's face. They were together in another place, another time, but on different sides.

The Kyuubi was right. Naruto had met Obito long before now. But Naruto didn't want him to be right. It wasn't fair. That Obito was not the same one that sat beside him right now. It should not have been like this.

"What is it, Naruto-chan? You were doing very well before it ran out," Fukasaku said. "Why didn't you move once you got into Sage Mode? Did you sense something?" He paused. "Is there something wrong?"

"What he's is doing to the older me right now is exactly what he tried to do to me back in Suna," Naruto muttered, rubbing his temples. "I recognize it. It's just like when he shoved Sasuke in my face. He even brought up our mom and dad and Ero-sennin, like when he talked to me. I already had it happen and get over it once, but the older me hasn't. And I don't want that to happen to Obito, either. So I can't let this slow me down right now."

That was right. He couldn't let this freak him out. Both of their older selves were in trouble right now.

Above all else, they had to get to the battlefield. They had already been through too much for him to let the circumstances between their older selves stop him from trying to change it.

Idiot. And who do you think it was that made it that way? We should be more worried about the Juubi. Forget about the Uchiha brat and concentrate on getting back to our own time.

Maybe that had been the whole point of imprisoning them together, but Naruto couldn't back down from what he knew. If Orochimaru wanted a show, they'd give him a show.

"Seriously, are you okay? What are you talking about? Did you get sunstroke or something?" Obito
asked skeptically.

"Sennin-jii, can you take us to the battle right now?" Naruto said urgently, turning toward the toad. "You've seen that I mastered Sage Mode, right?"

"Hmmm, I wouldn't say you've 'mastered' it," Fukasaku said. "You still look like a toad when you use it. But, I think that's alright. Jiraiya-chan never fully mastered it, either. You'll be able to do it when you're older, or maybe with a lot more practice."

"So then?" Naruto jumped up excitedly.

Fukasaku gave another 'hmm', and then a sigh. "It's already dark, and you must be tired from today. Let's have dinner, get a good night's sleep, and then head out in the morning. I can come along then, too."

"What? But we had a deal!" Obito complained.

"Alright, Sennin-jii," Naruto said, interrupting him. "But is it okay if we stay out and train some more, as long as we agree not to stay up too late? Shima-baa can send us a bento or something."

"Well... I suppose it couldn't hurt, as long as you stay away from the oil while I'm gone."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. C'mon, Obito," Naruto said, dragging away Obito, who continued voicing his complaints until they were well away.

"Hey, what gives? Are you just going to wait around here without even putting up a fight?" Obito said after he had been pulled into a grove with a small pond and little toad statues.

"No. We need to leave as soon as we can, but I get the feeling that no one is going to let us go, if they find out what I saw just a minute ago," Naruto said, keeping his voice down and looking around for any listeners nearby. "Have you figured out how to get back into that dimension yet? Maybe if we go there, we can come out of it somewhere else."

"I've tried, but I can't figure out how to do it," Obito said. "What is this all about? What did you see? You've been acting weird ever since then."

Naruto took a deep breath. "I found out where your older self is."

"What?" Obito turned to give him his full attention now, eyes wide underneath the goggles. "How do you know that? And where is he—me, whatever?"

"The way that Sage Mode works, I can sense all kinds of energy and people, even from far away," Naruto explained. As he did, he started moving even further away from where they had been training, and Obito followed after him. "I felt this really big disturbance far off, so I was trying to sense out that way to figure out what it was. Anyway, I started seeing flashes of different people, and it wasn't really clear until the very end, but... I definitely saw the older you. His energy felt like yours, and I saw his face. But—"

"Yesss! So now we know that I didn't die!" Obito said, energetically pushing aside the oversized lillies they were trekking through. "I knew it couldn't be true. I just had this feeling. So that means we just have to go find and talk to him directly! But, uh... where are we going?"

"I just wanted to get to where no one could hear," Naruto said. He took a careful look around, and then turned back to Obito. "Listen, when I said that Madara captured me before and told me all about his plans, I was wrong. It turns out, it wasn't really Madara, but someone else pretending to be him."
"Huh? Okay." Obito looked taken aback by the seemingly random tangent, and the grim urgency in Naruto's tone.

"I'm saying that it was your older self!" Naruto said, grabbing him by the shoulders. "That's why no one knows what happened to you, because you started wearing a mask and calling yourself Madara! I don't know how, but your older self is the one behind this war!"

What are you doing, idiot brat? I told you, forget him! This is just another distraction, the Kyuubi growled, but Naruto ignored it. Maybe the fox had been right about Obito, but Naruto was fiercely against allowing things to stay on this track, whatever it was. He had a right to know.

Obito stepped back, looking confused and slightly suspicious. He could tell that Naruto was serious about this, but it was so unexpected that he didn't know how to react.

"So yeah, I still think we have to go see him, but I think if Sennin-jiichan or one of the others realizes, there's no way they'll let us go," Naruto continued. "I mean, since it's your older self—"

"Stop saying that!" Obito demanded, teeth gritted. "That's a lie. Or maybe your so-called great senses are messed up. Did you ever think of that?"

"Listen, I'm telling you what I know so that maybe we can do something about it!" Naruto said, nearly shouting, gearing up for a fight. "The Kyuubi said he thought it was you, too, but I didn't believe him until I saw it myself. And he and everyone else would want us to leave it alone, but I'm sick of listening to other people say what I can and can't do; so, we're definitely going to leave here and talk to him ourselves! It's fine if you don't believe me, because you can just see for yourself once we get there."

"It doesn't make any sense," Obito said, anger fizzling out as quickly as it came. His posture visibly slumped. "I hate war. Why would I want to start one?"

He looked disgusted, and with that expression, Naruto could see even more of a resemblance between the younger Obito and the older one. But that didn't make him waver. In fact, it made him understand even more. The older Obito also hated war. He'd even said as much.

Naruto clapped a hand on Obito's shoulder. "I've heard many shocking things since coming to the future, including losing my master, and... even though my older self is okay, my best friend wants to destroy the village. Whatever's going on with your older self, I know that the you right here now is a friend and a comrade. And besides, it isn't too late to do something about it when you get home. No matter what it was, you can still change it. We'll figure it out, so don't worry." He gave a wide grin. "Right now, what you need to do is use your teleportation jutsu to take us to the battlefield. Your older self could do it, so I know that you can, too."

"But..." Obito's voice faded out strangely. "I don't know how to do it... I mean, especially to a place I've never been before? I don't even know how that would work."

"Hm..." Naruto crossed his arms. "Well, if you can at least get us off this mountain, maybe we can figure out how to get there after. I should be able to figure out what direction it is using Sage Mode. And maybe the older me will sense that we're here, too."

After spending several days in Naruto's company, Obito thought that the only part of Minato that got passed on to his son were his hair and eyes, but that wasn't true. No one else talked to him like that—like they truly accepted and believed in him, for no apparent reason. Not only that, but Naruto seemed to have the same ability to make people believe what he was saying, too, no matter how far-fetched it sounded.
Alright,” Obito said. His eyes flared red and he took another step back, face set into a look of
collection.

Knowing about his older self lent a sense of importance and urgency to the task of teleporting them
to the battlefield, but that didn't help Obito figure out how to actually do it. He'd been trying it ever
since they got here, with no luck.

They went on like this for what felt like hours, though it probably was not as long as it felt. Obito
tried all kinds of things—mentally picturing himself appearing in that dimension, trying to focus more
chakra into his eyes, staring really hard into the air hoping to see a rift or something that would give
him a clue. Just like he had been doing all day, he tried to think back to when he'd done it earlier. All
he knew for sure was that he'd wanted to escape from there so badly.

After they had been there a while, a small toad came by with a note from Shima and a couple of
bento boxes for them. Obito wanted to seize the chance to take a break right then, but changed his
mind when he saw the onigiri made of caterpillars.

"We don't need to eat anyway, remember?" Naruto said impatiently, tossing the food out as soon as
the toad left. "Just hurry up and figure out how to teleport!"

"Yeah, I'll just do that, no problem," Obito snarled. "You know, I think this isn't going to work.
Even if we get to that other dimension place, won't we just be stuck there again? Then you'll have to
call the old toad again, and everyone will get on our case for trying to sneak off. And we still
wouldn't have gotten anywhere."

"Well, it doesn't hurt to try! It's too soon to talk about quitting. What were you thinking about when
you did it the first time?"

"I told you, I wasn't really thinking about anything. I was just trying to drag you away before
Orochimaru could do that body-control thing again. And then the ceiling was about to fall on us, I
thought we were both going to die, and next thing I knew I was waking up in that other place."

"Hmmm." Naruto rubbed his chin as he tried to remember back to that same incident. They had to do
something; at this rate, it was going to be too late for them to do anything. It would make sense if
Obito could activate the jutsu in a life-or-death situation, but it wasn't like they could replicate that
here.

Or could they?

Naruto remembered the first time he ever managed to do a proper Summoning. Jiraiya had told him
to use the Kyuubi's chakra, but no matter how hard he tried, Naruto couldn't seem to do it without
the threat of danger. That was when Jiraiya decided to push him off a cliff, to force him into a
threatening situation. It had worked so well that he managed to summon Gamabunta.

"Okay!" Naruto said suddenly. "I think I know where we need to go."

"Huh?" Obito looked over at him with a raised brow.

"Yeah! I was just thinking, maybe if we go to the right spot, you'll be able to concentrate better.
There's a place that's really high up, where me and Sennin-jii went near the start of my training. I
think he said it's a good place for meditation. Maybe it'll help."

"Maybe," Obito said, without much enthusiasm. "I guess it's worth a shot."

"It's not that far from here. C'mon!"
Naruto jumped away, and Obito followed after him. Naruto was already congratulating himself on his brilliant plan.

The place was, as he'd said, not very far away. They were already close to the highest point of the mountain, where cliff faces and breathtaking waterfalls overlooked the lush forests that carpeted Mount Myoboku. It really was a pretty place, with a canopy of stars above and the calls of thousands of toads below.

"It's over here," Naruto said, leading Obito to the very edge of one of the tallest cliffs, making a show of looking out over the landscape. "Look, stand right here. Can't you feel the energy around this place?"

"Not really. I don't see how this is any different," Obito said. Nevertheless, he activated his Sharingan and stood where Naruto was, settling into a stance with his feet apart and his hands in a ram seal.

Naruto backed away slowly behind him, trying not to skritch his sandals on the ground and tip Obito off to his movement.

"It's a pretty nice view," Obito said after a second. "At least if I'm going to be standing here doing nothing——"

Taking a running start, Naruto tackled Obito in mid-sentence. His momentum kept them moving forward, and they both tipped over the edge of the cliff. Gravity reversed itself and they plunged head-down, rushing toward the distant spikes at the bottom of the mountain. The starry night sky stretched out endlessly below their feet.

"What are you doing?" Obito screamed. He tried to struggle free, but Naruto held on tightly. This place wasn't slick like the gorge Jiraiya had pushed him over. There had to be no chance of Obito finding a place to cling to the side of the cliff.

"Teleport us to safety!" Naruto shouted over the rushing wind. "I know you can do it! Otherwise, we're going to get impaled about a hundred times, and I don't wanna find out if we can survive that!"

"Are you insane?"

Obito's face was set in a grimace of terror. Naruto saw the tomoe in one of his eyes shift and make room for more. He had three in each eye now.

The ground was rapidly becoming more visible. Naruto really hoped Obito would hurry. Their bodies were made of tough stuff, but this was the kind of fall it might be better to die from than survive.

But it almost felt like they were slowing down. The space around them stretched and bent slightly, like wrinkles in a backdrop made of paper. The scenery above and below grew paler, almost transparent. Through the thinning material of this place and moment, they could almost see something... some place else.

And then, it was like they weren't anywhere at all. It still felt like they were falling, yet up or down no longer had any meaning. Obito strained to make the other dimension come more fully into view, make it more solid, instead of them hanging forever in this strange in-between space.

He started hearing someone's voice. It echoed around them in brief snatches, like a broken radio, except without the static.
"Obito."

Someone was talking to him? Where? How? He couldn't place the voice.

"You haven't realized it... but you've been trying to merge your past self with the current Naruto... hearing the old you in Naruto's words."

"What the hell?" Obito wondered out loud, but he couldn't hear his own voice. He looked at Naruto. From his expression, he could tell that he could hear the voice, too. There were more words, but they emerged only to fade out before they could be heard. Sometimes they overlapped with one another in disconnected snatches.

"It seems like I can't find anything that will change you. Right now, all I can give you... is death."

The other person said something in response, but it got blotted out muffled. The regular world faded in around them a bit. The ground was very close.

"Obito!"

This time, it was Naruto's voice. He was shouting in his ear.

"I'm trying!" Obito squeezed his eyes shut and willed with all his might for them to appear in the other dimension. He didn't know where those voices had come from, but they were nothing but a distraction. They had to push past it, past that in-between.

They landed on a hard, flat surface, but it was a very short fall. It felt like waking up suddenly from vertigo. Obito rolled over and immediately bumped into one of the many square columns that made up the other dimension. He opened his eyes. They had both managed to stay conscious this time, but he felt nearly wiped out. Naruto gave a victorious grin and a thumbs-up.

"Okay," Obito said. "I'm still really pissed that you did that, but—"

There was an explosion from some distance away, and they both jumped. Without having to discuss it, both Naruto and Obito got to their feet and peeked carefully over the edge of the column.

It was far enough away not to be able to hear every clash or punch, but there were definitely other people here, and they were fighting. The huge explosion was caused by one combatant blocking a fireball hurled by the other one.

"What is going on? How is there someone else here?" Naruto hissed, even though there was very little chance the people would hear them.

"We have to get closer."

It was exciting, even if they didn't understand it. Finally, something was happening. Naruto and Obito crept around that column to another one of the same height, gradually getting closer. The fight raged on, and the people didn't notice. Naruto stopped and gripped Obito's arm tightly when the entire area was illuminated by a brilliant blue light. It surrounded the body of one of the fighters, electrocuting him with the harsh shriek of lightning.

"What? We need to get closer. Don't tell me you're chickening out?" Obito turned back to him, annoyed.

"It's Kakashi-sensei."
"Huh? Are you sure?" Obito craned his head over the column they were standing behind, and Naruto did the same. "Then who's the other—"

The two bodies clashed against each other, and the boys stopped and stared, frozen in place. The question didn't have to be answered, because now it was completely obvious. The lightning-enhanced kunai illuminated the Uchiha crest on the back of the older Obito's coat, because it and Kakashi's hand had both gone all the way through him. Meanwhile, Kakashi was stabbed through his side with a black rod.

There was a horrifying second when everything was still, caught in the macabre image, but then the kunai dropped slowly out of Kakashi's hand and clattered to the ground. The older Obito's body heaved, and he coughed up blood. They shoved away from each other. Kakashi sank to his knees and pulled the rod out of his side.

"It's over, Obito."

The younger Obito stared with his mouth slightly open, watching everything play out in front of him, uncomprehending. He watched his older self sit up and half laugh, half cough. He looked up and gave a smile that made the younger shiver.

"You can have this battle. But I'm not giving up the war!"

The air crinkled again, converging in a spiral around the older Obito's single Sharingan. Within a few seconds, he had completely disappeared.

The younger's hands on the edge of the column were gripping so tightly that his knuckles turned white. He grit his teeth and pulled himself up, vaulting over the column. Naruto tried to catch him by his coat, but missed. Obito jumped down and started walking toward the battle site, all of his limbs shaking.

Kakashi was still slumped on his knees, breathing labored. But he looked up when Obito jumped down the blocks to that level. Mismatched eyes widening, Kakashi stood and stumbled backward slightly. But his surprise only lasted for a second. Regaining his footing, Kakashi's expression changed to a glare. He held up a shaking hand, and it burst with sharp blue energy.

"I told you, I'm not interested in your illusions," he said.
There was nothing that could have convinced Obito so much as seeing the truth about the future himself. That didn't mean it was easy to accept. He stopped walking to stare at Kakashi—recklessly, knowing that he was close enough to be in range of that lightning jutsu. He was too angry to be afraid.

"How could you have let this happen?" he shouted, fists clenched. "Why couldn't you stop me? You were always able to beat me before! Why not now?"

"Enough!" Kakashi said harshly. He took a step back and looked around, ready to defend himself from any side. "I told you that won't work. If you still want to fight, come out and we can finish this."

Obito growled and jumped at Kakashi, rearing back for a punch. Not expecting an attack to come from the 'illusion', Kakashi whirled around and threw out a kick that landed squarely in the middle of Obito's chest. Obito went crashing to the ground and rolled a couple of times before jumping back up, Sharingan blazing underneath the goggles.

Kakashi's brow furrowed, and he hesitated. His foot should have gone through an illusion, but this Obito was solid. And it was strange that he had the Sharingan. All the other illusions had been pleasant, trying to persuade Kakashi to give up on reality. And the amount of time they'd known each other after Obito activated the Sharingan was very short.

"Did you transform yourself?" he wondered out loud, latching on to the next thing that made any sense. He got back into a fighting stance.

Naruto climbed over the column, cursing under his breath. He jumped down from one block to another and got down to the bottom in time to see Kakashi and Obito clash, sending the young Uchiha flying.

Why were they fighting?

After Obito got back to his feet, Kakashi came toward him with a set, grim look Naruto didn't like at all. It was like he had resigned himself to do whatever was necessary. He must not know it was really his old teammate from the past!

This was too much like what had happened when Naruto had met the older Sasuke. Things were not going to be like that this time.

"Stop it!" Naruto yelled, jumping down onto the platform. "Kakashi-sensei, stop! This will probably be pretty weird to you, but it's not what—"

"Naruto?" Kakashi paused again, confused. "What is..."

Naruto walked until he was standing in between the two of them. Remembering himself, Obito deactivated the Sharingan, but he kept scowling. Kakashi glanced back at Obito then at Naruto again, suspicion lingering in his eyes even now. He looked around uneasily at the empty space around him.

"Why are you bothering to hide like this now? It won't do you any good to pretend."
"Damn it, we're real! Listen—" Naruto made to approach Kakashi, but he jumped back the moment Naruto made a move toward him. When he landed, it jolted his wounds and he winced, holding his side and sinking down to his knees. The front of his vest was slashed deep enough that blood seeped through it.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto ran over to him, watching out in case Kakashi decided to fight him, too. He'd never seen his normally unflappable mentor so shaken up before. "Are you okay? Just take it easy. Look, it's me, Naruto from the past, right? I can even summon a toad here to prove it, if you want. I know, everyone thought I was sent back, and I was—but Orochimaru brought me into this time again. This Obito here, he's like me. Orochimaru brought him to the future, too. He's not that... the guy you just fought."

Kakashi looked up at him, slightly out of breath and obviously in pain. He glanced at Obito standing there as before, then pulled the headband down over his Sharingan eye. Naruto suddenly realized he'd never questioned why his sensei had it before. Kakashi unfolded from the defensive crouch he was in and sat back on the ground.

Seeing that the situation had diffused a bit, Obito came closer, much of the anger gone in favor of interest and (though he wouldn't admit it) concern over the shape Kakashi was in.

"What happened?" Kakashi said, sounding weary. He didn't meet Obito's gaze—instead, he looked carefully up at Naruto.

"That's what we wanna know! We've been all out of the loop. Er, but..." He tried to exercise restraint for once and answer Kakashi's question before asking a hundred of his own. He wanted to make sure his sensei understood that they weren't a trick or genjutsu. "As for us, well... it's kind of a long story, but the important part is that we escaped from Orochimaru by accidentally coming to this place, and we've already found out about what happens to Obito in the future. And that's why we've gotta find another way of getting back. Right?" Naruto turned to Obito.

"...Right."

Kakashi glanced at Obito and then away again before his gaze eventually returned. It was like he had to adjust to looking at something that was too bright.

"If Orochimaru is the one behind it, it makes sense," he finally said. "He understands the forces behind the war. To think that he'd use that jutsu again..."

"We aren't the only ones," Naruto said quickly. "He brought in a kid version of Kabuto, too, even younger than us. He's still back there... and who knows how many others Orochimaru is gonna try to drag out. We have to get him to undo the jutsu completely if we want to send everyone back."

"That's easier said than done." Kakashi said. He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. "Alright, the first thing we need to do is get the two of you out of here. I don't know how we're going to figure out where to keep you at this point, but it isn't safe for you to stay in this dimension."

"Wait a minute," Obito said, gesturing. "You're wrong if you think we're just going to go hide somewhere. We went through a hell of a time just to make it this far. And I want to talk the older me. If you tell me about what happened, maybe I can stop him! Or maybe I can find out something useful. Then, when I go back home, I can make it so none of this happens in the first place."

Kakashi looked away again, hesitating.

"Kakashi!"
He still didn't answer right away. He looked pained, and they couldn't tell what was going on in his mind. What reason was there to hold back? Maybe Obito's appearance here was just too sudden, or maybe his wounds made it hard to concentrate? Naruto put a hand on Obito's shoulder when the latter made an impatient sound.

"I know," Kakashi started slowly. "It's strange… even after all these years, I know just what you're thinking. Everything was always so straightforward with you. If you can find out what happened, you can change it, and then everything will be perfect… is that it?"

"Are you doubting me? Do you want me to end up as someone that does stuff like that to my own teammates?" He indicated the deep, ugly slashes across Kakashi's chest. "What else am I supposed to do after finding something like that out? You have to tell me what happened. And where's Rin in all of this, huh?"

Obito tended to cover weakness with bravado, even at a time like this, but it hadn't escaped his notice that their last teammate seemed nowhere to be found. His worst fear was that the person he was to become, his older self with the twisted smile, had done something to harm her. Just the thought of it threatened to ruin the usual tough face he tried to put on around Kakashi, even a grown-up version of him.

He didn't know what made him change, or what his older self was capable of doing. Anything was possible.

"It isn't doubt. That's the problem. What happened in the past could repeat all over again if you knew. I don't want you to turn out the same way. Especially since I can't seem to think of any way to say it that won't end up with the same result."

"What do you mean? It'll turn out the same if you don't tell me, right? I'm telling you right here and now that I won't let that happen!" Obito said, getting frustrated.

"No one knows what kinds of consequences might come from changing the past. But it's hard to imagine things in this situation being any worse," Kakashi mused. He stared out in front of him a while longer, and the two boys waited.

They were both trying to think of anything they could say to get Kakashi to hurry up and tell the truth. If Obito's older self came back, there would be no time to listen to stories.

Obito was about to declare that he would find out the truth on his own, then, but that's when Kakashi started talking.

"I guess first, I just want to say that I'm sorry. For how I used to act when we were kids, and for being unable to stop this current situation. To say that I carry some of the blame would be an understatement."

"Kakashi-sensei—" Naruto started, but Obito cut him off with a wave of his hand. He was watching and listening intently.

Kakashi tilted the faceplate of his headband before letting his hand drop again. "You've probably figured it out by now, but this used to be your eye. I suppose the quickest way to start would be with that incident."

He shifted position, sitting cross-legged on the ground. Naruto and Obito glanced at each other once before following suit.

"Our mission was to destroy the Kannabi Bridge in order to cut off Iwagakure's forces," Kakashi
began. "It was supposed to be out of the way of the main fighting, and not too dangerous. If it happens the same way in your timeline as in this one, it'll be shortly after I make Jounin. That's how you'll know. But that simple mission ended up going wrong. On the way, Rin was captured by some Iwa-nin. You wanted to go save her right away, but as the acting captain at the time, I said no. I thought we should complete the mission above all else."

"What?" Obito clenched his fists.

"But you wanted to go on your own anyway, and we split ways there. Before you left, you said something to me that I never forgot. I think it's important for you to hear it, especially if you're able to make it back and this never happens. You said, 'In the shinobi world, those who break the rules are considered trash. But those who abandon their comrades are even lower than that'"

Naruto looked up quickly. "That's the same thing you told us when we did the test to become genin!"

Obito frowned at him, then turned back to face Kakashi. He wasn't sure what to make of that—that something he'd said actually had that much of an effect on his bossy, know-it-all teammate.

"You were right," Kakashi said. "Eventually I realized that, and I went back to help you. I was able to get there in time, but I lost my eye trying to defend you from one of the people that had captured Rin. Everything happened pretty quickly after that. We were able to get her out, but a big rock started to fall down in my blind spot as we were leaving, and you pushed me out of the way. It fell on you. Half of your body was crushed, and we couldn't do anything to get you out."

Kakashi was talking into complete stillness now, as Obito and Naruto sat there, transfixed. "We... we had to leave, or else we would end up buried underneath rocks, too. But you understood, you wanted us to get out. You had Rin transplant your eye to replace the one I lost. And then we left. Everyone thought you had died then."

Kakashi paused, wincing and favoring his impaled side. His breath grew short for a few seconds.

"I mean, but I didn't though, obviously," Obito said as he fell silent, looking pale. "Can't you give me more to go on? Like, when exactly does this happen? How many enemies were there? Where was Sensei?"

"On his own, doing another part of the mission," Kakashi said, voice shallow. "You'll have to make do with that for now, because there's more that comes after. We're leaving here in a few minutes, whether you're done listening or not. So this has to be a little more rushed than either of us would like. I can't say it any more gently."

Naruto wanted to ask if he was alright, or how they were going to leave here, but he took one look at Obito's stricken expression and kept silent.

"I can't say exactly what happened to you after that, because I don't know," Kakashi continued. "But I do know that at some point, you decided to reject reality, and start working toward creating a dream world where everyone could have their own idealized version of it. It couldn't have happened overnight, though. The real catalyst didn't come until later." He paused. "I let Rin die."

This time when Obito tried to punch Kakashi in the face, it actually connected. Kakashi fell to one side, bracing his hands against the floor. Then he slowly sat back up, looking at Obito steadily with his one uncovered eye. Obito ended up on his feet before he knew it—Naruto jumped up and put his arms under Obito's to hold him back.

"Obito! Stop it, okay? If you want to see him beat up, I think the older you already took care of that."
This made Obito stop moving. He sat back down, arms crossed and posture rigid. "What do you mean, you let Rin die? What, did you leave her alone in some situation like the other one, since I wasn't there to make you change your mind?"

"No," Kakashi said quietly, feeling of his cheek. "She was captured by Kirigakure, but I went to find her as soon as possible. By the time I was able to get her out, they had forced her into being the Sanbi's Jinchuuriki. Rin realized it when they were chasing us home. They were trying to make us get there faster, so they could unleash the Three-Tails on Konoha. Once she figured that out, she wanted to avoid going back at any cost. I tried to eliminate all the ones chasing us, but... while I was fighting, Rin suddenly jumped in front of my attack. It was on purpose. She wanted to make sure the Sanbi could not be used by them anymore."

Obito was bent forward, hands on his knees gripping cloth tightly. He bit his lower lip.

"Obito..." Naruto started. The story was hard enough just to hear, and it had all happened before he was even born. He could hardly believe that there was so much he hadn't known about his own sensei. "It's... that hasn't happened in your world. And it won't, because now you know."

Kakashi gave a long, nearly silent sigh. "Unfortunately, that isn't good enough."

"What do you mean?" Obito asked roughly.

"I may not have a right to say this, and I don't know if you'll even listen. But you should, because I heard this directly from your older self. Obito, you didn't start the war because you were mad at me for failing to protect Rin. It's the harshness of reality itself you're rebelling against. Imagining that everything will be perfect if you can stop this one particular event—that's not very different from wanting to go hide in a world where you can't get hurt. Your older self would never accept such an uncertain solution, which means that somewhere deep down, it would not be good enough for you either. Because, even if you succeed, it doesn't mean nothing bad will ever happen to you." He looked at Naruto. "I've seen enough of our world to know that bad, senseless things happen to people who don't deserve it. People hurt one another. It's why I've continued to get stronger, in order to protect what I can."

He smiled in his strange way, where it was possible to tell even though most of his face was covered up. Naruto rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, turning faintly pink. That was the same thing he'd said to Kakashi, right after arriving in the future the first time. He'd forgotten about that.

And he understood what his sensei meant. The whole time Naruto had been talking about changing the past, he knew that things might not always go right. There was even a chance that stopping one thing would make something even worse happen. There was no way to tell.

"But we have to try, as long as we can," Naruto said, looking back at Obito. "You don't give up when things don't go your way, right? I mean, that's just the impression I got ever since we met. I could be wrong, though."

Obito scowled at the jab. "If I can save Rin, I'll be able to face whatever else happens. You can count on that."

"I hope that's true," Kakashi said. He looked up and around, scanning the area again. "There's one last thing we need to figure out before leaving. But if the older Obito comes back, we're leaving, regardless. About this jutsu of Orochimaru's. Do either of you know how he actually performs it? If we had even just the seals used, that would be a start."

"No..." Naruto said. "Itachi had said Orochimaru probably can't use it as much as the Edo Tensei,
because it was harder. But we'll probably have to capture him before we can undo it, right?"

"I'm not sure." Kakashi paused. "Like the Edo Tensei, it takes your soul from another world and
attaches it to a host body here in this one. The difference is that the other time and place probably
does not exist until you get taken out of it. That's the diverging point."

Obito raised an eyebrow, and Naruto tilted his head, arms crossed.

"Where you come from is different from somewhere like the Pure World. It's probably another
dimension. Otherwise, your older selves would be able to remember all of this," Kakashi explained.
"That would automatically make it trickier than the Edo Tensei."

"Wait!" Obito interjected, leaning forward. "This is supposed to be some other dimension too, isn't
it? Does that mean I could just teleport myself home if I wanted to?"

"I don't know. Both my kamui and your older self's go to this dimension. It doesn't seem possible for
us to go anywhere else—at least when it comes to places outside of our known world. I wouldn't say
it's impossible. But we can't rely on that to get you home. Physical travel between here and there
would be even more difficult than what Orochimaru has done. I can't imagine what kind of power
that would take."

That sparked something in Naruto's memory. "That's what the older Obito said! I bet he would know
if it's possible or not. I mean, if we can make it to here, why not? Except... we don't want
Orochimaru to be able to find us again. With that control tag of his..."

"I don't think he had put one on me yet," Obito interrupted, pointing a thumb at his forehead. "I
mean... we never heard him gloat about it, anyway. And he could've stopped me from dragging you
out of there, right?"

"So if we can get him to undo the jutsu, you'll be home free," Naruto chimed in excitedly.

"Yeah, but what about you?"

"If I can make it back, even for just a little while... maybe I could tell them what's causing it. At least
until we can get that snake bastard cornered—"

"Alright, that's enough for right now," Kakashi said. "I don't know what's happened on the outside
since we landed in here. They might need my help, and I'm not leaving you two here."

"Good, then just take us with you!" Obito said. "I still need to talk to the older me. I might be able to
figure out how to get home."

"That's not a good idea. I don't think he will care that you're the same person. He'll destroy anything
in order to achieve his goals. And I don't want Naruto to get too close to the enemy." Kakashi
thought for a few seconds. "But... I don't have enough chakra to make more than one trip."

"Kakashi-sensei, you need a medic," Naruto said firmly. "Besides, do you want to just leave the
battle going on right now? You need to be there. We'll be alright."

"...Alright. But I'm only saying that because I think leaving you two on your own would be just as
bad. I'll land a short distance away from where the fighting is. And I want you both to run away from
there as quickly as you can."

"Whatever, let's just go," Obito said. Once he knew the way there, it wouldn't matter. He felt
confident that he'd be able to return on his own anytime.
Kakashi seemed to sense that his warnings had no effect. He side-eyed Obito as he stood in between the two, a good bit taller than either of them, and rested a hand on each of their shoulders.

It was dark where they landed. The moon was very high up in the sky, and nothing else could be seen in the immediate area. Naruto heard the sound of water, like the ocean or a choppy lake nearby. Kakashi leaned forward, winded. He was still holding onto them, for support this time.

"Where are we?" Naruto wondered aloud, holding his sensei steady. Wherever they were, it was nice to see the night sky and breathe fresh air again. The other dimension was useful, but it was creepy.

"We're a good distance away from the front." Kakashi panted. It seemed like he was going to say more, but he stopped speaking suddenly and let go of them. He crouched down heavily and pulled out something wedged in the rock—something that glittered against the inky-black backdrop.

"What is it?" Obito asked, craning his head to look. Naruto did the same.

It was a strange-looking kunai. It had three sharp prongs, and a heavy wooden handle with some kind of scribble painted onto it.

All three of them felt it at the same time. An incredible amount of energy charged the air, making the hairs on the back of their necks stand on end with static electricity.

*It's charging up a bijuudama! That idiot probably plans to send it over here!* the Kyuubi said.

"Bijuudama?" Naruto wondered out loud.

_We're going to die if we stay here! Tell them now!_

"Uh, ah—the Kyuubi says we'll die if we stay here!" Naruto blurted out in a panic.

"I see." Kakashi stood up, still looking at the kunai in his hand. "There's probably no use in running, so go back to the Kamui dimension."

"What?" Naruto was extremely confused.

"What about you?" Obito demanded.

"I don't have enough chakra to go again. You were able to get Naruto and yourself there to begin with, so you should be able to do that much."

Maybe it was the confusion, or else the intense, oppressive energy charging the air, but Naruto started to feel lightheaded. He felt strangely disconnected from the scene, as if he was suddenly watching it from far away.

"You think we're just going to leave you here?" Obito shouted. He grabbed Naruto by the arm and then Kakashi, pulling them all close together. "Don't apologize for being a jerk and then ask me to leave you behind somewhere, idiot Kakashi!"

The space around them twisted into a spiral, and it didn't even take long this time.

Their landing inside the Kamui dimension wasn't as graceful; they all reeled from the momentum, lost their sense of gravity for a moment, and nearly fell down. Naruto stumbled into a column, dizzy, but no longer feeling that strange disembodiment from a moment ago.
'What the hell just happened, Kyuubi?'

The Juubi was about to release a massive attack. It wasn't aimed for us, but with that kunai there, I knew we had to leave to be completely sure.

'If you say so... ne, do you still know if Orochimaru can see us in this dimension or not?'

I can't sense him here. But the moment we leave, his connection is still there. It is infuriating.

"...I don't care what you say, we need to go back there! Look, as long as we can come here, they can't touch us," Obito said.

"I think you're forgetting someone very significant, who can come here just as easily as you."

"Hey, Obito," Naruto said, going over to them, "did you get a weird feeling right before we left that rock?"

"I was kind of freaking out. Is that what you mean?"

"No, it was kind of like... almost like floating away, or falling asleep, only not."

Obito frowned. "Maybe. I don't think so, though. It could have been just the feeling like I was about to die again. I'll get used to that at this rate."

"Yeah..." Naruto scratched his cheek, stumped. That sensation was familiar, and it couldn't really be mistaken for something else. But for it to happen randomly like that didn't make any sense. The only cause he could think of was that they had been in danger at that moment.

But why this time? Was it because it was something that would definitely kill them, beyond a doubt?

"Listen," Naruto said slowly, scrubbing his hands through hair like he often did when he was trying to think. It was just a gut feeling he had, but there was something to it. There had to be. "I don't think Orochimaru will let us get killed. I don't think he would let me fall into the enemy's hands, either. Bringing us here wasn't easy to do, and it's not like he wants to let the world end by me getting captured."

Obito and Kakashi looked at him as that sank in.

"Well... that might be true. But it still isn't a good idea for you two to join in at the front," Kakashi said. "Too many things could go wrong. And even if Orochimaru did unsummon you to save you from danger, he could just bring you right back to his base afterward. You'd be trapped again."

"Yeah, I know. But then Obito could be back home, at least. I doubt Orochimaru could find him again without him having a tag. I'm not sure what to do about Kabuto... but Orochimaru probably doesn't plan on doing anything to hurt him. If I had to, I could endure it there a while longer. I mean, but that's just a big 'what if', obviously," Naruto added quickly at the look on Kakashi's face. "I'm just trying to say, it's better to be in danger out there than in here, 'cause Orochimaru can't see anything going on in here. That's all."

Kakashi kept looking at him, giving his patented stare. "Aa, I get it. You could be right. I'm sure Obito will take us back to the fight anyway, regardless of what I say. But, Naruto... keep in mind that this world could end if your idea is wrong, or if you make any big mistakes out there. Getting to safety should be your number one priority."

There was another meaning under his words: 'I know what you're thinking. Don't do anything rash'. 
Naruto swallowed. Even he wasn't completely sure that he was right, but making certainties out of uncertainties was his specialty, wasn't it?

"Okay," he said. "Obito, we might all get separated after this, so I need you to completely and absolutely promise that you'll set things right when you go back home. Don't turn into an evil jerk, either, or I will find a way to kick your ass."

"As if you could. Who do you think you're talking to?" Obito tilted his goggles. "I have the Sharingan and an awesome new jutsu already, so I'll be able to protect everyone. I promise you that."

"Good."

"Can you stand up, old-man-Kakashi?" Obito said. Kakashi's visible eye widened slightly in surprise when his former teammate ducked under his arm to hoist him up. Naruto grinned and held on to Obito's sleeve as he got ready to transport them all.

Where they landed this time was an entirely different scene from before. It wasn't as dark here, but barren dirt and torn rock was all they had for a landscape. But that didn't mean it was boring to look at. The huge red barrier and monstrous creature behind it took care of that. Naruto stared at it, mouth gaped slightly open. This was the first time he was able to actually see the Juubi, since it had never been clear when he used Sage Mode.

There were others all around it, too, but they were hard to notice with something like that in the middle. They were so tiny in comparison at this distance that they looked like fleas jumping around.

"Yes! I was able to get us closer!" Obito crowed.

"What..." Kakashi slumped to the ground. Even though Obito had taken care of transporting them this time, the fighting and the previous jumps were taking their toll. "Closer was not what you should have been aiming for, Obito!"

"Go find your older self. He should be where that big ugly thing is, the Juubi," Naruto said. "Most likely on top of its head. We can deal with things here. But don't let him kill you. I've got a plan for getting us back, so you might not have a lot of time."

Obito stared at him for a second, frowning. He looked at Kakashi, and then turned around. "Aa. You be careful, too. And if anything happens, well... it sucks that we weren't born in the same generation. We could've really kicked ass as a team. But, I look forward to seeing you again someday, anyway." He started to walk off.

"No, stop—" Kakashi tried to stand up, but his legs shook badly when he tried supporting his weight on them. Naruto caught him as he tipped to one side, then eased him back to the ground.

"Just rest right now, okay? You and the others just need to make sure you save this world. We'll worry about getting back to ours."

"What are you going to do?"

Naruto didn't answer. He took a few steps away from Kakashi and looked up at the Juubi, looming up ahead. There wasn't a lot of time. Someone on this battlefield was bound to notice them sooner or later, and then the chance might be lost. And while he needed Obito to leave so that he wouldn't hear what Naruto was going to say, it would be bad if he reached his older self too quickly.

"Naruto, tell me what you're planning. Don't make any big decisions on your own."
Naruto looked back at Kakashi and took a few more steps away, just to make sure he was well out of reach. He planted his feet firmly into the ground, and looked up.

"Orochimaru! I don't know what you're doing at a time like this, but you better stop and listen up!" he shouted at the sky, fists bared. "Right now, Obito is heading right toward the middle of danger. I don't know if you care enough about him to save him yourself, but you're going to care in just a few seconds."

"What are you doing? Do you even know for sure that he can hear you?" Kakashi demanded.

Naruto continued to ignore him. "If you don't send us all back—me and Obito and Kabuto, and anyone else we don't know about—in the next thirty seconds, I'll undo the seal holding back the Kyuubi. Good luck trying to control it with that tag of yours! And we'll be right here in the open where the enemy can see us."

"Naruto!"

"But," Naruto said louder, "If you cooperate and send us back, not only will this world not end, but you'll even get to keep your tag on me when you send me home. That's really what you want, isn't it? To see what I'll do when I go back?"

Naruto felt a burning sensation starting to come over him. It was the same feeling as before, when Orochimaru had started taking control over his body. He stumbled a bit and laughed aloud. It was working. The snake could definitely hear him.

"That won't work. I can at least go against you long enough to tear off the seal. My hand is on it right now."

Inside the seal, Naruto and the Kyuubi were standing eye to gigantic red eye. The fox stared at Naruto through the bars as he hovered in front of the seal, fingertips slipped underneath the edge of the paper.

"You don't have the key," the Kyuubi rumbled, eyes narrowing. "The only way would be to force my energy through, and your mind has to be entirely willing for that to work quickly."

"It is," Naruto said. His older self had told him what would happen when he pulled off that seal. Even if the Kyuubi came close to being entirely released, it would be alright. His dad would save him. Naruto closed his eyes, knuckles tightening around the edge of the paper.

"Naruto!"

The voice came from the outside world, but it wasn't Kakashi's voice this time. Naruto opened his eyes and felt someone's hands on his shoulders. He looked up to see an Edo Tensei face, with blue eyes against black, and cracked features pulled into a look of concern.

"Naruto, can you hear me?"

"Tou—?"

The moment his concentration wavered, Naruto got hit with the controlling sensation again, even more aggressively this time. He cried out, stumbling some more, limbs shaking with the effort of resisting. It would all be over if Orochimaru managed to get a hold on him. He was barely aware of it when Minato caught and lowered him to the ground. He started inspecting the seal, yellow brows knotted with worry.
"Kakashi, do you know what's happening?"

Kakashi's eye went wide at the sight of Minato in front of him, but he was able to answer readily enough. "Orochimaru has placed a control tag on this Naruto. This jutsu of his that summons past versions of living people is like the Edo Tensei, in that he can manipulate and control whoever he summons."

"I've heard something about it," Minato said. "It was Orochimaru that brought us here. But he's off somewhere else now."

"He's able to see and hear through Naruto. That's what he was doing... taking advantage of that by trying to provoke Orochimaru into releasing the jutsu."

Minato paused, hands hovering over the seal. "If this jutsu is like the Edo Tensei, what we need to do is seal Naruto's soul in a way that Orochimaru can't ever reach it again, but still leaves him back where he belongs."

"No," Naruto croaked out, with effort. He reached up to clutch the white cloth of his father's coat. "If you do that, I won't be able to save Obito. Orochimaru will just let him die."

"Obito?" Minato looked at Kakashi, confused.

"He brought Obito from the past, too. Right now, that Obito is trying to get to where his older self is."

Minato still looked confused, and a bit concerned. Naruto pulled on his coat, willing him to understand what he was trying to do, but finding it difficult to get his thoughts out.

"Orochimaru would lose Obito now if he died or got sent back, either way. He can't get him back without an anchor," he explained, voice straining. "So Obito's useless to him now, but I'm not. That connection has to stay, because it's the only way he'll listen to me. I don't mind it. Saving Obito is more important than saving me, because doing that will save you, too... and the me in his world, and a whole lot of other people."

Minato looked down at him, thinking, face set in a slight frown. But his posture relaxed after a few seconds.

"I can't remove the tag itself, since it's attached to your soul, just like with the Edo Tensei summons. But if you don't want your soul to be sealed away from Orochimaru's reach, I might at least be able to block him from controlling your body." He lifted a hand, and it started to glow. Naruto's eyes tracked the movement warily as Minato applied the hand to his seal.

"Itachi tried doing that with genjutsu, but it only worked once. And it didn't really help much."

"This will last longer. But it won't get rid of the tag completely. I don't know if it will last forever, either."

Naruto's face scrunched at the slight tickling that came from Minato manipulating the seal. He could tell that it was working. It gradually became easier to think, easier to move. He sat up slowly and flexed his hands, looking down as he clenched them into fists.

"Yosh," Naruto got to his feet, clumsily at first, then standing steady. "Now that he can't control me, he can't stop me."

"What are you planning to do?"
Naruto closed his eyes briefly, and took a deep breath.

'Does the tag still work? Can he still see what we're doing?'

Aa, I think so. Minato knows what he's talking about.

This wasn't going to be easy. Naruto had lost the element of surprise—Orochimaru knew what he was up to now.

Hopefully, it wasn't too late to pull it off anyway.

Naruto turned as his father stood up behind him, and Kakashi looked up from a little further back.

"I'll find a way that won't mess with the seal. Don't worry," he told them, resting a hand on his chest. "No matter what—whether this works or not, you won't be seeing this version of me again. But you still have the older me. Worry more about him, and focus on stopping the world from ending. I've pretty much reached the end of what I can do here in the future. Now, all I can really do is try to save the past, in my own way." Biting his lip, he turned to face Minato. "Tou-chan... look after Kakashi-sensei and Obito and the older me. We'll—we'll have the chance to talk again, but the older me might not. So..."

What he wanted to say was coming out more awkward and less heroic than he wanted, so Naruto simply turned around and started walking away, leaving them there.

"...I'm proud of you," Minato said softly.

"Sensei, the Juubi," Kakashi said.

Something about the energy in the air had shifted. A series of attacks exploded in the distance. The Juubi was thrashing around wildly inside the barrier.

"My main body is at the barrier. Something is about to happen. We need to reach whoever is controlling the Juubi right away." Minato took out one of his specialized kunai. "Will you be alright here?"

"Yes. I just need to recover some chakra."

"My other son should be able to take care of that, if he ever makes it over here." Minato smiled back over his shoulder at him, and then disappeared.

Obito ran as fast as he could toward the huge creature everyone was fighting, eyes fixated on its head—as if he had any hope of seeing his older self at this distance. The closer he got, the more clear it became that reaching there wouldn't be easy. For one thing, there was the massive barrier, large enough to contain something that size.

He wanted to make sure he stayed out of sight of everyone on both sides of the war. He didn't have time for any questions, and whether they happened to recognize him or not, Obito doubted anyone would let him go near the fight.

Jumping and ducking around as skillfully as he could, Obito pressed his back against a shard of rock and looked up at the barrier. He was close to it now, but the distance between it and the Juubi was greater than he originally thought.

"Obito?" an old, astonished-sounding voice said.
Obito flinched and looked around wildly. He'd already been discovered? By who?

He saw an old man dressed in battle gear sitting in front of the barrier, hands held in a seal. But he was currently staring right at Obito with wide eyes. Obito recognized him, too.

"Eh?! Sandaime-sama?" he ducked back behind the rock defensively. "Whatever you're thinking, it's not what you think! Wait..." he peeked back out. "I thought Naruto said you had been killed by Orochimaru."

"Aa, and I was brought back by him, too," Hiruzen said with a frown. "How do you know Naruto? Don't tell me—you're one of the ones brought here from the past?"

"You know about that?" Obito asked cautiously.

"Just a bit. What are you doing here, though? It's dangerous!"

"I have to see my older self." He came out from behind the rock. It didn't look like the Sandaime could move from the position he was in. "You're holding up this barrier, right? Can you let me through?"

"I'm one of the ones. And absolutely not! There's a beast in there strong enough to take on the entire Allied Shinobi Force at once, not to mention the man behind this war!"

"I know!" Obito shouted. "That man is the older me! And if I don't face him now, I'll probably never get the chance! So you just gotta let me through. Please!"

Hiruzen looked surprised, and then grim. "I'm sorry. I understand why you would want to go see him, but whatever circumstances there might be, it's just too dangerous."

Obito scowled, and turned to look through the barrier. There were people on the other side, rushing toward the Juubi. It looked like they were still able to use their jutsu in there.

Of course! He already had somewhat of a feel for landing where he wanted using the Kamui. And this time, he could even see the place he wanted to go to. So if he focused really hard, he should be able to make a pinpoint landing.

"I understand. You're just doing your job. But I have to go," Obito said. He activated his Sharingan and stared at the Juubi, trying to find a hint of familiar energy on top of it.

There.

Obito took a deep breath, focused hard on where he wanted to go, and stepped forward. The space around him twisted and bent at his command.

"Obito—"

The Sandaime's voice was cut off as Obito slipped into the other dimension. But this time, he didn't bother to materialize there all the way. He passed through it, concentrating on his destination, and came through to the other side as easily as stepping through a doorway. Despite how serious things were, he felt elated. This ability was becoming more and more natural to him.

A loud, wailing screech met him on the other side. The Juubi was thrashing and crying out. Obito's mouth fell open. His older self was right in front of him, but his appearance had changed dramatically. His whole body was taut with struggle, and half of it was covered in something pitch-black. His hands were locked in some kind of seal, and his hair was starting to turn white.
"W-What's going on?" Obito demanded, eyes wide with horror. "What are you doing? Stop!"

Not knowing what else to do, he put his hands on those of his older self and tried to pry them apart.

Only then did his older self seem to take any notice of him at all. His right eye was covered up by the black stuff, but the left one drifted downward to look at him, narrowing. It was a terrifying eye, purple with rings radiating out from the center.

Against his will, the younger Obito froze with fear as they stared at one another. This person was so far out of his reach that it didn't seem possible that they could have the same soul. That look didn't have shock, confusion, or anything else remotely human in it. It was cold. All his older self saw was someone else trying to interfere.

Arms suddenly wrapped around him from behind, lifting Obito up and pulling him away from his older self. At the same time, a bright, glowing orange form with black flames radiating from it appeared where he had been. Obito cried out in shock when he saw a stream of blood burst out from a slash across his older self's chest. Then he blinked, and he was suddenly back on the ground again.

Obito stumbled in his haste to turn around, ready to fight. Only...

His mentor stood in front of him, smiling.

"M-Minato-sensei!"

"Long time no see." Minato paused and rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I suppose that only applies on my side, doesn't it?"

"Ah! You're a zombie!" Obito cried, noticing Minato's eyes and the cracks on his face.

"Don't worry, I'm not under anyone's control," Minato said. He walked up to Obito and placed a hand on his shoulder. The skin underneath burned for just a second before the feeling faded away.

Obito pulled his collar to one side to see a familiar sequence of squiggly lines against his skin. "Hey, what was that for?"

"Proof," Minato said. "I don't know if that mark will be able to stay with you when you go back. But if it does, it might come in handy. For both of us. Besides, Naruto asked me to look after you."

Obito's hand dropped. He looked down, face burning with shame. "S-Sensei, I... everything going on here. It's all my fault."

"No," Minato said gently. "I have to take part of the blame, too. If I could have reached there in time, everything might have been different. But do you know... until just a minute ago, I didn't even know you were still alive in this time."

"Huh?" Obito looked up at him.

"Aa. That—"

Obito blinked when his sensei suddenly disappeared with a small sound, leaving behind a drifting plume of smoke.

A bunshin?

"This is something unusual, though I wouldn't say I enjoy the timing. You're not just a chakra construct... how did you get here, boy?"
The voice came from a man sitting casually on a rock behind where Minato's bunshin had been standing a moment ago. He had a massive amount of spiky, black hair, and...

Obito took a step back and leveled his Sharingan at the stranger. This man had the same kind of eye his older self had.

The land sloped downward as Naruto walked closer and closer to the battle front. Even at this distance, the wreckage from the fight was all too apparent. As he climbed over rocks, making his way through littered bodies and broken earth, he wondered again if this was the best way. After all, Orochimaru could just as easily decide to abandon him, and then all would be lost. That was doubly likely now that the first chance was ruined.

But he truly did not think that would happen. The only thing that really made this difficult was seeing the destruction this fight was causing. Naruto kept thinking back to everything he'd seen and done in the future. Had it been enough? Would he be able to make any difference on the outcome if he made it back to the past? Or was it like Kakashi had said, and bad things would happen no matter what anyone did?

Still, there was no other option, short of running away from reality.

No matter what happened, he would never give in to that. There was no doubt that eventually, the Obito from his time would try to convince him to.

He was ready for that.

'Kyuubi, we're almost there. Will you help me?'

Yes.

The older Naruto had been distracted by his younger self's presence ever since the latter had arrived on the battlefield. It had eased his mind a bit when he sensed Minato's bunshin join him and Kakashi, but for some reason he left, leaving his younger self wandering alone along the edge of the destruction. For the dozenth time, he reached his senses out, trying to figure out where the younger him was going. Was this real? Why was he here? Should he send a bunshin out to learn what was going on?

'Hey, gaki. Let me take control for a minute.' Kurama said, chin rested in one paw unconcernedly.

'What for?' Naruto asked, slightly suspicious. The last time the fox had asked that out of nowhere, he ended up throwing Kakashi straight into the enemy's attack. It had all worked out for the best, but still.

'Just do it. I've been talking with the me from the other time. He and the little you have a plan.'

'Really? What kind of plan? And what the hell are they even doing here? I thought we sent them back!'

'Hurry up and do it, alright? I'll explain later.'

Naruto grumbled, but he did as he was asked and relinquished control over to the fox.

With the switch, his eyes changed, and the dark lines on his face from the Kyuubi Chakra Mode grew thicker and wilder. Kurama pulled Naruto's face into a wide, sharp-toothed grin.
"Sorry about this, kid."

He instantly turned and started running away from the battle front, bright flames trailing behind from his speed. A few people called out, but Kurama ignored them. They could make do with Naruto's bunshin for just a few minutes.

'Oi! What are you doing?' Naruto yelled. He didn't appreciate the fox hijacking his body like this with no explanation. 'We need to go back! Tou-chan and Sasuke might need our help!'

"Just shut up and watch. Trust me."

They were running toward the churned up ground where hardly anyone else was, save for the younger Naruto. He stood there waiting for them, looking up as Kurama jumped the last bit of distance and landed down in front of him.

"Hey there, little brat. You'd better thank me for taking all this trouble. Your older self's a pain in the ass," Kurama said. He took hold of one of Naruto's forearms with either hand, and Naruto held on to his arms in return.

"Yeah, thanks." Naruto grinned.

Chakra flames licked over the younger Naruto's skin, pulled along up his arms as if with by some invisible, magnetic force. It wasn't even necessary to adjust the energy in order to transfer it over. And it didn't take very long.

The younger Naruto winced and hissed, holding on very tightly all of a sudden. His arms were starting to transform. Tough ridges formed on the surface of his skin and moved downward, lengthening his fingers. Budding branches started sprouting.

"Soon, it will be enough to start a chain reaction that no one can stop," Kurama said, smiling viciously. Naruto grimaced in pain, but he kept his eyes steady locked with the fox's.

"Kurama, stop! What the hell are you doing? It'll kill them if this keeps up!"

"Aa, I know. Any second now. This form will become unbalanced and start absorbing everything it can, including the energy inside of it, and they will die." He stared directly into the younger Naruto's eyes. "He's got a lot of guts, coming up with something like this, ne? But there's no need to worry about whether it's a bluff or not. You should know that I'm not soft like a human, Orochimaru. Even if the kid tells me to let up at this point, I won't."

"And I'm... not going to," Naruto growled, flinching as the energy worked its way across his shoulders. It felt like he was being burned alive. "So unless you want... everything you've done so far to be ruined—"

Naruto stopped and his eyes widened when he suddenly heard familiar laughter inside of his head. It echoed quietly, and then more loudly, sounding delighted.

The transformation Naruto's body was undergoing in response to the energy was agonizing. The cells hardened while also multiplying rapidly. He couldn't move his legs anymore, because they were quite literally rooted into the ground. It was hard not to panic with that laughter echoing in his head.

Did he guess wrong?

The Kyuubi in the form of his older self let go and stepped back as the branches tried to dig their
sharp ends into him. The transformation was beyond anyone's control now. Naruto squinted. He could tell that his older self was back in charge, since there was nothing he could do to stop the process anymore. The look of horror on his face made it obvious.

This whole attempt was another failure. But, at least the consequence was only on himself. There was still a chance to save Obito and Kabuto. If the people of this time were able to win the war, they could track Orochimaru down afterward.

"Win," Naruto said faintly. "And... protect Obito."

His older self's confused expression was the last thing he saw before closing his eyes and relaxing. It had been a long shot, trying to beat someone so much older, smarter, and stronger than him. But he'd done his best.

The pain gradually faded. Naruto found himself awash in a soft, pleasant light. Realizing that he was no longer stuck to the ground, he opened his eyes.

The only thing there was blank whiteness, and... Naruto tried to shake his head, but it didn't work. That guy from before was there, the one he hadn't been able to recognize.

"Am I dead?" Naruto blurted out.

"No," he said. "That was a close one, though."

"Then, what is this place?"

"The deepest part of your soul. A place you can only reach whenever you exist without a body. Everything you carry around with you lives here. Don't worry. You should be pulled back toward your natural body soon."

"W...wait!" Naruto called as he felt himself start to fall. "Who are you?"

But everything quickly disappeared, and he never got an answer.

Obito's entire body was tensed, ready to fight, but the shinobi sitting down on the rock didn't even shift from his casual pose. He looked at Obito like he was some mildly interesting object.

"Even if your body is just an imitation, your chakra is exactly the same as it was back then. How is that possible?"

"Do I know you?" Obito asked rudely.

"All that time together, and you don't remember me? Well, I suppose you wouldn't. Not if you're exactly what you look like."

"Whatever. I'm not in the mood for a guessing game right now. I need to go check back up with Naruto." Obito turned around.

"Oh?"

Obito started walking.

"You have both of your Sharingan."

"So what?" Obito said irritably, but he didn't stop walking.
"You probably don't even know how much power that gives you. A pair of eyes always work better together, after all."

Obito did stop this time. "What do you mean?"

"Hm. By any chance, have you ever heard of the Kannabi Bridge?"

Obito whirled around, glaring at the man. He was sitting there the same as before, smirking and leaning on one hand.

"I spent a lot of time near there, some years back. It could be very boring at times—that is, until an interesting child showed up. He was missing an eye and half of his body was crushed beyond recognition, but he still had enough power left to find me. I don't believe that things like that are mere coincidence. Some meetings are fated."

Obito felt chills run along his spine.

The man stood up with a sigh. "Again? I'm getting tired of this."

Obito turned back and saw a small crowd of people running toward them—but it was really just two people, multiplied several times. He'd seen their pictures before, at the Academy.

"Shodai-sama? Nidaime-sama?" he wondered out loud.

A bright explosion off in the distance caught his eye. Something was happening with the Juubi! Forgetting the odd group, Obito started running toward it to see what was going on better.

At the same time, a strange feeling came over him. It wasn't like a moment ago, when he was just creeped out. It was more like... like the time he and Naruto had gotten stuck in between dimensions. The entire landscape around him was fading out.

Obito stopped and looked at his hands. Color was rapidly leaving them. His vision changed; everything looked far away all of a sudden. He felt himself standing on the ground, but he could also feel himself floating up and away.

It was exactly how Naruto had described it.

Obito looked up one last time, tracking his older self's energy far away. Everything he'd seen and heard since coming here came back to him at once, and he had to bite down on his lower lip to stop the tears that threatened to rise.

No one determined his fate except for him!

"I'll show you," he growled defiantly as he faded away.

Naruto let in a long, slow breath, trying to calm the rapidly beating heart he could feel again in his chest. He dug his fingers into the sheets and pulled his hands into loose, shaky fists. He was almost afraid to open his eyes and look around. After all the failures and near-misses, it didn't seem like it could be real.

And even if it was, not everything had gone perfectly. Orochimaru's seal wasn't destroyed, just contained. But letting something be in it for the snake was the only hope Naruto had for getting home and saving Obito in the process. He hoped that he'd heeded his demands about sending Kabuto back, too. Not knowing for sure whether he'd succeeded or not weighed heavily on his
You did the best you could, gaki.

Naruto's lips curled into a smile and he let out a silent snort, fogging up the breathing mask on his face.

'So... Kurama, huh?'

What? the Kyuubi snapped.

'Ne, ne. That's what he called you, right? I heard him!'

Hmph. What's your point?

Naruto's amusement dropped off quickly when he heard a door slide open. He opened one eye just a tiny bit before closing it again.

"...instance of increased heart rate. It could be just another random hiccup, but it was as big a spike as the last time he woke up. We need to watch him closely, to be ready in case that happens again."

It was Tsunade. Naruto heard her heels clack on the linoleum as she walked around to the side of his bed, stopping there to fiddle with the machine giving out steady beeps. He slowly opened his eyes to look up at her.

Everything looked so clear. It had to be real, right? Naruto felt a knot forming in his throat. He lifted his hand slowly. It looked even thinner than it had the last time. But it was his. He reached out, touching the rough fabric of Tsunade's green haori.

"Tsunade-sama!" the nurse that had followed her in gasped.

Tsunade looked down at him, amber eyes widening when she saw that he was awake.

"H...hey, Baa-chan," Naruto said with a rusty voice, giving her his best grin.
Little Kabuto faithfully kept his post at the entrance to Orochimaru's base, even after Sasuke-san and his group had arrived, just as Orochimaru said they would. He had told Kabuto that there was going to be a big experiment today that might cause a lot of noise, and to make sure that no one but Sasuke was told where to find him. Sure enough, the boy eventually heard loud crashes coming from the other side of the base, but now things had been quiet for a long time. No one ever came to tell him what to do now, and he never saw anyone leave. After standing there for hours cluelessly, he finally decided to start walking that way to see what was going on.

But now... taking a look around only made him more worried and confused. The base was empty. All of the Edo Tensei guards had disintegrated. Naruto and Obito, Orochimaru, Sasuke—all of them were gone. Where? Where did they all go?

After searching for so long that his legs started to ache from all the time on his feet, Kabuto sank down to his knees in one of the hallways. He didn't mind treating gross, terrible wounds, and he didn't flinch at sights that could make even adults feel sick, but this—being all alone like this—was more than he could take.

Then, something unusual happened. Kabuto's vision grew hazy and white, even though he still wore his glasses. His entire body felt strange. Like it was suddenly heavy, or like he was high up above it but still inside of it at the same time. Kabuto clutched at his chest and gasped as the panic threatened to suffocate him. He couldn't breathe—he couldn't breathe!

This went on several long, frightening seconds more, and then it simply stopped. Kabuto sat trembling with his hands and forehead pressed against the wall.

What in the world was that? Was it really over?

He slowly opened his eyes and turned around. Everything looked exactly the same as it did before. The only sound was that of his own breathing. He stood up and started walking down the hall again.

"O-Orochimaru-sama?" Kabuto called tentatively. He looked around every corner and down every hall as he walked by, but there was no answer.

He finally found the experiment room, the source of all the noise from earlier. And no wonder; the place was in shambles.

"I don't understand it..."

Kabuto looked around at the room below, with its cracked floor and piles of mortar and stone. One of the walls looked like it had been blasted through.

"I don't understand it... why? Where did everyone go? Naruto... Obito..."

Tears beaded up in the corners of his eyes and fell out before he had the chance to wipe them away. Kabuto took off his glasses and scrubbed at his eyes with a sleeve. This wouldn't do! If Orochimaru-sama saw him crying, he might decide to send him back to the orphanage. As much as he missed home, he could not mess up this opportunity.
Still, he'd thought, for just a small moment, that he might be able to have friends here. Why was this happening?

Naruto was back.

For several seconds, the only thing that broke the silence was the quiet, regular beeping of the machine. Tsunade stared at him unguardedly, mouth slightly open in silent surprise, and Naruto smiled wider to try to reassure her that he was alright.

"N-Naruto!" she finally said, voice waver ing. She pulled him into a surprisingly gentle hug, carefully avoiding pulling on any of the things hooked up to his body.

"Heh, sorry for worrying you, Baachan," Naruto said as casually as he could, though his voice was still weak. "I just had to take a really long nap."

Tsunade gave an exasperated sigh as she pulled back, her usual manner quickly coming back. "Stop trying to act so cool. Can you leave us for a moment?" She looked up at the nurse. "Please pass this on to Shizune. She knows what to do."

"Yes ma'am," the nurse said, nodding her head and then leaving.

Naruto tried to sit up, but Tsunade put a hand on his shoulder to keep him still. He looked up at her nervously. "Um... I'm not in trouble, am I?"

"Are you really back this time? Or are you going to disappear again soon?" Tsunade asked. "If you know, tell me right now."

"A-Ah..." Naruto closed his eyes.

Are we? Are we really back for good, Kurama?

'I think so. Orochimaru shouldn't be able to exert any control over us at all, as long as the Yondaime's seal is in effect. But he might be able to see and hear everything we do after a while, if not already. Don't forget that. Never let your guard down.'

Naruto opened his eyes slowly. He'd had the chance to get rid of Orochimaru's influence for good, thanks to his dad's knowledge of seals. But he declined it, hoping to bargain with Orochimaru to send Obito and Kabuto back to their own times. Naruto didn't even know for sure whether Orochimaru had done it, since he'd disappeared before being able to see. Either way, those versions of the two were in completely different dimensions... and the ones that existed here were not the same people.

'Which is exactly the reason you're a complete idiot. Can you really trust the word of that snake?'

Naruto ignored Kurama.

"Yeah, I'm back for real," He said to Tsunade, trying to inject confidence into his smile.

"Then, is Konoha in any immediate danger?"

Was it? Everything about the war wasn't supposed to happen for another few years, right?

"Um... probably not."

"Then, we can forget about anything else until I assess your condition." Tsunade said. She took a
clipboard from the foot of his bed and started marking things down from the monitors and machines.

"Ugh, I'm hungry," Naruto complained as a wave of hunger hit him suddenly. He clutched his stomach and rolled over on his side. "I could eat twenty... no, thirty bowls of ramen..." He hadn't felt hungry for quite a while, but now the sensation was back with a vengeance.

"No solid food for a while," Tsunade said as she continued her work. "You're lucky. We were going to have to resort to more permanent measures to keep your body going soon. It probably should have been done sooner, but we hoped that you would be able to wake back up."

Something in the way she said it made Naruto forget his hunger for a second. He kept underestimating how much they must have worried about him, because he had been so busy learning things and fighting for his life in the future.

"What about Ero-sennin? What happened after I woke up that time?" he blurted out, rolling back over quickly.

"He came back here as soon as we contacted him about what happened. That was not the first time we realized that we were on the wrong track."

Then Jiraiya was okay. He was alive. Naruto was so relieved that his eyes started to sting. Tsunade looked down at his stricken face and sighed.

"You can see him in the morning, if you want. It's late right now. While I'm sure he wouldn't mind being dragged out of bed for this, you should have a few hours to re-adjust before seeing anyone, at least."

"So you're not..." Naruto's voice came out croaky. "You're not going to ask me about what happened?"

Tsunade leaned over the bed's rail and rested a glowing palm against his forehead. She stayed silently like that for several seconds. Her touch felt warm, and made him a little bit sleepy. Naruto gave her a questioning look when she stopped.

"For a good while, we thought that Akatsuki had taken the Kyuubi," Tsunade said. "But if that had happened, there was no way you should have been able to wake up. It just should not have been possible. Even if you are known for defying expectations." She ruffled his hair a bit before pulling her hand back. "Are you saying that you do know what happened?"

"Yeah." Naruto swallowed. He knew that there was no way he could just pretend like he didn't know. But there was so much to tell, he almost didn't know where to begin. "I never really learned all the technical stuff behind it, but it wasn't Akatsuki. It was Orochimaru. Um, only, it's not the Orochimaru you guys know." This already felt difficult to explain. How was he supposed to do this?

"What do you mean, not the Orochimaru we know?" Tsunade said, frowning.

"He's from another time—another dimension thing? It was a place just like here, only it was like... everything was happening years from now. There was an older version of me there, and you; everyone. The Orochimaru from that place summoned me from here and put my soul in some kind of fake body. I kept trying to get back, but it was really, really hard."

"Hm..." Tsunade hummed. Naruto didn't like the doubt in her voice, but he could think of no better way to explain it, not without going into every last detail from the start.

"I found out a lot of stuff about what's going to happen in the future," he insisted, gesturing the best
he could with his weak noodle arms. "I swear that I'm not making it up!"

Tsunade continued her work quietly for another minute, making Naruto nervous and frustrated. What would he do if no one believed him? He hadn't thought of that. They had a war to prevent! If no one listened, then how was he supposed to do it? Itachi had warned him that he couldn't do it alone.

"They said that it was like that jutsu that brings back dead people. The Edo-whatsit," Naruto burst out, trying again.

"The Edo Tensei?"

"Yeah!" Naruto said, reaching up to point at her eagerly, but pulling the IV taped to his hand in the process. "Ow! Yeah, that thing. And he and Kabuto are gonna use the Edo Tensei to summon a ton of dead people, too—the Uchiha clan—and it's all because of Uchiha Madara, see, he started a war with everyone!"

Tsunade frowned and put the clipboard in her hands back in its tray at the foot of Naruto's bed.

"Madara?"

"Yeah. I learned some stuff about him, and a bunch of other things, too. I can tell you all about them if you don't believe me."

"It isn't that I don't believe you, Naruto." Tsunade gave a sigh and pulled a chair up next to his bed. "Start at the beginning. But only the very basics, just so I can have a better idea of what you're talking about. What happened the night after the inauguration?"

Naruto rested his head back on the pillow, trying to remember. It felt like such a long time ago. And if Tsunade really believed him, then why was she acting so weird?

"I just went back home and went to sleep, that's all. Then I woke up in the future. I didn't realize it at first, 'cause I was outside the village. But I made it back, and... everything was so different. Kakashi-sensei and the other you thought I was an imposter of my older self, but we managed to get it worked out eventually..."

Naruto kept on talking, and Tsunade didn't interrupt him at all unless he started going off on a tangent or tried explaining something too complicated. When that happened, she would ask about what had happened next, and he would drop the current topic and move on. He tried to go off track often, because he was so determined to convince her he was telling the truth.

Tsunade's relative silence was very unnerving. She seemed less interested in the details of Madara's plot and the war, and more interested in the the Time-Spanning Incarnation jutsu and Orochimaru's activities.

But eventually, Naruto grew tired. He started yawning every other sentence, and his words were turning into mumbles. It felt like he hadn't explained but a fraction of everything that happened, but thanks to Tsunade's promptings, he was already close to the end.

"So how exactly did you make it home, if Orochimaru captured you after the second time you came back?"

"I escaped, obviously," Naruto said, a touch of his old bravado coming out, despite how tired he sounded. "I was able to summon the toad Sennin-jii and make it out. Then I was on the battlefield where everyone was facing off against Madara. Then I met my dad. He said that Orochimaru had brought him back with the Edo Tensei." Naruto fell silent for a moment and looked over at her. Tsunade had a look of deep concentration on her face. Her hands clenched the arm of the chair.
tightly. She didn't say anything, though, so Naruto continued. "My older self had told me about him before. He was able to alter the seal so that Orochimaru wouldn't have control over me anymore."

"That should not have been possible," Tsunade said, her grip on the chair relaxing. "Minato sealed himself using the Shiki Fuujin. It was the same move that the Sandaime used to seal Orochimaru's arms and his jutsu. And I know that he succeeded, because Orochimaru came to me himself to see about healing him. As far as I know, there should not be any way that he could summon anyone, much less Minato."

"I don't know anything about that, but he was there," Naruto insisted, frowning heavily. "And obviously Orochimaru could do it, 'cause he summoned me more than once, right? What gives, Baachan? You said you believed me!" He sounded hurt.

Tsunade rubbed her forehead with one hand, giving a low grumble that showed the internal debate she was having. Finally sighing, she leaned forward and rested her hand on the bed's rail.

"Naruto, I believe you when you say that you experienced these things. Or, at least... you are telling the truth about what you think you saw. But if what you've said is true—future time or not—it sounds like this Time-Spanning Incarnation jutsu really crosses dimensions, after all, since you said that your older self had no memory of it."

Naruto was caught off guard by this. "Yeah, and I'm pretty sure that's what they told me, too. So what?"

"Even assuming that's all true, how can you be sure that the place you went to follows the same path as here?"

"But... but..." Naruto gripped the sheets covering him. He hadn't thought of that, either. He could just say that it was a gut feeling, but where was the proof?

"Even if everything you said was the truth, we can't rely on it totally, or close our minds to other possibilities. We need to look out for anything you might have found out, but don't ahead of yourself. It's dangerous to blindly assume everything will be the same. That goes doubly when you consider who's behind it all."

"But... I spent so much time trying to get back home to warn everyone! I promised them I would... and I know that it's really the future. I can feel it."

Obito's older self even told him it was the real future, right? But... how did he know? He wasn't the one that had summoned him. Besides, like Orochimaru, he was an enemy. He said he could be trusted because he didn't care what happened in the younger Naruto's time, but did he even know what he was talking about?

"Don't stress yourself out over it. You need to rest and get your strength back." Tsunade said firmly, standing up from the chair. "For now, we'll keep this to ourselves. I'll let Kakashi and Jiraiya know, but don't tell anyone else until we have the chance to investigate further."

"Sure," Naruto huffed. He wasn't going to give up on this. There were still years until the war started. "Um... I know you said I should wait till tomorrow, but can I see Ero-sennin now?"

Tsunade looked over at a clock hanging on the wall. "Well... I need to talk to him, anyway. I suppose I could ask him to come over here, if it will help you relax."

After he was left alone, Naruto's brow furrowed, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. He was feeling drowsier and drowsier, no matter how much he fought it. He needed to get better as soon as possible,
become strong again, and go out training with Jiraiya. Once they were out traveling together, Naruto was certain that he'd be able to get across that everything he said was true.

After all, he'd left a lot out while telling it; and not just because Tsunade was focused on getting the general picture. He wasn't sure what to do about Obito, Itachi, Nagato, and Konan. The Obito from this time probably wouldn't want his help, and the other three had said not to worry about them. Still, Naruto didn't want to give out information about them just yet, if it meant they would get put down before he had the chance to do it himself.

So far, he had pinned the entire war on Orochimaru and Uchiha Madara, leaving any mention of Obito out of it. Just until he could figure out what to do. Why did this have to be so hard? Naruto wished he had the help of his older self with all of this, but he did at least have Kurama on his side.

More or less.

The Third Shinobi World War was still raging on, and at this point, no one knew for certain what the outcome was going to be. Not even Konoha's Yellow Flash.

It was just a routine mission near the border of the Lightning Country, far from the front lines, but Minato got an apprehensive feeling when two of his students arrived at the rendezvous point without the third. The longer they waited, the greater the tension in the air became.

"He'll probably come a few hours late with some excuse about a stray cat," Kakashi said, shrugging with his palms up.

"But you know, he's usually serious when it comes to completing missions, right?" Rin said. "I wonder if he..."

"Don't worry, Rin," Minato said, standing from a crouch and folding up the map he had been studying. "This area should be safe from any enemies. It could be that he is having a hard time finding the meeting place."

"If that idiot didn't accidentally cross the border," Kakashi said. "They might see that Uchiha crest on his jacket and take him without realizing that he doesn't even have the Sharingan."

"I'll go take a look really quick. The two of you, stay here. I'll be back before dark." Minato took out one of his specialized kunai and threw it down in the middle of the clearing.

"Y-Yes, sensei," Rin said. Kakashi just crossed his arms and leaned against a tree as Minato left.

"It's bad enough he has to be late all the time. At this rate, he's going to make the rest of the team look bad, too," Kakashi said.

"Aren't you worried at all? I mean..."

"No. Minato-sensei said he would be back by dark, so we should still get home within the allotted time."

"Oh." Rin sat down under a tree with her arms wrapped around her legs. That wasn't what she meant.

They waited mostly in silence as the sun worked its way across the sky. Minato didn't return until much later. It was well into dusk, and the darkness had already settled down in the forested area where the two waited.
"Sensei!" Rin trotted up to him when he reappeared. She stopped and fell silent, though, when it became obvious that he was alone. Minato held up a simple gray backpack.

"Obito's bag," he said, tossing it down. "It was next to a river near the checkpoint, where he dropped off the scrolls. The people there said he came by as assigned, but they don't know what happened to him after he left."

"That's all you could find?" Kakashi said as he walked up beside Rin.

"Yes. I can guess that Obito stopped at the river for a break after completing his assignment, but there's no hint of where he went after that. He might have seen something, and rushed off over the water so that he wouldn't leave tracks... at any rate, there were no signs of a fight there or anywhere else in the area. The checkpoint hasn't seen any of Kumo or Iwa's forces today, either."

"Then... he might still show up here, just really late," Rin said, forcing a smile. "Ne, Kakashi?"

"If he's not hurt and there are no enemies, then he has no reason to be so late." Kakashi crossed his arms grumpily.

"That may be. But we've completed our mission well within the allotted time, so we can afford to wait a bit longer," Minato said, moving to sit down at the base of a tree.

Rin and Kakashi exchanged looks. They understood what that meant. Extra time or not, they couldn't wait around forever. They had only carried supplies for the few days they were supposed to be on the mission. And with the war going on, they couldn't get away with any extended detours.

Naruto had fallen asleep. Noticing the morning light in the room when he opened his eyes, he swore aloud.

"Nice to see you again too, gaki."

Naruto quickly looked over to see Jiraiya grinning at him.

"E-Ero-sennin!"

"Whoa, easy there," Jiraiya said as Naruto dived forward to the best of his ability, trying to hug him. The railing made it awkward, and Naruto couldn't fully reach without tugging on his IV, but he halfway managed it. "Tsunade will let me have it if you hurt yourself now. Just sit back and relax."

Naruto let himself be pushed back gently, reclining on the soft pillows that somebody must have recently fluffed up for him. But he didn't want to relax. Jiraiya was really here! And there were so many things to talk about and do.

"When are we gonna go train?" Naruto asked immediately.

"Sheesh." Jiraiya gave a heavy sigh and sat back in his chair, arms crossed. "Well, it's good to know that spending months in a coma hasn't curbed your enthusiasm."

"Months? Hey... just how long has it been, exactly?"

He wasn't really sure how long he had been in the future—he thought it was a few months, but there was no guarantee it would be the same amount of time here, right? Naruto racked his brain, trying to calculate the exact length, but he couldn't come up with the answer.

"A little over three months," Jiraiya said with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Honestly, it's a miracle
that you didn't die. You were lucky that you had Tsunade's help, and the residual energy from the
Kyuubi. We thought that Akatsuki had managed to capture it somehow. But when you woke up
those two times, we knew that something else had to be going on. But, I heard everything about it
from Tsunade. I can't believe Orochimaru figured out how to do something like this."

Naruto leaned back, looking at Jiraiya with a frown growing on his face. "So you think I'm telling
the truth?"

"Hm... well, I don't think you're lying, if that's what you mean. You aren't really the type to make up
stuff for no reason. Besides, it is definitely true that something serious happened to you. You almost
died, Naruto." Jiraiya's voice gained a tone Naruto had never heard in it before. Not like he was mad
at him, but like... like he was telling Naruto more than just what his words said.

"Then... what are you going to do?" Naruto muttered.

Jiraiya crossed his arms and hummed. "There's no doubt that something strange and dangerous
happened here. But, I think there are bound to be some parts of it that you couldn't know or
understand, even if you got everything else right. What to do? First of all, what we want to do is
track down Orochimaru, and find out if the one in this time is also developing the jutsu you told
Tsunade about. If we can catch him in the act, we stand a better chance of finding out right away
how it works, and how to stop it from happening again."

Naruto sat up quickly. "I never thought of that!"

He'd been so preoccupied thinking about how to change things in this time for the better, and
worrying about the people in Akatsuki, he had forgotten that the Orochimaru from this time might be
just as dangerous as the one in the future. What if he was in the middle of developing the Time-
Spanning Incarnation jutsu right now? Did that mean Naruto would someday meet another, younger
version of himself? The very idea made his brain hurt.

"So there is that," Jiraiya said. "If we find out that he's doing something like that, then we might be
able to get more information about the jutsu itself. If not information, then at least we'll have some
proof to support your story."

Naruto pouted. He still couldn't tell if Jiraiya really believed him or not. "Then, what am I supposed
to do?"

"You? You need to focus on getting out of the hospital, first of all." Jiraiya waggled his finger.
"Don't tell me you expect to get out in a day, just because you woke up!"

Naruto grumbled and leaned back. At least they were taking some kind of action on what he said.
Maybe they would find something on Orochimaru, and get things moving the right way sooner. If it
hadn't been for Orochimaru, a lot of the bad that happened wouldn't be so—

Naruto's eyes widened.

"Sasuke! Sasuke is—?" He sat up even more violently than before, nearly launching himself out of
the bed.

"Hey! Calm it down," Jiraiya said, pushing him back by the shoulders once again. "Do you want
them to put restraints on you? I wouldn't put it past Tsunade."

"But Sasuke—did he leave the village? Did he go after Orochimaru?"

Jiraiya look troubled, and though he let go after pushing Naruto back, he looked ready to do it again
if Naruto didn't keep still. He answered in a gruff voice, "So you know about that too, huh?"

Naruto stared, his heart starting to thump quicker. Having gone for so long without a normal body, it felt strange. He could hear his own pulse in his ears.

"What happened?"

"Ah, well... maybe it's not the best thing to talk about right now—"

"I never got to face him," Naruto said, looking at his hands clenched in his lap. "I was supposed to face him and—and show him I'll do whatever it takes to bring him back, even if I couldn't win that time. And now, he..."

Jiraiya hummed sympathetically. "The truth is, we don't know a lot about it. He got a good head start on us. No one has seen him since the day after you were put in the hospital. There was a report about a group of Oto-nin in the area, and we believe there was a fight involving them not far outside of the village. It seems most likely that they came here for Sasuke. Judging by the extensive damage we found, Sasuke either got captured and tried to escape, or he left with them willingly and changed his mind afterward."

Naruto looked up. Sasuke fought them? But that didn't sound right... from what he heard in the future, Sasuke had gone with them willingly. Naruto didn't think it was either of the things Jiraiya suggested. But he had no idea what might have happened instead, and that was not good. It was too soon for everything he knew to be messed up! It wasn't fair.

Whatever had happened, Sasuke probably still wanted to kill Itachi, right? If only he hadn't left, Naruto could have explained everything to him. Whether or not Sasuke wanted to listen... he would come up with a way to make him listen.

"I'll take care of Sasuke," Naruto finally said. "If you guys can find Orochimaru, that will be good. Then I can just go right to him."

"You make it sound that easy." Jiraiya scoffed. "By the way, the old toad said you were pretty set against me investigating Akatsuki. Hmm? Maybe they really did get to you, after all."

"It's nothing like that," Naruto huffed. "It's just... just..."

How could he tell him? What if Jiraiya found out about Nagato and Konan and decided to go see them right away? Or what if Tsunade decided to attack Ame to get rid of them before they became a threat? Naruto had no idea how either of them would react.

"I just don't want you to go when there's no reason for you to," he said. "It's like I told Baachan... Madara is the one that wanted to start the war in the future. He's using Akatsuki for his plan. Some of them don't need to be... some of them aren't bad guys. Even though they're after me, I don't really want them to get killed."

"Their leader? You mean Madara again, right?"

"Uh, no. I don't actually know where Madara is." Naruto waved his hands. "But the one I'm talking about... he's unbelievably strong, but Madara is using him. I don't want that person to hurt anyone, or be hurt by anyone. But, I mean—if it comes down to it, I know the best way to beat him, so there's no reason for anyone to risk going there to find information. So, just... don't let anybody go there until I... I mean, until we can figure out another way to stop them."
Jiraiya raised a skeptical eyebrow, then sighed. "Well, for now, it's good enough to just look into what Orochimaru is doing. If there is any possibility of finding out how accurate your knowledge might be, it's worth doing before anything else." He pushed his chair back from the bed and stood up.

"Are you leaving?" Naruto asked, a little upset.

"Hm? What's with the face? Do you know how many times I came to visit you while you were taking a nap?"

Naruto looked down again. That was right. It was like that when they trained before, too. He wasn't a little kid, after all.

"Ha... y-you're right. I was just joking! I was gonna call someone to bring me some food soon, anyway. I need to hurry up and get my strength back as soon as possible."

Jiraiya watched him dubiously for several seconds, then sighed again.

"Come to think of it, I haven't had any lunch, either. How about I try to sneak in something a little better than hospital food for us?"

The way Naruto's face lit up at the suggestion made it completely worth it.

When Minato took them back to the village without the last member of their team, it was a tense moment for everyone. Kakashi seemed almost too eager to leave Obito behind so that they would make it back by the scheduled time. Rin was clearly reluctant to leave, and moved slowly when it was time to pack up and move on. Minato was torn between his duty as a sensei and as a team leader, and hid one of his markers high in a tree before they left. He silently decided to take the other two back as quickly as possible in order to return alone at his next opportunity.

Uchiha Obito was declared missing in action a few days after he failed to meet up with his team during the mission near the border of the Lightning Country. Days became weeks, and his name was called aloud at the periodic service with the others who had died or went missing in the line of duty during that time. But like all those whose statuses were unclear, Obito didn't get his name engraved on the memorial stone. He truly did disappear without a trace.

The war was still going on, of course, so his team continued on their missions without knowing if he was alive or dead. They didn't talk about it much. It was a sticky topic between Kakashi and Rin especially.

The decision to leave without finding Obito didn't sit as well on Kakashi's consciousness as he expected, but he didn't say so out loud. Rin inwardly berated herself for not insisting that they stay and look longer, but again, she kept that to herself.

Still, every time they went out on a mission, they kept a look out for any sign that might lead to where Obito had gone. Whether it was a casual inquiry by Minato to a jounin that had been through that area recently, or Rin and Kakashi discreetly looking around every time they went somewhere new, relevant or not... all of them felt the silent, persistent weight of Obito's absence. They were in limbo, not knowing whether to grieve or hope.

How long was this awful uncertainty supposed to last?

Obito heard the sound of running water, and it immediately called to attention how parched his
mouth and throat were. He pried his eyes open and looked around without moving his head. He was laying down on a futon inside of a small, plain room, with a sliding door on his left and an opening to his right that looked like a kitchen area.

He didn't recognize this place at all.

Obito blinked when he saw movement coming from in the kitchen. An old woman came from behind the partition and paused when she saw that he was awake.

His memory came back quickly. He'd been on the battlefield just a second ago, with Naruto and the Juubi—and Kakashi was grown up, and his sensei was...

"Wh-who are you? Where is this?" Obito sat up and crawled backward as the woman came into the room. The pain that shot through his body when he moved made him cry out loud.

"Now, lay still and calm yourself. My my, I am surprised that you managed to wake up." She knelt down beside his bed and put one hand on his head, and another one over his heart. Obito saw and felt the medical chakra given off by her hands.

"Who are you, obaachan?" he asked again after a few seconds.

She sat back and put her hands in her lap. "My name is Fumi. We are in a little country village in the Lightning Country. You were discovered floating down a river by some shinobi from Kumogakure. They thought that you must be from the Uchiha clan, judging by your clothing, so they brought you back to Kumo to make use of you. Fortunately for you, you never woke up, and it was discovered after some investigation that you are just a little Chuunin without the Sharingan. They sent you here in hopes that I would be able to bring you back to consciousness. They intend to do whatever they can to activate your Sharingan and take it after you wake up."

Then, he was back in his own time? Eyes widening, Obito scooted back again and stood up to run, but there was another sharp pain below his ribs, and it was almost enough to put him under again. Stooped over, his hand went to his side and felt the bandages that were wrapped around.

"What..."

Fumi walked around him and gently took hold of his arms, moving him back down to the floor. "Please sit down. It's almost completely healed, and you don't want to make it worse, do you?"

"What happened to me?" Obito leaned back on the bed reluctantly, grimacing.

"Burns. Those charming people at Torture and Interrogation tried to wake you up with a hot iron."

"They did what?" Rage clouding his voice, Obito moved again, but the pain reminded him to stay still.

"It was good that you did not. Things would have been much worse for you then."

"But... obaachan, if you were put in charge of healing me, then..."  
Fumi looked into his face, then stood up. "Don't worry, child. I have no intention of handing you over to them."

"Huh?"

Obito watched her go back into the kitchen, his confusion growing. If they were in the Lightning
Country, then the people here were loyal to Kumo, right? They had no reason to want to help someone from Konoha.

After several minutes, Fumi came back holding a tray with a bowl of thin soup and some tea.

"My grandson was about your age when he went out to war." Her small hands took things off the tray one at a time. "Maa, well, I may be the best healer in the country, but I am no shinobi. I am tired of the wars taking children. Here. You can sit up, but be mindful of your wound."

Obito did as she asked and sat up slowly, favoring his right side. The soup was completely bland, but he drank all of it down, feeling his stomach awaken after just a little bit.

"There. With an appetite like that, I'd say you have a great chance of making a full recovery. You can have some more in a bit, but not too much at one time."

"Thank you." Obito put the bowl back down on the tray. "But... if you don't turn me in, and they find out, won't you be in trouble?"

"Aren't you sweet," Fumi said with a chuckle. "Don't you worry about me. You might have caused some fuss to begin with, but now I think they've given up on you. I heard that they considered just making a ransom request when you wouldn't wake up, but they abandoned that idea after learning you were no one important in the Uchiha clan. Alerting Konoha could cause more trouble than it's worth. They probably expect you to die quietly here. Well, I did too."

She laughed again, and Obito's face turned red. Even if it ended up saving his life, it still pissed him off a little.

"At any rate, I can just tell them that you ran off while my back was turned. They won't arrest a poor old woman for that."

"If you say so," Obito said doubtfully. "Then, when do you think I'll be able to go home? Wait—how long have I been here already?" It had been hard to mark the passage of time when he was trapped in Orochimaru's hideout all those days.

"Oh, you've been here for a week now. I'm not precisely sure when they found you, though. A couple of weeks, maybe? The only thing I'm sure of is that they must have found you very soon after you fell unconscious. The state you were in, you could not have survived long without medical attention."

Obito frowned. He could have easily been missing for a month already. Naruto had explained to him that they left their real bodies behind when they went to the future. He was lucky to be alive, but this was bad. He had to get home as soon as possible! The older Kakashi said that everything would start happening right after he became a jounin, but neglected to mention exactly when that would be.

"I need to get back and save her," Obito mumbled.

"Hm?"

"Ah—um, it's nothing!" he said, waving his hands quickly. "But I definitely need to get back home soon. My team probably thinks I'm dead by now."

Even worse, was it possible that his disappearance now might change something? He really hoped not. Things were going to be tough enough as it was. But as long as he could save Rin, it would all be okay.
"Hm, you're right. Well, I'd like to keep you until your burn heals completely, at least. Don't want it getting infected." Fumi stood heavily and picked up the tray to take it in the kitchen.

Obito lay back again. He tried to calculate how long it would take for him to reach home, but the Lightning Country was large. It could be anything from a few days, to over a week to travel back to Konoha. He made a mental note to ask Fumi where they were when she came back in the room. It would probably save time in the long run if he waited until he was healed… but it was so hard to think about waiting around here when anything could be happening back home. No. He would leave in a few days, max, regardless of what Fumi said. He couldn't risk the shinobi from Kumo coming back to check on him.

Obito grit his teeth as Fumi applied salve to the many burns tattooing his side. He hadn't been looking forward to the moment when his bandages would need to be changed, and now his apprehension was being completely justified.

"It was a lot worse than this before," Fumi said matter-of-factly when Obito let out a hiss in response to her touch. "Be grateful you were unconscious for all that."

"Yeah, no kidding—ugh!" Obito tensed up involuntarily at a particularly sore spot, right in the middle of the burn, but that part was quickly over. Fumi went on to cover it up in bandages again, using smooth, expert motions. When that was done, she turned aside to put away her supplies.

The mortar in Fumi's hand slipped out of her grasp, making a loud crash when it cracked against the stone floor. She and Obito both cried out when they felt a cold, piercing energy slice through the air.

But Obito was able to recognize it for what it was—a Killing Intent of terrifying strength.

They saw a bright flash of movement, and Fumi was pushed against the wall with her hands wrenched behind her back. Obito jumped down from the counter, his mouth gaped open.

"M-Minato-sensei! Stop!"

Narrowed blue eyes turned toward him, before Minato's harsh expression changed to one of confused shock.

"Obito?"

Minato took a quick, sweeping look over the entire room, then let Fumi go.

"I suddenly felt one of my Hiraishin seals. I thought someone had taken one of my kunai to lure me out here."

"One of your seals—" Obito craned his neck around to look over behind his shoulder. He turned to show Minato the seal stamped there, plain as day.

"What?" Minato came over to look at it, confusion even more evident in his face now. "I don't remember doing that, but there's no mistaking..."

"Ah, well, that's kind of a long story," Obito said, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. "Anyway, this is Fumi-obaachan, she saved me. She was going to let me go soon to try to find my way back."

"A-Ah! Is that so?" Minato turned back to the woman, taking on the same sheepish pose as Obito. "I'm very sorry. Thank you for taking care of my student."
Fumi braced herself against the wall, staring at Minato. "You... you're..." she blinked, and then looked very serious. "The both of you should leave as soon as possible."

"Ne, are you sure you'll be alright?" Obito said, walking around Minato to talk to her. "If they find out you helped me escape..."

"No, it isn't Fumi-san's fault that I found out where you were and stormed into her house to get you back. Right?" Minato winked and took out one of his kunai and put it down on the counter. "I'll leave this for you. They will probably want to destroy it, but you can make it seem as though I attacked here."

"But, isn't that bad, too?" Obito asked, raising his voice. "I mean, we're technically not fighting Kumo right now—"

"If they want to complain about it, they would have to admit to taking you in the first place. That would make them implicate themselves." Minato rested his hand on Obito's shoulder, above where the seal was. "Well then, we'll be leaving. Please forgive the rude intrusion."

They looked at him like they were looking at a ghost. In a way, that's what he felt like. He knew now what it felt like to bend the shape of time and reality. Knowing what waited for him in the very near future, Obito could feel that same sensation in the pit of his stomach as he limped toward his teammates, leaning on one crutch.

"O-Obito?"

"Obito!"

Rin ran toward him and threw her arms around him, laughing and crying at the same time. He winced in pain and she let go, apologizing immediately and covering her mouth in shock and horror as he lifted his shirt to show the mostly-healed burn. Kakashi stood a little further back, but his expression was different from usual. His coal eyes wide as he saw his teammate back from the dead, he looked a lot more like his older self.

Obito grinned and pretended the tears in his eyes came from the pain. But really, he was still remembering the temporary sensation of Rin's arms around him.

From now on, he would re-write reality.

"I'm so glad you're awake, Naruto."

The phrase, so quietly and sincerely spoken, surprised him into silence for a few seconds. Mainly because it was Sakura speaking—this time's Sakura, not the older one who worried and fussed over him. But that was not the only way she resembled her older self right now. It was also in her smile. It was the same strange, painful smile she wore when she visited him in the hospital in the future. Was it already the time when she started doing that?

"Of course! You should know that I won't go down that easily, Sakura-chan," Naruto said with a grin. "But thanks for visiting me when I was knocked out. I'm glad that someone was there when I woke up the first time, since it let everybody know that I could come back. Oh yeah, what happened that time, anyway?" he added curiously.

Sakura's smile got smaller, but it looked less forced. "Ahh, You really startled me then. Kakashi-sensei and Tsunade-sama thought you wouldn't be able to wake up until they caught whoever did
that to you and made them reverse their jutsu. Well, I guess there's a reason why they call you unpredictable!"

Naruto froze. Wait... did that mean... did she know already? He hadn't considered it much, but he was eventually going to have to deal with his friends learning about his Jinchuriki status again, right? Well... they seemed to be okay with it in the future, so maybe there was nothing to worry about.

Kakashi had been standing back near the door, but he came forward now.

"Yes, thank goodness. Well, we still don't know what caused it, but it is a relief to see that you were able to break out of it on your own."

Naruto frowned. "But, Kakashi-sensei—"

"I heard all about it from Tsunade-sama," Kakashi interrupted cheerfully.

"Oh." Did that mean they weren't telling anyone? Tsunade had said that they would be keeping it a secret for now, but Naruto didn't know that also meant Sakura and the rest of his former classmates.

It would be better to not have everyone fussing over him about the dangers of Akatsuki (he had plenty enough of that in the future). At the same time, it felt awkward to have the truth hidden like that.

Sakura pulled a chair over and sat down. "Naruto..."

"H-Hah?"

Sakura looked down in her lap. Her hands gripped each other tightly, and her shoulders just barely shook.

"I... I'm sorry. I couldn't stop him... I should have done something differently, I should have..." but she let that hang. Even she couldn't figure out what might have been better to do. "I knew that something was wrong, but I didn't do anything about it... and by the time I finally tried to do something, it was too late."

"What? No, it wasn't your fault, Sakura-chan!" Naruto said, putting as much emphasis into as he could. "I'm just glad you didn't get caught up with those Oto-nin! It would have happened either way, believe me. You know how that guy is when he wants to do something. You would've just gotten hurt, so..."

Sakura flinched visibly at his words, making Naruto flounder even more, trying to find the right thing to say.

"Listen, I know it looks pretty bad, but we can get him back. We can save him, Sakura-chan. I'm gonna need your help with it. So what we need to focus on right now is getting as strong as we can, as soon as we can. We'll take him back and kick Orochimaru's ass while we're at it."

"...How can you be so sure? How do you know?" Sakura said quietly.

"Because I—" Naruto stopped, mouth slightly open as he stared. How exactly was all that supposed to fit in with everything else? Was it really okay to let Sasuke end up the way he was in the future, caught between Orochimaru and the older Obito?

"Because I promise," he said firmly. Sakura looked up at him. "I promise, and I never go back on my
word. That's my ninja way!"

END

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to everyone that stuck with this story this far! You've all been so amazing, and I've learned so much while working on it.

The sequel, titled I Will Become the Wind, is currently in progress! When I have a posting schedule set for it, I will update this story with Chapter 0 of the sequel and an idea of when posting will happen.

Thanks again!

Update: Chapter 0 is now added here. If you're wondering, 'do I need to read this to understand the sequel?' the short answer is no. I knew people might be likely to skip over it, so there's nothing vital. But it does give extra pieces to help you figure out later puzzles.
The gas lantern fizzled to life, and Kabuto snuffed the match on the metal tray below it. He turned around to examine the overburdened bookshelves lining the study. Despite his many years working for Orochimaru, he had yet to enter this room.

Technically, he shouldn't be in here. The seal on the door was designed to respond only to Orochimaru. Kabuto had gotten around that with a minor bit of treachery: stealing some of Orochimaru's blood.

Desperate times, as they say.

He had no idea if anything useful would be among these dusty books and scrolls. But the team sent to escort Sasuke was very late. Too late for him to become the vessel for this iteration. They both knew it.

Still. The failure made Kabuto restless. It chafed at his perfectionist nature. So in order to stop himself from circling how over and over in his mind, he went exploring.

His hand paused over a thin volume that looked hand bound—some kind of research log or journal. He slipped it from the shelf and leafed through it slowly.

It seemed less like a scientific record, and more like a series of musings. Kabuto's interest waned quickly when he realized it was all theoretical.

Then the words 'Edo Tensei' caught his eye, and he quickly backtracked to the beginning of the entry.

*For all its mystery, the essence of living things can be understood as energy.*

*The only difference between a living soul and a dead one is how malleable they are. Dead souls can never change. Even if they are brought back into the living world, they must stay as they were at the moment of death. That is one of the few ways to defeat the Edo Tensei summoning technique.*

*On the other hand, no matter what happens to a living soul, it will keep going—growing, adapting—until the body dies. That tenacity is more powerful than anything the Edo Tensei can produce.*

*My existence, unbound by the limits of one physical form, has already proved that.*

*But there are even more possibilities, still untapped.*
"Well, now. Snooping around in sealed rooms while I am stuck in bed?"

Orochimaru leaned heavily on the door frame. His naturally pale face was clammy and taut with barely concealed pain. But he was smiling.

"No." Kabuto lowered the notebook and pushed the bridge of his glasses back. "I thought there might be something else to help improve your condition. That being said, you should rest some more. Sasuke-kun will arrive soon."

"For all the good it will do now." Orochimaru chuckled darkly. "You won't find anything like that in here. These projects are all failures. Or to look at it optimistically, problems that don't have solutions yet."

"What is this? The Nidaime's resurrection jutsu?" Kabuto said, turning back to the book with interest.

"It's a prototype based on the Nidaime's theories. The natural conclusion of his research into space-time and energy transference. Or—that is what I would say, if it were possible. There is no vessel that can hold living souls from another plane. Not even a perfect genetic replica of the target. It isn't the same as splitting one's energy horizontally within the same plane, as in the Kage Bunshin jutsu."

"...Ah." No longer interested, Kabuto put the book back on the shelf along with the others. "Orochimaru-sama, please go lay back down. I'll bring you your medicine."

A strange expression settled on Orochimaru's face. Physically, he still looked pale and worn, stretched to the limit of his current vessel. But the fatigue in his eyes was gone, and he looked far more intrigued than the current situation could explain.

"It's in the wrong place."

"Orochimaru-sama?"

"That book. It was not here. Did you move it to this room?"

Kabuto pushed up his glasses, looking harassed. "I assure you, I did not."

"...No. It would be the opposite, wouldn't it? Here isn't unusual. What is unusual is finding it somewhere else."

"Should I bring this along?" Kabuto reached back toward the shelf uncertainly. He had no idea what Orochimaru was getting at.

"No. Leave it there." The brief flicker of enthusiasm was gone, and Orochimaru turned to shuffle painfully back to his room.

Kabuto gave a last doubtful glance at the shelf, then extinguished the lamp.

Later, after Orochimaru found a new vessel and regained his strength, Kabuto asked if he wanted the book again. Orochimaru was too preoccupied with other things and ignored him.

He chalked the odd moment up to physical strain and exhaustion.

The day after Naruto woke in his own body and timeline, he was not allowed to have very many visitors, or even get out of bed. Only Sakura was there after he fell asleep again.

Naruto would be glad when his strength got back to normal. It was quiet and boring, having to stay...
in bed and see hardly anyone. He was grateful not to be entirely alone, but Sakura mostly just sat and read a book.

Naruto was surprised when Jiraiya came back to visit him that evening, after just that morning, when he had acted too busy to hang around.

"How is it going? I see Tsunade hasn't had to put the restraints on you yet!" Jiraiya's jovial voice came from the door, and Naruto and Sakura looked up at him. Sakura stood up from her chair.

"Not so loud, Jiraiya-sama," she said with the slightest tinge of disapproval. "We're supposed to maintain a calm environment."

Naruto gave Jiraiya a pleading look.

Jiraiya laughed. "I see. You get the second Tsunade instead. Well, I was going to sing, but I guess I'll spare you. Tada!" He revealed the hand he had held behind his back. In it was a small cardboard box, opened up to reveal a cake.

"Tsunade-sama said no solid foods yet," Sakura said; yet, there was an undeniable gleam in her eyes as she took the box and placed it on Naruto's bedside table.

"What's this for, Ero-sennin?" Naruto said, staring at the box.

"Hmm. I figured you might not know, since you have been out cold all this time. It was your birthday yesterday! Happy lucky thirteen, kid!"

"Ehhhhhh?" Naruto scooted as close to the edge of the bed as he could in order to examine his cake. It had completely slipped his mind. Did that mean he'd spent part of his birthday in the future? Or were the days completely different?

Jiraiya seemed to be thinking the same thing. "You came close to missing your own birthday. I tried to negotiate for getting you out for a little while, but it was a no go. You'll have to make do with this."

"Man, this is the worst," Naruto complained, but the grin gave away his insincerity. True, being stuck in the hospital was a letdown. But time was moving forward with him in it again.

"Sakura, why don't you go ask Tsunade if we can let Naruto have some of this cake?" Jiraiya said, waving a cake server he produced out of nowhere. "I don't think my puppy-dog look would be as effective as yours. I've overused it."

"Hmmm, I can try." Sakura crossed her arms behind her back and rocked on her heels. "If not, it'll just have to be confiscated."

"Sakura-chan…"

Sakura gave an impish grin and walked to the door. "I'll be right back!"

Naruto muttered something incoherent, and Jiraiya put the cake server down next to the box. Then he walked around and sat down in the vacant chair.

"You should take the time to recover well, because we'll be leaving pretty quickly after that. I have things to do in the meantime, but I'll be keeping in touch."

Naruto looked up. This was the news he most wanted to hear. "We're gonna be training, right? What
sort of things are we going to do?"

"I was originally thinking we could work on you harnessing the Kyuubi's energy." Jiraiya leaned back in his chair, scratching his chin. "But from what you told me about the seal, it sounds like we need to be especially careful there. It's still an option. The main thing, though, is to start off working with your strengths. You said you can use Sage Mode now?"

"Yeah! I haven't tried it with my real body, though."

"In that case, don't try to do it until you've regained some of your physical strength. Physical energy is an important part of the balance. While you're stuck here, you can practice meditating. But don't try to push yourself into the Mode."

"Okay," Naruto said, disappointed.

"We'll see how far we can stretch your abilities, then move to finding unique ways you can incorporate it into your style. I have no doubt you'll discover a few."

"My older self could use bunshin to gather energy for him." Naruto leaned forward excitedly. "I want to learn how to do that!"

Jiraiya gave an understanding hum. "That sounds good. But you can't limit yourself to what that other you came up with. Aim to do even better than him, okay? Use your recovery time to think up some good ideas."

"Osu!"

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*Third Shinobi World War*

"Detecting enemies is a vital skill for any shinobi," Namikaze Minato began to the Academy students sitting around him.

Their eager faces were rapt with attention on Konoha's great hero. Most of them had started attending Academy after the war started, so they rarely got a chance to see the Yellow Flash in person.

"Fortunately, our brains are good at this even before we receive shinobi training. Have you ever been out at night and mistook a pole or trash can as a person standing there? The potential for danger makes it noticeable to us. On the other hand, you've probably never seen a person and thought they were a trash can."

The students giggled. Obito turned his head to stare pointedly at Kakashi. The latter gave a rude misuse of his hand-signing talents in response.

Annoying.

"But that is also why shinobi spend so much time developing techniques to twist enemies' perceptions. The mind is quick to accept what it sees as reality. That's why we have to be careful. Always assume that your senses might be lying to you."

Minato's clear blue eyes slid toward his team in the back, resting on them for the barest second before returning to the children. Rin leaned forward and raised a brow at Obito, who immediately dropped his scowl and looked down at the ground.
It was just another day in Team Minato. Technically, they were on leave after their latest mission—a mission Obito hadn't been part of, because he was too busy being dead. But they were at the Academy today filling in for the Sandaime, who was supposed to be giving the kids his twice-yearly inspirational pep talk. Something important had come up suddenly, leaving Minato to fill in.

That sort of thing was happening a lot lately. But it wasn't until the past few days that Obito understood why. Minato himself seemed oblivious to it, always agreeing dutifully like the loyal subject he was.

"I worry for the village, if those are supposed to be our next round of genin," Kakashi said after they were finally free for the day. He was walking with his arms crossed behind his head.

Obito wanted to kick him. Just in general, really.

"No one starts out knowing everything. That's what the Academy is for," Rin said. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and flashed a tolerant smile at Obito. It made his heart skip a beat. "You've gotten better at throwing skills. Try not to train on your own too much while you're still healing."

"I'm—I'm healed! I don't want to slow us down in our next mission."

"You all did a good job today," Minato said. "We'll still be on our break tomorrow, but I'd like us to run some team drills in the morning to make sure we're all in sync. Until then, be sure to take a rest."

They all split off their separate ways. But Minato fell into step beside Obito.

"I'm going back this way, too. I was thinking about having lunch at this new ramen place called Ichiraku's. Have you been there yet?" His grin was like a quieter version of Naruto's.

"I was just going to go home. I'm kind of tired," Obito invented.

For now, he was keeping the time travel and his new skills a secret. So he had to use every available moment by himself to practice. Tonight he was going to try using kamui for the first time since he got back.


Obito could have smacked himself in the forehead. Of course Minato was worried about him. He and everyone else thought that Obito had spent the past few weeks as a captive in enemy territory. It was true, yet very far from the truth.

"Actually, wait," he said. Minato turned back to him. "I'll go with you. I don't have anything good at home, anyway."

Minato visibly relaxed. For a high-level jounin, he could be easy to read sometimes. Obito didn't like having to deceive him, even for a little while. He planned to tell the whole story once he was sure it wouldn't change the timeline too much.

"You've really been working hard, even on days like today," Minato said as they walked. "You paid attention better than any of the students did."

"Yeah. I realized I need to try harder if I want to be Hokage someday."

"I see." Minato smiled.

Obito waited until the village was dark and quiet before he made his move. If he slipped into the
kamui dimension and got stuck, like the very first time, at least he'd have enough time to recover before someone came looking for him.

He held his hands out in front of him. Unnecessary, but it helped him visualize what he was going for. Stepping through the barrier between dimensions could be easy or difficult, soft or unyielding. All it required was the right *push*.

Obito concentrated, moving his hands apart, pushing through as if he was simply stepping through a curtain.

There was no strain. Just a noticeable shift in the light and the feeling of the air. He opened his eyes.

"Yes!"

The kamui dimension spread out in every direction, stretching so far it disappeared into a mysterious darkness.

Elation pulsed through his veins. Through his *human* veins. It still worked. His greatest weapon made it back home with him.

Grinning around at nothing, Obito ran and clambered up the highest block close to him. His mind was already buzzing with the different ways he would be able to use this. Training in secret would be a lot easier. He could keep extra weapons and supplies without even needing to carry storage scrolls. And, most importantly, it was the perfect place to flee in case of danger.

An irregularity in the angular landscape caught Obito's eye. From his vantage point, it looked like a strange black splotch on the uniform gray surface of one of the blocks.

He jumped down and walked over to it carefully, excitement giving way to caution.

It didn't take long to see that the black smudge wasn't the only thing. A thin, freestanding wall stood on the block, half crumbled. On the other side of it was a hole. There were smaller black smudges everywhere.

Obito crouched down in front of the large black mark, feeling his breath go shallow. He put his hand down on the cold stone, one finger drawing a line through the soot.

This was, without a doubt, the same place his older self and the older Kakashi had fought.

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Greets :D*

The sequel to TWTBW will be starting soon (June 1, 2017). You can view the up-to-date posting schedule on my profile. I've made the series listing here already, so you can add it to your bookmarks!

A few more details about the sequel for those who want to know: (no hard spoilers, but skip if you want to go in knowing nothing)
The story starts a little over a month after the end of TWTBW. So it's pre-Shippuden. I felt starting the story after the canon time skip would weaken the 'going back to the past' element of it, which is the whole point. And I've enjoyed it much more this way.

The main plot is Naruto's, and almost everything is from his POV. The different dimensions will affect each other, though how that works is something you'll have to wait to see. However, no new timelines will be introduced, to keep confusion down. (I hope).

Naruto's first goal after coming home is to retrieve Sasuke, since he thinks his new Sage abilities will give him the edge needed to make it work. But his disappearance hasn't gone unnoticed by the local Orochimaru, the upper ranks of Akatsuki, or Konoha's elite. Each side has their own reasons for trying to figure out the mystery of the Time-Spanning Incarnation jutsu, and each step they take challenges Naruto's goals more.

I've had a ton of fun writing it so far, and I hope it will be fun for you all too. I can't wait to start. :D

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