In Good Company
by weialala

Summary

This will sound a little ridiculous, no matter how Sasuke phrases it. I see dead people is embarrassingly tacky, and I'm half-spirit seems like something Sakura might say when she's stoned sky high. So he settles for a shrug.

Notes

This is a story about Uchiha Sasuke. I wrote this story to reimagine the major events of Naruto through Sasuke's viewpoint, but this an AU. Although this story builds on Kishimoto's world. Finally, please take note of the tags on this story. There are mature themes, war, violence, explicit language, and references to depression and suicidality. Also: Sasuke is a teenage boy.

Hazel is the editor; this series wouldn't exist without her. I have also tagged amazing artwork from incredibly talented readers along the way—haplessmedstudent (1, 2), Srdid (1, 2, 3), and RazzletheDazzle. I had a blast writing and sharing this story with all y'all. As always, let me know what you think.
Sasuke is drinking the yolk of his second egg—raw, because Sasuke won't admit it, but he really doesn't know how else to eat them, his mother never got around to teaching him those things—when he hears the gagging.

He puts the glass down with a decisive thunk and cracks his third egg against the edge of the mug. Briefly, momentarily, his Sharingan flares into life. It's his imagination, he knows, because for the past three hours he has tolerated Naruto and Sakura's incessant prattle, and he can still hear the echo of their conversation ringing in his ears (Maybe you shouldn't cut your hair, Naruto, Sakura pointed out, You might look good with a short ponytail. Really, Sakura? Because Iruka-sensei grew out his hair when he was young, and I wanted to—and where is Kakashi-sensei? He's so late...)

Sasuke rubs the bridge of his nose, trying not to think too much about the headache that's starting: a familiar thud-thud-thud in his ears. He had figured, for the first few days at least, that Sakura and Naruto becoming friends would be a good thing. But now they're eating his ears off, not giving him even the few, tense moments of silence that used to define their relationship. Now...

Now, he has a day off, courtesy of Hatake Kakashi—who never showed up, Sasuke thinks with a scowl—so he's left with nothing to do. He could have trained with Naruto, but that would also involve paying for the inordinate amount of ramen Naruto would demand afterwards for lunch.

But then again—

Sasuke accidentally breaks an egg in his anger at the memory of it.

Then again, Naruto wasn't too concerned when Sasuke said no to lunch plans, because..."Neji," the blond had mumbled under his breath, and smiled. And isn't that just precious. Naruto and Hyuga goddamn Neji.

"Spec-fucking-tacular," Sasuke grumbles and flicks off shards of eggshell into the sink. He licks at the drops of yolk on his fingers and hears it again, the muffled gagging. He glances over his shoulder at the sound, and frowns when he catches a glimpse of his living room, overflowing with scrolls, weapons, maps, and clothes. And Ichiraku ramen take-out boxes.

He returns to the eggs. It's not as if he wants to eat ramen with the moron.

And besides, Sasuke repeats to himself decisively as he heads towards his bathroom, there's laundry to do. An entire pile of it, occupying a corner of his room, and even Naruto, the observational king that he is, has noticed that Sasuke has worn the same shirt for the past three days. He glances briefly at the offending KONOHA SUMMER FESTIVAL 2002 shirt, speckled with mud now, and looking so old and tattered that Sakura said it was a crime to even own it, but it can't be that bad, probably could get another evening out of it...

Sasuke nudges the door to his bathroom open with his foot, and places the cup of egg yolk in the sink. The bathroom is so small it doesn't even have a counter, only a cabinet behind the mirror. He keeps his eyes on the yolk as he unzips and stands in front of the toilet bowl. Eating the egg raw smells a little strange, sure, but he needs his protein, and he really doesn't want to waste time making something out of an egg. His mother used to do that for him more than a decade ago...

Growling under his breath—goddamn son of a bitch Itachi took even the joy of eggs out of his miserable fucking existence—Sasuke pushes down the flush with his foot and zips up before
snatching the cup from the sink again.

He tips the cup to swallow a mouthful of yolk, determined now. Nap. That's the game plan for the
day, he thinks as he finishes off his breakfast. Wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand, he
steps into his only slightly less tiny bedroom, thinking that maybe takeout tonight won't be so bad—

"Doesn't this kid have any hygiene?"

"Punk didn't even wash his hands."

And there is no possible way that Sasuke didn't hear that, because it's right in front of him. He stops
instinctively to avoid crashing into the person who should be in front of him—but isn't, he panics—and
his foot tangles in a stray shirt on the floor. "Fuck—" He's falling face-forward even before he
can finish the word, dredges of egg yolk flying out of the cup to land on the carpet, clothes, and on
the bed sheets. He's in a defensive stance with a kunai held up a second later, crouching low to the
ground. Sasuke breathes through his nose slow, deep, and easy, because there are people here, and
he can't see them.

_Steady, Uchiha_, he tells himself and grips the kunai tighter, knuckles white and bones nearly
creaking from the pressure of it. He scans the room and his eyes land on the yellow stain of egg yolk
in front of him, accusing, proof of the voices he's heard. Because no matter how cluttered his home
gets, Sasuke never trips. He hears laughter, and then:

"That's right, kid. Fear the wayward yolk."

"What is he defending against?"

"Do you see anything?"

"No…Odd."

Silence again. Sasuke spins around, heart racing. He _heard_ that. There are voices, three—four
distinct voices. And not his neighbors' either. Couldn't be his neighbors, because the voices are right
there—one coming from behind him, one from next to him, one ahead of him, and another still, from
the door. He can't smell anything other than the usual filth of his apartment, can't hear anything aside
from the noises outside and his neighbor upstairs. And he can't feel any chakra besides the ones he
always keeps tabs on: Naruto, a bright, fierce flare somewhere in the center of town; Sakura, steady
and strong from outside the village; and Kakashi, sinewy and lightning quick in the Hokage Tower.
Nothing else. Sasuke's legs are starting to cramp with all the adrenaline now, and he shifts his
position a little, breath quickening.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Beats me."

"Where are you?" Sasuke hisses and hates himself for it. _Never call out an enemy_, Kakashi's voice
whispers in the back of his mind, just as Sasuke inches towards his living room where his weapons
are scattered. _Never reveal your weakness_. But he can't see, _he can't see anything_. "Show
yourselves."

"Okay. He's lost it." It's the voice from right next to him.

"Where are you?" Sasuke snarls, and it takes only one hundredth of a second for his eyes to bleed
into Sharingan, such a knee-jerk reaction that he doesn't even notice it until his senses become
painfully heightened, vision tinged red at the edges, the headache a loud thunder in his ears now.
And then he sees them, lounging casually at different spots in his room: One sitting on his bed, leaning forward to look at him, dark-black hair spilling over his shoulders. Another standing next to him, towering almost. Sasuke looks up from his crouch, sees an amused smirk and white eyebrows raised high. A third—is that Naruto? No, can't be—sitting at his desk, curiously peering over the scrolls laid out there. And a fourth, "Sarutobi-sensei," Sasuke mumbles and instinctively abandons his defensive crouch, dropping to one knee, head bowed respectfully. "Hokage-sama." And he stays like that for a split second before it hits him, the utter absurdity of that, so he pushes himself to his feet again. "What?"

"Ah," Sarutobi mutters, looking a little surprised. The expression vanishes quickly. "Sasuke, you can see me."

It talked, Sasuke thinks and reflexively takes a step back, then another, foot sliding on egg yolk on the floor. Sarutobi's eyes crinkle into a smile—he's dead, he shouldn't be here—and he gestures at the people around the room. "Forgive us for dropping in like this unannounced, but we were taking a stroll through Konoha, and I wanted to introduce my friends here—"

The doorbell cuts him off, shrill and insistent in the apartment, and Sarutobi falls silent. Sasuke flinches at the sound, but keeps his eyes trained on Sarutobi (dead, dead, dead, dead). There's a split second, and then loud banging. "Sasuke! Open up, or I'll kick the door down!"

Naruto.

"Visitor," says the man with white hair and jerks a thumb over his shoulder towards the door. "Doesn't sound too happy."

"I mean it, Sasuke! You better open this door, or so help me God—" Sasuke inches towards the door. This is a trap, an illusion. Itachi, a voice whispers in his mind. Which means Naruto is in danger, so he has to get Naruto out of here, because the idiot will kick the door down if Sasuke doesn't open it. "—you're in that dump of yours because—"

Itachi is here, and how did he manage to penetrate Konoha so easily? How had Sasuke walked into the illusion so blindly, and what kind of illusion was this anyways? Sasuke edges out of the bedroom, eyes still trained on Sarutobi (dead, dead, dead, dead). He takes a few short steps across the living room and fumbles behind him for the doorknob, hands sweating, straining with the effort to keep from visibly shaking. "—Sasuke, you jerk, stop ignoring me—"

Sasuke opens the door just a fraction. Not even bothering to turn around, he hisses, "Not now, dead last. Go away."

"What the hell? You're blowing me off for porn?"

"Idiot, I mean it. Leave, go get the Hokage." He's about to close the door when Naruto shoves it back up against him. The door hits Sasuke square in the back, knocking the breath out of him. And Naruto is inside now, hair windswept with wisps of straw-blonde strands floating around his face, within reach of any possible attack trajectory coming from the bedroom. Sasuke ignores Naruto's angry, "What is your problem?" in favor of pushing the blond back up against the door, using his body to protect him. It must be instinct—all those years of saving the idiot's ass—because Sasuke bites down the reflexive need to cover his own ass and leaves himself so terribly, horribly open to attack as he stares down the intruders. "Sasuke, what the hell are you—"

"Shut up, you fucking moron." Sasuke reaches behind him, feeling for the kunai holster on Naruto's thigh, still watching the people peering at them curiously from his bedroom door.
"Stop groping me, you pervert!" Naruto slaps Sasuke's hand away from his body and knees Sasuke in the small of his back. But still Sasuke holds his ground—*protect him, protect him, protect him*—and his Sharingan swirls so fast he can feel the back of his eyes tingling with it.

Naruto is in line of fire from the intruders, and Sasuke needs to protect him. One, two, three, four quick hand seals, a bite to his finger, blood drawn and smeared into a semicircle, and there's a protective wall around Naruto. There's 2.35 feet from the front door to Sasuke's weapons scattered on the coffee table. Jump, land, crouch, and he has his sword drawn in one hand, kunai holster in the other. Judging by the chakra signatures of these people, they're powerful. He stands no chance against them. "Naruto," Sasuke says slowly. "Leave. Get the Hokage—"

"Naruto," one of the men breathes out and pushes out into the living room. He hesitates for a split second, and then takes a shaky step towards Naruto. And the barrier around Naruto isn't strong enough, will never be strong enough against a man whose chakra is making Sasuke's hair stand on edge.

"Stay away from him," he hisses, drawing himself up as tall as he can without abandoning his stance. The man looks surprised for a moment and stops.

"Excuse me?" the man asks, sounding amused, as if he's humoring Sasuke.

"One step closer to him, an *inch*, and I'll kill you," Sasuke snarls, and is surprised to hear the honesty in his own words. His blood is pounding, thrumming through his veins in synch with the chant in his mind—*protect him, protect him, get him away*—

"What the *hell*?" Naruto takes two short, easy steps around Sasuke, past the barrier, and begins to pick his way towards the kitchen, muttering under his breath about pigs, Uchiha freaking Sasuke can't even clean up after himself, and is *stoned*, and reading porn to top it all off—

Sasuke watches, eyes widening in horror, because his apartment is so small, and Naruto is practically walking into the enemy's arms at this point. "Naruto, don't—" And Naruto walks *right through* the man, breezing past him without even a glance, visibly shuddering as he does. The man's body flickers once before becoming solid again. He looks down at himself for a split second, glances briefly at Sasuke with narrowed eyes before turning to follow Naruto into the kitchen. Sasuke lunges, killer's instinct so honed in him now that it's one, two, three kunais whistling towards the man's vital spots, the sword already drawn back to go right through his jugular, razor-sharp strings already between his fingers, lassoing around the man's torso and pulled back so roughly that it's sure to cut his body in half—

The kunais land with dull thuds to the ground, lodging themselves into the hardwood floor. His sword swings through the air, nearly toppling him from the unexpected lack of resistance—he'd expected a head to roll with the amount of power he put behind that swing—and his strings land pathetically by his feet, limp and not a trace of blood on them.

The man pauses in his trek towards the kitchen and turns to stare at Sasuke, an eyebrow raised. "That's enough." He tugs on the white robes hanging on his frame, and rolls his shoulders a little. "Stop interfering."

Sasuke's palm starts pulsing with chakra—he has to kill him fast, quick, efficient, and what better way than this? He'll vaporize the man's heart for trying to get near Naruto—

"Enough, boy."

But it's already done, and the next instant the apartment is filled with the noise of thousands and
thousands of birds chirping, his veins throbbing with the amount of energy he's putting behind this attack. Sasuke focuses some of the chakra towards his eyes, sharpening the Sharingan even more: 1.2 steps to the right, and the man can escape the attack, but Sasuke will be prepared with a kunai; 0.34 steps to the left, and he can attack Sasuke at his weak spot, but Sasuke will take that hit and slam his fist through the enemy's heart anyway.

*This is an assassin's attack, Kakashi told him once. Use it when you want to kill.*

In the short sixteen years of his life, Sasuke has already used it effectively four times. This is the fifth—and the ball of chakra keeps growing, keeps sparkling and crackling with energy. He didn't even *know* he could make it so powerful—and Sasuke will be *damned* if he misses this time.

The man's eyes narrow slightly when Sasuke nearly disappears in a lunge towards him, pushing himself forward with chakra, eyes swirling an angry red. "I said stay *away* from him."

From the kitchen, Naruto yells, "Sasuke, you freak, what the hell are you *doing*—"

There's a soft, cold pressure on the back of his neck, at the knob of his spine, and suddenly, the chakra in his hand frizzles and falls silent, sending Sasuke sprawling into the ground, head making painful contact with the hardwood floor.

His vision fades into black just as he hears Naruto's surprised, "Sasuke!"

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Kakashi is there when he wakes up.

"Naruto," Sasuke gasps and pushes himself up into a sitting position, eyes wild. "Where's Naruto? Is he—"

And as if on cue, the door bursts open and the blond darts in. He's dressed in dark jeans and a loose-fitting black shirt, the sleeves of which are bunched up around his elbows. "You moron! Couldn't you have waited for me before you woke up? But no! You live in a dump, and I had to take out your trash and—"

"You took out the trash?"

"And did your laundry, the dishes, organized your scrolls in alphabetical order..." a voice pipes in. "The kid got on all fours and cleaned the whole damn apartment."

"It must be a nervous habit," someone else interjects politely.

Naruto's eyes are almost an icy blue in his worry, and he frets his hands about, making odd gestures. "I didn't mean to—"

"You didn't do anything, Naruto," Kakashi cuts in softly. He puts a hand on Naruto's shoulder and edges him out towards the door. "Go tell the Hokage that there's nothing to worry about."

Naruto frowns and pushes Kakashi aside to walk back to Sasuke. "Are you sick? Was it the cursed seal?" Sasuke's hand comes up instinctively to cover the tattoo on his neck, and he digs his nails in, trying not to wince at the expression on Naruto's face.

"Cursed seal? What cursed seal?" a voice questions, and Sasuke swivels his head to his left where it came from.

"Those men," Sasuke breathes out. Doesn't Naruto remember?
"There were no men, Sasuke," Naruto says apologetically and waits for Sasuke's reaction with fearful eyes. There were no men, Sasuke repeats to himself and says it again just to be sure. But there's no time to feel surprised, much less look it, because the expression on Naruto's face—is that pity?—makes Sasuke smooth his features down.

He has enough problems up in his head. Hearing voices and seeing things would be the least of them. "Of course."

"Oh, we were there all right," a taunting voice says.

"You saw us, boy."

"Almost tried to kill me—"

"You're already dead, Namikaze—"

"Perhaps we should stop," comes Sarutobi's voice. "He can hear us."

Sasuke swallows down on the irrational fear crawling up his spine. "Naruto," Kakashi speaks again, patient. "That was an order. The Hokage, now, please."

The expression on Naruto's face makes even Kakashi's eyes soften, but the blond gets up anyway. He looks down at Sasuke, face going through so many different emotions it's hard for Sasuke to even keep up. They stare at each other for a few moments before Naruto raises his hand and slaps Sasuke upside the head. Hard. "What the—"

"Pull something like that on me again, Sasuke," Naruto seethes, voice low, "And I'll twist your balls off."

And then he's gone in a flash of blue, black, and gold. Sasuke raises a hand to rub gingerly at his head when he sees the bandages around his arm. The one he used for the Chidori. The swathes are thick, coming down from his elbow and wrapping around each of his fingers. Kakashi waits until he hears the loud bang of the front door before turning to look at Sasuke. "Well," he says politely, and Sasuke has been with Kakashi enough years to know exactly what that tone means. The last time Sasuke abused the Chidori—an unnecessary kill, one just for his ego, one that had put Sakura in danger—Kakashi had used the same voice to invite Sasuke to a training session. Sasuke had spent three days out cold in the hospital after that.

Kakashi watches as Sasuke plucks at the bandages, trying to reveal the damage he's done. The swathes fall gently from his hand and he winces at what he sees. There are angry, red track marks going all the way up his elbow, and his palm is actually scarred with deep, black lines.

"You blew the chakra pathways to your last two fingers because they couldn't take the load," Kakashi explains and leans against the reading table—which is spotless, Sasuke notices, and can't help but be impressed at Naruto's efficiency. "Your thumb, index and middle fingers are intact, so you'll be able to perform jutsus. Thanks to Sakura."

Sasuke flexes his fingers and nearly doubles over with the pain that shoots up his arm. He takes a few deep breaths until the fog clears from his vision. "Why are you here?"

"The entire village felt what you pulled, Uchiha" Kakashi says, amiable still. He pauses for a second before saying, still so very polite it makes Sasuke's skin tingle in anticipation, "You should rest."

Kakashi pushes himself off the desk to walk out of the bedroom. Sasuke watches him with narrowed eyes. There has to be more, should be more—At the door, Kakashi turns, looking as if he just
remembered something trivial. "Oh, and Sasuke, the Hokage recently told me that the well on Monument Hill is empty. Refill it with water from the lake by tomorrow evening."

Sasuke can't help himself. "How?" he snaps, and winces the instant he says it.

Even with the mask, Sasuke can imagine Kakashi's smile. "A bucket, of course."

The well on Monument Hill is not a well. It is a decorative man-made pond, installed towards the end of the Third Hokage's reign in honor of the fallen warriors of the Great War.

Sasuke dumps out the water of the twenty-third bucket and stares at the small puddle by his feet. His left arm is aching, hanging limply by his side and heavy with bandages. His right palm has a small groove where the bucket's handle has dug into his skin. The lake, thankfully, is only two hundred feet away from the foot of the hill.

*Kanaye*, he calls loudly in his mind. There is a stir of chakra, but the snake does not appear. "Son of a bitch," Sasuke growls under his breath. He raises his arms up in front of him and does a few quick seals, wincing when chakra runs down the overtaxed pathways of his left arm. There's a split second, and then a snake is rising to meet his gaze in front of him.

It's a black mamba, so gray and sleek it almost blends into the coming dawn. "Well, I better get rats out of this," Kanaye mumbles and slides up Sasuke's extended arm, giving him a quick bite on the back of his hand before wrapping lazily around his neck. Sasuke sucks at the puncture wound, scowling when he tastes something sweet.

"Stop biting me with poison," Sasuke hisses in snake tongue and scratches absentmindedly at Kanaye's underbelly.

"I'm hoping you'll die from it one of these days." Kanaye swivels his head around to take stock of his surroundings. "What? No battle?"

"No, really. You think?"

Kanaye's head snaps back, and his teeth sink into Sasuke's carotid. "Lots of poison in that bite," Kanaye mutters darkly. "What is it?"

"Help me heal," Sasuke mumbles, embarrassed at the request. But these are his snakes, and they've seen him in worse condition—after Orochimaru tortured him the first time, and when he limped back to Konoha, dragging Orochimaru's body behind him—so he swallows his pride and starts to undo the bandages. Kanaye slides onto his left arm and coils lightly around the wound, his tongue flickering out to taste the scars on Sasuke's palm. He's nearly four feet long, still a teenager in snake years, but when he wraps around Sasuke's arm, he covers nearly every inch of skin.

"Well," Kanaye mutters, and falls silent. Sasuke feels the careful, contemplative prod of snake chakra, cool and soothing against the burn under his skin.

Three hours later—when Sasuke is carrying his fifty-third bucket of water up the hill—Kanaye says, "I'm bored," and tightens his coil around Sasuke's arm.

"If you squeeze me any more I'm going to gouge your testes off with a kunai," Sasuke snaps in human tongue—because he doesn't know how to say 'testes' in snake yet.

Kanaye and all the other snakes occupy a place in Sasuke's mind where they have access to his thoughts. So it's no surprise when Kanaye says in human tongue, sounding as amused as a snake can
sound: "Testes, noun, part of the male reproductive system. Repeat after me." He pauses for a second to make sure he has Sasuke's attention before hissing out a long, vulgar sounding word.

It doesn't sound anything like testes. "Kunai," Sasuke mutters, still in human tongue, feeling his lips twitch, "Meet Kanaye's balls."

"Testes," Kanaye repeats, and hisses the word again, which is now longer and more vulgar than before. Sasuke ignores him, but when he goes downhill to refill the bucket, he makes sure to dump his left arm—and Kanaye—into the lake.

Kanaye bites him.

When he wakes up, Kanaye is nowhere in sight. His left arm is pounding, his legs are still cramped from the punishment of the day before, and the clock reads 10:07, which means he's late for training. Again.

Sasuke trudges into the bathroom and manages to get ready in ten minutes. When he opens the closet to pull out fresh clothes, he sees that the mess inside is completely gone and replaced with rows of neatly hung up pants, and shirts folded into perfect squares in perfect towers. "OCD, much, dead last?" Sasuke mutters under his breath, and pulls out a pair of pants and an old shirt that he may or may not have used to clean the kitchen counter with.

He doesn't have time to shave, so he scrubs angrily at stubble before strapping on his kunai holster. He knows that somewhere in the apartment, Kanaye is lounging in a tight curl. It must be the snakes, Sasuke thinks. He's starting to become like them—languid, lazy, and entirely uninterested in doing anything with the twenty-four hours in a day.

Or maybe it's Kakashi's influence.

Kanaye, he calls out with his mind and doesn't hear anything. So he tries again, this time in snake tongue. "Kanaye."

"Here," Kanaye hisses back, and in the next instant he's crawling up to curl around Sasuke's injury again.

"I'm late," Sasuke mutters. "You should have woken me up."

"I was asleep too," Kanaye snaps and settles comfortably against Sasuke's skin. The healing begins again: soft, feather-light touches that makes his skin itch. "Keep me today too. I'll heal you."

"I thought you'd be tired," Sasuke says, and closes the door to the apartment behind him. The snake healed him all day long yesterday, and even through the night. He's halfway down the stairs when he realizes that maybe—just maybe—a few protective seals around his door won't be such a bad idea today. He walks back up to his apartment door to make the necessary hand seals.

"Don't underestimate me." Kanaye pauses to watch Sasuke's seals. "You're getting paranoid."

"Let's not talk about that," Sasuke mumbles under his breath as he finishes the trap.

On his arm, Kanaye yawns widely, revealing two razor-sharp teeth. His tongue flickers out once, and then twice more before he asks, "You're meeting the Dog-Master today?"

Dog-Master in snake tongue means Kakashi. Sasuke's snakes have their own names for everyone in his life: Fox-Child for Naruto, Time-Witch for the Hokage, and Plum-Wine for Sakura. They haven't
told Sasuke what they call him.

"As always," Sasuke mutters, and tries not to think about the fact that Shikamaru's team has already started independent missions. Because, Shikamaru has actually passed the chuunin exams—and Sasuke hasn't. Sasuke fingers the cursed seal on his neck automatically, scratching at it until the skin starts to tingle with feeling again.

"Fudo says that it's good that you still have a master." Kanaye shifts slowly on his arm, getting more comfortable, and falls silent again to heal. By the time Sasuke reaches the bridge it's already 10:35, and Sakura has a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"One, you're late," she snarls when Sasuke ambles up to them. "Two, what were you thinking with that stupid, stupid, stupid move the other day?"

Naruto joins in. "And he calls me a moron!"

"I can't believe you, Sasuke—"

"And I don't even get a 'thank you' for cleaning up his shit!"

"You cleaned up his apartment, Naruto? Oh, thank God, he lives like a pig."

Naruto's angry blue gaze narrows and he points an accusing finger at Sasuke. "And look at what he's wearing today! I did your laundry, you ingratitude!"

Sasuke wants to point out that Naruto is a moron, that he doesn't live like a pig, thank you very much—and that his apartment is still clean except for a few dishes rotting in his sink. Also, since this isn't the KONOHA FESTIVAL 2002 shirt, could they please stop complaining? But just as he's about to, Kakashi appears with a soft pop.

Immediately, Naruto and Sakura abandon their tirade against Sasuke and turns on Kakashi. "You're late!"

"By three hours!"

"Once, can't you be on time just once?"

Kakashi clears his throat. "There," he says, pausing for dramatic effect—or to actually come up with a decent excuse. Sasuke isn't sure which—"Was a toxic spill in the south end of the forest."

Sakura throws up her hands with a frustrated growl and turns to Naruto for backup. They console each other in their misery, shaking their heads and whispering some sort of archaic chant that Sasuke figures will probably deliver Kakashi's—and Sasuke's—soul to Hell for all eternity.

Kakashi smiles pleasantly at Naruto and Sakura before turning to look at Sasuke, taking in the snake on his arm and his bedraggled appearance. There's a split second, and then Kakashi's hand is on the back of Sasuke's neck, gripping hard and pushing him towards the far end of the bridge. Sasuke matches his pace with Kakashi's and tries not to stumble when Kakashi gives him a particularly rough shove before letting go. Sasuke is almost Kakashi's height now—nearly 6'2"—and broader in the shoulders, but that doesn't mean the jounin is any less intimidating. "You were late to practice again today, Sasuke," Kakashi says.

Sasuke scoffs and turns his head away from Kakashi's lazy gaze. Naruto and Sakura are talking to each other on the opposite end of the bridge. Sakura is gesturing wildly and Naruto is nodding his head in understanding. On his arm, he feels Kanaye shift languidly.
"Kakashi," says a breathless voice.

"Ah, I told you, didn't I, Namikaze? He was an ANBU for quite some time, but he quit a few years ago. He is back to being a jounin, now. One of our best," Sarutobi says.

There's silence, and then, sounding so fiercely proud, "Naturally. He is my student."

Sasuke is frozen, listening to the side conversation carried on by the voices in his mind—and it must take place inside his head because Kakashi clearly can't hear them. Kakashi doesn't ever talk about his teacher, his previous team, or about anything from his time pre-Team 7. But this Namikaze in his mind, though, thinks that he was Kakashi's teacher. So either Sasuke has a really creative imagination, or...

"Well?" Kakashi interrupts, a little sharper.

_Dog-Master is angry, perhaps you should retreat and take cover._

_He's not going to retreat. He was late, too_, Sasuke thinks, and winces at how much like a whine that sounded. Kanaye doesn't say anything else. "I slept in. The alarm clock didn't go off."

"Oh?" Kakashi hm-s under his breath. "And as far as your snake is concerned?"

Kanaye lifts his head. _Tell the Dog-Master my name._ "Kanaye," Sasuke translates.

"Kanaye," Kakashi corrects, expression unchanging. "Leave Sasuke for the day, please."

"But he's—"

"Healing you, I see that," Kakashi interrupts and looks down at the snake again. "Leave, please."

If Kanaye wants to, he can kill Kakashi with his poison in under a minute. But he, and the other snakes, respect Kakashi for some unknown reason, so Kanaye nods once before looking pointedly at Sasuke, and Sasuke grudgingly lets him disappear in a small puff of white cloud. He hides a wince when the pain returns to him as sharp, silver-quick streams up his arm. If Kakashi notices Sasuke's discomfort, he doesn't mention it, just looks pointedly at Naruto and Sakura.

With a scowl, Sasuke turns on his heels, about to join the other two when Kakashi adds pleasantly, "Oh, and Sasuke? You can join Lee in his fifty laps around the village today."

In his mind, he hears a voice say—as if the person is standing right next to him—"Dear lord, Kakashi, you've grown to be quite the teacher."

Lee looks up when he sees Sasuke perched high up on the village wall. He waits for Sasuke to drop down from the wall and watches him land neatly on the outside of the village before he asks, "Late for training again, huh?"

Sasuke growls under his breath and falls into place next to Lee. It's become routine now, and Sasuke hates to admit it, but it isn't the worst punishment in the world to run with Lee. At least, unlike some people he knows, Lee doesn't blab unnecessarily except for the occasional and enthusiastic "Time of our youth" profundity. They get ready silently, and when Lee offers weights for Sasuke to use, Sasuke shakes his head. His body is still aching, and he's not sure he can take a single step with an extra fifteen pounds on each foot.

An increasingly familiar voice speaks up again. "Fifty laps, huh?"
"I'm betting six hundred ryo he'll drop down dead before the fifteenth."

"Eight hundred on twenty-five laps," a third voice says politely. "The Uchiha Clan men are born and bred warriors. He will complete at least half his assignment."

"Eight hundred ryo on five, Brother," the first voice says, taunting. "He's still exhausted from yesterday."

"Perhaps we should stop," Sarutobi interrupts. "He can hear us." There's silence after that.

Sasuke ignores them, and when Lee gives him a curt nod, they take off, following the wall as it curves around the circumference of the village. A little unnecessarily, Sasuke looks over his shoulder to see if they're being followed. Next to him, Lee yells out, "You want to grab lunch at the sushi place after this?"

Sasuke pretends to think it over—he has a reputation to maintain—but it's a lost gesture around someone like Lee, so he yells back, trying to ignore the cramp in his leg and the pain in his arm, "Fine."

He does all fifty laps, and in his mind, the voices haggle over who owes what to whom. In the end, everyone loses and grumbles about the utter unfairness of it all. It must say something about the state of his mind, because Sasuke bites the inside of his cheek to stop the triumphant grin that's threatening to break out over his face.

Sakura is waiting by the entrance of the restaurant, and when she sees Lee she gives him a soft, shy smile. Lee returns it with a grin, and the three of them walk in. Which is where Sasuke sees them: Naruto and Neji, sitting at a booth, talking with their heads bent close.

Lee tenses next to Sasuke, giving him a quick glance. Sakura offers, voice a little hesitant, "Maybe we should get ramen? I'll just tell Naruto that we—"

"No," Sasuke hisses and walks purposefully up to the table.

Naruto looks up when Sasuke slides into a seat, and a taunting smile comes readily to his face. "Kakashi-sensei's really pissed off at you, huh?"

Sasuke scowls and turns his face away from the utter and shameless lack of space between Naruto and Neji. A waitress comes to take their orders and vanishes for a few minutes before bringing out a tray laden with bowls. Once she's served the food, she turns to leave, gaze lingering on Sasuke. For the heck of it—such a petty, petty way to feel better—Sasuke gives her an appreciative glance. She blushes and stammers an "Enjoy," before disappearing. Naruto kicks him under the table, scowling. His smile is gone. "No shame. No shame at all."

Sasuke bites down the Look who's talking that's crawling up his throat and settles for a smirk instead. His gaze lingers just a little too long as Naruto turns back to Neji to finish his sentence, entirely oblivious to the expression that crosses Sasuke's face at the gesture. He should be used to this by now, he thinks, but it's useless when he's sitting right across from Neji and Naruto. Because when Sasuke left to go to Orochimaru, apparently Neji stepped in neatly by Naruto's side. Apparently.

Sakura growls before ordering everyone to eat and stop being such men around her, didn't she get enough of them already, and where is Tenten anyway?
Neji shrugs his shoulder at the question, and the movement—so deliberate, so slight—makes his shoulder brush against Naruto's. When Sasuke breaks his chopsticks, the wood splinters into several pieces. Growling, Sasuke stands abruptly, excusing himself to get another set of chopsticks. He's at the counter, asking for another pair when he feels Neji standing next to him. "If you're going to act like a prick," Neji says calmly, reaching for a handful of napkins, "You should leave."

Sasuke stares into Neji's milky-blue eyes and clenches his fist so hard the bones start hurting. "Fuck off, Hyuga." And it's such a pitiful comeback, even he knows it.

Neji smirks at him, wicked and triumphant. "Cat got your tongue, Uchiha?"

Sasuke glances briefly over at Naruto who's laughing at something that Lee is saying. If he were to punch Hyuga and walk away with his blood on his knuckles, Naruto will never, ever forgive him. Not after... "If you hurt him," he says instead, and is about to round off the sentence with a threat—

"Not everyone is like you," Neji snaps and turns his back on Sasuke's expression."

"Well, that's interesting," says a voice by his side. "Your son is in demand, Namikaze."

"They should both be castrated," another voice hisses in response, sounding unbelievably angry.

"They're teenagers," comes Sarutobi's voice soothingly. There's a few moments of silence as Sasuke gathers his anger and pride, watching as Neji slides back into his seat next to Naruto. Then, the same voice—Sarutobi's—offers, "Sasuke, perhaps you should..."

"I know," Sasuke mumbles under his breath, wondering why he's even listening to this insanity inside his mind, and heads back to the table. He's surprised when there's a cool, oddly gentle, touch on his shoulder as he starts to eat, head bowed over his food so he doesn't have to see Naruto's soft, fond gaze on Neji.

How it started is entirely irrelevant in Sasuke's mind, because all that matters is breaking a few of the bastard's bones. Just for the heck of it. "You don't want to get on my bad side," Sasuke scowls and twists Neji's arm a little more.

"Oh, do tell, Uchiha," Neji drawls, and does a half-twist to get Sasuke off of him. Sasuke lands a few feet away on all fours, grinning. Neji gets into a stance, his bandaged arms nearly glowing with the chakra running through them. He considers Sasuke for a moment before activating the Byakugan, eyes freezing into a steely, gray blue.

Sasuke growls low in his throat and crouches lower to the ground. He won't need the Sharingan to take Neji down. "Oh, shit," Sakura swears somewhere to his right. "I'll go get Kakashi-sensei, or Gai-sensei. Whoever..." Her voice starts to fade as she takes off.

"Or the Hokage!" Naruto yells after her before he turns to Sasuke. "What the hell, Sasuke! We're just sparring." On the other side, Lee is trying his best to calm Neji down. "Come on, buddy. This isn't —"

Sasuke smirks, the taunt coming easily to him. There's centuries of feuding between the two clans. He and Hyuga are, by birthright, obliged to carry on the discussion. "Byakugan, if you're too afraid to attack—"

"You're the one who's talking, Sharingan." Neji lunges, nearly blurring in his speed, but Sasuke— injured, tired, and exhausted as he is—has never felt anger like this before.
Training, Naruto suggested at the end of lunch, and after half an hour, this is where they're at.

Kick-block-punch-throw-duck-punch-kick—and Neji stumbles back with the force of that attack. He re-centers himself and stares at Sasuke, fingers bending a little. "You're at a disadvantage, Uchiha. Your muscles are overused and your left arm is practically useless. Not to mention you're left handed and can barely make jutsus. Yield."

"Listen to him, boy," a voice implores.

"Withdraw. This isn't your battle."

"Try and make me," Sasuke snarls, and he sounds animalistic even to his own ears. "Just try and fucking make me."

Neji appears a few inches from him again, and then their fists are flying. Ignoring the pain, Sasuke brings up his hands, makes a few quick seals, takes in a deep breath, and blows so hard his teeth sting from it and he can't breathe for a few seconds after. There's a ball of fire in front of him, blinding in its heat and light, and when it vanishes, Neji is barreling towards him, an angry, spinning tornado of kunais. It's Tenten's technique—Sasuke's seen it before—but Neji has modified it.

Sasuke dodges in a puff of white smoke. It doesn't give him much time, but it's enough for Sasuke to make a few seals. The pain in his arm is screaming now, and the scars on his palm are bleeding. Sasuke ignores it in favor of his next attack. He draws his sword with his right arm, balancing the familiar weight in his hand. It's still a new technique, so new in fact, that Neji—not Naruto—will be the first to see it. And live.

For sentiment's sake, Sasuke calls this the *Up Orochimaru's Ass Jutsu.*

"Here we go," Sasuke mutters under his breath, and the sword starts to fizzle and sparkle with chakra. The kunais stop flying, and Neji pauses for a moment to give the sword in Sasuke's hand a wary glance. It reminds Sasuke of Orochimaru's expression when Sasuke did the same only a year ago.

*One,* Sasuke counts in his mind and spreads his legs, grounding himself. *Two,* Sasuke breathes, and moves his left hand along the length of the blade. *Three.*

"Sasuke, whatever you're doing—" Sarutobi's voice cuts in urgently.

"Now," Sasuke growls, and pushes chakra into his left foot. He spins in a half-circle, blade sizzling in mid-air. A whip of blue comes off the blade and crackles against the ground, a safe two feet away from Neji who jumps back at the attack. When the dust settles, there's a deep, three-foot trench in the ground where the whip made contact.

The surprise in Neji's eyes—which quickly hardens into anger—makes it worthwhile. "What was that?"

"Lightning," Sasuke snarls. "Fire made into lightning."

"Fire?" It's not Neji, but Naruto. "But how did you..."

"Too scared, Hyuga?"

"How did you do that?" Sasuke hears Lee wondering in the background, sounding breathless and awed.
Sasuke doesn't withhold an answer. He remembers one of the voices in his mind saying, *The Uchiha Clan's men are born and bred warriors,* and that is the truth of it. "I am an Uchiha."

"And I," Neji counters, grinning, rising to the challenge, "I am a Hyuga." He makes a seal—a twitching movement of his fingers—and suddenly, Sasuke feels his hands spasm into rigidity. "You didn't block enough of my attacks," Neji points out. He makes a small finger movement, and a muscle in Sasuke's right arm twitches, pinning it to his side. "Your anger is distracting you."

Sasuke narrows his eyes, focuses his concentration, and realizes that somehow, sometime, somewhere, Neji got to his chakra pathways. *Clavicular and antecubital,* Iruka-sensei's voice lectures in his mind, and he can almost see his old Academy teacher, pointing at the life-size anatomy poster on the blackboard. "I haven't used my Sharingan yet," Sasuke says and closes his eyes, feeling the familiar twinge of his Sharingan. Without opening his eyes, he asks, "You want to settle this now? Byakugan or Sharingan?"

"Neither," interjects a tight, female voice—Sakura must have found Tsunade first—and the earth crumbles under Sasuke, walls of dirt closing in around him, and Sasuke sees darkness.

Kanaye is there when he wakes up—in a hospital room, Sasuke observes absently—looking angry. A rattlesnake comes into view beside him. "Fudo," Sasuke tries to say, and swallows dirt. The two snakes watch him as he leans to the side and spits and gags. "I think I ate a worm."

"You," Fudo hisses, rattling his tail dangerously, "are a moron."

"I realize," Sasuke groans, and winces when Fudo snaps his head and bites him on the forehead. He's angered the snakes twice before, and they let their feelings be known in ways that were almost always painful, if not a little messy. "Just shut up."

Sasuke gags a few more times, and when nothing comes up he sticks a finger down his throat and forces himself to heave. Kanaye coils tightly around his neck, squeezing a little too hard to help the process. "That's—" Sasuke drags in a gasp of air, "Good—" Another gasp. "Thanks—" A final shuddering breath. "Kanaye."

"I should kill you," the snake mutters darkly, and gives one more warning squeeze before sliding off.

"I know," Sasuke rattles off, voice monotone, "it was reckless of me. I wasn't grounded well enough. I could have blown my body to bits. Blah, blah, blah."

One of the voices in his mind speaks up all of a sudden. "Do you think they're trying to kill him?"

"No, I think they are trying to heal him, Tobi. In their own way."

Another voice asks, "But how did he summon them?"

"They summoned themselves," comes the quiet, disbelieving voice of the Third Hokage.

Sasuke doesn't have time to hear any more of that conversation because there is a loud, loud pop. Sasuke tries not to look, tries so very hard, but then, he hears a female voice. It's deep, resounding, and commanding in the small room. Fudo very visibly flinches. "Well, boy," he hears, and Sasuke manages to look at the snake, a giant, yellow python, spotted with orange and brown.
She is the mother of Sasuke's Snake Clan, and for this occasion, she has downsized herself to fit inside the room. Rin takes a deep breath, her throat becoming thick with the motion, and flicks out her tongue. "I should eat you," she says after a while, her tail tapping the ground in a slow, steady rhythm.

Sasuke has only seen Rin in this world a handful of times. The first time was when she tested him to see if he was worthy of her kind. He remembers Rin's fang sinking into his back to touch the knob of his second lumbar spine—an initiation ceremony—her poison like lightning, thrumming in his blood. The last time he saw her was when he fought and killed Orochimaru. Both times he was about the size of one of her fangs. Oddly enough, crammed into the same room as her, he feels much, much smaller all of a sudden.

The fact that she's summoned herself out of the Other World speaks volumes, Sasuke realizes, about just how utterly and devastatingly stupid he has been.

"Instead," Rin snarls, "I will just kick your stupid, adolescent ass."

"Hey," Kanaye mutters, sliding away quickly. "Wait for us to get out of the—" Sasuke takes a deep breath and braces himself when Rin lifts his body and slams him against the wall. The plaster cracks. Sasuke groans and rolls onto his back. "Can't I just get grounded?" he breathes, trying for a joke. She doesn't look amused, so he curls up into a ball to better defend himself. Rin throws him out the window and down three stories.

"Ow," Sasuke moans and writhes pathetically on Rin. He's spread out on her belly, in the center of her loose curl. Ishi is working to heal his left arm, Fudo is patiently pushing his tibia back underneath his muscle, and Kanaye is curled up next to him, gloating. Rin breathes in, and the movement makes Sasuke rise about two feet into the air. When she exhales, he comes gently down again. He tries again because he knows, very well, just how much of a sucker Rin is when he's in pain. "Owww."

"Shut up, boy," Rin snaps, sounding angry, but her large, large head comes into view to check on him anyway. Her tongue flickers out and slobbers saliva onto his body. Sasuke wipes it away from his face ineffectively, only gets a mouthful down his throat for the effort. "It'll heal you," Rin says, her hiss so loud in his ear that it's ruffling his hair. Scowling, Sasuke turns onto his side and stares down at the forest canopy a hundred feet below. Rin has moved them into the forest surrounding the outside of the village walls, away from curious, prying eyes.

"Play with fire like that again, boy, and I'll eat you. I don't like human flesh, but for you I would make an exception," Rin mutters to herself, and settles her face down a few yards away from Sasuke. Her golden-brown gaze is sharp in the moonlight, flickering with anger. "The stupidity. The utter stupidity..."

Kanaye giggles, and Sasuke slaps at him, his hand weighed down by Rin's slobber. Immediately, Rin's voice comes back, loud as thunder. "Enough, the both of you. Sleep, boy."

"You could have just grounded me, you know," Sasuke mutters, and closes his eyes when he hears Rin's soft hissing laughter.

"You don't want to be grounded," Kanaye mutters, raising his head a little. "Trust me."

"They're still hissing?"

"Getting kind of annoying... Should we go back to the Village?"
Rin's head snaps up, her entire body tensing. "Intruders," Rin growls, and her body shivers with anticipation. Sasuke pushes himself up into a sitting position, wincing at the strain. "You hear them? Oh, thank fuck."

"Who?" Fudo asks, head swiveling around.

"I don't hear anything." Kanaye offers, and looks up at Rin's flickering eyes. "You do?"

Rin looks down at the space a few feet away from Sasuke, and her eyes slit with recognition. Sasuke lets his Sharingan flare to life. They're there—all four of them—standing around at different spots on Rin. Sasuke glances up to see if Rin is looking in the right direction. "You see them too, right?"

Rin clears her throat and then rasps out in human tongue, "The Chieftain."

"Hello, Rin," Sarutobi says, looking up with a smile. "It's been a while. Sorry to intrude like this. I just wanted to make sure Sasuke was doing all right."

"You brought guests," Rin says, scowling a little, and then lowers her head to rest it on her stomach, a few feet away from Sasuke, blinking lazily. Her tongue flickers out dangerously. "It's rude to intrude on a snake's nest, Chieftain. You should know better."

"I do, I do," Sarutobi concedes, looking suitably apologetic. He indicates to the other three and sits down cross-legged. He is entirely comfortable despite Rin's presence in a way that Sasuke has never seen a stranger act around the huge snake before. "But some rules just do not apply when one is dead."

Sasuke decides that this moment, if any, would be a good time to faint. "Aw fuck," he mutters, and then he does—

Faint, that is.
"Wake up, boy," Rin says, voice loud in his ears. Sasuke rolls onto his stomach and buries his face into her scales, groaning in discomfort. He feels the sticky weight of Rin's guck around him, healing him, warm and comforting.

When Sasuke killed Orochimaru, he'd nearly died. Not because of Orochimaru's battle prowess, but because Orochimaru was so deeply embedded into Sasuke's being that cutting him out was nearly fatal. Rin had saved Sasuke then, out of sheer will and a strange sense of compassion that Fudo had later explained as a succession of debts: Sasuke killed Orochimaru and freed the snakes from an oath; in return, the snakes had saved his life.

All Sasuke remembers is waking up in a dark place, naked, and surrounded by his own filth and a sticky gel that he later realized was Rin's guck—the same she uses when she gives birth to her snakes. Rin had healed him in one of her nests: A deep burrow that reaches so far down into the earth that sometimes, Sasuke can still feel the rumble of a distant volcano and the shifting of the earth's plates.

He spent weeks in that hellhole until he was strong enough to walk, passing between sleep and wakefulness. All he remembers is Rin's glowing eyes looking down at him, and her careful, careful coil around his body when he woke up screaming from nightmares. When he'd finally emerged on the surface again, dripping wet from her care, stinking of all things foul, and still naked as the day he was born, Sasuke had looked up and seen Rin's face, proud and fiercely protective. *Well, boy?* Rin had spoken that day in snake tongue, and it was the first time Sasuke had understood her strange, booming hiss.

"I know you're awake," Rin snaps. "You want me to eat you?"

"No," Sasuke groans, his voice muffled by her scales. Around him, the chill of night makes him shiver and curl into a small ball, the guck settling around him more comfortably. He rubs some of it into his left arm to hasten the healing process.

"That's disgusting, kid," says a voice, and Sasuke immediately snaps into alertness.

Rin laughs, her voice making her body shake slightly. "The boy likes to be pampered," she says and bends her head down. In her current form, Sasuke is about the size of Rin's fang, so it takes only two licks before he's clean again.

"Pampered, sure," Sasuke mutters—if getting trashed into a bloody pulp and then covered with disgusting muck is snake lingo for pampered, then he can do without it, thank you very much—and activates the Sharingan. They're still there. "Are they real?"

"They're spirits," Rin explains. "I didn't notice their presence earlier because I was not in my true form."

Sasuke hisses Kanaye's version of testes several times over.

"How can he see us?" asks the man with white hair.

"Because he is half-spirit himself," Rin goes on, slowly picking her words. "Of sorts."

"He is half-spirit," Sarutobi repeats blandly, and looks at Sasuke, eyes narrowing slightly. There's a flare of chakra in the air, and then it settles again. "I don't fully understand."
"My boy killed Orochimaru," Rin mumbles, and her body moves into a tighter coil at the memory. "He almost died doing it because Orochimaru was a part of him. For freeing us from Orochimaru, I brought him back from the dead and gave him new life. At a junction half-way between this world and ours."

The blond—who looks so much like Naruto it makes Sasuke shiver—looks impressed despite himself. "Spirit-Boy Uchiha, then," he mocks. "That certainly makes things more interesting."

"And who are you?" Sasuke snarls, angry now. They have intruded into his life, and here they are, under a cloudy moon discussing his half-spiritedness, or whatever it is that Rin has done to him. The fact that she never told him only fuels his anger.

"He is the father of the Fox-Child," Rin explains. "You should pay your respects if you want the Fox-Child as your mate."

Sasuke blushes a deep, deep red, and kicks half-heartedly at Kanaye who's probably the one who told Rin. Out of all the snakes, he's the only one who can get away with gossiping like that. Fudo and Ishi are sleeping in tight coils a distance away. Kanaye himself looks half-asleep and pays no attention to Sasuke.

"I'm not—"

"You're growing old, boy," Rin interrupts. "Time for you to find a mate and sire children. You're the Snake Master now. Start acting like it."

Sasuke very faithfully, and successfully, buries himself into a sulk. "Ah, Rin," Sarutobi murmurs, interrupting them. He has one hand clamped firmly down on the blond's shoulder, who looks just about ready to blow a fuse. "If we could perhaps get on with the introductions?"

"Of course," Rin says agreeably and reads off in snake tongue, "The one with black hair is the Shodaime, Senju Hashirama: The First Chieftain. He knew your ancestors once, a long time ago, when the Uchiha Clan was still nomadic. His expertise is forest jutsu, weakness is fire. His left arm is a little damaged from battle." Sasuke glances briefly at the man and gives Rin a quick nod to show that he understands.

"The one with white hair is the Nidaime Hokage: The Second Chieftain, and the Shodaime's younger brother. His name is Senju Tobirama. He's a feisty one, so don't anger him. Strength is water and earth jutsu. That day with your Chidori, he was the one who shut down all your chakra pathways. They are spirits and have no influence on the living realm, but you are half-spirit and not immune to their powers. Be careful. They can do more than shut down your chakra pathways if they so desire." Rin is a snake; she trusts no one. Everyone is a potential threat in her mind. Even Hokages. "You already know the Third Chieftain, Sarutobi Hiruzen. Out of all of them, he is your ally."

"And the other one? You said he was Naruto's father..."

"And the Dog-Master's master. He also knew your ancestors," Rin says thoughtfully. She watches the blond for a moment before saying, "His name is Namikaze Minato, the Yondaime. He is famous in our world."

"Why?"

"He sealed the Demon Fox in his son. He died doing it, a loss that the Toad Clan still mourns."

Sasuke has a million questions, but he doesn't voice any of them. For some reason, Rin is being open
with her knowledge today. If he interrupts her now, it's unlikely he'll ever hear of this again. The ghosts wait patiently for Rin and Sasuke to finish their conversation. "Demons are spirits like us," Rin says, "but when a spirit like the Kyuubi becomes too attached to this world and tries to stay longer than is asked, or needed, it turns evil. It becomes infected by the pettiness and ugliness of your world."

"And me?" Sasuke asks and hates himself the minute the words are out of his mouth. It's a stupid and childish question, by any standard, and on any other day, Rin would have hit him for saying something like this.

Today, though, she answers him. "You, boy," Rin says, sounding amused, "are a bastard of both worlds. Now move along. I don't have all day to waste with you."

Sasuke stands up slowly, testing his strength and measuring the extent of his wounds. His leg is more or less healed, his body feels a little overtaxed, but he can still make it back to the village if he wants to. "Next time I get word about you playing with lightning unnecessarily," Rin snarls, "I won't be so kind. I tire of your recklessness towards your own life."

"I understand," Sasuke says and tries to look sincere. He still wants to whip the Hyuga boy with it, but knows better now. Rin doesn't look convinced, so Sasuke rolls his eyes and tries again. "I understand, Rin."

"Be warned," she hisses, and then she's gone, leaving nothing but air. The snakes and Sasuke start falling towards the earth. Fudo and Ishi are the first to wake up, and they both vanish with small pops. Kanaye though, Kanaye is still a young snake, and he depends on Sasuke to appear and disappear out of this world. So together—Kanaye hissing his scream and Sasuke cursing it—they topple nearly five hundred feet downwards.

Sasuke does the seals for Kanaye's dismissal mid-air and watches the snake disappear in a puff of smoke. He curls up into a small ball when he crashes through the canopy, breaking through several layers of branches and leaves before manages to grasp a thick trunk with his uninjured hand. In the end, he's left swinging lightly by one hand, chakra keeping his grip firm. Sasuke looks around in the silence that follows to see if the ghosts are following him, smirking when he sees nothing. "And stay away," Sasuke yells to no one in particular, because he has better things to do than be haunted by ghosts.

Sasuke slowly climbs down the full height of the tree, using chakra in his hands and feet to make the journey as smooth as possible, and lands with nothing but air. The snakes and Sasuke start falling towards the earth. Fudo and Ishi are the first to wake up, and they both vanish with small pops. Kanaye though, Kanaye is still a young snake, and he depends on Sasuke to appear and disappear out of this world. So together—Kanaye hissing his scream and Sasuke cursing it—they topple nearly five hundred feet downwards.

Sasuke's lets his sharingan come alive and sees that yes, the ghosts are waiting for him. Scowling, he steps around them and heads home. It's late enough now that the usual bustle in the streets has trickled down. Sasuke gets a few stares as he walks, but for the most part, he's left alone.

Predictably, the ghosts follow. The Shodaime falls into step next to him even as the other three ghosts move ahead. The Nidaime and the Yondaime are talking animatedly about something—ninen, Sasuke realizes—while Sarutobi listens politely. Sasuke has half a mind to tell the man to go fuck himself, but the ghost has a small smile on his face as he takes in the surroundings. "The city is always peaceful at night," the Shodaime says fondly.
"Looks can be deceiving," Sasuke mutters one of Kakashi's lines automatically, and flushes when all four heads turn to look at him. Before, when Orochimaru was still alive and burning his way to Konoha, Sasuke could see billows of smoke miles and miles away. Now, though, the horizon is finally, finally peaceful.

But Akatsuki wants Naruto, and they're getting impatient. Sasuke can feel it in the air. He knows his brother better than he knows himself, so he knows Itachi must be getting restless now. Each minute wasted is a minute that the bond between Naruto and the Kyuubi strengthens. And the harder it will be for them to separate the two. **Something is headed this way**, Sasuke thinks. He just doesn't know what or who.

He doesn't even have to put his key into the lock before the door opens and he's facing Naruto. He wrinkles his nose at the state Sasuke is in: ripped clothing, Rin's guck still drying on his skin, leaves and twigs in his hair, and mud caking his feet. "Sakura! He's home!"

"I heard," comes a voice from behind Naruto, and there's Sakura, looking very, very dangerous. "I would love to stay and kick your stupid, little ass, Sasuke, but my mother would kill me if I stayed out any later." She smoothes down nonexistent wrinkles on her outfit. "Naruto and I have spent time and effort making you a decent dinner. Make sure you eat everything. Naruto will take care of your wounds." She sends a glare in Sasuke's direction and turns to face Naruto. "You need anything?"

Naruto smiles, all his annoyance at Sasuke disappearing in an instance. "No, I'm good. Good night," he says. Sakura leans forward to peck Naruto on the cheeks, a gesture which he returns easily, adding under his breath, *Tell your mom I said hi.* Sakura takes a wide berth around Sasuke when she steps outside of the apartment and into the hallway. Her footsteps are light down the stairs, and Sasuke hears the loud bang of the building front door before there's silence again. "Take a shower, Uchiha," Naruto orders, and rounds on his heels without waiting to see if Sasuke follows. "I'll set the table."

"Are they dating, Uchiha and your boy?" a voice suddenly inquires. It's the Nidaime if Sasuke were to take a guess."

"No," says the Yondaime forcefully. And then, "I hope not."

"Shut up, Hokages," Sasuke scowls and heads into the bathroom to take a quick shower. By the time he's out again, the smell of something tasty is floating pleasantly into the bedroom. In the kitchen, Naruto is filling up a glass of water, which he sets down on the table with a scowl. "You're not drinking today," he announces. "Sakura and I got rid of all the booze in here."

Sakura and Naruto occasionally clear out Sasuke's apartment of all the alcohol, usually in anticipation or after one of his maudlin drinking binges that ends with him in some woman's bed on the opposite end of town—they're usually civilians, beautiful college students and younger professionals he spots at the bar and who return his gaze without erring; he almost never remembers their name, and he never brings them home. On those days, Sasuke is so impossibly late to training that Kakashi usually beats him to a pulp just to make a point, and Naruto doesn't make eye-contact with him while Sakura tends to his wounds later. Sasuke settles at the table with a scowl. "You couldn't leave a goddamn beer—" Naruto rounds on him, already disapproving of whatever Sasuke's about to say, so Sasuke switches the direction of his sentence. "Could you and Sakura **stop** treating me like I'm a raging alcoholic?"

"Of course," Naruto says, voice tight with his anger as he scrubs the already-clean sink into a fine shine. The line of his shoulders is a tight bow. "Because unlike most people who have a problem with alcohol, you only get black-out drunk and sleep around every two weeks. You're the epitome of restraint."
"Sasuke," Sarutobi breathes, his voice coming from the direction of the empty chair across from him. Sasuke lets his Sharingan come to life and sees that the ghost is sitting at the table, looking devastated. "Child," he breathes. "You can't—"

Naruto pulls back the chair, and Sarutobi gets hurriedly to his feet to yield the space to Naruto. "I also got rid of your cigarettes," Naruto announces, leaning back in his chair with a scowl. "Even that stash you think you hid so well in the back of your closet."

Sasuke bends his head over his food because the alternative is to argue with Naruto (and he never wins an argument against Naruto, there's no point trying), or looking at Sarutobi's devastated expression. Later, Naruto patiently cleans and bandages the cuts and scrapes on Sasuke's arms and shoulders from his fall through the redwood canopy. His hands are smooth and gentle on his skin, even though he mutters under his breath about Sasuke, and look who's the idiot now, you bastard. Sasuke doesn't say anything, just concentrates on not wincing at the sharp sting of antiseptics. After critically watching the nine o'clock news—providing running commentary on one specific political analyst's absolutely idiotic assessment of the latest peace treaty talks with the Land of Water—Naruto switches the channel to a movie. Sasuke rests his head on the back of his couch with his feet kicked up on the coffee table, and Naruto settles in next to him. Within twenty minutes, Sasuke gathers that the hero's mother-in-law wants him dead. There is also a dog involved.

Naruto falls asleep with his head nestled on Sasuke's shoulder, breathing deeply. Scowling—hating himself for this, because his mother taught him manners, damnit—Sasuke shifts lightly and murmurs, Naruto. Naruto startles awake, blinking at his surroundings. He frowns as the credits roll on the screen. "What happened to the dog?"

"It died and went to dog heaven," Sasuke answers easily, and Naruto rewards him with subdued smile.

"I should get home," Naruto announces, stretching overhead, but it's well past midnight, and it's a good fifteen minutes for Naruto to get downtown to his place. Naruto starts his day at four anyways, so Sasuke offers, "You can crash here if you want."

Naruto heaves a sigh, moving to the bedroom already, rolling his neck and muttering under his breath about how, one of these days, Sasuke will move closer to the rest of civilization instead of camping out in this shit-part of town where there isn't even a single good coffee shop. Sasuke follows Naruto into the bedroom and almost immediately, the Yondaime starts to yell at him. "Oi! You! What you do think you're—"

"Maybe," the Nidaime suggests. "We should leave."

"I agree," the Shodaime says, sounding far more amused than a man of his stature should.

Sasuke ignores the ghosts entirely and heads to his closet for the spare pillow and sheets, even as Naruto crawls into bed tiredly, pulling the covers over himself with a sigh and a murmured, Good night. Sasuke tries not to think about the sight too much, because he's wanted Naruto in his bed so badly, for so long, he's starting to suspect that maybe his cock is broken. When he settles down on his couch, so unbelievably angry that he has to sleep on the couch in his own goddamn home, he hears the Yondaime growl, "I've got my eyes on you, Uchiha."

Later that night, Sasuke has an unbelievably erotic dream, that starts, pleasantly enough, with Naruto spread out on his bed, fingers tracing his tattoo lazily, and blue eyes hazy with lust. Four minutes into the dream, Sasuke has Naruto bent over the Hokage's desk and is having the time of his life—"Yes," Dream Naruto whispers, and makes high, needy noises in synch with Every. Single. Thrust.
Dream Naruto is so very, very easy, it makes Dream Sasuke hard all over again, and they go at it for Round Two. "Yes, please, Mr. Uchiha," Dream Naruto, The Personal Assistant With A Wild Side breathes, and Dream Sasuke, The Boss With Unbelievably Comfortable Office Chairs obliges.

And then, there's water in his face.

It's Kakashi.

Sasuke groans awake and doesn't even bother hiding the evidence of his dream. It's Kakashi, for Gods' sake, he thinks. The man actually walked in on Sasuke with his hands down his pants during a mission, once. "This," he says coldly, "better be good."

"Oh, was I interrupting?" Kakashi asks innocently, and tilts his head. Sasuke really doesn't want to jerk off in the bathroom with Kakashi in his apartment, so he closes his eyes and thinks about unpleasant things. It's not very difficult, and by the time he remembers the sight of his mother's body crumbling to the floor, Naruto is nowhere near his thoughts.

"What?" Sasuke demands when he opens his eyes.

Kakashi's face goes serious. "Training," he says, and disappears.

"Now?" the Yondaime asks from somewhere in the room.

"I suppose," says the Shodaime. "He did say training, correct, Tobirama?"

"Yes, Brother," the Nidaime mumbles, yawning loudly. "Let's follow them."

The watch reads 1:02 a.m., and outside the sky is still dark and clear. Sasuke makes his way to the bedroom where Naruto is sleeping heavily, and heads towards the bathroom. Being Kakashi's student has taught Sasuke many things. Of them are: Protect your teammates; there is always a hidden truth; and know your enemies' strengths and your own weaknesses. Another is this: If there is training after midnight, you better take less than five minutes to get ready for it.

Sasuke spends two minutes and thirteen seconds in the bathroom, and comes out dripping wet from a cold shower. He tugs on clothes—randomly because he doesn't want to turn on the light even though Naruto is most definitely awake now. "Training?"

"Yeah," Sasuke mutters and finishes checking his kunai holster. Three minutes and nine seconds. Naruto falls silent again and watches Sasuke tie on his hitai-ate. They both know—almost everyone knows—that Sasuke and Kakashi train like this at the dead of night, when no one is watching to steal coveted Sharingan secrets from them.

Three minutes and forty-five seconds. Sasuke approaches Naruto and holds out bandages, which Naruto quickly wraps around his left arm, blue eyes so bright they look unnatural. Four minutes and twelve seconds. Kakashi will be waiting on his roof somewhere. "Try not to get your ass kicked too bad," Naruto mutters and settles under the covers. He watches Sasuke sleepily, hand still curled lightly around Sasuke's wrist where the bandages are snug and tight. "Be home soon?"

"Yeah, I will," Sasuke lingers by Naruto's side for a moment longer, trying to hold in the urge to lean down and kiss Naruto. "Don't stay up," he murmurs instead, and leaves when Naruto hm-s under his breath, already half-asleep.

Kakashi is waiting when Sasuke climbs up to the rooftop. Together, they slip over buildings and head towards the village training grounds. They're close to downtown, and Sasuke can see the lights and hear the laughter in the distance. "What's wrong with you?" Kakashi mutters by way of hello,
Sasuke isn't sure how to answer that, because the reason will sound a little ridiculous, no matter how he phrases it. *I see dead people* sounds embarrassingly tacky, and *I'm half-spirit* sounds like something Sakura might say when she's stoned sky high. So he settles for a shrug.

"You're getting paranoid," Kakashi mumbles under his breath and moves slightly. Sasuke tenses in anticipation of a fight, because Sasuke may have kicked Orochimaru's ass from here to the seventh layer of Hell, but if Kakashi really wants to, he can have Sasuke writhing on the ground within seconds and trapped in some sort of horrible Mangekyou illusion. "Whatever it is, it's affecting your ability to function."

"I'm not paranoid. Just because I'm late for training and—" Sasuke asserts and flashes his Sharingan to see if the Hokages are there. They are. Hovering just a few feet next to him. The Yondaime is next to Kakashi, watching the jounin with open fascination. "Fuck," Sasuke snarls under his breath, because they're *stalking* him now.

"It's not about the training, Sasuke," Kakashi interrupts sternly. "It's about your behavior. You're seeing things, attacking fellow Konoha shinobi, and then you get beaten to a fine pulp by your own snakes," Kakashi ticks off, unusually talkative. "So explain."

"I'm not paranoid," Sasuke argues, and clenches his hands into fists. He's been tense and shaking with anticipation and frustration for the past few days. Kakashi interrogating him like this isn't making it any better. "I'm just—" *Seeing dead people.* "And besides, it wasn't my fault. That stupid fuck Hyuga got so goddamn friendly with Naruto, he was asking for it—" He snaps his mouth shut when Kakashi's one visible eye curls up into a smile.

"Oh," Kakashi drawls, and stretches. "In that case. There's going to be a change of plans." He jumps down into the streets and motions for Sasuke to follow. When Sasuke lands next to him, Kakashi loops his hand around Sasuke's shoulder, friendly and comfortable.

"All right, punk," he says very, very solemnly. "Let's go have some fun, why don't we?"

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"I," Sasuke starts to say and slaps a chip down on the table. Asuma looks impressed, but he's drunk, so it isn't much of a standard. "Raise you two hundred."

There is a buxom woman hanging off his arms, making crooning noises in his ear, and Sasuke has to admit this is one of Kakashi's better ideas. It took some convincing, but somehow, Kakashi managed to slip Sasuke into the bar. Sasuke figures it has something to do with the five hundred ryo note that Kakashi slipped into the bartender's hand—and the fact that Sasuke had looked very much like he needed a drink.

"All right, Uchiha," Genma says thoughtfully, and then, "I see your two hundred and raise it three hundred."

Sasuke figures that it's a bad idea to squander his money away like this, but heck. He takes another drink and puts his arm around the woman next to him. "Oh," breathes the woman, and licks his ear. "Oh," Sasuke mimes, giving her ass a squeeze.

"Get a room," someone hollers from the bar, and Sasuke yells back, "In a minute."

"Condom, condom," Genma tuts and pushes two into Sasuke's hands. "Remember, sex lasts a night, but—"
"Syphilis lasts a lifetime!" the men intone gravely around the table.

Kakashi slaps some chips onto the table. He too, has a woman hanging off his arm, although she's wearing much, much less than the other one. "Gai, buddy," Kakashi says, and impossibly, the woman's kimono slips off her shoulder even more, "your game."

"This is deplorable," says a voice firmly. It's the Shodaime.

"The Shodaime," Sasuke says conversationally, "thinks this is deplorable."

The men nod their heads sagely, and Gai offers, "That is true. But you know, I once read somewhere that the Shodaime Hokage was a gambler himself—"

"I was not," the Shodaime interrupts tersely, but Gai is still talking. He throws an arm around his woman forlornly. "I'm going to have to fold. Your game, Genma."

"Sasuke, I have always known you to be a steady, level headed, decent boy. Put down the sake, drop the cards, leave the woman, and go home," says Sarutobi, trying to sound more patient than he probably is.

"The Sandaime thinks I should go home," Sasuke mutters, considering his cards and then Genma's face. He's bluffing. The woman on his arm nearly climbs onto his lap and rubs her breasts up against him enticingly. "Well," Sasuke says, and then, "Four hundred."

"Daring game," comments the Nidaime, and then, "Genma's not bluffing."

"Stop encouraging him. Kakashi, I can't believe this is the kind of example you give your student. I taught you better than this," the Yondaime chides, as if Kakashi could actually hear him.

"The Yondaime," Sasuke translates, raising his voice to be heard over the ruckus in one corner of the room. The woman is giving him a lap dance now, so Sasuke figures it's time to go. He gets up and the woman follows, smiling lazily up at him. Nice, Sasuke thinks, and settles his hand around her waist. "The Yondaime thinks he taught you better than this, Hatake," Sasuke announces very seriously, and entirely misses the look that Kakashi gives him. He puts his cards face-up, thinking that he'll win, but then Genma spreads his cards out and Sasuke says goodbye to the last mission's savings. "Oh, well," Sasuke sighs and looks down at the woman. "Let's go."

The men say "Goodbye," and "Come again later," and "you owe me, man" to Sasuke as he slips out into the night. The Hokages' voices are yelling now—of all the indecencies, the Shodaime scowls; only sixteen, Sarutobi deplores—but when he guides the woman into an alley, they all go silent.

Three hours later, the woman has to walk Sasuke home, mostly because Sasuke is so drunk he can't even see straight anymore. He's pushed her up against some wall twice already and made her come so hard she's offered to pay him for the night. When Sasuke looks confused, the woman pushes the money back into Sasuke's pocket and gives him a free blow job.

Sasuke's joints are finally relaxed, and the woman is laughing in his ear, smelling of lilies and wine, so he doesn't bother to be quiet when he stumbles into his apartment. "I'm home," Sasuke yells for the heck of it, and the woman squeezes the front of his pants for the effort. "All right, leave now," Sasuke orders half-heartedly, because he has training tomorrow. And he's run out of condoms.

The woman pushes him down onto the couch and smiles, her painted lips indecently smudged. "If you want to do this again sometime later..." She trills off as she slides a piece of paper into his hands. "I won't charge." For some strange reason, Sasuke finds this funny, so he starts laughing and falls onto the couch, loose limbed. He hears the door close, and then, finally, Sasuke slips into an easy
"Aw, Gods damnit," Sasuke groans, and touches his head to see if it's still there. It is. So he says again, "Gods damn it."

There are loud clangs and thunks coming from inside the kitchen, and more noise than could possibly be warranted for—Sasuke squints at the clock—eight in the morning, so Sasuke buries himself under his pillow and breathes in deeply. His insides are churning, his head is pounding, his tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth, and he's fairly certain that this is what Hell must feel like.

"Shut up," he croaks at the noise, but it gets louder, so he tries again, "I said, shut the hell up."

"I heard," comes a very, very cold voice. Sasuke lifts his head and stares at the blurry figure until it swims into view. It's Naruto, Sasuke tells himself, and slowly sits up, cradling his head. He'd forgotten that Naruto slept over.

"Goddamn Kakashi—" But Sasuke doesn't have time to finish his sentence because an egg flies at him and splatters neatly on his chest.

For the next three hours, Naruto yells incessantly and interrupts himself only to solemnly throw a piece of furniture or a sharp object at Sasuke. Nearing the fourth hour, a shuriken flies by Sasuke's head and lodges itself neatly into the wall behind him. "What the fuck, dead last!" Sasuke yells, and dodges another kunai. He's slower than usual, because, he has to admit, he may still be slightly inebriated.

"You came home drunk," Naruto roars furiously, and then the sofa is hurtling towards Sasuke, who only barely dodges it. It crashes loudly into the wall, rebounding with the impact force. "And with a woman hanging off your arm, no less!" Naruto howls and throws a pot at Sasuke. The handle lodges itself in the wall next to the shuriken. Naruto runs a hand through his hair, tugging at the strands in his frustration. "I'm going to kill you!"

A pan makes enthusiastic acquaintance with Sasuke's head.

Kakashi looks smug when Sasuke finally shows up for training, bruised and a little bloodied. "Feel better, Uchiha?"

Sasuke glares at him. "No," he mutters sullenly. "Naruto found out."

"Oh, wow," Kakashi says with feeling, and pats Sasuke's shoulder in a brotherly gesture. "Tough break."

"You have no idea," Sasuke confides, and rubs gingerly at his sore head. Naruto is already explaining the entire ordeal to Sakura who looks alternatively shocked and angry. "Piss drunk with some whore," Sasuke hears, and then Sakura gives him a dirty, dirty look.

Kakashi watches the two of them thoughtfully. They've taken a small break for lunch, and Naruto and Sakura show no inclination of talking to either Kakashi or Sasuke for the rest of the day. "You used condoms, I hope."

"Yeah," Sasuke mutters and looks away from Sakura and Naruto.

"You should start getting tested regularly from now on," Kakashi instructs. "Ask Shizune after training. She's discreet about these things."
"Fine," Sasuke says. Naruto yells "Kill him," and Sakura nods a little too enthusiastically. Suddenly, their voices drop into hushed whispers. They must be plotting his death, Sasuke figures, and settles down next to Kakashi with a sigh.

"I can't believe this," comes the Yondaime's voice. "I can't believe he is having this conversation."

"At least," the Nidaime offers, "he's being a responsible adult—"

"Responsible? He took the boy out for a night of carousing. What part of that is responsible—"

Sasuke resolutely ignores the conversation, and announces, "I have a hangover."

"I do too," Kakashi puts in pleasantly, and Sasuke gives the jounin a sidelong glance. He doesn't look it.

"My insides may be compromised."

"That happens," Kakashi assures, and hands Sasuke the bottle he'd brought with him to training. "Drink this. It'll help you keep hydrated." Sasuke follows the order and nearly gags at the liquid. It's foul, by any standard, but if it'll help him get through the day... He takes another swig before returning it to Kakashi.

"I can't believe this," the Yondaime breathes again, despairingly. "I just can't believe this."

"We going to train today?" Sasuke asks, because he's starting to wonder how much use it'll be. Hungover, he knows he'll get his ass kicked into the ground by Naruto and Sakura. He'll probably end up tied, upside down to a tree, and listen to their rant about the dangers of alcohol, gambling, and sex with strangers. Knowing Sakura, she'll also probably show him horrifyingly vivid pictures of STDs for emphasis.

"Maybe, maybe not," Kakashi mutters, and pulls out his book. Sasuke stares for a few moments, unable to take his eyes away from the cover. Kakashi fumbles around his pocket and pulls out another book before handing it to Sasuke. "Relax," the jounin advises and leans back into the tree shade. Sasuke glances at Naruto and Sakura, still hissing and whispering like angry pit vipers, and takes the book. He's becoming like Kakashi, he realizes, and finds that it doesn't disturb him as much as it should.

In his ear, the Nidaime chuckles at one of the jokes in the book. "Hey, this is actually good reading material," he points out, and the other three mutter curses under their breath about the dissolving standards of shinobi and the state of the world in general. The Nidaime ignores them and says, "Flip the page, you're a slow reader."

He's on chapter three when Kakashi asks, voice mild, "Oh, and Sasuke. How do you know about my sensei?"

"The Yondaime... Namikaze Minato," Sasuke mutters under his breath and feels the air still around him.

"That's right."

Sasuke realizes that Kakashi is very, very serious all of a sudden. He's treading on dangerous ground. "I won't bring him up again."

"Good," Kakashi says and falls silent. A few seconds later, as Sasuke's flipping a page, Kakashi offers politely, "I knew an Uchiha before you."
Sasuke stills.

He has always made it a point not to think about Kakashi's Sharingan, because it belonged to one of Sasuke's kin. He's not sure he wants to find out who, because it would mean that Kakashi killed him. There's no other way to explain the Mangekyou. "I don't need to know," Sasuke says and lets out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "It would be better if you didn't tell me."

"Because you'll have to kill me. Clan laws."

The Yondaime gasps, and there's a cool touch on his arm. Sarutobi says, "Steady, Sasuke."

"You have the Mangekyou," Sasuke speaks, slowly choosing his words. There is no Clan anymore, just Sasuke and Itachi. But the Clan laws are the laws. The Uchiha men are born and bred warriors, the Shodaime had said. There are laws that come with that.

"Uchiha Obito," Kakashi says eventually, despite Sasuke's warning, and Sasuke feels the blood drain from his face.

Sasuke doesn't remember Uchiha Obito, his father's youngest half-brother who'd lived in the main house. He's seen pictures, though, and heard stories. He was the brother that made Fugaku laugh. He imagines a boy with goggles, a big smile and gentle hands. He has pictures of Itachi playing with Uncle Obito. A young Itachi, latched onto the older boy's neck, blinking toothlessly at the camera. When Uncle Obito died, Itachi had told Sasuke once, Father locked himself up in the family hall and refused to come out for three days.

"So," Sasuke says and puts away the book slowly. "Your eye, it belonged to Uncle Obito. You killed him."

"You didn't even know him," Kakashi puts in pleasantly.

"He was my uncle," Sasuke says, and swallows on that feeling inside of him, that familiar, bitter feeling. "It doesn't matter if I knew him or not. He's family."

"No," Kakashi counters, and takes a swig from the bottle before offering it to Sasuke. Sasuke doesn't take it. "Just because he was related to you doesn't make him your responsibility."

Sasuke feels the anger rising like bile in the back of his throat; he can taste it, sharp and tangy on his tongue. "The day before he left for his last mission, Uncle Obito gave Itachi his favorite pair of goggles. Said that once he got the Sharingan, he should wear them to protect his eyes," Sasuke bites out. He remembers those goggles, lying at the bottom of a trunk in his closet. "I still have them."

Kakashi considers him for a second. "I didn't kill him," he says finally and presses a scroll into Sasuke's hand. It's from the Hokage's archives: a mission report. "It was his gift to me. This," he points at his eye, "and his friendship."

Kakashi disappears.

Shizune gives him a sharp look when he walks in and asks to be tested, but doesn't offer any comments. "All right," she mutters instead, and slides a needle into Sasuke's arm without much warning or grace. "The results for a full panel will take two weeks," she says as the small vial starts to fill with blood. "This test doesn't reflect any possible exposure to infections in the last three months. You'll have to come back in a few months for that, if that's what's worrying you."

"I'm not worried," Sasuke sighs and looks around. The room is polished and crisp with a window
overlooking the village. Ever since Tsunade became Hokage, more funds have been funneled into the hospital, and the results are showing. "Just wanted to be sure."

"Kakashi get you into this?"

"No," Sasuke says forcefully, and then, just as forcefully, "Yes."

"Well," Shizune sighs and snaps a white sticky label onto the small vial of blood she's drawn. She writes down his name on the label before sliding the vial into a plastic bag with large, red lettering on it. "At least you're being responsible about it." Sasuke scoffs and waits as Shizune puts a gauze pad on the injection mark and tapes it up. She considers Sasuke for a moment before saying, "You're a mess."

"I'm fine," Sasuke says and gets to his feet.

"Sit down and take off everything except your underwear," Shizune orders him briskly, and points to an examination table tucked neatly against a wall in one corner of the room. Sasuke grumbles under his breath, but obliges anyway, wincing a little when his pants catch on a bruise. He gets onto the table, soft and cushioned with a thin, white strip of paper laid out on it.

Shizune's a fast and efficient worker, Sasuke knows from experience, and she goes about healing him without any further ado. Her hands skim down his neck, prodding and fixing, easing his chakra pathways. When she gets to his left arm, she whistles. "Well healed. Who did this?"

"Snakes," Sasuke says, ignoring the look that Shizune gives him. By the time she's done with his left arm and his legs, it's nearly dusk. Sasuke knows from the way his body moves easier that Shizune must have spent a considerable amount of chakra healing him, but she doesn't even look like she's moved an inch.

"Come back in two weeks for the test results."

Sasuke nods his understanding and pulls on the rest of his clothes, silently grateful for her healing. Shizune fumbles around in the drawer of her desk before pulling out a small bottle of pills. "This should help the muscle ache. Take one every four hours, or two every eight hours for the next three days."

Sasuke pockets it and is about to leave when Shizune clears her throat and points to the scroll that Kakashi gave him. He must have turned his back long enough for her to steal it. He's impressed despite himself.

"And this," she snaps, holding it up in the air, "Is beyond your pay grade. I don't want to know how you got it, because you need at least Level Twelve clearance to open it." Sasuke watches the scroll with narrowed eyes, fingers twitching by his side. "Whoever gave it to you assumes you know how to unlock it."

"I'll return the scroll to the right person once I'm done," Sasuke says a few seconds later, once he's managed to construct a sentence that doesn't reveal too much.

Shizune hesitates for a moment before handing the scroll back to Sasuke. He's nearly out the door when she adds, voice cruel and unforgiving, "You've betrayed Konoha once already, Uchiha. We won't be so forgiving the second time."

"What's Level Twelve clearance?" Sasuke asks the minute he's gotten onto a rooftop, heading in the direction of his apartment and away from any eavesdroppers.
"I established a system when I was Hokage," replies the Nidaime, "that categorizes levels of confidentiality and disclosure. When I was Hokage, there were One through Eight. I didn't set up a Level Twelve."

"I did," says the Sandaime, his voice coming from somewhere behind Sasuke. "It was after the incident with your brother, Sasuke. It requires direct orders from the Hokage."

"What did his brother do?" the Nidaime asks, picking up on Sarutobi's somber tone. If he'd been a real man, anyone less than a Hokage, Sasuke would have killed him on the spot. But he's dead, and Rin has warned him about the Nidaime's temper.

So he answers him instead, and makes sure that his voice is completely neutral when he says, "He murdered the Uchiha Clan."

The Nidaime is silent for a moment. "You're alive."

"For his amusement," Sasuke says dryly.

"You were there, boy?" It's the Yondaime.

Sasuke has never been asked this before, and he's never told anyone. When the police finally came to his house, they'd found Sasuke in the middle of gathering kindle for a bonfire. From fire to fire, that was the Uchiha way. And then, the ashes would be returned to the Naka River, the only waters that calmed the fires they tended. He'd burned most of the people, and was dragging his aunt's mangled body towards the fire when someone knocked him out from behind. The next thing Sasuke remembers was being in the Hokage's personal study. Sarutobi had looked at him with concerned, old eyes, telling him Cry, boy. It's all right, you can cry if you want. And Sasuke couldn't. A million worried faces had swirled around him for the next few days after that, and Sasuke couldn't cry, wouldn't cry, didn't even talk.

Eventually, people had gotten the hint and dropped the subject.

"Yes," he says and jumps across a street and onto another building. "I was."

"You saw it all?" the Nidaime speaks again, and Sasuke really wants to kill him now.

"Most of it."

The most vivid of them all was his mother standing defiantly over her husband's body and pushing Sasuke behind her, saying, Itachi, I love you, and Your brother, your sister, over and over again. And Itachi, without so much as a glance, made a sharp twisting motion that had Mother crumbling to the ground, her throat a red gash.

Sasuke remembers his mother, so desperately trying to say, Run, choking back blood and tears, watching as her love and life bled away. But Sasuke hadn't run, because his mother was crying, so he'd tried, very earnestly, to stop the blood flow with his hand on her wound. When Itachi finally left, Sasuke had quietly dragged his mother's body to one corner of the compound and started to pile wood around her. He took apart the Uchiha compound piece by piece for the wood to burn his kin.

"Who did he kill?" the Shodaime asks quietly.

"Everyone," Sasuke says, and closes his eyes against the image of it.

"Why?" It's the Yondaime now.
Sasuke, over the years, has come up with a lot of different answers to that question. *He's a cold-hearted bastard* just doesn't cut it, and *He wanted the Mangekyou* sounds a little feeble. But Sasuke knows his brother. Itachi got the Mangekyou by killing Shisui, who is such a bright presence in Sasuke's memory, always a warm laugh, ghost fingers ruffling his hair, and memories of splashing around the river, learning how to swim.

If Itachi had wanted to avoid going blind from the Mangekyou, all he'd needed to do was kill one other Uchiha who possessed the Sharingan. Itachi doesn't do anything without a reason, Sasuke knows. He's clean, efficient, quick, and never ever redundant. So Sasuke has, over the years, come up with a lot of different answers, and has finally decided on this: "He got bored."

"He got bored—"

"Enough," interjects the Shodaime, cutting off any more questions. "That's enough."

They're silent then, until Sasuke finally settles in his kitchen with the scroll laid out. He's about to snap the scroll open when the Sandaime interrupts him. "If you do this wrong, it will kill you," he warns.

"Thanks, Hatake," Sasuke growls. "That's just fucking brilliant. Kill your goddamn student while you're at it."

"Language, boy," the Shodaime scolds, exasperated. "Honestly, listening to you sometimes... Well, go on then. Open it."

"Let's begin," Sarutobi agrees with a heavy sigh. "This always takes a while."

When Sasuke finally manages to unlock it an hour later, the scroll rolls open, and he scans the title. It's a summary of a mission, the ink so soaked into the parchment that the text has become a little blurry. "This doesn't look too important," he mumbles. "Why did they seal it with a Level Twelve security clearance?"

"It contains information about the Sharingan," the Sandaime explains. "An Uchiha was involved. It was a precautionary measure."

Sasuke grunts in understanding and goes back to reading the neatly packed writing.

*Members: Namikaze Minato, Jounin; Hatake Kakashi, Jounin; Uchiha Obito, Chuunin; and Inuzuka Rin, Medic-nin, Chuunin. Mission: Scout and encounter possible Rock-nin threats.*

There are small profiles on each of the members, and Sasuke reads them hurriedly. *Hatake Kakashi,* it says. *Jounin, Age thirteen.*

"Thirteen," Sasuke reads aloud, disbelieving. He's known, peripherally, that Kakashi is a force to be reckoned with, that he's some sort of genius prodigy of Konoha. He's heard rumors, whispers of the Copy Ninja Kakashi and his lineage. Now, he understands.

He reads through the report, told from several different points of view. They separated into two groups, the report reads, to cover more ground. Namikaze one group, the other three a separate group. They spotted four possible threats. *During an encounter with the enemy, Uchiha Obito activated his Sharingan successfully,* the report reads. *During a later encounter, he was a casualty.*

_Casualty,* Sasuke thinks, and the word makes him grit his teeth. It's lost its weight over the years for him. But then he remembers Itachi, looking stone-faced as he told Sasuke about Obito's death, about
how when she'd gotten the news of his death, their grandmother's broken wails had filled the Uchiha compound for hours on end, that she had worn out her voice that day, and the only thing left was an empty, fragile silence. Fugaku had been in mourning for years, Itachi told him. They'd almost named Sasuke Obito, but Shisui had wanted Sasuke to bear the name of legends, not be a constant reminder to Fugaku of the brother he'd lost.

He takes a deep breath, because this is a part of Kakashi's past, more than the jounin has ever, ever willingly given up. When Sasuke first met Kakashi, the jounin had pointed out that he didn't like any of the newly appointed Team 7, that he didn't particularly feel like telling them much about himself, and that everyone close to him was dead. Over the years, his curiosity about Kakashi has slowly faded away. Now, though...

The rest of the report reads like several bullet points meshed together: Rin was taken prisoner, Kakashi abandoned her, Obito went back to rescue his teammate, and Kakashi later followed Obito back. There, Obito sacrificed his own life to save Kakashi's. His dying request, the report lists, was to give Kakashi the Sharingan. Rin performed the surgery to transplant Obito's eye. Obito died afterwards of hypovolemic shock. His body was never recovered.

Sasuke tries to imagine Obito, lying in a puddle of his own blood, blind to the world, shivering until he slipped into his own death. The image comes easily enough, because this is a report written by an experienced ninja, and it details every single moment of the encounter with excruciating detail and imagery.

Sasuke's uncle gave his eye to Sasuke's teacher, and it must be some sort of strange, twisted symbolism, because Sasuke can't explain the coincidence of that no matter how hard he tries. Maybe that's why Kakashi agreed to take on Team 7, Sasuke thinks, and then remembers what Kakashi had told them that very, first day.

"Ninja who don't follow the rules are trash," Sasuke mutters to himself, and starts to roll up the scroll again. "But ninja who don't take care of their friends—"

"Are worse than trash," the Yondaime finishes next to him. "You're a lot like him when he was younger."

"Uncle Obito?"


"I've even made the same mistakes he has," Sasuke agrees, tired now, and lowers his head to the table, waiting for the visitor he knows he'll have.

Kakashi arrives nearly three hours later, around midnight, and slips into the kitchen. Without saying hello, he fumbles around the fridge, but emerges empty-handed. "You don't have much to eat here," he mutters, and pockets the scroll in one smooth motion.

Kakashi and Sasuke are socially demented enough that they will pretend that this never happened. Both of them know this, and neither will say anything. "I'd have to kill Naruto for the Mangekyou," Sasuke announces blandly, and watches Kakashi's face carefully. There's no change of expression.

"Or," Kakashi points out politely, "you can kill Itachi."

Sasuke gets to his feet. "I think I'm going to get completely wasted tonight."

"Sure," Kakashi says, and this time, when they head out of the apartment, none of the Hokages say anything. But then, a few hours later, when Kakashi and Sasuke are solemnly finishing their third
bottle, the Nidaime says firmly, "Easy, boy. That's enough for the night. Go easy there."

"All right," Sasuke says and swallows another cup, putting it down with a thunk. He gets to his feet a little unsteadily, and places his share of the bill on the table with a curt nod to the bartender. A few more visits, Sasuke figures, and he'll be considered a regular.

He manages to take a few teetering steps towards the door when Kakashi appears next to him, and supporting each other, they stumble back to Sasuke's apartment. Kakashi makes sure that Sasuke is safely sprawled onto his couch before saying, "Your uncle. His name is engraved on the memorial stone. On the hill." He vanishes without another word. Sasuke falls asleep then, and when he wakes up the next day, an hour late for practice, he heads towards Memorial Hill.

Unsurprisingly, Kakashi is there, head bent in contemplative silence, eyes trained on a name on the large, onyx-blue slab of stone. It takes Sasuke a few minutes to find the name, and when he finally does, he goes still like Kakashi. They stand there in silence for nearly two hours. When, finally, they head towards the training grounds, they're both three hours late.

Sakura vanishes midway through training, saying that she wants to go over some lessons with Shizune before the day is over. Kakashi disappears soon after, and then it's Naruto and Sasuke, sparring as usual.

Sasuke throws a kunai and misses. Badly. Naruto goes completely still and looks at the kunai that landed nearly eleven inches away from him, eyes wide. "Um, Sasuke? I'm over here," he points out, giving him a little wave.

"Goddamn son of a fucking—" Sasuke propels himself into Naruto and pushes him into the ground, snarling. Naruto freezes for a moment before flipping them over. He straddles Sasuke's lap, slim thighs pressing against Sasuke's sides, and considers the man underneath him for a few moments, brows furrowing in concentration. He pushes a few strands of hair away from his eyes a little distractedly, smudging dirt across his skin as he does so.

And then, "You're hungover."

"Mildly," Sasuke snaps and bucks his hips to get Naruto off of him. The blond doesn't move, just leans down closer, breathing harshly in his anger. He has one hand pressing heavily into Sasuke's chest, another around Sasuke's throat to keep his face still. Naruto opens his mouth to say something loud and disapproving, when Sasuke interrupts, "Not today, Naruto."

Naruto throws up his hands and punches Sasuke's chest weakly, argument gone. They've known each other long enough that they can measure the weight of each other's silences from two miles away. So Naruto understands, instinctively, that something is wrong. "I reserve the right to yell at you about this later."

"No, this conversation ends here," Sasuke determines, and shifts slightly so Naruto is perched a little more comfortably on top of him. Naruto scowls, visibly fighting the argument crawling up his throat.

"I think they're getting just a little too comfortable, don't you think?" comes an amused voice. It's the Nidaime. "Yep. They're gettin' real friendly—"

"Oh my God! Stop looking at my son like that—"

"Namikaze," interrupts a weary voice. "Let them be."
"I'll kill you, Uchiha! You hear me?" The Yondaime steadfastly ignores the Sandaime, so Sasuke casually lets his hand drop high on Naruto's thigh, near his waist. Naruto doesn't notice. "Oy, that's it! Let me at him! Let me get my hands on him! You get away from my boy—" Sasuke tunes out all the yelling about his near and imminent death, and focuses instead on Naruto.

He's sweaty, a little dirt-stained, and his hair is hanging loose and long around his face. The blond started to put it up in a ponytail like Iruka a week ago, but today his band has flown off sometime during their scuffle. This is a near exact replica of three of Sasuke's dreams (where Naruto pushes Sasuke flat and rides him until they both come hard enough to shatter the edges of the world), so Sasuke takes advantage of reality for the few precious minutes it'll last.

"No," Naruto growls and hits Sasuke again, still lightly. "I get to yell at you later. That, or I'll kill you."

Sasuke smirks. "You can try."

Naruto scoffs and fumbles around in his pocket. A split second later, he's tugging the hair out of his face and up behind him. One snap, another, and then his hair is in a small, neat ponytail, only a few wisps of stray blond locks floating around his face. Sasuke tries very, very hard not to reach up and pull Naruto's hair loose again. "Fine, then. I'll yell at you now."

He takes a deep breath, but since Sasuke still has a slight headache from drinking too much, he puts up a hand to stop Naruto. The blond snaps his mouth shut, looking triumphant. "Later," he concedes, and watches Naruto get to his feet and hold out a hand for Sasuke to take.

"I'll treat you out for ramen."

Sasuke doesn't take the hand, and stands up, grumbling, "I can pay for myself."

"Not from what I hear," Naruto points out, grinning widely. It makes his eyes slit and the scars on his face deepen. "You owe Genma a lot of money, apparently." Naruto turns on his heel and heads towards Ichiraku, tugging at Sasuke's arm impatiently. "Ramen is waiting for us! Stop being so slow," Naruto says, and makes the food sound like it's someone important.

"It's not going anywhere, dead last," Sasuke mutters and falls into step. "And if I'm slow, that makes you immobile—"

"Hah!" Naruto rounds on him with a pointed finger, voice raised to a familiar yell. "I was just going easy on you today, you drunk bastard!"

Sasuke snatches Naruto's index finger and squeezes lightly. "Slow," he says, and the taunt doesn't hold as much venom as it usually does. It sounds flat, uninterested, and pale.

Naruto's face stills, and slowly, carefully, he takes Sasuke's hand in both of his, expression softening. "Sasuke. What happened?"

Sasuke can feel four sets of eyes on him, can sense their chilly presence in the clearing somewhere. Sasuke's Sharingan swirls to life. The Yondaime is still there, head bowed and gaze on the ground somewhere by Sasuke's feet. This is their grief. His, Kakashi's, and the Yondaime's. He has an entire clan on his shoulders, all their deaths piled one on top of another, and now Uncle Obito's as well. He can carry that too, he knows, but maybe he doesn't have to keep this one so tucked close to his heart, because Itachi hadn't killed Obito. Maybe—

"I found out how my uncle Obito died," Sasuke answers and watches Naruto's face go through a
sequence of quick emotions. He holds onto Sasuke's hand for a moment longer, blue eyes dulled with an emotion that Sasuke can't quite place.

Naruto does not let go of Sasuke's hand still, just steps closer. "Tell me."

This is not Naruto's grief. But still. "It wasn't Itachi."

At this, Naruto's grip on Sasuke's hand tightens. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Sasuke."

From anyone else, it would sound empty, but this is Naruto. So Sasuke only nods, breathes deep against this grief that's clawing inside his chest.

There is a moment of silence, but then Naruto remembers his original complaint.

"That's no reason to get drunk, you nincompoop," Naruto yells suddenly, and slaps Sasuke with a resounding thwack. Sasuke's head whips to the side. The Nidaime lets out a startled laugh when Sasuke gingerly touches his cheek.

"Oh, wow," the Nidaime says, chuckling still. "He's got you whipped, Uchiha."

"Dear God," the Yondaime whispers fervently. "Oh, sweet, dear Lord. Have mercy."

Naruto is already stomping off towards the ramen stand. Sasuke follows faithfully, lips curling into a small smile when Naruto begins a long and detailed rant about how Sasuke (very obviously) has a drinking problem, the downside of alcoholism, and about how if Sasuke's going to be drunk all the time now, he's going to be even more of a pain in the ass.

Sasuke hm-s and ah-s at the appropriate moments and dutifully ignores Naruto's father's wild threats and enraged howls in his ears.

Shikamaru and Ino are at the ramen stand, and when Naruto walks in, Shikamaru's expression shifts slightly from dead bored to mildly bored. Naruto takes this as an enthusiastic hello, and barrels into Shikamaru for a hug. Sasuke watches, hands clenched at the sight until finally, Naruto lets go and yells, "Shikamaru!" into Shikamaru's face.

"Naruto," Shikamaru says, face slipping back into his regular dead bored mask. He glances at Sasuke. "Uchiha."

Sasuke nods at Shikamaru and watches as Ino lunges for her teammate. "Naruto," Ino moans and drags Shikamaru away from the blond. "Stay away from him! You've taken Sasuke, so leave Shikama—"

"What's wrong with you, woman?" Shikamaru scowls and shrugs away from Ino's hold, rolling his eyes.

Sasuke settles down across from them. Naruto is already enthusiastically placing their orders at the counter, hands flying about more than the process requires. A minute later, Naruto returns with two bowls: One miso, and another plain. "Finally," Naruto breathes and digs into his ramen without further ado. A split second later, his bowl is done and so is half of Sasuke's.

"Mine, damnit," Sasuke snarls and snatches his bowl back from Naruto. The blond has the decency to look guilty before turning to Shikamaru. "So, how was your mission?"

"Troublesome," Shikamaru says predictably, and gets up. He glances briefly down at Sasuke. "I'm
stepping out. Smoke." It doesn't really sound like a question or even an invitation to Sasuke's ears, but he understands all the same.

"Smoke? What smoke?" the Shodaime questions.

"Sasuke," comes Sarutobi's voice, sounding very serious. "Drugs are not the answer."

"Sure," Sasuke says, and ignores the dirty looks that Ino and Naruto gives both of them. He's pushing past Naruto when the blond gives him a hard, painful slap to the back of his head. Scowling, Sasuke turns to glare at him before he follows Shikamaru out of the restaurant. Shikamaru flips open a pack of cigarettes and offers one to Sasuke.

It's become a routine now, ever since Shikamaru once walked out of a stuffy protocol meeting and found Sasuke smoking languidly. Give me one, Shikamaru had insisted, and together, they'd ignored the meeting that they were bound by honor and duty to attend. The next day, Tsunade had called them into her office and yelled for nearly two hours about blatantly disrespecting their superiors.

Sasuke and Shikamaru had listened patiently, and once they were outside, compared notes on how big (exactly as per Sasuke's observations using the Sharingan, and Shikamaru's measuring of the shadows) Tsunade's breasts were. It was, all in all, a strong bond.

"They smoke?" a disbelieving voice demands. It's the Shodaime, sounding exasperated. "Sarutobi, what kind of children did you—"

"I didn't know either," Sarutobi says, and then, "Sasuke, you and Shikamaru need to stop right now."

Shikamaru lights up before holding up a still-burning match for Sasuke to use. They take a few relaxing puffs—the Hokages never shutting up in Sasuke's ears.

Finally, Shikamaru offers, sounding casual still, "I heard some rumors about Akatsuki's whereabouts."

The Hokages fall silent. "Oh?" Sasuke says and watches people walk by the ramen shop. Inside the restaurant, Ino is waving her hands about in the air. Naruto has an expression of understanding on his face. They're probably complaining about him and Shikamaru, Sasuke thinks, and looks away.

"They're recruiting," Shikamaru mumbles. "Someone named Pein."

"The leader," Sasuke explains and flicks off ash from his cigarette. He blows out in a thin, steady stream and watches as the smoke billows and then vanishes. "Any word on what they're recruiting for?"

Shikamaru shakes his head, and annoyance flits across his face, as brief as a passing cloud. "They're in Amegakure."

Sasuke grunts and takes in another deep breath. "Full of missing-nin. It's prime real estate." In the restaurant, Naruto is talking now, face scrunched up in anger and frustration. Ino is giving him sympathetic looks. "Names and locations?"

"No locations yet. But a few names. First, Kabuto," Shikamaru says, voice pitched low.

"Kabuto's dead." Sasuke breathes in on the cigarette again, the red ember flaring briefly to life at the end of the stick. "I would know. I killed him. Your contacts?"
Shikamaru gives him a look. "I don't give names, Uchiha." He shifts his gaze back to Ino and Naruto, who are now both sipping serenely at their drinks. "You sure he's dead? He's a skilled medic."

"I'm sure," Sasuke says and remembers pushing his hand through Kabuto's chest, grabbing the man's heart and squeezing the life out of it. "Look, if your intelligence is—"

"My intel is fine. I get perfectly good sources coming to me with sightings of Orochimaru. Kisame and Itachi are in Amegakure, last I heard," Shikamaru picks up where he left off.

Sasuke doesn't flinch at the name anymore. He's had nearly a decade to practice that. "And?"

"Deidara and Sasori are recruiting in the Sound Village. What's left of it anyways."

Right before Sasuke had left Sound, he'd leveled it in a short, vindictive sixteen-hour period. He'd pardoned everyone under Orochimaru's and Kabuto's command, told them, "Run." What's left, Sasuke thinks, watching as the fire crawls slowly up his cigarette, isn't much at all. "Well. They won't have much luck there."

Shikamaru gives Sasuke a sidelong glance. It's generally not talked about in the open, but there are more rumors swirling around Sasuke's experience in the Village of Sound than there are about Hatake Kakashi's hidden face. They range from mildly accurate (Orochimaru tortured Sasuke) to absurd (Orochimaru pimped Sasuke to raise funds for their traitorous cause). "I think they're after Naruto again," Shikamaru tells him. "Can't map out their movements for sure yet, but... I'm willing to bet they'll start heading towards Konoha fairly soon."

The Yondaime speaks then. "The Kyuubi," he breathes. "They want it?"

"Yes," Sarutobi says, his voice heavy with resignation and regret. "Your son... He is never as safe as you would like him to be, Namikaze. They have tried, and succeeded, in kidnapping Naruto once already. I apologize."

Sasuke's eyes instinctively seek out the blond, who is now digging into his second bowl of ramen. Ino is still talking, tugging absentmindedly at her hair. Shikamaru follows Sasuke's lingering gaze. "Time to tell the Hokage?"

"Yes!" all four Hokages insist.

"No," Sasuke says, and wonders just how safe Naruto is in Konoha. Wonders if he will be able to protect him, if he can hide Naruto away in a tower somewhere, far from all of this, and lock the door with his own bones.

"I'm with you there," Shikamaru agrees. "You going after them?"

The ghosts answer immediately. "No!"

"Yes," Sasuke says.

"When?" Shikamaru asks, putting out his cigarette.

Sasuke drops his cigarette onto the ground as well, and grinds his heel into it. "Soon. I have to heal first, and—" He looks at Naruto again. "Take care of a few things."

Together, they walk back into the restaurant.
"You are out of your mind," the Shodaime sighs heavily. "Four generations and Uchihas are just as stubborn as they were—"

"They'll slaughter you," the Nidaime points out bluntly. "Do you actually think you can do this?"

Sasuke rolls his eyes and turns on the Sharingan to look at the four Hokages. They're sitting across from him in a tight semicircle on his bedroom floor, looking down at the map that Sasuke has spread out in front of him.

"I was once an A-ranked missing-nin," he says, face neutral. It feels like he's interviewing for a job and is reading off his resume. "I killed Orochimaru and Kabuto. And I leveled the Village of Sound. I maimed nearly a hundred nin that day, the weakest of which were chuunin-level, and I came out without a scratch. Also, my Sharingan is more developed than you think. So yes, I'm fairly certain I can do this."

The Nidaime's eyes widen slightly at this, but he recovers quickly. The others are all stone-faced. "Akatsuki is composed almost entirely of S-ranked nin," Sarutobi says. "You cannot fight all of them. Go tell Tsunade. She is your Hokage, she can help."

"Who said I was going to fight all of them?" Sasuke puts in, and leans back against the side of his bed. "Besides, if I alert the Hokage, she'll play by the rules and ruin everything."

"Boy, the rules are what keeps everyone alive in this village," the Nidaime growls, and Sasuke feels a cool, threatening touch on his neck, the same he felt when he was aiming a Chidori at the Yondaime.

"What makes Akatsuki so dangerous is not their strength. It's because they don't have any rules. If they catch wind that the Hokage is mobilizing her troops against them, if they see even a single Konoha-nin trailing them, they will attack. Like you said," Sasuke says, and bends over the map again. "They're made up mostly of S-ranked nin, and we can't hold them back, not with the finest of Konoha. Orochimaru alone nearly toppled this village once before, and he was gracious enough to do it in broad daylight. Akatsuki won't be so kind."

"You seem to know a lot about this, boy," the Shodaime points out. "That medic-nin called you a traitor, didn't she?"

Sasuke stills and wonders how he's going to answer that question. A year ago, he sat in front of a panel of equally powerful ninja, and had to explain himself to them. The Council, all withered and bent over, but still pulsing with dark, powerful chakra, had listened patiently to him, and in the end, had granted him his freedom. But back then, he'd had Orochimaru's mangled, rotting body by his side as evidence to back him up. Now, he has only his word. "Three years ago, I betrayed Konoha and joined Orochimaru because he said he'd make me stronger," he explains, and his hand automatically goes to cover his neck where the cursed seal is still etched into his skin, a permanent reminder of the choices he's made. "And then I returned."

The Yondaime's eyes narrow dangerously. The blond leans forward, tugging at his white coat angrily, the way Naruto does with his orange jumpsuit when he's upset. "You're going to kill Itachi?" the Yondaime seethes. "That's your grand plan to keep Naruto safe? You stupid, selfish brat."

"Pein, not Itachi. I'm going to kill Pein," Sasuke interrupts, and points at the map. "Here, here, and here—that's most likely where they're set up. The Land of Rice Fields is predictable enough, and if I were Itachi..." Sasuke takes a pen and makes two markings on the map. "Here. A floating HQ, and base stations at the four corners of the country."
The Nidaime disappears for a split second, only to appear right next to Sasuke, bending over the map thoughtfully. "Manpower?" he questions.

"Ten core members and twenty auxiliary ninja at any given time. A leader, two vice-captains, three lieutenants," Sasuke ticks off. "The others can be anywhere."

"They have dispatched two of them to the Village of Sound, though," says the Shodaime, and he appears on the other side of Sasuke. "Deidara and Sasori."

"They're lieutenants," Sasuke says, and then taps the back of his pen on the map again. "Which means they'll take a team with them. I'm guessing—"

"They will probably scope out the entire country while they're at it," the Shodaime cuts in, his slightly transparent finger sweeping over the large area of the Land of Rice Fields. "Are you sure you took care of everyone?"


The Nidaime gives him a flat look, the same expression that Kakashi has when sizing up Sasuke's performance on the field. "Impressive, boy."

"Not something to be proud of," Sarutobi argues, and closes his eyes. "I will not approve of this."

The Yondaime looks torn between contributing to the strategy plans and holding out like Sarutobi. Sasuke meets his eyes, and then very pointedly, looks at the picture of Team 7 he has on his nightstand. The Yondaime follows his gaze, and his stare lingers for a few seconds. Then, with a pop, he's gone, only to reappear right across from Sasuke.

"Here," the Yondaime says, and points at a small village at the edge of the Land of Rice Fields. "It's a stronghold of missing-nin passing through the borders. Can you get any intelligence on this region?"

Sasuke grins, pleased, and does a few seals. A small coral snake appears. "Yuuta," Sasuke greets in a hiss, and lets the snake crawl up his arm. The snake looks at him with blank, cunning eyes. "Yes?"

The Hokages look expectantly at Sasuke, so Sasuke lets the snake slither from his arm onto the map. "Here," he says and points to the village the Yondaime singled out. "I want you to scout it out and keep me updated. Tell me what you see, and keep track of the chakra signatures of everyone who passes through."

Yuuta considers it, tilting his head slightly in a nod. "Report back when you get there and have established base."

"Very well," Yuuta hisses, and disappears with a pop.

"It's far," the Shodaime says immediately. "Your chakra can't possibly extend so much, Uchiha."

"I don't need chakra for my snakes."

"Right, right," the Nidaime says dismissively, smirking. "Forgive us, we forgot. You're Spirit-Boy."

The Yondaime breaks out into laughter, and Sarutobi joins him with an ill-concealed chuckle, Even the Shodaime smiles despite himself. Sasuke ignores all of them and goes back to the map.

Two hours later, Sasuke orders take-out and is digging his way through his third box of food when
the Nidaime looks up from the map and asks, "What are you? A pig?"

His mouth full, Sasuke merely shrugs. "Let him be," the Shodaime says. "The boy is still growing."

Sasuke is about to say something when he hears the front door open. He pushes the map under his bed with one hand and rolls out a nondescript jutsu scroll with the other. By the time Naruto waltzes in, Sasuke is eating his food again, Sharingan gone. Naruto drops onto Sasuke's bed without even a hello and sighs heavily. "I'm in love," he moans.

Sasuke very carefully, and very slowly puts down his food.

"I was walking back home after talking to that hag, Tsunade, right?" Naruto turns onto his side, and he's close enough that Sasuke can feel Naruto's breath reaching across the back of his neck. "Right?"

For added measure, Naruto threads his fingers through Sasuke's hair and gives it a hard yank. "Right?"

"Right," Sasuke says dutifully, and slaps Naruto's hand away.

"Anyways, Granny got mad at me about something I said and kicked me out of her office. So I was upset, and then guess who I walked into!"

"Who?"

"Guess," Naruto prods and yanks at Sasuke's hair again.

Sasuke hates this. "Hyuga," he bites out and hears Naruto's delighted, "Exactly!"

"And guess what Neji did!"

Sasuke really, really hates this. "Bought you ramen."

Naruto chuckles gleefully. "Yes, but it gets better—"

"Please, do tell," Sasuke bites out, and feels a cooling touch on his shoulder.

"Kid, here's the rule," the Nidaime explains slowly. "In unrequited love, you have to at least pretend to be happy for the other person."

"Oh my God, get away from my son," the Yondaime moans. "I mean it."

Sasuke ignores both of them.

"The waitress at Ichiraku bought me ramen, too." Naruto cackles a little maniacally. "Two bowls of ramen. Free."

"So who exactly," Sasuke snaps, turning around to look Naruto in the eye, "who exactly are you in love with?" They're very, very close now, noses almost touching.

Naruto gives him an odd look. "Ramen, obviously. I got my second bowl to go and brought it here for you." He taps the end of Sasuke's nose, smiling. A little dramatically, Naruto continues, "To spread the love."

Sasuke swats at him and goes back to the scroll, which, he realizes now, he's laid out upside down in his haste. Scowling, he rolls it close and tugs out another from his desk. "Hey, Sasuke," Naruto mumbles in his ear.
"What?" Sasuke forcefully reads the introduction to himself. *The Sharingan can be contained in three stages. With sufficient chakra control, the user can access each stage at will.*

"You know what you need?"

"What?" Sasuke knows this scroll already; he perfected it nearly four years ago. *The first stage begins with minimal chakra input to the area behind the eyes. It allows the user to memorize motion.*

"Love," Naruto breathes wistfully. "All you need is love."

"No, Naruto, what I need is a drink and a smoke, and you out of my apartment," Sasuke mutters, and rolls up the scroll. Naruto is in one of his moods again. The playful, annoying one. The one where all the blond wants is to get under Sasuke's skin with his excessive, flamboyant happiness. "What do you want?"

"Nuthin’," Naruto nearly sings. "What were you and Shikamaru talking about today?"

So that's his real reason. Shikamaru didn't tell him, so he's trying to pry information out of Sasuke now. "How unbelievably dumb natural blonds are," Sasuke evades, and digs viciously into his food. Fucking Hyuga had dinner with Naruto. Again. What were they? Dating?

"I think I might dye my hair," Naruto says speculatively, ignoring Sasuke's jibe completely. "Brunet, maybe? What do you think?"

"I like you blond," Sasuke mutters and gets to his feet, kicking empty take-out boxes out of the way. When he looks down at the bed, Naruto is running contemplative fingers through his hair, which looks... different. Softer, smoother, crafted almost. There are wild, delicate wisps of hair around Naruto's face, framing it now, and Sasuke realizes just how much of a heart shape Naruto's face is. "What'd you do to your hair?"

"Huh? Oh! Ino said I needed a haircut." He puts his hand up and inspects his nails, which look polished and smooth. "She also said a manicure wouldn't do me any harm. It was odd. But hey, Hinata, Sakura, and Tenten were there, so it wasn't too bad. We watched the Sunagakure Kazekage nomination process on TV. I think Gaara's going to win, by the way." Naruto fiddles absently with the ear piercings he got nearly a year ago—three, packed together on his right ear's cartilage. "Anyway," he says, "we ordered take-out and drank a bottle of wine. A few bottles of wine."

Sasuke arches an eyebrow. "Are you drunk?"

"Tipsy, but the Kyuubi will be taking care of that very soon," Naruto says and follows Sasuke out into the kitchen, tugging at his expensive-looking shirt. He's far beyond the years of relying on his modest orphan stipend and genin salary. Naruto earns enough to afford things for himself. He is powerful, someone important in the Tower hierarchy, and far above Sasuke's rank. He doesn't wear his orange jacket all the time anymore; now, he's usually in perfectly tailored robes that whip and snap around his feet as he walks through the Hokage Tower's corridors. When he's not wearing his robes, he dresses to the nines. Today, it's a loose, cotton shirt over a pair of snug-fitting jeans (*the ass on him, Sasuke thinks, could ruin warlords and kages*). Sasuke is utterly and helplessly distracted by the angular perfection of Naruto's collarbone each time his shirt slips over one of his bony shoulders. He stares at the lovely expanse of skin at Naruto's neck until he realizes that Naruto is still talking. "—seems logical, seeing as I can't go undercover very easily anymore—"

"Because you're on TV all the time," Sasuke points out mildly. He returns his attention to his food and finishes the rest of his food before opening the fridge. There's a thirty-pack sitting innocently on
the top shelf with a post-it note in Kakashi's handwriting: *Drink responsibly*. Grinning, Sasuke grabs a can and shoves the take-out box into the back of the fridge.

He's about to kick the fridge door close when Naruto stops him and leans down. He rummages around before emerging again with the empty take-out box in one hand and the post-it note in the other.

"Responsibly," Sasuke intones seriously, and brings the can up to his lips. Naruto grabs it without further ado, and drops both the take-out box and the can into the trash. He moves about the kitchen before pressing a glass of water into Sasuke's hands. "Stop drinking so much. And seriously, brunet?"

Sasuke spends the next three hours in bed, watching Naruto patiently iron all his shirts and pants, thwarting his efforts to convince Sasuke into getting a manicure. "Stop eating so much, Sasuke," Naruto interrupts himself, and folds up a shirt neatly. "Anyway, as I was saying—What was I saying?"

"A bug fell in your food," Sasuke prompts, and attempts to drop a noodle into his mouth while lying flat on his back. It's mildly successful, but he gets some soup on his nose.

"Right, so I'm thinking, heck, I killed one of Shino's bugs, he's going to kill me, right? So I sit there, freaking out for about ten minutes, until I realize, maybe I should run for it, you know? Take off." Naruto turns to put away the shirt in Sasuke's closet and his voice becomes muffled. "But I figure, that's a pretty rude way to go about things. I mean, if I killed one of your snakes by, you know, *drowning him in my soup*, and took off without telling you, you'd be pretty upset."

"I would," Sasuke says noncommittally, and slurps a noodle out of the cup that he's balancing on his chest. He's getting good at this.

"See what I mean?" Naruto says, and turns back to ironing one of Sasuke's pants. "So I decide I should just get this over with, and I turn to Shino and say, 'All right, Shino, I love you, you know that, right?'"

The ramen cup on Sasuke's chest nearly topples over, but Sasuke catches it, and eases it to the ground. It's Shino now? "Gods fucking *damnit*," he hisses. Just how many boyfriends does Naruto have?

"Who is this Shino fellow?" the Yondaime's voice thunders in the room.

"Another boyfriend?" Sarutobi offers. "He's a nice boy, Minato. Don't worry."

"Really in demand," the Nidaime puts in. "It does makes sense, though. You have a good-looking son, Namikaze."

"Thank you," the Yondaime says, and continues a little wistfully, "he inherited that from Kushina. He has my eyes and hair, but everything else—"

"And Shino goes, 'Sure thing, Naruto.' And I say, 'I drowned your bug in my ramen.'" Naruto heaves a deep sigh. "He let me have it. But about halfway into trashing me around, Shikamaru figures it's a good idea to point out, 'Hey, Shino, buddy, this doesn't look like one of your bugs *at all*.'"

"That's nice of him," Sasuke scowls and closes his eyes.

"Isn't it," Naruto says dryly. "After I broke my finger, too. Look, Sasuke, what that stupid bastard
Shino did to my finger. I mean, it's healed and everything." Sasuke obligingly turns and looks. Naruto's finger looks perfectly fine. "I mean, for a bug, it was pretty dramatic, you know?"

Sasuke refrains from mentioning that Naruto is drama on two legs. That everything about Naruto—from the way he walks to the way he breathes air—is dramatic, and that Naruto shouldn't be the one criticizing other people on excessive amounts of drama. He says instead, "Right."

Naruto goes back to ironing, grumbling under his breath about how there's wrinkles so deep in these things that—"Hey, you want to take me to dinner tomorrow?"

"Sure. Payment for doing my laundry."

"Don't push it, bastard," Naruto growls and wields the iron threateningly. "Let me remind you, if it weren't for me, your apartment would be a biohazard."

"You're just a neat freak."

"It's Iruka-sensei," Naruto mourns soulfully. "All his fault. Blame him. He raised me that way. Although..." Naruto trails off, making a face at some memory. "The lesson didn't really stick until I began to travel with Jiraiya. That man lives like a—" Naruto makes an expansive gesture, but doesn't finish his sentence. "I mean, the man didn't do his laundry for months on end, and if we stayed at any place for longer than a month at a time, it was awful. Did I tell you about that time when—"

"Iruka?" a voice inquires as Naruto rambles on.

"Ah, Namikaze, I never got around to telling you," Sarutobi explains quickly. "Iruka-sensei is a chūnin in our village. He took care of Naruto for the majority of his childhood, even risked his life to save him once. They're very close."

"And before I forget... About Iruka-sensei," Naruto says, and puts away the last piece of clothing. He snaps the closet door shut behind him and starts to fold up the ironing table, which he places up against the wall. "I think you should have dinner with him later this week."

Sasuke groans and buries his face in the pillow. His last encounter with Iruka was right after he came back from Orochimaru. "He always yells at me."

The bed dips with Naruto's weight, and suddenly, Sasuke is falling onto the floor, just barely avoiding the ramen cup. Naruto settles in with a happy sigh. "He's just worried," he says, looking over the edge of the bed at Sasuke.

"About you or about me?" Sasuke snaps and sits up, rubbing at his head. It's probably going to bruise this time. "If I remember correctly, most of our conversations are about doing things to my private parts if I hurt you again."

"I like this Iruka," the Yondaime says decisively. "He and I—we understand each other."

Naruto grins and turns onto his back. "Go away," he commands regally. "I'm going to bed."

"In my apartment," Sasuke scowls, but heads towards the living room anyway.

He's settling down on the couch when Naruto yells, "Oh, please, you mooched off of me for weeks, you bastard." Sasuke doesn't say anything, just turns onto his stomach. "And I took care of your sorry ass, might I remind you," Naruto says again from the bedroom.

Sasuke remembers very little of this week, mostly because he was out cold from some strange jutsu
he’d gotten hit with. All he remembers is waking up and finding Naruto curled beside him, smelling of fresh laundry and shampoo. "Good fucking night," Sasuke yells and pulls the pillow over his head.

"Well, sweet dreams," Naruto yells back, making it sound like an insult. "You prick."

Blessed silence. But then, "You're still taking me to dinner tomorrow! And not take-out! I want a nice place to sit down to eat, and a decent wine list! Make a reservation, bastard!"

It is a wonder, Sasuke thinks, that Naruto's vocal cords have survived so many years of constant abuse. If anything, he seems to be getting louder with each year. "Fine, okay, I'll make a gods damned reservation," Sasuke yells back. He rolls onto his side, grumbling under his breath about how Naruto is going to drive him to bankruptcy at this rate.

A few minutes later, the Nidaime says speculatively, "They may actually be married."

"In which case, I may actually have to kill myself," the Yondaime grumbles.

The Shodaime clears his throat politely. "You are already dead, Minato."

The Yondaime doesn't seem to notice the Shodaime. Instead, he takes a deep breath and starts yelling at Sasuke again about all the nasty, inhuman, and cruel things he'll do to Sasuke if he touches Naruto, thinks about touching Naruto, or if he even thinks about thinking about touching Naruto.

Sasuke gets no sleep that night, but in the morning, Naruto makes him omelets and coffee, and serves him with a sleepy grumble before vanishing into the bathroom. As Sasuke eats, he can hear Naruto singing loud and off-key in the shower, and it makes the Yondaime's now routine bitchfest much more tolerable.
Sasuke dreams he's drowning.

When he looks up in his dream, struggling through the water and feeling his body get heavy and dragged down, he sees his cousin Shisui, reaching out a hand for him to take. When Sasuke finally gasps awake, it's sudden, and his Sharingan flares into life. "Shisui," he rasps out and starts to cough, clutching at his throat because it felt too real to be just a dream, and he's still drowning, but on air now.

"A dream, boy," the Shodaime says. "Just a dream."

Sasuke pushes himself up, breathing heavily. He's drenched in sweat, the sheets clinging to his skin a little disgustingly. "Shisui," he whispers again and stagger to his feet. The clock reads 2:34 a.m., but there's no hope for him to fall asleep again. The Hokages step aside as he walks past them and heads into the kitchen. There's no food there, just alcohol, which is fine by Sasuke.

So he grabs a can and settles down in the couch, trying not to remember his last memory of Shisui. But every time he closes his eyes, he sees the body—bloating, rotting, inhuman, Sasuke thinks, and takes a swig of his beer, hoping the alcohol will somehow be enough to counter the horror of the image. It isn't.

Uchiha Mikoto had not wanted her son to see the body, but the entire compound had been abuzz with the news. Shisui was dead, Sasuke overheard, and with his hands shaking—what does dead mean? Gone? For good? What?—he'd run all the way to the Naka River where the police and older members of the clan had gathered. And Sasuke had watched, eyes wide as the body was dragged from the riverbed. It had been submerged for more than forty-eight hours, he would later learn. For forty-eight hours, Shisui had been left alone in that godforsaken water.

"Boy, you need to stop drinking," the Shodaime warns him, and he sounds genuinely angry. "Put down that beer and—"

Sasuke tunes him out for a few moments before he finally makes a decision. When he walks back into his bedroom, the ghosts follow, but he pays them no mind as he opens the door to the closet. He digs until he finds the kunai box. It had been his uncle's once, the Uchiha crest etched onto the lid of the box, starting to fade from the wood now.

"What's this?" the Nidaime asks, and Sasuke ignores him in favor of opening the box. He's thumbed through these pictures so many times now, he knows the order they're in, knows the faces he'll see, has memorized their smiles. Sasuke settles against the wall by the closet door, takes a swig of his beer and shuffles through the pictures until he finds the one he's looking for. Over the years, he has learned that this is the only way to chase away nightmares and memories of rotting corpses and burning pyres: pictures of his kin, healthy and whole.

Shisui's smiles were always crooked, as if one side of his mouth was incapable of quirking up into a smile. He's like all the other Uchihas—dark-haired, tall, and handsome in a strictly traditional sense. Sasuke's mother had had high hopes that Shisui would bring home the most beautiful bride the clan had yet to see.

Shisui taught Sasuke how to swim, had held him up in the water while Sasuke paddled and made an utter fool of himself. And once, when Shisui let him go (a little too early; Sasuke wasn't ready yet), Sasuke remembers sinking and being terrified, and Shisui lifting him out of the water with a laugh.
Sasuke hadn't let go of Shisui's neck until the older boy had waded out of the water. Hadn't let go until Shisui carried him all the way back home and handed him over to Mikoto's open arms.

Sasuke fingers the edge of the photograph and shuffles through until he finds a second picture. This one is of Shisui holding Sasuke as a baby, looking terrified of the child in his arms. Sasuke is grinning toothlessly into the camera, wearing only a diaper, one hand fisted into Shisui's shirtsleeve. The story is that Itachi took that picture right before another picture was taken with Itachi and Sasuke.

Sasuke was always told as a child that he looked more like Shisui than Itachi. Sasuke runs a hand over the line of his jaw, wondering if his mother would still think so now. "He looks like you," the Nidaime says gruffly. "Who is he?"

"My cousin. Shisui." Sasuke pauses a beat and corrects himself, "My brother."

Because that was what Shisui was. Shisui lost his mother to breast cancer long before Sasuke was born. Uncle Kyoguku, lost in his grief, had leaned on the Clan to help care for his son. Mikoto had stepped forward; she breast-fed Shisui, raised him alongside Itachi as if he were his own. Shisui and Itachi were inseparable so Shisui filters through all of Sasuke's childhood memories. When Sasuke thinks *Brother*, he sees two boys: Itachi and Shisui. *Twins*, Mikoto used to say fondly whenever she saw Itachi and Shisui at play, *The gods blessed me with twins*. When Shisui died, her grief had been difficult to watch. Sasuke can still remember the way she had pressed a hand to the soft swell of her belly where Tomomi was still growing and whispered, *My boy, my baby, my boy, my boy.*

Sasuke shuts the box and drinks the last of his beer. Shisui: Murdered by his best friend, drowned, and then falsely depicted as a suicide. This is what the Sharingan does to its users, Sasuke thinks, and remembers his own greed for it (still his greed, Sasuke knows, and worries waking up one day lusting for the Mangekyou enough to kill the one good thing in his life).

"I remember him," Sarutobi mutters, and falls silent for a few seconds. "He was a great warrior."

Sasuke laughs at that. "We're *all* warriors. That's all we ever were." Men who know only how to fight and kill cannot possibly live any other way. War, that's when a Sharingan is in its element. "Peace unsettles us," Sasuke reminds himself. His grandfather told him that once, but Sasuke was too young to understand.

The Nidaime clears his throat. "You must feel very lonely. I'm sorry for your loss."

Sasuke shrugs and puts the box away. He's gotten used to it by now. The sting is less painful when he takes stock of his life. When he looks at the Yondaime, the man has a pitying look on his face. He can't stand to hold the Yondaime's gaze, so Sasuke starts to pull on clothes. "You get used to it."

"Where are you going?" the Shodaime asks while Sasuke starts to lace his shoes, pulls on arm warmers and gloves.

"For a run," he says. He does a few stretches.

"Now?" Sarutobi asks. "It's three—"

"I'd like to go alone," Sasuke interrupts and pockets his keys. He shuts the door on Sarutobi's face, ignoring the older man's defeated expression.

Sasuke does twelve seven-minute miles before his legs start to cramp in the chill of early morning. He returns to his apartment at six. The Hokages are waiting for him, silent, and still don't say anything even as Sasuke slips into the shower for nearly an hour.
Sasuke falls into his bed wrinkled like a prune after his long shower, and doesn't wake up until ten, when the morning light streams in and interrupts his watery dreams.

Sasuke does fifty laps with Lee before he even reaches the bridge. Sakura and Naruto don't comment when Sasuke takes off his sweaty shirt and falls onto the grass to dry.

Sakura merely looks him up and down before saying, "Maybe more caffeine next time, Uchiha." And Naruto and Sakura launch into a lengthy, detailed analysis of different sources of caffeine, the best brands available in these sources, and the best way to make Sasuke ingest them. Sasuke ignores them both and closes his eyes to doze, enjoying the sun against his skin.

A few hours later—when Naruto and Sakura have moved on to the merits of free trade—Kakashi appears with a pop and a smile. "No missions today either," he says and sighs forlornly. "This is what peace does to a ninja."

"Kakashi-sensei," Naruto chides, and Sasuke rolls onto his stomach, because he knows exactly where this conversation is going. "How can you say that about peace—"

"Sasuke, you're late again, I see," Kakashi interrupts, and he's still casual. "Fifty—"

"Done." Sasuke feels the grass tickling his chin every time he talks. "Earlier today, around the village."

The Shodaime starts to laugh, a deep, booming sound that fills up the open space. The Nidaime joins, and eventually, the other Hokages also fall into slight hysterics. Sasuke hides his own grin into the grass when Kakashi kicks him lightly in the side.

"It's going to be a hundred from now on," Kakashi sighs. "I have something fun planned for you three today."

Naruto lets out an excited yell and Sakura cracks her knuckles expectantly. "Finally," she says and gives Sasuke a hard kick in the leg. "Get up, Uchiha."

Sasuke stays face down in the cool grass for a few more moments before pushing himself up into a sitting position. He lingers, yawning widely before getting to his feet. Sakura and Kakashi start walking away, Sakura talking excitedly about her ob/gyn rotations in the clinic, about how she delivered a baby—"It was a girl, Kakashi-sensei, she was so disgusting and adorable and loud and..."

Naruto watches Sasuke with bright, wide eyes, his cheeks a little red. Sasuke stares back, sitting cross-legged on the ground. "What?"

"I think," the Shodaime says pleasantly, "Naruto is watching you with some interest, Sasuke." Which is obvious enough, Sasuke thinks.

"Nothing," Naruto snaps and crosses his arms over his chest. "Let's go."

"If you're in such a hurry," Sasuke snaps back, "go ahead—"

"As in," the Nidaime interrupts, "he's checking you out, kid."

"Oh, God, someone please kill me now," the Yondaime moans. "My boy is actually interested in this delinquent?"
Sasuke thinks *oh*, and snaps his mouth shut. He gets to his feet, stretching a little more than necessary, and notices Naruto's face flush slowly but steadily. Sure, he'd known Naruto is gay. But knowing Naruto likes men is different from knowing that Naruto is... checking him out.

Naruto snarls, getting suddenly very angry. "Take your sweet damn time, then." And he rounds his back on Sasuke, jogging to catch up with Kakashi and Sakura. "Well," Sasuke says to himself and pulls on his shirt, ignoring the Yondaime's miserable wailing in the background ("... Lord God above help me, Sarutobi-sensei, what do I *do*?") and the other Hokages' careful consolations ("Naruto is clearly a level-headed boy, Namikaze. You should trust in him to make the right decision for himself...").

Sasuke catches up with the others quickly. Kakashi leads them for some time, hm-ing and ah-ing at Sakura and Naruto's low-pitched rambles about their lives, the trees, the weather, and whatever strikes their fancy at the time. "Kakashi-sensei," they begin each sentence with, and it's like they're still twelve, trying to get the jounin's attention and approval, fighting between themselves to earn the next fond look or indulgent smile.

It's a little pointless, because they're all Kakashi's favorite in one way or another: Sakura for her intelligence and carefully suppressed anger issues; Naruto for his persistent compassion so overwhelming that even Kakashi doesn't freeze up anymore when the blond dives in for a hug; and Sasuke for...

Sasuke trails off, not sure how to finish that thought. Maybe for his Sharingan, he thinks, and bites down on the disappointment at that. Maybe because Sasuke reminds Kakashi of Obito, or Kakashi himself.

"Where are we going, Kakashi-sensei?" Sakura asks, and Sasuke can see her bright, green eyes already darkening in calculations, estimates, and guesses. Naruto looks expectantly up at Kakashi—still such a huge height difference between them, Sasuke thinks with a smirk, because Naruto seems frozen at just 5'7", nearly a head shorter than both Sasuke and Kakashi.

"You'll see," Kakashi says, and he sounds just a little too pleased with himself. Finally, he stops at a clearing by the lake. The three of them stare at him expectantly, and then, Kakashi fumbles around in his back pocket before pulling out something. He holds it up in a closed fist for a split second, and then opens his fingers wide. Two bells drop down and tinkle invitingly.

The three vanish, all of them grinning widely.

"So the point," the Yondaime is explaining to the others, "is that one of them will inevitably be a casualty."

"Oh, I see," the Nidaime says, sounding excited. Sarutobi and the Shodaime 'ah' as well, and the Shodaime turns to look at Sasuke. "How about this? I have a jutsu for you to try, boy," he tells him. "Ready?"

Sasuke wants to point out that this is really not the time to be trying out new jutsus, because he's crouching so low to the ground that he can practically smell the earth underneath him. The bush is tickling his skin and from this angle, he can see Kakashi clearly, reading his book on the branch of a tree. He's wide open from two different angles—everything else is rigged with traps. Naruto has set off one already for Sakura and Sasuke to see.

"Focus your chakra into the ground, right beneath your fingertips. Search with your chakra until you find the roots of the trees. Have you found them?" The Shodaime demonstrates for Sasuke even as
he speaks, and Sasuke watches, his Sharingan swirling with concentration. "By the time this jutsu is done, you should be able to manipulate the tree. Understood?" Sasuke nods. "Watch," says the Shodaime, and his hands fly into seals. Sasuke's hands automatically start copying the movements. Then he feels it: The tug and pull of a tree, the one that Kakashi's leaning on. He watches the jounin to see if he has noticed and—there's a slight movement as Kakashi lowers his book a fraction of a centimeter, and then he's still again.

"Go," the Shodaime instructs, and Sasuke is flying just as the tree branch lurches and sends Kakashi tumbling down, two vines coming to wrap around his torso and slam him up against the tree trunk. Sasuke counts *one, two, three* traps, flashes by them all and is about to lunge at Kakashi when—there's no one there. "Shit," he hisses and feels someone right behind him.

Sasuke blocks a punch, a kick, a shuriken, and is about to retreat when he hears a rapid yell of seals. It's the Nidaime, and Sasuke follows the orders in quick succession. Four walls come up around him, and another slides into place on the top, effectively shutting Sasuke inside a protective barrier. "Here's one," says Sarutobi and does a few seals. He presses his hand into the ground. "It's to move earth. More chakra, more movement."

Sasuke repeats the steps and then, hesitantly, presses some chakra down through his feet and into the ground below him. He sinks nearly a foot. He grins and begins to dig away from Kakashi and back into the bushes for cover when he hears the Yondaime behind him, "Oh, try this one. See if you can get it." Sasuke pauses and turns to look at the Yondaime, glowing an eerie bluish white in the dark of the tunnel. The Yondaime does a series of seals for some time. "It's a water dragon," he says once he's finished.

Sasuke digs back up to the surface and sees Kakashi reading his book, looking bored. He looks at Sasuke and waves amiably. Carefully, Sasuke walks backwards until he's at the edge of the water. "Let's go, Uchiha," the Yondaime urges, and when Sasuke looks at him, he has a wild grin on his face, looking so much like Naruto in that instant that the corners of Sasuke's lips twitch into a smile.

"Here we go," Sasuke says to himself and starts to do the seals. The Yondaime joins him as a guide when Sasuke stumbles once with the seals. "Fine, you're doing just fine," the Nidaime coaches.

"Well, this is interesting," Kakashi mutters and puts his book away, his hands blurring into seals.

A giant two-headed water dragon rises out of the water behind Sasuke, and he turns around to stare at it, disbeliefing. "It worked?" he says over the rush of water. The dragon roars, a loud gurgling sound that drenches Sasuke with water. He laughs, swallowing water accidentally. "It worked!"

"Impressive, boy," the Shodaime says, and he's also smiling up at the monster Sasuke has created. "Very, very impressive."

"The first try, too," the Yondaime yells over the rush of water, sounding just the slightest bit proud. "All right, let's see what this baby can do."

Sasuke urges it on towards the jounin, quickening it with his own chakra. And then, when he vanishes to start setting his own traps to get the bells, the Nidaime interrupts, "Come on, kid, I have a really good one."

"I have to get the bells," Sasuke hisses.

"You make it impossible for us to live vicariously through you," the Nidaime complains, sighing forlornly. He adds, "It's a fire jutsu."
Sasuke growls and turns back to face the jounin, who is now, satisfyingly enough, dripping wet. But he doesn't have time to listen to what the Nidaime has to say, because suddenly, there's another Kakashi right behind him, holding him down.

"How about an earth jutsu?" the Nidaime offers. It's an hour into training already, and Sasuke has about seventeen new jutsus memorized and stored away in his mind. "You're too slow, boy. There's no excuse for you getting stuck in here."

"I was doing fine until all four of you went off at the same time and distracted me," Sasuke growls, and then says, "and Nidaime, I can't do jutsus."

"For the record, it was my turn," the Shodaime points out diplomatically, if not a little miffed. "If you would like to alternate the order, I will hear your suggestions." The others offer sincere apologies to the Shodaime, promise him that the current order (Shodaime, Sandaime, Yondaime, Nidaime) is just fine. The Shodaime nods, satisfied.

"Fire?" the Yondaime suggests after a while.

"I'd burn alive," Sasuke argues and wriggles life into his fingers. He's buried neck-deep in sand, and there's seven different traps around his head in case he moves—meaning jutsus are not an option right now. Naruto and Sakura are nowhere in sight.

"Oh, this is a good one," the Nidaime says from where he's floating a few feet off the ground, examining the knots that Kakashi made on a nearby branch. "Well done, Hatake."

"Kakashi was always good with traps," the Yondaime mutters. "No way out."

"Actually..." Sasuke says, an idea dawning on him. The air around him fizzes and cackles with electricity. The problem with dealing with lightning is grounding. If the grounding is off, no matter how accurate the aim, it'll kill the user first. Neck-deep underground though, Sasuke really doesn't have to worry about it too much.

Sasuke's studied the traps for the past ten minutes now, so he already knows which order to disarm them in. A sharp crack and there's a blue whip-line cutting the first paper-seal in half. "One down," the Nidaime says, grinning, "six to go."

By the time Sasuke traces Kakashi again, he senses Naruto and Sakura waiting nearby. The bells are still in Kakashi's hands. It's a tense moment, and then Sakura appears an inch away from Kakashi. She lets her fist fly and a large, large crater appears in the ground. Naruto appears a moment later, clones already in place. It's an impressive battle strategy that they've devised, Sasuke has to admit. They grapple, they struggle, and Kakashi dodges each and every single one of them.

An instant later, all is silent again, and Kakashi is parked neatly at the center of Sakura's crater, flipping through his book casually. "All right," the Nidaime growls then. "Either he's that good or you're seriously slow, boy."

The Shodaime mutters his agreement, "Will you be taking a bell or will you sacrifice yourself?"

Sasuke shakes his head slightly, and that is enough of an answer for the ghosts.

"I may have one," the Shodaime says a few seconds later. He waits for Sasuke's nod before starting an explanation. "It's a barrier. Barriers are usually used to protect, but you can also use a barrier as a cage. You'll need a seal facing south, east, west and north. I will tell you the blood seals, but how
you are going to get it around your sensei is up to you. Ready?"

Sasuke nods and watches the Shodaime as he demonstrates. The Shodaime repeats it just to be sure, and the other Hokages offer tips (don't put too much chakra for the boar seal, it will ruin the balance; take your time with the eastern ward, it's the hardest out of the four...). He memorizes the seals, and does a mock run before the Shodaime is satisfied. And then, Sasuke waits.

He needs them close to Kakashi, but there's no way of him getting anywhere near the jounin without being noticed. Sasuke looks around, and then he grins. Carefully, making sure not to make too much movement, he plucks off four leaves from the tree he's hiding in and quickly places the seals onto them, biting down on four different fingers for four different samples of blood. Next to him, the Nidaime mutters an approving, "Good..."

"So he's not too slow," the Yondaime says somewhat grudgingly, and they all fall silent.

One, Sasuke begins counting, and blows the leaves into the air and towards Kakashi. Two. He watches them float about languidly, Sharingan swirling to keep track of which seal is which. Three. Four shurikens out, poised to strike. Four. The shurikens fly, and instantly, Kakashi's attention is on them. The shurikens change trajectory mid-flight to curve slightly, and catch their intended leaf.

Kakashi doesn't move an inch as the four shurikens miss him by at least half a foot and land neatly on four different corners around him. He glances down briefly at the leaves, realizes their intent, and is about to jump away—"Now," the Shodaime orders, but Sasuke doesn't need any encouragement. He bites his thumb, draws blood, does the fifth seal and finishes the jutsu. Four paper-thin, blue walls rise up into the air, trapping the jounin in a small, contained box. Sasuke waits, because knowing Kakashi, he's probably going to vanish into a log, or a chipmunk, or dissolve into water. For once, he doesn't do any of that, just angles his head in Sasuke's direction with a smile.

"I won?" Sasuke thinks giddily, and jumps down to his feet, approaching the jounin carefully on all fours, crawling around the man to scout for any traps. There are three, but two of them are intended for Naruto and Sakura and the third he can easily avoid. He disarms them all quickly and finally rises to his feet to amble up to the jounin. They consider each other through the blue wall. "Well," Kakashi says, "get me out of here."

Sasuke grins. Like hell he'll let the man out. He, Uchiha Sasuke, is going to savor this moment. Behind him, Naruto and Sakura land neatly onto the ground. "What was that?" Naruto breathes as he circles the barrier with disbelieving eyes. Sakura does the same, and finally, they both turn to stare at Sasuke. "That was so many new jutsus!"

"Bet your ass they were," the Nidaime says, and Sasuke feels a cool touch on his head. "You remember all those jutsus, Uchiha, because it'd be a pain to teach them to you again."

Sasuke tries very hard not to look too smug. But he has Hatake Kakashi trapped in a small box. He has Hatake Kakashi trapped in a small box. He has Hatake Kakashi trapped in a small box. Sasuke, for sentiment's sake, goes through all the permutations of that sentence, adding emphasis to different words at different times. He has Hatake Kakashi trapped in a small box. Sasuke intends to savor this moment for as long as he can, but then, Kakashi interrupts his gloating. "All right, Sasuke," Kakashi sighs. "I understand you're proud of yourself, but you can undo the seal now."

Sasuke smirks, and nods at Naruto and Sakura. "Haruno, Uzumaki. Get the bells." At this, Kakashi's expression goes still. He watches Sasuke carefully even as Naruto and Sakura move forward to claim their prize.

Naruto slowly, carefully, puts his hand through the barrier and tugs one bell away from Kakashi's
hand. Sakura takes the other, and they hold it up, staring wide-eyed. "Wow," Naruto says finally. "I'm actually holding the bell. And not in a dream..."

Sakura waves hers around in the air a little. "You dream about them, too?" she asks, rounding on Naruto (Sasuke has dreamed about the bells as well; he will, however, never admit this). "Although... it's kinda anti-climatic."

"You lose," Kakashi points out to Sasuke while Naruto and Sakura continue to admire their bells.

Sasuke shrugs. "Yeah, well. You're trapped. And they have the bells." He feels his face splitting into a grin all over again.

They stare at each other across the barrier for a few more moments, Sasuke grinning, Kakashi considering.

"Sasuke," Kakashi insists a few moments later, looking slightly irked now. "The barrier, please." Sasuke relents and does the unbinding seal. Once the blue walls fall away, the leaves start to smoke and then catch on fire, slowly burning away. They all watch silently, until Naruto interrupts, "How did you know this jutsu—any of these jutsus you did?"

For the heck of it, Sasuke mutters, "I have these voices in my head..." and ignores both the disbelieving looks of Team 7 and the amused laughter of the Hokages.

The next morning, when Sasuke reaches the bridge (late, as usual), he sees a note pinned up on the tree in Sakura's handwriting: No training today. At Ichiraku if you want to join us. She's signed it with her initials. At least, Sasuke thinks, he has some time to train with the Sharingan now. He snatches the note and is about to leave when he senses Kakashi.

"I thought there wasn't any training."

"There isn't," Kakashi says, and drops to the ground in front of Sasuke. "But you're coming with me."

"I'm in trouble?" Sasuke scowls. "I didn't do anything."

Kakashi smiles. "You're not in trouble. Surprisingly enough."

"Then what?" Sasuke demands.

Kakashi just jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "Come with me," he repeats and starts to walk away. Sasuke falls into step, swallowing on the questions that he's itching to ask.

"This seems interesting," the Nidaime mumbles a few feet away from Sasuke. "Hey, Namikaze, you going to spend time with your kid or—"

"I want to watch this," the Yondaime says slowly. "Shodaime-sama? Sandaime-sama? Will you be coming, too?" The two men give their assents, and then all is silent again.

"Where are we—"

"Yesterday," Kakashi interrupts pleasantly. "All those jutsus. Where did you learn them?"

"Orochimaru," Sasuke lies easily. "Where are we—"

"That water dragon stunt you pulled, that was my sensei's favorite jutsu. Did you know? I learned it
when I was very young."

The Yondaime chuckles next to them. "The brat wouldn't leave me alone until I taught it to him," he says, and sounds fond. "It took him three tries to master it. He was nine."

The Nidaime grumbles his approval of "This Hatake fellow."

Sasuke got the jutsu in one try, but he's already sixteen, so Kakashi still beats him by a wide margin. "Yeah, I know, when you were nine," Sasuke scowls, annoyed, and shoves his hands into his pockets. "Overachiever."

Kakashi's stride actually falters at that, and he gives Sasuke a long look. "How did you know that?"

"I counted backwards from the scroll you gave me," Sasuke lies.

The Nidaime scoffs. "Yeah, that sounds believable."

Kakashi raises an eyebrow, but doesn't ask again. "You didn't take the bells."

Sasuke wants to say, No shit, Hatake but that will probably win him a slap on the head. So he settles for, "There were only two."

"But you could have taken one," Kakashi points out logically. "You won the test. You had the right to one."

"That's not the point of the game," Sasuke scowls. "The point is to ensure that your team gets the bells... Didn't you invent this game?"

"I did!" the Yondaime interjects, indignant. "Come on, give a man credit where it's due—"

"Namikaze did, huh?" Sasuke says to himself and lets his Sharingan swirl. The Yondaime is now walking a little ahead of the group. "That's Yondaime-sama to you, punk. And yes, of course I invented it. Nearly twenty years ago. Obito and Kakashi were miserable the first time around."

"He did," Kakashi says, giving Sasuke a heavy, calculating look.

Nearly twenty years ago, Sasuke thinks to himself. Before he was even born. "Gods, you're old." Kakashi's hand flashes out to hit him upside the head automatically. Sasuke has gotten so used to these slaps now, he can't even find the energy or interest in him to protest them anymore.

But he's Uchiha Sasuke, and he'll be damned if Kakashi gets away with the last word in this. "I did the math," Sasuke goes on, stepping out of Kakashi's reach. "You're really old. Thirty."

"Twenty-nine," Kakashi corrects. "And twenty-nine is not old."

"It's practically senile. Explains all the white hair," Sasuke says, and Kakashi's hand comes out to cuff him again, this time harder. Kakashi doesn't say anything else, though, so Sasuke smirks and adds to the scoreboard in his mind: Uchiha Sasuke - 7, Hatake Kakashi - 83. Sasuke is starting to catch up.

Kakashi starts heading up the stairs of one of the many large, training dojos in the village. He doesn't usually bring Team 7 to this end of the village, mostly because it's reserved for jounin and ANBU ninja and—according to rumors and Sasuke's own embellished fantasies—the dojos house the largest collection of weapons in the entire East, courtesy of the Nidaime Hokage. Sasuke nearly drools at the
sight of the building.

As they walk down the corridors, they pass ANBU in uniform. Each time they do, the ANBU comes to a complete stop, steps aside and stands at attention until they pass. "Why do they do that?" Sasuke mutters, looking over his shoulder at the last ANBU. The man looks at Sasuke, the mask of a bird hiding his face.

"Ask them yourself," Kakashi answers, and then pushes open a door for Sasuke to walk through. They step into an arena with a viewing area set above. Sasuke has been in a hall like this before, for the Chuunin exams. "For this training exercise," Kakashi says, not bothering with the preliminaries, "you can't use any ninjutsu and you have no weapons. You have a partner. Your mission—pay attention, Uchiha—your mission is to get yourself across this arena. You have an hour."

"Fine," Sasuke mutters and drops his kunai holster onto the ground, stretching with a yawn. "Is my partner the dead last or Sakura—" Kakashi walks away before Sasuke can even finish the sentence. "Or not," Sasuke grumbles to himself.

"Remember the mission objective," the Nidaime mutters to him. "That's the only way to pass this exam."

"Don't give him any more clues," Sarutobi protests. "Good luck, Sasuke." The other three Hokages echo the sentiment and disappear as well.

Sasuke is about to yell a question at Kakashi's retreating back when someone drops down next to him, wearing a face-cloth like Kakashi. He has brown hair and blue-gray eyes. The man stares blankly. Feeling a little ridiculous—because his father taught him manners—Sasuke nods a hello and says, "Uchiha Sasuke." The man turns away from him to look resolutely at the finish line across the hall. "Right," Sasuke mumbles and looks away as well. The arena is quiet for a few moments before the earth starts to shift and pillars start to rise, slowly taking the form of humans—rock golems, Sasuke realizes.

Sasuke gets into a defensive crouch. His partner remains standing.

"What are you—" But Sasuke doesn't have time to finish the question, because there are at least a hundred kunais coming at them.

Nearly half an hour later, Sasuke is bruised, bloodied, and has a kunai lodged into the back of his thigh because his partner, apparently, is a—"Fucking moron," Sasuke yells at the man he's crouching over defensively. The man stares blankly up at him.

Whatever 'training' Kakashi had in mind, he wasn't really joking around, because although the golem-ninja attacking them are faceless creatures of Hell and crumble into rocks the minute Sasuke lands a good kick on them, their kunais are very, very real. Sasuke spent the first ten minutes of the exercise dodging kunais, picking them up, and using them against his own enemies.

Then he realized that his partner was getting pummeled to the ground, and had to switch tactics. Currently, they are taking cover behind two of the golems that Sasuke demolished earlier and pushed on top of each other to create a wall. They are still only four feet from their starting point. Ahead of them, there is at least forty yards to go, littered with golems, who are waiting patiently for even an inch of Sasuke or his partner to emerge so they can pin their asses with needles.

"Fucking piece of shit," Sasuke mutters, and pulls out the kunai from his thigh. It didn't go too far in, but he'll need stitches for that later on. "Here's what we're going to do," Sasuke says after taking a
minute to think. "You will follow me, understood?"

The man nods his head.

"Think of me as your shield, all right, you idiot?" Sasuke growls out forcefully and watches as the man nods his head again. "Good."

Sasuke glances down at his watch. He’s eaten up forty-two minutes already, so without further ado, he gets into a crouching position and arms himself with the kunai still red with his blood. "All right, then."

Sasuke manages to make it another ten feet in the span of one more minute before he senses that his partner is in deep shit again, so he lunges at him to help him avoid a stray kunai. "What did I just tell you?"

The man stares blankly up at him. Sasuke glares sullenly at the finish line. He has only eight minutes left.

"I fucking hate you," he growls at his partner. The man stares.

Objective, accomplish the objective, Sasuke says to himself. Get yourself across the arena, Sasuke thinks, and hears it being said in Kakashi's voice. Get yourself across the arena, Sasuke repeats to himself disbelievingly. He doesn't have to protect his partner, because his objective doesn't instruct him to do so. All he has to do is get himself across. He can cross this arena easily—it would probably only take him two minutes flat—but his partner, on the other hand, refuses to defend himself.

Uchiha Sasuke does not like to lose. This is how he generally lives his life—don't lose, don't fall behind, stay ahead. But the problem with this situation is that no matter how he looks at it, he's going to lose. Either his partner or the mission objective. This battle, Sasuke realizes, isn't even worth fighting.

So with a growl, he drops onto his back behind a dead rock golem and pillows his head on his arms. His movement provokes another attack from the enemy, so Sasuke pushes his partner onto the ground next to him and lets the golem's crumbled body shield the attack. "Don't move till this is over," Sasuke instructs, and goes back to staring up at the high ceiling of the arena. "Piece of shit Kakashi and his fucking crap-ass excuse of a training exercise."

His partner is silent. The entire arena is silent, which is seriously starting to creep Sasuke out—just a little. "You're going senile, Hatake Kakashi the great Copy Nin," Sasuke yells as loudly as he can. "Senile in your old age."

Next to him, his partner says, "Five minutes to complete mission."

"How dumb are you?" Sasuke asks politely then. "I mean, really. How would you rate yourself on a scale of one to ten? Ten being you know your name, and one being you have a brain that's as big as your nuts. Which, let's be honest here, are probably not very big either."

The man says, "Four minutes to complete mission."

"I'll give you a two," Sasuke says generously. "Because you can apparently keep very good track of time."

"Three minutes to—"

"Here's an order for you. Shut up, shit face."
His partner goes silent for a moment before saying, "Two minutes to complete mission."

Sasuke doesn't say anything. Just grits his teeth and breathes in deeply to stop himself from killing his partner himself. He thought Naruto was hard to deal with, that Sakura was annoying. Nothing—absolutely nothing in this world—compares to his partner right now.

"One minute to complete mission," the man says solemnly. "You will fail to complete the mission if you don't cross the finish line."

"No, really?" Sasuke gasps. He is very, very bitter for not being able to complete as asinine a task as walking across a field. "I'd never have figured that out if you hadn't told me. Thank you oh so very much."

The man heaves a weary sigh and sits up. "Your hour is complete. You have failed the mission."

"Wow," Sasuke says, sitting up as well. The rock golems don't attack. Instead, they all crumble to the ground in one big heap. "You think?"

"Come with me," the man says roughly, and stands up.

Sasuke heaves to his feet as well. "I think I'll give you a three," he snaps at the man, falling into step beside him. "If you can talk then—"

"Please, shut up," the man growls and runs a hand through his hair. He guides Sasuke out of the arena, around a corner, and up a set of stairs.

"Piece of shit Hatake Kaka—"

The man rounds on Sasuke and grabs his collar, shaking it for emphasis. "One more word about the Boss," he growls, "and I'll kill you myself."

"The Boss?" Sasuke says with a bark of laughter once the man lets go. They start to walk again. "Kakashi? The Boss?"

The man wrenches open a door and pushes Sasuke through it. It's a medium-sized room with a table in the middle. There are two chairs on either side of the table, and one side of the room has a large, black-tinted window. It's an interrogation room, no doubt about it—Sasuke has been in these rooms more than once already. The door slams shut behind him, so he walks up to the desk and sits down.

When he glances at the window, all he sees is his reflection, so he shifts his gaze to his palm, staring at the lines there—Orochimaru had taken him to a palm reader once as a joke, and the woman had, very seriously, said that Sasuke would father an entire flock of children, and perhaps he should consider getting a vasectomy?—when a snake pops up in front of him. It's Yuuta, and he swivels his head around before turning to look at Sasuke. "Where are you?"

"No clue," Sasuke mumbles. "Dog-Master got me into this shit. You have a report for me?"

"I established base," Yuuta hisses, sounding a little urgent. "There's a lot of high chakra-leveled humans in a single concentrated area. They're all moving out northwest, though. Do you want me to follow?"

"Follow them," Sasuke commands. He reaches out to rub at a deep scratch on Yuuta's back. It's still lightly crusted with blood, so he asks, "What happened?"

"Eagle attacked," Yuuta says. "I killed it."
Sasuke isn't really the affectionate type, but he's already lost two of his snakes to Orochimaru and there is nothing worse than trying to summon one of his snakes and getting no response. There's only nineteen snakes now, including Rin, and he can't afford to lose anymore. So he says in a low voice, "Be careful."

Yuuta gives him a look before biting him on the hand lightly. He disappears.

Sasuke is sucking on the puncture wound when the door slams open and three men stride in. One of them has long, black hair, and it takes only a few seconds for Sasuke to recognize him. A Hyuga. "Your snakes summon themselves," the Hyuga patriarch states and sits down regally. The other two, with face-cloths, stand at attention against the wall behind Hyuga.

"They like to visit me," Sasuke drawls. "Why am I here?"

"You inherited them from Orochimaru," the man snaps, ignoring Sasuke entirely. "You can speak their language."

Sasuke leans back in his chair with a weary sigh. It's another one of those Are You Sure Orochimaru Is Dead interrogations, which means any plans he had of training today are going down the drain. "I already gave you people this information."

"The mission," the man says, and it's as if Sasuke doesn't exist, because Hyuga is carrying on this conversation over Sasuke's head somehow. "Was to get yourself across the arena. You failed."

"Wow," Sasuke says, throwing his hands up in the air. "I am just amazed at how intelligent people are in this place—"

"You gave up," Hyuga interrupts. "And here I was, thinking that the Uchiha Clan were people of more mettle."

"The Uchiha Clan, Hyuga," Sasuke hisses, leaning forward in the chair a little, "doesn't need to explain itself to anyone."

"You gave up," Hyuga says again, smirking. "Uchiha Sasuke can't even walk across an arena—"

"Because the assignment was stupid," Sasuke snarls, getting up at the taunt. "Look, I'd love to chat with your high and mighty ass another day, but for now, I have better things to do."

Sasuke turns to leave when Hyuga thunders, "Sit down, boy."

"I don't have to answer to you," Sasuke hisses, rounding on Hyuga. He lets his Sharingan swirl into life, because he is sick and tired of the Hyugas' superiority complex. And this man reminds him of a certain other Hyuga that Sasuke really doesn't like very much at all. "I don't have to answer to any—"

"Hey, punk," Kakashi's voice says lazily over the intercom. "That was an order."

Sasuke clenches his fists by his side and considers the consequences of walking out. Sasuke can completely ignore Tsunade, he can betray Orochimaru and face down the Five Kages themselves, but Kakashi—Gods damn the man—is Kakashi. So Sasuke wrenches the chair back and sits down again, breathing deeply to control his anger.

"You managed to get to 4.2 feet," Hyuga says and smirks again. "That's an all time low."

"The partner you gave me," Sasuke says, "was a defenseless—"
"He's one of the more advanced members of our squadron," Hyuga says pleasantly. "It would be in your best interest to refrain from insulting him any more than you already have."

Sasuke scoffs, rolling his eyes.

"You spent the first forty-three minutes defending your partner. Then, you abandoned the mission and rested."

"There was no point in completing the mission," Sasuke drawls out. "My partner would have been a casualty."

"The mission objective—"

"I got that," Sasuke sighs. "The mission objective didn't require my partner to cross the line with me. I could have just abandoned him and gone across."

Hyuga's eyes narrow a fraction. "You understood the objective, then."

Sasuke glances at the two men flanking the wall. "Who are they? Your cronies?"

"The fact that you understood the objective and didn't accomplish it regardless," Hyuga says, standing, "makes you even more of a failure."

Sasuke raises an eyebrow. "You wanted me to abandon my partner?"

Hyuga looks down at Sasuke, head held high. "The job of a ninja is to finish the mission," he says. He sounds condescending, taunting, when he adds, "I'm surprised you haven't been taught that by your esteemed teacher Hatake—"

Sasuke shoots to his feet even before Hyuga can finish the sentence. The movement topples his chair over with a loud crash. "Ninja who think like you are—"

"Following rules. My men are in the habit of doing just that. If you can't, you have no place here," Hyuga finishes easily. "Trust me, Uchiha, ninja like you who don't follow rules and orders are—"

"Trash?" Sasuke hisses, and Hyuga's words sting more than they should. Sasuke's been down that path, and he has Naruto's sky-blue eyes as a reminder of the decisions he's made. "I know. But you know what's worse than trash? People who don't protect their team."

"Is that another one of Hatake's teachings?" Hyuga scoffs and he sounds so patronizing it makes Sasuke's blood boil. "Typical of him to—"

Sasuke nearly disappears in his speed. He has Hyuga slammed up against the far wall, a hidden kunai against his throat an instant later. Hyuga stares blankly into Sasuke's eyes, a smirk still curling his lips upward. "You say one more word about him, Hyuga," Sasuke hisses and presses the kunai harder against the carotid. "Mark my words, I'll rain down a world of hurt on you."

"Let him go, kid," Kakashi says over the intercom. He still sounds unbelievably bored. Sasuke shoves Hyuga up against the wall one more time as warning before letting him go and storming out of the room. The minute he closes the door behind him, though, he runs into Kakashi.

Sasuke points at the closed door behind him. "Who the hell does he think he is?"

"He's the ANBU Captain, that's who," Kakashi says and puts his book away before looking pointedly at the closed door. "Watch your temper, Uchiha."
"I don't care who he is," Sasuke seethes. He pushes past Kakashi and is about to walk away when Kakashi grabs the back of his neck, hard.

"I realize you don't," Kakashi mutters and pushes the door open with one hand and drags Sasuke in with the other. Sasuke hisses obscenities in snake tongue and lets his Sharingan swirl into life again. He sees the Hokages then, casually stepping through the wall and into the interrogation room. They're all smiling or grinning, and even the Yondaime looks grudgingly pleased.

Kakashi kicks Sasuke's chair upright and shoves him down into it, letting his hand fall heavily on Sasuke's shoulder. A warning. Sasuke glares at Hyuga across the table, clamping his jaw down on the insults crawling up his throat. "Uchiha here," Kakashi says in his usual drawl, "understood the objective. Which means he passed."

"He failed the mission, and he very obviously has trouble following orders," Hyuga counters firmly, looking at Sasuke still. "Not to mention it takes very little to provoke him into losing his temper, Kakashi."

"I'm working with him on that," Kakashi says and pats Sasuke's shoulder. "The next round, then?"

Hyuga finally looks away from Sasuke and up at Kakashi, eyes narrowing dangerously. They consider each other for a few moments, Kakashi's one visible eye still curled into a smile. There is a tense moment that has Sasuke itching for a weapon, and then it passes. Hyuga stands up and snaps, "The next round."

Kakashi waves goodbye at the man as he walks away. The two bodyguards pause to nod respectfully at Kakashi before leaving as well. The minute the door closes on them, Sasuke gets to his feet. "What the hell is going—"

Kakashi slaps him upside the head. "Twenty-nine is not senile," he says, and walks out as well.

Sasuke doesn't have time to even understand the context of what's happening, because he gets shown into a bathroom by another face-cloth wearing man. He has a white vest thrown over his clothes, marking him as a medic. He patches up Sasuke's injuries, takes a vial of blood, and asks for a urine sample. "Look," Sasuke says, turning to look at the man. "I can't piss with you staring at me like that." The man continues to stare, so Sasuke turns back and focuses on the wall over the urinal. Eventually (fifteen minutes and two bottles of water later), Sasuke emerges from the bathroom.

Kakashi and Hyuga are waiting for him. They lead him outside, to a large opening surrounded by all the dojos. It's less than half the size of the Commons, the main parks that stretch out in front of the Hokage Tower, but this is cloistered on all sides by buildings. The entire area is thick with trees and bushes, almost claustrophobic in its density. "Get across," Kakashi instructs and points at the other end of the large area. "Don't be seen, don't engage. There are enemies stationed around this space. No ninjutsu, no genjutsu, and no weapons. You have an hour."

Sasuke stares at him. "Are you serious?"

"Just do it, boy," the Nidaime growls in his ear.

"Right," Sasuke says and walks towards the tree line. He looks over his shoulder at Kakashi for a brief second before he's gone, blurring in his speed.

Sasuke's shirt is ripped, and his back is so sweaty that dirt is starting to cake onto his skin. He is disgusting, Sasuke thinks with a grin, but he's also blending into the canopy so well that the man twenty feet from him has no idea that Sasuke is breathing down his neck.
Easy does it, Sasuke thinks, and slowly climbs down to the forest floor (fake, man-made, tiny forest floor, Sasuke corrects himself) and crawls on all fours around the man and up the next tree. It's twenty minutes into the exercise, but Sasuke is nearly at the finish line.

Hiding is Sasuke's forte, and Sasuke is well aware of this. Being Itachi's younger brother and Shisui's cousin has taught Sasuke a great many things, but patience and disappearing into the shadows are the best lessons of all. They used to play hide-and-seek together, and once (once) Sasuke had hidden himself so well that Itachi and Shisui lost the game (Sasuke was in his great aunt's kitchen pantry, in the very back behind a large gourd of homemade sake, holding his breath every time the door opened. Eventually, Sasuke had gotten bored and taken a sip of the alcohol. He'd been raging drunk by the time Shisui found him).

Sasuke eases his way past two more enemy guards—there are more of them towards the end now, Sasuke thinks—and waits patiently for what is bound to happen. It takes a few moments, but eventually, all the enemy trickle towards the other end of the forest, where Sasuke's left dummies for them to find (thus the ripped shirt, pants, and socks; sacrifice is necessary after all) and get distracted by. There is also a trap at each of these dummies, the kind that Sasuke used to rig in the Academy using twigs, rocks and logs.

Grinning, Sasuke reaches the end, and glances up at the viewing area. Kakashi and Hyuga are waiting patiently on the balcony. For once, Kakashi is not reading a book, just scanning the trees. The Hokages are also there. Sasuke scouts the area for any more ANBU, and sensing none, climbs back down to the forest floor.

He waits, crouching, muscles tense, until Hyuga and Kakashi are looking away. Then, he blurs again, disappearing through the doors and into the building of ANBU dojos. "That's that," he says, and dusts himself off. It takes a few minutes, but he eventually finds the door leading to the balcony. Stretching his arms over his head, Sasuke walks over to Kakashi. "What's next?"

"Well done," Sarutobi immediately says. "That was one of the finest performances I've ever seen, Sasuke!"

"Bar none," the Shodaime enthuses. "I did not even notice you enter the building."

The Nidaime puts a cold, icy hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "Your speed was impressive, boy."

"You're a mess," Kakashi says, but he doesn't look at Sasuke and focuses on the trees still. "Those traps you set up were childish."

"I thought they were a nice touch," Sasuke defends lightly. "Are we done?"

"Not yet," Kakashi sighs and turns to Hyuga, who is considering Sasuke carefully.

"One last test, Uchiha," Hyuga says, and it doesn't sound so insulting any more.

Sasuke is bored and, more importantly, angry. "Senile," he grumbles under his breath, but continues to run on the treadmill as per his instructions.

He's spent the last three hours going through all sorts of crap with only his taijutsu and Sharingan to rely on. He's battled two jounin and two ANBU. In the process he's gotten stabbed, beaten, and slammed so hard into a wall that he flew right through it and into an outside courtyard. His battle with the second ANBU had nearly ended in a stalemate. But then, Sasuke had spotted Hyuga standing with a smug grin on the viewing platform, and that was inspiration enough for Sasuke to cast a terrifying illusion on the ANBU that had the man rooted to the spot, shell-shocked.
The illusion is inspired by Naruto's Sexy no Jutsu. Only modified—which means the ANBU got to live out his best, most desired sexual fantasy. It lasted only for a few seconds, a distraction, nothing more, but that was enough for Sasuke to bury the man into the ground. And flip off Hyuga triumphantly.

He's shown to showers after his last match, and Sasuke spends ten minutes watching brown-tinged water drain away. When he comes out, towel wrapped around his waist, there's two people—a man and a woman—waiting for him, wearing medical vests and holding clipboards. Sasuke spends a good twenty minutes trying not to be too uncomfortable as they do a quick physical checkup. They poke, prod, and ask questions about each and every single scar on his body ("That's from Orochimaru," Sasuke explains, pointing to one curving around his torso. "Torture session." The woman stares at him, going pale.).

After muttering under their breaths about his chakra pathways ("This level is normal for you?" the woman asks. "Yes," Sasuke says, and lets lightning dance from his fingertips), they give Sasuke loose-fitting shorts, a pair of shoes, and usher him into a room with two sections. There's a treadmill, a bike, and weights on one side, and a small glass-enclosed room on the other. They hook up wires from medical machines to Sasuke's chest, and before disappearing into the glass room, they tell him to run as fast as he can, for as long as he can.

Which is how Sasuke ends up running on a treadmill, staring at a screen with a picture of his body colored orange, yellow, blue and red. There are also vitals listed: Heart rate at 104; breathing at an even 16; blood pressure at 112/76. The woman keeps leaving the glass room to inform Sasuke, a little unnecessarily, that he can stop when he feels tired. But she doesn't realize that Sasuke spends most days doing fifty laps around the village, that he actually enjoys running, and spends a good amount of his workout schedule dedicated to picking his way through forest trails. At thirty miles, the man orders Sasuke to stop, giving him an odd look in the process. He and his colleague come to unhook Sasuke, handing him a pair of loose sweats and a shirt to change into. Sasuke tugs on the clothes roughly and follows them into another room.

Kakashi and Hyuga are waiting for him. The room is relatively bare: A table with a chair on either side, and a wooden box on the table. Kakashi is at the back of the room, slouching comfortably against the wall. Hyuga is sitting on one end of the table, the other chair is empty. Sasuke takes the seat across from Hyuga and watches the woman hand a clipboard to him. "How does he look?" Hyuga mutters, as if Sasuke wasn't sitting directly across from him.

"I'm fine—"

"I wasn't talking to you," Hyuga snaps and turns back to the woman. "Well?"

"Damaged, but still functioning at a very, very high level," the woman says, shrugging. "His left leg is a little weak, but his chakra pathways are..." She gestures widely. "Inhumanly huge."

"That's normal for me," Sasuke reiterates.

"Well, then." Hyuga flips through the pages on the clipboard. "Your blood test came back clean."

"He should be dead," the man interrupts urgently at the mention of Sasuke's blood. His words sound hurried. "There's several kinds of snake venom in his system at concentrations to do harm to an ox, let alone a human. We detected rattle, cobra, mamba, several breeds of water snake—I've never seen anything like it. If someone were to accidentally ingest just a few drops of his blood, it would be only a matter of seconds before the venoms hit. He's a walking..."

"Bioweapon. A walking, talking bioweapon," the woman supplements when the man trails off.
"When your snakes bite you," Hyuga says slowly, leaning forward, eyes focused on Sasuke in interest. Even Kakashi looks a little surprised to hear about this. "Do they poison you?"

"Tough love," Sasuke sighs carelessly and sits back in his chair. He can feel the chill of the metal through the flimsy fabric of his shirt.

"It's freakish, that's what," the Nidaime growls, sounding just a little bit queasy. Sasuke's Sharingan flares to life in time to see the Hokages stepping through the wall. "You done here?" the Nidaime asks.

"Seems so," Sarutobi says. "Let's see what Hiashi decides..."

"Thank you," Hyuga tells the two examiners, and they bow respectfully before leaving the room. He turns to look at Sasuke. "There is the matter of your loyalty to Konoha, but I've been assured by Kakashi that your allegiance lies with this village and country."

Sasuke takes care to keep his face completely neutral. It's not necessary for Hyuga to point this out. The villagers still refuse to make eye contact with him. "You had three tests today. You nearly failed the first, but you finished the other two reasonably well. So now you have a choice. "Hyuga pushes the wooden box across the table, towards Sasuke. "You take it, or you leave it. I don't intend to make this offer to you again. You have an hour to make your decision." And with that, he leaves the room.

Kakashi lingers, still leaning against the wall, watching as Sasuke stares at the box. "What the hell?" Sasuke says to himself and glances up at Kakashi.

"Open it," the Nidaime urges, and the Yondaime puts in, "Don't you want to know what's inside?"

Sasuke flips the lid off the box and stares at what he sees.

It's a white, wooden mask with a pointed nose, looking slightly like a dog or a wolf. There are deep maroon-colored markings on the sides. "ANBU?" Sasuke asks dumbly.

Kakashi takes the seat across from Sasuke, where Hyuga had been only a moment ago. "You don't have to take it. I just wanted you to have the option."

Itachi became ANBU at thirteen, Shisui was ANBU at twelve. Sasuke fingers the design on the cheeks of the mask. "The Hokage trusts me now, then," he notes. Daringly, Sasuke picks up the mask, and is surprised to learn how light it is. "Is this a wolf?"

"You were young, you made a mistake. People have done worse," Kakashi says after a moment. "And no, that's not a wolf. It's a dog."

Sasuke puts the mask in the box and closes it. He has to ask, so he does. "Did you have to pull strings—"

"No," Kakashi interrupts cleanly and gets up to leave. "You passed on your own merit."

Kakashi is at the door when Sasuke asks, "Why a dog?"

Just when Sasuke thinks that he's not going to answer the question, Kakashi looks over his shoulder and says, "It used to be mine."

Sasuke had always thought that getting an ANBU tattoo was some sort of secret, intensely moving ritual. It isn't. In fact, it is the most anti-climatic way to end his day.
A balding man came into the room, ordered Sasuke to remove his shirt, and spent a quick fifteen minutes tattooing Sasuke. He is no stranger to the process; he had more than one tattoo inked into his skin during his time with Orochimaru. It was never this unceremonious, because Sasuke had been high with blood lust more often than not, his body coiled tight with the rush of victory in battle, but this time—This time, the bald man finishes without saying a single word and shoves a large box at Sasuke—his uniforms, apparently—and then leaves the room. So now, Sasuke is carrying his ANBU mask and the large box and trudging down the already darkened streets of Konoha.

He is tired, cold, and hungry, and his arm is starting to sting a little. It's all made worse by the fact that the Hokages are jovially dissecting his performance minute by minute, jutsu by jutsu. Including the Sexy No Jutsu illusion that Sasuke had been forced to confess. "Although," Sarutobi is saying, "that illusion was a little shameless."

"It was perfect," the Nidaime defends staunchly. "He understood his enemy's weakness and exploited it."

They debate the merits of Sasuke's performance and whether he is truly worthy of wearing Kakashi's ANBU mask even as Sasuke dumps the boxes in his living room, crawls in between his sheets and falls asleep.

In the morning, they're still talking about it, so Sasuke resolutely ignores them and goes about getting ready. He's about to slip out of his apartment (he's actually going to be a little early today—it's only 7:30) when he realizes that he has yet to check out his uniform. He stares at the brown box for a moment, the knowledge of Kakashi's old mask still weighing heavily on his mind. Eventually he shifts his gaze to the other, larger box.

"Well, open it," the Nidaime urges.

Sasuke slips out a kunai and slides it across the tape holding the box folds together. It pops open and Sasuke sees several uniforms packed neatly together. On top of it, though, there is a small note. It reads: Report at 0730 hours, ANBU Building, 2nd floor, meeting hall.

"My boy," the Shodaime says cheerfully, "you are late."

"Fuck," Sasuke groans and is about to rush out the door when the Nidaime says, "With your uniform, Uchiha. Change into your uniform! And don't forget your dog tags." Sasuke tugs on his uniform quickly with the help of the Hokages, who instruct him on how to pull on his white breastplate, how to thread the mask around his face, and everything in between. Sasuke slips out his window, still adjusting his gloves, and manages to make it to ANBU HQ in ten minutes. It's already 8:00 by then.

Sasuke nearly trips over himself in his hurry to run down the stairs. He doesn't know where he's going, how he's going to get there, and the worst part is that he's late now for his first ANBU meeting. "Take a left," the Nidaime says hurriedly in his ear.

"No, no, take a right," the Yondaime corrects. "They changed the layout when I was—"

"It's actually straight ahead," Sarutobi says pleasantly.

Sasuke nearly runs to the door, and when he approaches it, he takes a few seconds to calm down. Once he has his heartbeat back under control, he pushes into the room. Only to have the entire ANBU squad turn around to look at him. Hiashi is at the front, looking regal and commanding.

"You're late," Hiashi thunders.
"And royally screwed," the Nidaime says into his ear. "Say goodbye to the uniform, kiddo."

"There were baby dolphins," Sasuke says, and it's out of his mouth before he even registers the idiocy of something like that. He's spending too much time with Kakashi. This, if nothing else, is proof. "Drowning."

Hiashi stares at him, and a few of the ANBU snigger. "What?"

"Dear God, it runs in the family," the Yondaime groans. "Obito used to—"

"There were baby dolphins drowning," Sasuke repeats, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. He has to stick by his story now. No matter what. "I had to save them. ANBU duties and everything." There is some more muffled sniggering in the crowd.

Hiashi levels his gaze at the ANBU again and says, "Sign up for patrol duty by the end of today. I want the rosters filled for this month. Missions will be handed out at 0900 hours. New recruits, report to Jiro. The rest, dismissed."

Sasuke lingers by the door, unsure of what to do or where to go when he sees the dog (more like a wolf now, Sasuke thinks, and tries not to kill it out of reflex when it growls at him). Kiba appears a few seconds later, face hidden by cloth. "Well, well, if it isn't the great Uchiha."

"Inuzuka," Sasuke says and can't help but wonder how the dog-boy made ANBU as well. He'd known that Kiba had made chuunin, that he'd been toying with either jounin or ANBU for a while now (courtesy of Naruto, who keeps Sasuke updated on the lives of everyone in the village). He just hadn't thought that Kiba would pass.

But then again, Sasuke thinks, he'd defected from the village for a little over two years. That should have been enough time for the dog-boy to master his skills. "Wasn't expecting to see you here," Kiba mutters, and there's an insult in his words that makes Sasuke's skin itch with unresolved anger.

"Likewise."

"Unlike some people, Uchiha, I didn't get here by association—"

Sasuke takes a deep breath, but the Sharingan is flaring already. "Enough, both of you," someone interrupts. Sasuke is surprised that he hasn't sensed Shikamaru before this, but the man has a way with blending into shadows. "We need to report to Jiro sometime today," Shikamaru calls out. "Aburame, Hyuga, you coming?"

"You should tender your resignation," the Shodaime says suddenly, sounding very serious. "Before you kill the Hyuga boy."

"I second that," the Yondaime grumbles. Sasuke ignores both of them and concentrates on not starting another war with Neji. Another ANBU approaches, and this one has a loose-fitting cape around his ANBU uniform. "Uchiha," Shino mumbles and walks past Sasuke with a slight nod. Neji walks over a little more cautiously. He gives Sasuke a blank look before walking by.

"Let's go," Kiba growls and follows Shikamaru out the door. Sasuke trails after, a little behind the group.

They find Jiro in a small meeting room, flipping through manila folders. He's leaning against the table in the room. The man grunts a hello when the five of them walk in and glances up, bright brown eyes sizing up the new members. "All right, ladies, welcome to ANBU. Say hello to each other if you haven't met yet. You'll be in the same group. I'll be your commanding officer, and as
your C.O., my word is law."

The five of them sit down, and for a second there's only the scraping of chairs for noise in the room. "I've been through your files, so we can skip the ice-breakers..." Jiro pushes himself off the table and stretches. "I will be evaluating your progress for the next few weeks. If satisfactory, you'll be taken off probation. Any questions?"

Sasuke clears his throat and the entire room turns to stare at him. "Is Kakas—"

"You shouldn't call him by his first name," Jiro interrupts. "Otherwise people will doubt the merits of your acceptance into ANBU. I don't want my team to be thought of as anything less than the best."

"Nothing to doubt with the Uchiha—" Neji begins, and Kiba snorts.

"Oi, that's it," the Nidaime yells loudly. "Let me at him!"

"Calm down, Tobirama," the Shodaime chides patiently.

Jiro rounds on them before they can finish. "I won't tolerate any of your childhood Academy issues in this squad. If you have something between yourselves, take care of it when you're not in uniform."

Neji goes silent, eyes narrowing dangerously. Sasuke clamps down on the retort crawling up his throat. He manages to grit out his original question instead: "Is he ANBU?"

"No," Jiro says slowly, looking at Sasuke with an odd frown. "He's the Commander of the Joint Forces, Uchiha... Didn't you know?"

This is news to Sasuke. So that's what Kakashi does when he's not babysitting Team 7, Sasuke thinks. He's running the damn village because the Commander of Joint Forces is outranked only by the Hokage. Naruto probably knows already, and Sakura as well. Sasuke, as always, is the last to find out about these things. Sasuke feels his neck flush with the realization that he'd been so obtuse as to miss something as big as this. He's been back in Konohagakure for a little over a year, but he's isolated himself as much as he can if only to avoid the knowing looks of people around him (not that Sasuke can fault them for their judgement. They look at him and see Traitor; Sasuke looks at himself in the mirror and sees so much worse.)

"Uchiha was missing in action when the Commander was appointed. And of course there was his stint in prison and solitary confinement," Neji says. "He may not be as well-acquainted with the village hierarchy as the rest of us."

Sasuke grits his teeth so hard the muscles in his neck hurt. There is a cool touch on his shoulder, steadying him, but Sasuke doesn't have a chance to respond because Jiro cuts in neatly. "I forgot that you haven't been back for long, Uchiha. But now that you're ANBU, you're going to have to familiarize yourself with your commanding officers. All of them," he says, and his voice is utterly blank. There is no judgement there, just a commanding officer moving the conversation along. He opens the door to the room with a flourish. "Let's go, gentlemen."

Jiro guides the group down a corridor. He rounds a corner and then ushers them into a locker room. There are several men walking around with only towels tied around their waists, still dripping wet from showers. "Gentlemen! I'd like to introduce you to the newest creepers, Uchiha Sasuke, Hyuga Neji, Nara Shikamaru, Aburame Shino, and Inuzuka Kiba."

Everyone in the room pauses to look at the group. They all say, "Hey, man!" together, and some raise a hand in greeting while others grin. "How did the dolphin rescue go, Uchiha?" someone asks.
"Unfortunately, some tuna fish became collateral," Sasuke answers blandly and is surprised to hear the men laugh out loud. Even Kiba sniggers, looking a little guilty when Neji levels a blank stare at him.

For years now, stuck with Sakura and Naruto, and then with Orochimaru, Sasuke's come to think that he doesn't have a sense of humor. But these ANBU are actually laughing at what he has to say. Either Naruto and Sakura are abnormal and have no sense of humor, or ANBU are just as odd as Sasuke is.

Jiro loops an arm around Sasuke's shoulder, chuckling. "This is going to be a fun squad." He tugs up his face-cloth and ushers the group out of the room and down the corridors again. "The locker room you can use whenever you want to. You have your own space in there somewhere. Now, put on your masks, gentlemen."

The recruits follow the order. Jiro turns to say something, but comes to a sudden stop. "That's the Boss' mask," he says, voice holding no hint of emotion. "You get it by random?"

Sasuke isn't quite sure what answer would be best suited for this situation. So he settles for the truth, making sure to avoid Kiba's and Neji's gazes. "He gave it to me."

"And you earned it," the Shodaime puts in encouragingly.

Jiro doesn't say anything, just turns around and continues to walk. Neji gives Sasuke a lingering look before following. When they reach the mission room, it's filled with ANBU and Jounin. There's a row of desks at the front of the room, and a line of men in front of each of them. "We do patrols with Jounin," Jiro says next to Sasuke, "Go sign up for a shift. You'll operate as a group. Just hope you don't get stuck with the Eastern Gate."

"What's wrong with the Eastern Gate?" Kiba asks, but Jiro is already walking away.

"Right," Sasuke mumbles under his breath. "Let's go." He leads the way to a desk at the front, the other four close at his heels. Kurenai is sitting behind the desk when he finally reaches it.

"Kurenai-sensei," Sasuke says.

"Just Kurenai will do now," she corrects. "Congratulations. All of you." Her gaze lingers a little fondly on Kiba and Shino.

Sasuke shrugs and glances down at the roster, which is nearly filled. The Eastern Gate column is woefully empty, but there is one spot left: The Northern Gate. It's later that night, and it's a full ten-hour shift, starting at 2000 hours and ending the next morning at 0600. "I hope you don't have plans for the night," Sasuke says over his shoulder and signs them all up. There's a slot for ANBU numbers on the form, and it takes a moment before Sasuke realizes its purpose.

He fishes out his dog tags and stares at them. In his rush, he's not had the time to look at them closely, but now he finds something warm swelling inside of him at the sight of the two tags, dangling off the metallic chain. They both read the same thing: Uchiha Sasuke, DOB 23.7.1992, Konoha ANBU, 24907552. Sasuke pushes the dog tags back behind his breastplate and signs his number down, handing the pen over to Shikamaru.

"What do we do in the meantime?" Kiba asks, the last one to sign. Kurenai shrugs.

"You're not authorized to take missions yet," she cautions. "But you never know..." Kurenai points to her right, where there's already a short line of ANBU in front of a desk.
"Sounds like a plan," Kiba says and Akamaru barks in agreement, wagging his tail enthusiastically.

"Sure," Shikamaru drawls. "They'll just hand us a mission."

"We should run it by Jiro," Neji snaps. "We're not authorized to—"

"What, Hyuga?" Kiba asks, taunting. "Scared?"

Neji's blue eyes turn a shade darker.

"If you're not interested, you don't have to follow," Sasuke interrupts before anything starts up. "You have no obligation to follow me." Sasuke walks towards the line. The other three follow behind him, and Neji lingers for a moment before catching up to them.

"This is a bad idea," the Shodaime interjects hurriedly. Sarutobi echoes the sentiment, but the other two Hokages disagree. "So, he's showing some initiative," the Yondaime puts in mildly.

"Nothing wrong with that, technically." The Nidaime is silent for a moment before saying, "Just be confident. Don't let them know you're probationary. They can smell it—"

"Stop encouraging him, Tobirama!" the Shodaime snaps, but it's too late. The group in front of them moves away and Sasuke saunters up to the desk, doing his best to look as casual as possible. The ANBU in charge of the missions is looking down at his papers, so Sasuke clears his throat to get noticed. The man's eyes go wide when he sees Sasuke. "Boss...?"

"Uchiha," Sasuke corrects and holds out his hand. "Mission."

The man stutters for a moment or two before saying, "Uh...aren't you new?"

"The name is Uchiha," Sasuke repeats. He lets his Sharingan come to life and takes off his mask for added effect. "Uchiha Sasuke, check the list."

"Smooth," the Nidaime says, sounding proud.

"Try Hyuga Neji," Neji says casually. "That should be on it."

Shameless, Sasuke thinks, but smirks anyways. The man does at least know how to bend the rules, how to use his name to his advantage. He isn't as big a prick as Sasuke previously thought. The man starts to fumble with the papers when Kiba points out, "Hey, man, I appreciate the effort, but if we're late and the Captain nails our asses for it, I'll be sure to bring your name up."

"What was it again?" Neji asks lightly. "You haven't told us your name yet."

"Uh...right," the ANBU says quickly and snaps his folder shut. "Who's the C.O.?"

There's a split moment's pause before Shikamaru volunteers, "Uchiha." Neji stiffens visibly at that, but doesn't protest, because the man behind the desk hands over a scroll to Sasuke.

"Courier mission," he says, and hands another scroll over. "Your specs."

Sasuke pockets the scrolls and walks away, the other four in tow. "I really don't think this is a good idea," Sarutobi says, once they've left the mission room.

Sasuke looks at the four men around him. "Any objections to going through with this?" Shino shakes his head. Neji only pauses a moment before conceding.
"If this proceeds to hell—" Shino speculates as they equip themselves for their mission.

"If it goes to hell," Kiba corrects with a sigh. "And it's not going to hell."

"Sure it isn't," Shikamaru grumbles, but follows when Sasuke leads the way out of the ANBU HQ.

When they reach the village walls, the Hokages stop and wish Sasuke the best of luck, saying that they won't be able to follow him beyond the forest immediately surrounding the village; their souls are tied to their bones.

"All right," Kiba says loudly. They jump off the eastern wall and blend into the forest below.

"Let's go, gentlemen," Sasuke radios in and Kiba replies, his voice crackling a little over the radio, "Aye, aye."

The mission is a success (and boring, except for the part where they get attacked by wayward missing-nin; naturally, it ends a little messily. Bringing back five of the six missing-nin proves worthwhile, though, because apparently, their mission pay gets increased for the effort).

It goes to hell when Hiashi finds out, which is how Sasuke ends up in the Captain's office, Kakashi as sincere witness, getting yelled at. The entire team had nearly gotten punished, but Sasuke stepped up and took responsibility—he'd been their C.O.

"Your student is out of line," Hiashi thunders. "I knew it was a bad idea, bringing him on, he's hardly mature enough—"

"The mission was a success," Kakashi interrupts, flipping through the report that Sasuke wrote earlier in the day. It's a good report, Sasuke knows, because Shikamaru was at hand to help with its construction. He holds up the folder. "Five captured missing-nin, a sixth injured..."

"Whether or not it was a success is not the issue." Hyuga makes a fist and slams it onto his table. A pen clutters to the ground. "The question is about Uchiha's ability to follow orders."

"Technically, he did follow orders," Kakashi points out pleasantly. "He's already proving useful to the squad. Serving Konohagakure, securing her interests at large..."

"Goddamnit, Kakashi," Hyuga snarls. "You have a blind spot the size of Konoha when it comes to this boy. As your friend, I'm telling you. Just because he's your student doesn't change the fact that we can't trust this boy—"

Kakashi's face becomes still, and his one visible eye turns steel grey. "Now you're out of line, Captain."

Hyuga stills for a moment before switching gears on his argument. "He's on probation. He's not authorized to operate a team, let alone run missions."

"There's a way around that," Kakashi says, smiling. Hyuga stares at Kakashi for a split second before turning to Sasuke. "Dismissed. Wait outside with the others."

Sasuke leaves the room and joins the others out in the hallway. Kiba is scratching Akamaru behind the ears, looking serious. Neji looks supremely unimpressed with the entire situation.

Shino turns to look at Sasuke, eyes hidden by his sunglasses. Sasuke is starting to get annoyed at not being able to read the man, so he's a little surprised when Shino says, "Thank you for handling the
"Taking the heat, Aburame, you freak," Kiba corrects. He looks up at Sasuke, lips pursed into a thin line.

"Would've gotten fired if you hadn't done it," Shikamaru grumbles. "Not bad, Uchiha."

Sasuke meets Neji's gaze, but the younger Hyuga doesn't say anything. Just looks away.

Sasuke pushes down the urge to pace. So instead he leans against the wall, trying to look detached. The Captain wants to discharge him. The only thing in Sasuke's favor is Kakashi's approval and Jiro's good report. Hiashi never wanted Sasuke on the squad to begin with, so this is a perfect opportunity for him to fire Sasuke. The thought grates on his nerves. Not even a day, he thinks. He might not even last the day. And, there is still the matter of his loyalty. Always, always my loyalty.

"Are you going to get demoted?" Kiba asks, standing now. Sasuke shrugs and stares at Hiashi's office. There is no wall, just a glass door with shutters, and although the shutters are drawn, they're not angled shut. He can still see inside, and just beyond the HYUGA HIASHI, ANBU CAPTAIN written in white letters on the glass door, Sasuke can see Kakashi. A few moments later, Jiro comes walking up to the office, glancing at Sasuke for a second before he enters the room, shutting the door behind him. Sasuke watches as he stands at attention and answers Hiashi's questions. It's another ten minutes before Jiro steps outside and motions for Sasuke and the others to come in. As Sasuke walks past Jiro, the man slaps Sasuke on the shoulder, grinning through his face-cloth.

Hiashi leans back in his chair, staring down the newly minted team. "I hear from Jiro that he never actually told you not to take missions. Is this true?"

"Yes, sir," Sasuke answers for them all. He stands at attention, staring straight ahead.

"Your mission was successful, far more than anticipated..." He shuffles around his desk for a moment. "I have chosen to remove your team from probation. Effective today, you will assume the responsibilities of full ANBU rank." He pauses, glancing sharply at Kakashi before saying. "According to the report, Uchiha, you were the team leader."

"Sir," Sasuke says and feels something like hope stirring in his stomach. Maybe he won't get demoted.

"Fine, then," Hyuga snaps. "You're promoted to commanding officer. Dismissed." It takes a moment for the information to sink in, but it eventually does, and Sasuke has to bite the inside of his cheek to stop a grin. So Sasuke mutters a "Sir," before leaving the office, the others following behind him.

Once outside, Jiro thumps him on the shoulder. "Congratulations," he says, and it sounds sincere. "If you need help with any paperwork, I'm on the second floor."

"Appreciate it," Sasuke says and watches the man leave. When he turns to face the others, Kiba is grinning. "Off probation in a day," he breathes. Akamaru nips at Kiba's fingers, barking happily. "Sweet."

Sasuke glances at his watch. Another hour before patrol starts. "Let's eat," he says and starts to walk away. Shikamaru and Neji fall in step with him. Shino, Kiba and Akamaru follow. It's a little odd, having all four of them actually following him without the intent to capture and kill for once. He glances at the others and asks under his breath, "You know any good places?"
"Sushi," Kiba answers enthusiastically.

Shino growls loud enough for everyone to hear. "No more sushi, please. I may have to kill myself if I eat sushi—"

"Shut it, Aburame," Kiba snaps. "Sushi!"

"You should have intercourse with yourself, Inuzuka," Shino says pleasantly.

"Hey, dickwad—"

"Right," Sasuke mumbles under his breath. Shikamaru looks expectantly at him, as does Neji. "We'll get ramen."
The next day, Sasuke finds out that Naruto and Sakura have found out about his promotion. Like Sasuke, Kakashi had forgotten to mention it to either of them, and now Naruto and Sakura are out for blood. The Hokages tell him, interrupting each other as they deliver the news; it apparently took quite a bit of detective work to discern the exact flow of information that led to Naruto and Sakura finding out about Sasuke's ANBU initiation.

Apparently, Kiba told Hinata, who told Ino because Hinata is proud of her cousin, her boyfriend, and her teammate. Ino then told Sakura, but did not get the desired effect. Sakura merely hm-ed distractedly; she was about to scrub into a surgery. Ino then went to the Hokage Tower and delivered the news to Naruto directly. And Naruto is angry (*pissed* is the word the Nidaime uses)—but mostly at Sasuke for failing to mention anything to him. Over a lunch later that day, Naruto vents to Sakura about how Kakashi *and* Sasuke had trounced off to make Sasuke ANBU and hadn't told either of them. This time, Sakura paid attention, and unlike Naruto, she was equal parts angry at both Kakashi and Sasuke. Sakura then visited Kakashi for confirmation, going directly to the man's apartment for dinner. Kakashi watched her banged around his kitchen to make dinner, all the while telling Kakashi—for the *millionth time*—that he needs to be better about communicating and sharing major life events. Kakashi set the table, ate all the food Sakura placed in front of him with gusto, offered an apology and a promise to be better about communicating major life events. Satisfied, Sakura rewarded Kakashi with a treat she had picked up along the way: mandarins and pears. Kakashi's favorites. Afterwards, Sakura gave Kakashi a goodbye hug, and asked if it was all right if she beat the shit out of Sasuke for being an utter and complete idiot (*nimrod* is the word she used, according to Yondaime). Kakashi was more than happy to give her permission to do just that.

"Take cover," Sarutobi says cheerfully.

Sasuke ignores the Sandaime, because he's an Uchiha, and Uchiha's don't take cover. Instead, he focuses on the map in front of him. Hiashi points to a region in the Land of Rice Fields. "We have reports of some movement along this route, concentrated near this village over here," he says. "I want to know who it is, what they're doing, and why they're doing it. You'll be working with Jiro's men. Jiro is in command of both teams, but you pick the route since it seems you have more...personal experience in this part of the Continent."

Sasuke nods and listens a little absentmindedly to Hiashi give a few more directions. Hiashi dismisses him, but not before asking who the team's second will be. Sasuke pauses, not sure if it would be wise to exclude the Captain's nephew so blatantly. Shikamaru might be the better strategist, but he loathes any more responsibility than he already has. Neji is the obvious choice, by all accounts, but Sasuke would rather die than admit Neji as second. If he does, they would be working together more than the others. Sasuke says, "I haven't made up my mind yet."

Hiashi gives him a blank look. "Then make up your mind, ANBU."

Sasuke leaves the room, feeling his neck get warm with anger at the man. "You haven't made up your mind yet?" the Nidaime barks at him. "That's the stupidest answer I've ever heard from a subordinate—"

"He's still a child," the Yondaime scoffs, and when Sasuke glances at him, he looks unimpressed, condescending, and it makes Sasuke grit his teeth hard enough that he feels a muscle jump on his jaw.

"Enough," the Shodaime interrupts them, and the other Hokages fall silent. "You are a commanding
officer now, Uchiha, and you have four men who will follow your every order." The Shodaime suddenly appears in front of Sasuke, and automatically, Sasuke comes to a halt in order to avoid crashing into him. "Those men," the Shodaime continues, and comes just a little closer towards Sasuke. The Shodaime is a little taller, and having to look up at him—even the slightest bit—has the intended effect. He repeats, "They will follow your orders, boy. Each and every single one of them, without question."

And he leaves it at that, stepping aside to let Sasuke pass. There's a second's pause as Sasuke's hand lingers over the doorknob. And then, he's inside, interrupting a loud conversation Kiba is having with Shino. "Aburame, you douche—"

"Mission." Sasuke walks to the front of the room. There is a white board with a map of the Continent hanging over it. Sasuke pulls down the map to its full length and points to a square that includes a section of the Land of Rice Fields and the Land of Fire. "Unauthorized movement in sector JF-6. We survey their activity with Jiro's team, but we do not engage." He looks around the room. "No one gets hurt."

Sasuke takes off his mask and ties it to his belt, the movement familiar and comforting now. The weight of the mask against his hip is barely noticeable, but it's always a heavy presence in Sasuke's mind. Kakashi wore this, he'll think sometimes, and the enormity of a legacy like that weighs heavily on him. It's like having Itachi for a brother, almost. "Someone we know?" Shikamaru asks, stretching. The shadows on the walls flicker a little. The 'we' in his question is mostly 'me and my contacts,' because it's no secret now that Shikamaru is the counterintelligence liaison for the team. It could be Akatsuki, but Sasuke's not willing to share that information, not when it's based entirely on a hunch. Hiashi is not going to be sending out a still new team to scout out Akatsuki, no matter how good the team is.

Yuuta is surveying a town with high-chakra nin only thirty miles northwest. Far enough that they should be able to pass safely, but still, Sasuke feels a little hesitant, finds himself calculating the amount of time it would take for the village to dispatch reinforcements if the need arises. "We approach from south, move along the border and then enter JF-6," Sasuke says. It took him little time to decide on the approach, had figured out their strategy while Hiashi was showing him the mission specs.

"Good move," the Nidaime says, thoughtfully. "You'll stay out of Akatsuki's way."

"He should face them," the Yondaime says, and he sounds angry. "Why is he running from—"

"Enough," the Shodaime mutters. "Let the boy finish."

Shino is the one to object. "We would be wasting time. We can cut across instead of following the length of the border."

"How much time?" Kiba asks and leans forward in his chair a little, eyes narrowing in concentration. He's silent for a moment, calculating, and then mutters, "Eight hours, man."

It is too dangerous, because Sasuke knows that his team, even with Neji, Kiba, Shino and Shikamaru, would be no match against Akatsuki in enemy land with an army of recruits. They would be too far from the village to get reinforcements. It's not worth the risk, not when there are four lives at stake. Sasuke says, voice unflinching now in its finality, "Then we add those eight hours." Kiba opens his mouth to say something, but thinks better of it when Sasuke levels his gaze at him. Sasuke moves towards the door. "We leave at 0900 hours. Take the evening off, get some rest."
He's at the door when Shikamaru drawls out, sounding entirely uninterested, "Who's your second?"

Sasuke remembers the Shodaime, looking down at him slightly, saying, *These men will follow your orders, each and every single one of them.* So he answers, turning to look at the group, still in their seats, "Hyuga."

It's worth the widening of Neji's eyes, an unguarded moment of surprise on the man's face.

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Daichi does not look happy, but it's not much of a standard; the snake never looks very happy. He's one of the younger ones, a coral snake with dark orange and light brown patterns that conceal exactly how dangerous he is. His poison, when he bites, stings Sasuke for hours afterwards, so Sasuke tends to be careful around him. He appeared a few hours ago, and has been lounging around the apartment since, as Sasuke does laundry.

Eventually, Kanaye appears as well (*he's getting better*, Sasuke thinks; soon, Kanaye will be able to summon himself without the help of the other snakes), along with Daichi’s twin, Hideyoshi.

Sasuke asks—because he knows Daichi wants him to ask, is waiting for Sasuke to ask so he can complain—"Why are you here, Daichi?"

"I was bored," he explains and slithers through a pile of freshly laundered socks.

"Liar, liar, scales on fire—" Hideyoshi begins to sing.

"Shut up, Hideyoshi," Daichi snaps and lunges at the other snake. They coil on the floor angrily, fighting each other. Their hissing is only mildly distracting, sounding unnatural and vicious. Sasuke hears "Daichi, you bastard, go die!" and, "Hideyoshi! I should've eaten you years ago when Rin wasn't looking!"

They're a tangle now, Kanaye watching with his head tilted at an angle. "I think Daichi's going to win."

"Hideyoshi," Sasuke counters, because it's a gamble now and they can't bet on the same snake (Daichi will win. He's the more vicious of the two).

"You should intervene," the Shodaime counsels finally. "You cannot have your animals—"

"They'll be fine," Sasuke interrupts and shoves his clothes into the closet.

Daichi screams, "I hate you!" Hideyoshi yells back, "I wish I had a better twin!" Kanaye patiently explains that the quarrel is over a stolen rat, which, apparently, Ishi had eaten. He's not going to tell Daichi or Hideyoshi the truth, though, because it's been a while since something interesting has happened within the family and Kanaye was starting to get bored. And because Rin is in one of her month-long naps again, the war between Daichi and Hideyoshi will rage on for days.

Sasuke settles down in his couch for some TV. On screen, there's a comedian mocking Tsunade's latest attempt at peace with the Land of Water. He pulls a well-worn joke about *Water and Fire? They should stay the fuck away from each other.*

The man lets the audience's laughter fade before saying, "But, I gotta say, gentlemen, we're probably the luckiest demographic on the Continent, with a Hokage like Tsunade-sama. She can rule my nin any time of the day."

Sasuke chuckles despite himself, but when the Shodaime clears his throat pointedly, he switches to
the evening news and turns to the papers spread out on his coffee table. Human Resources sent them up to his desk earlier in the morning, saying that if he doesn't return completed forms, they will not be paying him. Sasuke knows the forms are not complete; he was hoping they wouldn't notice. It had been embarrassing enough when a H.R. employee had sought him out, only to tell him, dryly, that all fields were required.

Name, Age, Gender, Date of Birth, Home Address Line 1, Home Address Line 2, Phone Number, ANBU Number, Ninja Social Security Number, and every other field was filled. The only one left blank was the one that Sasuke always leaves blank. The Next of Kin or Closest Association, the H.R. employee had explained patiently, is the name and information of the person Sasuke would like his dog tags and hitai-ate returned to if he dies in action. Those are the only two things retrieved from a fallen ANBU—the body is left behind. S.O.P., the man had said, Standard Operating Protocol.

Sasuke has never thought this far, not because he hasn't gotten close enough to death—he has—but because it's a little pointless. When he dies, Uchiha Sasuke will stop being a person and become a footnote (textbooks will speak of a dojutsu, long extinct, called the Sharingan. Children will read: The last known user was the traitor known as Uchiha Sasuke). There is no need to drag it on any further, and Sasuke isn't the sentimental type. He doesn't mind that he will probably not leave any family behind, because at the rate things are going, he'll probably go with Itachi. He doesn't mind much of anything, because as long as Itachi stops breathing, Sasuke can stop as well, and that's enough for him. The truth is that Sasuke wants his dog tags to stay with him, would rather have them stay on his rotting body, melt into his bones, because at the end of the day, that's all he has: His name.

So Sasuke told the H.R. employee if he didn't take the papers and shut up about it, he'd do something cruel. The employee looked positively terrified and took the forms, saying that he couldn't promise Sasuke anything. Now, though, he has to confront this blank space. It's not much of a decision to make, really.

Which is how Sasuke ends up at Kakashi's apartment late in the evening, the second time he's ever visited the man (the first time was on his first night as a free man after being released from prison nearly a year ago; Kakashi let Sasuke crash in his guest room for the night). Kakashi's home is large, extremely fancy, and has (in Sasuke's opinion) the best surround sound system in the entire village. The jounin lives the life of a rich, powerful bachelor, who happens to be the Commander of the Joint Forces, and it shows: Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a full 3000 sq. ft taking up an entire floor of the building. It's in the richest area of town, in the kind of building with doormen. Kakashi has also outfitted an armory in one of his rooms: A collection of weapons from all of his fallen opponents. When Sasuke first stumbled upon this room, he nearly drooled at the sight of all the shiny, sharp metal.

Kakashi opens the door, eyebrow arched slightly. He's wearing only dark sweats with KONOHA written down the length of one leg in white lettering, but his face-cloth is firmly in place, as is his hitai-ate. It's generally not acceptable for Sasuke to barge in like this without a really good reason; unlike Sakura and Naruto, there are boundaries in Sasuke's relationship with Kakashi. But Sasuke is risking not getting paid, which in his opinion, is a very good reason. He has bills to pay. "Do you have a minute?" Sasuke asks and tries not to blush at the surprise on Kakashi's face. The jounin steps aside to let Sasuke in.

Kakashi leads them past the living room (where there's a large, flat-screen TV, paused on a pre-recorded game). There is a dog lounging on an ottoman, and as Sasuke and Kakashi walk past the living room, it raises his head to watch. In the kitchen, there are vegetables and meat laid out on a chopping board, and a pan is sizzling on the stove. Sasuke hasn't eaten yet and he's hungry, but he can't just barge in on Kakashi's apartment and expect to be invited for dinner. So he shoves his hands
into his pocket and waits for permission to speak.

"What's going on?" the Yondaime grumbles from somewhere in the room. "They going to train or what?"

The Nidaime scoffs, annoyed already. "I don't know. You guys want to watch this?" The Shodaime and Sarutobi say yes, and the Hokages fall silent. Kakashi goes about the kitchen for a while longer, adding spices to his food. It would be domestic had it not been for the weapons laid out on the dining table, gleaming fresh and dangerous.

It takes a few more minutes for Kakashi to prompt. "Talk," which is when Sasuke realizes that he has no idea how to bring up the topic on his mind. "You're pretty bad at this communication thing, aren't you?" the Nidaime grumbles while Sasuke struggles with what to say.

The Shodaime offers, "All Uchihas are a little impaired in this area. Sasuke is exceptionally horrible, yes, but—"

"Give him a break, Tobirama-sensei," Sarutobi says, chuckling. "He's getting better."

Sasuke decides against speaking, and instead pulls out the folded paper from his pocket. He places it pointedly on the kitchen counter and stays silent. The older man doesn't look at it until a few minutes later, only after wiping his hands on a dishcloth. "What about it?" he asks and pushes the form back towards Sasuke.

Feeling a little ridiculous, Sasuke holds it up for Kakashi to see and points at the missing field: Next of Kin or Closest Association, the header says, and it's bolded. There are a few empty lines underneath. "Can I put your name for this section? It's a required field, and they won't pay me without this form."

"What is it?" the Nidaime asks and when Sasuke lets his Sharingan come to life, the Hokage is looking over Kakashi's shoulder. "Next of kin or closest association," the Nidaime reads out finally. He pulls away from Kakashi, staring at Sasuke with a strange expression on his face. The Nidaime glances at the other Hokages quickly. They all seem frozen as well, the Yondaime's mouth slightly open as if he were about to say something.

It's another moment before Kakashi offers, "You thought you had to ask?"

Well, yes, Hatake, Sasuke thinks, but knows that voicing that would earn him a slap to the head. Instead, he says, "I figured it would be annoying if you had to deal with the paperwork once I died."

"Once you died," Kakashi repeats, and goes completely still. He puts down the knife he has been using. "Not if, but once you die?"

Sasuke shrugs and folds the paper, putting it away. "You'll get my hitai-ate and dog tags. You can trash those. You'll also get a few forms to sign. I've already taken care of all the other paperwork, my will and things. I don't need a funeral, so that would be the extent of your troubles—"

"You thought it would be annoying for me, once you passed away," Kakashi interrupts and still makes no move to continue cooking. The dog lumbers into the kitchen, silently watching the exchange with keen, intelligent eyes.

Sasuke shrugs. "I didn't want to be a burden," he mumbles, and realizes what Kakashi's questioning is all about: It's his way of saying no, and the disappointment of that stings more than it should. He clears his throat, swallows on the instinct to break away from Kakashi's unrelenting gaze. "I understand. I didn't mean to interrupt—"
"I didn't say no, Sasuke," Kakashi says, and he sounds resigned, so different from what he's usually like. "Why would you think I would say—" He stops, abrupt. "You know my information?"

When Sasuke nods, Kakashi stares at Sasuke for a moment longer. Time's up, Sasuke thinks and mutters, "I'll let myself out, then." Kakashi walks with him to the door, the dog trailing behind with the pitter-patter of claws against hardwood floor. Sasuke steps outside, and suddenly remembers a lesson his mother taught him a long, long time ago. "Appreciate it," he says and nods once at the man.

Kakashi looks as if he's about to say something, but instead, he reaches up to lightly pat Sasuke on the side of his face.

The jounin has done this—this strange, cheek-patting thing—just once before, nearly a year ago when Sasuke returned from the Village of Sound. He'd visited Sasuke in his cell, where Sasuke had been beaten and tortured by Ibiki's men, and then locked up in the deepest dungeons of Konohagakure. If Sasuke had wanted to, he could have escaped. Instead, he'd turned himself in, silent except for the occasional grunt when a blow landed too heavily. Kakashi had walked in, seen Sasuke slumped onto the floor and barked at him to stand up. And Sasuke stood, bracing himself for the beating he knew he deserved.

Kakashi hadn't lifted a finger against Sasuke, just muttered under his breath, sounding a little surprised, "You've grown," and patted him on the cheek before telling Sasuke to get some sleep, his trial was tomorrow, and not to be an idiot about it.

Now, when Kakashi does it again, randomly, Sasuke feels his entire face heating up. So he shoves his hands back into his pocket and doesn't meet the jounin's eyes when Kakashi says, "You need help paying your rent this month?"

Sasuke does need help, because he still hasn't gotten a paycheck since he joined ANBU. But he says, "No."

"I'll send a check over," Kakashi says, and pauses for a moment. "You've eaten yet?"

Sasuke lies, "Yes," but Kakashi is Kakashi, so he doesn't fall for any of Sasuke's bullshit, no matter how good Sasuke is at doling it out in large quantities.

"Get in," Kakashi snaps, and Sasuke does, because it sounded like an order. He's taking off his shoes again when he gets a slap on the head, unexpectedly. "What was that for?"

Kakashi just levels a glare at him. "Your idiocy, Uchiha. Your persistent, never-ending idiocy."

Their mission—even after everything that happens—is considered a success. The two teams find nothing, even after sitting perfectly still in trees for several hours on end. In the end, Jiro orders them to fall back, there's nothing here to see. They're nearing the border of the Land of Fire when Kiba falls behind and it all goes to hell.

It took them a day to reach their destination and once there, it's as barren and empty as suspected. It's a bit of a surprise for Sasuke, because he had been expecting something, was anticipating something. They're heading back through a darkened farm on the border, about twenty miles from the Land of Fire when they get hit. Shino radios in, sounding rushed, "We have company. Inuzuka went down."

"Retreat," Jiro snaps into the radio. "Keep moving, ANBU. We're not drawing attention, not tonight. Captain's orders."
"He's injured," Shino repeats. "I need backup—"

"He falls behind, he stays behind, Aburame," Jiro interrupts. Sasuke winces at the volume of this conversation. The corn stalks are thick, and with no light, it's practically impossible to see anything. But he can sense Kiba and Akamaru several hundred feet away, can see their chakra—faint, but persistent—with his Sharingan.

"But—"

"Aburame, fall back," Sasuke radios in. "I've got a visual on Inuzuka."

"Uchiha, I said fall back," Jiro hisses. He is Sasuke's senior, so technically, he outranks Sasuke. But Sasuke has never really cared for hierarchy. And he's always been bad at following orders, been much better at giving them.

"Fall back, everyone. That's an order," Sasuke mumbles and starts heading towards Kiba.

"I outrank you—"

"He's my man," Sasuke snaps and waits patiently, crouching close to the ground. The others are already fading away. He, Kiba and Akamaru are the only ones left behind. "He's my responsibility."

"I'll give you cover," Neji's voice comes in, urgent.

"Retreat, Hyuga," Sasuke snaps. "You're second, take over. That's an order, all of you."

"If this mission is a failure," Jiro warns, but doesn't finish his sentence.

"My responsibility," Sasuke repeats and turns off his communicator. There's silence in the air now, except for the corn stalks crackling in the breeze. There's at least four enemy nin, so Sasuke stalks around them, crawling still. It's easy with so much noise to cover his movements for Sasuke to pick out two of the four, which is when the other two start to panic. One breaks ground and runs when he spots Sasuke, looking dangerous with his sword drawn.

The other one is with Kiba, and when Sasuke finally reaches them, he sees that Akamaru is the only thing standing between Kiba and the attacker. The dog is growling threateningly, standing over Kiba's form and baring his fangs. Every time the man moves, the dog jerks his head up, as if to bite. It takes very little time for Sasuke to slide his sword into the nin's side and twists hard. The man whips around, and before Sasuke can pull his sword back and retreat, the man shoves a senbon needle into Sasuke's thigh.

Akamaru flies into action, biting the man's throat until bone crunches and the man gasps to his death. Sasuke pulls out the senbon, frowning when a shiver runs down his leg. It's just a senbon, Sasuke thinks, sniffing the tip—no poison, not as far as he can tell.

Akamaru turns to Sasuke, nuzzling the site where the senbon broke Sasuke's skin. He starts to lick at it, whining in the back of his throat. Sasuke quickly pushes the dog away before he accidentally licks at his blood, remembering what the medic-nin had said about the snake venom coursing through his veins. "It's just a scratch, you mutt," Sasuke grumbles, moving away to inspect Kiba, who is on the ground, gurgling for breath, but still conscious.

Sasuke cuts open Kiba's shirt with a kunai and wipes the blood clean with the rags, trying to see the extent of the damage in the dim moonlight. He has basic training, so he knows that this is a puncture wound, that Kiba's lungs are slowly filling with his blood, that it's easily treatable with the right training and equipment. Sakura, Sasuke thinks, and starts to bandage up the wound as he's seen her
do millions of times before. He takes off Kiba's ANBU mask and drags down his face-cloth to help with the breathing.

Kiba grins at him, teeth stained black and metallic with blood. "Fuck, man—"

"Shut up, Inuzuka," Sasuke interrupts, and starts to put another bandage over the wound, just in case, just to be sure. He knows only the most basic of medical jutsus, but those require knowledge of the exact wound site. In the darkness, there is a higher chance of Sasuke hurting Kiba than there is of helping him.

"You shouldn't have come back. Jiro was right," Kiba begins, but cuts off as he starts to cough, a wet sound that has Akamaru licking at his face worriedly. "Hey, buddy, I'm all right—"

"When I said shut up," Sasuke says and eases Kiba into a sitting position. "That was an order."

Akamaru barks at Kiba, tail wagging furiously. Kiba listens for a moment before turning to Sasuke and gasping out, "Your injury. It could be poisoned. Akamaru says it doesn't smell right—"

"I don't recall asking you for your opinion, ANBU," Sasuke mutters, but can't help but carefully feel his thigh out. It feels normal, nothing out of the ordinary. If Akamaru smells any poison, it's likely the snake venom in Sasuke's blood. "Let's get out of here."

"Aye, aye, Sarge," Kiba says, and it's a wonder he's still so good humored in a situation like this. Sasuke takes a deep breath and hauls Kiba over his shoulder. He tries the radio, calls in for the others' location, but there is no response. Sasuke does a few seals and Ishi appears, looking dangerous in the night.

Akamaru growls low in his throat at the sight of the snake. "Keep him alive," Sasuke orders, pointing to Kiba. The snake slithers up Sasuke's leg before moving onto Kiba, twisting around his torso to cover the wound. "I can't clear his blood, but I can keep some of it out," Ishi hisses and glows a little blue as the healing begins. Akamaru approaches the snake a little hesitantly. He inspects Ishi for a few moments before withdrawing, satisfied.

Slowly, carefully, Sasuke picks his way back home with Kiba (at 5'9", all 183 pounds of him) thrown over his back. Akamaru leads the way, turning back every so often to whimper and urge Sasuke on. They cover twenty miles or so, slowly, taking nearly three hours on foot. He can't afford to get caught in a fight again, so Sasuke breaks from his route to double back, gets rid of his trail, setting Kiba down now and then to check the bandages and see if the man is still alive.

On their fourth stop, a few miles from the Land of Fire's borders, Kiba leans over to the side and coughs up blood, hacking loud enough that any enemy or border patrol ninja ten miles away can probably hear. Sasuke begins, "Inuzuka, let's go—" but the man falls face first into the blood-speckled dirt, breath harsh and shallow.

"There's too much blood for me to fix, and he's too heavy for you," Ishi hisses then, sounding annoyed. "He will die either way. Leave him and retreat."

"This isn't your decision to make, Ishi," Sasuke says, and the snake considers him for a moment, eyes unblinking.

Ishi bites Sasuke lightly on the hand, but there is no poison behind the attack. "You will wear yourself out," he warns. Sasuke grunts his understanding and watches as Ishi goes back to coil around Kiba's chest.

Akamaru howls, nudging at Kiba's face and looking up at Sasuke pleadingly. An animal that can't
speak shouldn't be this intelligent, Sasuke thinks. Still, he speaks to it. "I'll move ahead. You take care of my tracks out behind. Understood?" Akamaru tilts his head a fraction before jerking his head—a nod, Sasuke realizes—and disappears into the forest. Sasuke lifts Kiba over his shoulder again, wincing at the strain now. He's been travelling for nearly two days with little to no food and absolutely no rest. He was tired even before they got attacked, but with Kiba in tow, he feels his body running out of energy, his chakra pulsing freely in an effort to keep up.

It's not subtle in the least, Sasuke knows. Any half-decent ninja in the surrounding twenty miles would be able to sense his presence. Sasuke keeps up his pace, feeling his back and legs start to cramp with the weight, listening to Kiba's rasping breaths throughout the night. He's in the Land of Fire by dawn and still, no radio contact. Which is his own doing, Sasuke thinks. He insisted on going this route, on avoiding any confrontation. The thought angers him, makes him grit his teeth. "Fuck," Sasuke grunts and falls to his knee, panting a little.

Are you injured? Ishi communicates forcefully.

How is he?

Nearly dead. Are you injured, boy?

Just a scratch on my thigh. I need a few more hours, Ishi. Keep him alive, Sasuke thinks back, and hears the snake's angry hiss from over his shoulder. The cobra does not say anything else, though, and falls silent in his healing.

Akamaru returns a few minutes later to lick at Sasuke's mask, nudging him with his nose. "Right, you filthy mutt," Sasuke breathes and gets to his feet again. His chakra is running out, Sasuke knows. He's pushing himself, each step driven by chakra.

Kiba's gurgling becomes louder as the night wears on and the sun rises. In the light of day, Kiba's face is pale and drawn, teeth bloody and lips a little blue-tinged. Not enough oxygen, Sasuke realizes, and feels his entire body strain under this weight, traveling for such a great distance at such a speed. He's not getting enough air. Akamaru is nipping at his heels now, growling anxiously, always a few feet behind of Sasuke and Kiba. As they near Konoha, Akamaru starts to get more restless, even bites Sasuke lightly on the calf when he slows down.

Leave him here, your chakra does not feel right, Ishi tries again. Something is wrong, you hear me? Something is wrong with your chakra—

"I hear you," Sasuke hisses, and his voice is out of breath. He continues to move, though, ignoring Ishi's warning ssssss.

When Sasuke reaches the village, it's late evening of the next day. The walls are a welcome sight, and Sasuke gasps into the radio, drawing heaving breaths in between every few words, "ANBU to base. I need a medic at the Western Gate. Man down."

Someone radios back, "We're ready for you, ANBU," and then the airwaves fall silent. It takes what little energy Sasuke has left to limp to the gates. The doors open, and when Sasuke steps through, Akamaru barking loud enough to alert every guard on duty, there are jounin waiting for him.

"He can't breathe," Sasuke says and hands Kiba to a jounin with a dog standing close next to him. Ishi falls off of Kiba's body and immediately slithers up Sasuke's frame, hissing angrily. Akamaru whimpers, pawing at the ground, nudging the jounin into action.

"Rest," Ishi says and coils around Sasuke's neck, a warning. "Enough. Find a human healer—"
"Puncture wound," Sasuke breathes. "Lower left lung. He can't breathe."

The jounin takes Kiba, and Sasuke hears a man say gruffly, "Kiba, Kiba, look at me, Kiba, my boy—Thank you, for bringing him home," the jounin says harshly, and then he's gone, gently easing Kiba onto a stretcher nearby.

Sasuke breathes once deeply and falls face-forward into Konoha dirt, just as he hears the Hokages' voices fade into his conscience and Ishi, rasping out in human tongue, loud and commanding, "He's dying, you fools! It's poison!"

"Good job, Sasuke," the Shodaime says, and as Sasuke slips into unconsciousness, he smiles.

Uchiha Fugaku was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a short fuse. Marriage to Mikoto grounded him, but after Obito died, his short fuse turned into temper. That is the father Sasuke remembers: Commanding, grief-stricken, and with a carelessness of his own strength. He never looked at Sasuke, not really, because Sasuke looked like Obito—laughed like Obito, sang like Obito, was joyful like Obito—and Fugaku could not stand the reminder.

He was the third son of Uchiha Yashiro, had three more brothers and a sister after himself. It was a large family, and Fugaku was always a responsible older brother. He helped his aunts deliver Obito, and watched as his stepmother, Yashiro's second wife, bled to death on the birthing bed.

Fugaku loved his sons—though the most he would ever convey was pride, and that too only for Itachi—and he would have loved his daughter had she been born. Sasuke knows intuitively that Fugaku loved him, even if he didn't think Sasuke was a very good Uchiha, even if most of Sasuke's memories of the man are tinged with distinct ache of bruises. With a son like Itachi, there really was no need for Fugaku to have another child, but Fugaku was raised in a large family and he wanted his son to have the same experience.

Itachi was three years old when Fugaku first said, "Good job, son."

Sasuke was six when he heard Fugaku say this about him, and that too indirectly. Fugaku told Mikoto, while Sasuke eavesdropped, "The boy's doing all right." It was Sasuke's first year in the Academy and he'd just brought home his first A.

Mikoto had said, patient, "He's doing great, Fugaku. You should tell him that."

And Fugaku, who was always a good father (Sasuke will never, ever say otherwise), said, "I'll tell him when he earns it."

Sasuke never earned it. He still hasn't earned it, but Sasuke is fine with that. Eventually, if Sasuke ever sees his father again, he'll have his brother's blood on his hands. That is all Sasuke can do in this lifetime.

This is how Sasuke remembers Fugaku: Just as his life faded away, Fugaku put a bloody, wet hand on Sasuke's shoulder and said, "Sasuke, my boy."

He wakes up to a cold touch on his forehead. "Father?"

"No," the Shodaime says, and he's right there, the cool touch lingering a moment longer on his forehead before moving to his shoulder. "How are you?"

Sasuke blinks up at the ceiling. He's in a hospital, can hear the steady beep of a monitor to his right.
He's taking stock of his body when he feels Ishi stir by his feet. The cobra raises his head, looking worn out. "You're a moron," Ishi hisses and makes a coughing, hacking sound.

"What happened to you?" Sasuke mutters and holds out a hand. Ishi slithers up to bite him lightly on the arm before coiling next to his head on the pillow.

"Me and Plum-Wine healed you," Ishi whispers. "I've been with you for the past week."

"Rest, Ishi," Sasuke rasps out and leans over to scratch the cobra's belly. The snake tolerates the treatment for a few moments before slithering away.

"Humans," Ishi spits, biting Sasuke on the neck. The sting of his poison is oddly familiar, comforting. "No sense of self-preservation."

Sasuke swings his feet over the bed, groaning at the strain in his muscles. "I can say the same about you," Sasuke says and hears Ishi's offended hiss.

"Hardly," Ishi scoffs and vanishes with a pop.

"You feel all right?" the Nidaime asks as Sasuke carefully pulls on clothes. He's fumbling with his pants when the door opens and Sakura walks in, clipboard in hand.

She looks Sasuke up and down before snapping on gloves from the counter. "It was a chakra draining poison," she announces, gesturing for Sasuke to sit back down on the bed. "Since you did not bring back the weapon, we were unable to identify the poison or its antidote. As a result, there was a slight glitch in your healing."

Sasuke sits down, because if Ishi was right and he has been out for a week, then something must have been wrong. "What the fuck did you do, Haru—"

"Shut up, Sasuke," Sakura interrupts and pushes Sasuke onto his back, looking dangerous. "Watch."

She pushes some of her chakra into Sasuke's system. This is a routine procedure medics do all the time. Usually, it's a little ticklish, as if someone were crawling inside Sasuke's skin, makes his eyes tingle a little. This time, though, Sasuke's chakra pathways light up so bright and blue under his skin, he turns fluorescent. The Nidaime starts to laugh. "He looks ridiculous."

"Impressive," Sarutobi mutters. "Were you aware you had this much chakra, Sasuke?"

Sasuke stares at his hand, turning it over slowly. He's practically glowing, the outline of his legs visible through the black of his pants. "All Uchihas do. They have to sustain the Sharingan," the Shodaime offers. "But I doubt many Uchihas have this much."

"Is it dangerous?" the Yondaime asks curiously, and he is so close that Sasuke flinches away from the chill to his right. The Yondaime doesn't pay him any attention, just puts a hand experimentally through Sasuke's arm, hm-ing under his breath.

"I doubt it," the Shodaime says and comes to stand next to Sasuke, arms crossed over his chest. "His body is built for it. The chakra pathways are always more extensive in an Uchiha, so it should be able to take this load."

"—arm, the one you blew out with the Chidori that day, Sasuke, remember?"

"What?" Sasuke mutters and returns his attention to Sakura. The woman looks angry at Sasuke's absentmindedness. She grinds out, "The chakra pathways you blew out in your left hand with your Chidori."
"What about them?" Sasuke mutters.

"Sakura restored them," Sarutobi explains with a smile.

As far as Sasuke had known, his chakra pathways had been blown out so badly that they were beyond repair. But Sakura has always been a good medic, one of the best. It shouldn't be so much of a surprise that she's fixed him up. "How?"

"How?" Sakura yells and brandishes her clipboard threateningly. "I just explained how, you stupid, stupid, arrgh!"

"Of course." Sasuke lies down on the bed because this will take long, he can already sense it. "Go on."

Sakura takes a few calming breaths before saying, "Your energy was depleted, and you almost died of chakra exhaustion. I was keeping you stable with my chakra until Shizune got here, when your snake, the cobra, it pointed out a reserve—"

"Where?" Sasuke demands, because it's just a little embarrassing that he didn't know about this reserve in his body. His chakra control is a little weaker than Sakura's, but missing an entire chakra reserve large enough to turn him into a glow-in-the-dark freak of nature was beyond ridiculous.

"Your abdomen, by your lymph nodes," Sakura explains and for added measure, unbuttons Sasuke's pants and pushes it down. Sakura starts to poke around his stomach with gloved fingers, seemingly unaware of the fact that her former teammate, ex-crush, and Uchiha goddamn Sasuke is hers to ogle. "Here and here," Sakura continues, and moves her hand even lower, so dangerously low that Sasuke hopes—prays—that his body doesn't betray him.

Sakura is all curves, dangerous green eyes, and wild hair, the kind of kunoichi that Sasuke might take as a wife. The light blue of her scrubs makes her look a little older, especially since her hair is falling around her face loosely. But she's Lee's woman, and even if Sasuke's body might think otherwise, according to Sasuke's mind, Sakura is too much 'friend' to be anything more. He looks away from Sakura, concentrating instead on Sarutobi's kind, smiling face. "Shameless!" the Yondaime yells loudly. "Utterly shameless. One minute he's lusting after my son like a crazed lunatic, and then this? What is this? I knew you were a good-for-nothing—"

"Namikaze," the Nidaime grumbles exasperatedly under his breath. "So this definitely makes the Uchiha kid bisexual, right?"

"—worthless piece of adolescent delinquent, who would just ruin my son's life—"

The Shodaime gives Sasuke a thoughtful glance. "I assumed he was straight since he gives preference for only women. Of course there's Naruto, but no other man has interested him."

Sasuke tries to keep his face carefully neutral. Having his sexuality discussed by dead men is making him uncomfortable, mostly because Sasuke has never really thought about it. There's Naruto, who he wants. And then there's women with their sweeping curves, long hair, coy smiles. Like Sakura and Ino and Hinata, and the entire goddamn village, filled with women.

And Naruto. Always, forever, Naruto. "—you don't deserve my son!" the Yondaime screams. "Stay away from him!"

"Look," Sakura says suddenly and slaps Sasuke on the chest. Sasuke dutifully looks as Sakura puts a hand right over the line of his boxers and pushes chakra in. His entire stomach lights up such a brilliant shade of blue that chakra starts to wisp away from his skin, like steam.
"Shit," Sasuke mutters, because he can feel a slight tingling in his groin, strange and unfamiliar. Hesitantly, he lifts the band of his boxers to look. It's blue. "Oh, fuck."

Sakura peeks under the boxers as well, eyes going wide. "I missed that," she says, unfazed, and writes it down on the clipboard. "Excuse me," she says politely and snakes a hand under Sasuke's boxers, feeling around carefully.

"Sakura," Sasuke says carefully, lying completely still.

"Sasuke," Sakura answers, looking Sasuke in the eyes, face serious even as her hand experimentally squeezes here and there. "Don't make this awkward, Uchiha. I'm your attending."

"Right," Sasuke says carefully and stares at the ceiling. Sakura is always his attending physician, because no other medic will willingly treat Sasuke, not after what he's done. If, in the rare occasions Sasuke gets injured and Sakura is not around, he has to wait, even if his injuries become infected and swollen. They've turned him away at the E.R. before, so Sasuke usually avoids the hospital. "What are you doing?"

"Testicular exam," Sakura mutters under her breath and pushes Sasuke's pants further down. When he feels Sakura push some more of her chakra in, it feels ticklish. Sasuke blushes despite himself—Sakura is groping him with chakra, he thinks, and tries not to think about that too much.

"Well," Sakura says and straightens, taking her gloves off in a practiced motion. "That's news to me, but everything looks fine. You should still be able to have children."

"That's...good," Sasuke says slowly.

"Orgasms might be more intense, which will make Naruto very happy," Sakura mutters to herself. The Yondaime groans, sounding so utterly devastated and miserable that Sasuke can't help but smirk. Sakura writes down something on her clipboard. "I'm ordering a testicular ultrasound just to be sure. The hospital will call to schedule it with you."

Sasuke zips up, trying not to feel too self-conscious. "Your pathways are still the same, but you should be careful not to overload jutsus with more chakra than necessary," Sakura cautions. "I showed Kakashi-sensei your file, he said he'd work on it with you."

"Fine," Sasuke grunts and pulls on a shirt, wincing when the muscles in his back practically creak with the movement. His uniform is still caked with dirt, and disturbingly, Kiba's blood. He draws his katana, inspecting it for any damage. There is still blood caked on its tip. This could have been Akatsuki recruits or just wayward ninja, and he needs to find out who.

"I just sent Naruto home," Sakura says, voice suddenly soft. "He's been staying over every night, wanted to be here when you woke up, but he hasn't been eating well and I sent him—"

"I have to get back," Sasuke interrupts, because it's not like he hasn't noticed Naruto's absence. The blond is always there when Sasuke wakes up. This is the first time he's been missing.

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"I will kick your ass for being such an idiot another day, Sasuke," Sakura snaps, not missing a beat. She watches as Sasuke finishes putting on his uniform. "I have to do rounds still. You should visit him, by the way."

"Who?"

"Naruto, you idiot," Sakura growls. When her pager starts to beep she glances down at it, mumbles a "for fuck's sake" under her breath. She doesn't leave immediately, though, just lingers by the door.
"Kiba has already been discharged."

Sasuke ties on his kunai pouch. "Good."

"I'm wondering, Sasuke," Sakura says after a moment's pause. She sounds thoughtful, as if she's figured out how to say this already, has practiced it a little. "When will you start to value your own life as much as you do other's? Or maybe your brother's?"

Sasuke freezes at that, because it's not a secret in Team 7 that Sasuke has a death wish, that he's resigned himself to dying before he ever reaches twenty. Once Itachi dies, Sasuke isn't sure what else to do with himself. Dying seems just as good an option as any. People like Kiba, Naruto, Sakura, Neji, though—they have a life to come back to, a life they want to come back to.

"I already do," he lies, and doesn't meet Sakura's eyes as he leaves the hospital room.

The ANBU headquarters is milling with people late in the evening, either reporting for duty or getting back from missions. It's an austere building with a black-marbled wall at the entrance, where the ANBU logo is etched in silver. Next to it is the lettering: Ansatsu Senjutsu Tokushu Butai.

When Sasuke steps out of the elevator onto the sixth floor, there are people waiting for him in uniform, in civilians, even with just a towel around their waist. "Uchiha!" one of them yells and they all start clapping, some whistle, a few more thump Sasuke on the back as he walks by. "Well done, ANBU," a few lean forward to mumble, and they all give way for Sasuke as he steps into the locker rooms. It makes something warm stir in Sasuke's stomach, because the last time people lined up to welcome him back, it was to hiss Traitor and You're not welcome here.

When he gives the Hokages a sidelong glance, the Shodaime is smiling at him. The Nidaime nods his head, an acknowledgment that is almost respectful. Even the Yondaime looks impressed, arms crossed over his chest. He takes a quick shower, changes out of uniform, and is about to return home when Hiashi finds him. "My office, ANBU, now." And then, he's walking away. "What, really?" the Nidaime barks, voicing Sasuke's own annoyance. Sasuke follows Hiashi anyways, keeping his face neutral as the older man holds open his office door.

"Your theatrics, although impressive," Hiashi says by way of hello, "were out of line."

"If I had been the Commander, I'd fire this man," the Nidaime snarls earnestly. Hiashi sits down in his chair, eyes narrowed. "You disobeyed your commanding officer's orders. The mission specifically stated that you should avoid confrontation."

"Here we go," Sarutobi says wearily. Sasuke's mind goes blank, and when he doesn't say anything for a moment, the Yondaime urges, "Answer your Captain, boy."

This is such a stupid line of questioning, Sasuke isn't even sure how to answer it. It was an obvious choice, not something that needs to be explained away in the Captain's office. "He's my teammate."

"That's no excuse to risk the mission—"

"The mission," Sasuke snaps, and gathers his words before continuing. "The mission was completed successfully by that point. I ordered the others to retreat. Whether or not I returned was irrelevant to the mission's success or failure at that point."

"You are a part of the mission," Hiashi thunders. "More importantly, you still have trouble following orders—"
"With all due respect, Captain," Sasuke interrupts. "No matter what you say, how you say it, or how long you say it for, I won't apologize for, or regret my actions."

"You are out of line——"

"And this conversation is pointless, Hyuga," Sasuke snarls, eyes burning into a Sharingan now. "He is my man, my responsibility. Fire me if you want, but don't lecture me. It's a waste of both of our time."

Sasuke is half-expecting Hiashi to lash out, maybe even throw a jutsu at him. It's a surprise when Hiashi takes a deep, steadying breath and stands up. "Like teacher, like student, they say."

"Don't bring him up in this," Sasuke hisses, gritting his teeth. "It was my decision——"

"I'm suspending you from your duties."

"The fuck?" Sasuke growls, just as the Nidaime mutters, "That's interesting."

"For forty-eight hours," Hiashi finishes coolly, and the Shodaime actually laughs. Sasuke snaps his mouth shut, not sure what to say to something like this. The Yondaime is the first to speak in the silence that follows, "I thought he was going to fire you."

Unthinkingly, Sasuke repeats, "You're not firing me."

"My nephew, your second in command, was there that night," Hiashi speaks, voice quiet now. He looks Sasuke in the eyes when he says the next words. "I wonder if it had been my boy instead of Inuzuka, whether I would've ever been able to repay you." Sasuke unclenches his fist, relaxes his muscles at this. There's another moment's silence before Hiashi says, voice curt again, "Dismissed."

Sasuke leaves, wondering whether that's what binds a ninja village together: Debts, from one man to another. In the Village of Sound, the only thing that bound the men together was bloodlust. Sex, alcohol, and the adrenaline rush of killing or getting killed were enough for ninja to work together under Orochimaru. But in the end, they'd all betrayed each other, ran like cowards as Sasuke burned his way through their ranks.

The Hokages are silent for a while before the Nidaime points out, "I think your Captain doesn't hate you anymore."

"Hate him?" the Shodaime asks. "The man never hated him——"

"He hated him," the Yondaime deadpans. "He's a Hyuga, this boy is an Uchiha...God, that story gets old."

"It's a new chapter in history!" Sarutobi enthuses brightly. "Imagine the two clans getting along!"

Sasuke feels his lips twitch into a smile despite himself as he leaves H.Q. The Hyuga and Uchiha Clans will never, ever get along. The next generation's future is ruined already due to the simple fact that Neji is eyeing Naruto.

Shikamaru's voice, when Sasuke hears it from across the street, is a surprise. "Uchiha!" Shino is with him and raises a hand in greeting. Sasuke returns the gesture and approaches them. Neji is also there, and when Sasuke is within earshot, he drawls, "I've turned in the report for you already."

"A 'hello' would have been good," the Nidaime grumbles.
"They're talking!" Sarutobi breathes, positively delighted. "They're talking, Shodaime..."

"Let's eat," Shino says and jerks a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of a grill/bar. Sasuke follows them towards the restaurant and settles in a chair. The men order a round of beer, which is when, surprisingly, Kiba walks in.

"Gentlemen," he greets, sitting down across from Sasuke. Akamaru barks happily and then settles under the table. Kiba looks like he usually does, which can only mean that Tsunade healed him. He orders a beer as well and sits back, grinning. "You were out for a while," Kiba says, smirking. "I recovered before you did, huh?"

"Uchihas have always been slow," Neji mutters under his breath, and when Sasuke turns to look at him, there is no malice in his expression.

"Fuck you, Hyuga," Sasuke says and leans back into his chair when the waitress places their order on the table.

"You get demoted?" Shikamaru asks around a mouthful.

"Suspended," Sasuke corrects and takes a sip of his beer. "Forty-eight hours."

Kiba sniggers. "Should've gotten fired for what you pulled."

"Shut up, Inuzuka," Shino says politely. "What he's trying to say is thank you. Unfortunately there is not very much gray matter in his skull so—"

Kiba slams his fist into the table, voice raised already. "Oi, Aburame!" A few of the other patrons in the restaurant turn to look at them.

"Shut it, you troublesome piece of—"

"Goddamn bug-freak! I'll show you thank you—"

"Behave, for God's sake," Shikamaru grumbles threateningly.

Sasuke points out, "Nara, your woman's turning you into a woman." He takes a swig of his beer, smirking when Kiba starts laughing at that.

"Behave," Kiba mimics and falls into a fresh round of laughter. "That sounds like Ino."

"Boys, that's no way to talk in front of a lady," Sasuke mumbles and Neji's lips twitch. Even Shino chuckles.

"Fuck you, Uchiha," Shikamaru says solemnly, jabbing his fork at Sasuke. "Fuck you."

"Teamwork, right?" the Yondaime mumbles.

Kiba is reenacting Sasuke's dramatic rescue, complete with Ishi's hisses, when they see the others.

"Then he goes, 'Cover my trail, Akamaru! Understood?'" Kiba says. "And the snake goes 'Sssssssss,' and then Uchiha actually says back, 'Ssssssss.' And it's like, they can fucking communicate this way or something—"

Neji starts to laugh again. The man has had a few beers and has loosened up considerably. Shikamaru is bent over in half, laughing so hard that he can't sit up straight anymore. "I mean, there's this fucking seven-foot long cobra around me, and I'm thinking, damn, this thing is going to eat me..."
"He wanted to," Sasuke says. He glances at the waitress to get her attention, and orders another drink. "I should've let him."

"—And after I throw up my guts, I pass out. But does this man leave me? No—"

"You need to get on a fucking diet," Sasuke interrupts, turning to look at Kiba with a smirk.

"Inuzuka, you fat cow," Shino deadpans and takes a swig of his beer. "You fat, bloated cow." Neji and Shikamaru drown in slightly drunken hysterics again. Kiba follows shortly, slapping the table top with his palm. He makes a wet coughing sound now and then, but that's the only sign of his previous injury.

Which is when Sasuke spots Naruto, walking through the restaurant doors, Sakura, Lee, Hinata, Ino, and Chouji close at hand. "Hey, Sarge—" Kiba begins but then falls silent when he realizes who just walked in. "Hinata!"

"Whoa, boy," the Nidaime whistles. "Steady, Uchiha."

"This village has at least fifty restaurants," the Yondaime grumbles. "Why do they all have to visit the same one?"

"Perhaps the food is good," the Shodaime speculates.

"It looks good," Sarutobi puts in, sighing wistfully. "I want an apple."

The Nidaime says, looking longingly at the beer in Sasuke's hand, "A sake. A shot, that's all I ask."

Sasuke watches Naruto approach, hand curled around the mug in his hand. Naruto looks older, tired, worn out, as if in the week Sasuke was sleeping, he's aged. When he sees Sasuke, he looks relieved, but his lips are still pressed into a thin line. Not a smile in sight, which is when Sasuke realizes just how much he likes them—Naruto's smiles, the way they make the scars on his face become thin, his eyes brighten, something in the air lighten.

And why, Sasuke wonders, did Naruto even leave his side? Why wasn't Naruto there when he woke up? "—pull up a table," Kiba enthuses, and within the next minute, the gathering has doubled in size. Naruto is on the other end of the table, paying attention to the story that Kiba starts narrating. He doesn't meet Sasuke's eyes, not even when Sasuke stares pointedly. After a while, Sasuke gets to his feet, ready to leave. The table falls silent and everyone turns to look at him.

Kiba asks, "We'll see you Monday, then? We can finally get some missions once you get back..."

"You," Sasuke says, jabbing his finger at Kiba, "are relieved of field duty until you're fully recovered, Inuzuka."

"Oi—"

"Hyuga." Sasuke turns to Neji, voice flat as he does out orders. "I want him doing paperwork."

"Roger," Neji says, stretching. "We've only done patrol since you've been out, so there's plenty of paperwork." Sasuke places a few bills on the table, ignoring Kiba's indignant howls.

Hinata gives him a grateful, heartfelt smile. "Thank you, Sasuke. For everything. My father is Captain, so I know what your actions must have cost you." Only forty-eight hours, Sasuke wants to
say, but Hinata smiles again and all he can do is nod. Kiba yells, "Paperwork? Fucking piece of shit, Uchiha! Is that why you saved me? So I could do your goddamn paperwork?"

"You should do something," the Nidaime whispers suddenly in his ear. "Don't just ignore Naruto, you won't get anywhere if he has to make all the effort himself—"

"Stop helping—"

"He was so worried," Sarutobi sighs. "He stayed by your side for days, Sasuke."

"Take the initiative for once, kid," the Nidaime commands. "Don't be a coward." And that's all it takes for Sasuke to make up his mind (coward? An Uchiha?) "Dead last," Sasuke says, as he's passing Naruto. "You done?"

Naruto freezes, eyes widening slightly. "Done?"

"Eating. Are you done eating?" Sasuke mutters, aware of the entire table staring at them now. Naruto's plate is full, but he gets up anyway and gives half-hearted goodbyes to the others. Ino grabs Naruto's arm just as he's about to leave and gives him a long, meaningful look. "I know," Naruto hisses, pulling away from her. Sakura scoffs around a mouthful, jabbing Lee in the side as if encouraging him to speak. The man just shakes his head, looking disappointed.

Neji gives Naruto a blank, heavy look before turning away. "That's...odd," the Nidaime says finally. "What was that?"

"Let's go," Sasuke snaps when Naruto lingers, and is rewarded with a "You impatient bastard."

Then, they're outside, walking towards Naruto's apartment. "Say something," the Nidaime prompts. "Go on. This is a perfect opportunity, boy—"

The Yondaime screams, "Get away from my son, you delinquent!"

"Where were you today?" Sasuke asks and that's all it takes for Naruto's monolithic guilt complex to kick into hyperdrive. He comes closer to Sasuke, touching his elbow hesitantly.

"I went home for the afternoon, a few hours at most, I didn't think..." He trails off and grips Sasuke's wrist lightly. "I wanted to be there when you woke up. You know that, right?"

"I know," Sasuke relents, because the expression on Naruto's face is the very definition of misery. Naruto still looks ready to walk off a cliff in his despair, so Sasuke tries again. "It's fine, Naruto."

"You feeling all right?" Naruto asks, voice pitched low.

Sasuke rolls his eyes. Naruto and his goddamn concern, he thinks. "I'm fine, dead last."

"Good," Naruto says, voice clipped. He grabs Sasuke's arm and forces Sasuke to face him.

Sasuke stops, frowning slightly. "What are you—"

"I will kill you now," Naruto says, smiling brightly, and lets his fists fly.

After kicking each other around for a few hours, Naruto decides that he's given Sasuke the beating Sasuke deserves for being such an idiot and declares loudly that he's going home. Sasuke usually enjoys sparring with Naruto, because it's challenging, because Naruto can hold his own against Sasuke, and because when Naruto fights, he becomes slightly sweaty, flushed a pretty pink, and
sometimes even takes off his shirt to combat the heat. Over time, Sasuke has realized that if he uses more fire jutsus and raises the temperature high enough, Naruto will strip down faster and well—there are a great number of perks to being an Uchiha.

But while Naruto heals instantaneously from their spars, Sasuke is always still slightly sore. Today, he's even limping from a brilliant maneuver Naruto executed to pin Sasuke down. Which is why Naruto takes pity on him and offers to fix Sasuke up. Sasuke protests for an appropriate amount of time and then lets himself get dragged behind Naruto.

Naruto's apartment is close to town, set in one of the ritzier areas overlooking the Hokage monuments. Naruto moved in once he started to train under Tsunade as the pick for Hokage when his time comes. Tsunade has unknowingly furnished Naruto's apartment, mostly because the inordinate amount of time Naruto spends as her aide gives him a good paycheck.

Naruto keeps a spare of everything for Sasuke to use, so spending the night at Naruto's place is never an inconvenience. Sasuke's toothbrush is in the cabinet, his towel in the closet in the bathroom, shaving kit behind the mirror, even though Naruto can't grow a beard or any body hair (the Kyuubi's chakra leaks out and fries his hair follicles and nerve endings. That's why I can't feel pressure or temperature against my skin, Naruto explained to him once mournfully; Such a freak of nature, dead last, Sasuke dutifully insulted, but then went home later that night and readjusted each and every single one of his fantasies).

Naruto has even bought Sasuke's favorite brand of shampoo, soap, and deodorant. He keeps them well stocked in his apartment so if Sasuke were to ever show up one day, he would feel at home. Sasuke steps into the shower for a quick rinse and then emerges, towel around his waist. He's going through Naruto's walk-in closet, looking for pajamas when he hears Naruto yell from the bathroom around the toothbrush in his mouth, "Second drawer, to the left."

Sasuke opens the second drawer, wondering idly why Naruto so compulsively rearranges everything in the apartment at odd intervals. "Just leave my clothes alone, dead last."

"You have closet space here?" the Yondaime breathes, sounding desperate. He clutches at his heart dramatically. "I think I'm dying. God help me, I need to lie down. I need to lie down."

"You're already dead, Namikaze," the Nidaime says, unhelpful as always. He eases the Yondaime onto a chair regardless. When Minato descends into paler shades of blue, the Nidaime turns to the elder Senju. "Brother, he doesn't look too good."

"Breathe, Minato," Sarutobi counsels. "In, and out, in and out, in and out, see?"

"Shut up, you bastard," Naruto snaps back and spits viciously into the sink. Sasuke watches him wrench open the closet in the bathroom (his bathroom is big enough to have a closet, two sinks, plenty of counter space and a glitzy-looking shower stall). He rummages around before emerging with an armful of first aid items: Gauze pads, self-adhesive tape, warming pads, antibacterials. He doesn't need any of these personally; they're for Sasuke, Sakura and Kakashi when the need arises.

Sasuke dutifully sits down on the bed, dressed in boxers and sweats. The bed is as deliciously comfortable as it looks (Naruto has furnished his apartment with the most luxurious furniture available. Sasuke is willing to pass out on Naruto's carpet—steam cleaned once every month by a service Naruto hires—if Naruto gives him permission). It's a little embarrassing that Naruto makes so much more money than he does. His days of living on a meager stipend provided by the Village Council are long over. Now, Naruto is what ninja Sasuke's age consider well off. The strangest thing is that Naruto is still a genin, but goes on A- and B-rank missions right along with the other jounin. At this rate, he'll be the first genin to become Hokage. And that's so typically Naruto, the most
unpredictable ninja in the village. From genin to Hokage, and no one will contest his ascent anymore, not after everything that has happened.

Naruto gets to work on dressing Sasuke's wounds with practiced ease. He's done this countless times for Sasuke before, and it's a familiar routine. When Naruto rolls up Sasuke's pants to expose the injured knee, Sasuke doesn't protest, just leans up against the headboard. They're silent as Naruto goes through these movements except for the occasional "Hey, bastard, this feel all right?" and "Fine, dead last."

It's when Naruto is carefully spreading antibacterials to scratches on Sasuke's back (courtesy of Naruto's nails as he fought tooth and claw to escape Sasuke's hold at one point) that Naruto mutters, "I'm proud of you. For what you did for Kiba."

Kiba, Shikamaru, Neji and Shino all nearly died in an attempt to retrieve Sasuke from Orochimaru once. There was a time when Shikamaru would not look Sasuke in the eyes, still seething over Chouji's injuries. There was a time when Kiba would look through Sasuke, as if Sasuke didn't exist. Sasuke doesn't say any of this, even though it weighs heavily on his mind. Instead, he says, "Did you think I'd leave him behind?"

"No," Naruto says, voice suddenly loud. He is a little rough when he presses a two-by-four gauze pad into one of Sasuke's wounds and doesn't say anything for the rest of the time. When he's packing up the materials fifteen minutes later, he mutters, "It's nice to see the village start accepting you again, though."

And isn't that the strangest part of it all, Sasuke wonders, flexing his fingers. Naruto has bandaged his knuckles up a little too tightly, but Sasuke will not complain. He's too amused at the irony of it all: Naruto, once the hated demon child of Konoha, now the obvious pick to be the Seventh Hokage, taking pity on Uchiha Sasuke, once the village's darling, now their reformed traitor. "I'll take the couch," Sasuke offers, getting to his feet.

"See?" the Nidaime crows triumphantly. "The boy's horny as hell, but he's not going to take advantage of your son! He's honorable, like I said."

The Yondaime doesn't relent. "Don't be too sure of that, Tobirama-sensei."

"Take the bed, you jerk," Naruto snaps and pushes Sasuke back towards the bed. "You just got out of the hospital." Naruto never, ever offers to take the couch. He likes large, comfortable beds, heavy sheets, big pillows. This is the first time Naruto has ever willingly given up a bed for Sasuke. Even on missions, Sasuke usually spends the night on the floor or a lumpy futon while Naruto spreads out happily on the bed (mostly because Kakashi orders him to—otherwise Kakashi will have to sit through Naruto's incessant complaints for the rest of the mission).

"Dead last—"

"My home, my rules," Naruto insists, defiant now and shoves Sasuke onto the bed. "Shut up and just take the damn bed."

"He is worried," the Shodaime explains patiently. "He was worried you might not wake up, Sasuke."

"We all thought that," the Nidaime puts in, and his voice sounds a little gruff. "You piece of shit, pulling a stunt like that."

Sarutobi chuckles, placing a hand on the Nidaime's shoulder. "What Tobirama-sensei means is that
he was worried. As was Naruto, so you should comfort him."

Sasuke isn't very good at comforting people, mostly because he hasn't had to do it much in his lifetime. So he offers, trying to lighten the mood, "We can share the bed." On any normal day, Naruto would have yelled at him for being a pervert before hitting him and throwing him out. Today, though, Naruto freezes for an instant before muttering, "Fine," and he's crawling into bed the next instant.

Sasuke's mind goes blank. This, he realizes, is a plan that has backfired. He can offer to take the couch, kick Naruto out of the bed, or settle in next to the blond and thank the gods for his luck. The only problem with sleeping next to Naruto is this: Sasuke almost always ends up getting hard about halfway into the night and has to jerk off, which is beyond embarrassing when it's in Naruto's bathroom. But there's really no way of escaping this situation, because Naruto mutters, "Hey, you coming to bed?" And that's all it takes for Sasuke's will to crumble (maybe today's my day, he tells himself), and he settles under the covers as well.

Naruto turns off the light, which is when the Yondaime whispers, "Can we possess people, Sarutobi-sensei?"

"No, Minato, we can't possess people."

"Maybe I should sleep on him," the Yondaime says slowly.

"And what would that accomplish?" the Nidaime drawls. "He'll just get cold."

"Eventually, I'll sink into his spirit, take over his body, and then walk him off a cliff," the Yondaime breathes, the idea slowly forming in his mind. "He's half-spirit, right? I can shut down his chakra pathways like the Nidaime did and then walk his body off the cliff to a messy, terrible death—"

The Shodaime interrupts the Yondaime sternly. "We all agreed not interfere with the boy's chakra pathways ever again, Minato."

"Yes, sir," the Yondaime responds. Sasuke thinks that the Shodaime's reprimand might have been enough to shut up the Yondaime for good, but it's not. "But possessions don't involve—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Minato," the Nidaime says with a laugh, "you can't possess people. This isn't a children's horror movie—"

"Shut up," Sasuke mumbles and rolls onto his stomach, getting more comfortable under the covers. The bed is even more comfortable than he anticipated. It's perfect, he thinks with a sigh.

Naruto shifts closer to Sasuke, hand reaching out to touch him. "I didn't say anything, Sasuke."

"Fine," Sasuke says and pulls away from Naruto's touch, edging to the other end of the bed. He's not sure he can handle Naruto so close. But then again, the Yondaime is right there so it's doubtful his body will betray him any time soon.

"Just remember, Uchiha," the Yondaime hisses. "One move."

Naruto is silent for a few moments before he inches closer and puts a hand on Sasuke's back. He pushes chakra in, not budging even when Sasuke hisses in annoyance as his skin lights up blue. "Is this safe?"

"It's fine," Sasuke snaps and tries to push Naruto away.
"Kakashi-sensei looked a little worried when Sakura told him," Naruto murmurs, and his hair falls into Sasuke's face, smelling fresh and wild.

Sasuke clenches his fist so he doesn't reach up and do something stupid: Like feel the texture of Naruto's hair between his fingers, maybe tuck it behind Naruto's ear. "He was probably just bored."

"No, he was worried. I know the difference between Bored-Kakashi-sensei and Worried-Kakashi-sensei," Naruto insists. "Are you sure it's safe?"

"Uchihas are born with this," Sasuke explains and rolls onto his back. Naruto moves his hand to Sasuke's stomach, resting it lightly over his belly button. "It's for the Sharingan."

"But Kakashi-sensei isn't an Uchiha, so how does he keep up the Sharingan without the chakra pathways?"

*Good question.* But Sasuke isn't willing to stay up discussing the specifics of the Hatake bloodline, their strange, ancient chakra and Sasuke's private theory that Kakashi might be the greatest ninja to date. "I don't know, ask Kakashi," Sasuke says. "Dead last, I'm tired."

Naruto stills at this, and even in the dark, Sasuke can imagine the expression on the blond's face, the dulling of his blue eyes, the small crinkle between his eyebrows. "You always do these things, you idiot," Naruto says softly and moves his hand up to Sasuke's chest, where his heart is. "Sakura said you probably wouldn't survive. I asked Tsunade to heal you, but she wouldn't."

Tsunade refusing to heal Sasuke is no surprise, but the knowledge of it still stings. "I'm sure she had her reasons," the Shodaime says, but his cheer is a little forced. Sasuke's betrayal of the village is still fresh on Tsunade's mind; Sasuke could live a thousand lives, serve the village with all his heart and she would still not forgive him for his treason.

"Sakura did fine on her own," Sasuke mutters and lies completely still, because Naruto lowers his head onto Sasuke's chest lightly. He stays that way, unmoving, and Sasuke realizes in that instant that Naruto is listening to his heartbeat.

A few moments later, Naruto pulls away from Sasuke slightly, but doesn't move far, his breath hot against Sasuke's shoulder. Naruto is silent for a long, long time. Eventually, he presses his hand against Sasuke's stomach. Sasuke is glowing bright blue before he can protest, chakra evaporating off his body like steam. "Sakura said," Naruto mutters, sounding wicked and inching closer. "That you were blue."

"I am, you idiot," Sasuke barks and holds up his hand. "I get that—"

"Blue everywhere," Naruto repeats and puts his face close to Sasuke's, close enough that their noses are touching slightly. He angles his head as if to kiss Sasuke, parts his mouth as if he's going to lick him. The blond has spent enough time with Jiraiya, knows exactly what will drive someone mad with lust. It's frustrating because Naruto realizes this advantage over Sasuke, uses it to his full extent, because Naruto is a shameless, manipulative bastard like that. It's the same way he pulls out a sexy no jutsu for Jiraiya and dangles the latest edition of *Icha, Icha Paradise* for Kakashi. "Blue everywhere, Sasuke," Naruto breathes on Sasuke's lips hotly.

Sasuke freezes for a split moment before he slaps Naruto's hand away. The glow of his body fades almost instantly. "What happened to patient confidentiality?"

Naruto laughs, loud and clear. "I heard sex with you would be greatly improved as a result," he says, leering. He pulls to the other side of the bed before Sasuke can process this phrase. "Good night,
Sasuke.

Sasuke feels his mind go blank and he manages, "Huh."

The Yondaime just howls.

Sasuke gets hard at exactly 2:13 am, when Naruto rolls onto his back and mhmms in his sleep, breathing deeply. His hand brushes against Sasuke's shoulder.

So, dutifully, Sasuke slips out of Naruto's apartment, blurs across town and slams into his bathroom (ignoring the Hokages yelling at him, "What's wrong, Uchiha? Is there a threat?") He emerges twenty minutes later, scowling, and wearing a new set of boxers.

The Nidaime is the first to understand and he whispers something into the Shodaime's ear. Sasuke hears him say, "Brother, he's..." The Shodaime's eyes go wide in understanding and he conveys the message to Sarutobi who ah-s knowingly. They leave out the Yondaime who keeps glancing between the others and demanding an explanation.

Sarutobi clears his throat as Sasuke is slipping under his covers (his ears are burning in embarrassment) and says, "Sasuke. It's a natural process for teenagers to—"

Both the Yondaime and Sasuke round on him, faces flushed pink. "Sarutobi-sensei!"

Sasuke does not masturbate for three entire days after this incident.
Kobarashi Isamu is a nondescript brunet with straight, yellowing teeth, and a scowl on his face. His blood is on Sasuke's blade, and it is the only sample of DNA that comes out with a positive match in the ANBU databases. His picture appears almost immediately when Sasuke takes the initiative and orders Shikamaru into Shinobi Counterintelligence.

The investigation is unauthorized. Hiashi has not ordered them to find out the identities of their attackers—that is a task for Special Jounin and S.C.I. Once those two departments have sorted out the details, ANBU will then be dispatched to deal with the threat. But Sasuke's curiosity has been eating at him, and he doesn't like to be in the dark, especially when it concerns Naruto's safety. He has to know—needs to know—if it was Akatsuki who attacked the team during their mission to the Land of Rice Fields.

It takes Shikamaru two days, and when he returns, it is with a folder and a grumble. "So damn troublesome, Uchiha."

The folder is relatively thick. Kobarashi has been associated with several outlaw groups, including Orochimaru, the Eastern Front Liberation Army, and more recently, Akatsuki. He's a scouting agent, recruits potential members and gets paid a small fee for every willing fighter he provides. The fact that Akatsuki is recruiting is a red flag in itself, has the Yondaime pacing the length of the small conference room.

Neji, Kiba and Shino have gathered as well, slumped into chairs and quietly waiting for Sasuke's analysis. "Akatsuki," Kiba grumbles, letting his head drop to the table. "Man, they're such a pain in the ass."

Shino glances up at the ceiling where one of his bugs cautiously inspects the light fixtures. "Akatsuki is an exclusive group. They do not recruit."

"They're apparently recruiting now," Shikamaru says, nonchalant as always. "And this means… Uchiha?"

Sasuke gets to his feet and approaches the map on the wall. Groups like Akatsuki use recruits only as warm bodies, distractions for a larger fight of some kind. It's the perfect cover for Akatsuki. With Orochimaru gone and without the Village of Sound, the Land of Rice Fields is a power vacuum, and different groups are likely competing to fill the space that Orochimaru left behind. And it's working, Sasuke realizes, because Konoha has already shifted its attention to the Land of Rice Fields. ANBU teams are being dispatched to investigate this activity, but they're wasting their time. Sasuke is wasting his time, lounging around Konoha as if he has nothing better to do, when he should be heading west.

Shino clears his throat. "Uchiha," he repeats.

"It's a smoke screen," Sasuke answers finally. The Nidaime hm-s under his breath, nodding his head in agreement.

Neji walks to the front of the room as well, standing next to Sasuke with his head held high. After a moment, he taps on the dot that is labeled Konohagakure. "They're heading for Naruto."

And the concern in his voice makes Sasuke's heart quicken with anger. He feels immediately ashamed of this reaction. Akatsuki is closing in on Konoha, and he is still distracted by something as
petty as Naruto's romantic entanglements. Sasuke is spared the need for having to agree because Kiba throws up his hands dramatically. "Really? I mean, really? Do they have nothing better to do?"

Shino ignores Kiba in favor of asking another question. "But why are they—"

There's a brisk knock on the door, and then it opens. A genin enters, poking his head cautiously through the crack. He's a messenger, and wordlessly, he approaches Sasuke, handing over a letter. It has the official seal of the Commander of the Joint Forces. "Well? What is it?" the Nidaime demands from his corner of the room.

Sasuke pushes a few bills into the genin's hand. The boy scurries almost immediately. He opens the letter distractedly, even as he says, "We keep this investigation to ourselves until further notice."

Neji angles his head a fraction. "Is that an order?"

The note reads: Field 9. 0930 hrs.

Field 9 is a beat-up training ground by the jounin dojos where Kakashi sometimes trains Sasuke, but only in the dead of the night, when there is no one to see. They have never trained in the mornings, when the dojos are full of people. This is unusual, but Sasuke doesn't have time to puzzle out the meaning of this because his watch reads 0923. "Typical, Hatake," Sasuke grumbles under his breath. He has seven minutes to get from here to the other end of the village. And if he's late—

Sasuke pockets the message and looks at the others. They look expectant, curious, and even Shikamaru has a contemplative look on his face. The Commander of the Joint Forces doesn't frequently contact any individual ANBU member. But then again, Sasuke thinks, the Commander of the Joint Forces isn't just anyone's delinquent, good-for-nothing teacher.

Kiba opens his mouth to ask the question on everyone's mind—What did the Commander say?—but Sasuke interrupts before the man can get out a word. "Yes, that was an order," he says, and vanishes with a pop.

Predictably, Kakashi is late.

Sasuke does an hour's worth of stretches, warms up for another hour, and even rearranges all the weapons in his holster. The ghosts watch him, the Nidaime and the Yondaime becoming increasingly impatient as the hours tick by. "Where is he?" the Yondaime demands every so often, floating up into the air to get a better visual.

Kakashi may or may not show up for training, but Sasuke has been Kakashi's student for long enough to know the virtue of patience. So he ignores the other jounin training around him, and waits patiently on a wooden bench by the side of the field.

It's been three hours since Sasuke arrived when there is a soft flare of chakra and a pop.

Kakashi stretches lazily. "Well."

Sasuke gets to his feet and faces Kakashi on the field, getting into a defensive stance. "I have better things to do, old man."

"Sakura tells me," Kakashi says loudly from the other side of the field, "that you glow blue in the dark." There is a weighty pause. "The problem is systemic, I hear."

Sasuke feels his face heat up, even as the Hokages start to laugh. "Fuck off, Hatake," he yells loudly,
and blurs.

Sasuke's fist does not make contact with Kakashi's face as he had hoped.

Predictably.

"What are you doing wrong?" Kakashi probes, sounding bored. He is sitting on Sasuke's back, trapping Sasuke's hand at an odd angle, and it makes it almost impossible for Sasuke to breathe without pulling at the muscles in his ribs.

Sasuke answers, "Boar seal," but it comes out as, "Brrrseshhhheel," when he tries to say it. He spits out a mouthful of dirt, but only gets more dirt caked to the side of his face. Kakashi places a hand on Sasuke's head and rubs his face into the earth for emphasis.

"So fix it." The weight suddenly disappears from Sasuke's back, and Sasuke gets back to his feet. He is sweaty, dirty, and getting more and more frustrated in their second hour of training. It doesn't usually take him this long to understand a lesson, but this is a chakra lesson, and the only member of Team 7 with a decent understanding of chakra is Sakura. Even Naruto, the idiot that he is, has improved considerably under Jiraiya's tutelage. But Sasuke's forte has never been chakra. It has always been strategy, katon techniques, weaponry, and brute force.

"I don't know how," Sasuke yells at Kakashi, who has retreated to his side of the field. "I keep pissing chakra from every fucking orifice of my goddamn body when I—" He makes a seal to demonstrate and chakra sizzles off his hands. "Every fucking time!"

Kakashi is silent for a moment. "This isn't working."

Sasuke wisely keeps his mouth shut, because he can tell Kakashi is also getting frustrated. Which is always a bad sign and usually ends with Sasuke out cold on his back after Kakashi hands him his ass on a platter, Sakura tutting at his injuries. Sasuke can already hear her lecture: Why do you always egg him on like that, he wants the best for you, but you always make it so difficult for Kakashi-sensei, I don't like it when you two behave like this, and Naruto doesn't either, what is wrong with you two, honestly, boys.

"Sharingan," Kakashi orders briskly and pushes up his hitai-ate. Sasuke glances around at the crowd of ninja idly watching them train, having abandoned their own training to observe the spectacle before them. This is an audience, which is generally unacceptable when training with the Sharingan. The secrets of the Sharingan are theirs, no one else's, a ritual between Kakashi and himself that even Sakura and Naruto are not privy to.

"What, now?" Sasuke asks incredulously, but Kakashi's hands are already blurring into seals, and Sasuke instinctively follows, Sharingan bleeding into life.

It's a grounding jutsu, Sasuke can tell, but he doesn't understand until Kakashi slams his palm down to the earth. The entire field rumbles with the chakra he dispels, and then settles as the power diffuses out. Kakashi straightens, and Sasuke repeats the jutsu, but when he does it, there is a mild earthquake. Cracks emanate from his palm, breaking the field into sections. Sasuke tries to control it, slows the flow of his chakra to a more concentrated stream, but this only widens the crack.

Sasuke wasn't even aware he had this much chakra; enough to split the earth in two, and he doesn't even feel it. Doesn't feel drained, doesn't feel anything, just a slight tingle as the crack continues to spread. The crowd watching by the sidelines sidesteps the crack, pushing against each other as the earth stops shaking and slowly comes to a stop.
Sasuke doesn't straighten immediately, can feel Kakashi's disappointment and annoyance thick like molasses in the afternoon heat. There will be a price to pay for his incompetence.

"Wrong," Kakashi corrects impatiently, and Sasuke defends against the sudden kick aimed at his side, a punch, another series of kicks and punches—and one lands on his shoulder, a splitting pain immediately blooming down his arm. Kakashi grabs his wrist and twists, ignoring Sasuke's curse to point out three different spots on his forearm. "Here, here, and here. Your chakra pathways branch, amplify, and then reconnect. That's why there's a surge when you do the boar seal. Fix it."

He retreats back to his side of the field. "Sharingan," Kakashi orders again, and his hands blur. It's the same jutsu, but Sasuke is more careful this time, feels where his chakra pulses and breathes deeply against the sudden flare of chakra in his stomach.

They do it together, and this time, the earth trembles but doesn't crack. Immediately, the Shodaime speaks. "Better," he critiques, with a slight smile. "Much better. But still—"

"Wrong," Kakashi barks, and Sasuke has less than a heartbeat to respond to Kakashi's sudden flurry of attacks.

Three hours into the training, and the crowd watching Sasuke and Kakashi has grown even bigger. They've moved onto weapons training now, typical of Kakashi's schizophrenic training sessions, and now—finally—Sasuke understands.

Kakashi's training sessions don't make much sense until they are at the end. Kakashi never begins a session by saying, Today, we will learn about earth jutsus. He only starts throwing fire jutsus at Sasuke until Sasuke understands that the only way to counter is with earth jutsus. Under Kakashi's tutelage, Sasuke has come to understand that this brand of teaching works just fine for him.

Sakura and Naruto frequently complain about Kakashi's teaching methods, sometimes to the man's face, but Sasuke finds himself always on Kakashi's side. For some reason, no matter what the lesson is, Sasuke remembers it (Rule one, Kakashi taught him, Look out for your teammates. Rule forty-seven, he would say six years later, Always carry condoms). Today has somehow become a session on weaponry and taijutsu. And it isn't until now, when Sasuke finds himself breathing out controlled fire from his lungs that he realizes the point of the entire training session.

Sword fighting and taijutsu, especially against Kakashi, requires all of Sasuke's concentration and patience. Forcing a katana on Sasuke and limiting the number of jutsus is the perfect way to drive home this lesson: It's not that Sasuke can't control his chakra, it's just that he has to relearn his patience and start from square one again. It's embarrassing to have to learn this in front of an audience, even worse since every time Sasuke turns around, there is a larger crowd. At one point, he saw Tsunade patiently watching them, her gold crown standing out in the sea of gathered nin. And there is a reason for this, too, Sasuke realizes, because out of shame alone, Sasuke is relearning how to master his chakra much quicker than he would have done otherwise.

Orochimaru taught him how to wield a sword when he realized Sasuke had a natural affinity for weaponry. Orochimaru had been a master, but he did not wield a sword like Kakashi does, like an extension of his limbs or something to be honored. There are samurai in Kakashi's family, Sasuke knows, because the Hatake family is originally from the western lands. So it's not surprising that Kakashi moves with the sword with perfect grace and absolute ease. And because Sasuke is Kakashi's student, and because he is a Sharingan wielder, Sasuke is already mimicking the man move for move, and he has become better already. He can feel it in his bones, can sense it in the way Kakashi's eyes crinkle with approval when Sasuke gets into a perfectly held stance with the katana drawn out behind him. The sword that Sasuke is using for this session—one that Kakashi tossed in
his direction two hours ago—is almost perfectly balanced, well cared for, and obviously well used. She fits perfectly into Sasuke's hands, and when his sword meets Kakashi's, she screeches bright and loud.

He loves her already.

Kakashi has not yet used a single jutsu, because he doesn't need to. He's schooling Sasuke's ass pretty well with just his sword. He lunges towards Sasuke, and in the time it takes Sasuke to react, he has grabbed Sasuke by the wrist, twisting until Sasuke drops his sword with a curse. "Never drop your sword," Kakashi instructs, stern, and then jumps slightly to deliver a kick at the center of Sasuke's sternum. Sasuke staggers back, groping for a weapon at his thigh only to remember that Kakashi has made this a sword-only exercise. He only has one jutsu and taijutsu left to defend with now, and already, Kakashi is moving towards him, a quick flash of silver and black.

"Never," Kakashi repeats, angling his sword—and it's to kill, Sasuke realizes, that's an angle to kill—"drop your sword during battle." Another parry, and Sasuke is being pushed towards the edge of the field, conceding ground even as he forms seals for an earth jutsu. He slams his hand into the ground, and it trembles, but Kakashi doesn't lose his footing even when tree roots burst out of the ground to wrap around Kakashi's midsection. It is the Shodaime's technique, but Kakashi has already seen it once.

"Fuck," Sasuke mutters when Kakashi disappears, and it's only a second later that the jounin appears in front of him. There's a thin whine—the sound of the blade moving through the air—and Sasuke knows now that this match will end with his loss. He knows that feeling though, the heavy weight of disappointment, and he's had to live with it every day of his life for nearly a decade.

So Sasuke does the only thing he can think of: He stands his ground. He pushes his chin up, looks Kakashi square in the eyes, and spreads his feet shoulder-length apart to meet the attack head-on.

Kakashi changes the sword's angle mid-air to avoid any serious injury. There is a dull thwacking noise when the sword hits Sasuke upside the head, flat-edged and entirely harmless. The crowd laughs at this, and as if on cue, Sasuke feels the warmth of a flush spreading down his neck. "Look at that," Kakashi deadpans. "You're dead." The jounin is walking away before Sasuke can even react.

"Mediocre," Kakashi calls out over his shoulder, and Sasuke knows that the session is over. His grade for the day: Mediocre (and one of these days, he'll force the man to admit, Good, maybe even, excellent).

"Mediocre?" the Nidaime asks loudly. "He thinks that was mediocre? If I'd had a student like Uchiha —"

"You had a student like me, sensei," Sarutobi says, and it sounds only slightly petulant.

The Shodaime laughs, but before the ghosts can get into another conversation, Kakashi claps his hands. "Show's over folks, back to work." There is a murmur amongst the crowd, and they start to slowly trickle away. Sasuke joins Kakashi and starts to pull on his shirt. "I'm hungry."

Kakashi doesn't miss a beat. "You're always hungry." He pulls on his jounin vest and tugs once to settle it over his shoulders. "You're going to drill a hole in my pocket, kid."

Which means that Kakashi will pay for food, and, potentially, alcohol. Sasuke rolls his eyes. "You're the Commander of the Joint Forces, Hatake. I couldn't drill a hole in your pocket even if I tried."
Kakashi puts a hand over his heart. "I donate to charity," he says solemnly, and shivers when the Yondaime reaches out to ruffle his hair fondly.

"Your little stunt," Kakashi begins mildly once they've started walking towards town. Sasuke heaves a sigh, because he has heard this lecture before. It is the one lesson that Kakashi can't teach him, no matter how many times he tries. *There is no cowardice in a strategic retreat*, Kakashi had told him once, a very long time ago. *Bullshit*, Sasuke had seethed, and Kakashi had laughed at the time.

"Spare me, Hatake."

Immediately, the Nidaime thunders from somewhere to his right, "You will show your sensei some respect, boy, or so help me—"

"I wasn't talking about the training session," Kakashi mutters, stretching his arms over his head. Instinctively, Sasuke flinches, expecting a head slap. There is none this time. "Although, you should have retreated."

*There is no cowardice in a strategic retreat*, Kakashi taught him, but Sasuke knows that there is. Sasuke knows cowardice, can feel it pressing down iron-heavy on his shoulders. He can't concede any more ground, not even in training sessions with Kakashi, because some days, it feels as if that's all he's ever been doing: Retreating, retreating, retreating from Itachi.

"I ordered Hiashi to fire you for that stunt you pulled on your mission," Kakashi says conversationally a few moments later. "It would seem as if he's picked up some of your habits in insubordination, however."

Sasuke's Sharingan swirls to life almost instantaneously, and he rounds on Kakashi. He wants to shove the man, maybe punch him. But this is Kakashi, and something like that would probably end with blood. "What the *fuck*, Kakashi?"

Kakashi stops walking, turning to look at Sasuke with a narrowed eye. "Excuse me?"

"Since when did you start teaching your students to be spineless cowards and—"

"Again," Kakashi interrupts calmly, gray eye like steel now. "Excuse me?"

Sasuke bites down on the words crawling up his throat, breathing heavily to control his anger. Kakashi did not trust his ability, did not think he was fit for duty, and that is what stings the most. Sasuke rarely gets Kakashi's approval, and no matter how many times he's disappointed the man, it still stings—somewhere deep in his stomach, where Sasuke gathers what's left of his pride after all these years. He looks at Kakashi for a few more moments, and then rounds on his heels. He's already several feet away when Kakashi calls out, "I thought you were hungry."

"Yeah, well." Sasuke turns to face him again, and seven feet away, it's easier to raise his voice against the man. "I lost my fucking appetite."

Kakashi jabs a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of downtown. "Let's go."

The ghosts are hovering around Kakashi, watching Sasuke carefully as if calculating the time it would take for Sasuke to lose his temper again. But they don't know Kakashi, not like Sasuke does, and his *Let's go*, no matter how casual it seemed, was an order. So Sasuke clenches his hands into fists and follows Kakashi again.

They fall into step, silent for a few, long minutes before Kakashi says abruptly, "My father's name
was Hatake Sakumo. They used to call him White Fang."

Sasuke has heard of the White Fang, but not connected with the name Hatake. He assumed it was another exaggerated legend—a ninja greater than the Sannin themselves, but tainted with the dishonor of a thousand cowards. Hatake Sakumo, Kakashi pronounced carefully, and it reminds Sasuke of the way he says his own father's name. Always Uchiha Fugaku, never Father.

"During the Five-Year War," Kakashi goes on casually, "Hatake Sakumo was given a mission of great importance. The success of this mission could have shortened the war, definitely shorter than five years." Kakashi stops just as abruptly as he began, and it's now that Sasuke realizes just how carefully Kakashi is holding his posture. He's not slouched like usual, but has drawn himself to full height, chin held high as he recites the story.

"Kakashi," the Yondaime breathes, and when Sasuke glances at him, he sees the same expression that Naruto gets whenever Sasuke talks about his clan. There are too many emotions to pin down just a single one of them, as if the Yondaime is carrying Kakashi's burdens as well.

Normally, Sasuke would've interrupted the narration. So what? or What the hell does this have to do with anything? But in all the years that Sasuke has known Kakashi, this is the only time the man has disclosed any information about his family. So he stays silent and waits for Kakashi to finish his story. But five full minutes pass, and Kakashi still hasn't said anything. His curiosity gets the better of him, and before he can stop himself, Sasuke asks, "Was the mission a success?"

Kakashi huffs a laugh at this. "A failure, on every single level. Six of the men fell behind, so Sakumo doubled back to save them. His decision compromised the mission, compromised national security, and in the long run, extended the war by another year."

And now Sasuke understands the point of this story. This is Kakashi trying to say, Surrender, learn how to walk away. "I didn't compromise national security or—"

"It was a routine mission, and this was a routine training session," Kakashi interrupts sternly. "If it had been more important, you would have done the same. Regardless of the context, you keep making the same mistake."

Sasuke clenches his hands into fists. "Saving your teammates is a mistake now? You taught me—"

"I never taught you to throw your life away," Kakashi says, and this time, he stops walking to face Sasuke.

Sasuke snorts at this assessment. Sakura had said this to him only a month ago, and here is Kakashi, parroting her nearly word for word. "Did Sakura talk you into this bullshit?" Kakashi's jaw clenches at the question, and Sasuke can see the flex of muscle even through the man's face-cloth. "I did the right thing," Sasuke presses, because for once, Kakashi doesn't have a reprimand ready for his insubordination. "You know I did the right thing—"

"Not everything has to be about Naruto," Kakashi says suddenly, and almost instantly, all the anger in Sasuke fades away. Instead, there is that ever-present sense of gnawing guilt. He had forgotten the rules once, and he'd shoved his hand through Naruto's right lung because of it—and Naruto shouldn't have been alive after that, wouldn't have been if not for the Kyuubi. And it's not just Naruto now. Kiba, Shikamaru, Neji, anyone who crosses Sasuke's path, he can't leave them behind when there is still a chance that he can save them. Since when has human life lost its value? Sasuke wonders. Just when did a human life stop mattering? Hadn't he learned when he had watched his brother murder his mother? The fact that he'd forgotten, even for a moment, has to be the single most tragic perversion in Sasuke's cluster-fuck of a life.
"What happened?" the Yondaime presses at the mention of his son, standing close to Sasuke now. "What happened between you and Naruto? Why won't anyone ever talk about—"

"So what?" Sasuke interrupts a little too loudly, because it hadn't occurred to him that the Yondaime doesn't know what he did to Naruto. Sarutobi had died before it ever happened, so none of the ghosts know the full extent of his sins. And if they were to find out, if any of them were to ever find out—"You think I should have left Inuzuka behind?"

Kakashi takes a deep breath. "Sasuke," Kakashi says slowly, carefully. "Someday you're going to have to leave somebody behind, and you're going to have to live with that."

"No," Sasuke insists. Because, he won't have to live with a feeling like that again, not if he gets his way. He has been down that road before, and Naruto's blue, blue eyes are a constant reminder—every single day of his life. "No."

Kakashi's shoulders move up and down in a shrug, the fabric over his lips ruffling with his sigh. "I feel," he says slowly, "that your skull is thickening with age."

The moment hasn't passed yet, Sasuke knows, but Kakashi is trying. The least he could do is return the courtesy. "You going to buy me food or what?"

Kakashi tilts his head. "I left you something in your ANBU locker," he says, bypassing Sasuke's inquiry entirely, and then, with a soft snap, he's gone.

Sasuke waits for a moment before heading back towards ANBU headquarters. He tries not to look too eager in front of the ghosts, but it's a wasted effort. The Nidaime gives him a flat look. "Just go already, kid. Don't let us keep you." He has a reputation to maintain, damnit, but Sasuke hasn't gotten a gift in nearly a decade. Even on his birthday he dutifully avoids celebrations. But this—from Kakashi, and Kakashi has only ever given gifts to Naruto and Sakura—this is different. "All right, boy," the Shodaime says, lips quirking into a smile. "Go on. Go see what your sensei has given you."

Sasuke blurs in his speed, and when he gets to his locker, the ghosts are already there. He takes a breath and opens his locker to see—

The katana he used in training. The sheath is whetstone black and smooth to the touch when Sasuke grips it. It's a good sword, better than the one that Sasuke has been using. The sword unsheathes with a sharp click, and now that Sasuke isn't in battle, he finally notices the three initials carved near the hilt:

**NM HK US.**

"Namikaze Minato," Sasuke reads. "Hatake Kakashi…"

"And now, Uchiha Sasuke," Sarutobi finishes kindly.

"It's an Iwate sword," the Yondaime explains, squaring his shoulders. "Iwate Aina forged it for her son during the Five-Year War, but he died early on. So she gave it to me. I handed it down to Kakashi when he made jounin."

"You should be proud," the Nidaime says gruffly.

Sasuke rubs his thumb over the initials, reading them like braille: **NM HK US.**

"I am," he answers finally, and feels the weight on his shoulders easing.
Naruto finds Sasuke the next day in the commanding officers' lounge. Sasuke, Neji, and Jiro are working steadily through paperwork when Naruto enters the lounge with a flourish. Naruto's hair is pulled back into a stern ponytail, not a single stray strand in sight. He's dressed like Jiraiya, almost, but his kimono top has the brick red Konoha insignia. He's here as Tsunade's personal aide, which means—

Everyone in the room stands at attention—even the jounin across the room—which is when Sasuke realizes. Saluting Naruto isn't humiliating, not as he'd imagined it would be. If anything…Sasuke's mind sidetracks into his fantasies in less than a second, and the next thing he knows, he has an image of Naruto in the Hokage's office, wearing nothing but his robes, and saying slowly, *I didn't dismiss you, Mr. Uchiha*—

The Nidaime yells from somewhere across the room. "Hey, kid, congrats!"

Sasuke lets his Sharingan swirl to life and tries very hard to keep his face straight when he sees the ghosts at the front of the room, having arrived along with Naruto. The Hokages are all smiling, even the Yondaime.

Earlier that morning, only two hours ago, Hiashi had arrived to announce the formation of Unit 3. Ten men, he'd said, dropping a stack of files on top of Sasuke's desk. "You're the C.O. Congratulations."

ANBU is required to operate with fifty members, Neji explained later. Five ten-man units at all times under the command of the Hokage. Every so often, units are rotated out—older members are put into Jounin ranks, and a younger batch is ushered in. Sasuke and Jiro's teams were the probationary five-man teams that would later be combined into a new unit based on their efficiency. The best man would be made C.O. Apparently, Sasuke had been in competition with Jiro without even knowing it.

"As you were," Naruto says easily, and the room resumes its earlier pace.

Jiro clears his throat. He's here to debrief Sasuke on his men, answer any questions Sasuke might have, and help ease the transitional process of the two teams merging. It's odd for Sasuke, especially because Jiro was his commanding officer when he first joined. The man doesn't seem too bothered by this shift of authority, but still… "As I was saying earlier, sir, I can have a progress report on each of the men—"

Naruto walks over to the table and rests a hand on Neji's shoulder in greeting. Sasuke bites down on the surge of feelings at this (of course he's here to see Neji). "A moment please, gentlemen," Naruto cuts in politely.

Jiro gets to his feet with a mumbled, "Yes, sir." Sasuke follows as well, putting out his cigarette in the ashtray and gathering his paperwork. He's about to leave with Jiro when Neji stands as well, giving him an odd look. "Yes, sir," Neji says pointedly and reaches for the paperwork in Sasuke's hands.

There's a moment of stillness—Sasuke and Neji staring at each other, both holding onto the same stack of files—which Naruto interrupts impatiently with an exasperated, "You bastard." He places a hand on Neji's elbow lightly, and Sasuke feels his heartbeat quickening with anger. He doesn't need to see this, damnit, he doesn't need this rubbed in his face day in and day out. He's gotten better at working with Neji, at forgetting about all the intimate moments that Hyuga must be sharing with Naruto (and Gods the images in his mind, one chasing after the other, and he feels *pathetic*, dreaming about a man who's fucking his second-in-command). "Sorry, Neji," Naruto murmurs, voice pitched low. "The bastard can be spectacularly awkward at times."
Sasuke feels his face flush. Naruto knows, Neji knows, everyone in the goddamn village knows about what Sasuke's thinking. "I'm fucking leaving," Sasuke snarls, and is about to walk away when Neji pulls at the files in his hands.

"No," Neji insists. "I will be leaving." He pauses a beat. "Sir," he says, and the word comes out pronounced, as if he's willing Sasuke to understand.

"All right," the Nidaime says, "I'm a little confused."

The Shodaime clears his throat politely. "Perhaps, Uchiha, you should—"

"Oh for God's sake, Sasuke," Naruto hisses. He reaches for the files and shoves them into Neji's hands. "I'm sorry, Neji. Thank you."

Neji gives Sasuke an odd, calculating look before turning to Naruto. "It's fine, Naruto. Dinner..."

"Absolutely," Naruto says, beaming now. "Come by my place at seven. I won't burn the food this time."

Sasuke takes a breath and meets the Shodaime's eyes. "Count to ten," the Shodaime instructs. "Before you say anything, count to ten."

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—"What the hell is wrong with you?" Naruto asks the minute Neji is out of earshot.

You're fucking my second-in-command, Sasuke wants to say. But—"Can I help you, Counselor?"

Naruto opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. He gapes at Sasuke for a second before rounding on his heels. "The Hokage would like to speak with you," he throws over his shoulder.

Sasuke is about to completely ignore the entire incident and go back to work when Naruto turns around to snap, "Now, ANBU."

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. Nine and a fucking half. Ten. "Yes, sir."

The Shodaime exhales. "Well done, Uchiha."

Three minutes into their walk across town, and Naruto still hasn't said anything. It is possibly the longest time Naruto has ever been silent around Sasuke, and that alone is starting to make Sasuke itch for his weapons. The Hokages are still trailing them, keeping up a steady stream of commentary to analyze what may have just happened in ANBU headquarters.

"So, they're having dinner," the Nidaime ticks off. "But it didn't seem—"

"Oh, no, they're having dinner," the Yondaime says smugly. "And my boy is cooking. I approve. It will be a good match, I think, if they are truly serious. The Namikaze line with the Hyuga Clan. I couldn't have hoped for a better suitor for my son. I think Kushina would have approved as well."

Sarutobi chuckles. "Personally delivering a simple message to an ANBU C.O. is hardly a duty for a junior counselor, Minato. Naruto seemed like he was operating outside his usual responsibilities. If I were to guess, I would say he must have wanted to see Sasuke."

Sasuke's mind latches onto that last detail, and before he can strategize a good opening line—"Dead last. What the fuck was that at H.Q.?"
"To ten," the Shodaime snaps immediately, exasperation obvious. "Think before you speak, boy. Think."

Naruto stops mid-stride, right at the entrance of a small store. A few people step around them to go in and out, the door tinkling every time it opens and closes. "You," Naruto hisses angrily. "You don't get to ask that question, not when you acted like a complete and total—"

Sasuke bends his head to crowd into Naruto's space, letting his Sharingan swirl. "Excuse me?"

Naruto immediately raises to the bait. "You acted like a two-year old. We don't need to air out our personal problems in front of other people, certainly not in front of your colleagues—"

"I," Sasuke snarls, and he has to take a deep breath, look away from Naruto and run a hand through his hair to control the rage crawling up his throat. His anger is his weakness, he knows, and he will control it. By Gods, he will. "I was trying to give you two lovebirds some fucking space. You're oh so fucking welcome."

Naruto punches Sasuke in the shoulder, and the suddenness of the attack jostles Sasuke a step back. Sasuke pushes right back, not touching Naruto, but still crowding in. Naruto can be loud, can yell, can throw a punch or two, but Sasuke will not deal with Naruto like this. Sasuke has learned to respond with silence and by occupying what little space Naruto leaves between them.

He will not—not now, not ever again, not after what he's done—raise a hand against Naruto in anger.

Naruto purses his lips into a thin line, scars thickening with the expression. He punches Sasuke again in the shoulder, and this time, Sasuke doesn't budge. "Dead last," Sasuke says, and still doesn't raise his voice, because Naruto will always beat him in a yelling contest.

Naruto shoves at Sasuke's shoulder, not a punch, just an open-handed shove to get Sasuke to move away. It's a bit unusual for Naruto, this silent reaction, but the blond doesn't need to say anything to express his anger. His eyes are ice blue and there's enough venom in each one of his shoves for Sasuke to get the message.

"All right you two, break it up," the Nidaime counsels. "You're making a scene."

Sasuke knows they're making a scene. He also knows that together, Team 7 has been making a scene in Konoha since its inception. Naruto pushes with both hands against Sasuke's chest, and this time, Sasuke grabs Naruto's wrists. "That's enough."

It's enough to send Naruto off into complete fight mode, and before Sasuke knows it, a searing pain blooms across his jaw. Distantly, he hears the Yondaime's disapproving, "Naruto," but the damage is done.

Besides, Sasuke has been itching for a fight.

It takes a full twenty minutes for Sasuke to pin Naruto up against the wall and immobilize him. Naruto is at a disadvantage—he's seething. It's not his usual anger, the kind that he can direct into productive tajutsu and ninjutsu. This is the kind of anger that Sasuke rarely sees, the one that turns Naruto into a flurry of elbows and knees.

They're in an alley now, by the side of the store where they first began their scuffle. So there is no one to see them like this, with Sasuke pushing Naruto up against a wall and holding him down with his weight alone. Naruto's hair isn't as pristine anymore, and there is a smudge of blood on the collar of his robes—Sasuke's, from a scratch to his face—but he's still breathtakingly beautiful in all his
Naruto jerks briefly, trying to get free, but Sasuke shoves him firmly back up against the wall. "You done?"

Naruto is silent for a moment before saying, "I hate how you treat Neji like he's—"

And it takes all of Sasuke's will not to grip Naruto's wrists tighter in his anger. "Well I'm so very sorry to have upset your boyfriend's feelings, but—"

"He's not. My. Boyfriend," Naruto hisses. A beat, and then, "He's straight, you moron!"

Sasuke goes still at this, and in that moment, Naruto breaks free. "And stop acting like I'm—like I'm sleeping with every man who comes my way," Naruto continues, pulling his hair back into a ponytail. Sasuke isn't sure how this conversation went from Neji to Naruto's boyfriends to Naruto's general sex life, and he's not even sure he's hearing these words right. (Neji is straight?)

"I'm not, okay? I haven't even had sex in like—like fourteen months. Between Tsunade's insane work hours and—" he makes a rude gesture at Sasuke. "And you, I've practically taken a vow of chastity."

"What?" the Nidaime says suddenly, close to Sasuke. "Whoa, whoa, hold up. What?"

The Yondaime makes an odd, wailing noise. "But—I—what? I assumed—but—"

Sasuke opens his mouth, but then remembers the Shodaime's advice. One Naka River. Two Naka River. Three Naka River—"I don't see how this is relevant."

Naruto takes a deep breath. "I'm single, okay? Understand? Me, Uzumaki Naruto. I am sin-gle, you dimwit." He pauses a beat, and then, slowly, "I am also gay."

"Well, yes," Sasuke snaps, feeling his face turn red. He gestures expansively at Naruto. "I got that part."

"Good," Naruto says, and he's slightly pink as well. "I just wasn't sure. I didn't know if you knew. For sure."

"I knew," Sasuke says hurriedly, and the image flashes across his mind again, as vivid as the day he'd walked in on it (Naruto on his bed, leaning over a dark-haired chuunin from the Land of Wind, straddling the man's thighs in nothing but a dress shirt, one hand working a steady rhythm in the man's pants).

"Just to be clear," Naruto insists, words coming out clipped. He smooths down his shirt again, almost nervous. "We're clear?"

"Crystal," Sasuke answers immediately, and the heat has spread to the back of his neck now. He's in a goddamn alleyway, discussing Naruto's sexuality, with Naruto's father a few feet away. He stays silent, not sure what else to say in a situation like this. It's slightly surreal, this entire conversation, and he's not even sure how he got here. Finally, crumbling under the weight of five expectant gazes, Sasuke clears his throat and says, "The Hokage, you said."

Naruto opens his mouth to say something, but then lets it hang open. Just when Sasuke is about to make a comment about gaping fish being unattractive, Naruto throws up his hands. "Unbelievable," he mutters, walking away from Sasuke.
Sasuke feels a chill on his shoulder before he hears the Nidaime. "I think we may have missed something just now."

Sasuke lets his Sharingan come to life so he can stare at the man. "You think?" he snaps, and follows Naruto before the ghost can say anything else.

Tsunade is in the middle of a phone conversation when Sasuke and Naruto are ushered into her office. Kakashi is lounging on one of the ornate sofas in the room, reading through a file and signing wherever Shizune points. Hinata is also there, and she gives Sasuke a small smile when their eyes meet.

The Hokage motions for Naruto to approach and points to another phone located on a separate table. Naruto walks over and picks up the phone, hand covering the receiver to mask any noise. Tsunade continues talking while Naruto listens. "Like I was saying, Mizukage—" She stops, listens, hm-s into the phone, and picks up again. "I'm hoping we can reach an agreement even sooner, Mizukage." Another beat. "Absolutely, and you, too."

The conversation ends, Naruto and Tsunade hanging up simultaneously. "My God that man is demanding."

"It's a reasonable request," Hinata says diplomatically. Sasuke had known, peripherally, that Naruto and Hinata are now colleagues working their way up through the ranks in the Tower. Naruto is a junior counselor and personal aide to the Hokage, and Hinata, from what Sasuke has gathered, is only a step or two below Naruto's position. He's seen them huddled close over lunches and dinners before, discussing politics and strategy at a quick pace.

"His waterways for our port isn't a fair trade," Naruto counters easily. "Our leverage with the East is our control over the river mouths—"

"But," Shizune interrupts, placing another file in front of Kakashi for his perusal, "what about the southern port?"

Tsunade scoffs. "We didn't have the southern port on the table before. I want to know more details about it before making a decision."

Naruto takes a deep breath. "I'll talk to the Department of Agriculture and the Council's Budget Office to pull some numbers about the southern port."

"When can I expect your report?"

"Give me three hours," Naruto answers neatly. "You'll have it on your desk by day's end."

Hinata gets to her feet. "You have a meeting with the Senior Council later today, Hokage-sama. Would you like to include the southern port on the agenda?"

Naruto perks up at that. "Hey, am I sitting in on that or—"

"Senior Council, brat, there's no baby-seats at the table for you," Tsunade grumbles. "And no, Hinata. We'll keep this to ourselves before bringing the council into the loop."

Naruto makes a face. "They don't even want this peace treaty to go through. Lord Danzo has been clear all along that he'll oppose whatever legislation or policy this administration wants to put out—"

Kakashi clears his throat. "Naruto," he begins, one eye crinkled in a smile, and Naruto immediately
loses his steam. He stomps over to where Kakashi is and sits down next to him with a huff. Sometimes, Sasuke forgets that Naruto exists outside the context of missions and Team 7. It's difficult to imagine Naruto as anything but his teammate, but now and then, he's reminded of the amount of power and clout Naruto wields within the new administration. He's the rising star of Tsunade's legion of counselors, often quoted in newspapers, and has already got two significant bills under his belt: Free health insurance for low-income and orphaned children; and a fair trade agreement with the Kazekage. With Gaara elected as the new Kazekage, he's likely to accomplish even more internationally.

"This blows, Kakashi-sensei. I've been working on this damn treaty for months, and now Danzo is going to throw a tantrum over a change in syntax and it's not going to pass."

"Hey," Kakashi says with a chuckle. "You're doing well."

"Uuugh," Naruto groans, and tilts over sideways against Kakashi's shoulder. Kakashi automatically puts a hand on Naruto's head, ruffling lightly. "I hate the Senior Council, Kakashi-sensei."

The Nidaime laughs. "I hated my Senior Council, too."

"The price of our Republic," Sarutobi says with a long-suffering sigh. He continues pensively, "Although, Danzo has become especially antagonistic in recent years. I'm not sure why, but perhaps —"

"Well," Hinata says causally, gathering files into her arms. "I might coincidentally end up sitting in the same room and coincidentally overhear the proceedings." She gives Naruto a small smile. "My great uncle likes me at hand for these meetings sometimes. He says it's good training for the next Hyuga Clan's leader."

Naruto grins. "I love you," he gushes. "There are no limits to my love for you right now."

"Try not to get carried away," Hinata says with a wry smile. This is not the same girl that Sasuke knew before he left Konoha. That Hinata had been a blushing, stammering girl who'd been completely unable to string together a coherent sentence in Naruto's presence. By the time Sasuke returned, though, something had changed. She's Hyuga Hinata now, next in line for the Hyuga Clan. And apparently, she can hold her own in front of the Hokage and the Commander of the Joint Forces. Sasuke has seen her on occasion, when she visits her father at work, and although there is an unwritten rule in ANBU that no man should ever even look at Hinata, he can't help but stare. She's lovely, with pale, smooth skin, and a wonderful curve to her hips—the last man who made a comment about her spent the rest of the month doing missions that somehow always involved the sewer system. The last time Neji overheard a chuunin make a crude comment about his cousin, the man showed up in the E.R. with the chakra pathways to his testicles blocked off. It eventually wore off, but people got the message. Now, Sasuke moves his gaze away quickly before he's caught. How Kiba landed a woman like that is a mystery, but they both seem happy.

"All right, the two of you, get out," Tsunade orders, pointing at Shizune and Hinata. "You," she snaps, jabbing a finger at Naruto. "Sit still and keep your mouth shut. Commander, I want you to stay out of this until I say so. And ANBU—" Tsunade finally looks at him. "Take a seat."

Sasuke sits across from Tsunade, sparing a brief glance at Kakashi as Shizune and Hinata file out of the room. There isn't much time between the door closing and Tsunade throwing a file towards him. "Kobarashi Isamu. Start talking."
Sasuke gives her a blank stare. "The file is right there, Hokage-sama."

"Boy," the Shodaime warns. "She is your Hokage, and you will treat her with the respect she deserves."

_She is a healer who refuses to heal_, Sasuke wants to point out, but there is a time and place for conversing with ghosts. This is not one of them. Tsunade sits down from across Sasuke and takes a breath. "I have neither the time nor the patience to deal with you right now, Uchiha."

"Good," Sasuke says easily, and gets to his feet. "If that's—"

"Sit down," the Nidaime snarls, and the viciousness of his command makes Sasuke's Sharingan swirl into life. He glances at the man, startled. "You will conduct yourself like an adult instead of an overgrown toddler. God help me—"

"The Uchiha Clan," the Shodaime interrupts calmly, "was once known for their honor, integrity, and their decency. Your ancestors were a great people, respected across the nation. Do not expect to regain the respect they once had without showing some respect in return, boy."

"—listening, ANBU?"

Sasuke blinks at Tsunade. He wants to say something rude, walk away from this woman who has never, not once in her life, extended even the most basic of courtesies towards him. He's always blamed her for their relationship, held her in contempt for refusing to treat him time and again. But the Shodaime said that he can't expect to gain any respect—any courtesy—if he doesn't return the favor. And he is an Uchiha, it's who he is, what his entire life has been built around. He clearly remembers people standing aside when his grandmother walked down the street, entire rooms falling quiet when his grandfather spoke.

Sasuke has dragged the Uchiha name through the mud, associated it with words like _traitor_ and _monster_. He will not keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

So, "Yes, ma'am." Then, he sits.

Tsunade looks taken aback. She snaps her mouth shut, and then says slowly, "I won't ask again. Kobarashi Isamu. What do you know?"

Sasuke's Sharingan flickers to life, and he gives the Shodaime a sidelong glance. The man's face is carefully neutral, but Sasuke knows that the man is waiting to see what he does. _One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine._ Sasuke takes a breath, swallows on the instinct to lash out at the woman in front of him. _Ten._ "I only know what's in his file." A beat. "Ma'am."

"You ordered your men to keep a tight lid on this investigation," Tsunade presses. "Which was unauthorized in the first place. Your duty as ANBU is to report your findings, however illegal, to your commanding officer—"

"My duties as ANBU are to serve in the country's best interest," Sasuke interrupts neatly. "Which I've done." Tsunade makes a face at him. For a woman who can have his face in the dirt with her eyes closed and both hands tied behind her back, she is surprisingly ignorant about some things, Sasuke thinks.

"If I had reported my findings to the Captain, then what would have happened?" Sasuke prompts. Tsunade's eyes narrow dangerously, so he answers his own question. "The Captain would have reported to the Commander and to you," Sasuke finishes.
Tsunade begins to tap impatiently on her table. Her long, lacquered nails making a clicking noise, impatient and entirely unimpressed by Sasuke's line of thought. "Keep going," the Nidaime says into the sudden silence.

"Then," Sasuke continues, leaning forward to tap the file. "You would have gotten this on your desk. And your reaction would be to drag me into this room." Sasuke makes an open-armed gesture. "Here I am."

"Okay. You're getting cocky again," the Nidaime grumbles.

Sasuke glances briefly at the Nidaime. He doesn't continue again until he's sure he has his annoyance under control. "Your reaction would probably be to order S.C.I. and Special Jounin look into it. Their first step would be to send out a two-man team to check out Kobarashi, his known associates, and maybe scope out Akatsuki's whereabouts while they're at it."

Tsunade angles her head just so, and her tapping comes to a halt. "Are you telling me how to do my job, ANBU, or is there a point to this?"

"I'm telling you," Sasuke snaps, leaning forward in his impatience now, "you would be putting Naruto in danger by making all the wrong decisions—"

"That's interesting to hear, Uchiha, especially coming from you." Sasuke feels his anger leave him in a rush. The hypocrisy of it must be a sight to see from the other side of this conversation: The man who tried to kill Naruto now lecturing a Hokage on how to protect him. "You acted irresponsibly. There is a reason why there's a chain of command. You need to learn how to respect that command —"

"Uchiha," the Yondaime says, appearing suddenly by Sasuke's side. "I don't know what happened between you and Naruto, but I do know that your actions thus far have been in his best interest. Just explain yourself more clearly to Tsunade-sensei."

Sasuke has practiced in his mind several versions of confessing his guilt to the Yondaime: I tried to kill your son, and I put my hand through his chest because I was that blind, and I almost ruined the one good thing in my life because of my greed. He's not sure how the Yondaime would react, but at times like this, Sasuke wonders if the man would forgive him. Naruto has, so why not the Yondaime?

"Your decision to conduct the investigation on your own was correct," the Shodaime instructs. "You need to convince your Hokage of this. She does not see the point you are trying to make, so try again."

"You do your job," Sasuke says finally, and interrupts Tsunade mid-sentence. "And Akatsuki will find out. The minute they do, they will make their move. They're recruiting warm bodies for some grand-scale attack because they like the theatrics of it. But if you interrupt them, they won't hesitate to come after Naruto. It'll be silent, quick, and effective. A small-scale investigation is your best bet. I'm your best bet because I know how groups like this work. So I—"

"So you secretly issued an investigation without informing your C.O.s?" Tsunade demands. "How the hell am I supposed to trust you, Uchiha?"

So that's what this is about, Sasuke realizes. Tsunade doesn't think he made a mistake; she just doesn't trust him to do this job. The realization makes his anger pulse. "What army do you have?" Sasuke snarls, getting to his feet, Sharingan whirling painfully now. "What army of yours can protect him against all of Akatsuki's forces? They infiltrated Konoha once before, and they weren't even
"Trying, Senju."

"This isn't some romantic movie for you to play out," Tsunade counters, and she gets to her feet as well. "You can't win my boy's heart by heroically defending him from—"

"You expect me to come out of this damn thing alive? You expect anyone who goes into this to come out of it alive? Why do you think I was trying to do it solo?" Sasuke throws up his hands in frustration, giving Tsunade an incredulous look. There is no prize at the end of this mission, Sasuke knows. There is nothing here but an ending, not even the promise of Itachi's death and his clan's vengeance. "I wasn't going to throw shinobi at Akatsuki for target practice. Are you out of your mind?"

Tsunade rolls up her sleeves. "All right, that's it, you piece of shit." She takes two steps around her table and in the next second, she's in Sasuke's space. "Get out."

"No," Sasuke answers automatically. "Give me this assignment. I know how Akatsuki works. I won't let them take Naruto, not a second time—"

"Get out, ANBU. That's an order."

Sasuke runs a hand through his hair. "For fuck's sake, you stupid woman, I'm on your side!" He stops the minute he says it, because now at least, he knows he has crossed the line. Chakra sizzles off Tsunade's frame, her hair standing on edge with the electricity of it.

"Hold your ground. Do not attack her back," the Shodaime orders quickly, and it takes all of Sasuke's will to obey that order. His Sharingan comes to life, and he sees her hand flex back to punch him, a whorl of chakra gathering around her knuckles. He doesn't dodge, doesn't even bring his hands up, just shifts his legs to spread his weight evenly.

The attack snaps his head sideways, and he sees black for a few seconds, even though the rest of his body stays at attention. There is a sharp, ringing noise in his ears, and beyond it, distant voices. When his vision clears, he's surprised to find himself still standing. The entire lower half of his face is in pain, and he can feel blood dripping down his nose. There's a tangy taste in his mouth, and something wet dripping down his chin.

He takes a breath and turns to face Tsunade again. She looks surprised, staring at Sasuke with wide eyes. "Defend, child," she breathes, reaching out to touch Sasuke's face lightly. "How are you standing still?"

Sasuke blinks and sees black again. "With—with great effort," he manages finally, and blood drips down his chin even more.

Tsunade's lips twitch into a smile despite herself. She is quiet for a moment, and then, "Your investigation, ANBU?"

"Under progress," Sasuke answers, breathing carefully. He's pretty sure she broke most of the bones in his body with that punch. He's not even sure if a move like that should be legal against human beings, maybe restricted to large rocks or walls. "I'm trying to—to—" A breath. Short sentences, Uchiha. "Location."

Tsunade folds her arms across her chest. "Like teacher, like student, they say."

"Actually," Kakashi interrupts cheerfully. "I would have defended against that."

Sasuke opens his mouth to say something, but there's a rush of blood in his ears, and the next thing
he knows, there's darkness.

He wakes up with a thin wad of gauze pad between his teeth. The ghosts are in the room with him, having a conversation of some sort. Mostly, though, it's the Yondaime yelling at Naruto to get away—

Naruto is tucked close to Sasuke, warm and solid by his side. He's stretched out on the hospital bed next to Sasuke, a book spread out in his lap. "They should have a room for you," Naruto says by way of hello. "The Uchiha Room, reserved and always open for your constant and recurring hospital needs."

Sasuke spits out the cotton in his mouth and then spends a few moments recovering from the effort. Almost immediately, he tastes the tang of blood in his mouth. So that's what the cotton was for—so he wouldn't keep swallowing his own blood. He can't move, can't even breathe without feeling something pull or tug in his body. Tsunade is a force to reckon with, Sasuke knows, but he's never understood what that meant. One punch, and he can barely move.

How Orochimaru ever thought he stood a chance against this woman is a mystery.

"Although," Naruto goes on, shutting his book with a snap. He shifts so he can face Sasuke. "Although," he repeats, voice pitched low and gentle. "That was quite brave of you. I've never seen anyone stand their ground against her like that." He pauses a moment and wrinkles his nose in distaste. "Shizune thinks it proves your stupidity."

Sasuke blinks stupidly at Naruto. He's not sure he can speak just yet. It's odd for him to be this floored after an attack, which can only mean—"Drugs," he groans out, and sure enough, there's an I.V. dripping into his arm.

"Sakura's got you on the good stuff," Naruto says with a grin, and reaches over Sasuke. Any closer and drugs be damned, Sasuke is pretty sure the hospital sheets will start to tent at his waist. There's a soft click as Naruto adjusts the I.V. drip. "That was a chakra-powered punch, and you don't want to be awake for the next two hours. Trust me."

Sasuke tries to say, No and Get that fucking thing out of my arm, but all that comes out is, "Ungh."

"Oi, bastard, listen to me," Naruto goes on, putting a hand lightly against Sasuke's chest. "I know you don't like to be drugged like this, but the pain's only going to get worse."

"Nnn—" Sasuke begins, but the drugs are starting to kick in. He takes a few deep, ragged breaths. He doesn't like this, doesn't want to be pulled under by drugs, oblivious to the entire world. He reaches for the I.V., but the most he can manage is a twitch of his wrist.

"She thought you were going to defend, so she didn't hold back at all," Naruto goes on. "She broke your jaw, your nose, and the scan picked up a few micro-fractures in your skull. You strained the muscles in your neck and back with the backlash. Tsunade healed you herself, so there won't be any lasting damage. But the pain is going to be unbearable for the next few hours. I know you'd rather take the pain over the drugs, but—"

"Yesshng," Sasuke hisses out. "Yes—"

"But not this time," Naruto insists. "Tsunade's attacks aren't ordinary, so not this time, okay?"

Sasuke can feel his fingers getting numb from the drugs, and he takes a few heaving breaths to stay awake. "I'll be here," Naruto promises him softly, putting a hand on Sasuke's cheek gently.
Sasuke blinks a few times, letting his Sharingan swirl into life. The ghosts are hovering at the periphery of the room; even the Yondaime is silent for now. "Nnn," Sasuke manages, lifting his head from the pillow lightly.

"Kid, it's just a few hours," the Nidaime says. Sarutobi steps forward, looking like he wants to add something, but Sasuke shakes his head, tries to say again—"Nnnn." He takes a breath. "Nnno. No."

"I'll be right here," Naruto whispers, and moves even closer. He presses his forehead against Sasuke's. "It's only for a few hours, until the worst passes. I'll be right here."

He can feel the numbness setting in, the paralysis setting in from the waist down. The terrifying part—the most terrifying thing—is that he can't keep his Sharingan alive. It keeps sputtering in and out as the drugs spread into his bloodstream. It makes him panic, makes his heart speed up, makes his palms sweat. *The Sharingan should always be under control,* Kakashi told him once. *Always under your control, don't ever, ever—*

Vaguely, Sasuke feels the pressure of Naruto's fingers on his, and then he sees Naruto bringing up his hand. "I'll be right here, Sasuke," Naruto repeats, pressing Sasuke's hand against his cheek. The scars on his cheek are rough ridges against Sasuke's palm. Naruto turns his face into Sasuke's palm, his breath warm against Sasuke's fingers. "Don't make me watch you go through this. Please. Do it for me."

There are very few things that Naruto asks of him. He asks for ramen, his friendship, and Sasuke's promise that he will never, ever leave Konoha and break his heart and trust again. This is the first of this kind of request, and Sasuke has been a bit weak against Naruto's requests ever since getting back to Konoha. So Sasuke takes a breath, another, gathers his strength and manages, "Ffff—fine."

The smile he's awarded with makes it worthwhile, he thinks, because Naruto doesn't smile like that at him very often. Naruto lets go of Sasuke's hand and reaches over to the I.V. again. There's another click, a third, and a fourth. "Give it a few seconds," Naruto says, turning his attention back to Sasuke.

The panic begins to set in again, his breathing coming out irregularly. A few hours under some drug-induced haze, and nothing—absolutely nothing—to keep him awake. It is worse than sleeping, because at least he can wake up from sleep. This is absolute paralysis. He will be helpless, he can't even keep his goddamn eyes open—"Watch me," Naruto says, holding Sasuke's face in his hands. "Watch me. I'm here. I'll be here when you wake up."

The door to the room opens with a soft click, and he hears footsteps. But the sounds are muted and dull. Sakura's voice, "Is he…yet?"


Sasuke closes his eyes, feels his mind's focus whittling down to Naruto's hand on his chest, and Naruto's breath on his cheek. "I'll be here," Naruto whispers. "Right…so bad…later…"

There's a moment, and then, a soft press to his forehead, his cheek, the other cheek.

Then the corner of his lips, lingering and sweet.

Distantly, Sasuke can hear the Yondaime's voice, loud and jarring, "What—Naruto—oh my God, what—"
Unit 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ehime Taro is only three years older than Sasuke, but he's ten times as crude and entire magnitudes more fire friendly than any Uchiha that Sasuke has ever met. The man is an explosions expert, Jiro explains during their meeting. Give him some C4—heck, give him a flint—and the man can make the sky light up.

"My friends call me Tottori," Taro says by way of hello, gripping Sasuke's hand hard. He's a brunet with a disarming smile and an easy laugh. Sasuke feels himself returning the shake and saying, "Uchiha—"

"Uchiha fucking Sasuke, I know," Tottori interrupts enthusiastically. "Dude, you and me? We're a match made in fucking heaven, man. I'll provide the explosives, you provide the spark, and boom. The rest, as they say, is history." Sasuke doesn't doubt the man, because according to his file, he's had quite the record with Special Jounin, S.C.I. and ANBU already at the ripe age of nineteen.

The rest of Jiro's team is just as impressive. Jiro is a weapons and traps specialist on par with Tenten, according to Neji. He is the oldest in the group at twenty-two, and the most experienced ANBU. The others are all new to the force, and Sasuke who was already two years younger than anyone else in his graduating class from the Academy, is the youngest at sixteen. He is also the only one—apparently in all of ANBU history—to go directly from genin to ANBU C.O. Sasuke winces at this bit of information. Like the blind leading the blind, he realizes. Jiro, by all accounts, should have been C.O. of the new Unit 3. But for some reason, Hiashi has singled him out.

Sasuke's new unit also includes an asset that Sasuke had been wanting for some time now: An Illusions expert. Aichi Kenshin—"You can call me Ken," only twenty-one—is a linguist, fluent in seven languages, and apparently has the finest henge no jutsu in the entire eastern seaboard. He's been embedded in deep covers for the past four years. But he'd gotten sick of the spy's life and returned to ANBU. According to the records, he didn't even have to take the ANBU exam. Hiashi rolled out the red carpet for the man to join. In Jiro's team, he had been second-in-command.

And of course, there's Lee and Chouji, two of ANBU's freshest recruits. They were transferred out of Jounin Ranks two weeks ago, Jiro explains, not because they requested it, but because Hiashi and Shikaku put in the joint orders. It's not surprising, because putting Lee and Chouji in the same team as Shikamaru and Neji will be an advantage on the field. The men have many years of experience working together, so placing them in the same ANBU unit is ideal.

"Neji! We are united again as comrades!" Lee says in greeting, grinning wildly. Neji does not say anything, but there is a slight twitch of his lips when Lee throws an arm around Neji's shoulder casually. "Let's train later."

"We trained this morning, Lee," Chouji grumbles. He's already made himself comfortable next to Shikamaru, and almost absentmindedly holds out the bag of chips he's devouring steadily. Shikamaru takes up on Chouji's offer and begins munching on some chips as well.

"So that's all of us," Jiro says. "Gentlemen, this is Uchiha Sasuke, your commanding officer."

"And this is Hyuga Neji," Sasuke introduces, gesturing at the man. "He's your second." Neji looks surprised at the introduction, but the choice was easy to make for Sasuke. There is no reason to make
Jiro his second just because Neji and Sasuke have a history of antagonism. Hyuga is good, one of the most efficient, professional ninja that Sasuke has ever seen on the field. Letting emotions get in the way of this choice would be stupid—and besides, Sasuke thinks, Neji and Naruto are not dating, so there really isn't any reason to hold a grudge against the man.

Apparently, Neji isn't even gay.

The new members shake Neji's hand, Tottori with an enthusiastic, "Two fucking dojutsus in a team. Nice."

"There are three other blood lines as well. The Nara, Inuzuka, and Aburame families are all represented," Neji corrects. "I'll introduce you to them."

Neji glances towards Sasuke for the final okay, and he nods. They file out, but Jiro lingers for a moment after they leave. "Sir," he begins, and then clears his throat. "I just wanted to say that the best man got the job. It'll be a privilege to work with you."

Sasuke nods, unsure of how to respond to something like this. "Likewise."

"Sir," Jiro salutes, and then the door closes shut after him. Sasuke breathes out into the silence of his office. He moved in earlier that day, grumbling the entire time about the absolute waste of resources it is giving ANBU C.O.s an office of their own. But now, he understands the need for a space to himself. It's nine men now, all under his control, and the missions they get will be harder, tougher, and bloodier.

"It'll take time," the Nidaime says from somewhere in the room, and Sasuke curses his surprise.

"The fuck, Nidaime, a little warning," Sasuke grumbles and lets his Sharingan swirl into life. The man is lounging against the far wall.

"It'll take time," he repeats. "Your Captain will build up your missions. Tonight's job is just patrol."

Sasuke shrugs, sitting in his chair carefully. The damn desk even has a plaque with his name on it, UCHIHA SASUKE, COMMANDING OFFICER, UNIT 3. There is no pride with this title though, just the apprehension of being responsible for these men.

"Something's wrong," the Nidaime says as he takes in the expression on Sasuke's face, and he appears across the table from him.

Sasuke shakes his head and flips open a folder. It's Jiro's, describing in detail the extent of his abilities. The man has a better track record than Sasuke—certainly no charges of treason—and not a single life has been lost in his name. "He should be C.O.," Sasuke says finally, glancing up at the Nidaime. He feels ashamed for admitting this, but these are his thoughts, and if he can't share them with a ghost, then who else?

"Iwate Jiro," the Nidaime reads. He leans forward to catch Sasuke's gaze. "You think he should have been made C.O. Why?"

Sasuke pushes Jiro's folder towards the Nidaime. He doesn't have access to his own folder, but he knows what it must read like: Traitor; incapable of following orders; one man injured on a routine mission already; and a fucking expiration date with Itachi's name next to it. Side-by-side, Jiro's folder must outshine his by several leagues. Whatever possessed Hiashi to promote him over Jiro... it's a mistake. "And you think," the Nidaime says slowly after reading the folder, "that he's a better man for this job than you."
Sasuke feels his face flush. Kakashi has taught him never to doubt himself, but his entire life has been whittled down to a series of doubts: Can I kill Itachi? Can I escape Orochimaru? Will I ever be forgiven? Is there a special place in Hell reserved for trash like me? And now, it's: Can I protect Naruto?

"I can't change how you think," the Nidaime says finally. He stands up, tugging the Hokage robes firmly over his shoulders. "But I can tell you this. If I had been your Captain, if I had been your Commander, or your Hokage, I would have appointed you to this job. Look at me, boy."

Sasuke drags his eyes away from Jiro's folder and meets the Nidaime's gaze. "I would not hesitate," the Nidaime goes on. "Not to make you a commanding officer, and not to place my life in your hands. Am I clear?"

Sasuke sometimes forgets that these ghosts—the men who watch him stumble out of bed, badger him into eating healthier breakfasts, and comment on the state of his sex life without much hesitation—are Hokages. He forgets that they are the same men in history textbooks, the four greatest ninja that Konoha ever produced, the finest warriors on the Continent.

"Am I clear?" the Nidaime repeats, stern, and Sasuke is reminded of this man's legend.

"Yes," he says finally, and gets up to meet the rest of his unit.

"Yes, what?" the Nidaime barks.

"Yes, sir," Sasuke says, and this time, the Nidaime smiles.

Yuuta makes his second report towards the end of their patrol. He appears suddenly just as the Unit is wrapping up for the night in the watchtower, logging anything they've seen or noticed. In the relatively small room, he gets lost in a flurry of feet.

"What is this?" Yuuta hisses, slithering towards Sasuke.

Chouji is the first to notice the snake, and he does so with a loud, "Holy—" Two kunais fly towards Yuuta in the next instant, and then another three as Jiro reacts.

Yuuta dodges all of them easily enough—Jiro doesn't have enough room to let his weapons fly—and slides up Sasuke's leg with an easy slither. He coils around Sasuke's bicep, hissing angrily at the others in the room. "Stand down. He's my snake," Sasuke orders, turning back to his paperwork.

Patrols like these are mostly tedious and a waste of time in Sasuke's opinion, but it is the best way for a new team to get familiar with each other. It takes a few moments, but eventually the men get back to logging their hours. "Fucking hell," Ken mutters, giving Sasuke a wide berth. Akamaru considers Yuuta for a few long minutes, tail wagging, before returning to Kiba's side.

"They're moving west," Yuuta begins without prompt, slightly hurried. "There are several high-level nin. They gather at a place filled with women and fornicate, but they conduct their affairs away from the village."

"A whorehouse," Sasuke mutters. Orochimaru liked to gather with his men in whorehouses as well. It was the perfect field trip for the men: A chance to get work done and fuck all wrapped in one. It's comforting, almost, to see that Akatsuki operates just like any other outlaw group.

"A what?" Yuuta snaps, impatient.
"A whorehouse, a brothel," Sasuke clarifies. "It's where men gather with women to fuck."

"There was a lot of that, yes." Yuuta says, unimpressed.

Sasuke chuckles. "You watch, Yuuta?"

Yuuta's bite is fast and almost painless against his neck. "You want your report or not?"

Sasuke ignores the sting on his neck, angling his head away from the snake. "Yeah."

"I sensed Kin-Butcher and another one of your blood," Yuuta hisses, and this time, Sasuke freezes. This isn't one of Yuuta's usual reports. Something is worrying the snake, enough for him to act out like this. "This other one, he is ancient, much older than the others. He is your blood—"

"There's no one but me and Kin-Butcher," Sasuke interrupts sternly. "You were mistaken."

"I wasn't mistaken," Yuuta snarls, and he sounds unearthly in the quiet of the Tower room. "There is another of your blood."

There is no one, Sasuke knows, because he checked himself. After Itachi, he checked, counted the bodies and lined up each mangled form with a name. There were twenty-three of them that day, eleven Sharingan users, and their families. There is no one else, Sasuke knows, because he feels the solitude of his existence pressing heavily onto his shoulders each day. With every breathing moment he feels the loss acutely.

Yuuta must have sensed his doubt because he insists, "I don't make mistakes, boy. I know your chakra, and your blood. I sensed another of your kin."

Sasuke can either trust Yuuta's instincts or dismiss them. He settles for a neutral, "Anything else?"

"The ancient one, he sensed me, I think."

"No one can sense you, Yuuta," Sasuke mutters. Yuuta stays silent at this, and it is only now that Sasuke notices just how loosely the snake has coiled around his arm. It's been a week now, not as long as some of his other missions, but something has clearly drained Yuuta this time. Sasuke reaches over to grab the snake, and almost immediately, Yuuta starts to snarl. It's a guttural hissing noise, the kind that makes someone's hair stand on end. Nothing human, certainly nothing normal, but Sasuke has gotten used to these sounds. He's heard Rin at her most dangerous—Yuuta's bitching isn't nearly as intimidating.

Akamaru begins to whimper slightly, coming up to hover anxiously by Sasuke's feet. "Fuck, man," Tottori mutters.

Sasuke begins to uncoil Yuuta from his wrist when the snake bites, sinking both fangs into his hand. There is a slight tingle from the poison, but Sasuke ignores it in favor of examining Yuuta's scales. Neji draws in a sharp breath. "Uchiha—"

"In a minute, Hyuga," Sasuke says, and Neji falls silent. There is dried blood and dirt caked along the snake's underbelly. Satisfied, Sasuke lets go of Yuuta. The snake coils around Sasuke's wrist, squeezing hard enough now for the bones in Sasuke's arm to start hurting. This isn't out of hostility, Sasuke knows. This is just how his snakes react. "Rest, Yuuta," Sasuke orders, and the snake drops to the floor with a small thud.

Akamaru backs away with a loud bark. Yuuta doesn't vanish immediately though, just stares up at Sasuke, his eyes hard. "I don't make mistakes, boy," he insists.
I know, Sasuke communicates forcefully. Yuuta is a meticulous spy, and his information has always been better than any human intelligence. This ninja that Yuuta sensed could be anybody, and it will require Sasuke to personally look into it. But as promised, Yuuta has finished his mission: Sasuke knows where Akatsuki is, and he also knows which way they're headed.

"You trust me," Yuuta demands, and that is the closest the snake will ever come to asking that question.

Sasuke crouches by the snake and takes a breath to answer. He still remembers the first time he saw Yuuta, how he had stupidly held out a hand carefully to lure the snake closer. Yuuta bit him then, latched on with all his force and drew blood. I'm no dog, human, Yuuta had spit viciously. What do you want?

Yuuta's first mission had been to spy on Orochimaru, memorize his schedule and report back to Sasuke. Yuuta's intelligence had helped Sasuke kill Orochimaru and eventually escape the Village of Sound. Out of all the others, Yuuta was the first snake that Sasuke trusted, the first and last he always relies on for help. Nothing—not even a supposed sighting of a third Uchiha—can shake this.

"As you trust me," Sasuke hisses carefully.

The snake angles his head a fraction. And just like that, he's gone.

Shikamaru puts two and two together even before Sasuke returns to his office. "You have information," Shikamaru says in lieu of hello. He steps neatly out of the shadows, and this time, even the ghosts startle.

"He's good," the Nidaime mutters, clutching at his chest and breathing heavily. The ghosts had been waiting for him at the end of patrol, eager to hear news of how the new unit was functioning. Apparently, the Nidaime had shared Sasuke's apprehensions with the others, and they were all waiting to offer their support. It made something warm in Sasuke's chest to see them all vouching for him, but the moment was short-lived. "Yuuta came back with a report," Sasuke had told them in a low voice, and the ghosts had fallen silent.

"How did he find out?" the Yondaime demands now, looking irked. "Uchiha, can't you keep a secret to yourself?"

"What makes you think I have information?" Sasuke asks politely and steps around Shikamaru to get to his desk. Tomorrow, Hiashi will be expecting a report on Unit 3's integration and progress. Usually, Neji does all the paperwork. The man is a perfectionist and he has no patience for Sasuke's two-line reports and utter disregard for protocol. Today is no different. As always, Neji and Sasuke will spend the time after missions getting through paperwork and figuring out the nuances of keeping the team cohesive.

"You know, I never understood how you collected your intelligence," Shikamaru says. "None of my sources knew anyone who talked to you, and as far as I know, you've cut all contact with the Land of Rice Fields—you mind if I smoke?"

"No," Sasuke says, and when Shikamaru holds out the pack, Sasuke takes one himself. Sasuke ignores the ghosts' protests as he lights up (Tobacco kills, Sarutobi says seriously. Sasuke refrains from pointing out the very obvious fact that he will die long before lung cancer ever gets to him).

Shikamaru settles across from Sasuke with a yawn. "But I noticed today that your snake summoned itself. Appeared right out of thin air, and you know what else? Your chakra level didn't even budge.
Not one bit. So it got me thinking."

The man falls entirely silent and stares at Sasuke with a blank expression. "This man..." the Shodaime says in the ensuing silence.

"Nara Shikamaru," Sarutobi supplements. He pauses a beat and says, voice soft, "It's a joy to see him again. I used to play shogi with him sometimes. The boy would skip his classes because he got bored, and his mother came to me to ask for help. So I'd spend some time with the boy, talk to him, and—"

Shikamaru sits forward a bit. "Your sources are your snakes. Although I haven't figured out how you can extend your chakra across the country." He takes a deep drag of his cigarette and blows it out carefully. "But then again, you don't use your chakra for your snakes, do you? They're bound to you by some other oath, not chakra, but something else."

Sarutobi chuckles. "He was always a bright boy."

Sasuke rubs at the line of his jaw. He can deny it, but this is Nara Shikamaru, and he'll figure it out eventually. "There a point to this?"

Shikamaru grins at this, and it is the first time Sasuke has seen the expression on the man's face. Sasuke can't help the twitch of his lips at the sight. He doesn't have to worry about Shikamaru sharing this information—the man would go to his grave with it. It is just nice, after all these years, to be able to share this with someone else. Even Kakashi doesn't know, because he operates under the firm belief that the relationship between a man and his animal spirits is private.

"So how are they bound to you?" Shikamaru presses, angling his head to the side.

Sasuke knows that there is a blood oath, but all animals have that with their humans. The blood binds their loyalty, and the chakra binds their subservience. He has both of these, but there is something else that lets him communicate with them in their tongue, share his thoughts with them without ever speaking, and to summon them from thousands of miles away without performing a single seal. They know him, his snakes, know the beat of his heart, the thrum of his chakra, and each and every single feeling of shame and doubt that Sasuke carries on his shoulders. This isn't just a blood and chakra bind, and he's not sure he can ever explain it to another human being. So he settles for a shrug.

"You don't know," Shikamaru breathes in realization, sitting back. "You've got to be—"

There's a quick knock on the door before it opens and Neji breezes in. He stops at the door, spotting Shikamaru. "Is something going on?"

Shikamaru cranes his neck and watches Neji for a few moments. Neji stares right back, but then, it begins to get uncomfortable. "Uchiha here has information on Akatsuki," Shikamaru says finally, sounding like his usual bored self. Sasuke turns to stare at Shikamaru, a dozen different reprimands on the tip of his tongue (What the fuck do you think you're doing, Nara and This is classified and I never gave you permission to share this information). But the ghosts step in neatly. "You will need the Hyuga," the Shodaime counsels. "He is loyal to Naruto, and he is your second. Your snakes will not be enough. You will need manpower for this mission, you know this."

Neji sits down very carefully in his seat. He seems composed, but his eyes are an icy blue. The nerves around his eyes have spidered out (whoever said that the Sharingan was a freaky dojutsu, Sasuke realizes, must not have seen the Byakugan). "What do you know?" Neji asks finally.

Sasuke lets his Sharingan come to life and glances at the Hokages. The Shodaime is right, but just
because he needs manpower doesn't mean he has the right to drag these men into a mission that will most likely end up bloody for everyone involved. "Well?" the Yondaime presses, sounding hopeful. "What will you—"

Sasuke points to the door. "The two of you can walk out of this room if you'd like."

The Yondaime interrupts again. "You need more manpower, Uchiha. You can't do this alone—"

Neji answers first. "You're not the only one who cares about Naruto, Uchiha. If you think—"

"I am giving you the option to walk away from this," Sasuke interrupts.

Neji sneers, the expression making his usually handsome face ugly. "I am not a coward, Uchiha."

"I am giving you the option to walk away because you have families and friends in Konoha. Not because you're cowards," Sasuke explains, and it takes all his will not to raise his voice. They don't understand, can't see this situation for what it is. Naruto is their friend, true, but they have mothers, fathers, sisters, girlfriends and teammates who depend on them to return at the end of each mission. The value of a ninja isn't just a sum of his mastery of ninjutsu and taijutsu—if that were the case, Sasuke would be one of the more valuable fighters in the village. But Sasuke has learned over the years that the value of a ninja is measured by those around him. Neji, Shikamaru, Kiba and the others, they are all valuable, far more valuable than Sasuke ever was or ever will be.

Priceless, by comparison. So Sasuke adds, "If you oppose Akatsuki, they will come after you and everything you hold dear. Take twenty-four hours to think it over. Now, get out."

"I will not—"

Sasuke levels a stare at Neji, and he stops short. Shikamaru gets to his feet. "Sir," he says, and turns towards the door. Neji lingers for a few moments longer, but mimics Shikamaru. They leave with a soft click of the door.

Sasuke takes another long drag of his cigarette in the silence that follows. He picked up smoking in the Village of Sound to blend in with the others. It was an advantage to be able to smoke with the other men and be included in the gossip and information that was shared during those moments. Underground, with little to no ventilation, the entire village had smelled like tobacco. Sasuke had assumed that once he left the village, that after he escaped Orochimaru, he would stop smoking.

But.

There's a comfort in familiar motions. The first cigarette is done—it's not even his brand of choice—Sasuke shifts in his seat, reaches into his back pocket, pulls out a pack and taps out another cigarette. He lights it carefully, lets the embers pick up just so, and breathes in deep.

In all likelihood, both Neji and Shikamaru will return, willing to lay down their lives. But they deserve the chance to change their minds. Maybe some time with their families will give them pause to think, but twenty-four hours from now, Sasuke is willing to bet that both Neji and Shikamaru will be in his office.

Konoha isn't in the habit of raising cowards, Sasuke knows. Except one, of course—

*And what a coward I am*, Sasuke thinks.

When, finally, he lets his Sharingan flare back to life, the ghosts are nowhere to be seen.
The ghosts ask questions while Sasuke gathers some cleaning tools, but they fall silent once Sasuke reaches the shrine at the edge of the Naka River. It's across the river from a neighborhood of houses, built on the land that Sasuke's forefathers once owned. He couldn't afford the taxes to maintain the clan's compound, so he was forced to sell and watch as they razed the buildings to the ground. Now, there is a gated community with cookie-cutter houses. The only thing remaining is the Uchiha Clan's shrine, left in peace because even real estate agents know not to dishonor the dead.

The shrine is a small building, a little bigger than Sasuke's living room, but with a sloping roof and brick-red walls. It's set on a grassy hill overlooking the river below. Sasuke's grandfather, Uncle Yashiro, once told Sasuke that the Uchiha Clan's earliest members practiced their art by the banks of the Naka, that the Naka's water tempered the Uchihas' fire. Sasuke walks through the gate—with two dragons etched in at the top—and up the steps, his cleaning supplies thrown over his shoulders.

The ghosts linger at the gate, hesitant. "You can come up if you'd like," Sasuke offers over his shoulder, trying to sound casual. This isn't a personal visit. It is strictly business. He doesn't need to get sentimental about this.

The Nidaime is the first to take Sasuke up on his offer, and passes through the gate. The others follow closely behind, giving Sasuke the space to push open the imposing double doors of the building. He doesn't take his shoes off although it is called for, just drops his backpack of cleaning supplies on the ground and gets to work.

Eventually, curiosity gets the better of the Nidaime. "What are you doing?" he asks mildly.

Sasuke looks up from his crouch by the bottom of a slab of stone. For all their pride, the Uchiha Clan's shrine is sparse, nothing at all like some of the other families' shrines. It is just a large slab of gabber stone, polished to an ink-deep shine, names of the dead etched into it.

He has a flashlight in his mouth so he can read the scroll he's holding up. Uchiha Yashiro once told Sasuke that no name could ever be etched into this stone without the complete extinction of the user's chakra. An Uchiha must pass from this world to the next—his Sharingan must be cremated—before this stone will accept his name. The stone, according to legend, was carved from the Sword-Ridge Mountains in the far western lands where the tribes still roam free. The stone was infused with dragon fire, long before ninja nations were ever born. The red-eyed dragons had chosen the Uchihas to share their secret with, and ever since, the Uchiha Clan has been its keeper.

It is a superstition, Sasuke knows, but no Uchiha with an activated Sharingan has ever had their name recorded on this stone without the absolute and utter certainty of his cremation.

"Sasuke," Sarutobi asks finally. He crouches by Sasuke, old face kind and open. "What is it, child?"

Sasuke rolls his eyes. He's never understood why everyone gets so sympathetic around him when it concerns his family. It isn't their loss, not their grief, and none of their damn business. An Uchiha carries his own burdens, his father told him once, and Sasuke will. "Fffawing a leaaf," he mumbles around the flashlight. Sarutobi blinks at him, so Sasuke takes the flashlight out of his mouth and repeats, "Following a lead."

He lays out the scroll on the dusty floor. When he shines the flashlight on it this time, the ghosts gather around him to observe. It's a family tree, spanning generations and tracing all the way back to the legends themselves, the nomadic warriors who swore oaths to dragons at the peaks of the Sword-Ridge Mountains. "This stone has the name of every Uchiha there ever was," Sasuke explains and flashes his light in an arc over the slab-stone. It's standing up right, a foot from the back wall, and bracketed on both sides by oil lanterns. The lanterns hang from the ceiling, and according to tradition, they must be lit at all times.
It has been nearly a decade since the lamps were last lit, has been years since Sasuke last set foot in this place to face his ancestors. Sasuke points to the scroll again. "I need to verify that all the names of the Sharingan users are here on this stone."

The Shodaime gives him a look. "Why?"

"Yuuta came back with a report," Sasuke explains, rubbing his fingers together. This close, the ghosts make his breath come out in a mist. "He verified Akatsuki's location and said they were moving west." And that is enough information, Sasuke decides, so he leaves it at that.

The Nidaime sits down on the ground. He takes a deep breath and prompts, slowly, as if talking to a particularly stupid child, "And what about that report made you come out here in the middle of the night?"

Sasuke looks away from the ghosts and picks up a roll of paper towels. He rips off a couple of sheets, sprays on a generous amount of liquid soap and starts to wipe down the stone. He doesn't want to share this information with them, because this is personal, this is his family. The Yondaime prompts him with, "Uchiha."

But the Yondaime has a stake in this too. This is about his son, and the man deserves an explanation. "Yuuta sensed two Uchihas," Sasuke answers finally, not looking up at any of them. "My brother"—Kin-Butcher they call him—"And another, more older one. I'm here to check."

"Is your snake sure?" the Nidaime demands, pressing forward. "How can it be sure?"

"Yuuta knows my chakra and my blood," Sasuke explains and goes back to cleaning the stone of its dirt. It's a tedious process, made all the more difficult by years of grime that Sasuke has neglected.

The first year after the massacre, Sasuke felt the loss of each person acutely. Every moment, each breath he took, was in their absence. As the years passed though, the desperation matured. He started missing the smaller, quieter moments of their existence: The crinkle of the morning newspaper that his grandmother read at the table every day; the sounds of a kitchen full of his aunts and mother making dinner enough for twenty-three; the soft thuds of Shisui and Itachi training in the compound.

"This is our ancestral stone," Sasuke explains, more to distract himself in the silence than anything else. "My great-great-grandfather's grandfather chiseled this stone out of the Sword-Ridge Mountains, back when the dragons were still alive. No Uchiha's name can be carved into this stone without his chakra being completely destroyed. The stone won't accept the name of a soul that has yet to pass on."

It sounds more ridiculous now that he's said it out loud. "I don't… I don't know how else to check Yuuta's information. It's the only documentation I have of my family, besides the KPD files on their deaths."

Sarutobi lays a hand on Sasuke's shoulder, and this time, Sasuke is unable to suppress a shiver. "I'm sorry, Sasuke."

Sarutobi has been apologizing for Sasuke's past ever since Sasuke can remember. Sasuke doesn't understand why the man continues to apologize, because it isn't his fault. It's Itachi's. It's the Sharingan, it's their blood. Uchiha Madara, Sasuke's ancestor, was a traitor. What was the world expecting from Madara's heirs? Heroes?

"It's a lead," Sasuke insists. There is no need to make this sentimental.

"It's your family," Sarutobi protests, and he looks devastated. The other ghosts are similarly stone-
faced. It's not pity, not quite, but it still makes Sasuke's neck flush with shame. "It's your family, Sasuke."

Sasuke shrugs and goes back to cleaning. He can't help himself though, because the ghosts must all be thinking it too. "Figures. If there was another Uchiha alive..." The towels he's using are already grimy with dirt. Sasuke tears off another two towels and sprays it again. With each swipe of his hand, names come into view. Each one is identified by their last name, redundant in a site that is dedicated to one family only. U-c-h-i-h-a—

"Figures, though, doesn't it?" he asks again, huffing a small laugh. "The only other Uchiha alive, and he'll probably turn out to be a murdering, traitorous psychopath like the rest of us."

The Yondaime takes a deep breath, shoulders moving up and down with effort.

"Get it?" Sasuke prompts. "It's funny."

The Nidaime is the first to interrupt the silence that follows, but his voice is quiet now, not his usual loud bark. "Who's next, Uchiha?"

By the time Sasuke gets to his father's name, the sun is coming up and the flashlight is unnecessary. The ghosts have maintained a respectful distance this entire time, only responding to Sasuke's confirmation that yes, the name is here. It seems unnecessary to check this obsessively—just checking the police logs should be enough (and Sasuke has already done that; he has copies of each page of the Konoha Police Department's investigation into the massacre). But Yuuta is absolutely certain, and this is the best Sasuke can do.

Sasuke makes sure that he does not hesitate when clearing his father's name. He does not linger on the gravestone's inscription, and he does not pause for a moment of respect. It's when he passes his mother's name on the way to Shisui's that he becomes still. He doesn't need to clear her name to check (he's been skipping all the non-Sharingan users until now; Uchiha Mikoto was from a small family from outside the village), but it's only a span of seven inches of space, and he can't pass her name by, not when he can't even make out the Mikoto of her name.

Sasuke rubs at the dirt on his hands, wipes at his face with the back of his arm. He's here, might as well—

He begins to clean it. He's tried for years to visit this site and give his parents the respect they deserve. But mourning is difficult, Sasuke realized soon after his parents died, especially when he's the only one to carry the burden. He's not a good son, never has been, but he's not as bad as to walk by his mother's name without cleaning it.

Sasuke works quickly, keeping his head down. It takes nearly half a roll of paper towel, because while Sasuke might not be the cleanest person on the planet, this is his mother's name, and she always kept a clean house. When he finishes, Sasuke lingers for just a moment, tracing a finger over her name—Uchiha Mikoto, he thinks, and the memories are easy to recall.

Sasuke doesn't remember exactly how she smelled, what her voice sounded like, or what it felt like when she hugged him. Only a few memories remain now: Her outline at his door every morning when she came to wake Sasuke up; the brush she used to try to tame Sasuke's hair with after his baths; her incessant humming while she graded her Academy students' papers. She didn't like it when Sasuke walked through the kitchen with muddy shoes on, and she always started her mornings with a cup of tea and toast with blueberry jam. She could make eggs just the way Sasuke liked them,
served them with a large cup of milk and an apple for the walk to school. He remembers calling out to her (Ma), the word familiar and comfortable.

Sasuke places a palm over her name, and it is enough to cover all the letters. He huffs a breath on the name and wipes away the condensation again carefully. Does it a second time, a third, until her name is bright and clear. This is Mother.

Another decade, and he might forget these details, too. But then again, Sasuke thinks, shifting over to return to the task at hand. Then again, he's probably not going to make it another decade. Another year, two at most, and that should be it. He's not sure why anyone would want to live for more than twenty years. Sixteen years, and it already feels like a hundred to Sasuke. Why would anyone—how could anyone—live beyond that?

The ghosts are still hovering at the door, silent. Uncensored, Sasuke finds himself saying, "I don't usually have time."

"Of course," the Shodaime says, and it isn't unkind.

"I used to for a couple of years," Sasuke continues, picking up the scroll with the family tree. The ghosts are silent, so Sasuke adds for clarification, "Perform my duties, I mean. As the son."

The sun is shining brightly now, and in this light, the ghosts look translucent. There is no need to explain himself to the dead, but it's shameful for a son to neglect his duties like this. "I was gone for a while. And now, with ANBU and Akatsuki…" Sasuke trails off.

No, that's not it. "There's a lot to do for one person," Sasuke says, gesturing at the lanterns. The members of the compound took turns checking on the light when Sasuke was young. For one person to keep a fire alive, day and night, is a difficult task. The silence is stifling, and Sasuke can feel his face getting hot. He's never been a good son, and there's no way to say that aloud.

They must know, though.

So he clears his throat and points at the name Uchiha Shisui on the family tree. "Last one."

Naruto finds him in his office the next day. "Well, well, ANBU," he says tauntingly as he steps into the room. "It's about the size of my office's waiting room, but it's still an office."

Naruto isn't alone. Sasuke hears a polite, "Good morning, Uchiha," from the Shodaime. Sarutobi greets him with, "Sasuke, good morning," and the Nidaime with, "Hey, kid." The Yondaime is there, Sasuke knows, but he is probably throwing his routine hissy fit about Naruto's choice of company.

Sasuke ignores them in favor of signing off on the stack of papers that Neji placed on his desk earlier this morning. He must have finished the paperwork at home, then, even after their argument at the office. "What do you want, Uzumaki?"

"You're no fun today," Naruto grumbles, dropping off his bag in one of the chairs. He walks around the table to stand next to Sasuke. A moment passes, and then, "What's wrong?"

Sasuke doesn't answer for a few minutes. He gets through a full folder before Naruto reaches out a hand to tug at his hair lightly. He lets his hand linger, gently running his fingers through Sasuke's hair. It's intimate, but Naruto has never had any respect for personal space. "Bad night? You have nightmares?"
Sasuke tolerates the proximity for only a bit before he shrugs away. Naruto is the only one who talks about these details of Sasuke's life, reckless in pushing the boundaries with Sasuke at each and every turn of their friendship. Even Kakashi knows well enough to stay away. But Naruto—"Hey," Naruto mutters. He takes Sasuke's face in both his hands. He angles Sasuke's face up, studying him. "Did you get any sleep?"

"No," Sasuke answers shortly. He doesn't want to tell Naruto about his trip to the Uchiha gravesite. He'd start asking questions, and then what?

Naruto bends at the waist lightly and rests their foreheads together. He closes his eyes, breathes deep enough for the both of them. "You used to come over to spar when you had nightmares," he mutters. "What are we now? Strangers?"

"I had work," Sasuke dismisses and pulls away. The ghosts are politely looking away, but it's still odd to share private moments like this with someone else.

Naruto snorts. "Like hell you had work. That's not even your handwriting."

"It's Hyuga's," Sasuke admits and skims the paragraph on Tottori. Integrating well, Neji has written on a post-it note plastered down on the page: Cost of explosives - expanded budget request? I'll file paperwork as needed.

"I heard you kept him as your second," Naruto says, hoisting himself up on the desk. "He was surprised, you know. But—" Naruto pauses for Sasuke to look at him.

There's no point fighting it. So Sasuke looks up. "But what?"

"I told him you finally figured out he wasn't gay," Naruto says, smiling lightly. There's a snigger from the Nidaime that Sasuke chooses to ignore. "He didn't know whether to be offended or relieved," Naruto goes on. "I told him he should be relieved." And this last part Naruto says with a quick glance at Sasuke from underneath the sweep of his lashes. Sasuke looks back at him and begins to tally the details—he always notices the details about Naruto, can't help but stare at the blond no matter how hard he tries not to.

For today, Naruto has switched out his earrings. His usual silver loops are gone, leaving behind small, dark holes where they usually are. He's dressed in civilian clothes, dark jeans and a long, white-sleeved shirt with a wide collar. Even his hair is pulled back into a loose ponytail, not the usual slicked back look he sports for official work. The perks of working in the Tower, Naruto had told him, was that he got weekends off. Politicians don't work on Sundays, he'd said once, and Sasuke had thought he was joking. "Stop looking at me like that, Sasuke," Naruto says finally, flushing. "Like you don't see me every day—"

"Your earrings," Sasuke defends quickly. "They're gone."

Naruto traces the shell of his ear with a finger thoughtfully. "You don't like it? I thought I could go today without them."

Usually, Naruto looks sharp and beautiful, like he's daring the world not to look. He makes Sasuke's hands itch to touch him, makes his mouth go dry every time Naruto looks at him through his lashes. Today, though, Naruto looks scrubbed clean, fresh and soft. It's not the kind of look that makes Sasuke's pants uncomfortably tight; it's the kind that makes Sasuke want to pull Naruto close and run his fingers through Naruto's hair. He'd like to wake up to Naruto looking like this, be able to bury his face in the line of Naruto's neck and breathe deep and easy in the early morning sun. "I figured that a future Hokage shouldn't be waltzing around with piercings," Naruto explains. "I'm trying to look
respectable. You like?"

Sasuke makes a dismissive gesture at the question, trying to seem uninterested. "I like you however."

That, he realizes a moment later, did not sound uninterested. If anything...

"All right, that's it," the Yondaime declares loudly then. "That's it—"

"Namikaze—"

"He's flirting with my boy. Shameless, I tell you. In front of me, he's flirting with my boy like some sort of—""

Naruto kicks Sasuke's knee lightly, but there's a pleased smile on his face. "Idiot." He jumps off the desk and walks over to his bag. "I have a present for you."

"Be grateful, Uchiha!" the Yondaime thunders from his left.

Sasuke hm's and goes back to his paperwork. Hiashi likes to deal with his commanding officers on Saturday mornings, which is possibly the worst rule the man has ever made. So now, Sasuke has to sign this last report on the team, drop it off in Hiashi's mailbox and hopefully be out of the office before lunch. Then, he has to follow up on this third Uchiha and make plans for surveying the area himself.

Naruto places a small white box in front of Sasuke. "Here," he says and takes his seat on the edge of the desk again, looking at Sasuke expectantly. "Open it."

Sasuke stares at the box warily. Naruto isn't angry with him, but still, he has to cover his bases. "Today is March 17," he says slowly. The date doesn't seem important, but he could be forgetting some inane anniversary that Naruto has decided to celebrate. Usually, he can just take Naruto out for ramen, but if Naruto has gotten him a gift, then maybe it's something more important—

"Oh, just open it," Naruto mutters impatiently. "You haven't forgotten anything. I just got it for you for your promotion."

Sasuke glances up at Naruto to make sure—it could be a trap to see if Sasuke has really forgotten—but the blond seems genuine. So he opens the box carefully. There's a thin white sheet, and when Sasuke folds it over, he sees the gift.

It's a framed picture of Sasuke and Kakashi, one of those candid moments that Sakura has captured. The picture itself is at an odd angle, the background a crystal-blue summer day in Konoha. Kakashi is reaching over to smack Sasuke upside the head, eye crinkled in a smile, and Sasuke is ducking out of his reach. But what makes Sasuke pause is that in the picture, he's sporting a lopsided smile as well, looking entirely unguarded and at ease. "It's a good picture of you two," Naruto explains softly. "I thought you might like it for your office. Kakashi-sensei has a copy on his desk, you know."

Naruto takes the picture and places it on Sasuke's desk, angling it this way and that before he's satisfied. "What do you think?"

He likes the picture, feels something warm in his chest to be able to put it on his desk (the other C.O.'s have pictures, he knows, of girlfriends, families, teams). But he doesn't say anything, just settles for a shrug.

"It's a good picture," the Nidaime says with a chuckle. Sarutobi voices his agreement, and even the Yondaime says, sounding fond, "Kakashi looks good in it."
Naruto threads his hand in Sasuke's hair and tugs playfully. "Liar. You like it."

Sasuke moves away from Naruto's hand half-heartedly. He's keeping his hair much shorter now, cropped close to his head in short spikes so he can't be so easily identified as an Uchiha. But Naruto still tugs and manhandles it like he did when they were children and Sasuke had the Uchiha mane. Naruto announces, still tugging at Sasuke's hair, "Let's eat."

"Hey," the Nidaime says, sounding pleased. "The kid's got a date!"

The Yondaime groans.

Lunch isn't their usual ramen stand pig-out. It's a quiet, intimate affair on the balcony of some classy restaurant that Sasuke has never set foot into. The waitress leads them to a small table that overlooks the street underneath, and when Sasuke and Naruto take their seats, Sasuke's legs brush against Naruto's.

"You're a giraffe," Naruto says, kicking Sasuke under the table.

"The table's small," Sasuke corrects.

Naruto starts a low-pitched rant about his peace treaty. He leans forward as he talks, idly twirling the chain around his neck as he speaks. It's not unusual, just another one of their lunches. But this time, it is at a different location, and Naruto's father is breathing down Sasuke's neck.

"Anyways," Naruto says, tracing the rim of his glass with a finger. It makes a low whistling noise as he does this. "I don't understand what Danzo hopes to accomplish by being such an ass. This treaty is important. The Shodaime established this treaty during his administration, and it's been renewed every year since. After Orochimaru's attack we've fallen out of the habit, but now..." He shakes his head, tugging at his necklace in frustration. "Now, Danzo is going to spit on the Shodaime Hokage-sama's grave by vetoing it in the Senior Council."

"Well," the Shodaime says mildly. "Not literally, I hope—"

"I mean, insulting Tsunade, insulting the Mizukage, insulting the Land of Water, I can live with that. It's politics," Naruto goes on in a low voice. "I just can't stand the insult to the Shodaime-sama. It's like—it's like he's—" Naruto makes a vague, expansive gesture. "There are no words for that."

The Nidaime whistles. "Wow, Brother. He's taking this pretty hard."

"I am honored," the Shodaime says solemnly.

Sasuke blinks at Naruto. Sasuke doesn't like politics. They're petty, pointless, and hardly suited for men like him. If Naruto wants to spend his days maneuvering the bureaucracy and politics of the Tower, then that's his choice. For his part, Sasuke would prefer to be on the field. "You know what?" Naruto asks suddenly, sitting up straighter.

Dutifully, Sasuke asks, "What?"

"I should leak a quote to the press," Naruto says and takes a sip of his water. He clears his throat. "Hear me out: Lord Danzo is abusing his power as a Senior Council member. The treaty with the Land of Water is of historical significance and by vetoing this treaty, Lord Danzo is letting politics stain our nation's diplomatic legacy." He pauses expectantly. "Well?"

"Impressive," the Nidaime says. "Minato, your kid's got talent."
"He does," the Yondaime says, and Sasuke can easily imagine the proud set of his shoulders without looking.

"Sounds good," Sasuke mutters and reaches over to grab some of the food on Naruto's plate.

"Hinata will help me polish it up. We should be able to get a few inches in the Monday morning cycle," Naruto goes on, rummaging in his bag for a bit before drawing out a notepad and a pen. He starts to scribble away angrily. "Danzo isn't even a tenth of the man that the Shodaime-sama was," he says, snapping his book shut once he's written down his notes. "Although, I guess that's an unfair comparison. Senju Hashirama against any man is an unfair comparison."

The Nidaime starts to laugh. "Brother, he likes you!"

"Um," the Yondaime says, clearing his throat awkwardly. "I'm sure he doesn't mean it in that sense, Tobirama-sensei. Probably just hero worship or—"

"I've seen some of Tsunade's pictures of when the Shodaime Hokage-sama was younger," Naruto goes on, looking out over the balcony and towards the Hokage Monument. "My God the shoulders on that man."

"Right," the Yondaime says hurriedly. "He's young, he says some things, and some of those things may be slightly inappropriate. For that, Shodaime-sama, I apologize. Truly, sincerely—"

"No, no," the Shodaime says with a laugh. "I will take it as a compliment." Sasuke's Sharingan flares to life and he levels a flat gaze at the Shodaime. The man's smile falls away even as the Nidaime and Sarutobi descend into laughter.

"Okay, here's something you probably didn't know," Naruto goes on, leaning forward with a small smile, "the Shodaime-sama was my first crush. I mean, the first man at least. Tsunade showed me her photo album, and I swear, love at first sight." Naruto sighs wistfully. "If he were alive…"

"He's not," Sasuke says flatly.

Naruto makes a face at Sasuke. "Well, I know that. Anyways, he's been my favorite Hokage ever since."

"He's your favorite Hokage," Sasuke says slowly, "because you like his shoulders."

"Turns out I have a type," Naruto says, taking a bite of his food. He swallows before adding, "I also think the Shodaime-sama was the greatest political mind that this world has ever seen. The thing with the Tailed Demons? Using them as diplomatic leverage?" Naruto throws up his hands in the air. "Brilliant. The world is about to collapse, and this man stares down the apocalypse with a straight face and goes, 'You know what? I'm going to fix everything because I am that awesome.'"

"Well," the Shodaime says, and he coughs lightly to clear his throat. "My thoughts were not really —"

"If that isn't sexy, I don't know what is," Naruto says, jabbing his chopsticks at Sasuke. "Senju Hashirama, all alpha male, making everyone his bitch." Naruto's face goes blank, his eyes glazing over dreamily. "I bet he was like that in bed too. Probably took control and tossed people around a bit—"

"Ohhh-kay," the Yondaime says loudly.

"Will you shut up?" Sasuke hisses, feeling his face heat up. "He's—" Right here " —He deserves
"your respect."

Naruto looks insulted. "I do respect him. All of them. I mean, don't get me started on the Nidaime—"

"Please don't," Sasuke scowls.

"Not like that," Naruto dismisses with a wave of his hand. "I mean, the Nidaime Hokage-sama was a class of his own."

"Really?" the Nidaime asks, sounding interested. "Ask him why, Uchiha. Go on."

The Shodaime laughs. "Tobi…" There's a chill to his left, so Sasuke parrots, "Why?"

Naruto takes a bite of his food and chews thoughtfully. "We haven't seen military genius like that since…well, since ever. The Shodaime-sama may have handled the Tailed Demons, but the Nidaime-sama was the one who put theory into practice and dealt with the aftermath. Especially since after Shodaime-sama's death, the Land of Fire could have potentially become a power vacuum. If the Nidaime-sama hadn't been the man he was… we probably wouldn't be sitting here."

The Nidaime chuckles. "Well, when you put it that way," he says with exaggerated bravado. "I guess I am pretty good."

Naruto tilts his head pensively, and Sasuke knows now that the blond is on a roll. He gets like this sometimes, when he's talking about politics or history. Naruto may have been the dead last of their Academy class, but now, he is anything but. He pushed himself physically, proved himself on the field. He is still pushing himself on the field, but now, Naruto is flexing his political and mental strengths. Hokage isn't just about being the strongest, he'd explained one day, it's about being smart about this strength. So Naruto made himself smart, went after it with the same dedication and determination he did with training. There are still entire days that Naruto holes himself up in the library, devouring just about anything that comes his way and steadfastly ignoring Sasuke's sparring challenges.

And all the while, Sasuke thinks, Naruto becomes more and more beautiful. With each passing day, it becomes harder for Sasuke to look away—for anyone to look away. (Sasuke isn't blind; he sees how men and women let their gazes linger, how free drinks start to arrive the minute he sits down in any bar…) So Sasuke doesn't look away (can't look away) while Naruto keeps talking about the Nidaime's battle prowess in greater detail. Sasuke starts to memorize the details again—the blue of his big, almond eyes; the perfect angle of his cheekbones; the lush swell of his lips; the small, delicate round of his chin; the long column of his neck and the coy line of his collarbone disappearing into the loose neckline of his shirt. He looks fey, perched at the edge of his seat as if he'll flit away with the next breeze. So while Naruto talks (and gets lost in his love for history and this one biography he'd read of the Nidaime-sama), Sasuke wonders if Naruto's skin is slightly olive-hued everywhere, proof of his mother's foreign blood, or if it's a tan from all the sunshine he soaks up. What would it be like? Sasuke thinks. To hold Naruto close, to wrap his arms around Naruto, and just be for a while? What, Sasuke thinks, would that be like?

Sasuke has never known anything but his shit-show of a life, and he's been rubbed raw, chipped jagged, and worn thin by all of it. But now, Sasuke thinks that having Naruto in his arms for even a moment would give him just that single instance of peace he needs to get through this last leg of his life—

A piece of bread hits Sasuke square in the chest. "Oi!" Naruto yells. "Quit staring at me, you perv. I'm trying to have a civilized conversation with you."
Sasuke wipes at the crumbs on his shirt with a scowl, and doesn't bother to dignify Naruto's accusation with an answer—largely because he's been caught red-handed and there's no point denying it at this point. "You've got that lovestruck teenager look down pat, kid," the Nidaime says, and Sasuke feels his entire neck get warm. The ghosts start laughing at his reaction, all except for the Yondaime who takes a deep breath to begin what is no doubt a detailed treatise on Sasuke's imminent death.

Naruto speaks before the Yondaime can get a single word out. "Anyways, the Nidaime-sama was a league of his own, but his student? Sarutobi-sensei? He kept the world together after the Nine-Tailed Demon attacked, and he did it with grace," Naruto says, and he looks infinitely fond as he says this. "He was the wisest, kindest man to have ever walked this earth, and losing him was—" Naruto's voice cracks on the last word, and he stops speaking, abrupt. He blinks hard, and looks away towards the Hokage Monument.

"Oh, child," Sarutobi mutters, reaching out, almost as if he wants to put a hand on Naruto's shoulder. But before he can get there, Naruto recovers with an offhanded, "Mostly though, he intimidated his opponents by just existing, so let's not even go there."

Sarutobi laughs at this. "Well, that's not quite—"

"And Tsunade is just a big bully, and most men can't think straight when they see her, so she has her own style," Naruto finishes with a flourish. "And who knows what'll come next. Kakashi-sensei will probably have to be dragged kicking and screaming into the Tower, but he's Hatake Kakashi."

Sasuke isn't the only one who notices the omission, because the ghosts fall suddenly silent. Probably an honest mistake, Sasuke thinks, and prompts casually, "And the Yondaime, too."

Naruto laughs, and it sounds strange, forced almost. "Yondaime-sama died before he could show what kind of Hokage he may have become."

When Sasuke glances at the Yondaime, the man's face has become stone still. "He's a kid," the Nidaime says quietly, putting a hand on the Yondaime's shoulder. "He's a teenager." The Yondaime looks away from Sasuke when their eyes meet, and oddly, Sasuke feels a need to defend the man. He's loud, obnoxious, and has absolutely no respect for Sasuke's personal space, but the man is good—the same breed of kindness and sincerity that Naruto has inherited.

"The Yondaime," Sasuke says sternly, "was one of the greatest warriors that Konoha produced. He saved this country, and he—"

"I know exactly what the Yondaime did and did not do," Naruto interrupts. His face has gone completely blank, and there isn't a trace of laughter anymore. "Unfortunately, he was my father, so I've done my research."

The Shodaime is the one to break the silence that follows. "Minato, he is only a child. He is speaking out of anger."

"No, it's fine," the Yondaime insists. "He has a right. I mean, what kind of father…" Sasuke keeps his eyes on his food. He doesn't want to look at the Yondaime right now, because the man has a right to his privacy, and this isn't Sasuke's conversation.

"You don't mean that," Sasuke says finally, and it's the least he can do in the man's defense. "Uchiha, I appreciate what you're doing, but Naruto has a right to feel the way he—"

Naruto's lips turn down into a frown. "Yes, I do."
"Kakashi says your father loved you more than you could possibly imagine," Sasuke insists, and it's only a half-lie. He's seen how the Yondaime watches his son, as if Naruto is the most precious, incredible thing that he has ever seen. Naruto's happiness, even the smallest joys, makes the Yondaime's face break out into a wide grin, and each one of Naruto's disappointments weighs heavily on the man. "He would have been a good father, if he had lived."

Naruto makes a face, annoyed now. "Don't lecture me, Uchiha," he snaps, and drops his napkin on the table. He reaches for his bag and gets to his feet, ready to leave. "What would you know about fathers, anyway?" He snaps his mouth shut the minute he says it, sitting back down slowly. "Sasuke, I didn't mean—I wasn't thinking—"

"It's fine." Sasuke puts his napkin down as well, reaching out for his wallet to pay for lunch. Because Naruto, in all his anger, was right. Sasuke doesn't know about fathers, at least the good ones. Fugaku was hardly a model example, and it's not as though Sasuke has experienced much fatherly love in his cluster-fuck of a life.

"Sasuke," Naruto begins, "I didn't mean it—" Sasuke gets to his feet, and Naruto mimics him, gripping Sasuke's wrist to halt him in place. "I'm sorry."

Which is when Sasuke realizes Naruto thinks that he's angry, that he's leaving out of anger. "I'm not angry," he says with a shrug. Naruto opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. "You're right. Fugaku was a bad father, and he died when I was young, so I wouldn't know."

Naruto stays silent at this, and so do the ghosts. It is the first time that Sasuke has admitted that out loud, that Fugaku was anything less than ideal (that he drank too much and when he did, he lost that famous short temper that all Uchiha men are born with; that after Obito's death, his grief calcified him beyond recognition; that he saw Obito in Sasuke and withheld his affection from his own son in an attempt to shield himself from his longing for his little brother; that Sasuke can't remember a single memory of his father being kind to him until the very, very end, and even then, was it kindness? It was just recognition: Sasuke, my boy. He hadn't said anything else, hadn't said, It'll be all right, or even, Run).

But Fugaku is his father. The only one Sasuke ever had, even if it was for just six short years. It's embarrassing to have talked about Fugaku so carelessly, but before Sasuke can make his escape, avoid all the eyes following his every move, Naruto closes the distance between them. "Hey, listen," Naruto says, and takes Sasuke's hand in both of his. "I'm sorry."

Naruto doesn't usually have reason to apologize to Sasuke, not even for being so persistently annoying. It's strange to have to hear those words coming from him, and it takes a moment for Sasuke to react. "It's fine," Sasuke says and pulls away to pay for the food. He drops a few bills on the table and is about to leave when Naruto grabs his wrist again. He rubs a distracted circle against the scar on Sasuke's palm (a kunai accident when he was four; Itachi had been quietly furious).

"You were right, though. About my father, I mean," Naruto goes on. "He was a good man. I just—I just wish sometimes. Is all."

"Yeah," Sasuke mutters and watches as Naruto carefully traces the scar.

Finally, after a few long moments, Naruto says, "The Yondaime Hokage was one of the greatest patriots and heroes that Konoha has ever seen. He sacrificed himself for the safety of his village, and he did it with pride. He envisioned a world that was peaceful, where children did not have to go to war, and where men would live well into their old age. He was a kind man. I heard."

"He is," Sasuke promises, and Naruto smiles at him.
"If I ever become Hokage," Naruto says. "I want to finish what he started. I want to be like him. I just wish...I just wish he was here, that's all. Him and Mom." Sasuke can't help but glance at the Yondaime, just in time to see the ghost wipe at his eyes quickly. The Nidaime has a hand firmly on the Yondaime's shoulder, gripping it tight.

And because it is getting a little too sentimental for Sasuke, he shrugs a shoulder, nonchalant. "Not as loud as him, I hope."

"OI! I am right here, you ingrate. Dishonoring a dead man like that, where do you get the nerve—"

"—calling him loud?" Naruto yells into his face, shoving him away. "I will show you loud, Uchiha Sasuke, so help me God—"

Sasuke rolls his eyes at the Nidaime. The man smiles and holds up his hands as if to say, All yours.

Chapter End Notes

_Naruto, First Aide to the Godaime_, by the incredibly talented haplessmedstudent!
The next morning, Neji and Shikamaru are both in Sasuke's office, which Sasuke has been expecting.

What Sasuke hasn't been expecting—what has him gritting his teeth—is that Kiba, Shino, Chouji, Lee, Jiro, Kenshin and Tottori are also there. So is Akamaru, gnawing dedicatedly at the leg of Sasuke's desk.

"Well," the Nidaime says thoughtfully, surveying the men gathered in the room. "The more the merrier, I guess."

Kiba is sitting in Sasuke's chair, legs propped up on Sasuke's desk as if he owns the place. But surprisingly, Sasuke can't find any anger at the gesture. It's Kiba, for God's sake, he thinks. This is just who he is. Insolent, almost always out of line, but loyal and trustworthy to a fault.

"So what's the plan, Sarge?" Kiba asks when he sees him. "We go kick their ass or what?"

Sasuke works best when he is alone. He knows this as an absolute, knows of having no one but himself to rely on. He is used to the solitude of a solo mission, used to the utter lack of responsibilities of a solo mission. Now, though, there are nine men looking at him expectantly, waiting to follow his orders.

"Well?" Shino prompts, arms stretching over his head lazily. A few of his bugs fly about at the movement before settling again. "What is the plan, Uchiha?"

Sasuke takes a breath, and counts to ten.

Two days before his surveillance mission, Sasuke becomes a vandal, a grave robber, and a wanted criminal with a large bounty on his head. Sasuke is used to committing crimes, but this is a new low—even for him. He lets his displeasure known loudly, vocally, and with a great amount of oratory flare, but the Yondaime and the Nidaime combine their vocal powers to convince Sasuke to take the ghosts with him, and after twelve continuous hours of *Uchiha, Uchiha, Uchiha, boy, Uchiha*, Sasuke finally caves.

Because the ghosts are bound to their remains, Sasuke must take the remains with him if he intends to go too far past the village forest. Which is how Sasuke ends up breaking into the Hokage Memorial located in the very depths of the Hokage Gardens. It's an impressive gravesite, makes Sasuke hesitate once he finally manages to sneak past the ANBU guards.

"I'm not going to dishonor your graves."

"We give you our permission," the Shodaime says serenely, gesturing at the path leading up to the monument. It's a large circular area, surrounded by a wide stream of water that has golden lettering etched onto the floor of the pool: A protective jutsu, meant to prevent anyone from entering the premises. Orochimaru had broken in once a long time ago, and he had raised the Hokages against Sarutobi during his battle. Now, security has been increased.

Sarutobi is the one who breaks the code of the jutsu. (He says: "Ah, this would have been nice to have had *before* Orochimaru got your DNA, Shodaime-sama and Tobirama-sensei," ) and guides Sasuke through the steps to disarm it. Sasuke walks past the large fire at the center of the monument—meant to symbolize the strength and soul of Konohagakure, Iruka had explained to them on one of
their field trips—past statues of guardian animal spirits, and right past the line barring visitors from
going any further.

"Oh, fucking hell," Sasuke mutters to himself and begins to dig with the shovel he brought along with him. It takes him three full hours to dig out the large slabs of stone that are covering the graves of each of the Hokages, and another hour to move each one. ("What are you, a civilian? Put your back into it, boy, push.")

The Shodaime is buried in full armor and splendor, with all his weapons neatly laid out around him. There is also a considerable amount of gold. Sasuke jumps into the grave and grabs the smallest bone he can find (a toe knuckle, and no matter what the Nidaime says, he is not taking a lock of the Shodaime's hair, for fuck's sake).

"Perhaps," the Shodaime says thoughtfully, looking down into the hole where Sasuke is standing. "You should steal the gold as well. And my weapons."

Sasuke stares up at the ghosts. "What?"

The Nidaime hm-s under his breath, thoughtful for a few moments before saying, "Brother's right. You should take the gold."

Sarutobi points out, helpful as always, "And the weapons. Loot it clean, Sasuke. You must make it look convincing."

"No," Sasuke says, resolute. He's been pushed around by the ghosts enough. He's not going to let them bully him into stealing. And besides, Sasuke may have been a traitor and an outlaw, but he has never, and will never, steal.

"Take the gold, Uchiha," the Yondaime snarls. "Or I will walk into you, so help me God."

Sasuke grits his teeth. "You can try."

The Yondaime walks into him, and stays there until Sasuke's teeth start to chatter and his pulse begins to slow from the chill.

He takes the gold and the weapons. Overall, even Sasuke has to admit, it's a very convincing robbery indeed.

He makes headlines the next day. HOKAGE GRAVES VANDALIZED, PRICELESS ARTIFACTS MISSING, according to the Konoha Telegraph. LARGE MANHUNT UNDERWAY FOR THIEF, in another paper that Sasuke picked up while on his morning run, which also conveniently doubled as a cover to bury the artifacts. The radio is blaring the news, every single channel on TV is zooming in on teary-eyed school children and stone-faced warriors. There's even a picture of Tsunade, kneeling down by her grandfather and great uncle's graves, an unreadable expression on her face. Everywhere Sasuke turns, he hears people talking about that Son of a bitch, let him rot in Hell, him and his ancestors—

"Don't feel bad about it," the Nidaime consoles as Sasuke packs his weapons for the mission. "You can return the artifacts once this is over."

Right now, the loot is buried under a large stone in the Eastern Forest, along one of Sasuke's running routes. The four knuckle bones—I am a sick, sick man, Sasuke thinks—are in Sasuke's kunai pouch, and will travel with him wherever he goes. With the bones mobile, the ghosts will be able to follow, no matter how far Sasuke goes.
Sasuke heads towards the Western Gate, ignoring the ghosts' running commentary on the safety of the loot. The others are waiting for him when he gets there, though none of them will join him on this mission. When Sasuke had insisted the others stay behind, Shikamaru had surprisingly agreed. "This is only surveillance," Shikamaru explained to the others. "It's best for Uchiha to follow up on his lead alone. Anymore manpower, and it will attract too much attention." And for once, Neji conceded to the point as well, and with him, the others followed.

But this time the men aren't bantering like usual. Even Kiba is silent, Akamaru standing close to his side in the early morning chill. Sasuke is quiet when he walks up to them, and although they all stand up straighter at his arrival, there are no greetings.

"Stick to the route, Uchiha," Shino insists, voice pitched low as Sasuke balances on the edge of the high wall. The entire trip is unauthorized, but thanks to some bureaucratic magic courtesy of Neji, Sasuke has a reasonable amount of funds to go through with his plans and a proper excuse for his absence ("Sick leave," Neji said flatly and procured an inordinate amount of paperwork that amounted to nothing less than medical fraud).

"My weapons," Jiro offers and presses a rolled up cloth into Sasuke's hands. Sasuke unrolls it and finds an array of knives. They're perfectly balanced and probably some of the finest knives in the Continent, Sasuke knows, because Jiro showed them to the others one day. The Iwate family is a family of blacksmiths, and their swords are all priceless. Sasuke's sword, the one Kakashi handed down to him, is an Iwate sword as well.

"Five energy pills," Chouji mumbles and takes Sasuke's hand to press a bag into it. "One every four hours, no more, or you'll hit liver failure. After twenty hours, you'll need medical intervention."

"We'll stand guard, Sarge," Kiba goes on, putting a warm hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "If you're not back in three weeks, we'll be right on your heels."

"You need to reassure your men," the Nidaime prompts from his left suddenly. Sasuke gives the ghost a sidelong glance. Why? he wants to ask, but the ghost answers without Sasuke voicing the question. "The last time you refused back-up and went solo, you were in a coma for a week from chakra poisoning."

Once, when Kakashi had to leave them behind on one of their missions, Sakura and Naruto had clung to his side. Naruto checked and double-checked Kakashi's weapons, testing each one of them to make sure they were good. Sakura restocked Kakashi's supply of emergency medicine and water supplies every two hours until the jounin finally told them to stop it, to sit down and rest for the night.

Sakura and Naruto had pulled their bedrolls close to Kakashi for the evening, curled on either side of the jounin like parentheses. The jounin had to go, Sasuke understood that, even at eleven, because their C-rank mission had stumbled them right into the middle of a war between two outlaw groups, and Kakashi had to scout out a safe passage for them. We can come with you, Kakashi-sensei, Naruto whispered in the middle of the night, sounding worried and small. And Sakura joined him in their low-pitched pleading for the jounin to let them come along, Please, please, please, Kakashi-sensei, don't go.

Three months after the incident with Zabuza, and the team still hadn't recovered. Kakashi left early the next morning anyway, but only after yielding to Sakura and Naruto's drawn out hugs and final threats and promises to Kill you if you get hurt, even a bit, Kakashi-sensei, I swear.

And Kakashi had said then, nonchalant as always, I'll see you kids in a while. It was just enough for Naruto and Sakura to loosen their holds on the jounin's vest and Kakashi disappeared.
Sakura and Naruto huddled close to each other, miserable, and waited for the jounin to return for two straight days. They were irritable, distracted, useless for even simple tasks like hunting for food and firewood. It wasn't until Kakashi returned, eye crinkled into a smile that the clouds lifted over Team 7. Sasuke hadn't been as obvious as the others (ninja don't cling to their teachers, they face whatever is thrown at them), but he can still remember the loud thump of his heartbeat when Kakashi disappeared into the mist outside their camp.

Now, Sasuke pulls up his face-cloth (no ANBU mask for this mission, nothing to identify him as a soldier of Konoha) and considers what he can say to these men (his men now, because he has his own team). They're grown men, and still the worry is thick in the early morning air. Even Shikamaru is silent, breathing in his cigarette with unusual dedication.

In the end, Sasuke settles for something simple. If it worked for Kakashi—"I'll see you ladies in a while."

He pushes off the high wall and into the forest below to the sound of Akamaru's farewell bark.

It's five hundred miles to the border of the Land of Fire, and one hundred and thirty-two more into the heart of the Land of Rice Fields. He travels light, fast, and silent except for the occasional request for the ghosts to step back a bit, it's too cold.

Yuuta joins him twenty miles into the journey, appearing with a soft pop when Sasuke summons him with a thought. "Westward," he hisses and slithers up to coil around Sasuke's bicep. The second day, it starts to rain, an unrelenting, miserable downpour that follows Sasuke for miles and miles.

"They were here," Yuuta insists, surveying the forest around them when they reach their destination. "They were here, damnit."

But there is nothing here, not a trace of any human activity in the last month or two from the looks of it. Not a single leftover chakra signature, no site off-camp where the men may have taken care of business, not a single damn thing. Which means that there is no third Uchiha, that it is only Itachi, and that they are headed back towards Amegakure. This is nothing, not any useful information that he can use.

"Boy," Yuuta snarls, his throat thickening with venom and anger. He must sense Sasuke's frustration, because Sasuke has to clench his fists and jaw to control it. "I am telling you—"

"Enough, Yuuta," Sasuke says, looking around the clearing. But Yuuta is a proud snake, quick to anger and even quicker to defend his name.

"They were here. The Kin-Butcher and another of your clan. They were here, and one of them sensed me—"

"Enough," Sasuke interrupts. He is cold, wet, and tired. Hundreds of miles from home, his patience is starting to wear thin. He'll have traveled over a thousand miles when he returns to Konoha, and for nothing. "You were mistaken, Yuuta. That's all there is. We return to—"

"Ninety-six years of my life," Yuuta snarls, interrupting. "And not once, not once have I been mistaken about—"

"What's going on?" the Nidaime asks from Sasuke's side. "What are you two talking about?"

Sasuke pulls down his face-cloth and rubs angrily at the stubble there. The stupid cloth has gotten wet in the rain and it's been difficult to breath through. Three and a half days here, and three and a
half days back. Not a single lead to show for it except for a wet face-cloth and a beard.

"—listen to me when I speak to you!" Yuuta snarls, and his voice is loud and unnatural in the silence of the mid-afternoon stillness.

Sasuke lets his Sharingan swirl to life. "Enough," he says, and this time it is in human tongue.

Yuuta blinks up at him, and Sasuke can sense his anger against his own mind, thick and cloying. Finally, Yuuta asks, "Orders?"

"Dismissed," Sasuke snaps, and the snake vanishes without another word.

He regrets it the minute the silence settles. And isn't this fucking perfect, Sasuke thinks angrily. It's raining and cold, he's tired, hungry, and here he is, in the middle of the Land of fucking Rice Fields, feeling guilty.

"You tried," the Yondaime says after a few moments of Sasuke just standing there, staring at the spot where Yuuta had previously been. "Some leads are going to be dead ends. That's just how it is."

Sasuke glances at the man, unwilling to say anything because he knows exactly why the Yondaime is giving him this pep talk. In the end, this is about Naruto, not about Sasuke's anger or Yuuta's hurt pride. A useless lead for the Yondaime is just that devastating—a dead end. They know nothing new from this expedition: Akatsuki is still operating out of Amegakure, they're recruiting warm bodies in the Land of Rice Fields, and they're heading towards Konoha.

Sarutobi takes a deep breath. "We head back to Konoha, regroup and—"

And what would he say to Kakashi when he got back? He took on this task, singlehandedly wrestled it out of the Hokage's grip, and he comes back like a sullen teenager without anything to show for a week-long mission? There is a difference between a barking dog and a biting dog, Itachi said to him once. And Sasuke knows that difference better than anyone else. He will not—he cannot—return to Konoha empty-handed.

"No," Sasuke interrupts. "We're not done here."

He heads northwest without giving the ghosts a chance to answer, going deeper into the Land of Rice Fields. The ghosts follow immediately, asking him questions, talking over each other to convince Sasuke not to do anything rash, to turn around and go back to Konoha. "What are you doing?" the Nidaime demands.

Sasuke gives the man a sidelong glance. "Yuuta doesn't make mistakes," he explains.

"Everyone makes—"

"Not Yuuta," Sasuke insists, because this is a faith that cannot be shaken. He's not trailing run-of-the-mill ninjas. He's tracking Akatsuki, and if they want to disappear without leaving a single damn trace, they can do it. The absence of a trail here doesn't necessarily mean anything. And Yuuta has never, ever, ever made a mistake. If Sasuke starts to doubt his snakes, then how the hell is he supposed to fight this fight against Pein?

The Yondaime appears in front of Sasuke suddenly, floating backwards to keep pace with Sasuke's momentum. "So what now? You're going to what? Track down an Uchiha without any supplies, any backup, or any plan? I asked you to help my son, not be reckless—"

"No," Sasuke corrects again. "I'm not being reckless."
Because Kakashi taught him better than that. After all his years as Kakashi's student, waiting hours on end just for the jounin to show up, Sasuke has learned the value of patience. It is the second lesson that Kakashi taught him. *Rule one, always protect your teammates.*

*Rule two, be patient.*

"Then what is your plan?" the Yondaime demands loudly. "What is your grand strategy here?" Sasuke tugs down his face-cloth, balances on a branch and takes a deep breath. He can smell the fields in the distance, the slightly stale, musky scent of rice and wheat carrying over the wind.

"So?" the Shodaime prompts. "Now what?"

Sasuke glances at the man. "Now I get a drink."

Urausu has a population of five hundred and forty-nine people according to the local priest. She knows, she says, because she's christened nearly half of those five hundred and forty-nine, and the other half, her father christened. Sasuke knows this because the local priest is also the local bartender, and Sasuke is an acquaintance of Urausu's one and only bartender.

When Sasuke steps into the tavern, there is no one at the counter. It's nothing more than a dingy room with wooden benches and seats, a chalkboard at the front of the room highlighting the drinks and their prices. There's only four taps at the front, but Sasuke knows that each of those brews are local, and a glass, no matter how cheap, is one of the best in the Continent. There is no one in the bar, and that's to be expected. Past midday, and all the men of the town will be hard at work in the fields. "You still have time to retreat," the Nidaime says in a rush. "Turn around and no one will recognize you. Uchiha—"

"Mrs. Oonishi," Sasuke calls out, pulling down his face-cloth. The Nidaime's mouth falls open mid-sentence at the interruption. When there is no response, Sasuke tries again, even louder. She was fifty-eight when he last saw her, aged early by years of hard work, and already hard of hearing. Now, she must be over sixty. "Mrs. Oonishi!"

There's a moment, and then he can hear some clattering from the back of the shop. "Who is it?"

"It's me," Sasuke calls out, pulling off his gloves and stepping further into the shop. "Uchiha S—"

"Sasuke?" Mrs. Oonishi breathes out, and she's standing at the other end of the room, squinting at Sasuke to get a better look. Her hair is almost entirely grey now, pulled back into the same ponytail that Sasuke remembers. Her skin is a dark, rich brown, like almost everyone else in the Land of Rice Fields. "Gods be good, boy, they said you were dead," Mrs. Oonishi breathes. *I was dead*, Sasuke wants to say. But that is a story for another day. Right now—

"A drink, Mrs. Oonishi."

Mrs. Oonishi's mouth opens, and for a moment she doesn't say anything. Then, her brown eyes crinkle into a smile. "Will a pale ale do? I don't have your usual on tap anymore, the brewers have been out of business out in Niseko, and you know how it is…"

"A pale ale is fine." Sasuke sits at one of the high stools and accepts the drink that Mrs. Oonishi places in front of him with a sigh. It's been many, many months since he's had some good ale, and after seven hundred miles, it's possibly the only thing Sasuke could ask for. A drink.

No matter how much he hated his time with Orochimaru, he always liked the freedom of living in the Land of Rice Fields. No one recognized him in the Land of Rice Fields, didn't look at him and know
immediately *Uchiha* or *traitor*.

Mrs. Oonishi leans on the counter to look Sasuke in the eyes. She's a short woman, nearly two feet smaller than Sasuke, so she has to reach up to smack Sasuke on the cheek lightly. Sasuke doesn't shy away from the touch, because this is Mrs. Oonishi, the same woman who tutted over him when he first stumbled into this bar, terrified and unsure of the decision he'd made. *Here, child,* she'd said, and gave Sasuke his first drink.

"Not a single letter all this time?"

Sasuke stays silent. He should have written, could have written, but instead, he'd dragged Orochimaru's rotting body all the way back to Konoha and spent a few months in jail for being a traitor. Any correspondence with the Land of Rice Fields would have been a liability. And besides, he wants to say, he wasn't aware that he was *supposed* to write.

Mrs. Oonishi heaves a sigh, her large chest moving up and down with the effort. "Well, what are you here for, then? Spit it out, I have a business to run here." She gestures expansively at the empty room behind Sasuke.

Sasuke can't help the curl of his lips. Mrs. Oonishi, despite her looks, is a businesswoman first. "I'm looking for Karin."

"The least you can do is speak in a language we can all understand," the Yondaime snaps.

Mrs. Oonishi chuckles. "Oh?"

Sasuke ignores the Yondaime's request to speak in the southern language. "You know where she is." It isn't a question, because Mrs. Oonishi knows where everyone is at any given time in the Land of Rice Fields. She is the hub of the country in some ways, in a country without a Kage, without a ruler, without any government to organize the hundred free tribes that roam its vast lands.

Mrs. Oonishi hums under her breath, ignoring Sasuke. This may or may not be a successful transaction of information. Just when Sasuke is about to press for more information, Mrs. Oonishi says casually, "Well, then. While you're here." She jerks a thumb over her shoulder. "I have some chores I could use some help with."

It's a deal, then. Sasuke finishes the drink and sets the mug down. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Oonishi?"

---

Sasuke met Karin on his third day in the Village of Sound. After dragging himself halfway across the Continent, burning up with a fever and the cursed seal, fingernails still tinged red with Naruto's blood, Sasuke collapsed at Orochimaru's doorstep.

He awoke two days later with red hair in his face and a loud voice that immediately fell silent when Sasuke rasped out, *Sakura?*

*No, my name is Karin,* the girl had said and blinked furiously at Sasuke. She had red hair, nearly red eyes, and two spots of red high on her cheek. Her neck was flushed pink too. Sasuke had been hounded by nearly every Academy girl in Konoha, from the youngest of the young to older genin. He knew a crush when he saw one.

For the first few weeks, Sasuke took great pains to avoid Karin while he was in Otokogakure, but it was hard to avoid her. She was one of the few people his age, the only one that wasn't a wanted criminal or a psychopath, and the only one without a cursed seal. She was one of Orochimaru's many
assistants during his experiments, useful only now and then, but otherwise inconsequential.

Within the month, though, Sasuke understood. She was quiet, but she paid attention. She had a bloodline she underplayed to make sure Orochimaru didn't notice her too much. She gathered gossip and rumors like she did currency, and everyone within miles of the village knew her in one way or another. She was never in anyone's debt, but everyone owed her a favor.

Eventually, Sasuke became the one who tagged along with Karin. Her freedom became Sasuke's freedom—she showed him the hidden passages around Otogakure, how to get out of there, how to navigate the fields surrounding the village, and the small towns nearby. She was the one who introduced Sasuke to Mrs. Oonishi, the one who covered for him when he came back to the village drunk, unable to walk in a straight line.

Sasuke can remember instances of being attracted to her, because he hit puberty with all the subtlety of a raging army, and in the roar of hormones, he couldn't help but notice the flush of Karin's thighs during muggy summer days, and the small undulations of her breasts under the white tank tops she always wore. But Sasuke's attractions never got far. The only time he spent in Karin's room was when they were sharing a joint, breathing hazy smoke into the air and floating higher, higher, higher.

Karin isn't like any other woman Sasuke has ever met. She grew out of her crush on Sasuke within weeks, went from being awestruck to overprotective within the span of four months. And when—three years later—Sasuke said, *I want to kill him*, she hadn't flinched a muscle. They were up against Orochimaru and an entire army, but she hadn't even blinked at the challenge that lay ahead.

Instead, she just said, *All right. Give me a month.* Karin gathered intel, gave Sasuke the explosives he would need, and set the trap in the end. Karin drew Orochimaru away from the village, and then, she sealed the only exit out of Otogakure. She hadn't opened the doors again until Sasuke was done inside, having descended on Orochimaru's army with his Sharingan and cursed seal burning. And then, she'd taken Sasuke to Orochimaru, told Sasuke, *Go ahead, Konoha.*

Orochimaru had never paid nearly enough attention to Karin, but Sasuke has always been good at learning from other people's mistakes. They call her the Black Widow now, and for a reason. So he waits, patiently, for Karin to show up in Urausu.

Karin appears in a flurry of red and white three days later. Sasuke is on the roof, repairing a leak with new shingles when he hears Karin call down from below, "Sasuke! I'm here!"

"Yeah, I heard," Sasuke calls back, but he doesn't come down immediately. The plan to find Karin had been mostly impulsive. Now, though, he has to actually deliver on the plan and get results. His search, even with Yuuta's help, will be futile. Yuuta is only useful when he has a target and a location given to him. He's a spy, not a tracker. Searching such large landmasses is beyond Yuuta's level.

Karin is the only obvious choice, but Sasuke isn't sure what cards he has to play at this table. The last he saw of Karin was when he flattened the Village of Sound and told everyone to run, *Run, or I swear by almighty fucking God, I will kill all of you.* She had been on his side against the army. When the battle was won and Karin had guided Sasuke to Orochimaru, she'd left without a goodbye, assuming that Sasuke would die in his battle against Orochimaru.

He finishes the job first, checking the shingles to make sure they're snug and won't come loose in a heavy storm. When he drops back to the ground, Karin is waiting for him. She isn't shy about giving Sasuke a long, hard look, lip twitching at what she sees.
The last time he saw her, Karin was only slightly beautiful. Now, she's stunning.

She's all curves, wonderful red hair pulled back into a braid, dressed as if she just walked out of a television set, and damn, she smells good. And her eyes: A maroon-brown, nearly red in this light and brilliant behind her sleek rectangular glasses.

"Sasuke," she says, stepping close to Sasuke. She's almost as tall as Sasuke with her ridiculous heels (and how she can fight in those things, Sasuke will never understand), so she has no problem tilting her head just so and giving a peck on Sasuke's cheek. "How are you?"

There is no hint of derision in that question. And just like that, Sasuke understands. It's as simple as that, sometimes. Just ask, Karin had told him once, a long time ago. Sasuke had been sick of the darkness, sick of the stale air, sick of Orochimaru's depravity and oppression. He wanted sunshine, clean air, and freedom. Karin had been the only one who knew the secret routes out of their underground prison. Just ask me, Sasuke.

So Sasuke asked, I want to kill him. And she'd shown him how.

Sasuke answers, "I'm fine. You?"

"Wonderful, thanks for asking," Karin says, stepping back fluidly, her billowy shirt rustling slightly with the movement. Her shirt is cut low and is loose enough that Sasuke can see just the barest hint of Karin's bra, a little black thing that draws Sasuke's eyes immediately. "Mrs. Oonishi says you've been looking for me."

Sasuke eyes the bar where Mrs. Oonishi is busy taking inventory of her stock. His Sharingan swirls to life briefly and he sees the ghosts a few feet away, waiting expectantly. Sasuke hasn't had the time to explain his purpose here yet—there hasn't been any time with Mrs. Oonishi giving him errands to keep him occupied nearly all hours of the day. They must be wondering, though.

Sasuke knows Karin, though, and she won't yield any information without a bit of wooing. So, "Drink?"

Karin doesn't miss a beat. She swings her rucksack over her shoulder and walks towards the bar without waiting for Sasuke. "You can pay, Konoha," she throws over her shoulder.

Sasuke follows her, pausing only when Karin leans over the counter to reach for a mug. "Easy on the eyes, this one," the Nidaime says thoughtfully from his right. "I'm guessing that this isn't a social visit, Uchiha, but if is..." He trails off.

Sasuke smirks, Sharingan flickering into life just in time to catch the Nidaime's expression. The ghost looks amused. "If it is a social visit," he continues, "Well done, boy."

"It's not a social visit," Sasuke mutters under his breath, and tries very, very hard not to stare at Karin as she settles onto a bar stool and crosses her long, lovely legs, leaning against the counter to talk to Mrs. Oonishi with a smile.

Predictably, the Yondaime doesn't believe him. He looks furious at Sasuke's contemplation of Karin. The Nidaime pats the Yondaime on the shoulder, offering some semblance of reassurance. "Give the kid a break, Minato. A man can't not look. Not when a beautiful woman walks by."

Sasuke follows his gaze back to Karin. "No," he agrees with a curl of his lips. She is, perhaps, the most stunning woman on this side of the Continent. "No, he can't."
He breaches the topic much later in the night, with Karin curled up next to him in bed. It hadn't been hard, really, to get there. A drink, two, and then they were heading upstairs into one of the rooms that Mrs. Oonishi rents out to travelers.

Sasuke takes a puff of the joint and holds it in his lungs before letting it out. He's already pleasantly buzzed, because as always, Karin has the best. The ghosts had left the minute they realized Sasuke's plans for the evening, when Karin had produced a bag of weed and announced, "Let's get baked, Uchiha, for old time's sake." (Drugs, Sasuke? Sarutobi had asked, sounding broken. Have I failed you that much?) When they were in Otogakure, Karin offered him alternatives whenever Orochimaru refused to heal him. She didn't have access to painkillers or anesthetics, so she gave Sasuke the next best thing: Weed.

So now, he is alone with Karin, falling into some old habits. "I need you to track someone," Sasuke says without preamble, and Karin hm-s into his shoulder. She gets touchy-feely when she's high, eyes distant and tracking wayward ninja that flit by her conscience. "High-level chakra, a little like mine."

Karin freezes, and then she sits up in a huff. Immediately, she is alert, chakra spiking in her anger. "Your brother?"

Sasuke hands her the joint. She eyes it warily before taking it. "Not him."

Karin breathes in deep. She doesn't offer it back, though. "I'm not going to track Akatsuki, Sasuke."

"I only need a location," Sasuke insists. Karin is still silent, so Sasuke relents. "I'm willing to pay."

Karin's frown doesn't vanish, but she pauses in thought. "Twenty-five thousand ryo," she says neatly. When Sasuke raises an eyebrow at the price—high, even by outlaw standards—Karin rolls her eyes. "You think I'm cheap, Uchiha? You want a tracker like me, you better be willing to pay."

For the trip, Neji gave Sasuke a little over the twenty-five thousand ryo Karin is asking for. And he needs a bit of currency to be able to get back to Konoha in one piece. "Twenty," he says, and when Karin opens her mouth to bargain, he puts a hand up. "That's all I have."

She gives Sasuke a long look before saying with finality, "You owe me." She lies down on the bed again, the transaction now over. They contemplate the ceiling together, blinking against the low haze of smoke hanging in the air.

"I'm starving."

She wakes up early the next morning and disappears in a clatter of heels down the stairs. Sasuke listens to her go before getting up to shave and shower. By the time he comes down, Karin is already packed and ready to go, saying her farewells to Mrs. Oonishi.

Sasuke waits for Mrs. Oonishi to finish hugging Karin and offers to escort her out. He rounds on her the minute they're out of Mrs. Oonishi's earshot. "Our deal."

"I remember," Karin says, brushing off Sasuke with a shrug. "Your target—" She points west and south. "Seventy or so miles that way. I sensed them a few weeks ago, and I've kept tabs on their movements since. High-level ninja. Akatsuki, from the looks of it."

"How many?" Sasuke prompts.
Karin tilts her head in that direction, hm-ing under her breath lightly. "Two," she says finally. "They're traveling…fast. Heading away from us, towards—Well, only one city that way, really."

"Amegakure," Sasuke finishes, running a hand through his hair. "What kind of chakra? You have anything else on them?"

Karin purses her lips into a thin line and leans in towards Sasuke a bit more. "I thought it was you," she admits finally, and this is the first time Sasuke has seen this expression on Karin's face. She is almost never uncertain about her tracking abilities, but now, she's biting her lip, looking thoughtful and sounding unsure. "I was headed in their direction because I thought it was you."

"It was my brother."

"No, I know his chakra signature. I've tracked him for Orochimaru before. It's someone else." She turns west again. The sun is still low in the sky, but the early morning heat is already starting to set in. "I could have sworn the other one was you, and I was curious. I didn't understand why you'd be traveling with him. But then Mrs. Oonishi put the word out for me. So I doubled back to get here."

Sasuke takes a breath against this information. Almost exactly what Yuuta said. The chances of both of them making the same mistake are slim to none, so there must be some truth to this. "Anything else?"

Karin shakes her head, stepping back. "Just that whoever it is, it's an Uchiha. Powerful. And…" She makes a face, lost in thought. She turns towards the chakra source again, tilting her head up. She breathes in deeply once, twice—

"Old," Karin mutters finally. "Very old. Old as the trees."

Sasuke follows her gaze. "That's what Yuuta said."

"Yuuta was always a good scout," Karin agrees. She turns to Sasuke and holds out her hand. "Unmarked, nonconsecutive bills. Without your ridiculous Konoha trackers, please."

"Yeah, yeah," Sasuke mutters, and pulls out his wallet. It's standard procedure for ANBU to be issued randomized bills for their missions. Still… it would be difficult to explain this expense to Neji, who had taken these funds out of their equipment budget for the next two months. Apparently, if any one of his men is in severe need of kunais or shurikens in the coming weeks, Sasuke will not be able to provide them with any arms. Jiro will not be happy.

He counts out the bills and hands them to Karin, who double-checks before slipping them into her bag. She smiles at him. "Nice doing business with you."

"You knew the information already," Sasuke points out, looking over his shoulder when he hears Mrs. Oonishi bang open the front door to her bar. Mrs. Oonishi steps outside and begins to beat out a table-cloth. She waves her hand at Karin, and Karin returns the gesture, waving back enthusiastically. Mrs. Oonishi lingers on the porch for a moment before returning inside. "You overcharged."

"But the company was good, though," Karin says with a grin.

Mrs. Oonishi closes the door to her bar with a loud bang. "Head underground," Sasuke instructs. Itachi must have noticed Karin following them, and Itachi doesn't let slights like that go. "Lay low until Akatsuki clears out."

"Look at you, all concerned," Karin croons with a laugh. She steps forward to kiss Sasuke on the
lips. It's brief, chaste, but Karin is smiling into the kiss for the few moments it lasts. "Watch your back, Konoha. Akatsuki's got four of the tailed demons already. Rumors are they're recruiting for something big. They're on the move for that jinchuriki of yours."

Sasuke frowns at her. "He's not my—"

Karin interrupts Sasuke with a laugh. "You betrayed Orochimaru and laid waste to Ototakure for him," she says, walking away already. "You didn't think word would have spread by now about the modern-day Romeo and Juliet?"

She vanishes in a blur a moment later, not even giving Sasuke enough time to respond. Sasuke blinks at the spot where Karin had been.

"Well?" The Nidaime prompts. "Translation, please."

Sasuke turns in the direction where Karin had pointed. "Two, high-level nin, seventy miles or so in that direction, according to Karin. They're moving fast, likely towards Amegakure. Both of them are Uchiha. One of them is my brother, and the other is..." Sasuke takes a breath, unsure of the words to use. In the end, he opts for a direct translation. "Old. Old as the trees."

"How did she..." the Yondaime breathes, and for once, even he is at a loss. But Sasuke is used to this side of Karin, her uncanny sensitivity to chakra no matter how far away it is. It's her bloodline, Orochimaru explained to him once. Orochimaru recruited her for this purpose alone. The Yondaime recovers quickly from his surprise. "Did she have any other intel?"

Sasuke shakes his head, but then remembers her parting words. It may or may not be important; with Karin, it pays to be sure. "Who is Romeo?" There is a moment of startled silence, so Sasuke clarifies, "Karin said something about me burning down Ototakure for Naruto, and then she mentioned someone two people. Romeo and Juliet? I don't know anyone by those names. Do you?"

The Yondaime throws up his hands, lets out a rumble of a growl, and rounds on his heels. He walks as far as he can, tethered as he is by the bones that Sasuke carries and then starts yelling at no one in particular, stomping his foot at random intervals. Sarutobi turns his gaze heavenward, mutters a prayer under his breath, and walks away to join the Yondaime without another word. Sasuke watches Sarutobi console the Yondaime for a few moments. "Does the Yondaime know them? Romeo and Juliet?"

The Nidaime starts to laugh.

It takes him the better part of the evening to travel a little over sixty miles, and by the end, Sasuke is feeling the strain of it. He's used to traveling long distances, but not at such high speeds. It took him all his patience to wait until the sun had set before heading in the direction Karin pointed out. But once he starts to travel, he can't help but travel hard and fast despite the ghosts' warnings to pace himself, that it is no use arriving at his destination worn out.

He can't pace himself, though, because there is a third Uchiha. He's spent the majority of his life convinced that his life will be defined by its loneliness. But now. Now, there is a third Uchiha.

He's not sure who he could have missed. Itachi had killed everyone that night, and Sasuke had double—and triple—checked the bodies before they were cremated.

He takes a break only when he can't ignore the burn in his legs anymore and his breathing has started to come out in gasps. When he finally slows to a jog, and then to a complete stop, the ghosts fall silent. Sasuke spends a few minutes doubled over, breathing hard and trying to calm the thundering
of his heart. He can't sense Akatsuki at this distance, but they must be twenty or so miles ahead. He could push through, could stumble into their camp around midnight, but then what?

There's a cool touch on his shoulder. "You've been patient all these years. You can wait one more night," the Shodaime says, and it's not unkind. "Make camp."

Sasuke straightens and wipes the sweat from his brow. "I'll lose them."

"Not with your speed you won't," the Nidaime points out. "Make camp, boy."

Sasuke hesitates only a moment before he follows their advice. He doesn't bother making a fire, just picks the largest tree he can find to lean up against and brings out the bags of food that Mrs. Oonishi gave him before he left the tavern. The Land of Rice Fields doesn't have the forests that Konoha does. The trees in this country are shrubs compared to the great oaks and redwoods that surround Konoha. The smoke from a fire can be spotted a mile away by someone watching, and in the Land of Rice Fields, someone is always watching. Which means he'll have to tolerate the cold and sleep without the protection of the canopy.

Shisui was sent on a solo mission to the Land of Rice Fields once, and it lasted nearly three weeks. Shisui had returned with dirt under his fingernails and dark circles under his eyes. Sasuke remembers waiting for Shisui's return, recalls how the entire compound had held its breath while one of its sons traveled hundreds and hundreds of miles in solitude. Itachi had welcomed him home from that mission with a hug, Sasuke remembers, because the mission was supposed to be a week long, but it had taken Shisui the better part of a month to return home.

Maybe this was what Shisui faced those three weeks, night after night. This muggy, oppressive silence in the middle of nowhere, and the gut-wrenching feeling of having no cover, not even a decent tree or shrub to hide out in.

Sasuke is nearly done eating when the Yondaime asks, "Who do you think it is?"

Sasuke double-checks his traps in favor of answering. He's not sure he wants the ghosts to witness this. This is his family, not some soap opera for everyone to watch. More importantly, he's not sure how to answer. He settles against the tree, hand curled around the hilt of his sword laid out next to him.

The Nidaime prompts, "Do you have any idea who—"

"That is enough, Tobi," the Shodaime interrupts sternly. "Let him sleep."

The Nidaime clears his throat. "I wasn't thinking—"

"It doesn't matter who it is," Sasuke answers finally, interrupting the ghost in his awkward attempt at an apology. If Sasuke could wish any Sharingan user back to life, if he could wish for this third Uchiha to be anyone, it would be Shisui. But Shisui was found dead, bloated and rotting at the bottom of the Naka River. And Sasuke is many, many years past the age of wishful thinking.

Right here, right now, it doesn't matter who it is: Shisui, Fugaku, Obito, or another one of his uncles. It doesn't matter. If they're traveling with Itachi, then they must be affiliated with Akatsuki. And that means—

Sasuke settles more comfortably against the tree. "Fucking Uchihas," he sighs into the silence of the night, and closes his eyes.
He wakes up with a startle when he feels a familiar chakra against his consciousness like a jolt of electricity. Uchiha, he knows it, because it's his own blood. *Brother.*

It's nearly morning, and in this light, Sasuke can see the ghosts' pearly blue silhouettes gathered around him. "What is it?" the Nidaime demands, getting to his feet.

Sasuke signals *enemy* and points in the direction from where he sensed the chakra. It's Itachi, he's sure, because he knows it better than any other chakra signature on the face of this Continent. The chakra flare was brief, most likely out of anger or pain—and Itachi’s self-control must have broken for only a moment—but it is enough for Sasuke.

"How far?" the Shodaime asks. "We will scout ahead."

Eighty or so yards, Sasuke estimates. He thinks, *Daichi,* and the snake appears by his side with a soft pop. He raises his head to scan the surroundings, tongue flickering out to smell the air.

*Kin-Butcher,* Daichi communicates. Sasuke points and Daichi trains his eyes in the direction Sasuke is indicating. *Close by. Will you retreat?*

Sasuke has no backup, no game plan, and not nearly enough weapons to defend himself against Itachi. He's still tired from traveling so hard the night before, and God damn it, he hasn't even taken a leak in over six hours. But retreating against Itachi—

Sasuke presses himself close to the ground. He begins to move towards the target. *Cover my back.*

*No. I'll scout ahead. Stay here,* Daichi says and slithers past Sasuke before Sasuke can react. He's a blur of brown and orange as he moves on the ground, almost invisible except for the aftermath of a slither in his wake. *And isn't this fucking brilliant,* Sasuke thinks. Just when he needs Daichi to follow orders most, the coral snake goes ahead and does what he always does—makes his own decisions. He summoned Daichi because out of all the snakes, Daichi has the quickest bite. His venom is not as poisonous as Kanaye's or Fudo's, but Daichi is a good line of defense.

But Daichi is also notoriously inept at following orders, and Sasuke should have seen this coming a mile away. Of course the snake would volunteer to scout ahead.

*Daichi,* Sasuke communicates forcefully, but the snake is already vanishing beyond his sight. Sasuke follows, abandoning his low stance in favor of jogging silently after the snake. Daichi is Sasuke's to protect, and if either Itachi or the other Uchiha finds him, the snake doesn't stand much of a chance against them, and Sasuke cannot—he will not—lose another one of his own. *Daichi, get back here.*

*Daichi—*

"What are you doing?" the Nidaime demands loudly. "What the hell do you think you're—"

*Daichi,* Sasuke communicates, pausing behind a small birch. There is silence, so Sasuke tries again, *Retreat. They outnumber you—*

*There are two,* Daichi says finally from somewhere ahead of him.

*Retreat,* Sasuke orders forcefully. *Retreat or I swear, Daichi, I will pull out your fucking fangs—*

*There's two,* Daichi repeats, and his marvel is plain as daylight. *There's two of your blood. Two of your brothers are here.*

Sasuke crouches on the ground, fingers digging into the earth to stay balanced. He doesn't have nearly enough cover to advance on two Akatsuki members (*two Uchihas*), but he can't walk away,
not when he's so close to Itachi and another of his clan. He can't turn around, not now.

The Nidaime appears by Sasuke's side, close enough that Sasuke shivers. "Listen to me. It isn't one, but two Akatsuki members in that direction. You're outnumbered, tired, and not fit to fight the both of them at once. Turn around, boy."

Kakashi has taught Sasuke time and again that there is no cowardice, no shame in a strategic retreat. But there is, Sasuke knows. If he walks away from this, then how the hell is he supposed to live with himself? He can't wake up a single day without remembering Itachi's taunts and his duty to his clan, can't think about Naruto without remembering the wet crunch of the blond's flesh against his hand… Just how many more of these disappointments does he have to shoulder?

*Will you follow?* Daichi asks after a moment, even as the Yondaime pleads, "For Naruto, Uchiha."

Sasuke can measure his life in long intervals, each separated by a chance meeting with his brother. Under Orochimaru's care, he greeted every day with the same thought: He's still alive, still alive, that son of a bitch is still alive.

He'd returned to Konoha with Kakashi's words ringing in his ears, and when he got back, it was to Naruto's blue, blue eyes. It has been easy since returning to Konoha for Sasuke to push Itachi further back in his thoughts, because Sasuke has started to measure each day by the number of times Naruto smiles at him. And just like that, his world has gone from a chorus of *Itachi, Itachi, Itachi* to *Naruto, Naruto, Naruto*, always, forever Naruto. He doesn't have the luxury to live his life that way, though. He cannot be distracted, not by Naruto, not by anyone.

*Will you follow?* Daichi prods again. *Should I retreat?*

His brother is here, he's sensed it, and Daichi has just confirmed it. And now, this close—*No*, Sasuke communicates back and reaches into his holster for a kunai. He breathes through his nose, slow and easy. *Where are you?*

*Forward*, Daichi directs, and Sasuke follows the tug and pull of Daichi's presence in his mind carefully, ignoring the ghosts' pleas to retreat. Ten feet, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-five, thirty…and each inch he crawls closer, the ghosts fall more and more silent. *Where?* Sasuke asks, even though he doesn't have to. He can sense his snakes wherever they are, but there are a thousand and one thoughts going through his mind and he can't stop his palms from sweating. *Where are you, Daichi?*

*Forward*, Daichi repeats, and doesn't say a word about Sasuke's nervousness. He must feel it, though, because it's strong enough to nearly blur Sasuke's vision. The trees are thicker here, but still not enough to provide Sasuke with enough cover. He can't afford a jutsu, not without alerting Itachi of his presence. All he has to rely on are the shadows of the early dawn and his years of practice trying to sneak up on Itachi, Shisui, and Kakashi undetected.

Sasuke follows, gripping his kunai hard enough that his knuckles turn white. *And then what?* Once he gets to Itachi, what exactly is his plan? To fight? He's high on adrenaline, can barely think past the fact that Itachi is here, here, here, a few yards away, and with him, another Uchiha.

"Uchiha," the Yondaime tries again. "I'm asking you, for the sake of my son, for the sake of Konoha __"

*Forward*, Daichi says, and he's only three feet away now. Sasuke gets on all fours and presses close to the ground. Just for a moment, Sasuke leans his forehead against the ground, breathes in deep and easy. He can feel the dirt caking onto the sweat on his forehead, on his upper lip, his palms. His thighs are burning with the effort of staying so still. He counts:
Daichi meets him halfway, slithers up Sasuke's arm to coil around his bicep. A tree two feet to the left should provide cover, he offers, and Sasuke follows, barely breathing now.

He sees them in profile. Itachi sitting on a fallen log, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. There is another man wearing a mask with a spiral design, gesturing at Itachi. Now and then, Itachi will angle his head forward or make a gesture with his hand as if to say go on.

Kin-Butcher, Sasuke thinks, and stills at the thought. Since when had Itachi become Kin-Butcher to him? Daichi and the others had given Itachi that name, because one day, when Rin asked about his father and his mother, Sasuke had explained to her what happened. Kin-Butcher, Rin had spit, eyes narrowed into slits, and she understood what that meant. Because Rin, for all her bravado, had lost two of her sons to her cannibalistic, crazed uncle. She lost a daughter too—a precious, precious daughter, and they are so rare in the snake clan.

He used to be Brother once, Sasuke remembers, and it had been a wonderful privilege to be able to call Itachi that. He was the pride of Konoha, the heir to the Uchiha Clan. He was Sasuke's brother, who taught him how to throw a kunai.

Sasuke's memories of Itachi are vague at best. It's been over eight years, and at this point, Sasuke can't distinguish between his memories and his fantasies. He has pictures of himself on Itachi's shoulders, of Itachi and himself in the Naka River splashing around, of Itachi and himself curled up on the living room futon under the same blanket. Sasuke remembers waiting for Itachi to come home from work, because at six, all he could understand was that his big brother was suddenly no longer available to play with him. He's not sure about any of these memories anymore, because he's not sure who his brother is. His own blood, and Itachi couldn't be more of a stranger.

"Retreat," Sarutobi urges quietly. "They haven't noticed you yet, Sasuke. You should—"

"Wait," the Shodaime breathes suddenly, and he steps forward into the clearing. He approaches the two, stepping close to the masked man, head tilted at a fraction. "Brother," the Nidaime calls out loudly. "What are you doing?"

"Wait a minute," the Shodaime says, and he steps even closer to the man in the mask, who stops talking suddenly. The man takes a step back, visibly shivering, and then starts talking again. It's a slow, rambling talk, the kind that would usually bore Itachi. This is the third Uchiha, Sasuke realizes, and for the first time since laying eyes on him, turns away from Itachi and shifts his gaze towards the other man. He doesn't recognize him, can't even sense his chakra. It's almost like he doesn't exist, but there he is, talking, talking, talking.

Itachi might be patient, but he rarely sits through people lecturing him. The only person he ever paid any real consideration to was Mikoto. He used to sit at Mikoto's kitchen table and listen to her concerns, fears and worries, let her kiss his cheek, his forehead and flick his nose with a laugh. Mikoto was an affectionate woman, disregarded her husband's every reprimand not to pamper her sons, and took great joy in bundling her children close for hugs and kisses for any given occasion. Itachi was reserved when he was young, but he still responded to Mikoto. He listened to her, sat with her when she wanted company, and let her pull him close before each, and every single one of his missions, even patrols.
Sasuke remembers waking up one day and finding his mother by Itachi's bed, smoothing away the hair from Itachi's face and saying, *You want lamb or chicken soup?*

And Itachi had croaked out, shifting closer to Mikoto's warmth, *Chicken soup, Ma. And then, Go away, Sasuke. You'll get sick, too.* (How, how, how did he find it in himself to kill her, then?)

The masked man continues to talk, and Itachi doesn't move. A minute, two, and then three full minutes of the man talking — and if Itachi is sitting through this, then this man, whoever he is, must be important and must command his respect. Which means —

The Uchiha heir. This is the Uchiha Clan's elder. *Dragon heir,* that's what this man is. Heir apparent to the secret of the dragons, captain and guard of the Uchiha forces. Itachi is honor- and duty-bound to obey him.

"Brother," the Nidaime tries again, sounding apprehensive. "We need to go." It's been over three minutes now, and Sasuke's grip on his kunai is starting to get loose with sweat. Sasuke is good at surveillance, but Itachi will notice him eventually. He always does.

"Just a minute," the Shodaime calls back again, and it's odd to hear his voice so loud when Sasuke is trying his best to be absolutely and utterly still. "Give me a minute."

"We should go back," the Nidaime mutters under his breath.

"Tobirama, over here," the Shodaime says suddenly, loudly. The Nidaime reacts almost immediately, blurring to stand next to the Shodaime. He places a hand on the Shodaime's shoulder, tugging him back towards Sasuke. The Shodaime resists, and the two fall into a hurried conversation.

"What are they doing?" Sarutobi breathes, taking a step towards the other ghosts. "What is Tobirama-sensei doing?"

"If you die here," the Yondaime pleads. "Who will take this information back to Konoha? They will breach our borders —"

*There is no cowardice in a strategic retreat,* Sasuke repeats to himself, and it's like Kakashi is by his side saying these words to him again. He walked away before, laid waste to an entire village and dragged Orochimaru's rotting corpse across a continent. He is a better man than Itachi because Kakashi has taught him better. His target isn't Itachi, not even this third Uchiha. It's Akatsuki, and their leader, Pein.

*This isn't cowardice,* Daichi's voice filters into his mind, his coil tightening around Sasuke's bicep. *This just isn't a fight worth dying for. There's a war to be fought. This is just a battle.*

*I know,* Sasuke agrees, and begins the process of convincing himself to retreat from Itachi. He will retreat, return to Konoha and take this information back with him. There is a third Uchiha, which means he will need Kakashi by his side to fight this battle.

There is a lull in Itachi's conversation, and then, the masked man takes a few steps back, making an open-armed gesture. He vanishes an instant later, without performing a single seal.

Itachi is silent for a few moments. And then, his voice loud in the silence of the coming dawn, "It's rude to eavesdrop." He turns his head to look at Sasuke, the red of his Mangekyou almost black in the dim light of the early morning.

Daichi slithers off his arm almost immediately, disappearing into grass with a slight rustle. Sasuke straightens to his feet. There is no cowardice, Kakashi taught him, but Kakashi has never had a
brother like Itachi, has never had to look his older brother in the eyes and think, *Kin-Butcher.*

Itachi straightens to his feet. He makes a gesture, as if to invite Sasuke to come closer.

"Retreat," the Yondaime orders.

This isn't a fight worth dying for, Sasuke knows, mostly because it won't even be a fight. He'll get slaughtered, hundreds of miles from Konoha during a surveillance mission. But it's not a fight worth walking away from either. It is not worth it to run, because Itachi will eventually catch up, and that death will be far, far more humiliating than this one. So Sasuke raises his chin to meet Itachi's gaze and steps into the clearing even as Sarutobi breathes his name, sounding resigned and mournful.

Sasuke walks up to Itachi, stopping only a few feet away from him. He's spent his entire life looking up to Itachi, so it's a surprise that when he is finally facing the man, he's at eye-level. An inch taller even, broader in the shoulders, too.

"You've grown," Itachi says finally. *You've aged,* Sasuke wants to say. There are circles under Itachi's eyes, and he looks older than his twenty-one years.

Daichi stirs lightly from somewhere in the field. *Kin-Butcher's wounded deeply,* he communicates. He breathes with great difficulty. Great difficulty for Itachi is only a slight clench of his jaw when he talks. *He bleeds freely,* Daichi continues. *The stench of blood is thick in the air. The garments conceal it.*

"You're wounded," Sasuke counters, and Itachi becomes utterly still, hiding what little discomfort he had been showing. That's why he looks so tired, Sasuke realizes. He's lost blood, enough that his chakra is no longer under his control as it always is.

This is not the Itachi that Sasuke knows. Itachi does not get wounded, does not get strained, does not yield in the face of something as simple as blood loss. *You are an Uchiha,* Fugaku had taught his sons. *That means something.* And this is what it means, Sasuke realizes.

It means standing in a clearing, hundreds of miles from the home they swore to protect, and counting the heartbeats until one of them pulls a weapon and draws blood.

It would be easy—easier—to kill Itachi right now. But... *(Go away, Sasuke. You'll get sick, too.)* Sasuke doesn't let himself think too hard. Just says, "You need care."

"Just a scratch," Itachi deflects, making a dismissive gesture. And because Itachi is incapable of having a normal, logical conversation, he changes topics entirely. *"My friend is headed towards Urausu. After a woman."

They know about Karin following them. Which explains why the two had shifted directions towards Urausu. Sasuke had estimated another ten or so miles before he caught up with Itachi and the other Uchiha, but their paths have crossed. They were doubling back to track Karin.

If they're the men Sasuke thinks they are, they will follow Karin's scent until they reach her. But Karin isn't stupid. She is probably long gone by now. All that's left is for Sasuke to get out from under Akatsuki's crosshairs long enough to deliver this news back to Konoha. It's difficult enough to defend against one rogue Uchiha. Against two, it will be nearly impossible.

He needs to return to Konoha. Itachi is a concern for another day. *And besides,* Sasuke thinks. He's not the kind of man to fight an injured man. Kakashi has taught him better. *"You should take care of that wound."

"Sasuke jerks a thumb over his shoulder, pointing south. *"There's good healers in Kitahirosiho, ten miles south of here."

"
Itachi tilts his head slightly, considering. It feels strange saying these things to Itachi, but although Sasuke has never been the best of sons, he has always—always—been a good brother. Finally, Itachi takes another breath. "You look like Shisui," he admits finally, voice pitched low, and that was the last thing Sasuke expected to hear. "Like Uncle Kyogoku."

"Steady," Sarutobi mutters, standing close to Sasuke now. His hand is icy cold on Sasuke's shoulder. Sasuke breathes deeply through his nose, trying to control his anger. Itachi has no right, no right, to talk about Shisui or Uncle Kyoguku or anyone. "You should take care of that wound," Sasuke repeats, because he doesn't trust himself to say anything else.

Itachi spreads his hands, lips quirking up in something of a smile. "Here I am." He pauses a beat and adds, tilting his head at that angle again (just like their mother, Sasuke remembers. That's who Itachi takes after. Their mother). "Best shot you'll get, Sasuke."

Sasuke can feel his nails digging into his palms. Itachi is here, standing four feet from him. He is duty-bound to revenge his father's killing, but several hundred miles away, Naruto is waiting. Kakashi is waiting, and so is Sakura. Konohagakure is waiting, and Sasuke will not disappoint her a second time.

_We stand sentinel_, Kakashi explained to him once, because Fugaku was dead, and there was no one else to explain the duties of an Uchiha to Sasuke but a one-eyed outsider. That is what the Sharingan does.

He is a better man than this, Sasuke reminds himself. He will not let the Uchiha name be reduced to madmen slaughtering each other. There is a time and place for revenge, and this is not it. He will give respect, and he will gain it back in turn, and he will redeem the name of what was once the greatest dojutsu in the Continent. _Your ancestors were a great people_, the Shodaiime had told him. He is duty-bound to honor his mother's death, but he is the last of three, and he will not go down in this pathetic field, miles and miles away from the redwood forests.

"There's no battle to be fought here," Sasuke says finally and takes a step back. Itachi's face goes blank. He is silent for a moment before saying, "Detour around the Village of Sound before heading towards Konoha. You'll avoid the others."

"Is he..." the Nidaime trails off, sounding unsure. "Could be a trap."

Growing up, Sasuke learned that Itachi never lied. He only withheld the truth. So this—whatever this is—must be truthful. And besides, Sasuke thinks, if Itachi wanted him dead, Itachi would do the honors himself. "The other man—"

"Uchiha Madara," the Shodaiime supplements, just as Itachi says, "Tobi."

"Madara is dead," the Nidaime hisses immediately. And it takes Sasuke's brain less than a fraction of a second to recognize the name. Uchiha Madara, one of Sasuke's ancestors and one of the first successful Sharingan users according to the legends. By all accounts, the man has to be dead. Sasuke hadn't bothered to check for his name, because Uchiha Madara was a traitor, and traitors have no place in the Uchiha Clan's family tree or on the dragon stone.

This also means that Madara is centuries old. "I buried the fucking—"

"Tobirama," the Shodaiime chides, frowning at the Nidaime's choice of words. He looks at Sasuke and says again, "Uchiha Madara." He takes a breath. "I can recognize my best friend, boy. That's him."
"We should go," Sarutobi says quietly.

"Tobi will be back soon," Itachi mutters, turning his face in the direction of Urausu. He looks like Fugaku in profile. He has the same strong jaw and defined nose, the features that make Uchiha men so distinct. This is my brother, Sasuke tells himself. And this is Itachi performing his duties as an older brother. He's saying: Run. "He travels fast."

If he wanted to, Itachi could have attacked him by now. But he hasn't. Instead, he's telling Sasuke You look like Shisui and Tobi will be back soon. Which means—"Madara," Sasuke says suddenly, and Itachi's gaze snaps back to him, Mangekyou swirling.

"Uchiha," the Yondaime growls. "What are you—"

"Namikaze," the Shodaime says sharply, and the Yondaime immediately falls into a reluctant silence.

Sasuke stands his ground, swallows on the feelings crawling up his throat. Itachi is wounded, bleeding freely, and despite it all, he is still Kin-Butcher. But his gaze holds the weight of the Uchiha Clan hierarchy. He is Sasuke's brother, and at one point, the obvious choice for Clan elder. It's been nearly a decade, and still Sasuke feels the same way he felt when he accidentally ruined Itachi's ANBU report. Any minute now, Itachi will tell him to go up to his room and think about what he'd just done.

Itachi's hand twitches, coming up to rest on the hilt of his sword. Sasuke takes a breath and slowly reaches for his kunai holster, fingers resting lightly on the hilt of a kunai. "Easy," the Nidaime counsels, holding up a hand.

"His name is Tobi," Itachi corrects carefully, and his Mangekyou is still swirling with his chakra. It makes the hair on the back of Sasuke's neck prickle, because he knows the full damage a Mangekyou can do.

"He should be dead," Sasuke presses on, because for some reason, he is still alive. If he tries hard enough, he might be able to get a bit more information out of Itachi. "He a zombie or something? Do I need to carry a silver cross?" Itachi raises an eyebrow, and in that instant, Sasuke feels like an utter and absolute moron. In his mind, zombies and vampires seem like a feasible alternative. What with the seeing ghosts thing and all. But now that he's said it aloud—"It was a joke."

"It wasn't very funny," Itachi comments dryly.

"Yeah, well, no one said you were the one with the sense of humor," Sasuke mutters, making a face. He doesn't have time to regret his words, because Itachi's lips twitch up into something of a smile. He looks amused, but it only lasts for a second before he switches topics again. "Kisame and the others are in Otogakure."

The Nidaime steps closer to Itachi, close enough that Itachi's breath comes out in a sudden fog. Itachi doesn't shiver, though, just breathes out in little puffs of smoke. He is severely injured, then, if his breathing is this labored. "What's he playing at?" the Nidaime asks finally. "Why is he telling you this?"

This is no way for a Kin-Butcher to act. "And Madara?" Sasuke asks.

Itachi shrugs, a half-aborted motion that ends with a wince. "He'll return soon. When he does, he'll notice a Konoha ANBU following us. You can't hide so well for much too long, Sasuke."

The Nidaime curses. "So it's him, then," he hisses. "How the fuck did he—"
"I met him once," the Yondaime breathes suddenly. He steps towards the Sandaime, gesturing widely in the air as if his thoughts are going faster than he can articulate. "When my wife was giving birth to Naruto. Do you remember, Sarutobi-sensei?"

"We moved her to a safe house," Sarutobi finishes, eyes going wide with the memory.

The Yondaime picks up the story again. "When Kushina gave birth to Naruto, the danger was that her seal would weaken. I was there to oversee it, but the perimeters were breached—"

Sarutobi interrupts with a hurried, "Minato, you said you met a masked man…"

"He was fast," the Yondaime says, more to himself than anyone else. Sasuke and the other ghosts are all watching the Yondaime now. This isn't Madara's first attempt at Naruto, then. Which means he has more of an advantage than Sasuke ever imagined. He's not new at this Kill Naruto business. He's been trying and failing for as long as Naruto has been alive, almost eighteen years of relentless pursuit. Sasuke's mind races as his brain puzzles together all the details: Akatsuki is the product of Madara's delusions and malice, not Pein, not Itachi, not anyone else. The target isn't Pein. It's Madara.

"He copied my jutsus," the Yondaime continues. "I thought it was just his ability, but I didn't make the connection until now. I had the hardest time tracking him because his chakra was practically dormant. It was the Sharingan Mangekyou. That was Madara. He's been—"

"—attention?" And before Sasuke can react, Itachi is reaching forward to flick a finger against his forehead. "Sasuke."

Sasuke freezes. Itachi has done this before, when they were younger.

"Go on," Itachi orders and presses his forefinger into Sasuke's forehead again, pushing this time. Sasuke stumbles back a step, not because Itachi pushed particularly hard, but because he's not expecting this. He's been expecting hostility, maybe even to get trashed around just so Itachi can prove his point again. Not this—whatever this is.

"You should go," the Shodaime suggests, and there's a cool touch on his shoulder. "Your brother has offered you amnesty."

Is that what this is?

Itachi's gaze lingers another moment. "There is no battle to be fought here," Itachi echoes, and this time, when his lips twitch up into a half-smile, it stays.

"Yeah," Sasuke agrees and takes a step back. And because Itachi is his brother (Kin-Butcher, yes, but Brother first), Sasuke adds, "Follow the Ikeda River nine miles south. Kitahiroshima is by the mouth, a mile or so from the riverbank." Feeling awkward, he adds, "Ask for Okeida, he always has good painkillers. For your—" He gestures at Itachi's chest. "Scratch."

Itachi takes a step back as well, half-turning in his departure. He doesn't immediately leave, but lingers for a moment. "Another time, then, our disagreement."

So the fratricide is still on the schedule. "Sure. Another time."

Itachi watches Sasuke for another moment, and then, his hands come up to form a jutsu. "Watch, Sasuke," he instructs, and Sasuke's Sharingan automatically flares to life. He follows the seals carefully, because Itachi is going at his usual breakneck speed. It's nothing like Sasuke has ever seen, a strange combination of seals that has Sasuke wondering if Itachi will whip out some crazy katon
jutsu that will burn him to a crisp. Itachi's hands slow slightly, the only indication that the jutsu is about to come to an end. Sasuke glances up from Itachi's hands briefly, catches Itachi's gaze. "Crane seal to finish," Itachi instructs, and then—

He vanishes without even a hitch of chakra. There is no evidence of his presence, not even a cloud of smoke that usually characterizes translocation jutsus like this. It would be hard to follow someone using this jutsu.

Not a katon jutsu, certainly not something intended to kill. It was just one of Itachi's side-lessons. Watch, Sasuke, Itachi used to say, taking Sasuke's pencil away and writing out Sasuke's long division with infinite patience. You carry over the difference, like this...

Sasuke's hands come up to form the seals. Itachi had told him, Leave. Now, he'd showed him how to get out as well.

He performs the jutsu perfectly.
The team is waiting for him when he gets back to Konoha. Another day, and they would have followed after Sasuke, Kiba explains, pulling Sasuke into a rough hug. "Fuck's sake, Sasuke, you couldn't get back here any faster?"

"We've been found," Neji says bluntly. "Naruto figured it out."

"So he suspended all of us for a week without pay," Shikamaru adds with a grumble. "So fucking —"

"Troublesome," Shino finishes. "I am not sure how I feel about him becoming Hokage anymore."

"At least he didn't have the Captain fire us," Chouji consoles. He munches on his chips solemnly. "Please tell me you've gathered some useful intelligence at least."

Lee steps forward before Sasuke can answer. "Let him rest," he says, and places a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. Sasuke forgets sometimes that for all the obnoxious green, the obnoxious voice, and the obnoxiousness that defines Lee, the man is empathetic and perceptive. The others take his cue and fall back immediately. They insist that Sasuke get some rest—and take a fucking shower, Sarge, Kiba adds, Akamaru is dying here—and then, Sasuke is in his apartment. He showers, eats, falls into bed, and then drifts into a fitful sleep that the ghosts don't disturb.

He dreams constantly, wakes up sweating and panicked, always with Itachi chasing his thoughts. He has a duty to report what he's found to Tsunade. If Naruto is facing Madara, then they will need more men, more resources, all the defenses Konoha has to offer. But Sasuke avoids these duties. Instead, he spends two full days in bed, eyes closed against the realities of his day-to-day existence.

Itachi offered information about Akatsuki, a window of opportunity to escape, and even told Sasuke how to leave without being detected. He was wounded, bleeding, and oddly willing to smile. This is not the Itachi that Sasuke is familiar with.

Watch, Sasuke, Itachi had said, and like an echo of that command, Sasuke finds himself repeating the seals over and over again, fingers twitching into formations without any conscious thought. Crane seal to finish.

Sasuke doesn't finish the seal, just places a hand against his forehead where Itachi's finger had been, thinks, Another time, then. But he's in Itachi's debt now, because Sasuke didn't sense Akatsuki even once on his entire journey back to Konoha. Five days after their meeting, and Akatsuki still hasn't crossed Land of Fire's borders. Which means they don't know, that Itachi kept their meeting a secret. The Shodaime had called it amnesty, and that is what Itachi had granted.

Kakashi is the one who summons him in the end. So, with the ghosts watching him closely, Sasuke dresses in ANBU uniform and heads over to the Tower. The offices of the Commander of the Joint Forces are in the East Wing, on the opposite side of the building from where Tsunade has her rooms. Sasuke makes the trek in an absent-minded daze. He's not sure what to report yet, hasn't discussed with the Hokages what he should and shouldn't report. What can he possibly say? My brother took pity on me or Uchiha Madara is alive, I'm not sure how or I ran like the coward that I am, because apparently, there will be another time for me to kill the only family I have left.

Yoshie, Kakashi's civilian assistant, ushers Sasuke through the large waiting area and to a set of double doors. She knocks once and pushes open one of the doors, leading Sasuke in with a brief,
"Commander. Uchiha Sasuke for you."

"Thank you, Yoshie," Kakashi says, not looking up from his work. He's standing behind his impressive desk, bent over a set of scrolls laid out in full. Yoshie leaves with a clatter of heels and shuts the door behind them. "Sit down," Kakashi instructs the minute the door closes.

Sasuke sits in one of the chairs across from Kakashi's desk. Kakashi goes back to his work, so Sasuke turns to look out the large window to their left. It overlooks the ANBU, Jounin, SCI and Konoha PD facilities, a direct view over the men that Kakashi commands from his seat. This early in the morning, only 0730 hours, and the training fields are filled with men. It's been nearly two days since Sasuke has gone on a run, done anything besides wake up, eat, and sleep. He feels sluggish, almost as if his muscles have atrophied in these past two days of inactivity.

Kakashi taps his finger on one of the scrolls on his desk to get Sasuke's attention. "You ran into Itachi." And then, he goes back to work, left hand moving as he makes notes on the scroll. It's already littered with post-it notes, pins, and red and blue ink. It's a map of some territory, but Sasuke doesn't care enough to snoop.

There is a slight chill to Sasuke's left, and Sasuke remembers, belatedly, that the ghosts are still with him. "Kakashi needs to know," the Yondaime urges.

No, Sasuke wants to say. No one needs to know. Not the clusterfuck of a freak show that his family has become. Uchiha Madara is still alive because those are the kind of freaks the Uchiha Clan produces, and Uchiha Itachi is still alive because Sasuke is too much of a coward to fulfill his duty as a son. Kakashi drops his pen on the table and stretches. He considers Sasuke for a moment before walking around his desk to sit in the chair next to Sasuke's.

"Your mission was a failure, then," Kakashi says, and his voice is not unkind.

There is a heat rising Sasuke's face, unfamiliar and strange. The air feels too small and hot, as though Sasuke can't get enough space to breathe. There are too many eyes on him, too many men watching his freak show of a life unfold. He could barely go through the motions of his life when he was alone; now, though, with an audience, it's nearly impossible. He blinks hard, and doesn't answer until he's sure his voice will be steady. "It was a success."

Kakashi sits back in his chair. "Good."

"Make your report," the Nidaime prompts. "Go ahead."

Sasuke knows what he should say: Uchiha Madara is alive and Akatsuki is Madara's organization and This isn't Madara's first attempt against Naruto. But instead, he finds himself staring down at the calluses of his hands to admit, "Brother was wounded."

Kakashi doesn't skip a beat. "So you walked away."

Sasuke had an audience of four to witness that day. Four years ago, Sasuke would have attacked Itachi, regardless of whether Itachi was injured or not. What did it matter, Sasuke used to think, how he avenged his Clan's massacre? Itachi's death was Itachi's death—whether Sasuke killed him with Orochimaru's seal burning his skin, or whether Sasuke killed him while Itachi was already wounded.

Four years ago, Sasuke would never have spoken a word about Itachi, because he used to jealously guard his secrets. But Kakashi is Kakashi, and no matter what rumors might say, Sasuke leveled Otogakure and drove his sword through Orochimaru with Kakashi's voice ringing in his ears, and it was Kakashi's forgiveness that Sasuke first sought when he returned to Konoha.
So, "Yeah."

"Because he was wounded," Kakashi finishes.

"And the mission," Sasuke begins, but doesn't finish, can't find the words to explain. Instead, he settles for a shrug. The movement feels odd, as if his body has never done it before. But then again, Sasuke has felt strange in his own skin since returning to Konoha. The itch is back now, the impulse to find Itachi, hunt him down, kill him, because Gods know, there is no other justice to be had.

But—

But.

It's not the same anymore. It's not the same all-consuming thought. Now, thoughts of killing Itachi are dulled. Amnesty, the Shodaime had called it, and that was exactly what it was. If Itachi hadn't shown him mercy, Madara, Kisame and the others would have hunted him down.

Kakashi has never hesitated to look Sasuke in the eyes when talking about Itachi or the Uchiha Clan. Now is not an exception. He leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees, but Sasuke does not meet his gaze. "Look at me," Kakashi says, and it's an order. So Sasuke looks at the jounin, feels his neck flushing with shame. I walked away, he thinks. What kind of a son does that? What kind of a son walks away from the man who murdered his mother?

Kakashi's one visible eye is a dull gray in this light. "You did good."

No, Sasuke thinks. I don't think I did.

"You did good," Kakashi repeats steadily.

Sasuke scoffs at this, looks away from the jounin's gaze because he can't—he cannot face Kakashi anymore. How many more disappointments will the jounin tolerate from him? Sasuke stares at his hands, not sure where else to look. Everywhere around him, there are people watching him, watching this. "Your standards are pretty fucking low, Hatake."

"No," Kakashi gets to his feet, rises to his full height and towers over Sasuke. It makes Sasuke feel twelve again. Twelve and stupid and so goddamn lost, it hurts just to keep breathing. "They're not."

He places a hand on Sasuke's shoulder, just rests it there for a moment. For once, Sasuke doesn't move away from the touch, just dips his head under the weight.

Tsunade's debriefing, naturally, does not go as smoothly.

Kakashi had told him that Tsunade is expecting a report that night, that there would be an audience, and that Sasuke better take the day to prepare. Sasuke had told Kakashi about Madara, and all he'd gotten was a slight narrowing of Kakashi's eyes. That was the only sign of Kakashi's surprise, and like his reaction to everything else in life, it was mild.

When you make your report, Kakashi said evenly, you'll have to convince people.

First, Sasuke went to his ancestor's site. Madara's name had been missing. Next to Uchiha Izuna, where Madara's name should have been carved, was a dull black space. Sasuke ran a hand over the blank spot. On a whim, he took out a kunai and started chiseling with short, forceful stabs. U-c-h-i-h-a M-a-d-a-r-a.
They waited, all five of them, with bated breathes. There was a flicker of a breeze, a warm gust from the open doors, and then the carved letters started to fade. It took a few moments, but by the end, there was nothing but incoherent scratches.

"Dragons," the Nidaime breathed into the ensuing stillness. "There were dragons once?"

For assurance, Sasuke chiseled in his own name and watched. Again, a flicker of a breeze (Sasuke turned to face the open door, turned to face whatever it is that holds power over these grounds). His name disappeared as well.

"The legends are true," the Shodaime whispered, sounding awed as he looked up at the slab of stone. "The dragon stone is true to your clan's blood."

Sasuke placed a hand against the stone. He felt the heat of it, the life and the oaths that were sworn. There are no dragons (there can't be, Sasuke reasons). Sasuke is too old to believe in them—but then again, he'd been too old to believe in ghosts and two hundred year-old Uchihas as well. So maybe the legends are true, maybe they'd carved in Madara's name into the dragon stone, but the name never took because Madara's Sharingan still lived.

He spent the rest of the day preparing the necessary documents for the meeting. The ghosts helped, which is how Sasuke knows that he is as prepared as he will ever be. Nestled in all the paperwork is a single-page profile of Madara that Sasuke dug out of the Jounin archives. Uchiha, Sasuke recognizes immediately. There is no mistaking the shock of black hair and the dark eyes staring back at him in the black-and-white photograph.

Tsunade and her men are given advance copies, so the debriefing is essentially a Let's-Grill-Sasuke-Endlessly session. It gets boring really fast, and it's made all the worse because Naruto is also in the room, sitting next to Jiraiya in his Junior Counselor's regalia. His kimono lapels are so perfectly pressed that Sasuke thinks he could cut his finger on the crease.

Naruto doesn't smile at Sasuke once throughout the entire meeting. In fact, he partakes in the grilling. "Your intelligence, as it were," Naruto points out politely, "is hardly justification enough to mobilize troops or to initiate Defcon Four."

Sasuke has an answer ready. "My intel has been confirmed by two separate sources, and by a current member of Akatsuki."

"One of your sources is unnamed," Naruto goes on, even though he knows exactly who this source is. He knows that Sasuke relies on his snakes for his intelligence, but Sasuke chose not to reveal this information to the group at hand, and Naruto is in one of his moods. "The other is some...woman."

Sasuke's Sharingan flares. "A source."

"An undisclosed source, one you've never even registered as a confidential informant with ANBU, SCI, Jounin forces, or KPD. You've never even mentioned her in any of your previous fieldwork," Naruto snaps.

"The need never arose."

Naruto's lips purse. "And there was such a need this time, I'm sure."

Sasuke flushes. It's a CO's prerogative to provide corrections to his subordinates on any lifestyle choices that interfere with their performance on the field, but this is not one of those instances. Naruto has no reason to trust Sasuke—he's never approved of his one-night stands, and Gods know Sasuke has enough of those—but for once, Sasuke is not lying.
Naruto continues, "We have no previous history to inform us just how reliable this source's information might be. All we know is that she is a former member of Orochimaru's group. And you trust her."

This is an easy one to answer. "Yes, sir."

Naruto's chakra flares at this, making all the papers on the table rise lightly. They hover a few centimeters from the table top, crackling with his energy. "You must be close if you still keep in touch with her." Naruto's eyes narrow in his consideration. "Which is odd. Because I've never heard of her."


Naruto arches a perfect eyebrow. "Do you."

It is not a question, so Sasuke is left standing there without anything to say to defend himself. The Nidaime mutters under his breath, "This is awkward."

Hiashi clears his throat in the moment that follows, which prompts Sasuke to swivel his gaze towards the Captain. Sasuke can't quite place the expression on the man's face, but it isn't anger. If anything, it's sympathetic.

Naruto recovers easily, and the papers settle back onto the table with a whisper. "And your third source is your brother, who is himself a missing nin. So let's see what the final tally is. An undisclosed source you will not name, an acquaintance from the Land of Rice Fields, and your brother."

There is silence in the room. "I always knew that Naruto had great potential," Sarutobi mutters, words sounding strained. "I never realized just how much, I suppose."

"The preponderance of evidence, ANBU," Naruto deadpans, "is truly staggering."

The Nidaime whistles quietly from Sasuke's right. "Ouch."

Sarutobi chuckles but when Sasuke's Sharingan swirls to life, the man's smile fades. "Count," the Shodaime counsels. "Count before you respond."

Sasuke counts to ten. Twice.

Sasuke understands why Naruto is reacting like this. He has never appreciated the coddling that comes with being a jinchuriki. More than once, he's been spirited into safe houses on the basis of some rumor that filters through the various agencies. It is not the inconvenience of it, or the fact that he is sidelined for an upcoming fight that frustrates Naruto. It's the fact that the standing order for troops is to protect Naruto—even at the expense of letting the Village burn. Almost always, when the order for retreat is issued, Naruto, Kakashi, Jiraiya, and Iruka get into heated arguments. These are the only times that Sasuke has seen Kakashi raise his voice against Naruto.

Shikaku—bless his soul—takes over the questioning. "Your brother didn't confirm his identity," Shikaku points out.

Sasuke takes a breath. They have been through this. "But he did not deny it, sir. Uchiha Itachi does not lie. He views lies as unnecessary. His instinct is to just withhold the truth instead."

Ibiki sits forward in his seat. "You must understand, ANBU, why we are not convinced."
"Uchiha Madara is alive," Sasuke repeats. "I give you my word."

Ibiki scoffs at this. "Is that all you're giving us? Your word?"

Immediately, Sasuke's Sharingan whorls to life. The Shodaime is immediately by his side, an icy cool hand on his shoulder. Sasuke takes a breath, and then another. "Stand your ground," the Nidaime counsels. "Don't let that go unanswered."

There are a thousand things Sasuke wants to say, but none of them are appropriate. Instead, his chakra continues to build like a hot coil in his stomach. "Steady," the Shodaime counsels. "Breathe through it. Remember what I told you."

A man is only worth as much as his word. Years ago, Sasuke broke an oath of fealty to Konohagakure, and ran away while she burned. He didn't understand then what that action would cost him, what it would cost his Clan and the legacy of the Uchiha. He knows now, and he won't make the same mistake twice. So Sasuke takes a breath against his anger and says, "Yes, sir. That's what I'm giving you. My word."

Ibiki holds Sasuke's gaze steady for a few seconds longer. The man knows what Sasuke sounds like when his nails are ripped out, and he knows exactly how much pain Sasuke can withstand before he passes out. He has seen Sasuke covered in his own vomit and piss, and he knows how hard he needs to kick Sasuke in his ribs to hear the crack of bone. He has seen Sasuke completely and utterly humiliated in the very depths of Konoha's prison.

But today—when Sasuke holds his gaze—the man tilts his head in acknowledgement, and concedes. "Very well. Proceed, ANBU."

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They take a break after Sasuke's debrief. Sasuke spends this time answering Hiashi's questions, mostly having to do with the path he took to the Land of Rice Fields. "We should collate your knowledge of this area," Hiashi is saying to him, when Tsunade reenters the room, Jiraiya, Naruto and Shizune close by her side.

Automatically, Sasuke's attention moves to Naruto. He hasn't said anything to him since his last question, and Sasuke wonders if this is what Naruto will be like as Hokage, completely engrossed in his job and the responsibilities that come with it. Everyone stands at attention at Tsunade's entrance. "As you were," Tsunade says.

Jiraiya is the first to take his seat, and he does this with an order for Sasuke: "You're dismissed, ANBU."

It's instinct. "No."

The Shodaime takes a deep breath, rubbing his temples with his fingers. "Two steps forward."

"One step back," Sarutobi finishes.

"Excuse me?" Jiraiya barks.

"I should stay," Sasuke answers. "I got you this intel—"

"Well, whoop-de-fucking-doo. Let's give you a medal, Uchiha. But for now, get the fuck out."

Sasuke remembers to count to ten, and only because the Shodaime clears his throat loudly. "I am an asset to this team. I know how groups like Akatsuki work."
"Yes. You know a little too well," Jiraiya counters easily. "So please, get out."

They don't understand, Sasuke thinks. None of them understand what's coming. So he tries again. "Uchiha Madara is two hundred years old. Mangekyous last a few decades at most, but Madara has enough chakra control to sustain it for centuries—"

Jiraiya throws up his hands. "Oh, for the love of—"

Sasuke raises his voice to be heard. "I can help you. As an Uchiha, I'm an asset to your team. Let me be on the team."

"We've fought this war before, Uchiha. And we did it without you."

Sasuke's hands are clenched into fists so tight, the muscles in his forearm begin to feel the strain. "You didn't win, you only delayed it. If we're going to win this war, we can't do it the way we normally do. Brute strength isn't enough, not if we want to keep Naruto and Konoha safe."

Jiraiya actually laughs at this. "You know, it's pretty goddamn interesting to hear about protecting Naruto from the one person in this room who's tried to kill him."

Naruto grips the edge of the table, but he does not say anything. No matter how loud Naruto gets, this is one detail of his life that he does not talk about. So when Jiraiya brings it up in a room full of commanding officers, he does nothing but take a breath, grip the edge of a table, and hold his head high.

Even the ghosts are not saying anything for once, because they're rooted to the spot, listening. Sasuke has shared a great deal of his life with the ghosts, but not this, not the memory of pushing his hand through Naruto's chest. Even Sarutobi does not know; he died before he could witness Sasuke's betrayal.

In the end, it's the Yondaime's expression that stops Sasuke from standing his ground against Jiraiya.

When Sasuke got back from Otogakure, it took Naruto a full week before he visited Sasuke in his cell. It was a muted affair, Naruto just looking at him and Sasuke staring back for all of forty-six short seconds. Naruto didn't speak a word to him for three weeks.

Sasuke betrayed Orochimaru because he woke up one day with Kakashi's voice in his ears. *I am a better man than this,* Sasuke realized that day, because Orochimaru didn't hesitate to give orders against women and children in a village that refused to pay their fealty to him. *I am a better man than this, Kakashi taught me better.* He left Otogakure burning, sealed off the entrance so no sick, depraved soul could ever crawl out of its depths ever again. And he did all this with Kakashi's rules going through his mind.

Orochimaru's orders against the small village were carried out, and the death toll had been seventeen. Nine of those had been women and children, and the others defenseless farmers who had never lifted a weapon in their lives. Sasuke had been too much of a coward to stand up to Orochimaru when the orders were issued; it wasn't until he heard about the deaths from Mrs. Oonishi that he made his decision to betray the man. Sasuke returned to Konoha sick to the bone, tired, and ready to accept whatever punishment Konoha exacted.

He didn't return to Konoha for Naruto. He did that for himself, and for Kakashi.

He *stayed* in Konoha for Naruto.

The Yondaime takes a breath. "For the Mangekyou," he says, understanding finally.
Sasuke is the first to look away from the Yondaime's gaze. He packs up his paperwork, keeping his head down all the while. There are too many eyes on him, and he can't stand to be in the Yondaime's presence anymore.

He leaves, and doesn't meet anyone's eyes as he does.

Kiba is a good drinking buddy, mostly because he can pick up cues and go from there. So when he sits down on one of the bar stools next to Sasuke, he doesn't greet Sasuke with his usual enthusiasm. Instead he says, "Naruto told me what happened." He waits until his drink is placed before him before clarifying, "Well, not all of it. Classified and all, just that. I heard Jiraiya said a few things."

"We don't—" Kiba stops, abrupt. He rubs at the markings on his face absent-mindedly. "I used to think like him, too. Like Jiraiya."

Sasuke takes a breath. So this is why he's here. To give Sasuke a pep talk. "Inuzuka, you don't need to—"

"No, listen," Kiba interrupts. "Listen, all right?" When Sasuke doesn't say anything else, Kiba goes on. "I used to think like Jiraiya. We all did, the entire Village. I hated the idea that you were my CO for a real long time. We used to talk about you behind your back. Jokes, you know? The other men at ANBU, they used to say that our team was fucked from the start, cause who knew? You could take us out somewhere and we might never return, shit like that. That's what we all used to say."

"Good to know," Sasuke mutters, and turns back to his drink. He'd known, at an intellectual level, that his presence was unwanted. It's still difficult to have to hear it though.

"But we don't anymore," Kiba finishes. He shrugs, holds his mug carefully between both hands. "None of us do. Maybe other people do, but no one in ANBU does anymore."

Sasuke raises a hand to get the bartender's attention. The man, Tagami, slides another order in Sasuke's direction without any prompting. He's familiar with nearly all the ANBU since they visit the place nearly every third night. "You boys want a table tonight?"

"No," Sasuke answers, just as Kiba puts in, "Yeah. The others are heading over. Thanks Tagami."

Tagami leaves with a smile and before long, one of the waitresses is ushering Sasuke and Kiba to one of the tables. "What is this?" Sasuke asks once he's taken a seat. "An intervention?"

Kiba grins, all teeth. "Nah," he says. "We figured after two weeks out in the boonies, you could use the break. So. We're getting hammered."

Which explains Akamaru's absence, Sasuke realizes. The dog never accompanies them on these trips—apparently, he hates the smell of alcohol. They've ordered another round of drinks when the others amble up. "Did you two hug?" Shikamaru asks by way of hello. "Has the moment passed or do we need to give you two some space?"

Kiba makes a face, even as Neji snorts a laugh. Lee places a hand on Sasuke's shoulder, squeezes lightly for a brief moment before sitting down next to Chouji.

"I believe a hug may be appropriate," Shino defends. "Is it not?"

"My God, to think you get laid. How, Aburame? Tell me, how? Do you ask her, man?" Kiba asks. He deepens his voice to mimic, "I believe my hand up your skirt may be appropriate. Is it not?"
Shino’s brown eyes crinkle in a smile. "You are not one to comment, Inuzuka. You said you passed out when Hinata—"

"I am right here," Neji hisses, blue eyes becoming icy with the Byakugan. "Right here."

"Dude," Tottori breathes, sitting forward. "I met Aburame's ex-girlfriend, and I'm telling you, whatever the fuck he's doing, he's doing just fine." Some of the men chuckle at this, because for all his reservedness, Shino manages to land some of the Village's most incredible women (older college girls, civilians in small skirts and tall heels and low-cut shirts that reveal the wonderful swell of their breasts, all of who swoon whenever Shino so much as looks at them).

"Speaking of women. I read your report, Uchiha," Shikamaru mumbles, leaning forward. "So what's with the twenty grand you spent on an unnamed tracker? Was it just for tracking or…"

Sasuke can't help the twitch of his smile. "That report was confidential."

"The fuck it was," Neji says.

Shikamaru picks up a pair of chopsticks and starts to twirl them around in his fingers, like he might with a kunai or shuriken. "So?"

Sasuke wonders how he got here, from being chewed out in front of a roomful of commanding officers for his treason, to sitting in a bar with his team exchanging stories of conquest. But Kiba had made a point of saying, We don't anymore, none of us do, and the others seem to agree. If Shikamaru can forgive him for what happened to Chouji, than maybe—

"She's just a friend," he answers truthfully.

Naturally, they don't believe him.

He finds the Yondaime the next day. It's not very difficult, because they are by their graves. They're deep in discussion when Sasuke ambles up, and when they see him, they fall silent. By way of hello, Sasuke shoves his hands into his pockets and says, "I tried to kill Naruto for the Mangekyou."

Nidaime takes a breath. "Good morning to you too, Uchiha."

"I thought I had to, because that's the only way to get the Mangekyou, to experience a grief of such magnitude that it floods open the orbital chakra pathways. The easiest way to do that is to lose someone precious," Sasuke goes on, looking at the Yondaime. The man's face is carefully blank still. "I didn't—couldn't kill him. I could have, but I couldn't."

Which isn't even the worst part, Sasuke knows, but he still has to tell the Yondaime the entire truth. "I hurt him. The right lung, he was..." Sasuke takes a deep breath. "He was badly injured. I didn't get medical help, and I didn't stay to make sure he survived. I left him behind. For Otogakure."

And finally, because Sasuke rehearsed this all night long, he looks the Yondaime in the eyes and says, "I should've told you earlier. You should've heard this from me a long time ago."

The ghost is silent, long enough for Sasuke to think, That's it, then, but then, the Yondaime takes a shuddering breath and says, "All right."

"All right," Sasuke says, and looks around at the gardens. It's entirely empty so close to lunch time.
The sun is exceptionally bright so that even with the Sharingan, Sasuke can't make out the ghosts too well. He's not sure what to do with himself anymore. It feels odd to be in front of the ghosts now that they know. He's turning to leave, excuse himself with something about training or maybe even eating lunch, but the Nidaime stops him.

"Heck of a love story, though."

The Yondaime immediately rises to the bait. "Nidaime-sama," he sputters, and points an accusing finger at Sasuke. "He drinks and smokes and sleeps around like some sort of—some sort of degenerate when my boy very clearly deserves more—yes you, Uchiha, I'm talking about you, you ingrate, you can't even make toast without setting off the fire alarm, you useless piece of—"

Sasuke settles down against the Shodaime's gravestone to listen to the rest of the rant. The ghosts let the Yondaime go off, the Nidaime goading him every now and then. Sasuke can't help the twitch of his lips, and the occasional chuckle, because not once—not in the eighteen minutes that the Yondaime keeps up his rant before he has to break for heaving gasps—does the Yondaime mention his betrayal.

It takes nearly an hour, but eventually, the Yondaime exhausts his energy. Sasuke lies on the grass, listening to the Shodaime's low, rumbling explanation about how dragons were hunted out of existence. This is not the story that Sasuke was told growing up, but it's interesting to hear what the other clans were told about Sasuke's birthright.

He falls asleep to the Shodaime's voice, still telling him a bedtime story.

He wakes up when he senses Naruto's chakra. "This is new," Naruto says. He looks around at the Hokage monument with a frown. "Last place I expected you to be sulking."

Sasuke cracks open an eye. "Sulking?"

"Please, that's your specialty," Naruto grumbles, and sits down on the grass next to Sasuke. He doesn't lie down, though, just sits close enough that his knees are touching Sasuke's side. "Sulk no Jutsu."

"I don't sulk."

Naruto doesn't answer, just looks towards the freshly covered graves. There is still yellow tape surrounding the graves after Sasuke's robbery. "It's considered rude to sleep in graveyards."

"We don't mind," Sarutobi says pleasantly. "Anytime you'd like to take a nap by our graves, you are welcome to Sasuke."

"Yeah," the Nidaime mutters. He's stretched out on his back as well, but unlike Sasuke, he's floating a few feet in the air. "That's all we do in these parts of town."

Sasuke doesn't pay attention to the ghosts because, like the Yondaime, he's too busy watching Naruto closely. For once, Naruto's face doesn't reveal anything. In profile, all Sasuke can see is a blank gaze fixed on the yellow Konoha Police Department tape: CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS —

This isn't like Naruto, not in the least. "Dead last—"

"You shouldn't have walked out," Naruto interrupts, and finally, Sasuke understands. This is Naruto angry, truly, genuinely angry. The kind of anger that might make his irises bleed red if he isn't
careful. A breeze picks up suddenly, because that is what happens when Naruto is angry. He moves
the wind.

Sasuke's skin crawls with the need for a weapon. But this is not the same anger as the kind that
Naruto unleashes on a battlefield. This is off. Different.

When Sasuke doesn't respond for a while, Naruto turns to stare him down. "Jiraiya called you a
traitor and worse, and you just walked out."

The words are out of his mouth before Sasuke can think twice: "Can't fault a man for telling the
truth."

This time, the wave of chakra is powerful enough that the earth rumbles. The loose earth in the
vandalized grave shifts. Naruto gets to his feet angrily. His chakra ripples against Sasuke's skin even
as the wind picks up even more.

"My God," the Nidaime mutters, taking a step back from Naruto. Even Sarutobi and the Shodaime
give Naruto a wide berth. The only ghost that takes a step towards Naruto is the Yondaime, and he
looks more concerned than ever.

Sasuke gets to his feet as well. He's not as cautious as the ghosts, though, just reaches forward and
takes Naruto's elbow in a careful grip. An angry Naruto is dangerous; an emotional Naruto is even
worse.

"It's true if you don't defend yourself," Naruto hisses. His voice is pitched low, and with each word,
Naruto's chakra is ratcheting up another level. His eyes are turning crimson now, flecks of red
creeping slowly. "I grew up with people saying things about me too, and the minute you stop
defending yourself, it becomes true. The minute you stop believing in yourself—"

Naruto stops, abrupt. He has that drawn look on his face whenever he remembers the first twelve
years of his life. The unrelenting silence of his apartment, the whispers behind his back, mothers
shielding their children when Naruto walked down the street. It was only a few years ago that Naruto
was utterly and completely alone in the world. No matter how sunny and cheerful Naruto may seem
now, the memory must still be painful.

It makes Sasuke's blood boil, those memories of Naruto's solitude.

Naruto pulls out of Sasuke's grip. This is not their typical fight, but it still has Sasuke's heart racing.
"You are not that man," Naruto insists. He pushes his hair out of his face, swiping aside blocks of
hair behind the curve of his ear. "You are a better man than what they say you are."

Somewhere in the city, Tsunade will have sensed Naruto's chakra. She will have moved his troops to
respond to the possibility of the Kyuubi stirring. There will be teams of specially trained Jounin,
Special Jounin and ANBU heading this way. These men and women will have spent their entire
lives training for one possibility and one possibility only: containing the Nine-Tail Demon. Kakashi
will lead that team.

So Sasuke takes Naruto's elbow again, grips hard and firm. "Your chakra is out of control."

But Naruto isn't listening; he just takes another step back. "Everyone just assumes the worst of you.
They don't understand why you walked away, so they just think that—"

It's more instinct than thought that propels Sasuke forward. He's a Sharingan, and so it's only natural
that he mimics. This time, he mimics Naruto, takes a page right out of Naruto's book:
He takes Naruto's face in both his hands (such fine bones, he thinks, he could flatten cities with his anger), tilts Naruto's face up and brings him close. Naruto's chakra stills almost immediately.

Sasuke reaches for the right words to say—It's enough for me that you and Kakashi and Sakura know, and Would you hate me if I moved a little closer now?—but all he says is, "Your eyes are turning red."

He lets go almost immediately, and the red vanishes from Naruto's eyes. Sasuke doesn't move back though because Naruto repeats, "You're a better man than what they say you are."

Sasuke presses a hand carefully on Naruto's body, exactly where his lung had ripped and bled under Sasuke's attack. It's solid now, skin warm under Naruto's shirt. They're close enough that Sasuke can feel Naruto's heat. But still, Sasuke remembers the distance he put between them years ago. "Am I?"

Naruto stills at this. Then, carefully, he relaxes. "I forgave you years ago."

But that's exactly the point. Naruto forgave him, even though the truth is—"I never apologized."

And finally, finally, Naruto's lips quirk in a smile. "No. I guess you never did."

Sasuke takes a step back from Naruto at this, not because he wants to, but because he feels Kakashi's chakra close by. Along with a handful of other chakra signatures: Sakura, Shizune, Jiraiya, Shikaku…

"Well?" Naruto demands. "Where's my apology, Uchiha?"

I never wanted to hurt you, I couldn't hurt you, what have you done to me, Gods help me, what is this that you've done— "Don't hold your breath, Uzumaki."

He vanishes just as Kakashi's chakra snaps into the space twenty yards behind Naruto.

Jiraiya is not happy when he opens the door. "You have got to be kidding me."

Sasuke can see over Jiraiya's shoulder into the expansive suite that the man has rented for his stay in the village. There is a woman curled on the bed, the naked soles of her feet delicate and lovely in the still of the night. "Sorry to interrupt."

Jiraiya follows Sasuke's gaze over to the woman. Her face is covered by long, carefully curled brown hair. "Make it quick, Uchiha."

This is Sarutobi's idea, which Sasuke agreed to only after his conversation with Naruto. It becomes true if you don't defend yourself, Naruto had said, and it reminds Sasuke of the Shodaime, telling him of the respect his ancestors had once commanded.

"There's a bar downstairs," Sasuke mentions. "Is it any good?"

Jiraiya's eyes widen in surprise, but the moment passes quickly. "Good enough," he grumbles. "Naruto put you up to this?"

Sasuke can't help the quirk of his lips. He taps the side of his head. "I hear voices," he deadpans. "Sometimes, they give me the stupidest fucking ideas."

Jiraiya, of all things, starts to laugh.
Orochimaru pleaded with Sasuke at the end. He was on his knees, bleeding from an intestinal wound, blood oozing into the ground beneath him. *We can unite*, he promised Sasuke. *We can fight together—*

He died begging, gargling over a mouthful of blood when Sasuke slit the man's throat with a kunai. As the man lay dying, he grasped for his sword to hold while his soul passed over. Orochimaru, after all, believed in the same old religion as Sasuke's ancestors. It is a religion for warriors, a religion where the gods are vengeful and quick to anger. A sword is the dying man's only passageway into the afterlife.

Shisui once explained to Sasuke that in the afterlife, there was a Great Hall where all the warriors of the world—enemies and friends alike—gathered for a feast. After lifetimes spent battling one other, these men and women would finally lay down their weapons and dine together. But to enter the Great Hall, a man needed to die with his sword in his hand. When Sasuke dies, he hopes to go to that Great Hall. He hopes that once there, finally, he can sit down with Shisui, his father, his uncles, all his ancestors, and finally—finally—lay down his weapon. Itachi will be there too, Sasuke hopes, and they will finally break bread and drink together, as brothers should.

Orochimaru, though, has no place there, so as Orochimaru lay in the mud, rasping out his dying breaths, Sasuke kicked Orochimaru's sword out of reach and watched the terror in Orochimaru's eyes as he realized that Sasuke had denied peace for his soul.

In the Academy, none of the instructors taught the truth about what happens in battle. They never tell the eager students that at the end, most men shit themselves when their bowels let loose. By the time Sasuke slit Orochimaru's throat, he was already used to the stench and terror of dying men, so he didn't flinch when Orochimaru's body gave one final convulsion and went loose in the mud.

He dragged the man across the continent, and each night he fell asleep, he'd wake up to find that animals had picked away a little more at Orochimaru's corpse. Orochimaru's eyes were the first to be pecked into bloody pits by the birds. By the time he reached Konohagakure's gates, there wasn't much left of Orochimaru's body, but there was enough to prove that Orochimaru, Sannin, legend, had been defeated.

Jiraiya never got to see Orochimaru's body. By the time he returned to Konohagakure, the body had already been buried in an unnamed location, Sasuke had already stood trial and done four months in jail for his desertion. Sasuke learned of Jiraiya's anger at him only months later, but he didn't understand why until Sarutobi explained it to him.

Orochimaru's life was Jiraiya's to take, just as Itachi's life is Sasuke's. By killing Orochimaru, Sasuke robbed Jiraiya of his duty as Sarutobi's student. *Jiraiya is like my son*, Sarutobi told Sasuke. *Orochimaru was his best friend, and Orochimaru killed me while Jiraiya could do nothing but watch. You understand his anger, don't you, Sasuke?*

Sasuke understands, so this is what he tells Jiraiya later that night over drinks:

"Orochimaru died without a sword in his hands. I made sure of it." Jiraiya doesn't believe in the gods that Sasuke does—he only has one God, a benevolent one who preaches peace—but there is a grim satisfaction on his face when Sasuke tells him the method of Orochimaru's death. "He died a coward, without a sword in his hand, and without a proper burial."

And this:

"Orochimaru gave an order against civilians in a village called Ayagawa. I didn't say anything when the orders were given, and by the time I got to Ayagawa, seventeen people were dead. Nine of them
were women and children, and the others were defenseless villagers. Orochimaru's death was on you, I know, but that was my mistake to correct."

And finally:

"You're right that it sounds hypocritical for me to talk about Naruto's safety. But that was then, and this is now. Whether you learn to live with that, or you don't, it's not my concern. But I won't stand down. Not when it concerns Naruto. If you have a problem with this, we can step outside."

At this, Jiraiya arches an eyebrow, looking amused. "He yell at you this morning, too?"

Sasuke makes a face. "He always yells at me."

Jiraiya chuckles. "Tell me about it. It's genetic. He gets that from—"

"The Yondaime, I know. They speak in the same decibels. Makes my fucking ears bleed," Sasuke interrupts. He is drunk enough at this point that he does not notice the words that he says or Jiraiya's sudden silence. He takes another shot.

"I'm good," Sasuke assures him. The door begins to close. Instead of two elevator doors, though, Sasuke sees four.

Jiraiya grins and holds up a hand in good-bye. "I'm good. You're good. We're both good. Go home. Get laid."

"I will," Sasuke promises, and twenty minutes later, he finds himself knocking on Naruto's door.

Naturally, the night ends with Jiraiya and Sasuke utterly and completely drunk. "You good?" Sasuke asks Jiraiya, watching the man stumble into the elevator. Jiraiya blinks at the row of numbers. "I'm good," he mutters. The elevator dings. "You good?"

"I'm good," Jiraiya assures him. The door begins to close. Instead of two elevator doors, though, Sasuke sees four.

Jiraiya grins and holds up a hand in good-bye. "I'm good. You're good. We're both good. Go home. Get laid."

"I will," Sasuke promises, and twenty minutes later, he finds himself knocking on Naruto's door.

Naruto opens the door with a scowl. He's wearing a shirt that says KONOHA LAW SCHOOL CLASS OF 2007, socks, and sweats that look snug and worn, riding just so on his hips.

Sasuke realizes that he may or may not be developing an unhealthy obsession with the sharp cut of Naruto's hips. He can't keep his eyes off the stretch of skin between the hem of his shirt and the band of his sweats. He would scorch acres of earth for those centimeters of skin, conquer fucking kingdoms to put his hands around Naruto's waist and—

"How drunk are you, exactly?" Naruto asks.

From somewhere in the apartment, Sasuke hears the Nidaime say loudly, "Hey, kid!" The other ghosts also announce their presence, although at much lower decibels. The Yondaime, naturally, lets his displeasure known creatively and loudly.

Naruto considers him for a few moments, which is when Sasuke realizes that he still hasn't answered Naruto's question. "Only a little," he promises. "I just thought that you should, you know. I mean, you should know. I talked to Jiraiya. We're cool now."

"Niiice," Nidaime says from the background. "You manned up, Uchiha. Well done."

"I manned up," Sasuke repeats to Naruto. He straightens to his full height, squares his shoulders. Puffs out his cheeks with a deep exhale. "I had words with him. I also had drinks with him."

Naruto's lips are quirking into a smile. He leans his head against the door, wearing an expression
somewhere between amused exasperation and resignation. "I see that. Lots of drinks, it looks like."

Sasuke nods. And then lets out a deep breath, bracing himself against the door frame because the world is now spinning. Jiraiya can drink. "Lots. And lots."

"This will end in disaster," Yondaime breathes. "Disaster."

"This won't end in disaster," Sasuke promises Naruto earnestly. "I mean. I'm drunk, and all. But it won't."

Naruto bites his lip, smiling still. "You planning on making a move, Uchiha?"

Sasuke thinks about this. "I feel like I should," he says. And then, because Naruto looks expectant, he gropes for something to say, a move to make. After a few moments of consideration, all he can come up with is: "I got nothing."

Naruto actually laughs at this. He opens the door wider to let Sasuke in. "I can't wait to tell Sakura about this," he mutters. Sasuke steps inside.

The Yondaime immediately rises to the occasion, watching Sasuke as he stumbles into Naruto's living room. "I will smite you, so help me God if you so much as—"

Sasuke falls face-first into the comfort of Naruto's couch, and passes out before the Yondaime can even finish his sentence.

Later that night, Sasuke gets up to use the bathroom. Somewhere between washing his hands and turning off the light in the bathroom, it occurs to his drunken mind that he doesn't need to go all the way back to the living room when—

Oh, look at that.

A bed.

They wake up tangled together, but for once, Sasuke is too tired to have any sort of reaction. Instead, he says into the back of Naruto's neck (mostly his hair), "Aw fuck. I'm hung over," and despairs about the state of his life.

Naruto goes completely stiff in his arms. Then, very, very slowly, he turns onto his back and levels a flat gaze at Sasuke. "That's it?"

Sasuke blinks stupidly for a few moments. His head is pounding too loudly for him to comprehend Naruto's question.

Naruto makes a gesture, as if encompassing the two of them. "You wake up with us like this, and all you have to say is, I'm hung over?"

Which is when Sasuke realizes. They aren't just tangled: they're sharing a narrow strip in the middle of the bed. Sasuke has a leg between Naruto's, an arm around Naruto's waist, and until a few moments ago, he was breathing the sweet, clean smell of Naruto's hair, lips pressing against a patch of skin at his neck. This is the closest Sasuke has ever, ever gotten to Naruto.

Sasuke moves away quickly, flushing. Naruto actually looks angry, and that's when it hits Sasuke. He'd crossed a line just now.
So Sasuke takes a breath, squares his shoulder and does what his mother taught him. "I was asleep. I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable," Sasuke explains stiffly. He gets to his feet, feeling awkward in nothing but his jeans. Apparently, he'd thought to take off his shirt last night before crawling into Naruto's bed. "It won't happen again."

Naruto pushes himself up on the bed. His hair is a wild mess around him, but his eyes are bright and alert. "What the ever loving fuck?"

Sasuke feels his neck flush with shame. Naruto must have thought that Sasuke was…(and he wouldn't be wrong in thinking that. On any given day, Sasuke *would* be thinking that, but he was drunk, so very drunk last night.)

But Sasuke had read Naruto wrong, of course he'd read Naruto wrong. He'd looked too deeply into Naruto's intentions, misunderstood, and now look how badly he's fucked up. Sasuke has never been good at understanding people—taijutsu, strategy and war? He understands those perfectly well. But not this—whatever this is.

Ever since he's returned from Orochimaru, he's always been cautious about how he deals with Naruto. He put a hole in Naruto's lung, left him bleeding in the middle of nowhere. He has no right to presume anything with Naruto anymore, not after what he's done.

"I'll leave," Sasuke offers, picking up his shirt from the floor. He tugs it on hurriedly.

Naruto blurs across the room to grab Sasuke's wrist. "Stop it, stop." When he's sure he has Sasuke's attention, he says carefully, "Get dressed. I'll make us breakfast. We'll talk about this later. All right?"

Sasuke pulls his hand away from Naruto's grip slowly. "Fine."

Breakfast is a quiet affair, and Sasuke keeps his head low over his food the entire time (*Note to self, Sasuke commits to memory, never share a bed with Naruto ever again*). Even the walk to the Tower is silent.

It's not the embarrassment of his actions. The thing is—

It stings.

Sasuke has lived with his…thing for Naruto. He'd never thought far enough to act on it (he has no right to, not when his life is already prescribed to hunting down and killing his only family left), let alone to anticipate Naruto's reaction to a move on his part. But now that he knows, it stings. Naruto had looked *angry* when they woke up together. From the way that the Nidaime and the Shodaime talked about Naruto and him together, Sasuke had thought that maybe, *maybe*—

Apparently, not.

Sasuke busies himself with his duties. He manages to forget the morning fiasco with Naruto (as much as a Sharingan can forget; Naruto's angry expression will haunt him for years). That is, of course, until Naruto finds him again later that day.

Sasuke is taking a smoke break with Tottori in the ANBU courtyard when Naruto finds them. The rest of his team is training. Apparently, Neji banned Tottori from the training grounds for blowing up too many explosives. Sasuke doesn't mind Tottori's presence because over the weeks, they've developed an easy camaraderie. It's not as seamless as the partnerships between Neji and Lee, Shikamaru and Chouji, or Shino and Kiba, but it's a work in progress and Tottori's affinity for explosives makes him the natural partner for Sasuke.
When Naruto appears, Tottori puts out his cigarette immediately and stands at attention. "Sir."

Sasuke follows suit, but at a much slower pace. He focuses entirely on the cigarette, and even takes the time to pull up his face cloth before addressing Naruto. "Sir."

Naruto hesitates for a moment before turning to Tottori, "If you could give us a moment, ANBU."

Tottori's expression doesn't change. He just says, crisply, "Sir," and leaves. He doesn't go far though, just stands at a distance far enough that Sasuke and Naruto have their privacy. Tottori, as per protocol, will not leave until Sasuke dismisses him.

Sasuke is grateful for the privacy, really. Naruto said they would talk later, so here they are. Later. Talking.

What he's not grateful for, however, is:

"Hey, kid!" and "Hello, Sasuke, I hope you haven't been smoking too much today," and "Good morning, boy," and, "I've got my eyes on you, Uchiha."

Sasuke lets his Sharingan swirl just long enough to get a visual on all the ghosts. They're all standing at a respectful distance from Naruto, but even in the open air, it feels crowded.

Naruto doesn't say anything, just looks towards the Tower a few blocks down the road. ANBU HQ and Jounin HQ are two halves of a semi-circular building, both of which face the back of the Tower. The positioning of the buildings, the Shodaime explained, was meant to be symbolic. The Tower, built on the tallest hill in the Village, overlooks the entire Village, over the nearly six hundred thousand people who live inside its massive, sweeping walls. Behind the Tower, out of sight, is the might of the ANBU and Jounin forces that gives the Hokage her power and authority over the land.

Despite it's name, though, the Tower is only four levels high. It's wider than it is tall, with graceful, sloping roofs and lean, whetstone smooth columns that raise the full height of the building. It looks like a seat of power, and some day, Naruto will preside in it. He will rule the country, and he will rule it well. There is no denying this now because Naruto becomes stronger, smarter and more politically accomplished with each passing month. He's already one of Tsunade's top legal aids, convincing Senators and the civilian Representatives to follow Tsunade's vision.

Sasuke has no place, no business, with Naruto.

"Okay," the Nidaime says slowly after a few minutes have passed in silence. "This is odd."

The Shodaime's eyes narrow in understanding. "Something has happened between them."

The Yondaime gasps, clutching his heart. "What? What? Something happened? I told you we should have stayed!"

Sasuke squares his shoulders. He doesn't want the Yondaime to think that he…So he breaks the silence first. "About this morning." Naruto gives him a sidelong glance, but holds his peace. His face is carefully neutral, and that in itself is unsettling. Sasuke's mother taught him better, though. He didn't actually say the words this morning, so he will now. "I apologize."

Sarutobi's eyes narrow in consideration, but the Nidaime is the one to respond. "Wow. You must have screwed up really bad, kid."

The Yondaime opens his mouth to say something, but Naruto beats him to it. "You think you did something wrong?"
Sasuke refrains from answering that immediately. It's a stupid question. What's worse, it's just dragging on this apology. "Yes. You were uncomfortable," Sasuke manages finally. The words feel like sandpaper against his tongue. He clears his throat. "That wasn't my intention."

"Okay, can we leave now please?" the Nidaime asks hurriedly. The Yondaime stands his ground, looking furious. And he has a right to be, Sasuke thinks.

Naruto doesn't look away. Sasuke is used to Naruto's scrutiny. That's part of what makes Naruto so unnerving. He just stares and stares and stares into everyone's eyes, as if he can uncover the truth if he just looks hard enough.

Sasuke wants to peel his skin off for having crossed a line with someone in that way. It's a disgusting thought, that he pushed Naruto beyond his comfort zone, was unwelcome in Naruto's personal space. Sasuke knows he is many things. A traitor, a coward, a thief, even, but he would never, not in a million years, force himself—

Naruto lifts his chin, defiant. Like he's preparing for a blow. "So what, then? If that wasn't your intention, what was? Did you ever have any…intentions towards me? Or was I just reading you wrong this entire time?"

When Sasuke doesn't immediately answer, Naruto elaborates. "I mean, correct me if I'm wrong here, but you did an awful lot of looking for the past few months." Naruto makes a vague gesture in the air, and even though the gesture is benign, it makes Sasuke flush. "And you were looking with a whole lot of intent, let me tell you."

Sasuke hasn't been able to look away from Naruto since he got back from Otogakure. Somehow, even Naruto—the idiot that he is—has noticed Sasuke's blatant staring. Sasuke offers the only thing he can. "I won't look anymore." But then, because he has his pride, "And for the record, it wasn't really my fault."

Naruto's eyes narrow. "What do you mean it wasn't your fault, you dipshit? Grow a pair already! Take responsibility and explain what the hell is going on in your head because I'm getting a little tired of your drama."

Sasuke's patience snaps. "It's not my fault!" he hisses and gestures at Naruto. "You look like—like—"

Naruto snarls, hands are clenched into fists now. He looks as though he's about two seconds away from punching Sasuke. "Use your words, Sasuke."

Sasuke gropes for words and comes up with ones that aren't even his own. For lack of anything better, he uses the same words the Nidaime used when he saw Karin. "A man can't not look. Not when you look the way you do."

Naruto's chakra crackles. "What?"

Sasuke feels his own chakra coil, knows that this kind of reckless use of their power isn't safe. But Naruto has always been the only one who can get a rise out of him like this. On cue, Tottori takes a tentative step back towards them. "A man can't not look," Sasuke repeats, ignoring Tottori. "Not when you go parading around looking the way you do. And I'm going to do you a favor—"

"What's that supposed to mean? The way I parade around? If you have a problem with my being gay, Sasuke, I swear, I'm going to kick your ass—"

"I'm going to do you a favor and tell you this, Uzumaki. You might want to tone it down a bit,"
Sasuke continues, raising his voice to be heard over Naruto's mounting anger. "Because I won't be the last man in your life who finally acts on it and does something to make you feel uncomfortable."

Naruto becomes completely still at this. Sasuke runs a hand through his hair, feeling the energy drain from him now that Naruto's own chakra has settled. "For God's sake, Naruto," he mutters. "Don't stand so fucking close if you don't mean it."

Naruto still doesn't say anything. "It won't happen again," Sasuke promises. He makes sure to meet Naruto's eyes when he says this. "You have my word. It won't happen again. I was drunk, and my behavior was unacceptable." Sasuke takes a deep breath to steel himself for what needs to be done. "You should bring it up with Kakashi. He'll know what to do, and I'll honor whatever decision he makes, court martial or otherwise."

Naruto makes a face, the same one he makes when someone puts the wrong order of ramen in front of him. "You're such an idiot. That's all you have to say for yourself?"

Sasuke flushes. "I won't defend my actions. They're not worth defending. Talk to Kakashi, and I'll honor whatever disciplinary actions he deems fit," he repeats, and then takes a step back. "You won't have to see me again, if that's what you want."

Naruto puts up a hand to stop him. It's not the hand that stops Sasuke from leaving immediately, but his sudden smile, open and friendly again, like the conversation they just had didn't even happen. "I'm going to do something that will make both our lives a hell of a lot easier. But you have to promise not to freak out," Naruto says very, very carefully.

He looks radiant, and Sasuke's promise of I won't look is already slipping away (how can he not look, how can he? How can anyone not look?)

The Yondaime mutters, "I am so very confused right now."

The Nidaime hm-s in agreement. "Hey, Brother. Five hundred ryo, Naruto's going to beat the shit out of Uchiha. What do you think?" The Shodaime immediately agrees to the wager and adds five hundred ryo of his own.

Sarutobi observes Naruto carefully. "He doesn't look angry anymore." The ghost glances around them, looking concerned. "Although Naruto's anger can be unpredictable and quite destructive to nearby buildings—"

He's interrupted because Naruto takes three strides and steps right up into Sasuke's personal space. Sasuke edges back until his back hits the tree. He's cornered now.

"All right, here we go. Ready? Remember, no freaking out," Naruto says, and places both his hands on Sasuke's armor right over his chest, as if trying to calm a wild animal. Naruto smiles. "I love you."

The Yondaime staggers back at this, clutching at his chest dramatically. "What? Wait what? Why?"


But Sasuke knows better. I love you, Naruto told Shino, and then to Hinata, and to everyone else he considers a friend. And he does love them, he loves every single soul in this village. Sasuke won't read into this. He won't make the same mistake twice.

"I'm in love with you," Naruto insists, as if reading Sasuke's mind. He steps even closer into Sasuke's
space until they're pressed together (in the middle of the garden, and anyone with a decent pair of eyes can see, but Sasuke feels stuck to his spot, he can't move when Naruto is looking at him like that). "And god only knows why because half the village is on my case for it. God, if I have to listen to another one of Lee's lectures on how I'm ruining my life—"

"Lee?" Sasuke asks, dumbfounded. That traitor, a voice in his mind whispers.

"But they don't know you like I do," Naruto goes on, determined now to make his point. "I mean, aside from all the drinking, and the smoking…" Naruto trails off, looking at a spot on Sasuke's shoulder, and half lost in thought. "Well, I mean, there's also the time in prison. And you look like a thug with your tattoos. Also the drugs, and the bounty on your head in two separate countries…"

Naruto stops in his list. "So you're not the most upstanding citizen in the Village."

The Yondaime yells, "No he is not, Naruto. You deserve better—"

"But you're a good man," Naruto continues. "And you're a gentleman, sometimes at that worst possible moments like this morning—"

"I'm not a—"

"I've seen you carry groceries for old ladies, and hold out Sakura's chair for her when you take her out to dinner, Uchiha," Naruto interrupts sternly. "And I don't know what you call that little speech you gave just now. What would I tell Kakashi anyways? That you put your arm around me in your sleep? Snored a little? You moron. I've been trying to get in your pants for months now."

The Yondaime takes in a sharp breath. "I did not need to know that."

The Shodaime makes a soothing tutting noise. "It is natural for a parent to feel this way, Minato. It takes a bit of time to adjust, but once you accept that your child has grown and is an adult—"

"For the love of all that is good, Sasuke," Naruto goes on. "I thought I was finally going to get laid this morning, but no. All you did was bitch about your hang over. I was this close to punching you in the face."

Sasuke's mouth snaps shut with a click of his teeth. Oh, he realizes. That explains a lot.

"I love you," Naruto repeats quietly. He takes a few careful steps back, away from Sasuke. "I know you'll never say the same to me. And I know you'll leave again soon. You might have Kakashi-sensei and Sakura fooled, but I know you will."

"It's my duty to my Clan," Sasuke finds himself repeating the same words Naruto has heard a thousand times before. He doesn't have to explain himself to anyone, but when he's with Naruto, he feels the need to justify his actions, whatever they may be. It's not that Naruto is judging him; it's that somehow, over the years, Sasuke has started to care what Naruto thinks of him, how Naruto measures him as a man. He wants to do better—he wants to be better—because that is what Naruto does to him.

"I know." Naruto takes a breath and forces a smile. "I'm not a child anymore, Uchiha. I don't expect a happily-ever-after."

The words are out before Sasuke can rethink them. "You deserve one."

Naruto's smile is a bit more genuine this time. "I've learned to work with what I've got."

Sasuke takes a breath. This is the first honest conversation they've had in a long time. He may not get
another chance to say the things that need to be said. "A few months. A year at most."

That's all the time he has. Akatsuki is moving, and Sasuke will have to strike first. He may never fulfill his duties—not if Itachi gives him amnesty another time, and not if every year, Naruto etches his way deeper into Sasuke's skin, into his very bones. He has to say the words aloud, break the hold that Naruto has on him. He needs to cauterize this wound before it bleeds him to death.

"I won't stay. And when it's done, I won't come back. I don't want to come back. This—" He gestures between the two of them, has to swallow on the words he wants to say. Instead, he says what needs to be said: "I don't want this."

I can't have this.

Naruto nods at this. He doesn't look surprised, just tired. "Say good bye when you leave this time."

This is a promise he can keep. "I will."

Naruto lips thin into a weak smile. He looks worn out, not at all like someone who just said I love you. It should be a joyous thing to say those words. Sasuke should know; Sakura has made him sit through enough chick flicks to be able to surmise that much. But there's no joy in this. "I have to get back to work."

He's about to leave when Sasuke reaches for his wrist. Naruto's skin is warm under his fingers, and Sasuke can feel the pull of him. If he yields, Naruto's gravity could anchor Sasuke for a lifetime. He wants to yield, wants to close that gap between them because it feels as though Naruto is tugging at his very marrow. He could have this, if he wants, but hundreds of miles away, he has kin to murder.

Sasuke can't bring himself to say the words he ought to say, so he holds onto Naruto's wrist and stares at the spot where their skin makes contact. Naruto tolerates Sasuke's silence for a few moments, but then he pulls away. His fingers are gentle as he pulls Sasuke's hand free from his wrist. He leaves without saying anything else.

Sasuke turns back towards Tottori, intending to head back to work as well. Tottori has turned his back out of respect for their privacy, and Sasuke is grateful for that gesture. Sasuke takes a few steps towards the building, but the ghosts don't follow, frozen in the moments after witnessing something that wasn't intended for their eyes.

As Sasuke is passing the Yondaime, he pauses just long enough to look the man in the eyes and say what he should have said to Naruto:

"I'm sorry."
Chapter Notes

Sasuke avoids Naruto for the next few weeks and devotes all his time to his job. The only company he has these days is the ghosts. All except the Yondaime, that is.

The Yondaime's loud, angry outbursts have been replaced entirely by his stony silence towards Sasuke. It's this—not the betrayal of Sasuke pushing his hand through Naruto's right lung, but Sasuke's decision to leave Naruto when the time comes—that the Yondaime can't seem to forgive. He begins to avoid Sasuke entirely, spending most of his time with Naruto.

The Shodaime and Sarutobi are busy monitoring the situation in the Tower, but the Nidaime bores easily of these long meetings. So when Kakashi takes Sasuke out for drinks a few weeks later, only the Nidaime is with him.

The plan, Kakashi explains, is to strike Akatsuki first.

Sasuke listens while Kakashi talks about Madara's army. "He's recruiting from different sites, so the troops are spread out," Kakashi explains, slouched back in his chair as if they're discussing weather patterns and not an impending attack by an undead Mangekyou user. "They're rotated in and out of Amegakure. He knows that all the Kages are watching him, so he's keeping them all guessing about the cards he's holding."

What happens in Amegakure, stays in Amegakure. It's a black hole of information. Not even Karin, with her spiderweb network across the entire Continent, has reliable sources inside the city.

"That's like him," the Nidaime agrees. The information Kakashi is sharing isn't new to Sasuke. The ghosts have been attending every single meeting in the Situation Room, and the Nidaime tells Sasuke what he hears. Despite Sasuke's drinks with Jiraiya, he still doesn't have clearance for these meetings. Counterintelligence is working to gather information right now about Madara's army and the Akatsuki members themselves. There's nothing concrete yet, because Akatsuki isn't easy prey to locate.

The debate among Tsunade's captains is this: To strike the army first, or to send out small groups to assassinate Akatsuki members individually?

"It's a tough call," the Nidaime points out. "You have two assets to protect: The Nine-Tails, and the village. And you have two attacks coming your way: The army, and Akatsuki itself. But before you make a decision, you need information. You know this already."

Sasuke nods. It's the worst part about wars, the waiting. You can't make a move without being absolutely sure that resources are being spent in the right place at the right time. Tsunade, more than her predecessors, is proving to be a cautious Hokage. She won't send any one of her men and women into a battlefield without being absolutely sure that all other options have been exhausted.

The Nidaime holds up a finger to make his next point. "But the difficulty is in separating the information that comes out of Amegakure. Half the chatter we hear from that city is false, designed to throw us off Akatsuki's scent. So the intel we have doesn't corroborate with information that the Mizukage or the Kazekage has. We're fighting blind. There's only a few ways to get around this, and none of it is viable given our resources. The issue that Tsunade and Kakashi have to deal with, then,
"—listening to me?" Kakashi looks irritated.

Sasuke blinks at Kakashi. It was sloppy of him to focus on the Nidame so exclusively. He was even looking at the Nidame as the ghost talked—to Kakashi, it must have looked as if he was staring at an empty seat. "Yeah."

"Your Sharingan," Kakashi points out mildly.

Sasuke lets his Sharingan die out. He needs an explanation for his behavior. Sitting in a bar across from Kakashi with his Sharingan at full activity isn't acceptable. "I was just..." Sasuke makes a vague gesture.

Kakashi's hand curves around his beer. He is considering Sasuke closely. "You were distracted."

Sasuke shrugs, trying to move past the topic. He was distracted, yes, but that's the one thing he doesn't want Kakashi to notice about him. Instead, he finishes the last of his beer, and then looks for the waitress for a refill. She's busy with another table, though, so she doesn't notice Sasuke.

"You were distracted," Kakashi continues, mild still, "because of Naruto." Sasuke tries to shrug, but it feels stiff even to him. Kakashi takes a breath. "The two of you," he says, "belong in a goddamn soap opera."

Sasuke's anger flares at that immediately, even as the Nidaime mutters, "Amen," under his breath.

"It's none of your business, Hatake."

Kakashi's voice is low when he responds, but his words are sharp. "It is my business because your behavior reflects on me, Uchiha. Do you understand?"

Sasuke opens his mouth to say something, but the Nidaime beats him to it. "Count, kid. Remember what my brother told you."

So Sasuke snaps his mouth shut and counts to ten. "Did the Captain say anything about my behavior?" Sasuke asks finally. The truth is that Hiashi has started to rely more on Sasuke in the past few days. Sasuke is called in to discuss each and every single one of the missions that Hiashi assigns his men. The current ANBU Lieutenant, Subaru, also runs mission routes by Sasuke frequently. A lot of Hiashi's men are traveling through the Land of Rice Fields, maneuvering around Amegakure to get the information they need, so Sasuke's expertise of the area is needed to ensure the safety of the men that are deployed in the field.

Unit 3 itself is sent on more missions than the other units, and these days, Sasuke and his team spend more time outside the village than they do back at home. These missions don't involve engaging the enemy. Instead, they stalk persons of interest, watching their trails and making note of any increased activity in sectors of interest. Finding out Madara is alive is one thing; gathering information about what he plans to do next is quite another.

Kakashi doesn't answer Sasuke's question. Instead, he glances over at the waitress to get her attention, and this time, she arrives with refills. "Here are your drinks," she says with a smile. She's a pretty blonde with dark-brown eyes, and her gaze lingers on Kakashi. She's likely only a few years older than Sasuke, a civilian college student, and she's clumsy in trying to get Kakashi's attention.

"Thank you," Kakashi says politely, and the smile she gives him is so obvious that the Nidaime chuckles. Sasuke is used to this—women falling over themselves to get Kakashi's attention. When he
was younger, it made him feel embarrassed watching Kakashi run his eyes over the women who approached him. It happened on every mission, no matter where they went. Now, it's less of an embarrassment, because Sasuke finds himself as the wingman every now and then. To be fair, Kakashi is sometimes his wingman, so all in all, it's an even deal.

Still. Sasuke has to take a shot when he can. "She's barely twenty, Kakashi," Sasuke mutters when the waitress leaves. "Speaking of which, Sakura's going to be twenty in two years."

Kakashi had been watching her leave, a speculative gleam in his eyes, but he instantly looks away. "I appreciate you making that comment."

Sasuke grins. "I thought you might."

Kakashi's eyes crinkle in a smile, and he neatly switches topics again. "Hiashi tells me good things," he says casually. "You're coordinating missions now, I hear."

Sasuke shrugs, trying to be nonchalant but failing. "I know the Land of Rice Fields well enough." It's a serious responsibility to be given charge of other men's lives, and Hiashi trusts him enough now to do it. The fact that Hiashi reports to Kakashi on his performance is odd; it's above and beyond what a Captain needs to report to his Commander, so Hiashi must be sharing this information with Kakashi informally.

"Resolve this thing with Naruto," Kakashi orders, switching topics again abruptly. "You can't have such an unstable personal life."

Sasuke makes a face. "There's nothing to resolve."

"That's not what Sakura tells me," Kakashi answers. "Whatever it is between you and Naruto, fix it. Naruto is your senior officer, and he's a public figure in the village. He's above and beyond your pay grade, and I don't want your childishness disturbing his career."

Sasuke flinches at this. Naruto and Sakura are Kakashi's pride and joy. He loves them too much and has invested in them too much for Sasuke to go messing it up. Naruto, especially, is being groomed for the legacy he is: The son of the Fourth Hokage, Hatake Kakashi's student—Kakashi himself slated to be the Sixth Hokage—Jiraiya's godson, and Tsunade's favorite and legal heir. The stars are aligned, and Sasuke needs to step out of the way.

"Your behavior is unacceptable for a CO of the ANBU forces," Kakashi continues. "And Naruto has more important things to do with his time. Do you understand me?"

Sasuke nods once. It's bad enough that he needs to have this conversation; it's worse coming from Kakashi. Of all the humiliations in Sasuke's life, getting a reprimand from Kakashi ranks pretty high. "Yeah, I got it."

Their drinks are nearly done, so Kakashi reaches for his wallet. Sasuke does the same, and they both place bills on the table. Kakashi, Sasuke notices, leaves an extravagant tip. He can't help himself. "Seriously?"

Kakashi gets to his feet. Even with his face mask, Sasuke knows that the man is smiling. "Are you really that intent on making sure I don't get laid, Uchiha?" He doesn't give Sasuke enough time to answer, but saunters casually towards the waitress instead. Sasuke rolls his eyes, and watches their brief exchange, fighting the twitch of his lips.

Sasuke can understand Kakashi's attraction: She's fresh-faced and bright with slim jewelry twinkling at her ears and her slender wrist. "That man," the Nidaime says, sounding impressed, "has got some
Kakashi lingers for a few more minutes, and in those minutes, the waitress edges closer towards him, tilting her face up to get Kakashi's attention. Kakashi tilts his face down, and Sasuke can imagine that both their voices are now low. It's another few moments before Kakashi is heading back towards him, looking smug.

"Twenty," Sasuke reiterates as they step back into the night air.

"One, she's twenty-four," Kakashi points out, holding up a finger. "Two, just because you're not getting laid doesn't mean you can rain on everyone else's parade. Now go away. Her shift ends in a few minutes."

Sasuke grins. "For the record, you're an awful role model. Sarutobi-sensei is mortified that he ever chose you as my mentor. He's ashamed of your behavior."

Kakashi loops an arm around Sasuke's shoulders. "You were beyond redemption when I met you. And Sarutobi-sensei was—" Kakashi places undue stress on the word. "He was more than happy to leave your sorry ass for me to kick into shape. Now, leave."

Sasuke mock salutes the man and steps away before Kakashi can reach out to smack him on the head.

When he gets summons the next morning from Kakashi, Sasuke thinks nothing of it, and neither does the Nidaime. He listens to the Nidaime's low-pitched ramble as he relates his days as an ANBU, at the very beginning of the organization, when Konoha was still just an idea, when the Western tribes were still uniting under a single banner to protect against the growing threat of the demons.

The Nidaime is still talking about his first failed missions as they approach the Konoha Police Department. For some reason, Kakashi requested Sasuke's presence at the station instead of his offices in the Tower, but the man is unpredictable enough that Sasuke doesn't think to question it.

"I didn't always win my fights," the Nidaime explains. "That's what surprises me when I hear people talk about me these days. They make it seem like I never lost a single battle."

Sasuke can't help but grin. He keeps his voice pitched low as he walks through the double-doors into KPD. "You're a legend, Tobirama-sensei. Legends don't have losses."

The Nidaime chuckles. "Boy, I sometimes got my ass whooped so bad in the field, my brother had to spoon feed me my meals for days afterwards. This one time—"

He falls abruptly silent, because he sees Yamanaka Ino. She's waiting for Sasuke in the large foyer where visitors check in, holding a manila folder in her hands.

"ANBU, with me, please," she says neatly, and doesn't give Sasuke enough time to respond. Instead, she rounds on her heels and walks past the security desk. Sasuke falls into step next to her. He doesn't say anything immediately because Ino is the Deputy Lieutenant for Ibiki's KPD forces. Technically, she outranks him.

She's dressed elegantly as always, hair pulled back into a slick ponytail for the day. She looks stunning, so it's hard for Sasuke to keep his eyes off her when she talks. "Jounin forces intercepted a male, between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, Westerner of unknown origin. Weighs about two hundred pounds, six feet, three inches. He was trying to infiltrate our northwestern border. He's one
of Orochimaru's men based on the dormant seal visible on his neck."

There were dozens of men and women with seals on their necks in Otogakure. Orochimaru was a firm believer in having back up plans.

Sasuke stays silent, waiting for Ino to divulge any more information. A seal-bearer from Otogakure could be anyone. More than likely, they're not friendly. But no matter how long Sasuke waits for information, there's no more information forthcoming. Ino looks stern in profile, jaw clenched tight against what she knows and will not reveal. They're making their way through the cramped, labyrinthine corridors to whatever destination Ino has in mind for this occasion.

KPD is in one of the oldest buildings in Konohagakure. Sasuke's great-great-grand father built this building and headed the first KPD division. This is the first generation in which there wasn't an Uchiha serving in Konohagakure's police force.

Sasuke knows the corridors of this building better than any other in the village, so he knows exactly where he is as he follows Ino's lead. Sometimes, when Sasuke got out of school early, Uncle Kyoguku would let Sasuke visit him at the KPD. Sasuke would sneak around the building whenever his uncle wasn't looking, pretending to be a cop, hiding under agents' desks and poking through case file archives. When it was time to go home, Uncle Kyoguku would open the door to his office and yell: "I'm counting to three, Sasuke!" If Sasuke weren't back in his uncle's office by three, his uncle wouldn't buy him ice-cream on the way back home.

When Ibiki arrested him, it wasn't the arrest that stung most. It was the fact that they led him past his uncle's office in shackles that made Sasuke's eyes sting. So now, as Ino leads him past that door, Sasuke has to grit his teeth against that hallowed out feeling in his chest—

Remembers, vividly, the door opening, Uncle Kyoguku stepping outside—

"—all right, kid?" the Nidaime asks softly.

Sasuke snaps back to awareness and realizes that he's paused at the door. It's a simple wooden door with CAPTAIN etched into it. There is also a small fan under the words—Uchiha—because for generations, an Uchiha shouldered this responsibility. Sasuke always thought that some day, he'd step into that role as well, earn his badge and carry on his uncle's legacy.

But Uchiha Kyoguku will be the last of the Uchiha Captains. Out of respect, this room is left empty in KPD now. Ibiki occupies a different office, the same office he occupied when he was Uchiha Kyoguku's Lieutenant.

Ino is waiting respectfully for him to move on. She smiles when their eyes meet. "Uchiha Kyoguku was one of the greatest Captains this department ever had. We are all honored, each one of us, to carry his legacy forward." She takes a breath, "I never got a chance to say this, Sasuke, and this is delayed, but I'm sorry for your loss. I truly am."

She's Deputy now, so she must have access to the classified archives. She must have seen the cold case files with his family members' names stamped on them.

Sasuke's first instinct is to lash out, but then he looks at Ino and sees something there that reminds him of how the Nidaime had looked when he found out. He had always thought that it was pity, and so he had kept his family's death close to his heart, unwilling and unable to tolerate any form of pity. But it isn't pity, not in the least, because each and every single ninja has felt loss in their own way.

He counts to ten, gives himself the time and space to find the right words to say.
Finally, it occurs to him. "Thank you."

Ino goes entirely still. Her mouth is slightly open, as if she's on the verge of saying something. When a few moments pass without any reaction from her, Sasuke gestures down the corridor they were walking. "After you."

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Ino gestures at the door behind her. "The Hokage, Commander, and Captains are waiting inside the interrogation viewing room. Three of the Hokage's aides are present as well, representing the Department of Justice and the Hokage Legal Counsel. So is Jiraiya."

"Quite the audience," Sasuke says. The Nidaime puts a head through the door, and Sasuke can't help but stare. He's gotten used to the ghosts being ghosts, but it still unnerves him when they float or materialize out of walls.

"Brother, Minato, and Hiruzen are in there, too," the Nidaime says, pulling his head back out of the door. "Seems serious. The lawyer girl, Tenten? She and Naruto are talking some legal jargon about the prisoner." He points to another door down the corridor. "The prisoner's inside over there. Big guy."

Sasuke knows the layout of this level of KPD very well. He's been in the interrogation room more than once. It's odd now to be on the other side of the door.

Ino slaps the manila folder she's holding against Sasuke's chest. "Jounin field report, and KPD arrest reports for the guy. They're not very useful. The suspect speaks our language well enough, but I'm guessing he prefers the northern dialect. We have a translator in the viewing room, so no need to speak in our language during your interrogation of him. The man won't say anything, except that he wants to speak with you. Alone."

Sasuke is about to say something light—make a joke about his fans from around the world—but he opens the folder and freezes at the headshot he sees there.

"You'll brief the commanding officers about what you know, and then you and I will interview him together," Ino is saying. "I'm not authorized to breach his mental barriers until—"

Sasuke doesn't let her finish her sentence. Instead, he pushes past her and towards the interrogation room.

When Sasuke opens the door, the prisoner turns to him with a warm smile. "Sasuke."

Sasuke shuts the door behind him. He'd been expecting an enemy, so it's hard to keep the smile off his face now. "Jugo."

Jugo isn't in handcuffs. Sasuke suspects that this absence is due to the sheer size of the man. There are not likely to be handcuffs big enough to wrap around the man's wrists. Instead, he has seals around his wrists, delicate paper curled around the wide circumference of his hands. If Jugo were to break the seals, Sasuke isn't sure it would do him much damage. The man is all coiled muscle and bulk, a juggernaut on and off the field.

But he is also kind and loyal, a man that Sasuke would want on his side in any war, on any battlefield. The smile that he gives Sasuke is open and friendly, and makes the freckles on his face crinkle.

"How is she?" Sasuke asks, switching neatly to the northern dialect. He takes the seat across from Jugo without any further greetings. Ino hasn't followed him into the room, which Sasuke is grateful
Jugo doesn't need clarification. There is only one she: Karin. "She's fine," Jugo replies, taking the cue from Sasuke and speaking in the northern dialect as well. It has been far too long that Sasuke has spoken the northern tongue; it's a relief to speak the language again.

The interrogation table and seats are placed so that both Sasuke and Jugo are visible in profile to whoever is watching in the viewing room; no doubt, the translator is making note of the conversation for everyone who is watching. It's a fine line for him to walk: speak to Jugo as freely as he would like without compromising Jugo or Karin in the process. And besides, his loyalty has always been questioned; he can't give Konohagakure any more reason to doubt him. "She safe?"

Jugo answers the question with a brief nod. Sasuke knows that Tsunade and the others must be frustrated with this conversation, but Karin prizes her secrecy. She's the Black Widow, the only woman who holds any amount of power in the wild lands of the Rice Fields. She has far too many enemies—including Tsunade—and Sasuke will protect her, because that's what he owes her. But if Jugo is here, then something might be wrong. "Who's with her?"

"Most of our men. She's settling down for the season, so she won't be traveling so much anymore. We can all stop worrying about her. For now, at least."

It's hard to keep Sasuke's irritation out of his voice. "You're not there right now." Jugo is one of Karin's best lines of defense. It angers Sasuke enough that Karin travels alone as often as she does. The fact that she's being this reckless with Akatsuki on her trail makes him see red.

Jugo smiles again. He doesn't take offense at Sasuke's line of questioning, because he's as loyal to Karin as Sasuke is. "No, I'm not. But Suigetsu is with her. So are Subaru and Inoue. They send their regards. One of Suigetsu's women has just had a baby girl. He wanted me to share the news with you. Her name is Megumi."

Sasuke smiles despite himself. Something warm blooms in his stomach. In the bowels of Otogakure, none of them ever thought they would see sunshine, have families, live normal lives. But here is proof that they made it out: A baby. And Suigetsu, of all people, a father. "Megumi," Sasuke repeats, and can't keep the wonder out of his voice.

Jugo has a smile too. He cups his hands together as if holding a child. "She's this small, Sasuke. The Gods as my witness, she's the most beautiful thing on earth. You should have been there."

Sasuke nods, holding onto the warmth of the feeling for as long as he can. "She needs a Godfather," he points out, because in the Land of Rice Fields, that is as important as having a father. Especially so, when fathers are always dying so easily. "You stand for it?"

"You weren't there," Jugo points out. "So I stood for it."

The guilt gnaws at him. He didn't even say goodbye to Suigetsu and Jugo; he just dragged Orochimaru's body to Konohagakure. This is the first time he's seen Jugo since it all ended. "I would have come if he'd sent word, Jugo." He takes a breath, clenches his hand into a fist on the table. "I know I left without—I know I haven't been a good friend—"

Jugo puts up a hand, silencing Sasuke with a smile. "Sasuke, stop apologizing. You're not very good at it, and if Suigetsu ever found out you said I'm sorry, he'll never let you live it down." Sasuke doesn't bother to hide his smile at the assessment, grateful that Jugo spared him from his meandering attempt at an apology. "We are blood-brothers, us three. Always. There are no apologies between us, no need for explanations," Jugo says, meeting Sasuke's gaze and holding it steady like he always
does. "Suigetsu knows you would have ridden north. That's why he didn't send word."

Sasuke carefully unclenches his fist, presses his hand against the table firmly. They are blood-brothers, beyond friends, a bond so strong that they are kin; it isn't even a choice. He would have ridden north, but Suigetsu knew, instinctively, that Sasuke needed to keep his distance from the Land of Rice Fields. He needed respite after five years of war and death. "I saw her in Urausu. She didn't even tell me Suigetsu was expecting a pup." He doesn't understand why Karin didn't mention it; she has always wanted his loyalty, and telling Sasuke of Megumi's impending arrival would have been a sure way of securing it.

Jugo's smile is full of warmth. "It was a bit of a surprise for all of us," Jugo mutters. Sasuke smirks; this can only mean that Suigetsu was as blind-sided by Megumi's arrival in the world as Sasuke is now. "Suigetsu says hello, by the way. He would appreciate it if you visited soon to see Megumi."

Sasuke can't help it, he laughs. Suigetsu is a foul, violent, unpredictable man. He hates most of humanity just on principal. "That's not what Suigetsu said."

Jugo's eyes crinkle in a smile again. "He said that you're a pox-ridden son of a whore, and if you don't visit Megumi, he'll cut your neck while you sleep and piss on your corpse."

It's instinct to respond. He doesn't know how else to interact with Suigetsu except with death threats and vile insults. "Tell him that he is a piece of shit that dribbled out of a goat's ass, and that if he disturbs my sleep, I'll gouge out his eyes and make him scream for his bitch of a mother."

"I'll tell him you said hello back," Jugo says, diplomatic as always. "Anything else?"

Sasuke tilts his head. He misses being able to prod Suigetsu and provoking his anger. For over three years, it was all the entertainment he had in his life. "Tell him I'll visit next month and as often as I can after that. Gods know we can't trust the stupid son of a bitch to raise the girl on his own."

Jugo's eyes go slightly wide. "This is a disaster, isn't it?"

Sasuke can't help himself. He laughs a second time. It's easy to laugh with Jugo because Jugo witnessed some of the worst moments in Sasuke's life; laughter is much easier to share. This time Jugo joins him, the two of them getting louder as the thought sinks in: Suigetsu, a father. "Oh Gods help us all," Jugo says, laughing still, "she's going to be a little terror."

Sasuke feels his eyes tearing up from laughter, so he rubs at his face to calm down. It's hard to keep the occasional chuckle from escaping even as he says, "So you got yourself fucking arrested to tell me that Suigetsu procreating is a bad idea? You know I'm broke, right? Short of breaking you out of here, I'm not sure I can afford your bail."

At this, Jugo's smile becomes strained. Sasuke feels his own smile fall away in increments. Jugo and Suigetsu were his only companionship for nearly three years. They lived under the same oppressive stench of Orochimaru's sickness. They shared the same strain of desperation—murdered brothers and fathers, entire oceans of blood shared between them in unfulfilled revenge—that drove them all to Otogakure. They were his right and left hand in battle, shared the same miserable trenches and faced the same unrelenting enemies. He knows Jugo well enough now that he can read the man's silences.

Jugo traveled hundreds of miles to deliver a message. The message wasn't the birth of Suigetsu's daughter. There's something more.

Sasuke places a hand flat on the tabletop, pressing his fingers in to ground himself. "Whatever it is —"
"Best be alone for it," Jugo interrupts quietly.

Sasuke glances to his right at the black, opaque screen separating them from the viewing room. "You breached our borders, Jugo. There's paperwork to do, probably a fucking court appearance before I can—"

Jugo leans across the table to place a hand on Sasuke's forearm, gripping hard, and Sasuke falls silent at the gesture, remembers—

Itachi's careful grip on his hand on his first day of school, telling Sasuke that he'd be there at three, on the dot, to pick him up again after school finished, *don't worry, Sasuke, it's not all bad, you'll find friends*—

"My brother," Sasuke says.

Jugo pulls away carefully.

Sasuke waits in the silence for Jugo to correct him, to say *no, it's not your brother*, but there's nothing. So he lifts his eyes from the tabletop and meets Jugo's gaze. "Is my brother well?"

Jugo's eyes are bright. Usually, Jugo is unflinching, broad-shouldered and so steady that he feels reliable as a mountain. Now, though, he looks helpless. "We don't have to do this now."

The exhaustion sinks into Sasuke's bones all at once. "Okay." His voice sounds foreign to his own ears, as though he's a child again, afraid and unsure and ill-prepared for what comes next (*Where's Shisui? When's he coming back?*) "Okay."

There is a way to do this, a way to give the news, and a way to receive it. So Sasuke takes a breath, counts, *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine*—

*Ten.*

"All right," Sasuke says, and it comes out as a whisper despite himself. He clears his throat, says, louder, "Now. We do this now."

"Get to your feet, Sasuke," Jugo says, and even as he says it, Sasuke pushes away from the table and gets to his feet, bracing both hands on the tabletop to hold his weight. He keeps his head bowed low—

Remembers Uncle Kyoguku in that moment, how he'd staggered to his feet when KPD officers arrived at his doorstep forty-seven hours after Shisui had gone missing—

Sasuke feels crowded in, as if there's not enough air in the world for him to take. It feels as if he's drowning, as if he's Shisui going under and feeling his lungs fill up slowly. It dawns on him then: *I'm alone.*

The thought makes him close his eyes, breathe deep against the hollow feeling in his chest. He thought he knew what loneliness meant. He didn't.

"Now?" Jugo asks, because he knows the drill. His family believes in the same old religion as Sasuke does. He knows how this is done.

Sasuke breathes through his mouth, sucks in the air as though he's a man drowning. He knows he should count to ten, but if he starts counting now, he'll never stop. He'll keep counting until he can delay the truth of the moment for a day, a month, till the end of the fucking world. So he says,
"Now."

Jugo gets to his feet wearily and waits for Sasuke to straighten up. Sasuke stays braced against the table, hunched over on himself so that all he sees is the table top and nothing else. Jugo repeats, quieter now, "Get to your feet, my friend."

Sasuke pushes himself to full height, plants his feet shoulder-width apart, breathes deep and squares his shoulder.

He will take this news standing, because this is how it is done: You stand in respect.

You ask: "Is my brother well?"

"No," Jugo answers. "Your brother is dead, Sasuke."

The Uchiha Clan's vigil is one that lasts just long enough for a man and his sword to burn on a pyre. The pyre is always lit on the banks of a body of water; for generations, this has been the Naka River. Whatever is left of the metal is thrown into the water along with the ashes.

Burning a body takes a few hours; melting steel takes longer. The fire is sustained by chakra, by the Sharingan users who use katon jutsus to make sure that the process is complete. At the end of that time, their name is etched into the dragon stone. This is how the Sharingan oath to the dragons is fulfilled: Through fire.

The last time Sasuke held vigil, he was eight years old, and his hands were shaking so hard he couldn't perform the katon jutsus needed to sustain the fire long enough to melt all the bodies and all the swords in the Uchiha Compound. So he ripped apart the wood of the Compound instead, decimated each chair, bed, wall, and paneling, built a pyre so high that the fire department arrived on scene to make sure it wouldn't spread. He had an audience for it, people lining up on the bridge to gawk at the skinny little kid dragging bodies to a mass pyre on a wheelbarrow still half-full with fall leaves that Uncle Inabi had raked the weekend before, a trail of red marking the path he took from the Compound to the riverbank. Eventually, KPD officers arrived on scene and tried to stop him long enough to get a statement, but Sasuke was crazed with the need to finish the task at hand.

The last time Sasuke held the vigil, he didn't finish, because someone knocked him out from behind. The next thing he knew, he was in the Hokage's offices, looking into Sarutobi's kind face as he blinked back to consciousness.

Usually, the vigil is held only by Sharingan users. But Sasuke doesn't hold this vigil alone, because the ghosts are with him. So are his snakes, scattered across the slope of the hill. They appeared a few hours after Jugo delivered the news. They must have sensed Sasuke's grief, so the entire hill is littered with snakes now, eighteen of them. None of them are venturing too close to Sasuke, which he appreciates. Rin isn't here, but Sasuke can feel her presence in the back of his mind.

It doesn't occur to him to ask any of them to leave.

Sasuke cleans out the shrine, lights incense, and scrubs the steps leading up to the double-doors. The ghosts watch as he does this, patient as the hours roll by, and don't say a word even when Sasuke finally lights the lanterns in the shrine and begins his vigil.

Sasuke builds the pyre on the slopes of the Naka River, just beyond the steps leading up to his family's shrine. There is no body, no sword, nothing at all to place on the pyre because Jugo couldn't find a body.
Jugo had told Sasuke—the both of them standing ramrod straight in that interrogation room—that Itachi had died of an infection. Karin had felt Itachi's chakra spike precipitously and then flatline a moment later, the typical sign that someone had passed on. By the time Jugo had traced that chakra signal to Kitahiroshima, it was too late. Itachi had arrived for treatment, but the medic—Okeida; Itachi had seen the man Sasuke sent him to—wasn't able to do anything to save Itachi from the infection that had set in. Okeida had disposed of the body as discreetly as he could: He dumped it in the Ikeda River. Jugo had traveled downstream and searched the riverbank for any sign of a body. He found none.

Sasuke hopes that no one will ever find Itachi, that his brother's body and his Sharingan are rotting somewhere—out in the great wide ocean if the currents have carried him that far—unknown and unsullied.

There's traffic on the street across the river from him, mostly from the apartment complexes that have been built where the Uchiha Compound used to stand. People don't pay attention, though, because the fire is small enough not to draw much attention, especially at high noon when the sun is so bright it makes Sasuke's Sharingan sting. Sasuke had walked numbly out of KPD into bright sunshine just a few hours ago, only vaguely registering Kakashi's hand firmly gripping his neck, speaking to him in a low voice, telling him, *Breathe, kid, just breathe through it.* He remembers Naruto gripping his hand with both of his, promising him, *I'm here, Sasuke, I'm here.* Ino had placed a pen in his hand and pointed at different spots on a prisoner release form, promised him that Jugo would be set free within hours after he had been processed. Sasuke had signed and signed and then signed again. He told Kakashi he was fine; he told Naruto to make sure Jugo was allowed to walk out of Konohagakure a free man, without an ANBU tail or any surveillance, that Jugo isn't an enemy, he is a friend. He had come here as a friend, to deliver the news of Itachi's death in person. Naruto had promised him he would walk Jugo to the Village gates himself, and Sasuke had turned his back on KPD to head for the Uchiha Clan shrine on the banks of the Naka River.

Now, Sasuke stands with feet shoulder-width apart and shoulders squared as he lights the pyre. The katon is simple: Crane, ox, and dragon seal to finish. The ghosts hover a few feet away from Sasuke and watch the fire catch. It's a hot fire, entirely blue and white with no hint of orange or red in it. Sarutobi is the one to break the silence. "I've never seen this jutsu before."

Itachi taught Sasuke this jutsu when Shisui died. Sasuke had been old enough to attend the vigil then, so Sasuke had watched while Fugaku, Uncle Kyoguku, Uncle Inabi, Uncle Taro, and Uncle Yakumi had performed the jutsu at exactly the same time. When they breathed through their fingers, there was just a silvery wisp of air that shimmered in afternoon heat. The fire took Shisui's corpse and sword in one yawning blaze of blue and white. Itachi had a firm grip on Sasuke's shoulder for all six hours it took for the body and sword to burn down. After, when the vigil was over, Itachi took Sasuke home and showed him the jutsu. *Just so you know,* he'd said, insistent that Sasuke learn it even though tradition dictated that Fugaku teach the technique to Sasuke.

Sasuke never learned the technique to Itachi's satisfaction. The fires he produced were always orange hued, not the pure blue-white that is required for the ceremony. Itachi got progressively more angry with Sasuke with each failed attempt until, finally, Sasuke broke down crying, babbling inanities about, *Shisui, where's Shisui? Why can't he teach me? Where is he?* Itachi had stormed off at Sasuke's tears, but hours later, in the dead of the night, he'd snuck into Sasuke's bedroom and whispered, *I apologize for yelling at you,* in that stiffly formal way of his. Sasuke said back, hot-tempered even as a child, *Shisui never yells at me. He was a way better brother than you, always.* He'd been hoping to get a rise out of Itachi, make him angry in some way, but all Itachi said was, voice thick and unsteady, *I know he was.*

"My brother taught it to me," Sasuke says aloud, surprised to hear his own voice. When he glances at
the ghosts, he sees their confused expressions.

"What did he teach you?" Sarutobi asks, kindly, and Sasuke realizes that a long, long time has passed since Sarutobi made his first observation.

"The katon jutsu," Sasuke clarifies. "My brother taught it to me after Shisui died. The jutsu is taught only to Sharingan users, but never for use in battle. Just for a vigil."

The Shodaime gives Sasuke a heavy look. "We apologize for intruding—"

"You're not intruding," Sasuke interrupts. He'd always thought he'd want to be alone for his brother's vigil if he ever held it, that he'd slit his own throat at the end of the vigil and let his body rot next to the pyre if he were to ever survive killing his own brother. But that's not how it happened. What happened is that his brother died of an infection thousands of miles away, seeking medical attention from the healer Sasuke had told him about.

And Sasuke?

Sasuke was safe within the boundaries of the redwood forests, keeping dead men for company. He's not sure where else to go from here now. To fill the awkward silence that follows, he adds, "The dead are dead. Doesn't matter who's here to witness this. It's a stupid tradition, really."

"No," the Shodaime says, stern. "Each clan has its own way of mourning. The Senju bury their dead, and say prayers over their soul."

Sasuke turns back to the pyre. Six hours, that's how long he intends to let the fire burn. That's how long it took for Shisui's body and his sword to burn down. Sasuke grips the hilt of his sword tightly, watches the wood burn away entirely. There's hours left to go, so he lets his chakra flow freely instead, sustaining the fire with nothing but his will alone. "Brother must have had his sword with him when he died," Sasuke says, finally giving voice to his greatest fear: That Itachi didn't have his sword, that he won't find entrance to the Great Hall, that Sasuke will finally get to the Great Hall himself and find that his brother isn't there. He's spent an entire lifetime without his brother at his side. The thought of spending an eternity in the afterlife without him is—

The Yondaime offers quietly, "Jugo said he died of an infection. He didn't die in battle."

"He would've had his sword close," Sasuke insists. He doesn't want to think about how his brother died, of some middling infection that must have burned its way through his body. He died in Kitahiroshima of an abdominal wound. That's no way for an Uchiha to die. That's no way for Itachi to die. "In our religion, you hold your sword at the end. You need your sword to get into the Great Hall, otherwise your soul—That's our way. You hold your sword."

"I didn't know this about your traditions," Sarutobi says after a moment. "There are so few families who still practice the old ways."

Sasuke feeds the fire a bit more, listens to the whip and crackle of fire burning. He wants to point out, I'm not grieving, and, No one grieves for a murderer like him, and, It should have been me who killed him. But instead, he finds himself saying, "He said it was just a scratch."
"Yes, he did," Sarutobi says.

There were twenty-five of them once, the Sharingan themselves and the families that married into the Clan but never left over the centuries. In Sasuke's immediate family there had been his grandfather, Uchiha Yashiro. He'd had five sons and one daughter. There had been three grandchildren: Itachi, Sasuke, and Shisui. Uncle Taro's wife had been pregnant, and Uncle Inabi was engaged to be married. Aunt Tsubasa was still a teenager, just started dating a chuunin from her Academy class. When it all came to an end, the family was blooming with the promise of new life just around the corner; all the adults were looking forward to the patter of small feet in the courtyard.

There would have been twenty-six if his sister had been born, but Itachi killed twenty-three, and now he's dead too. Sasuke is the twenty-fifth of the Uchihas, the last surviving one of this age. It's a lonely thought, because Sasuke has never thought past Itachi's death. He told Naruto When it's done, I won't come back. I don't want to come back, and that had been the truth of it.

But here he is, holding vigil by the Naka River. And where is his brother?

"They must not have had the antibiotics he needed," Sasuke reasons, because what else could it have been?

Sarutobi places a cold hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "That's what Jugo said."

"I guess," Sasuke says and rebalances himself, digs his feet into the soft earth below to make sure he stays standing for this.

A while later, the Nidaime asks, "How long does your vigil last?"

"Six hours," Sasuke answers, because that's how long it took for Shisui and his sword to burn down. There's hours left; Sasuke might as well get comfortable where he's standing.

The Nidaime's shoulders move up and down in a deep breath. "It's been fourteen hours."

Sasuke looks away from the fire and realizes then that the sun has set. The lights in the apartment complex across the river are all dark. The katon is still burning because Sasuke is still letting his chakra bleed away to feed it. It's almost supernaturally bright, a small disk of brightness in an otherwise still night.

Sasuke looks around himself. He feels it now: the burn in his legs, the dried sweat on the back of his neck, the sting of chakra being used too freely and too recklessly for so long. Still, he wants to stay rooted to this spot. Here, in this spot, Shisui burned, his entire Clan burned, and now Itachi.

Sasuke digs his toes into the ground beneath him, watches the grass bend and give way, watches his shoes get muddy with the upturned earth. This is all that he owns in this world, this single patch of land on the Naka River's banks where his ancestors built a shrine for their dead. Back when demons roamed the land, when dragons held the oaths of men, Sasuke's ancestors claimed this land as their own. They carved a slab of stone from the mountain caves of dragons and placed it here. And they chiseled the names of their dead on that stone, a testament to the oaths that they would hold, that all their descendants would hold after them. Sasuke is the last of these oath-holders.

He will not leave. He will stand until he turns to stone here. He will die here, he will soak this earth with his blood and then the Uchiha Clan will have fulfilled its duties. The world can burn around him. There is nowhere else Sasuke can go.

"It's been fourteen hours, Sasuke," the Nidaime says again, softer now. "How much longer?"
This is how it ends then: Sasuke a thousand miles away while Itachi dies of an infection. The blood they share is so muddied now with all that has happened, Sasuke isn't even sure what to do about the tightness in his chest.

He understands now why Uchiha vigils are limited to family. There are some things that he can't share, not even with his snakes. "Leave."

His snakes disappear instantly, Hideyoshi lingering just long enough to curl around Sasuke's ankle lightly. The ghosts leave a few moments later. The Nidaime is the last to go, and he waits until the Shodaime is out of earshot before speaking. "When my brother died, it nearly killed me," he says, and it sounds as though the words are being ripped out of him, bloody and jagged. He looks down at his feet. "I'm sorry for your loss. I really am." The Nidaime places a cool hand on Sasuke's shoulder and then drifts away with the rest of the ghosts.

Sasuke breathes in the silence for a few minutes, feeling his face get hot and swallowing thickly against the knot in his throat. A long, long time ago, he promised himself he wouldn't cry when this time came. He can't remember anymore why that had seemed like an important promise, one worth keeping.

Sasuke lets the katon die out, breathes a moment in the ensuing darkness, and finally—finally—yields to his grief.

Hours later, after the sun has risen, Sasuke returns to his apartment and finds that the ghosts are waiting for him there. He spends just a few hours there, and only to shower, shave, and change into more formal robes. When Sasuke looks at himself in the mirror, it's as if Shisui is alive again. The resemblance leaves him breathless for a moment.

When Sasuke was scared by Itachi's impatience and anger, he would sneak away to Shisui's room across the Compound and hide himself in a tight curl under Shisui's blankets. That's what he wants now, to be able to sneak away to Shisui's side and listen to the quiet, precise cadences of his voice. He is so jealous, so very jealous, of Itachi's privilege to be with Shisui again.

"You ready?" the Nidaime asks politely from the door, and Sasuke realizes that he's been staring blankly again. He's lost several hours like that since coming home. When Sasuke leaves his apartment, he doesn't head back to the shrine. Instead, he heads to the artisan district across the village. He doesn't bother walking, but takes a street tram instead and sits down at a window seat. The ghosts get on the tram as well, picking seats a few rows away from Sasuke. This early in the morning, there are not too many people awake. Those that are awake give Sasuke odd glances—he's wearing full Uchiha regalia with his katana across his lap—but Sasuke ignores them in favor of watching the city roll by.

The artisan district is quiet when Sasuke gets there. He doesn't find a master sculptor, but he does find an apprentice. His name is Ayumu, and he is a Westerner with hazelnut skin that's coated with a fine layer of white marble dust. When Sasuke explains the job, the man's smile fades. "I'll do my best to honor his memory," he promises. "You have my word." So Sasuke hires him.

Before they leave, though, Ayumu requests a few minutes. Sasuke waits outside and watches another apprentice chip away at a large slab of marble. He doesn't understand what the apprentice is doing, because it seems that despite the man's best efforts, the marble doesn't yield an inch.

Ayumu returns wearing more formal clothes for the occasion. He has wiped away the marble dust on
his skin as well, and Sasuke realizes then that he's far older than he originally suspected, maybe older than Kakashi. He looks somber as he shoulders his sculpting tools. "Lead the way."

They take the tram back to the shrine, and on the way, Ayumu is respectfully silent next to Sasuke. He doesn't speak until they reach the family shrine. Sasuke is already taking the steps up to the shrine when Ayumu calls out, "A moment, please."

Sasuke turns to look over his shoulder and sees that Ayumu is taking off his shoes. The man puts his hands together in prayer and mutters under his breath, eyes closed. He stays still for a moment that way before following Sasuke up the steps.

The lights of the lantern are still glowing bright when Sasuke opens the doors to the shrine. Sasuke reaches into his pocket and holds out a slip of paper. It reads: Uchiha Itachi.

Ayumu accepts the piece of paper and approaches the slab of stone. He bows once to pay his respect before setting his tools down on the floor. Sasuke doesn't have to point Ayumu in the right direction, because the sculptor finds the space on the stone intuitively: Next to the name Uchiha Mikoto.

Itachi has no right to be on this stone, not with the blood on his hands. He is *Kin-Butcher*, true, but he is *Brother* first, and Sasuke can remember to this day the weight of Itachi's hand on his shoulder, the way he'd said, *Watch, Sasuke*. He's never wanted the burden of hating his own brother. He doesn't want that weight even after Itachi has died. He hopes that one day, he'll see Fugaku in the Great Hall, and he'll explain to his father then why he had Itachi's name carved onto the stone. *There's no one left*, he'll say. *What's one more name?*

Sasuke watches the man clean the space. He's patient and respectful as he does this, not letting his fingers linger too long on the stone out of respect.

"He is a good man," the Shodaime observes to Sasuke's right. And he is. Sasuke and the ghosts watch Ayumu inscribes Itachi's name with quick, glancing strokes. He spends an equal amount of time to sand the stone and smooth out the sharp edges of his chiseling. When he's done, he bows at the waist to the stone, and follows Sasuke out into the sunshine.

They walk a few yards away from the shrine before Sasuke reaches for his wallet. Ayumu holds up a hand. "There were a lot of names on that stone. And they were all chiseled recently," he says. "I won't accept money for this."

The sculptor Sasuke hired to chisel the names of his family all those years ago was an old man whose face had been wet with tears as he did his job. Sasuke has not thought about him until this moment, and he doesn't ask how Ayumu knew all that he did just by looking at his mother's and father's name on that stone. Instead, Sasuke presses the money forward. "I don't want to be in anyone's debt."

Ayumu glances down at the money. "You can pay me later."

"No," Sasuke insists. "I don't want to be in anyone's debt." How much longer? the Nidaime had asked. Not much longer, not too long at all. It feels as if Sasuke's bones have been sapped dry. How much longer can a man keep going if he wakes every day feeling the way Sasuke does now?

Ayumu takes the money then. He hefts his tool bag more securely across his shoulder, turning his face to meet a sudden, violent breeze that flashes across the slope of the hill. Sasuke pulls his robes close against the wind and pockets his wallet. "I'm sorry for your loss," Ayumu says.

Sasuke has gotten better at accepting condolences. "Thank you."
Ayumu leaves then, and Sasuke watches him go. The ghosts wait with him, looking over the river. The five of them stay standing for a long while, watching the sun climb over the sky.

*Watch, Sasuke*, Itachi had said.

Sasuke watches.

Hiashi summons him to ANBU HQ the next day, so Sasuke goes. Kakashi is waiting for him.

Apparently, the higher-ups have made up their minds: They will send out a team to attack Akatsuki members, while the rest of the army hunts down Akatsuki's armies.

The ghosts and Sasuke had missed this new development because of Itachi's funeral. Still, none of them are surprised. "It's a good time to attack if there ever was one," the Nidaime mutters under his breath. He doesn't need to explain why: With Itachi dead, the group is one man down, and likely reconsidering its next step.

Hiashi pushes a folder across his pristine desk. "There are a limited number of spots available for the mission. I know you have unsettled business."

This mission is a one-way ticket. Whoever else has signed up has done so voluntarily. "Who else has signed up?"

Hiashi sits back. He looks drawn when he lists the names: "Inuzuka Kiba, Nara Shikamaru, Aburame Shino." He pauses, drags a breath in, and then releases it. "Hyuga Neji."

So that explains the circles under Hiashi's eyes, the grim set of his mouth. It's usually the younger ANBU members who sign up for these death traps; older nin generally have families and children to consider. "Would I be CO for the operation?"

For the first time, Kakashi speaks up. "No. That would be me."

Sasuke's mind goes blank.

"He can't go," the Yondaime says immediately. He places a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "You have to convince Kakashi not to—"

"You would send Sasuke, but not Kakashi," the Nidaime interrupts coldly. His eyes are narrowed into near-slits. "You would send him—" He points at Sasuke. "But not your darling boy?"

"Tobirama," the Shodaime interrupts sternly.

"No. I've made this mistake once before, and I'm not doing it again. So, no," the Nidaime says even louder than before. "He's sixteen. He's not a—a *tool* for us to use, he has a life, he has potential, for fuck's sake, and you would send him to his death because what? Because he's a dojutsu? Because —"

"I can't," the Yondaime says loudly. "I can't stand idly by while he does this."

"But it's okay for Sasuke to go?" the Nidaime counters. "Why? Is it because you don't like how he looks at your son? What the *hell*, Minato? When did you turn into such chickenshit?"

"If you had to send Sarutobi-sensei," the Yondaime says harshly, pointing at Sarutobi. "If you had to send your student, would you?"
The Nidaime falters at this, but he doesn't rest his argument. "He's sixteen, for God's sake. He's in love. Is this what we do now? Send the most reckless teenager out to the battlefield just because he volunteers? He just lost his brother, and now—"

"Kakashi," Sasuke interrupts, getting to his feet abruptly. He doesn't want to hear the Nidaime talk anymore, so he heads for the door. "A moment."

He breaks every single rule in the handbook talking to his CO this way, but Sasuke is beyond caring. Surprisingly, Kakashi follows him out into the hallway, one visible eyebrow arched sharply. "You can't come," Sasuke says without preamble. "You have the Sharingan, and you're not an Uchiha. There's a punishment for that."

"Ah, yes." Kakashi leans against the wall and sighs, melodramatic. "Clan Law. I've violated the Twenty-Second Amendment, isn't that correct?"

The Constitution itself has written into its charter laws to protect the Uchiha Clan from those who would harvest their dojutsu. By the Twenty-Second Amendment, Sasuke has the right to claim Clan Law and execute justice as Clan Law dictates. Sasuke has never claimed that right and never exacted the revenge that he is honor-bound to fulfill. Madara will not hesitate. He will hunt Kakashi down with a vengeance, out of spite. The punishment isn't something Sasuke wants to think about.

"He'll kill you," he says finally, and the words sound tired even to his own ears. He's lost his brother already. He will not lose Kakashi.

Kakashi takes a deep breath. "He'll kill you too."

"Yeah, well." Sasuke shrugs. He's known that for a long, long time now. He's already made his peace with it. He exhales slowly, feels something like relief at the thought. "It's about damn time."

"No," Kakashi says sternly, placing a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "No, it isn't time for you. Do you understand?"

Sasuke shrugs Kakashi's hand away. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that Kakashi could hear the Nidaime as well. "I'm a decade overdue, Hatake."

Kakashi's eye narrows. He switches topics neatly. "It's a good team we've assembled. Your entire unit volunteered for this mission, but I picked the bloodlines."

"The bloodlines might be impressive, but the collective IQ of my men is surprisingly low," Sasuke mutters. He can't hold it against Kakashi for picking the men he did. Five well-trained bloodlines on a team is a rare advantage. If he were Kakashi, he would've done the same.

Kakashi pushes himself off from the wall. "We leave at dawn two days from now," he says. "I'll hand out assignments the day of."

"Dibs on Madara," Sasuke says, before Kakashi returns to Hiashi's office.

If Kakashi heard him, he gives no indication of it. "Go get some rest. Dismissed."

Sasuke doesn't rest. Instead, he heads to his apartment. The ghosts are waiting for him, silent even as Sasuke starts to change into something comfortable.

"Where are you going?" the Nidaime asks finally, watching as Sasuke starts to lace up his sneakers.

Sasuke is halfway through packing a knapsack with the essentials—granola bars, water bottles,
iodine pills, and a barebones first aid kid—when the Yondaime steps forward with the same question. "Where are you going, Uchiha?"

Sasuke meets the man's gaze, feeling his neck prickle with shame. They must think—

"I'm not going AWOL," he explains, the words heavy on his tongue even as he says it. He's run before; their line of questioning isn't completely out of line. Still, it stings to have to explain himself. Sasuke rubs at the scruff on his face, trying to dislodge the flush blooming across his cheeks. "I just wanted to go for a long run." He shrugs, trying for nonchalance even though the shame of this moment is eating away at what's left of him now. He meets the Yondaime's gaze. "No need to get your panties in a bunch, Yondy. I'm not the type to run from my duties twice."

The Yondaime's mouth drops open slightly. "That wasn't what I—Why would you think—I never thought that you were the kind of man to—" He stops, abrupt, and switches topics. "What I said earlier in Hiashi's office, Uchiha. I wanted to apolo—"

"I'm going now," Sasuke announces awkwardly, interrupting the Yondaime before he can say anything else. He leaves behind his kunai pouch, and with it, the Hokages' bones. When he finally steps outside the village walls, he takes a deep breath and experiences, for the first time in a long time, complete and utter solitude.

He picks a trail and runs. The trails start familiar, but before long, Sasuke is exploring new territory. Years now, he's been running these redwoods, and still there's more he has to discover.

Three hours in, Sasuke is more than thirty miles from the village. He stops only when he reaches a small lake, quiet and still in the early morning stillness. There is absolutely no one around, so Sasuke takes off all his clothes to wade into the water. It's a little too cold for swimming, but he dives in anyways, aiming for the opposite shore.

When he reaches the opposite side of the lake, he scrambles up one of the rocks and spreads out to dry under the rising sun. Eventually, though, he realizes that he's not the only one who would enjoy scenery like this. Yuuta, he thinks, and the snake appears with a slight pop.

"Orders?" he asks mildly, and Sasuke realizes that he has yet to apologize for their fight nearly a month ago.

Sasuke will not apologize, though, because he and his snakes are not in the habit of apologizing. It's one thing they have in common. "Nothing for now," he mutters, and gestures at his surroundings with a vague sweep of his hand.

Yuuta swivels his head around, swaying lightly. He's a water snake, so he enjoys places like these more than any of the others. "It's too cold," he says, and turns his gaze back to stare at Sasuke, unblinking.

"Well, it's probably going to be your last swim up here," Sasuke mutters, and lets one foot dangle into the water. "On my watch, at least."

Yuuta's tongue flickers out. "You have a mission."

"For Madara," Sasuke fills in. "The third Uchiha you sensed."

Yuuta doesn't say, I told you so, or even, You're forgiven. Instead, he sways for a moment, and then slips down the stone and into the lake with a ripple of water. Sasuke watches, follows the wave and twist of Yuuta's body underwater. He's nothing more than a sleek brown line, blending almost
Yuuta appears above water several minutes later, nearly in the middle of the lagoon, nothing but a dark brown coil. "It's too cold," he hisses loudly.

"Yeah?" Sasuke asks. "I didn't think it was too bad."

Yuuta silently communicates a curse, something about Sasuke sucking a goat's dick. He says aloud, "Then get in the water, human."

Sasuke pushes off the rock and stands knee-deep in the water. It is cold, but…

He dives into the water, feels the cold slice of water around him. This must be what Shisui experienced in his final moments, the shuddering cold of water closing around him, and the knowledge that his own kin was responsible for it.

He returns to Konoha just in time for the mission. The last forty-eight hours he spends in the forest, camping under the night sky and protecting against the cold with large fires. It's not that he's abandoned his post—they must have seen the smoke from his fire all the way in Konoha—it's just that this is how he'd rather spend his time.

Yuuta stays out with him the whole time. Sasuke sleeps well both nights in the forest. Sometimes, though, he finds himself waking up with a start because he's either snoring or drooling uncomfortably into the forest floor.

Once, Yuuta wakes him from his nap with a hushed, The jaguar, you hear it? Sasuke follows the jaguar's trail further north, trying to catch a glimpse of the animal. He's heard the tales, but he's never seen one before. He doesn't find the animal, because he realizes halfway that the jaguar is stalking him instead.

"Well, fuck," Sasuke says with a laugh, and doubles back only to find a cold trail and old claw marks on tree branches.

"Another time, then," Yuuta says, slithering off the tree where there are telltale signs of a jaguar gnawing at the bark. It must have rested there for the night. "It's a difficult animal to follow. Even for me."

"You follow ninja easily enough," Sasuke points out.

"Humans are loud creatures," Yuuta elaborates with great amusement. "We can follow the jaguar another day."

"Sure," Sasuke mutters, and begins to pick his way back to Konohagakure. There are better times and places for the question he's about to ask, but he doesn't have that luxury. "How do I release you from your oath to me?"

Yuuta is silent for a long, long while. "Do you want to release us?"

Yes, of course, Sasuke wants to say. Itachi killed everyone, and made him witness it. For nearly ten years now, Sasuke has been slave to that one driving impulse. Kill, kill, kill his own brother. He left Konoha, thinking that he would find that freedom, and instead, he walked right into Orochimaru's cage. Sasuke reaches up to his neck, digs his fingers into the dormant cursed seal there. And still, he's bound by the consequences of that action. Now, it's Madara, driving him west towards Amegakure.
"Don't you want to be released from your oaths?" Sasuke asks, because he'd give anything for that liberty. The snakes, with centuries of promises and oaths to humans, must want it even more.

Yuuta disappears ahead, leaving a hush of a trail behind. They're only a few miles from Konoha now, and at this point, Sasuke has slowed down to an easy walk. He catches up to Yuuta, who is dangling around a tree branch. "How do I release you?" he asks again, and reaches up a hand to let Yuuta crawl down.

Yuuta slithers down easily and coils around his bicep. He doesn't answer until Sasuke is walking through the Northern gate. "You speak it," Yuuta says finally, and drops to the earth with a slight thud.

"I speak it," Sasuke repeats incredulously. He crouches by the snake. "What do I speak, exactly?"

"Summon Rin. Speak your name," Yuuta lists. "And say, I release you. Speak it in your human tongue. Rin will accept, and that is it."

Sasuke considers this information. It seems fairly easy. "That's what you want, right?" Sasuke asks. The snake clan is a fiercely proud tribe, younger and smaller than most others, but still powerful and dangerous. Rin betrayed her own uncle, Manda, to escape her oath to Orochimaru. Sasuke will not do them the disservice of dying and binding them to humans for eternity.

Yuuta's tongue flickers out once, twice, and then a third time. "What do you think?" he asks finally.

Sasuke straightens and shoves his hands into his pockets. "Okay."

Yuuta slithers away a few feet. "Should I go?"

"Yeah, go." Yuuta doesn't disappear immediately. He lingers for a moment, watching Sasuke with a blank gaze, and then vanishes with a soft pop.


It takes him an hour to get ready for the mission. He returns to his apartment for his belongings. He's checking the weapons in his kunai when the Shodaime appears, "We would like to come with you, Uchiha. If that is all right."

Sasuke glances up at the man quickly. "You'll be stuck in the middle of nowhere with my body—"

"It's either that, or Konoha," the Nidaime interrupts gruffly. "And it's about damn time we stop haunting the living, anyways." He pauses a moment, and then adds, a little too loudly, "Also, there's no guarantee you'll die on this mission. Some confidence can go a long way, kid. Turn that frown upside down, as I always say."

"You've never said that," Sasuke counters neatly. They've been haunting him for so long now, he can predict each of their moods.

"Yes, I do," the Nidaime insists, and completely ignores the way the Shodaime arches an eyebrow.

Sasuke gives the Nidaime a dubious look, but the Yondaime steps in before he can say anything. "We woke up only recently. Our spirits were…resting before then, but something woke us up. I'm sure we'll go right back to sleep."

"We would like to accompany you," the Shodaime insists.

Sarutobi adds, polite as always, "Unless you think we'd be a distraction, of course."
"No," Sasuke says, and bites down on the swell in his chest at their offer. He's gotten used to them. He closes his hands around the small bag of bones. "I could use the extra set of eyes."

The ghosts fall silent after that, and watch as Sasuke finalizes his belongings. His will has been in place for a long time now, so it's just a matter of locking up his apartment and dropping off the keys at the rental agency's office. By the time he walks to the Western gate, the others are already gathered. They're all a little early, all of them quiet and watching as the sun slowly rises over the tree tops.

Kakashi appears exactly on time, to the second. "Everyone take care of everything?" he asks.

Neji is about to answer, but then he looks over Kakashi's shoulder and tenses. Sakura and Naruto have appeared with soft puffs.

Naruto is wearing his Counselor robes, and he's pulled them tight around him to ward against the chill. "We'll wait over by the gate," Neji offers diplomatically, and the men trickle off to give Team 7 their privacy.

"You shouldn't be here, Sakura," Kakashi chides, but there's no edge to his words.

"This is what happens when you two idiots refuse to say goodbye the night before," Sakura scoffs, rummaging in her bag. She is dressed to start her day at the hospital: Scrubs, canvas bag, and a name tag that reads DR. HARUNO SAKURA hanging around her neck. I won't see her again, Sasuke thinks, and the thought hits him like a punch to the gut. "Honestly, it's like dealing with two overgrown children."

She presses a scroll into Kakashi's hands. "This is a blood binding scroll. It'll slow blood flow from most major wounds, about ten hours or so. Don't use it for any pneumothoraxes, though, that's when you get a hole in your lung—"

"I know what it is, Sakura," Kakashi interrupts lightly.

"Well, how would I know when you're listening to me and when you're not?" Sakura demands, pushing hair away from her face. She gives Sasuke another scroll, and then hands both Kakashi and Sasuke small packets of pills. "This is for you, Uchiha. I specifically calibrated this one because you bleed like a pig. I spent hours in the lab getting the chemistry right, so don't be a bitch and be appropriately grateful. The colored pills are broad-spectrum antibiotics, and the white pills are pain and fever reducers."

She stops, abrupt. Rubs her hands together nervously. "I have more supplies if you need."

Kakashi pockets the scroll and pills. "This is more than enough."

"Yeah, well," Sakura mutters, and then looks up at Kakashi, lips pressed into a thin line. "You better come back in one piece, Kakashi-sensei, or I swear—"

She cuts herself off, takes a shuddering breath. "Hey," Kakashi says lightly, tugging at her shoulder, and Sakura pulls away, shaking her head stubbornly.

"I'm fine," Sakura mutters, shoulders hunched in on herself.

Kakashi moves forward anyways, just in time for Sakura to bury her face into his chest. She goes utterly still in his arms, and Kakashi, for his part, cradles her close, rests his cheek against her hair and doesn't move a muscle. She is his little lady, the only woman in my life, he tells her always, just for the pleasure of seeing her smile.
"Make some space, Haruno. Quit hoarding him," Naruto grumbles, moving towards Kakashi as well. Kakashi chuckles and holds out a hand for Naruto, who leans right into the man. "You guys had to leave at the ass-crack of dawn, didn't you," Naruto grumbles into Kakashi's chest. They stand huddled together for a moment, Kakashi's head bent over them. This is how Sasuke thinks of Team 7:

Kakashi, Naruto and Sakura, together.

It makes something warm swell in his chest every time he sees them together like this, and now is no exception.

"Remember what I taught you," Kakashi instructs into Sakura's hair. "Protect the Hokage and the village. And watch out for each other."

"We will," Naruto promises.

"Good," Kakashi says, and steps back, holding them both at arm's length. "Go back to sleep, you have a long fight ahead of you."

Sasuke glances down at his watch. Two more minutes before they have to go. He's about to turn and leave, but Sakura breaks from Kakashi to pull him into a fierce hug. "Don't be a hero, Uchiha," she whispers into his ear. "You hear?"

"I'm not a hero," Sasuke snaps, pulling away from her grip, because really? Who did she think she was talking to?

Sakura rolls her eyes. "The fuck you aren't."

"The fuck you saying the fuck for?" Sasuke asks. He's always held the firm opinion that someone as beautiful as Sakura should speak like the lady she is. This earns him a laugh (it's worth it to make her laugh, worth it every fucking time), and Sakura steps back.

"We should go," Sasuke urges Kakashi. The jounin takes a deep breath and starts to walk away. Sasuke is about to follow, but then he catches Naruto's gaze. He's watching Sasuke carefully, as if he's waiting for something.

"What? You need a written invitation, Uchiha?" Naruto asks.

Sasuke shoves his hands into his pocket, and half-turns towards Kakashi, who is waiting a few feet away. "I'm going, I'm going."

He's about to turn and leave—he's already memorized every little detail of Naruto's face, doesn't need to look at him anymore—when Naruto suddenly moves. He closes the space between them in three strides, grips the edge of Sasuke's armor, and pulls him close.

"You coward," he accuses in a hot whisper, and then tugs Sasuke's face-cloth down to—

It's chaste by anyone's standards, but it lingers just long enough for Sasuke to understand the press of Naruto's lips against his.

The moment passes quickly because in the next instant, Naruto is pushing at Sasuke's chest, making Sasuke stumble back a step or two.

"I should…" Sasuke jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "Go."
"Do," Naruto prompts, and his lips quirk up in a tired smile.

Sasuke turns and takes one breathless step after another, away from Naruto.

In the end, the mission is a success. They terminate six of Akatsuki's members. The others retreat.

Naruto, Tsunade, Jiraiya and the others win against Akatsuki's army, and thanks to Naruto's crack diplomacy, they did it without too much bloodshed. Madara was paying his army to fight his war. Naruto, unpredictable as always, offered a handful of the mercenaries a higher price to turn against the others. The minute the army realized that there were traitors in their own midst, the whole operation fell apart despite Akatsuki's best efforts to hold the line. Naruto's negotiations between the mercenary leaders and the Senior Council would go down as one of the most unexpectedly successful diplomatic maneuvering during wartime in Konoha history.

Temari is the one who delivers the news on Kakashi's team. She had acted as a messenger and ambassador between Sunagakure and Konohagakure before, so she's the first to reach Tsunade with the news.

"The team is safe in Sunagakure," she says, and the room cheers. Kurenai turns her face up and thanks all God above for protecting her boys, *thank you*—

"All but two," Temari interrupts. "Hatake Kakashi is in intensive care, and Uchiha Sasuke is missing, presumed dead."

Tsunade temporarily hands over the Hokage mantle to the next in line, Jounin Captain Nara Shikaku, ignores every advisor who tells her no (including Jiraiya), and heads straight for Sunagakure because she sent six of her men out on an impossible mission, and she will bring them home safe so help her God. Sakura goes with her, face grim with determination: She's lost Sasuke already, she will not lose Kakashi. That is a loss she cannot live with.

When they reach Sunagakure, the Kazekage tells them that Kakashi's men came back in bits and pieces. Akamaru was limping, paws turned bloody after traveling so hard and so fast over such long distances. Shino was half-blind, Neji half-deaf, both moving slowly behind Shikamaru as he manipulated Kakashi's shadow across the dessert. "Uchiha Sasuke," Gaara informs Tsunade solemnly, "was not with them."

Konohagakure wasn't expecting any of her men to return from this mission, so in the grand scheme of things, the loss of one is a price she is willing to pay.

Chapter End Notes

Incredible art for a scene in Chapter 9 by the lovely M!!!
Mangekyou

It takes the team exactly two days to make it to the borders of Amegakure, and when they finally see the city, it's through a pre-dawn mist. It's a large city with imposing walls and no easy entry point. Each gate is heavily guarded, and there are watchtowers at regular intervals around the perimeter of the city.

There is an overwhelming stench of overpopulation that seeps through Sasuke's face-cloth. His eyes take a moment to adjust as well, because the city is blanketed with a thin veil of smog and smoke. They split up at few miles from the border of the city, each destined for their targets and with the knowledge that they terminate their target or they die trying.


Only part of it goes according to plan. Neji, Kiba, Shino and Shikamaru find their targets and neutralize them. Kakashi ends up running into Kisame and Kakuzu. Sasuke runs into Pein, Madara—and Itachi.

Miraculously, they all survive their initial encounters.

They honor Kakashi and his team when they get back to Konohagakure. Tsunade awards them with Medals of Honor—the highest award afforded a ninja. Kakashi is absent, and after calling his name three times (Commander Hatake Kakashi? Commander? Hatake Kakashi?), Gai steps forward to accept the award on Kakashi's behalf.

He finds Kakashi in the Uchiha Clan grave sight, staring at the newest name etched in. It reads Uchiha Sasuke, but the name is already starting to fade slightly. They may have to etch the name in again, a weekly ritual that Kakashi presides over. "It's the stone," the mason, a man named Ayumu, keeps telling them, looking puzzled. Both Uchiha Sasuke's and Uchiha Itachi's names refuse to take no matter how many times Ayumu carves it in.

Ayumu had stepped up when he heard news of Uchiha Sasuke's death. He wanted to pay his respects, and he returns to the shrine regularly to etch the name in. Both Uchiha Sasuke's and Uchiha Itachi's names refuse to take no matter how many times Ayumu carves it in.

Gai gives Kakashi the space and silence he needs. When Kakashi finally acknowledges him, it is with a raspy, "You just going to stand there, Gai?" He spots the award that Gai is holding in his hands, but doesn't say anything because his lungs are still recovering from the damage of his battles. Five Akatsuki members attacked him. Kakashi eliminated two. Only Hatake Kakashi is capable of a track record that impressive, Gai thinks.

Gai has known Kakashi for as long as he can remember. He understands the slouch of Kakashi's shoulders for what it is. All that returned from that mission is a hallowed out version of Kakashi, a shadow of the man that left.

"Ready to go?" Gai asks finally.

Kakashi just takes a deep, long breath. He doesn't answer, not because he doesn't want to, Gai knows, but because he honestly doesn't know. He hasn't had to grieve like this in a long, long while.
But then again, this grief is entirely different from the grief he carries for Obito or the Yondaime. This is a new kind of grief.

So Gai closes the space between them and places a hand on Kakashi's shoulder, nudges him away from Sasuke's name, out of the Uchiha Clan's shrine, and into the streets.

_No man should have to bury his own boy_, Hiashi said at drinks the other day, because Kakashi's discontent is reflecting on every single ninja in the village. Hiashi himself looked drawn and strained as he'd spoken the words. He spends each night by his nephew's bedside these days, praying for Neji to open his eyes.

Kakashi is Konohagakure's pride and honor, and her people have raised Kakashi to a high altar. It is a hard truth to swallow that Hatake Kakashi is _just_ a man, just as vulnerable to grief like the rest of them.

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Konan can make a cloud of little birds that slice into Shino's jacket and skin without much effort. By the end of their first half hour together, Shino is reduced to his undershirt. His bugs have fanned out around him, having lost the safety of Shino's jacket.

She seems mostly annoyed at Shino for having disturbed her, and she takes out her anger with the fury and vengeance only a kunoichi can. Shino lets her for a while, because if anything, Kurenai has taught him that a woman in battle is much more dangerous than a man when provoked. A kunoichi is quick, intelligent, and merciless when she is defending her turf. The best way to defeat a woman—to woo a woman, too, Kurenai pointed out—is to get to know her.

So Shino gets to know Konan, as well as he can, and by the fortieth minute, he decides, _I know now_.

Konan can make a thousand little birds with her paper, but Shino commands a much more potent army of his own. He doesn't linger long, just defeats her in the span of fifteen quick minutes. It is a hard battle, though, because some of Konan's paper birds have sliced through Shino's left eyelid. He can feel a strange pressure building in that part of his body, and although his bugs react to the shift in blood, there is a steady trickle of blood down the left side of his face and he can't see very well anymore.

So he pauses for a while on the ground next to Konan. He doesn't get up until Konan's blood slowly seeps across the floor and reaches him.

They hold a funeral for Sasuke despite the explicit instructions in his will that no such thing should take place. The will says that Sasuke's body should be burned and his ashes scattered over the Naka River, that his name—his full name, _Uchiha and Sasuke_—be etched into the Uchiha family shrine by his brother's name.

The will also states that his personal belongings all be donated, that his mother's jewelry be given to Dr. Haruno Sakura, and that the black trunk in his closet should be buried at the steps of the Uchiha Clan site. The trunk is all that is left of the Clan, and Sasuke intended to keep them next to where their names will be remembered. Finally, it says that a lantern be lit in the Uchiha shrine if at all possible.

The funeral takes place at the Monument Hill, among rows and rows of other fallen soldiers, and attracts nearly two hundred people. The entire ANBU squad is there, forty-eight of them to honor one of their own. Kakashi's jounin friends have also shown up to offer their support to Kakashi. Tsunade and Jiraiya are also in attendance, sitting next to Iruka who holds Naruto's hand throughout
the entire ceremony.

Sakura, Ino, Hinata, and every student from their graduating Academy class is also there, along with a few people from beyond the Village, mostly from Land of Rice Fields. The Black Widow arrives with Jugo and Suigetsu. They slip into the back and go unnoticed. Konohagakure never finds out that the Black Widow herself had breached the walls.

The only one absent is Hyuga Neji because he has yet to wake up from his coma.

The funeral is done with full military honors because Hiashi insists on it despite what Sasuke indicated in his will. Kiba, Shikamaru, Lee and Shino carry an empty casket—draped with Konohagakure's flag—in perfect synchronization down the field and lower it onto the ground. They are dressed in full ANBU regalia, with dark robes and two katana by their hips. When they fold the flag over the casket, their movements are perfectly synchronized.

Sakura delivers the eulogy, a short, beautiful thing that has Kakashi stiffening in his chair and taking deep, measured breaths.

Kiba delivers the folded flag to Kakashi (Next of Kin, his application had said, the only name he listed). He says to Kakashi in the silence of the funeral, "On behalf of the Hokage of Konohagakure, the Commandment of the ANBU Forces, and a grateful nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's service to this Country and the ANBU Corps."

Kakashi takes the flag, grips it loose in his fingers. Later, Hiashi personally delivers his official letter of condolences. It's his duty, as Sasuke's commanding officer, to offer this courtesy to the kin of his fallen men. He also returns to Kakashi Sasuke's mask, as per his wishes.

Kakashi holds out a hand, palm facing up. "His dog tags."

Hiashi looks away from Kakashi's unflinching gaze. "They weren't returned. He wanted to keep the tags," he explains, and watches as they lower a casket into the ground. On top of the casket, the priest sprinkles water and dust, muttering a prayer under his breath. Sasuke is a pagan, and they hold no such rituals. This ritual is for Kakashi, because Tsunade decided that without a funeral, her Commander might never be able to grieve properly.

Hiashi, Gai, Kurenai, Asuma and Genma wait with Kakashi until the burial is complete. When Kakashi heads over to the Uchiha shrine, they all follow. Kakashi sits on one of the steps leading up to the shrine and doesn't move until the sun begins to set. "Kakashi," Gai begins, but Kakashi is already done removing the cast from his arm—still healing after being broken in seven different locations—and gets to his feet. He is steady when he walks to a large black stone and does the seals carefully.

There is a moment, and then Kakashi holds two fingers together in front of his lips and breathes out, Katon.

The fire is bright and catches easily. When Kakashi steps away and sits back down on the steps at the base of the monument, there is a small, bright fire in each of the two lamps. Seventeen hours in, Tsunade herself comes down from the Tower to coax him away from Sasuke's grave.

Kakashi doesn't move for two full days.

Sasori is almost too kind to kill. But really, the puppet thing he has going is just fucking creepy, so, "I'm going to kill you, you little fucker," Kiba says when he finally catches Sasori.
Sasori just tilts his head at this odd little angle and says, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

He's so freaking polite, Kiba nearly loses his resolve, but then Sasori comes at him with all his strings shining like a spiderweb in the early morning light. When Sasori turns into a scorpion, Kiba lets all hell loose. It takes thirty minutes before Sasori lands a noteworthy blow, one that makes Akamaru crash into a nearby wall with a crunch and drop to the floor.

"Akamaru, you all right?" Kiba calls out, and defends against Sasori's advancing scorpion. Akamaru barks in response, but the lower half of his front-right leg is dislocated and he can't get up without limping. "Fall back," Kiba calls, but Akamaru is even more stubborn than Kiba is, so he doesn't pay any attention to Kiba yelling at him.

Instead, Akamaru reaches down and clamps his jaws around his foreleg in a vicious bite that draws some blood. He pins the leg against the ground and then pulls his body up and back, making a sickening popping noise that ends with a slight whimper. Then, he's back next to Kiba, fangs bared. "Oh, you creepy-ass son of a bitch," Kiba grits out at Sasori. "You hurt Akamaru, you piece of shit. I'm going to hurt you so bad, you'll cry all the way back home to your mother."

"Please," Sasori says (politely). "Don't speak about my mother."

"Oh, you just watch us," Kiba taunts, and does the seals. When he stills his hands, Akamaru emerges from a cloud of smoke and chakra looking exactly like Kiba. It's not nearly enough because even after another forty minutes of fighting, Sasori's armor is almost impossible to penetrate. They break off its stinger, but still, Sasori is safe inside his shell. "New plan," Kiba breathes, and turns to Akamaru.

Akamaru looks back at him. His mop of brown hair is matted with blood, and there is a cut across his cheek. The thing with their merging is that whatever wound inflicted on Akamaru, Kiba feels, and vice versa. So when Kiba reaches up to his face, there is a line of blood against his cheek too.

It's always a little uncomfortable to turn into a wolf, but Kiba has shared more than his blood and chakra with Akamaru—he's shared his life. So when they start occupying the same space in a shared mind, Kiba hears a rush of Akamaru's thoughts: *We must defeat him quickly, or we will be drained.*

Their Fang Wolf Fang attack has never been successfully blocked, and Sasori is no different. His shell pierces easily, but he's ready with another puppet. "The Sandaime Kazekage," Sasori introduces politely. "This is Inuzuka Kiba and his wolf, Akamaru."


Kiba lets Akamaru take the lead on the charge, and because Akamaru is more wolf than Kiba will ever be, he goes right for Sasori's jugular. They end up ripping Sasori apart, limb for limb, until Sasori is scattered across the arena in parts.

And still, Sasori isn't done. He lifts his head, mumbles under his breath, and different parts of his body begin to move, realigning themselves into something new. Akamaru is about to move and attack again when Kiba stops him with, *Wait, watch.* Slowly, Sasori's pieces assemble into two different puppets. These are not ninja, or anything even remotely dangerous. They are just two middle-aged people, a man and a woman, who cradle Sasori gently. "Ma," Sasori breathes, and buries his face into his mother's shoulder, breathing slowly.

Kiba walks away from the sight. He doesn't return for twenty minutes, and only to check that Sasori is truly dead. Next to him, the puppets have collapsed into the lifeless heaps they are.
Hinata sits by Neji's side for hours every day and sleeps in a small cot next to his hospital bed at night while Hiashi rests in a chair by Neji's side. More often than not, Hanabi will curl into a tight ball by Neji's side on the bed, one arm clutching his hospital gown tightly.

Hinata feels the responsibility of her future settling heavily on her shoulders and wonders, briefly, how her father manages to carry the weight of a house full of ninjas with such grace and strength. Neji is more seriously injured than the others because, as Shino explained it to her, Neji was given the task of defeating one of the most mentally unstable members of Akatsuki's group.

Deidara was his name, and Hinata is surprised by the insurmountable rage building up in her. Deidara's last attack was more deadly than it appeared, as it turns out, because a bit of shrapnel lodged itself in the back of Neji's neck. He didn't notice it, such a small splinter is barely a wound for a ninja of Neji's caliber, but with each mile he traveled back to Konoha, it went deeper and closer towards his third cervical vertebrae.

He's lucky to have found medical attention when he did, even luckier that Sakura was quick to order a scan of his head (Neji was complaining of a dull ringing in his ears). Tsunade took out the splinter in the end, and spent nearly six hours in surgery to make absolutely sure that Neji would emerge unscathed from the procedure. The surgery was a success, but it takes another two months for Neji to open his eyes.

When he does, it's to say, "Hinata-sama?"

Hinata wants to cry with relief. Instead, she tilts her chin high and says, "How are you, Brother?"

"Well, thank you," Neji answers respectfully. He moves his hand out of Hinata's tight grasp. Hinata has held on for the past three hours, so both their hands are clammy from the shared heat. "Please, don't worry yourself."

And this is when Hinata loses her patience. She made a resolve, a long time ago, that when she is the head of the Hyuga Clan, things will be different. The branch family will not be strangers around their own kin. "It is my job to worry about you, you emotionally stunted imbecile. That's what family is for," she snaps. "You nearly died. A little bit of fucking concern is normal—" She stops, abrupt, calms her anger.

When she speaks again, her voice is calm. "This is an order, so listen closely. You will no longer accept any volunteer missions without running them by me first. Am I understood?"

Neji's lips twitch lightly. "Yes," he says finally. He is still for a moment before reaching out to hold Hinata's hand again. "And I appreciate the…fucking concern."

Hinata can feel her chin quivering. It is always the first sign of tears to come. So she does them both a favor and bends over their hands to hide her face. "I was so worried," she breathes.

Neji places a hand on her hair, callused and large enough to cover the crown of her head entirely. "Uchiha Sasuke?" he asks finally.

Hinata may not have known Sasuke very well, but everyone around her is slowly unraveling at his absence. Kiba barely laughs and doesn't talk about work the way he used to, Shino won't look in her in the eyes when she asks why he requested to be transferred out of ANBU, and even her father feels Sasuke's absence ("He had an odd sense of humor," her father told her over a quiet dinner, unprompted.) Sakura's smiles have become hollow and her bursts of anger have been muted, replaced instead by a constant worry about Naruto and Kakashi, leaving her no time to grieve herself.
And the Commander... His grief is so heavy it's hard to be in the same room with him without being reminded of his loss.

For a man who spoke so little and who kept to himself so much, Sasuke's absence is profound. "Is he well?" Neji asks, and this is the first time Hinata has heard her brother sound like this.

"No," Hinata says finally, and braces herself for another fresh wound. "Uchiha Sasuke is dead."

Shikamaru defeats Hidan out of sheer will and intellect alone. He does it at the exact time—nearly to the minute—that Neji defeats Deidara.

Hidan is an arrogant man, Shikamaru learns very early on during their encounter, and this is his undoing. It takes him many, many hours to defeat Hidan, mostly because Shikamaru understands the importance of strategy. So he baits Hidan and retreats, baits and retreats, baits and retreats until he understands the full extent of Hidan's skills.

There is no such thing as immortality, Shikamaru knows, because his family is of the shadows and they, more than others, know the transience of passing time. Hidan seems to be the exception to this rule, but Sarutobi Asuma has taught him better, and Shikamaru doesn't retreat from this battle.

There is a pleasure to be had when, at the end, Hidan's body scatters across the land in small bits and pieces. Shikamaru waits until the explosion is truly done before walking across the field to kick lightly at Hidan's head. "Pride," Shikamaru mutters, lighting up a cigarette, "cometh before the fall."

Hidan opens his mouth to scream something at him, but Shikamaru beats him to the chance by gagging him with dirt and rock. The pit is easy enough to create with an earth shifting jutsu, and it's even easier to set up the blood seals around the pit to ensure that it will never be disturbed. It's an eternal shadow-binding jutsu, one that makes this piece of land impenetrable to all but a Nara. To be extra sure, Shikamaru creates one pit for each body part.

When he kicks Hidan's head into the pit, it rolls around a bit before settling. His fingers shake when he makes the final seal, still recovering from Hidan's last attack. The earth falls in with a great rumbling noise, and then settles.

It is then that Shikamaru hears the sound of a loud explosion from nearly three miles away, where Neji's chakra has been crackling angrily for the past few hours. Shikamaru waits, holding a lungful of cigarette smoke. He doesn't exhale until he feels Neji's chakra again, but the relief is short-lived. From across Amegakure, almost at the city's borders, there is a sharp, blue light that arches up into the sky. Shikamaru hears, distantly, the sound of a flock of birds taking off in flight—thousands and thousands of them, it seems, all chirping at once.

"Hatake goddamn Kakashi," he murmurs aloud, because who else has balls enough to be able to pull off something like that in enemy territory? Asuma told him once that Kakashi is a living legend, that generations thereafter will remember him for his courage, strength and honor. Shikamaru always thought that legends were exaggerations, but he thinks that maybe Asuma had been right about Kakashi because a few seconds after the light, there is thunder.

Shikamaru tries to walk towards Kakashi, because he might need assistance, but his knees buckle and he collapses onto the ground. He stays kneeling on the earth where he buried Hidan, face tilted to the sky to watch the crackle and blue of Kakashi's lightning reaching up to the sky. Three miles away, Neji does the same.

It rains.
The worry of Kakashi's wound buffers the news for the first few days. Then, the chaos of trying to relocate everyone back to Konoha without attracting what remains of Akatsuki's attention takes over. When the team gets back to Konohagakure, it's to a great deal of fanfare from a Village that doesn't know of its losses just yet. The funeral and ensuing media blowout despite Hinata's best attempts to contain it—any comments, Counselor Uzumaki? How is the Commander doing? Is he expected to recover and resume his duties?—takes care of the next two months.

Naruto doesn't have time to breathe, time to do much of anything (he's Counselor now, no longer a Junior Counselor). It isn't until two months later, when Neji has woken up from his coma, that he realizes the truth of it. He's leaving the hospital after visiting Neji when it hits him—

"Oh, you goddamn bastard," Naruto says under his breath, and leans against a nearby wall to collect his breath. "You son of a bitch."

It's his first panic attack—the only one, really; he is Uzumaki Naruto, and Uzumaki Naruto doesn't have panic attacks—and he rides it out in a bathroom stall in the hospital, resting his head against the door and taking short, painful, staccato breaths.

It's not the loss. Naruto has been prepared for this eventuality; Sasuke had told him as much: When it's done, I won't come back. It's just that he thought they would have more time. He thought—

A few more months. Maybe a year.

When he emerges fifteen minutes later from the bathroom stall, he makes quick work of pulling himself together in front of the bathroom mirror. He takes a deep breath, exhales, buries that grief inside him so deep that it will never, ever be touched again, not by anyone or by anything.

Easy, Uzumaki, he tells himself. He doesn't question the sudden chill in the bathroom that makes his breath fog out and his lips turn slightly blue, because he is too focused on telling himself, Easy.

"Here we go," Sasuke mutters when he finally catches up to Madara in an abandoned factory. Madara isn't alone, and a moment later, the door behind Madara opens and Pein steps out. Right at his heels is—

"Brother?" Sasuke goes stock-still. Sasuke had mourned him, but here he is, alive and well.

Itachi angles his head only slightly, but he doesn't say anything because Madara starts to laugh.

"They sent you?"

"He was always arrogant," the Shodaime mutters under his breath.

Kanaye, Sasuke calls loudly, and the mamba appears with a soft pop by his side. The snake notices Madara, Pein and Itachi almost immediately and bares his fangs, swaying dangerously in the air.

"And a lizard," Madara goes on, laughing still. "They sent you and a lizard."

"Lizard?" Kanaye snarls, turning to look at Madara. "Let's kill him."

"Let's," Sasuke says, and gets into a stance. Madara, he reminds himself, dragging his eyes away from his brother (alive, alive, alive, alive). Madara, keep your eyes on Madara.

The Nidaime turns to Sasuke and meets his eye. "Draw your weapon, boy."

Kakashi trained him with this sword. It is an Iwate, perfectly balanced and engraved with the names
of two of the greatest warriors in human history. So when Sasuke draws it, he does it with the same respect Kakashi would require him to, gets into a perfectly held stance and breathes.

"Oh, look at that," Madara mocks, pointing at Sasuke to demonstrate to the others. "He can hold a sword. That filth taught you well."

"His name is Hatake Kakashi," Sasuke calls out, feeling his blood roaring in his ears. "Hatake Kakashi, you piece of shit. He eats men like you for breakfast."

"It barks," Madara announces, and claps his hands, delighted. "Let's see if it can bite."

Sasuke barrels into him with his blade swinging. His fist makes contact, and so does the butt of his sword hilt. Out of spite, he reaches for Madara's face-cloth and rips, feeling his fingernails dig into skin and breaking the surface in the process. When he retreats, it's to see Madara's surprised face. There is a shock of black hair, and a man who looks as though he might be forty, maybe forty-five. There are wrinkles around his eyes, though, deep wrinkles that stand in contrast to the relative smoothness of the rest of his face.

_Uchiha_, Sasuke realizes. "No, the mask was a good idea," he says, and throws the cloth to one side. "You are one ugly-ass son of a bitch, Madara."

Madara's Sharingan swirls, and it's perhaps the most powerful Mangekyou that Sasuke has ever seen. "Would you like me to, Tobi?" Pein asks mildly from the sideline.

"No," Madara says, and stretches his arms over his head. "It's time I taught the boy some manners."

Sasuke grins at the man, all teeth. When Madara attacks, he's ready.

It takes six full months for the official report to be filed, and by then, summer has turned into autumn, and then, winter. For all its delay, it is only a single page long. It lists all six members of Kakashi's team, their intended targets, whether or not the target was terminated, and by what means (Buried alive, Shikamaru lists clinically.)

It is the seventeenth copy of this report. The previous sixteen have been pushed aside on Neji's—once Sasuke's—desk. Each time Neji gets to Sasuke's name, he finds himself writing volumes, page after page of what he witnessed that day. The measure of a man is how he meets his death, his uncle told him once, and Neji tries time and again to do Sasuke justice. In the end, he settles for one simple sentence. Sasuke was always chronically succinct on his reports, so Neji decides to follow in his footsteps.

There is a blank in the space next to Sasuke's intended target section, because no one is sure the damage that Sasuke has done, if any. But in the margins, Neji writes:

_Uchiha Sasuke died fighting for his Village and his Country._

That is the truth of it, for anyone who is interested. They don't need to know the rest.

Sasuke gets about ten minutes of good attacks in. He manages to press his palm flat against Madara's elbow and pull his hand back far enough to hear a sickening crack, and then pushes in a kunai into the man's thigh. The sword is long gone—he was forced to drop it—and now it's just a matter of taijutsu and speed. Sasuke feels as if he's in the Academy again, mastering the basics of his footwork and fluid movements.
They fight quietly, broken only by the sound of their fists and legs hitting muscle and forearms blocking potential attacks. It's a steady rhythm of *thwacks*, and the occasional grunt when Madara puts too much pressure in one area. "Here, here, and here," Madara points out and matches each word with a quick jab at Sasuke's torso. "Weak points that you fail to defend."

Then, Madara falls back, cradling his broken arm close to his chest. "Look at what you did," he says, sounding disappointed. Sasuke stares at him, breathing hard and trying to control the thunder of his heart. By now, his left eye is nearly swollen shut, his lip is bleeding, and with each inhale, he can feel the tug and pull of the muscles around his ribs.

"Keep at it," the Nidaime orders from the sideline.

Sasuke raises his chin just a little, ignores the twinge of pain at that motion (a brilliant maneuver by Madara that had him with his face down on the ground, twisted at an odd angle). Madara tugs at the arm experimentally. "Nagato," he calls out, and Pein responds immediately. Pein takes Madara's arm lightly in his own, and says, "On three. One—" he pulls, loud enough that Sasuke hears the crack and snap of muscles. "There," Madara says, flexing his fingers. "Better."

"How did he…" the Yondaime trails off. "*How?*

And just at this moment, there is a loud crackle of chakra from the other side of the Village. Immediately after, a blue bolt of lightning shoots up to the sky. "Hatake Kakashi," Madara breathes, baring his teeth in a feral grin. "*Finally.*"

"Take care of him," Madara orders, already half-turning towards Kakashi's location. Sasuke blurs in his speed to block Madara's path.

"We're not done," he rasps out, and feels the rattle of his breath shake his entire body. *Thirty* minutes, and he's already weakened. But he gets into a stance again.

"What's this about, huh?" Madara asks. "Is it cause I'm after that jinchuriki of yours? I've heard the rumors about you and him, kid, but I gotta tell you, it's all hormones. It'll pass. What's important is that you have potential. If you want to join us—"

"We're not done," Sasuke repeats, because that's about the most coherent sentence he can come up with. He will not let Madara get anywhere near Kakashi.

Madara throws up his hands in frustration. "Seriously, kid. Let it go."

"*No,"* Sasuke insists, and takes a deep breath. He presses a hand against his stomach, feels the churn of chakra there. Kanaye slithers up his leg and coils around his bicep to communicate, *You need to stall him longer. The Dog-Master needs more time.* So Sasuke takes another deep breath and holds out his hand. "*We are not done,*" he says and lets his chakra gather in his palm.

The sound of a thousand birds fills the air, loud, louder than anything Sasuke has ever heard. He can feel his chakra pathways straining under the effort, the skin on his palms becoming hot and blistered with the energy. Madara watches him carefully. He doesn't move until the Chidori is almost as big as a basketball, and when he does, it's to get into stance.

"*No,"* Madara agrees. "*It seems we're not."

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The Nidaime is the one who says it in the end, while they are all looking out over the Village from the top of the Hokage Monument. It's winter now, and Konoha has become still under the snow and cold. "It's quiet without him."
The Shodaime places a hand on his brother's shoulder. "It is."

"We could have—"

"We could not have done anything," the Shodaime interrupts neatly, because he knows his little brother better than he knows himself. When he was fourteen and Tobirama was nine, their mother had died from yellow fever. It had been a slow, painful death, and when their mother finally passed, it fell on Hashirama to raise his brother. He made sure there was food on the table, a roof over Tobirama's head, and after some time, an education.

So when the Nidaime's shoulders stiffen with grief, the Shodaime feels it even more acutely than his own. "He was a good kid," the Nidaime announces a little too loudly.

"Yes," the Shodaime agrees, and looks across the Village towards Amegakure. The boy was rude, disrespectful, and had no regard for hygiene or decorum at times. But he was good, sincere in a way that constantly reminded the Shodaime of his own little brother. "He is at peace now."

"That's bullshit," the Nidaime hisses, rounding on the Shodaime. "That's bullshit, and you know it. He's dead, and that's all there is to it. There is no peace, no fucking paradise on the other end. You and I both know that all he had was—"

"Tobi," the Shodaime breathes, and gathers the Nidaime into a hug. The Nidaime tolerates it only for a moment, and then, he pulls roughly away.

"I'm going."

"Where?" the Shodaime asks.

The Nidaime is already walking away, but at this question, he half-turns to answer, "I don't know. For a run, I guess."

In Sasuke's defense, he kills Madara once.

The Chidori is magnificent. Even if it doesn't meet its target head-on, it grazes by Madara, close enough to shred away his shirt and a part of his side, where his liver is closest to the surface. Madara is seething at this, which is the only reason why Sasuke manages to make some sort of headway with Madara. The ghosts seem surprised at this turn of events, but halfway through pounding Madara into the ground—he's got one knee on Madara's hipbone, and his hands are a blur of fists now, hitting at every vital point that Kakashi ever taught him—Sasuke realizes:

Madara isn't particularly strong, and he's vulnerable to his emotions. His Mangekyou is draining him, so in a fair fight, Kakashi would probably stand a good chance against him.

The problem is that no matter what Sasuke does, Madara keeps returning full-force. It's almost like—

"Can't you fucking die?" Sasuke roars. "Kanaye now!"

The mamba latches onto Madara's carotid, sinking in his fangs with almost as much force as Sasuke uses to pry Madara's jaws open. He bites his wrist just over the vein, sucks in the blood that comes out, and holds it in his mouth, making sure that Madara doesn't move too much. He's got Madara's arms pinned at odd angles, both broken and useless to shake Kanaye off his neck.

Kanaye slithers away, That's all I have, he communicates, and this is Sasuke's cue. If the venom of a mamba isn't enough—the most poisonous snake venom known to mankind—then Sasuke's own
venom will have to help.

So Sasuke bends over Madara until his lips are right over the other man's, and spits the fresh blood into Madara's mouth. He snaps Madara's jaw shut and pinches his nose, forcing Madara to swallow. "*Drink,* you fucking piece of—"

Madara begins to convulse, seizing hard enough to jar Sasuke off his body. Sasuke crawls away, panting hard and licking at the blood on his teeth still. Kanaye slithers towards Madara, swaying lightly in the air. "Give it time," Kanaye mutters. "He'll die soon enough."

"Is he..." the Shodaime stands over Madara, watching carefully as Madara's convulsions slow and then stop. "No sign of chest movement, signs of cyanosis in his fingernails already," Sarutobi points out, crouching by Madara's body. "Your mamba's venom is potent, Sasuke. Well done."

Sasuke gets to his feet shakily and rounds on the others. They haven't moved an inch since the fight started nearly two hours ago, watching almost disinterestedly as the entire thing played out. "Who's next?" Sasuke asks, and spits viciously to his right. His saliva is tinged red, and he can taste the distinct flavor of bile at the back of his throat.

"Take care of him, Itachi," Pein says, and he sounds supremely uninterested. He walks towards Madara's body, ignoring Sasuke almost entirely.

"What?" Sasuke asks dumbly and turns to watch Pein crouch over Madara. He places a hand against Madara's carotid for a moment. Then, he begins to do a few seals, hands moving so fast that with his weakened Sharingan, Sasuke has a difficult time following. He's so busy watching Pein that he misses the Yondaime yell out, "Uchiha!"

Sasuke turns just in time to see Itachi cross the distance between them in one quick blur. "Brother—"

Itachi reaches out to cradle the back of Sasuke's head, pulls Sasuke close almost as if for a hug. Sasuke feels the kunai even before he can react, a slicing pain that makes him gasp for breath. He makes an odd noise in the back of his throat at the pain, feels his heartbeat take off.

"Sasuke!" Sarutobi yells loudly, and the other ghosts yell his name too, voices overlapping and almost indistinguishable against the roar in Sasuke's ears.

Itachi holds on for a moment longer, hand gentle on the back of Sasuke's neck and body solid against Sasuke's when his knees buckle. It reminds Sasuke of the pictures he has of him and Itachi, the ones where Itachi is holding a baby or toddler Sasuke in his arms. In all the pictures, Itachi always has a careful hand on the back of Sasuke's neck to support his head.

Itachi eases him onto the ground in increments, so when Sasuke's knees hit the gravel, it isn't as jarring as it might have been. Sasuke looks down to see that the kunai is still lodged in his body. Itachi hasn't jammed it up to the hilt, but it's deep enough that blood is dripping down and soaking Sasuke's pants.

When he looks up, it's to see that Itachi is walking towards Kanaye, kunai drawn. Kanaye has his fangs bared, coiling to attack, but he doesn't stand a chance against Itachi. So Sasuke raises his hands and does the few seals it takes, and Kanaye vanishes mid-air.

Itachi glances over his shoulder at Sasuke before joining the others. "Anything yet?" he asks, and Pein hm-s under his breath.

A few seconds later, Madara stirs, coughing lightly. The Shodaime breathes, "Impossible."
"No," Sasuke breathes and tries to pivot towards Madara. He has to finish his mission: he will not let his efforts go to such waste.

"He's persistent," Pein says, and gets to his feet. Madara is pushing himself up as well, shaky but alive. How, how the hell? Sasuke thinks, but he doesn't have time to finish his thoughts because Pein draws a kunai. He takes a step towards Sasuke.

"Hatake Kakashi is still alive," Itachi interrupts, tilting his face in the direction of Kakashi's crackling chakra. Madara wipes at the saliva on his chin. Sasuke gropes blindly at his thigh for weapons, but his fingers feel too thick and slow to respond. "I have unfinished business with the Commander."

"I do too, actually," Madara mutters, distracted already, and turns towards Kakashi. Pein advances towards Sasuke again, but Madara dismisses Sasuke with a careless wave of his hand. "Leave him, Nagato. Itachi is right. There's bigger game to hunt."

"Shouldn't we put him out of his misery?" Pein asks mildly, twirling his kunai lightly between his fingers.

"No," Madara orders. "Little fucker spit in my mouth. Let him bleed out."

Sasuke watches the three of them leave, feeling the slow, seeping chill of his blood drip down his shirt and stain his pants a darker black. His snakes appear with soft pops only a moment later, coiling quickly around Sasuke's body to contain the damage. The snakes are quiet. Even Daichi and Hideyoshi don't comment on the heat in Sasuke's stomach, a familiar burn of shame and disappointment. He couldn't harm a single one of them, and the worst part is that the ghosts were witness to it. Even worse, he will probably survive this attack because Ishi coils around the kunai's hilt and pulls it out easily enough. His chakra is a cool, soothing touch against the damage in Sasuke's body.


Madara, Pein and Itachi are heading towards Kakashi, all three of them, and they will exact their revenge on Konohagakure by killing her greatest son.

And Sasuke? Sasuke is kneeling on the ground in the middle of Amegakure, seven miles from where his sensei will be slaughtered.

By the time he staggers to his feet, Kakashi's chakra is gone.

They say it over and over and over again, but for all his intelligence, Kakashi doesn't seem to get it. It's not your fault, Kakashi-sensei, Sakura repeats when they're in one of their physical therapy sessions. Naruto points it out over lunch one day, head bent over his ramen. It's not your fault, you know, Kakashi-sensei. The bastard had a death wish since he was eight.

But it is, Kakashi knows. It is his fault because he's gotten the truth out of Shikaku's boy, Shikamaru, over a game of chess. "If I win," Kakashi challenges. "You will tell me what happened. To expedite things, consider that an order."

Shikamaru puts out his cigarette. "Yes, sir," he says, and since he is Konoha's undefeated chess champion, he takes the challenge. He's defeated the likes of Sarutobi Hiruzen. Hatake Kakashi, genius or not, doesn't stand a chance. It's not arrogance, it's just confidence. Shikamaru knows his strengths and he's played enough chess games to be able to predict every possible permutation of moves allowed.
In the end, it's not Shikamaru's confidence that gets him. It's his unwillingness to ask the Commander of the Joint Forces of Konohagakure if he cheated.

Kakashi tilts his head at an angle polite and casual, even though one of the rooks has moved at a crucial moment of the game. Shikamaru knows each and every single chessboard he's ever played. But he can't ask Hatake Kakashi, Did you cheat, sir?

He loses, and Kakashi collects on his promise.

Neji told everyone to keep their damn mouths shut about the mission (because that's what Sasuke asked for right before he left, Don't tell Kakashi-sensei what happened). Shikamaru made a promise to a dying man and his commanding officer, but Kakashi is looking at him from across the table with an icy-gray eye. He holds his peace for as long as he can, but then Kakashi asks, sounding far more broken than a man of his legend should, "Why is it that even Pakkun won't tell me what happened?"

"He didn't want us to tell you, sir," Shikamaru offers. "That was his last order to us before he turned back."

Kakashi sits back in his chair, breathing deep. It doesn't take him long to put two and two together. He survived a mission that he shouldn't have, but Sasuke is missing. He understands exactly what happened because he knows Sasuke, he taught the boy everything he knew, and he knows Sasuke's strengths and weaknesses. This is one weakness that Kakashi has never been able to correct in the boy, stubborn as he was.

He'd told Sasuke that he'd have to leave someone behind someday. Told him, And you're going to have to live with that.

Sasuke had been so defiant then, said No to his face. Kakashi misunderstood. Sasuke wasn't just saying no, he was saying, No, I won't have to live with it.

And he hasn't had to. He is dead because he refused to leave Kakashi behind.

Shikamaru knows the minute he understands because Kakashi's shoulders move up and down with a deep, deep breath. "You played well, Shikamaru. I'm sorry I had to cheat."

There really isn't any protocol for this. So Shikamaru says, "Sir," and watches Kakashi leave.

Pakkun is the one who finds them, huddled around a fire and nursing their wounds. They are at their designated rendezvous point a few miles outside the Village, nestled at the entrance of an abandoned factory's drainage pipe that smells almost as foul as it looks.

Kakashi's orders were that if any one of them did not return to the rendezvous point by 2300 hours of the second day, then the others leave them behind. He told this to Sasuke several times over when they set out, said it over and over and over again until Sasuke snapped, Fine, old man. But the only reason Sasuke even agreed was because he never thought he'd come back alive.

But he is alive, and if any of the others were surprised to see him stagger into camp, they don't show it. My failure cost the Commander's life, Sasuke wants to tell them, but they're all tired and too exhausted to hear news like this. He'll have to wait until he gets back to Konoha, and he will announce it then: Hatake Kakashi is dead because of me.

When Pakkun trots into the glow of their dim fire, Sasuke gets to his feet immediately. "He wants to see you before he goes," Pakkun announces, sounding tired.
"The fuck he does," Sasuke says harshly, and follows Pakkun, hands nearly shaking at the thought that Kakashi is still alive. The wound from Itachi pulls and tugs with each step he takes.

They find Kakashi nearly seven miles beyond Amegakure's borders, leaning heavily against a tree trunk and breathing shallowly. His face-cloth is ripped off, and there is a deep gouge across his left eye where Madara must have tried to rip out Kakashi's Mangekyou. And now, finally, Sasuke sees the man's face in its entirety. He's handsome, rugged and strong-jawed, obviously the heir of the western samurais.

"He doesn't have much time left," Pakkun explains, shifting from one paw to the other. "He wanted to see you."

"Kakashi," the Yondaime breathes, and goes to Kakashi's side. He reaches out to touch Kakashi's head lightly, and he looks so very old now, almost as old as Sarutobi. "You going to bail on me too, kid?"

"I'm sorry," Pakkun says under his breath, looking right at the Yondaime. "I'm so sorry you have to see this."

Sasuke kneels by Kakashi's side and begins to take off Kakashi's vest and weapons. Kakashi is leaner than Sasuke across the shoulders, but he is a bit taller and weighs only a few pounds lighter. So Sasuke cannot afford any extra weight. *Ishi, Fudo, Daichi, Hideyoshi, Yuuta*, Sasuke orders, and they all appear with soft pops.

"Keep him alive," Sasuke orders, and the snakes hesitate only a moment before coiling around Kakashi's torso.

"Kid," Pakkun sighs. "He's nearly gone."

Sasuke eases Kakashi over his shoulder, wincing at the strain of the effort. "Let's move out," he orders the others. Neji hesitates, so Sasuke barks out, "Now."

They move slowly because all of them are injured, and Sasuke has Kakashi's weight thrown over his shoulder. They take turns carrying Kakashi, but Sasuke volunteers the most time. The Yondaime trails close to Kakashi the entire time, face a careful blank.

Behind them, Akamaru and Pakkun are covering their tracks, so when Akatsuki picks up the scent a day later close to the border of the Land of Water, they're the first to know. Akamaru comes bounding into the clearing with a quiet huff of a bark. Pakkun follows a moment later. "They're behind us," Pakkun announces, and as if on cue, Fudo raises his head from his tight coil around Kakashi's chest with a rattle of his tail.

"Three of them," Fudo hisses.

Shino fills in the rest. "They're moving fast," he says quietly, holding out a finger for one of his bugs to rest on. "We need to move faster if we intend to stay ahead of them."

Sasuke resettles Kakashi's weight over his shoulder. "Let's go." The others are silent for a moment, none of them willing to say what needs to be said. "Let's go," Sasuke snarls, letting his Sharingan swirl to life.

The Yondaime is the one to break the silence first. "Leave him," he says, and there is a resignation to his voice that makes Sasuke's chest feel too tight. He puts a cold hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "It's his time."
"No," Sasuke insists. "I'm not leaving him behind."

"Listen, kid," Pakkun says. "I'll stand guard with Kakashi until—"

"Until what?" Sasuke hisses, rounding on the dog. "They come back and finish their job? He's still breathing, he can—"

"You need to leave him behind," the Shodaime counsels kindly. "It is either him or your team. Make the choice. If you wish to spare him the suffering of being found alive, that is an option as well."

Sasuke remembers each and every single one of the lessons Kakashi taught him. One of them was: *Protect your teammates*. His teammates are Neji, Shino, Shikamaru and Kiba, all of them wounded and in enemy territory. The right thing to do, what Kakashi taught him to do, is—

Sasuke puts Kakashi down on the ground, props him up against a tree. The man's head drops forward, so Sasuke supports it up. He is still breathing shallowly, in and out, in and out, in and out.

"Kakashi," Sasuke tries, slapping the man on the cheek lightly. "Hey, Kakashi."

"He's gone," Ishi warns. The other snakes slide off Kakashi's body. "Move out or the others will catch up to you."

Sasuke woke up one day in Otogakure, hearing Kakashi's voice rattling around in his mind: *You protect those who cannot protect themselves. That is your duty*. Orochimaru's orders the previous week had cost an entire hamlet its life. So Sasuke burned down all of Otogakure, telling himself, *Kakashi taught me better than this, I am better than this because Kakashi taught me.*

When he left Otogakure, Sasuke stepped into sunlight a free man for the first time in almost three years and headed towards Konohagakure. He never apologized to Kakashi when he got back, just said, "He killed civilians."

"He did more than that," Kakashi pointed out mildly, sitting on a low stool in Sasuke's cell, and that was that.

"Let's go," the Yondaime says again, putting a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. It makes Sasuke shiver lightly, even though his face and neck are getting hot. "Hey, sensei," Sasuke persists. He shakes Kakashi's shoulder lightly, blinks furiously against the blur in his vision. "Kakashi-sensei. Wake up."

"Twelve or so miles," Kiba announces, tilting his face west.

"Sasuke," Neji tries, and places a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "Let's go."

Sasuke shrugs him away, moves towards Kakashi instead and pulls the man into a rough hug. He swallows on the heat prickling his eyes and the lump in his throat and breathes deep.

"He is gone, son," the Shodaime says by his side, and his voice sounds far away through the strange ringing in Sasuke's ear. "Let him go."

"Let go of him," Pakkun says kindly, nudging at Sasuke's hands with his nose. "Go on, kid."

The thing, though, is that Sasuke isn't supposed to be the one burying Kakashi. It's supposed to be the other way around. He has seen twenty-three of his Clan die already. The grief of watching his mother and father get murdered has slowly settled over the past decade, but here it is, all over again, that same wrenching feeling that makes Sasuke's hands shake and his breath come out in deep, heaving gasps. He feels as if he's either going to throw up or pass out, and his head feels as though
it's going to split into two.

"I told you not to come," Sasuke says, and hides the thickness of his voice in Kakashi's shoulders. "I fucking told you—"

"Sasuke," Kiba interrupts, and puts a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. He tugs once gently, and this time, Sasuke lets go of Kakashi and gets to his feet. "That's enough," Kiba insists, and this time, he takes Sasuke by the elbow in a firm grip to pull him away.

Pakkun lifts a paw in Kirigakure's direction. "Go on. Get out of here."

Sasuke takes in a shuddering breath. He tastes salt on his tongue, but he can't care. "If they find him and he's still alive—"

"I'll take care of him," Pakkun promises quietly, sparing Sasuke the need to say it aloud. Kill him before they find him. By all rights, Sasuke should be the one to do it but he can't. He can't, he can't, he can't—

Sasuke rubs at his face with the back of his hand, but it's useless because his cheeks get wet a moment later. "Don't leave him. I don't want him alone when—"

"I'll stay," Pakkun insists. "To the end, I'll stay."

They get as far as two miles from Kakashi before Sasuke has to stop, hand braced on a tree, because his breathing is coming out too shallow and he can't fucking see through the sting in his eyes and the headache pounding down his spine. Shino stops next to him and places a hand on Sasuke's back. "Sasuke, you did the right thing."

"No, it's not that," Sasuke insists, shrugging away from him, and turns back in the direction of where they left Kakashi. "I can't see. I can't fucking see."

"Look at me, son, tell me what is wrong, look at me," the Shodaime instructs, and Sasuke blinks towards the man's voice, wiping at his eyes to try and make the Shodaime's outline more distinct. "Mangekyou," the Shodaime breathes.

Kakashi talked about getting the Mangekyou only once before, and that too, hesitantly. What did it feel like? Sasuke asked, eager and still young enough to believe that the price for a Mangekyou was worth paying. Kakashi had been slow to answer. Worst fucking moment of my life, he'd said finally.

Sasuke knows about the Mangekyou in theory. It is the second stage of the Sharingan's evolution. The first is the birth of the Sharingan. The second is when the chakra pathways that normally connect his eyes to his brain shut down to allow for the Mangekyou to be born. With this second stage, normal eyesight is compromised. The only way to counter this is by activating the Mangekyou.

The first surge of chakra locks the eyes into a perpetual Mangekyou state. The Sharingan, in its truest form, is a parasite, one that drains the user of his chakra and slowly robs them of their eyesight. The Mangekyou seals the fate of an Uchiha. It takes two decades, maybe three, for the Mangekyou to degenerate the eye completely. But to even get the Sharingan, the user has to suffer a steep price. The cost of the Sharingan is great sadness, a grief strong enough that the Uchiha somehow activates two remote chakra pathways to his eyes.

Itachi learned all this from Fugaku, sitting across from him in their Clan's dojo and listening quietly as Fugaku's low, rumbling voice explained the dangers of the Mangekyou. The knowledge is passed
father to son, beginning with the very first Uchihas who made blood oaths to the dragons in the Western Mountains. Itachi and Shisui were the last of this tradition, though, because Sasuke was too young to hear it from his father.

By the time Sasuke developed the sharingan, the Clan had been buried for nearly six years. Kakashi took on Fugaku's responsibilities, and he did it even when Sasuke spat, *You're not an Uchiha.*

Sasuke would point this out to Kakashi over and over and over again, because he was twelve, and he still hadn't learned how to grieve properly without hurting everyone around him. Fugaku may not have been a good parent, but he was still Sasuke's father, and his absence was all the more obvious in the years after Sasuke got his Sharingan.

It was only their second month as teacher and student—Kakashi only twenty-five, and Sasuke an even younger eleven—so neither knew how to handle themselves around each other. *Let me know when you find someone else to teach you, then,* Kakashi had said, irked, and left with a pop.

They didn't talk about it again until Sasuke got his Sharingan. Then, when Sasuke was doubled over with pain, clutching his head and blinking back tears against the worst headache of his life, Kakashi placed a callused hand over Sasuke's eyes and said, *Breathe, kid. Just breathe through it.*

When Kakashi was thirteen, he returned to Konoha with one eye burning red. So Uncle Kyoguku took Kakashi in—a dishonor to Obito, Uchiha Hoshiko accused, *you dishonored Obito, you coward,* let that Hatake rot. Obito’s mother had died in childbirth, and it was Hoshiko, Yashiro’s third wife and the woman Sasuke had known as grandmother, who had raised the boy. When she had been told the news of her child’s death—and Obito may not have been hers by blood, but he was her son—she had cried and cried until she had lost her voice. Hoshiko was grieving the death of her son still, Kyogoku understood her grief (Obito was his brother too; it was his grief too), but for the first time in his life Kyogoku broke rank and ignored his step-mother's orders.

The Mangekyou would have killed Kakashi, but Kyoguku owed Hatake Sakumo a great debt: Kyoguku was one of the men that Hatake Sakumo had saved during the war, one of the men Sakumo was supposed to leave behind but defied orders to rescue. So Kyoguku taught Sakumo's son the way of the Uchiha Clan, beginning with the katon jutsus. The bastard Sharingan, they called him.

Kakashi taught everything he learned from Kyoguku to Sasuke. Most of the time, the lessons took place while they were walking back to Konoha after a long mission. Sakura and Naruto would be ahead, Naruto chattering away while Sakura listened and tried hard not to be drawn into Naruto's enthusiasm about this or that. This is also when Kakashi taught Sasuke his rules, all fifty-six of them, including the one about condoms. He made these rules up as they went along, because Kakashi realized very early on that Sasuke liked lists, things he could remember and memorize.

*He should be here for this,* Sasuke realizes, closing his eyes to take a deep breath. Kakashi has already taught him what to do (*just in case*, the jounin said, and it went unsaid that Kakashi might die before Sasuke ever gets here, or that Kakashi might have to kill Sasuke for murdering Naruto when the time came).

"Uchiha," Neji says sternly. "We don't have time to stand around here."

*When it's time, just take a breath,* Kakashi told him. *Always remember to breathe. When you're ready, focus your chakra right behind your eyes, and—*

Sasuke feels the tingle of chakra at the back of his eyes. It's not nearly as triumphant a moment as Sasuke expected, but when he opens his eyes, the world is awash with new colors and movements. Even in the predawn light, he can see the silhouette and angle of each leaf in the canopy overhead.
Kakashi's life, Sasuke realizes, isn't worth this. Every waking moment from this point on, he'd open his eyes and be reminded of the price of his eyes. This isn't worth it.

He starts running back towards Kakashi, taking off at full speed and ignoring Akamaru's bark and the ghosts' reprimands. When he bursts into the clearing, Pakkun is still there by Kakashi's side. The rest of the team appears a few moments later, just in time to see Sasuke hiking Kakashi over his shoulder again.

"You can't carry him," Neji breathes. "Uchiha, you can't—"

"I'm not," Sasuke interrupts neatly and moves towards Kiba. "You said you owed me, right?"

Kiba stares at him. "What?"

"When I carried you from the Land of Rice Fields, you said you would return the favor to me one day," Sasuke elaborates. Kiba nods his head slowly as he begins to understand. "I'm asking you now," Sasuke says, and this is the first time in his life he's ever done this. It isn't as difficult as he thought it would be to ask for help though, not when it concerns Kakashi. "I want you to take him west, to the Land of Wind. Head straight for the nearest checkpoint. Gaara will give you protection. I'll double back and hold them off."

"I—" Kiba stops short. "Of course."

Sasuke hands Kakashi over to Kiba and turns to his snakes. "Keep him alive," Sasuke orders, pointing at Kakashi. "They have a little over a hundred miles to get to safety. Stay with him until he wakes up." That's ten hours at their slowest speeds. The rate they're traveling, they could make it in six or seven hours. Sasuke can hold off Madara for that long. He will have to.

On any normal day, his snakes have no qualms sharing their objections. But they occupy a space in Sasuke's mind and can read his thoughts as easily as they can their own. So instead of saying anything, the snakes coil around Kakashi's body again until his torso is glowing a light blue with their chakra.

"Sasuke," Sarutobi says quietly. "You can't—"

Sasuke takes off his mask. He hands it to Neji, pressing it into Neji's hands when the other man is slow to react. "This is his," he explains. "Give it back to him when he wakes up."

Shikamaru steps forward, looking ready to say something. But Sasuke holds up a hand to interrupt him. He digs around in his kunai pouch until his hands close over the small brown bag with the ghosts' bones. "Bury this by the Uchiha Shrine when you get to Konoha," he tells Shikamaru, and holds the pouch out to Shikamaru. "Take the quickest route to the Land of Wind border. I'll cover you."

Shikamaru is quiet for a moment before reaching into his own pocket. He pulls out a small bag of pills. "Chouji gave these to me," he says by way of explanation. "Just…if you need them."

Sasuke pockets them quickly. "Don't tell Kakashi what happened here," he says to the men in the clearing. "He'll wake up and he'll start asking questions cause he's a nosy son of a bitch, but don't tell him anything. That goes for you too, Pakkun."

Pakkun nods once. He looks up at Sasuke for a few moments, looking as if he's searching for something to say. "I'll scout ahead, then," Pakkun offers in the end, and disappears into the overgrowth without waiting for a response.
Akamaru barks lightly once, nudging Sasuke's hand until Sasuke's hand is resting on his head. Sasuke scratches Akamaru lightly behind the ears. "Cover their tracks," he orders, and Akamaru nods once.

Shino faces west. "Seven or so miles that way. They're hard on our trail."

"Then you should probably move out," Sasuke offers.

Kiba shifts Kakashi's weight more securely over his shoulder. "I'll get him home," he promises. He holds Sasuke's gaze for a moment before disappearing into the trees. Shikamaru follows an instant later, followed by Shino. Neji is the last one in the clearing, still holding Sasuke's ANBU mask in his hands. He ties the mask to his belt, fingers slow but sure. When he's done, he faces Sasuke again, face unreadable behind his mask.

"Sir," he says and stands at attention.

Sasuke takes a breath. "Dismissed," he responds, and Neji vanishes into the trees.

And still, the ghosts linger. The Nidaime is the first to speak. "Just go easy," the Nidaime counsels. Sasuke doesn't need to ask for clarification. "You won't want to, but try."

Sarutobi smiles lightly. "I will miss you, Sasuke," he says, and he is so sincere that Sasuke can't help the flush of his face at this.

The Yondaime is about to say something as well, but Sasuke interrupts him with a hand. "Spare me, Yondy." He might be about to head out on his last mission, but that doesn't give everyone a reason to start acting out like this. The Yondaime's features only soften further, which isn't the effect Sasuke was going for. So he turns away, facing Madara's crackling chakra, advancing fast.

"Who knows," Sasuke volunteers, "maybe I'll see you guys later, and we can have a drink..." He trails off, embarrassed, remembering that these men believe in a different God, a different kind of death and afterlife.

"We will see you," the Shodaime offers. "Have your sword ready."

Sasuke leaves the ghosts before they have a chance to say anything else. It's not like this is a big surprise, he thinks. He figured he'd die out in these forests anyways, might as well be for something useful like saving Hatake goddam Kakashi's lazy ass.

This is how Kakashi finds out—when it happens:

Ishi, Daichi, Hideyoshi, Fudo and Kanaye keep their promise to Sasuke and stay with Kakashi until he wakes up. They keep their distance as Tsunade and Sakura spend hour after hour healing Kakashi back to life, breath by precious breath. The humans in the room give the snakes their distance, avoiding the window sill where the snakes have all coiled.

Kanaye keeps a constant vigil, face turned north and east to keep track of Sasuke's chakra, so he is the first to know.

"Let's go," he orders the others, and his hiss is such a surprise in the silence of the room that even Kakashi tilts his head towards the snakes.

Fudo raises his tail, rattling an uneven rhythm. The boy's chakra is fading, dropping precipitously. Rin is with him, it seems, which is some comfort. "We should go," Kanaye insists. He's the youngest
of the Snake Clan, so Sasuke is his first master; he doesn't yet know how to deal with the death of a human. He's lucky, Fudo knows, because their previous master had been Orochimaru and before that, a Land of Waterfalls ninja who was too much of a coward to summon them.

The boy had been so stubborn, surviving so many improbable battles that it was starting to feel as though he were indestructible. But he is just a human, still only a child, and they are weak, weak creatures in the end, these humans. Fudo feels the words, the release of his bond and oath to the boy. So Yuuta hadn't been joking, then. The boy had intended to release them at his death. "Let's go," Fudo agrees, turning to his brothers.

Daichi and Hideyoshi vanish in quick succession, and Kanaye follows them. Ishi lingers, watching Kakashi closely. The man is trying to lift himself up into a sitting position, but he still has tubes running into his body. It's not until Tsunade and Sakura help him that Kakashi manages to sit up fully. He tugs off the mask on his face and rasps out, "How—"

He places the mask back on his face, sucks in a lungful of oxygen and tries again. "How is he?"

Ishi raises his head, fanning out to his full brilliance. He is Rin's second-born, always quiet and reserved. Today, though, he breaks his silence and speaks to an outsider, the human dialect sounding strange and halting. "He will be glad to know you are well, Hatake Kakashi. It will ease his passing."

He disappears with a soft pop, leaving Fudo alone with Kakashi. Fudo lingers just long enough to watch Kakashi slump back into Sakura's ready arms.

Sakura cradles Kakashi's head close, and says, voice thick with grief, "Thank you."

It isn't much of a fight in the end.

He doubles back and creates fake trails, leading Madara, Itachi and Pein away from Kakashi, and further east in Konoha's direction. It's an easy trick to play because Madara and the others would expect the team to head back east to Konoha, not southwest to Sunagakure.

It's seventeen hours before Madara, Pein and Itachi find him, and only because by this point, Sasuke is exhausted and running a fever from having used so many of Chouji's energy pills. He stops running, too tired to try and make his own escape. His team will have reached their destination by now anyways.

When they burst into the clearing, Sasuke is sitting on a tree stump, too damn exhausted to do anything but rest his elbows on his knees and breathe hard. Still, for the sake of appearances, he hauls himself to his feet and wipes at the sweat on his brow to face them. "About fucking time."

Madara sneers, his face turning ugly and pinched. "You got the Mangekyou, Sasuke. Congratulations. Who died, I wonder?"

"No one died," Sasuke announces, and draws his sword. NM HK US. By now, Kakashi will have reached Sunagakure. By now, he will have gotten the medical attention he needs. By now, he will have survived.

There's no other alternative, no other series of events that Sasuke can accept at this stage.

Madara's sneer doesn't slip from his face. "Hatake Kakashi is dead, then." He bows lightly, a mocking gesture that has Sasuke's blood curdling. "You're welcome."
"He deserved his death," Pein says, baring his teeth. "He deserved it and a hundred more."

"He's a little upset," Madara explains. "One of Hatake's men killed his girl, Konan."

*Aburame Shino, you clever son of a bitch,* Sasuke thinks with a grin. Shino had eliminated his target.

Pein's eyes narrow dangerously. He blurs before Sasuke can react, and he feels a sharp, searing pain. When he looks down, it's to find that Pein has shoved a kunai up through his torso, in almost exactly the same spot where Itachi had earlier. But unlike Itachi, Pein shoves it all the way to the hilt, twists angrily, and keeps twisting until the kunai has turned a complete three hundred and sixty degrees. *I'll drown, I'll drown in my own blood,* Sasuke thinks over the searing pain, because the kunai is going right through his lung and it's already getting difficult to breathe. Over Pein's shoulder he sees Itachi, standing as still as a rock next to Madara.

"See," Madara says loudly, clapping Itachi on the shoulder. There's a dangerous edge to his voice. "*That's how you kill him.*"

"He's always been persistent," Itachi says, words clipped and taut. *This is my brother,* Sasuke tells himself. The one who killed his mother, and the same one who told Sasuke, *Crane seal to finish.*

Pein grabs Sasuke by the face and forces Sasuke to meet his eyes. He brings out another kunai and presses it against Sasuke's face, right above Sasuke's eyebrow. "Like teacher like student, they say," he hisses, and pulls the kunai down in one ruthless swipe across Sasuke's eye. The blood almost immediately blurs his vision, and he can tell—even without a mirror, he can tell—that his eyelid has been sliced in two. Like Kakashi's.

"Your village will pay for what you did," Pein goes on, and returns his attention to the kunai in Sasuke's chest. He pushes it in. "You will rot in Hell."

"Been there," Sasuke says with a grin. He feels blood drip down his chin. "Done that."

He closes his hand over Pein's, stilling the kunai's movement. The thing with kunai is—"Metal," Sasuke points out, and spits out another mouthful of blood. Pein's eyes widen slightly, but before he can pull back, Sasuke lets his chakra loose. It's lightning, ungrounded, and Pein feels the full affect of it through the kunai.

They hit the ground simultaneously, Pein doubled over as chakra arches off Sasuke's body in loud snaps and crackles. Sasuke can feel his heartbeat thundering in his ribcage. But Pein is still convulsing, which means his heart is still beating. A few more moments, Sasuke wills, *just a few more seconds—*

Madara slams an earth jutsu into Sasuke, separating him from Pein with a soft rumble of soil. Sasuke tilts sideways, coughing up blood and shaking with the effort to remain alive now. He hears Madara distantly yelling at Itachi, "What the *fuck* is wrong with your brother?"

"As I said, he's persistent," Itachi yells back, walking over to look down at Sasuke. He crouches by Sasuke, and places a hand on Sasuke's forehead, as if checking for a temperature. It's an odd gesture, made even stranger by him saying low enough for only Sasuke to hear, "Rest, Sasuke."

Sasuke pulls up his hands and does one unsteady seal: The snake. For all its majesty, summoning the Snake Clan is just as simple as it may sound. *Rin,* Sasuke calls, but all that comes out is a gurgle of a sound. Sasuke turns his head to the right, sees Itachi's shoes in his view, and spits out some of the blood pooling in his mouth. *Rin,* he tries again, and there is a loud, loud crash overhead.

Before she can attack any of them, Sasuke communicates, *Rin, over here.*
Rin is there immediately, not a supernaturally large animal spirit, but just a python curling lightly around Sasuke's body. Itachi startles back at her appearance but doesn't move far. "You idiot," Rin says, and rests her head on Sasuke's. She pays no attention to Itachi. "I told you not to play with lightning."

"I, Uchiha Sasuke," Sasuke breathes out in human tongue. He takes a shuddering breath, and finishes, "Release you."

It feels like as if someone is tugging at his insides, trying to pull away what has always been there. It would be a lonely existence—even those few moments of life without his snakes—and the feeling of loss is made all the more acute by the fact that he can feel his vision fading. Sasuke blinks against the brilliant yellow of Rin's scales and reminds himself of the Nidaime's words. His body doesn't want to die yet, it's the survival instinct kicking in as his body struggles to keep hold of its surroundings. But—

Go easy, the Nidaime had said. You won't want to, but try.

Sasuke gropes for his sword, but it's Itachi who hands it to him. "Rest, Sasuke," Itachi repeats again, and closes Sasuke's fingers around his sword. He doesn't let go immediately, just holds Sasuke's hand around his sword. His voice is thick, the words halting and strained as he says them. "I won't be far behind. I promise. I'll see you soon. Rest."

Sasuke nods once, movements jerky as he slips into shock. It's odd, but this is relief he is feeling, seeing his brother alive and by his side in his last moments.

Itachi's lips thin. "Close your eyes. I'm here."

Sasuke meets his brother's eyes at that moment. When they were little, Shisui would sneak in ridiculous horror movies for the three of them to watch while the adults slept. Sasuke always woke up with nightmares afterwards. Sneaking under the covers next to his mother was not an option because Fugaku didn't tolerate weaknesses like that from his sons. So Sasuke would tiptoe down the hallway and bother Itachi instead. He'd always stand at the doorway, fingers twisting in his shirt and wait to be noticed, unwilling to wake Itachi. But Itachi would always wake anyways, squinting into the darkness at Sasuke’s silhouette in the doorway to whisper, annoyed, Fine, get in. Sasuke remembers how his brother would place a hand on the back of his neck and hold him close. He’d grumble, It was just a stupid movie, Sasuke and Tomatoes can't kill people or We'd figure it out if an aliens snatched Uncle Yakimo's body. And if that wasn't enough to calm Sasuke, he'd say over and over again until they both fell asleep, I'm here.

And now, here is Itachi, saying the same words again. Sasuke wonders if this is what the Nidaime meant about going easy, about not wanting to go. Maybe this is what he meant. Sasuke grips his sword tight. He needs to be sure he heard Itachi right. So he asks, "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Itachi agrees. His shoulders move up and down, breath coming out harsh and rushed. He looks so very old all of a sudden. He looks even more exhausted than Sasuke feels. Itachi's voice is thick, but then chokes the words out eventually: "I'm here."

Sasuke closes his eyes then, and hears the Shodaime's words in his head. Always, count:

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—

"I refuse," Rin says into his ear, and tightens her coil around Sasuke's body.

They vanish, and this is the burst of chakra Karin feels nearly four hundred miles away, a slight spike
of Sasuke's chakra as Rin transports them to the far islands of Land of Water—to the very depths of the Earth.
It's dark, and he is suspended in mud and clay. He can only breathe in short, staccato breaths without getting too much of it in his lungs. There isn't enough oxygen.

The first time Sasuke was down here, he woke up asphyxiating on his own vomit. He had screamed and screamed and nearly drowned for his efforts. It wasn't until he felt the careful coil of Rin around his body that he stopped screaming long enough to fall back asleep. He doesn't scream this time, but the panic is still there, just beneath the surface of his skin.

He feels a tug and pull on his insides, as if some unknown force is waiting to pull him down, down, down.

He understands he is elsewhere—he hears the rumble of volcanoes below, the muffled rush of oceans above, the tectonic shift of plates around. But he doesn't understand where or how or why. There are no seconds or minutes or days, just the knowledge that he is here. He cannot escape. He does not belong here. His soul is decaying, and he feels the weight of its corruption in the marrow of his bone.

He wants to hold his breath until he suffocates, bite his tongue till he chokes on blood. He wants to push his nails into the space between his ribs and still the weak beat of his heart. There are better deaths than this, but he doesn't do any of these things, because his fingers clench around mud and nothing else in this darkness:

He doesn't have his sword.

Sometimes he wakes to find that Rin has coiled around him. He hears her warning in his mind:  
Patience.

He cannot move, and no longer comprehends the space that his body occupies. Sometimes, he focuses on the fingers of his hand—he has those, he knows—and imagines that yes, the right index of his left hand has twitched. Sometimes, he wakes from nightmares and Rin will be there, telling him, Patience. Most times, he wakes from nightmares and Rin will be absent. In her absence, his nightmare continues because his nightmares are not of Brother or Mother or Father or Shisui, but of this place, of the endless darkness and expanse of this place.

He thinks he must be in Hell.

He sleeps, he wakes, he sleeps, he wakes. He feels his muscles remake themselves under Rin's careful chakra.

Patience, Rin tells him, until one day, she says instead, Climb.

Sasuke has heard these instructions before, and he isn't sure he understands them. All he understands is that he is now on all fours, the mud cold against his knees and palms. There's something pulling on his insides, tugging him down. He can't fall, though, because he must climb, and he must do so of his own free will, of his own strength. That is the bargain for his life. This is what he must do if he wants to feel sunshine on his skin again: Climb.
It takes him days before he gasps his first breath of fresh air, and when he does, the memories fade and slip away. All he has is a sword clenched tightly in his fingers, three initials engraved close to the hilt: NM, HK, US.

_Uchiha Sasuke:_ That's who he is.

_Hatake Kakashi:_ That's who he must find.

He doesn't remember if he had this sword in his hand the entire time, or if he has grasped it just now. He's grateful for its weight in his hands.

He's left with nothing but dread and the vague memory of mud and clay and shit between his toes.

He's on a northeasterly island of Land of Water, by the entrance to a pit under a willow tree. Sasuke crawls a few feet away and spends a few hours gasping for air, feeling the breath rattle in his throat and gripping his sword close to his chest. He's caked in mud and his own filth.

He can't afford to stay long because it's the dead of winter and even his chakra can't keep him warm for long enough in these temperatures.

He has to walk forty minutes before he comes across a fishing village. The first hut he knocks on belongs to a fisherwoman and her two daughters. They're all scandalized into speechlessness at Sasuke's naked state, the reeling stench of his body, his cracked and bloody feet and weeks-old beard. Sasuke holds up his hands to show that he means no harm. When he speaks his voice is a groan, musty from disuse. "Water. Please."

The fisherwoman recovers quickly after that. She ushers him in sternly, wrapping her face with a scarf to ward against the stench. She prepares a scalding hot bath in their too-small bathtub in the backyard, and Sasuke steps in with a groan. He's shivering so hard he can't clean himself properly, so the fisherwoman steps in and rolls up her sleeves. Her daughters pour bucket after bucket of fresh water into the tub. It takes nearly thirty full minutes for Sasuke to get completely clean and rid himself of that gagging smell.

His beard and hair are too matted to salvage, so the fisherwoman gets to work with a blade. She shaves him clean, gives him a buzz cut, and then rummages around musty chest boxes for a pair of her late husband's clothes. They're a size too small and short, but Sasuke says thank you and doesn't complain. Then, she pushes warm tea and food into Sasuke's hands. While Sasuke warms up by their fire, she tells him that the nearest port city is two days away by land. Konohagakure is at least three weeks of travel, likely more with the weather.

Sasuke learns from her that eight months have passed. He's seventeen now.

The fisherwoman introduces herself as Mrs. Shimizu Tsubasa. She's straight-faced even though Sasuke asks inane questions like, *What year is this, what month, what date? And where am I? And what news from Konohagakure? Is their Commander well?* She doesn't know anything about Konohagakure or her Commander.

Instead, she asks: "What's your name, child?"

Sasuke is so lost in his own thoughts that he's caught off guard by the question. He answers with the first thing that comes to mind: "Senju."
The woman doesn’t flinch. "And what did your mother call you?"

The second name that comes to his mind is: "Shisui."

The crow’s feet around Mrs. Shimizu's eyes crinkle with a smile. "You have very interesting eyes, Senju Shisui."

Sasuke remembers that his Mangekyou is alive now. He’d forgotten to cast an illusion, and now it's too late. Mrs. Shimizu doesn't give him long enough to answer, though, just keeps talking. "You'll want to leave before the sun sets," she says, glancing towards her two young daughters watching him warily from a corner of the hut. "It gets too cold to travel after that. And if it's Konohagakure you're headed for, I wouldn't recommend it. Not in this weather, and not without any supplies. The closest port city from here is Ikamane. You'd best try your luck there for the season."

It's a dismissal if he's ever heard one. He gets to his feet. "Ma'am."

He heads for Land of Rice Fields. Konohagakure is too far and the weather too unpredictable to risk it, not without knowing exactly what Akatsuki's status is. Itachi, Madara and Pein are all still alive. Setting off alone towards Konohagakure blind and in haste is no better than painting a target on his back.

There's only one person who can get him out of this situation, and while Sasuke doesn't like being in her debt too much, there's only a handful of people he can trust when shit really hits the fan.

There's really no other place to go but Land of Rice Fields.

Sasuke follows the fisherwoman's advice and heads to Ikamane. The journey is cold and wet. His clothes are too small, his shoes are leaky, and he doesn't have nearly enough layers on to protect against the weather. The snow and slush seep into his shoes, drenching his flimsy wool socks and making it seem as if he's walking on pins and needles the entire way. He uses his energy sparingly, letting just the smallest amount of chakra pool under his skin to keep warm. He's an Uchiha, and it's ridiculous that he's letting himself get this cold. Their blood runs hot and their chakra even hotter; still, he can't afford to broadcast his presence.

By the time he reaches Ikamane, Sasuke is desperate for a roof over his head, warm food, and clothes that fit. Ikamane is an old port city, with narrow buildings rising over pockmarked cobble stone streets. Sasuke follows the bustle of the crowd and heads for the dry docks in search of a ticket off the island. It doesn't take him long to find a trading ship heading to the mainland. The ship is carrying copper and quartz stones from the outer Land of Water islands towards Hyogo, a port city in Land of Rice Fields. The captain, Sasuke finds out, is in search of an oarsman.

No one in the crew has any news about Konohagakure or Kakashi's well-being.

It's not the worst kind of manual labor, but it carves in new calluses on Sasuke's fingers and leaves his lower back aching every night he beds down on the hard wood of the rocking ship. He doesn't have seasickness, but it still leaves him unsettled to be stranded in the middle of so much water. At the end of the day, he's an Uchiha—water unsettles him.

The captain navigates the ship from island to island, picking up new goods while trading others. It takes them two weeks to reach mainland, and by the time they dock in Hyogo, Sasuke is ready to get on his knees and kiss the ground under his feet. He accepts the meager pay that the First Mate hands him, and then sets inland towards Urausu.

It takes nearly three weeks to get to his destination, and with each passing day, Sasuke's impatience
grows. The weather is unrelenting, forcing him to find shelter in inns whenever he can. When he finally reaches Urausu, Mrs. Oonishi's reaction isn't the one he was expecting.

"Took you long enough," she mutters by way of hello. She looks older than the last time he saw her. The skin on the back of her hands is a tapestry of wrinkles, and it makes her wrists look frail. Still, her grip on Sasuke's elbow is firm when she ushers him in.

Sasuke doesn't bother to keep the surprise off his face. He'd been expecting shock and joy at his return. Not impatience. "How did you—"

"You think people are blind, boy?" Mrs. Oonishi snaps, and slams the door shut behind them. When she holds out a hand, Sasuke automatically starts to strip out of his dripping jacket, pulling off his skull cap and scarf with sharp tugs. It's warm in Mrs. Oonishi's tavern, even though it's only seven in the morning. It's almost as if she was expecting him.

"I was careful—"

"Your tattoos, you fool," Mrs. Oonishi hisses, slapping Sasuke on the arm. Sasuke has so much ink on his upper body—back, shoulder, biceps, and curling down to his forearm—that he doesn't even pay attention to them anymore. He glances down at his right forearm where his sleeve is pushed up. There's a trail of symbols inked into his right arm: Northern runes, the kind even an illiterate Land of Rice Field farmer can recognize. Peeking out from under his sleeve is the most prominent tattoo, three characters curling around one another, jagged and defiant against Sasuke's skin:

*Fire-born, War-forged, Death-blessed.*

A gap-toothed refugee in Otogakure had offered to ink him after Sasuke returned from battle victorious. It was the first time he led Orochimaru's men in a raid, and Sasuke had single-handedly slaughtered thirty-one men of an enemy clan in the north of Land of Rice Fields. Sasuke and his men left a graveyard in their wake, not a single fighting man or woman left to oppose Orochimaru's rule.

Sasuke had been young and impressionable then, drunk off his victory and the lingering metallic stench of blood in the air, so he agreed. The tattoo artist was the one to suggest the runes. You're in the North now, he'd said, explaining the significance of the runes as he penned them onto Sasuke's body. A northern warrior. You have a right to this ink. Orochimaru had been furious, not because he disapproved of tattoos, but because he'd marked Sasuke's body as his to occupy in the future. To spite him, Sasuke kept expanding the ink on his body, starting with an elaborate dragon curling down his back. It took the artist seven sittings to finish the dragon. Sasuke kept going back to the man for more, pleased with how aggressive the tattoos always appeared after the man had finished.

Now, though, the runes seem dramatic and boastful. Hindsight, as they say.

"I hadn't thought—"


Sasuke feels his face get hot with embarrassment. So much for his attempt to stay under the radar. The most he can do under Mrs. Oonishi's withering glare is to repeat the same question he's asked everyone he's met so far. No one has been able to provide an answer, but Mrs. Oonishi has always been a hub of information. "Have you heard anything about Commander Hatake Kakashi?"

Mrs. Oonishi's expression softens. "He's safe, child. So is Konohagakure, and that jinchuruki of yours."
Sasuke glances towards the back room. He can smell bacon. Still, his mother taught him better. "I should go. It's not safe for me to stay here long."

Mrs. Oonishi rolls her eyes heavenward. "Seven children and nineteen grand children I've raised. None as stupid as you. Karin and Jugo are on their way. The gods know you need their help." Sasuke flushes, but Mrs. Oonishi doesn't pay him any attention. "Go on. Wash up. Breakfast will be ready in five minutes."

Sasuke stumps up the stairs to one of the empty rooms in the tavern, feeling his neck flush in shame at Mrs. Oonishi's reprimand. When he comes back downstairs for breakfast, Mrs. Oonishi smacks his cheek lightly. "Stop sulking, and sit down. I made you your favorites."

"I'm not sulking," Sasuke says coolly, and takes a seat at the table. "And I'm not hungry."

"Of course you're not," Mrs. Oonishi agrees soothingly.

He ends up eating a full platter of bacon, a big bowl of grits with honey, four eggs, a side of potatoes, and a full glass of milk.

Karin and Jugo arrive three days after Sasuke.

Jugo pulls Sasuke into a rough hug the minute he steps through the door, nearly lifting Sasuke off the ground. When he pulls back, he grins at Sasuke, even though his eyes are bright and face is flushed pink. "It's good to see you again, my friend."

Sasuke steps back. "You too, Jugo."

Karin, on the other hand, is not so pleased to see him. "Senju Shisui?"

So the fisherwoman had been talking. How had people connected the dots so quickly? "It's the first name that came to my mind."

"The first name that came to your mind," Karin repeats slowly, "is that of your dead cousin and one of the greatest warrior Clans in the Continent?"

Sasuke opens his mouth to say something, but then thinks better of it when he catches Karin's expression. He'd been sloppy; there's no use denying it. "What do people know?"

Mrs. Oonishi motions for Jugo and Karin to step further into her tavern. She hadn't bothered opening up for the night because of the storm that was moving in. The inside of the tavern is quiet and still except for a crackling fire in one corner of the room. "Take a seat, the both of you. I'll bring out some ale."

Jugo, Karin, and Sasuke head for the table closest to the fire. Jugo peels off his gloves slowly. They're dripping wet, and he lays them out by the fire as he talks. "A fisherwoman in a village called Chubu says she opened the door one day in the middle of a storm to find a man with red eyes. He was covered from head to toe in mud. He didn't have a stitch of clothing, but he had a katana in his hand. He said his name was Senju Shisui and he didn't know where he was or what year it was. She gave him water to bathe, a blade to shave his beard, and helped him cut off all his hair. She saw that he had scars and tattoos all over his body. Just above his right shoulder, she saw three swirling dots. On his back is a large dragon. On his left bicep was what looked like the sigil for ANBU, although she couldn't tell which country it belonged to. On the left side of his neck was a python, with its fangs showing and curled around a sword. And, most interestingly, down his right arm were three northern runes: fire, war, and death."
Jugo pins Sasuke with one of his heavy gazes. "She fed him and clothed him. He asked her two things: Is the Commander Hatake Kakashi well, and is Konohagakure safe? She didn't know the answer to his questions, so she sent him to Ikamane. He left."

Sasuke takes a breath. He'd been sloppier than he thought. That's enough for anyone with half a brain to connect the dots. After crawling out of that hole, he didn't have his wits about him enough to avoid these mistakes.

From the back room, Sasuke can hear the bustle of Mrs. Oonishi preparing drinks and food for them all. Jugo doesn't let the silence last for long. "In Ikamane," he continues, "the man boarded a trading ship as an oarsman. The First Mate and Captain didn't know what to make of this man. He looked like a warrior, even carried a sword. But he needed to get to Land of Rice Fields, and he said he'd work to pay his way. He said his name was Shisui, and he had a tattoo of a python and a snake on the side of his neck and a scar down his left eye. He was over six feet tall, and about two hundred pounds. He had deep brown eyes, almost black, but some of the other crew swore his eyes looked red sometimes. He sounded like he was from Land of Rice Fields, but he asked about Commander Hatake Kakashi and Konohagakure. None of the crew knew the answer to his questions. He got off in Hyogo. That was the last they saw of him."

Sasuke rubs a hand down his face. If Sakura had been with him, he wouldn't have made any of these mistakes. Of everyone in Team 7, she's the most levelheaded, the one who can think seven moves ahead. Sasuke had acted as irrationally as he always does, thinking no further than his immediate impatience and the cold.

Karin taps her lacquered nails on the tabletop. They're painted a searing orange this time, reflecting the flicker of the fire like mirrors. She has her hair pulled up into a stern ponytail, and without her glasses, she looks even more angled and sharp than she usually does. "You left a trail of breadcrumbs across Land of Rice Fields," she says. "People swear they saw Uchiha Sasuke, only he's calling himself Shisui now. Senju Shisui, if anyone asks twice for a last name. The news is spreading like wildfire."

Sasuke asks the one question worth asking. "Does Kakashi know?"

"Of course he knows," Karin answers tersely, just as Mrs. Oonishi arrives with food and drinks. "The entire Continent knows."

Jugo mumbles a polite thank you to Mrs. Oonishi and waits for her to leave before picking up the conversation again. "You were gone for eight months, Sasuke. You were dead for eight months. Then you show up naked, covered in mud, asking what year it is. And this isn't even the first time you've come back from the dead. Do you even know what people are saying about you?"

Sasuke waves aside Jugo's question and reaches for his drink. "I don't care what people are saying about me."

"They're saying that you're not human," Jugo insists. He reaches for the amulet around his neck, a small strip of iron meant to keep evil spirits at bay and call on the God of Thunder for protection. "They're saying you were raised from the dead by—"

"How do you do it?" Karin asks suddenly. Her lips are pressed into a thin line, and it's only now that Sasuke takes the time to look at his friends more closely. They're holding themselves carefully. Karin looks tense in her seat, as if she's ready to dart at a moment's notice. "Nine lives? A genie granted your wish for immortality? Is that why you keep coming back from the dead?"

Sasuke meets Karin's gaze with a straight face. He will not answer. He cannot answer, not Karin, not
the Senior Council in Konoha when he stood trial the first time he came back from the dead, not anyone—the gods themselves could climb down from the skies and Sasuke would not answer. This is Rin's secret, one that he swore to protect.

Still, he owes these two something. They traveled across half the country to reach him when he needed backup. "I never died in the first place. I was injured."

And even as Sasuke says it, he remembers the mud and darkness, the stench and sounds, the way his mind had skittered along the edges of reality every time he woke up in that place—

Karin takes a breath. She knows Sasuke well enough that she won't push for details anymore. Instead, she changes topics. "Your brother—he's back from the dead too."

Sasuke goes still at the news. Of course Karin found out about Itachi's rebirth. She always does. "Oh?"

Karin watches Sasuke silently for a few moments. Her lips curl in a lopsided smile. "You already knew."

There's no point denying it. She knows him too well, and it's always dangerous to lie to her. What goes around has a way of coming around with her. "How did you find out? His chakra?"

Karin angles her head in that distinctive way of hers. "There were rumors he never even died in the first place. And just about the time you died, his chakra spiked."

"And?"

"And then nothing," Karin says with a shrug.

Sasuke grips the edge of the table hard enough that his knuckles turn white. Karin has always been evasive, but now is not the time. "Is he dead?"

Karin rolls her eyes, puffing out her cheeks with an exasperated sigh. "And then, nothing. He's just as hard a man to kill as you, Konoha. He disappeared."

Sasuke stares down at his uneaten food. Itachi was dead, and then not. And in Sasuke's first encounter with Madara, Itachi had an easy shot to kill him. Instead, he twisted his kunai a little to the left, didn't push it in hard enough. Itachi doesn't make mistakes like that.

And Sasuke remembers distinctly—remembers it as though it was yesterday—how Itachi had pressed a sword into his hand, gentle, and told him, Rest.

He said he wouldn't be far behind. Sasuke remembers this. He told Sasuke, I promise. He is Kin-butcher, true, but he is Brother first. It had been easy to forget this before—before Itachi warned him to run and said, Watch, Sasuke, before he said, I won't be far behind.

Something doesn't add up, not quite. He's been itching to head back to Konohagakure to see Kakashi again, but Kakashi is safe. Konohagakure is safe. Kakashi even knows of Sasuke's return.

Konohagakure is calling to him, a gentle tug at his insides that makes him anxious to head back South. But something doesn't add up, and his brother is missing. "I have to find my brother."

"Well, you're not the only one looking," Karin mutters under her breath, and Sasuke freezes.

"Why are you looking for him?"
"We're not looking for Itachi," Jugo says, looking at Sasuke evenly. "Pein is."

{Something doesn't add up.}"

"Akatsuki is hunting Itachi down," Karin goes on. She lets the words hang in the air. "You don't seem surprised."

Sasuke reaches for his drink and takes a slow sip. He can feel Karin's eyes on him the entire time. There's no point hiding this from her, not when she's always been one of his greatest allies. "During battle, my brother showed me mercy."

Karin doesn't bat an eyelash. "Mercy how?"

Sasuke places a hand on his chest where Itachi had driven the kunai in. "He didn't kill me when he should have." Instead, Itachi had missed—on purpose, he's sure now, because Itachi doesn't miss. Pein had driven a second kunai into Sasuke's chest much later, just two inches to the left and one inch deeper to show Itachi the proper way to finish the job. Sasuke remembers it still, the way Madara had thrown a hand across Itachi's shoulders and said, {That's how you kill him.} There had been an insult in Madara's words, a warning.

And Itachi had been right by his side at the end, pressing a sword carefully into his hands, telling him, {I'm here.}"

Something doesn't add up."

"Seems mild enough a mistake, considering," Karin mutters under her breath. "He's spared you before. What's different now?"

The question lands heavily. There's truth in what Karin said. Itachi has spared Sasuke before this, starting on that first night in the Compound when Sasuke returned from play to find his home drenched in blood and the stench of the dying. Each time, Sasuke assumed it was Itachi's pride and arrogance that stayed his hand, Itachi's unwillingness to fight someone weaker than him. Now, though, all he can think about is the way Itachi had promised him, {I'll see you soon.}"

Now—

"—spacing out on me?" Karin asks, placing a hand over his forearm.

Sasuke blinks at her. "What?"

Jugo gives Sasuke a sympathetic look. "Itachi has spared you before, Sasuke. Pein never turned on him then. What's different now?"

I am, Sasuke wants to say, but that's no answer. He feels a chill over his shoulder, and out of habit, Sasuke turns to look.

There's no one at his back—just Mrs. Oonishi opening the door to step outside. She returns only a moment later, dusting off snow from her cloak.

Karin raps her knuckles on the table to get his attention again. "You expecting company, Uchiha?"

"No," Sasuke lies, and turns back to eat his food.

There's no place to start but from the beginning, so there's no place to go but one:
Kitahiroshima.

It takes three weeks to reach the village when in any other season it might have taken a few days. There are constant snowstorms, the snow reaching as high as Sasuke's waist at times. Walking on top of the snow with their chakra is too dangerous in untamed territory like Land of Rice Fields, so when the snow proves too deep, Jugo moves a few feet ahead, using his bulk and weight to plow a path for Karin and Sasuke behind him. Even with the new clothes Mrs. Oonishi provided him—a large wolf-fur cloak, thick-soled boots, and snug, wool clothes—Sasuke still gets chilled to the bone.

Along their journey, Sasuke finds out more from Karin.

Pein has been scouring the Continent for Itachi, leaving a trail of dead bodies in his wake. Karin thought it best to lie low—with a talent like hers, Pein might come knocking on her door to recruit her into his cause at any time.

Now that Sasuke was back from the dead, though, she reemerged from the shadows. "Curiosity killed the cat, as they say," Karin had said darkly, and grimly pushed through the snow.

Okeida's hut isn't hard to find, because Sasuke, Karin, and Jugo have been there too many times before during their tenure with Orochimaru. It's set at the edge of the village, facing the Ikeda River as it curves and surges seaward. The hut is set low to the ground, squat and formidable despite the frigid cold and unrelenting weather.

Karin calls out a greeting as she knocks, rapping her knuckles in a curious succession of taps with pauses in between: two, three, two, one. "Okeida!"

There's a pause before the door opens to reveal the man.

When he sees Sasuke, his albino-red eyes become light with a smile. "Senju Shisui in the flesh. First time you've walked through my door in one piece, boy."

"First time for everything," Sasuke agrees, and ducks his head to enter into the warm cocoon of Okeida's healing house. It's not much, just a large open space inside with a bed for Okeida's patients to one side of the room, and a second bed on the other side of the room for himself. All along the walls are books, stacked one on top of another. From beyond a second open door, Sasuke smells Okeida's typical brew of herb tea.

"I hope we're not disturbing you," Jugo says politely, taking off his jacket and wool cap.

Okeida smiles again, his pearly white teeth looking even whiter against the pale hue of his skin. "Nothing to disturb, not in a storm like this, anyhow. Can you believe the weather we're having this season? Come in, come in, I've just put on a pot of tea."

Sasuke, Jugo and Karin exchange glances at this—Okeida always has a pot of hot tea ready for them, no matter the time of day they arrive at his doorstep, bloodied and bruised and sick to the heart. He'd watched them grow up, so when he ushers them with a firm hand into his kitchen, they obey with polite nods.

"I hope we're not disturbing you," Jugo says politely, taking off his jacket and wool cap.

Sasuke, Jugo and Karin exchange glances at this—Okeida always has a pot of hot tea ready for them, no matter the time of day they arrive at his doorstep, bloodied and bruised and sick to the heart. He'd watched them grow up, so when he ushers them with a firm hand into his kitchen, they obey with polite nods.

It's the same cramped space Sasuke remembers from years ago, dimly lit and cozy. Now that he's grown a foot and a half, it feels even smaller. Sasuke has to duck hanging pots of herbs and curling vines to reach his seat, setting aside botany textbooks to make place for himself at the small, round table set to one corner of the space. The windows have been sealed shut with animal skin, and with the added heat of the stove, it's almost too warm in here. Sasuke starts to peel off layers of clothes even as Okeida bustles around to get cups, saucers, and snacks ready for them.
Karin holds up a hand, flushing pink in her embarrassment. "Really, Okeida, you don't have to keep feeding us every time we—"

Sasuke has two almond cookies in his mouth and a third in his hand by the time Karin finishes her sentence. She gives Sasuke a hard glare. "Really?" she hisses.

Sasuke carefully puts the third cookie back on the plate, even as Okeida laughs. "Let the boy eat. He's growing still."

"He's grown enough," Karin snaps, impatient with Sasuke's lack of manners. "Anymore and he won't be human anymore."

"Half-giant, like our Jugo here," Okeida says, good-natured as always. He gives Sasuke and Jugo a conspiratorial wink, the way he used to when Sasuke was only thirteen and still reeling from whatever injury he'd sustained. *I'll keep a secret if you can*, the wink used to imply. *You can cry if it hurts, no one will know outside these walls."

There's a reason Sasuke sent his brother to Okeida all those months ago. Next to his snakes and Sakura, Sasuke trusts no one else to heal him.

Sasuke curls a hand around the tea and takes strength from its warmth. There's no time for pleasantries. "Did my brother come by, Okeida?"

Okeida nods, and his face became grave at the sudden shift of topic. "Yes, he did. He was injured."

Karin sits forward. "Did he say who injured him?"

Okeida's lips thin with displeasure. "You know I don't ask those kinds of questions, Karin."

"We know," Jugo adds quickly. "But any clues based on his wound? Anything at all to help us?"

"It was a battle wound, though it wasn't intended to kill, I don't think."

Karin hm-s under her breath. "A punishment, maybe?"

There's only one person in the world who could punish Itachi in that way. *Madara*. Sasuke presses back against the chair, preparing for whatever this conversation will reveal. "What did he say?"

"He asked me to heal him," Okeida answers simply. "So I did. And then, he left."

Karin taps her fingers against the table, impatient now. "You told Jugo that you dumped his body in the Ikeda."

"I did tell him that," Okeida admits. He gives Jugo an apologetic smile. "I apologize for lying to you, Jugo."

Jugo doesn't seem to take offense. "But why lie?" he asks.

Okeida shrugs at the question. "Because you're a friend of Sasuke's. And Itachi asked me to lie to any friend of Sasuke's that came looking for him."

Karin's incessant tapping on the table comes to a halt. She pins Sasuke with her sharp gaze. "Because if you thought your brother was dead, you'd tell your Commander, and your Commander would be prompted to come out and attack Akatsuki directly. And without Hatake Kakashi manning the walls, Konoha would fall."
Sasuke lets his finger rest on the rim of the teacup and feels his skin get damp with the steam coming off his drink. "Maybe," he says slowly, even though Karin's logic is flawless as always. She's always been a good strategist, the first person in camp to understand the enemy's strategies. But the way Itachi has been acting—I'm here, he'd said—that's no way for an enemy to act. "Maybe not."

Karin opens her mouth to argue, but Jugo cuts her off with a stern look. "Then what, Sasuke?" he asks patiently. "Why do you think he did it?"

Sasuke tries to place himself in his brother's shoes, tries to imagine what his brother must have been thinking. He used to trust in his ability to predict his brother. He thought he knew his brother's arrogance, his pride, and his apathy. Now, though, Sasuke doesn't feel any certainty, not when he can still remember the way Itachi had told him, I'm here.

"I don't know," Sasuke mutters, pushing away from the table.

"I think I might be able to help with that," Okeida says politely, getting to his feet quickly. He disappears into the large pantry adjoining his kitchen before Sasuke can say anything else. Sasuke hears hurried clattering from within, and then a moment later, Okeida emerges holding something tightly in his hand. He holds it out for Sasuke to take. At first, Sasuke thinks it's a small pill, but then he realizes—

"A note?" Karin breathes, incredulous. Her words come out rushed in her excitement. "Since when did your brother start leaving you notes?"

"He told me to give it to Sasuke and to no one else," Okeida says. "I held on to it even after news of your death. Didn't know what else to do with it, really."

Sasuke begins to unpack the note, carefully unrolling it. It's a long strip of paper, barely the width of his finger and spanning no longer than a few inches. The writing on it is cramped and familiar. It makes something ache in Sasuke's heart to know that even after all these years, Itachi still writes as if he can't hold a pen straight.

"What's it say?" Karin breathes, craning her neck to look over Sasuke's shoulder. "I can barely read his writing—"

"Chicken-scrawl," Sasuke whispers under his breath, remembering how their mother used to grumble at Itachi's homework. Still, Sasuke can read his brother's handwriting better than he can read his own. This is the handwriting he learned his alphabets from.

Loping across the crumpled and stained length of the small piece of paper, Itachi had written just one name:

**Senju Hashirama**

Konohagakure is hundreds and hundreds of miles away, and Karin will go no further than the edge of Kitahiroshima. She's risked herself enough; putting herself between Akatsuki and Konohagakure is a death sentence. Jugo stays behind with Karin because they've always traveled together and they promised Suigetsu they'd be back to help him with the baby.

Okeida provides supplies, Karin provides him with money, Jugo provides him with weapons. Sasuke heads South.

The route is filled with icy roads that force Sasuke to find lodging at taverns and inns. Whenever he's asked for a name, he tells the truth—**Uchiha Sasuke**—and watches their eyes go wide with disbelief.
The cat, as they say, is out of the bag. There's no point trying to hide now. It takes him almost a month to reach the redwood forests, a trip that would usually take only a week of traveling at most. By the time he sees the Village walls, Sasuke's heart is thundering. Konohagakure, he thinks, (Kakashi, Sakura, and then, a breath later, always, always, Naruto, Naruto, Naruto).

The chuunin guard at the Eastern Gate doesn't look up from his paperwork, just demands, "ID."

Sasuke takes a deep breath to calm his immediate annoyance. "I don't have any."

"Is the Commander in the city?"

By protocol, Sasuke should report to Tsunade first, tell her what he's found out. But he can feel the whip and crackle of Kakashi's chakra somewhere in the East Wing of the Tower, and he can't go anywhere but towards it. The last memory he had of Kakashi was of the man dying. His snakes told him, Karin told him, and every Land of Fire villager he passed assured him, the Commander is alive, but he needs to see, he has to verify the information for himself.

News spreads ahead of him. Sasuke is sure the chuunin placed a few calls the minute Sasuke left, so by the time Sasuke reaches the Tower, there's a full audience waiting for him. They line the corridors, some peeking their heads out of closed office doors to verify the rumors.

Sasuke feels embarrassed at having so many eyes on him, but he has his pride, so he tilts his head up and keeps his shoulders squared. He lets his Mangekyou whorl with chakra and lets his hand rest lightly on the hilt of the battle-ax at his waist. Sasuke knows he looks out of place in his bristling wolf-fur cloak and Northern clothes, but it's not as though he had time to change into uniform before reporting to his commanding officer.

Kakashi's chakra is a crackling beacon coming from the East Wing, and Sasuke follows it unerringly. It reminds Sasuke of the first time he came back from Otogakure. He'd been younger and stupider, but even then, he sought out Kakashi first. He'd followed the man's chakra through the streets of Konohagakure all the way to the jounin training grounds where Kakashi had been training with Gai. Sasuke dumped Orochimaru's body at Kakashi's feet and waited for the man's reaction. He left a trail of stunned bystanders in his wake, but Kakashi hadn't flinched a muscle. To this day, Sasuke wishes Kakashi had said something to him at that moment, anything at all. But the truth is that Kakashi had just looked at Orochimaru's body for a brief moment and ordered Gai, "Place him under arrest."

The offices of the Commander of the Joint Forces are on the top floor of the East Wing, overlooking the redwood forests. They're majestic offices, intended to signify the power and responsibilities of the man who carries the mantle of Commander. There are two assistants immediately outside the heavy double doors leading into Kakashi's offices. Both assistants are waiting for Sasuke when he arrives. One of them—Yoshie, if Sasuke remembers her name correctly—gestures at the door with a hand. She's a middle-aged civilian, very obviously with child, and very obviously puffy-eyed from crying.

"He's expecting you," she says, voice quivering with unshed tears.

Sasuke hesitates outside the door. He sees the gold lettering etched into the door: COMMANDER HATAKE KAKASHI.

There's nothing victorious about his return, nothing to celebrate. Just the familiar sting of shame—
Madara and Pein are still alive; he spent eight full months wallowing in his own filth and praying for sunlight instead of facing his death as he should have.

Sasuke presses a hand flat against the door, breathing deep. He has to tell Kakashi of his failures again, but he knows there's only so much disappointment the jounin will accept from him. Even so, Kakashi has taught him better. He will stand tall and admit what he has to admit.

*Best get it over with,* that's what Shisui used to say whenever he got into trouble and had to face the Clan elders.

Sasuke closes his eyes and counts to ten. *One, two, three, four, five, six—*

He feels a presence right over his shoulder, and when he turns, it's to find Yoshie—only Yoshie, not the Nidaime or the Shodaime or Sarutobi or even the Yondaime—looking at him with a smile. She's crying openly now. "He's expecting you," she repeats. "You can go in."

*Seven, eight, nine.* Sasuke knocks once and steps inside. *Ten.*

Kakashi is sitting behind his desk, but he's not alone. Jiraiya and Tsunade are sitting across from him, and at Sasuke's entrance, they both twist in their seats to face him.

Sasuke takes a few steps into the room carefully. He was hoping Kakashi would be alone, but there's an audience for this reunion. The only thing he can think to do is fall back on the comforting familiarity of shinobi hierarchy and protocol. So he salutes and stands at attention. "Sir."

There are maps and files spread out across the expanse of Kakashi's table. The room is airy and wide, but Sasuke still feels as if the walls are closing in on him. Behind Kakashi, there are large windows. The Hokage Monument is clearly visible, and it shows all four men. They all look regal and austere, and nothing at all like the men that Sasuke knows. Sasuke keeps his eyes trained on the Nidaime's face as he stands at attention.

He dares to glance at the jounin quickly. It's the same blank expression from before, the same one he had when he looked at Orochimaru's body and told Gai to arrest him.

Tsunade is the first to react. *"Senju Shisui?"*

Sasuke tries to think of a response, but can't find anything that would explain his behavior. He sometimes forgets that she is Senju Tsunade. It was her name that he'd borrowed, even though he'd been thinking of the Shodaime at the time.

Jiraiya arches an eyebrow. *"You activated your Mangekyou. Congratulations."*

Sasuke swallows on that churning in his stomach—he can still hear Kakashi's ragged breathing when he closes his eyes—and says, *"Thank you."

And now, finally, Kakashi speaks. *"Is Itachi dead?"

Sasuke feels his face flush. *"Best get it over with. *"No, sir."

Kakashi's expression shifts minutely. His one visible eye widens with confusion. It's the first time Sasuke has seen the expression on his face. It doesn't last long, though, because in the next moment, his gaze hardens. *"You took it from Madara?"

Sasuke feels his stomach drop. It reminds him of all those times Fugaku looked at him—through him—measured him for a son and found him lacking. That Kakashi would think he was the kind of man
to harvest a dead body for its eyes—

Then again, he'd pushed a hand through Naruto's chest for exactly the same reason.

He thought he'd won back a little bit of Kakashi's approval over the past few years, but the truth of the matter is that he'd dragged his own name so low—traitor, coward, and even thief—that there's little weight to Sasuke's word. There's not much left there to salvage.

Kakashi's jaw clenches hard enough that Sasuke can see the muscle at his neck jump through his face-cloth. His words are harsh in the silence of the room. "I asked you a question."

Best get it over with. "No, sir."

Kakashi's eye narrows, but before he can say anything, Tsunade steps in.

"It's you, Kakashi," Tsunade says softly, cutting into Kakashi's anger. She looks old all of a sudden, despite her ever-vibrant beauty. "He thought you'd died. That's how he got the Mangekyou."

Kakashi goes entirely still for a moment, even as Sasuke feels his face get hot with embarrassment. He knows he's blushing now, but there's nothing to do about it but stand there and count the seconds.

When the silence drags on for a few moments too long, Sasuke clears his throat to finish his report. "Madara, Pein, and Itachi are all still alive. I was unable to finish my mission. I have information that in the past ten months, Itachi may have broken rank with Akatsuki. I believe Pein is actively searching for him now. I tracked down Itachi's movements and—"

"Dismissed," Kakashi says suddenly. He sounds tired, as tired as Sarutobi does at times. He waves Sasuke away with just a twitch of the wrist. "Give your report tomorrow."

Sasuke squares his shoulders. He can talk circles around what happened that day in Amegakure, but the fact remains. He did not complete his mission. He did not die when he should have. He crawled out of that hellhole, spent weeks tracking down Itachi's movements, and still has nothing to show for his efforts except a nonsensical note with Senju Hashirama's name on it. There is no excuse, none at all, for his failures. Still, he can't fight the urge to defend himself. "I killed Madara once. I don't know how he did it, but Pein performed a jutsu and Madara—"

"Tomorrow," Kakashi interrupts again, firm now.

Sasuke knows there's no point in arguing anymore, that he's making an ass out of himself in front of Tsunade and Jiraiya. But Kakashi's face is as unreadable as always, and Sasuke still remembers him saying, Place him under arrest all those years ago. "I can still finish the mission, Kakashi." A beat. "Sir."

Kakashi's shoulders slump. "I know."

"Okay," Sasuke says firmly. This is Kakashi giving him another chance. He won't screw up again. "I'll complete the mission this time. I just..." He doesn't quite know how to finish his sentence. Madara died but came back to life. He needs to figure out a way around that. And then there's his brother, telling him, I'm here. "I just need a little time before I head out again."

Kakashi takes a deep breath, shoulders moving up and down. "There's no rush."

Sasuke feels something like relief. Kakashi is acting like himself again, which is the most he could hope for after the clusterfuck in Amegakure. If Kakashi is willing to give him another chance at this mission, then Sasuke will make sure to do right by him.
He'll tie up all the loose ends—Madara, Itachi, and himself—and put the Uchiha Clan to bed once and for all. That is the only thing left he can do to salvage what's left of his pride and name. "I can give you a full report now if you want."

"Tomorrow," Kakashi says. "Dismissed."

Sasuke salutes. "Sir." He looks to Tsunade and Jiraiya—sees something between surprise and pity on their faces, although he doesn't understand why—and offers. "Ma'am. Sir."

He's almost out the door when Kakashi calls out, "Uchiha."

Sasuke turns around, and forgetting protocol for a minute, says, "What?"

"I have something of yours." Kakashi reaches into a drawer to his left. Sasuke re-enters the room just as Kakashi pulls out—

His ANBU face mask.

Sasuke walks around the table to approach Kakashi. He takes the mask, feels the familiar weight and texture of it in his palm. Carefully, he brushes a thumb over one of the markings on the right cheek of the mask. He realizes now—"I should have kept it."

"It's yours," Kakashi points out. "You never had to give it back to me."

Sasuke ties it to his belt securely and meets Kakashi's gaze. "I'll keep it with me next time," he decides. Next time, he'll have his sword and his mask.

Kakashi bows his head, reaching up a hand to press against the bridge of his nose. "Next time."

"Next time," Sasuke promises with a wry chuckle, "I won't fuck up so bad."

Kakashi gets to his feet, hauling himself up with both hands as if his weight has suddenly become too heavy for his legs to bear. Standing so close, Sasuke notices it now, the extra wrinkles around Kakashi's eyes; the weary set of his shoulders. He can't help himself: "You need a hand there, old man?"

Kakashi takes a deep breath. "Listen." He stops, abrupt, and then takes another deep breath. "Listen, Sasuke. Listen to me."

A few moments pass, and Kakashi still doesn't finish his thought. It's the first time Sasuke has seen him at a loss like this, and it makes him uneasy. For as long as Sasuke can remember, Kakashi has always been steadfast and unflappable. Sasuke rushes to ease the moment and break the tension in the room. "Are you having a senior moment right now? Is that what this is?"

It works like a charm. In an instant, Kakashi's strange trepidation vanishes. He looks like his old self again: unimpressed and mildly annoyed at the world for disturbing him. "I want Sakura's medical evaluation of you on my desk by day's end. Get out."

Sasuke grins. In his mind, his score against Kakashi racks up a few points. "There's these number puzzles and word games you can do, you know. It keeps the mind sharp as you age—"

"Get out."

"Just saying it might help with the memory loss and—"

Kakashi's hand is too fast for Sasuke to duck. The head smack leaves Sasuke's scalp tingling, and he
rubs at it a few times. "Hormones acting up, too? You seem a bit emotional—"

The next time Kakashi reaches up to smack him upside the head, Sasuke ducks away and beats an exit out the room. He closes the door on Kakashi explaining to the Sannin what a piece of shit Sasuke is and hears Jiraiya agree, wholeheartedly.

Naturally, Sakura's first reaction is violent.

She punches Sasuke hard enough in the nose that he lands flat on his back, blood dripping down his face. Kakashi had ordered Sasuke to visit Sakura for a medical check up before he did anything else, so here he is, getting his face pummeled in.

Sasuke rolls his eyes at the ceiling. Such is his life.

The nurses in the ER titter nervously. One of them tries to move forward to help Sasuke, but when Sakura levels her with a flat glare, the nurse sulks away.

"With me, Uchiha," Sakura orders, and rounds on her heel.

Sasuke follows her into an empty examination room. "Get on the table," she orders, and starts pulling on her gloves. She doesn't say anything until she's halfway through healing the bloody nose and black eye that she greeted him with. "Not a single word from you for a year, and here we all were —"

"It wasn't safe," Sasuke interrupts neatly. "I was injured."

"Who did this?" she asks quietly, reaching out to trace the scar on Sasuke's face lightly.

"Pein."

Sakura frowns. "You look like Kakashi-sensei. Sort of."

"I think that was the point," Sasuke mumbles, and stays still as Sakura fixes his nose with a bit of her chakra.

Sasuke is used to the feel of her hands against his wounds; he has woken up so many times from his injuries to Sakura's hair in his face and her voice in his ear telling him, You idiot. She's always loved him, he knows, and although he still hasn't understood why, he's come to accept it. So when she lets her fingers linger on his cheek, he grips her wrist in a loose hold and presses a thumb against her pulse point. He doesn't move her hand away from his face, just holds them both still for a moment.

She is alive. She is safe. Madara, Itachi and Pein did her no harm. Next time, Sasuke will not even give them the chance. He will finish what he started.

Sakura is wearing his mother's silver necklace and earrings. The necklace is hidden under the V-shape of her scrubs, so he reaches out and tugs it out into the open, until the small, diamond pendant comes into view. "You're wearing them," he says unnecessarily.

"What else was I supposed to do with them?" Sakura demands, impatient with Sasuke as always. She hesitates for a moment before admitting, "Thank you. For giving them to me."

Sasuke shrugs, unsure of how to respond. There is no other woman he would have given his mother's jewelry to. It's just that he didn't think he'd ever get the chance to see what Sakura would look like wearing them.
She looks lovely.

But rather than get caught staring so openly, Sasuke opts instead to look at a poster on the far wall for cholesterol lowering medication, at the light fixtures in the ceiling, at anything but Sakura's fond gaze on him.

Sakura's lips twitch into a smile. "Way to make the moment awkward, doofus," she mutters, and leans forward to kiss him on the temple.

Sakura gives him a clean bill of health, although the chakra around his eyes is unstable and jittery. "I'll let Kakashi-sensei know he needs to train you with your Mangekyou," she mutters under her breath, scribbling notes as she fills out the medical evaluation form.

Sasuke watches her scribble for a few moments longer before asking carefully, "Is Naruto on a mission?"

He'd practiced the question in his mind the entire time Sakura poked and prodded at him during the evaluation, but it still comes out sounding awkward. Sakura glances up sharply from her clipboard. "No. One of the bills he drafted is being contested in the High Courts so he—didn't he come to see you in the Tower?"

Sasuke shoves his hands into his pockets. "No."

Sakura bites her lower lip carefully. "He's probably in his office, if you want to—"

"No, it's fine," Sasuke interrupts, hurried. "It's not important."

Sakura puts down her clipboard, placing it carefully in her lap. "Sasuke, we thought you were dead for the better part of a year. It's important."

Pein, Madara and Itachi are all still alive, and Sasuke has a mission to finish. But he can still remember the press of Naruto's lips against his; he's not sure he can walk away from that a second time. "I have to file a report first thing," he says, getting to his feet. "I'm probably going to head back out on a mission pretty soon, anyways."

Sakura exhales shakily. "How many times are you going to break his heart?"

"His" being Naruto's. There's no easy way out of this conversation because as always, Sakura cuts right to the bone of things. Sakura doesn't bother to wait for Sasuke's response. Instead, she says, "Maybe that's why he didn't come to see you himself."

"Yeah," Sasuke agrees. He gets to his feet and gathers his cloak, knife, and face mask. It's strange being able to carry all that he owns so easily, but he doesn't feel a need to start gathering things for himself again. He'll be in and out of Konohagakure, staying just long enough to get his intel in order before heading out for his brother. This time, at least, his search will be sanctioned by his COs. "You'll tell Kakashi I'm fit for duty?"

"If I didn't, would that keep you in the city?" Sakura asks quietly. She almost sounds hopeful. Sasuke scowls, so she amends, "I'll tell him you're fit for duty."

"Good," Sasuke says, intending to sound firm. But Sakura looks tired and his conviction dies in his throat. He knows he's the reason for that weary set to her shoulders, and he hates himself for it. He's made her cry so many times, the gods only know—"I should go."
"Go," Sakura says, offering a small smile. "Come visit me this time before you leave. Don't be a stranger."

"I won't," Sasuke promises, and leaves before she can say anything else.

He can't go see Naruto, so Sasuke prowls the streets looking for company elsewhere. In the end, he finds the ghosts by Obito's gravesite. Yondaime is talking in a low voice, a rambling narration that has some of the ghosts chuckling every now and then. They're all standing around the gravesite in a loose semi-circle, listening to the Yondaime speak. He's more subdued than usual today, not gesturing wildly like he always does.

Sasuke walks close enough to hear the Yondaime say, "—and then she goes, oh, no you don't, Obito, and just lets them both have it. I swear, the girl had a fouler mouth than all of my men combined. So then Obito, the little brat that he is—"

He stops short because he spots Sasuke first, eyes wide and translucent in the afternoon light. The others turn to look and they all freeze as well. "What?" the Nidaime says dumbly. He opens and closes his mouth a few times. In the end, he manages, "The hell?"

"You didn't hear the rumors?" Sasuke asks and stands next to the Shodaime, who is gaping at him.

Sarutobi says carefully, "Perhaps he is dead. This may be his spirit."

"He got a haircut," the Nidaime counters. "I didn't get a haircut when I died."

Sasuke rolls his eyes at the men. "I'm not dead. Rin saved me." When Yondaime continues to gape at him, he asks again, "You didn't hear the rumors about me? They would have started a month ago."

"We have not been—" The Shodaime stops abruptly and makes a vague gesture with his hand to encompass the Village around him. "We have retreated from the Village after you..."

"Died," the Nidaime finishes bluntly. "After you died."

"Nearly died," Sasuke corrects, and rubs his hands together. It's a cold day out, despite the sun, and the Monument is half buried by the snow. The Yondaime hasn't said anything yet, so Sasuke prompts, "What about Uncle Obito?"

"He..." The Yondaime trails off, shrugging almost helplessly at Sasuke.

"Cat got your tongue?" Sasuke asks, and even then, the Yondaime does not rise to the bait.

The Nidaime is the one who breaks the silence, rubbing at his face tiredly. "For God's sake, boy, we need time to react."

"You're fucking kidding me," Sasuke grumbles, looking around at the gathering of men. Sarutobi is staring at Sasuke like he's the greatest miracle on the Continent, which, really, is a bit overkill. For the Yondaime's part, his eyes are bright and his chest heaving, as if breathing deeply for all that his heart wasn't beating. "You need a hanky, Yondy? Some tissues to weep into, maybe?"

"Yondy?" the Yondaime snarls, and finally, he kicks into action. He strides forward to stand a few inches in front of Sasuke. "Yondy? Who the hell are you calling Yondy? What does that even mean?"

This is more familiar territory, so Sasuke is ready with an answer. "It's short for—"
“That was rhetorical!” the Yondaime yells into his face, and reaches up to smack Sasuke on the head. Sasuke ducks, because he doesn’t want the chill that will likely follow their contact. Still, he’s not fast enough and—

He feels a hand against his head.

Sasuke freezes, and even the Yondaime goes completely still. He stares at his hand, still outstretched, and then back at Sasuke’s head again.

The Nidaime takes a step forward. “Did you just…”

The Yondaime very, very carefully places a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. There is the usual chill of his touch, but he is solid and real.

“What the fuck?” And even as Sasuke says it, he’s reaching forward to press a palm against the Yondaime’s chest. His hand makes contact. There is no warmth there, and it doesn’t feel like touching anyone living. Still, Sasuke can feel the rough texture of the Yondaime’s Hokage robes and the solidity of a body underneath. Sasuke stares at the Yondaime and can’t help the grin on his face.

The Yondaime for his part is still shell-shocked, but the Nidaime moves into action. “Is it just Minato or—” His hand falls heavy and solid on Sasuke’s shoulder. It startles a laugh out of the Nidaime. “Hey! Kid!”

And then, Sasuke is being pulled into a hug, feels the thump-thump-thump of the Nidaime’s large hand on his back. Sasuke puts his arms around the ghost and holds him for only a moment before the Nidaime is pulling back and holding him at arms length. “Look at you!” the Nidaime says, laughing still. “Look at you! Built like an ox, you are!”

When Sarutobi steps forward, Sasuke feels suddenly shy. Sarutobi was his Hokage, and he grew up with the man as a figure that loomed larger than life. Now, though, Sasuke knows him better. So when Sarutobi reaches up a hand, Sasuke ducks his head and lets the ghost place his palm against the top of his head. It feels like a blessing. “It’s good to see you, Sasuke,” Sarutobi says, earnest as always.

The Shodaime hm-s in the background. He has his arms crossed over his chest. “Rin saved you again.” Sasuke nods, connecting the dots that the Shodaime has so quickly grasped. “So you are no longer just half-spirit. You must be more. Before you could just see and hear us. Now…” The ghost steps forward and holds out a hand.

Sasuke shakes the Shodaime’s hand. His grip is as firm as Sasuke ever imagined it would be, and in that moment, Sasuke is taken aback by the reality of the moment:

This is Senju Hashirama. Legend. The songs and stories call him Demon’s-Bane.

“Sir.”

“Well, this is fortunate,” the Yondaime says. He steps into Sasuke’s line of view. He cracks all the knuckles of his right hand. Then, he starts on the left. “We have unsettled business, Uchiha. I believe I owe you a thrashing.”

“No, Minato,” Sarutobi interrupts neatly. “We have a lot to talk about. Sasuke, you should get lunch. You are hungry, I assume.”
The ghosts trail him back downtown, the Yondaime reminding the others that of course Sasuke is hungry, he's always hungry, all he ever does is eat too much and die on people—

Sasuke gets a seat at an empty table at the back of the diner, facing away from the rest of the patrons so that he can hold a low, whispered discussion with the ghosts about everything that has happened since they last saw each other.

It’s a little different now that the ghosts can reach out and touch him. Sasuke pushes the slip of paper across the table for the ghosts to see.

The Yondaime frowns at the scribble. "Are you sure this says—"

"It says Senju Hashirama," Sasuke whispers.

Sarutobi's lips twitch into a half-curl. "Itachi's reports were always a nightmare to get through for me. I could barely understand anything he wrote."

"But why the Shodaime’s name?" Sasuke asks, unable to face Sarutobi's obvious fondness at the memory. Sarutobi Hiruzen himself has fond memories of his brother, and yet—

Something doesn't add up.

The Shodaime bypasses Sasuke's question entirely. "Have you told Kakashi yet? You said you met him?"

"I was going to tell him but he said I should make my report tomorrow," Sasuke mutters, glancing over his shoulder to make sure that yes, no one has noticed him whispering to himself like a lunatic. "I wanted to find you first and see what you thought, but..." Sasuke trails off, embarrassed at his own actions. Like a child, he'd gone running to check on Kakashi first, even though he'd known Kakashi was well. Ninja don't fret like that.

"Of course, Sasuke. We understand. Did you get to see anyone else besides Kakashi?"

Sasuke shrugs, trying to look nonchalant. "I saw Sakura." A little unnecessarily, he adds, "She did a med eval. I'm fit for duty again."

It's odd to find himself talking so much, but he's gotten used to their constant presence despite himself. He feels compelled to fill them in on the details they’ve missed, even though there's no obligation for him to do so. "Then I found you guys."

The Nidaime’s eyes crinkle in a smile. “I’m glad you did.” He thumps Sasuke on the back. Sasuke pitches forward, nearly spitting out the mouthful of food he’d been chewing. Everything about the man, Sasuke realizes, is emphatic. The Shodaime has already apologized more than once about how his little brother has never known his own strength, but it still surprises him.

Sasuke reaches for the small slip of paper and rolls it back up carefully. He puts it back in his wallet, wedging it carefully to one corner so it won't slip out. It feels like the most important thing he's ever carried or owned. "So? Why your name? What's our next move?"

"We cannot act in haste. You have just returned. You must take time to get your bearings before you head back into the field. At the very least, you must train with your Mangekyou, unstable as it is. I know you are impatient to find your brother, but you cannot leave the Village, not yet. You might be fit for duty, but you are not fit for battle."
Sasuke swallows on his frustration. He was hoping the Shodaime would have a quick answer, a hint or a lead he could follow up on. Pein is hunting for his brother, and Sasuke needs to be three steps ahead of him if he has any chance of getting to the bottom of whatever it is that's going on. But he's grounded, because no matter how eager Sasuke might be to hit the road again, the Shodaime has a point. He thought he'd be in and out of Konohagakure in a few days at most, but now—

Now, he has time.

Now...

The Yondaime is the one to say it aloud. "Are you going to see Naruto?"

Sasuke freezes at the question. When he was down in that pit, he'd dreamed himself an image of Naruto over and over and over again, reminding himself of the details: the blue of his eyes, the small wrinkles on the back of his knuckles, the arch of his feet. He knows now what it feels to have Naruto's lips against his. He knows he can't walk away from that a second time. He's never been that brave, never been that strong.

"It is all right to see him if you want," the Shodaime offers after a few moments. "You are allowed that."

The Yondaime clears his throat. "It's been difficult for Naruto while you were away," he reveals, picking his words carefully. "Just..." He trails off, grasping for words. Finding none, he falls silent.

Sasuke gets to his feet and drops a couple of bills on the table to pay for the meal. "Don't fret, Yondy," he mutters under his breath. "I'm not going to see him."

Still, when he leaves the diner, he sets off in the direction of Naruto's apartment. He makes three detours, walking around and about Naruto's apartment building. The ghosts accompany him in his rambling walk, saying nothing as they take in their surroundings.

It takes nearly two hours for Sasuke to finally end up at Naruto's building, and even then, he idles outside the door to Naruto's apartment, feeling like an idiot. The ghosts are expectant, waiting patiently as the snow falls around them. Sasuke rounds on his heels, but then changes his mind two blocks down. He returns to the exact same spot by Naruto's building.

For eight months in that darkness he couldn't stop thinking of this. He is here now, finally, and he wants—

Sasuke glances up, squints against the snow to the top floor where Naruto's apartment is. The ache in him is stronger now than it has ever been, because that one kiss, and Sasuke feels like the earth shifted on its axis. He can't afford that kind of an anchor, not when Madara is alive, not when the memory of Itachi pressing his sword into his hand is still fresh.

Sasuke curls a hand around his sword now, feels the familiar texture of the hilt—tries to imagine what Naruto's hand in his would feel like instead of his sword. He'd held Naruto's wrist for a few short moments all those months ago, when he couldn't bring himself to say I'm sorry and could only promise, I won't come back.

He wants that moment again, that feeling of having Naruto close enough to hear him say, I'm in love with you.

But someday, Sasuke will have his brother's blood on his hands. That's his lot in life. Sasuke doesn't want to think past the moment when he pushes his sword through his brother's body, even if all the moments thereafter means having Naruto by his side. Even Naruto—his eyes, his hair, the sharp
angle of his jaw, the sweet bow of his lips, the joy he brings every time he smiles at Sasuke—can't
change the stain of Itachi's blood on Sasuke's conscience.

Sasuke lets his hand drop from his sword hilt. He feels it again, strong as ever, that tug-tug-tugging
of the blood he shares with his brother. Sasuke must follow, especially now that Itachi left him a
message: "Senju Hashirama."

"Yes?"

Sasuke blinks at the Shodaime. "No, I meant...The note."

The Shodaime's shoulders move up and down with a heavy sigh. Sasuke is expecting the man to say
something, but it's the Nidaime who steps forward. "Don't be a coward, Uchiha," he urges. His
words hold no sting, though. He just sounds tired. "God knows I was, and I regretted it—" He stops,
abrupt. "It's possible to be what you are and want what you want at the same time. They're not
mutually exclusive."

The Nidaime spent a lifetime alone according to the records. There was no one who anchored him in
his life, just the string of broken-hearted women he left in his wake. Now, Sasuke wonders what
kind of woman could have made the Nidaime look as wrecked as he does now.

The others are watching Sasuke carefully. They've seen him at his worst—waking up gasping from
his nightmares; being beaten down, down, down, by his own brother in battle; limping away from a
loss so humiliating that it almost cost Kakashi his life. This moment here feels just as bad. They
know what he has to do and the obligations he bears. Still, they tell him you can want what you
want.

The thing, though, is that he's never said it aloud. If he did, maybe they'd see it for what it is. He
doesn't have to explain himself to these men, he knows, but he wants to.

He names it for what it is, finally, after all these years: "Fratricide."

The Nidaime holds out his hands in an open-armed gesture. He looks like he's pleading. "It's
justified. That doesn't make you—"

"It makes me his brother," Sasuke interrupts.

"It's justified. It's your responsibility as your father's son. You have to avenge your Clan," the
Nidaime insists. "There's honor in—"

"Killing my own brother?" Sasuke asks. He waves towards Naruto's apartment building, unable to
speak aloud what Naruto offers, the life he might have if he were to only climb those stairs. "Let's
say I do kill my brother. Then what?"

Sarutobi touches Sasuke on the wrist lightly. "You tell us, Sasuke. Have you thought that far?"

No, Sasuke wants to say. He's thought as far as that, has only ever thought as far as that. Never
further.

He lies. "Yes."

He doesn't bother to see if they believe him or not, just turns away and walks back towards
downtown to find a motel for the night. He's walked away so many times before, he realizes
It's not so hard to do anymore.
Chapter End Notes

Two unbelievable pieces of art for this chapter:

*Fire-born, War-forged, Death-blessed* by the incredible haplessmedstudent, and *Sasuke Uchiha* by the amazingly talented Mrbid/Srdid!
Hiashi summons him first thing in the morning. The genin who knocks on his motel door is practically shaking in his boots. The kid is barely ten years old, if Sasuke were to guess; he doesn't even clear Sasuke's elbow.

The genin clears his throat and stands at attention. "Sir. Good morning, sir. Captain Hyuga Hiashi of ANBU would like you to report to his—"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Sasuke demands, and the genin's mouth drops open at the interruption. Sasuke is still too groggy with sleep to bother with pleasantries. He barely got any sleep the night before because of his nightmares. In the end, he had to turn on all the lights inside his room to push back memories of darkness and mud in his mouth. Still, the motel bed, shitty as it is, was heaven after so many weeks on the road in the miserable cold. The genin looks confused at Sasuke's question, so Sasuke says, very slowly, "It's three in the morning. I repeat: Are you fucking kidding me, boy?"

"No, sir. I am not kidding you, sir," the genin says quickly. "The Captain would like you in his office by oh-seven-hundred—"

"Tell him I'll be in his office at oh-seven-up-his-fucking-ass," Sasuke snaps, and slams the door shut. He's almost back in bed when he realizes that he's forgotten to tip the stupid little fucker. The genin is still standing exactly where he was when Sasuke wrenches the door open. He stays standing at attention while Sasuke fumbles in his wallet for the few bills he still has left. Sasuke pushes two hundred ryo into the messenger's hands—poor kid had to make a three am run; it's the least Sasuke could do for him. When he slams the door shut a second time, he hears the kid's rapidly retreating footsteps a moment later.

Sasuke slips back into a sleep so deep he doesn't even notice Akamaru until the dog is in his face, licking his cheek awake. Sasuke cracks open an eye and almost passes out again from the stench of dog breath. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Akamaru barks a few times loudly, tail wagging at super sonic speed. It stirs a wind in the room. "He says you have morning breath," Kiba translates from somewhere in the room. He looks too pleased by half.

"You have morning breath," Sasuke snarls at Akamaru and pushes the dog away roughly. Akamaru only wags his tail more vigorously. It's only then that Sasuke notices his motel room is full: Shikamaru, Shino, and Kiba are all lounging casually at various spots in the room. Neji, however, is standing at the foot of the bed with his hands crossed over his chest.

Neji arches an eyebrow. "Oh-seven-up-his-fucking-ass?"

"My bad," Sasuke snaps. "Is it up-his-fucking-ass already? I must have overslept."

Kiba laughs so hard he snorts, which sends him into another round of laughter. Even Shino chuckles at Sasuke. "It's eight," Shikamaru provides, sounding amused. "The Captain said we could let you sleep for an hour, but no more."
Sasuke swings his feet over the bed. The ghosts are nowhere in sight; otherwise, he wouldn't have been caught so off guard. "So what does that make you? My disciplinary action committee?"

"He's not mad, actually," Shino says, diplomatic as always.

"My uncle's heart has softened in the time you've been away," Neji says, lips curling up in a small smile. "Get up, Uchiha. You're expected."

Shino tosses a duffel bag towards Sasuke. It has an ANBU uniform, a few clothes, and enough supplies to last him a few days. Sasuke rummages around until he finds a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a shaving kit. "Go on, attend to your beauty rituals." Shikamaru prompts, stretching his arms over his head.

Sasuke slams the bathroom door. He's stepping into the shower when he hears Kiba's voice raised loud enough for him to hear the mock amazement as he says, "Wow! I never pegged him as a morning person! Such sweet disposition first thing in the morning!"

It takes all of Sasuke's will not to yell back something rude and obscene. Instead, he turns on the water. The plumbing gurgles a few times before a weak splutter of cold water starts to seep out of the shower head. Sasuke turns his eyes heavenward. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

He doesn't head straight for ANBU HQ even though Neji tells him, several times over, that the Captain is waiting for him. Instead, he stops at a diner to pick up coffee and breakfast. Out of spite, he makes Neji pay for him. Neji's eyes go wide at the final figure on the bill, but he forks over the full amount without much of a fuss.

The men are waiting for him when he enters ANBU HQ. They break into cheers the minute he steps through the door.

"Sarge!" Tottori says loudly and bounds into him for a rough hug, gripping tight.

Kenshin mutters, "Fucking hell, Uchiha, you son of a bitch," and claps Sasuke on the back warmly. The others greet him as well, disarmingly welcome as they pull Sasuke into brief one-armed hugs in turn. Lee's hug lasts particularly long, and when he pulls back, his eyes are bright with unshed tears. "It's good to have you back, Sasuke," he says, voice thick with emotion. "My morning runs were getting boring."

When Chouji barrels into Sasuke for a hug, he actually lifts Sasuke off the ground a few inches, squeezing tight enough that Sasuke begins to cough for breath. Jiro is the one who pulls Chouji away, and puts a warm hand on Sasuke's shoulder as he doubles over to catch his breath.

"You should see the Captain," Jiro says, walking Sasuke past the gathered ANBU and towards Hiashi's office. "He's been waiting."

Sasuke drops his empty coffee cup in a trash can. "Best get it over with."

Jiro knocks on Hiashi's door. They hear a muffled, Come in, from inside, and Jiro pushes open the door. Sasuke steps inside, and Jiro shuts the door firmly behind him, not bothering to step in himself.

Sasuke stands at attention. "Sir."

Hiashi looks up from the letter he's writing. "Are you finished?"

Sasuke blinks at him. "What?"
"With your temper tantrum?"

Sasuke scowls. "Three am. You sent that punk at three in the morning for a seven o'clock meeting."

Hiashi's lips twitch, and Sasuke realizes only now that his Captain has been messing with him. Sasuke huffs out a breath, impressed despite himself. "How much did you pay that genin for that shit stunt?"

"A thousand ryo. I heard you tipped him another couple of hundred."

Sasuke slumps into the chair across from Hiashi, unable to hide his smile. Hiashi is smiling more openly now as well. "What do you want?"

"You resume full duties starting in eight weeks," Hiashi orders without preamble and pushes a folder towards Sasuke. "By the end of tomorrow, I expect your report on your mission to Amegakure and the past eleven months. I'll be passing it along to all the senior commanders."

Sasuke reaches for the folder and flips it open. There are pages and pages of printouts, progress reports of the five units under Hiashi's care. "Review them and give me your input," Hiashi says, with an imperial wave of his hand.

"No," Sasuke says, and pushes the folder back towards Hiashi. "I hate doing paperwork. And the other teams aren't my responsibility."

Hiashi closes his eyes and takes a breath, looking as though he's fighting a particularly persistent headache. "You understand I am your CO—"

"So I won't lie to you," Sasuke interrupts. "I'm not doing any more paperwork than I already have to. The bureaucracy in this place is asinine."

Hiashi looks pointedly at the folder and then back up at Sasuke. With a roll of his eyes, Sasuke relents and flips the folder back open. He sees it then, at the very end of all the papers. There is a blank line for him to sign at the bottom of the page, but underneath it, in print, is his salutation—different from what he's usually used to seeing:

_Uchiha Sasuke. ANBU Lieutenant._

Sasuke sits back in his chair to process the information because, sure, he was expecting to get his job back, but he wasn't expecting a promotion. "What about Subaru? Takahashi?"

"They've moved onto Jounin," Hiashi answers neatly. "There was a war. We went through a cycle of recruitments in your absence." A little mildly, he adds, "You were gone for nearly a year, Uchiha."

Sasuke runs a finger along the edge of the folder, trying to formulate a response. If the ghosts were here, he'd have some help, but they haven't showed up this morning yet. "Are you _trying_ to make me doubt my decision?" Hiashi asks. He considers Sasuke from across his table, but there is nothing hostile about his gaze.

Sasuke shakes his head. "I don't need a pity promotion."

"It's not—"

"I've been absent for nearly a year, and I had less than seven months of ANBU experience before disappearing," Sasuke interrupts neatly. "There are better men suited for this job. Your nephew, for
Hiashi's lips quirk up into a smile. "Hatake Kakashi was ANBU lieutenant when he was just sixteen and a half. I was twenty-one, and he was already my acting commander."

"I know." Sasuke memorized Kakashi's biography when he was thirteen, had vowed that he'd outdo the great Hatake Kakashi. He's already fallen behind—far, far behind—and he's given up on trying to live up to Kakashi's legacy by now.

"He'd been in ANBU for just eight months when he got his promotion; he refused it at the ceremony. The Hokage was left standing in his office with a promotion to award and no one to receive it. Kakashi didn't think he deserved it," Hiashi finishes, and Sasuke understands now where this story is going. "I wanted to avoid creating a similar scene because I thought…Like teacher like student, they say."

He opens his drawer and pulls out dog tags and the red Lieutenant armband onto the desk. Sasuke doesn't move to take them. "I'm heading back out again soon, Captain. It's best if you hand this promotion to someone else. I'd recommend Hyuga Neji."

Hiashi raises an eyebrow. He doesn't look impressed by Sasuke's logic. "You have a way of coming back from the dead," he says mildly. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't second-guess all my decisions like this in the future. I want the name of a Deputy Lieutenant by the time the day is through. Have the paperwork done as well. Talk to HR for the details for your back pay and eight week disability leave."

Sasuke hesitates only for a moment before accepting the folder, dog tags, and the Lieutenant armband. "I don't need eight weeks. I can start tomorrow."

Hiashi shakes his head. "Eight weeks is what you get after a mission like that. It's protocol. Even the Commander got eight weeks."

"I've had nearly a year."

Hiashi doesn't budge an inch. "Eight weeks. You'll be expected to debrief the COs of your mission to Amegakure the day of your return."

"I can give it now," Sasuke offers.

Hiashi shakes his head. "We'll have a paper copy of your report in hand, so there's no rush for an in-person debrief. Take your eight weeks. I'm sure you have a lot to do to settle back in."

Sasuke doesn't say that he doesn't plan on settling back in, because it'll be a pain to tie up loose ends when he leaves again. Instead, he gets to his feet. Oddly, Hiashi stands as well. He holds out a hand, "Welcome back, Lieutenant."

Sasuke accepts the hand. They shake on it.

Unit 3 is still waiting for him when he steps outside. Neji looks smug, which can only mean—

"You knew about the promotion?" Sasuke asks.

"Well?" Neji asks, expectant. He holds out a hand. "Give me that paperwork. There's things in there for me to review and sign as well, I'm guessing."
Sasuke glances down at the folder in his hands. He's not sure how he got here. Hiashi didn't even want to hire him two years ago, and he'd just handed him a promotion. The men in ANBU didn't trust Sasuke to have their back two years ago, but they cheered his return today. And Sasuke hated Neji all of two years ago, but here they are, Neji assuming that Sasuke will promote him to Deputy. Which, to be honest, isn't a wrong assumption. Sasuke isn't sure whom else he'd have as his right-hand if not Neji.

He shoves the folder into Neji's hands. "Have fun. Nara, congrats. You're Unit 3's new CO. I want the name of your second by tomorrow."

"Shino, you're my second," Shikamaru says easily. "I'm hiring you back into ANBU."

Sasuke glances up sharply at Shino. "You quit?"

Shino shrugs. "It did not feel right. I had gotten used to you being my CO."

*How did I get here?* Sasuke wonders again, but he doesn't have time to think through an answer because Kiba throws an arm around Shino's shoulder, pulling him into a rough side-ways hug. "Welcome back, Aburame!"

Sasuke rounds on his heels before he can get caught up in their next conversation. "Oi, Lieutenant!" Kenshin calls out. "Where are you going?"

"Errands to run," Sasuke calls back over his shoulder and takes off in a sprint towards the Hokages' grave site.

The Shodaime smiles broadly when he spots Sasuke approaching at a dead run. Sasuke doesn't slow down soon enough, so he skids on the wet grass, barreling into the Nidaime by accident. The Nidaime steadies Sasuke with two hands on his shoulder, laughing as they collide."Whoa, whoa, hold up!"

"Slush," Sasuke explains a little unnecessarily. He shoves the toe of his boot into the mud, still slick from the last rain. The last time he was alive, the leaves were still changing colors. Almost an entire year has passed and here he is again, back at square one.

The mud yields under his boot, and Sasuke freezes. He remembers having mud between his toes, behind his ear, in the crevices where his thighs meet his hips. Mud in his nose, mouth and eyes, everywhere, suffocating him with the stench of his own waste. He climbed out of that place once, and he'd managed to forget it slowly over the years that followed. This time, though, he had been awake for longer stretches while he was down there, and he emerged with the Mangekyou Sharingan. Forgetting the humiliation of those months—

The Shodaime taps Sasuke on the shoulder with a finger. "Did you enjoy your run here?"

Sasuke shrugs, looking out across the Hokage grave site. There's a fine drizzle of rain coming down still. It feels like the whole world is turning to mud. "It was fine."

The Nidaime eyes the Lieutenant armband on Sasuke's left hand. He grins, wide and carefree as always. "You got news to share with the class, Uchiha?"

Sasuke holds out his left arm, displaying his armband for the others to see. He doesn't know how to feel about the promotion yet. "Wonders never cease," the Yondaime says mildly, but he's smiling, eyes crinkling at the corners with it. Sarutobi gives Sasuke a broad smile. "Congratulations, Sasuke."
"Well earned," the Shodaime agrees. "What are your orders?"

"I have to submit a report to the COs by the end of tomorrow," Sasuke explains. "And then I have eight weeks leave."

Sarutobi smiles. "Shall we get to work?"

Sasuke heaves a sigh, rolling his shoulders to shake off the weariness that's seeping into his muscles and bones. "Sure."

Sasuke spends the day holed up in the library writing out his mission report under the ghost's careful guidance. He signs out a study room for the occasion so he can close the door and speak aloud without drawing strange glances from other library patrons. It takes several drafts before the ghosts are satisfied with the story Sasuke wants to present.

"You cannot tell them about Rin saving you," the Shodaime says sternly for what seems like the hundredth time. "You must swear to me that you will not."

Sasuke heaves an exasperated sigh. "For fuck's sake—"

"Language," the Shodaime interrupts sternly.

Sasuke switches curses neatly. "For Gods' sake, I said I wouldn't a hundred times already. I didn't tell anyone the first time, so why would I tell them now?"

"Because there's a huge gaping hole in your story otherwise," the Yondaime mutters to himself. "Who's going to believe that you got away when Madara, Pein, and Itachi were hunting you?"

The silence extends for a moment too long, so Sasuke offers, "I've always been good at running away. Trust me. No one's going to have a problem believing this story."

The joke falls flat. None of the ghosts smile, not even the Nidaime. "I've never known you to run, Sasuke," Sarutobi says after a moment.

"You died before I started turning tail, Sarutobi-sensei," Sasuke says, still trying to lighten the mood. He cranes his head to catch Sarutobi's gaze. "I was actually in the process of running away when you died."

The Nidaime places a heavy hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "Why do you think so little of—"

"Can we just get this over with?" Sasuke interrupts, shrugging off the man's hand on his shoulder. He holds up the five sheets of paper he's filled with his writing. "Are we all satisfied with this draft of the report? We good?"

The ghosts each give their approval, and Sasuke sets off back towards ANBU HQ to drop off his report. No use putting off things for tomorrow what you can do today.

Hiashi isn't in his office, and Neji drives him away with a stern warning not to step foot back in the building for the next eight weeks, so Sasuke heads to the shopping district to pick up supplies—underwear, mainly.

The motel isn't far from downtown, but it's tucked away into a side street. The decor is bland, but at least the bed is king-sized and the bathroom seems relatively clean. Sasuke scans his surroundings, taking in the wilting window drapes and the dingy carpet. It's not the worst place he's ever been; he'll
be fine here for the next couple of months until he heads back out. With his back pay and disability check, he'll have more than enough to rent it out on a per day basis.

He's folding up his new purchases and uniform to put in the armoire under the TV set when the Nidaime clears his throat. "Well, aren't you being a good little boy all of a sudden. Folding your clothes, Uchiha?"

Sasuke ignores the ghost in favor of pulling on a new pair of sweatpants and undershirt he bought for himself early in the day. "It's a small room. It'll get messy quickly."

The Shodaime angles his head thoughtfully. "Do you plan on staying long?"

Sasuke falls onto his back on the bed, pushing out his hands and feet until he's spread-eagled along the length and width of the mattress. "Till I head back out for my brother, at least." He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. There's dinner in takeout containers waiting for him in one corner of the room, but he can't be bothered to do anything about it. It's almost as if all those weeks of traveling in the snow have sapped what energy he had left. Or maybe he's always been this tired and never noticed. Or most likely, Sasuke thinks, dying and coming back to life twice in just seventeen years probably does a number on anyone.

There's a silence in the room; Sasuke opens his eyes and lifts his head to see if the ghosts are still in the room with him. They are. The Yondaime takes a deep breath. Sasuke is half-expecting him to start yelling at him, but instead the Yondaime just exhales loudly.

Sasuke scowls. "What?"

"You should find a place to live," the Yondaime says slowly. "A studio, at the least."

Sasuke drops his head back heavily onto the mattress. "Not worth it. I'll be out of here soon anyways."

"It'll be eight weeks before you're back on active duty," the Yondaime tries again. "You can't stay in a motel room for eight—"

"Then I'll switch motel rooms every now and then, Yondy. Quit nagging me," Sasuke grumbles. He turns onto his side to get more comfortable.

Sarutobi clears his throat in the silence that follows. "Sasuke. Dinner."

Sasuke pushes his face into his pillow. "I'm not hungry."

"You're always hungry," the Yondaime points out, but his words don't hold their usual taunt.

The Shodaime joins in. "Eat, boy."

Sasuke pulls the covers over himself. "I'm going to sleep. Go haunt someone else."

Another silence. Sasuke wonders if they've actually listened to him for once and left him alone, but then Sarutobi speaks up. "You should turn off the lights if you're going to bed now," he offers, patient as ever. "You'll get a good night's rest, at least."

Sasuke goes still at the question. He'd slept the night before with the table light on, and the night before that. At every inn and tavern he stopped, he kept a light going. The darkness felt too oppressive otherwise. It reminds him vaguely of mud and filth and his own choking fear that he'd drown and sink down, down, down to the very depths of the earth. He'd been buried alive in that
place. That is the measure of Rin's loyalty to him; she'd sustained him for eight months in that hellhole until he could crawl out of his own free will again.

Sasuke doesn't bother responding to Sarutobi's suggestion, just closes his eyes. He hopes that the ghosts will eventually get bored and leave him alone.

He falls asleep. A few hours later, when he wakes up with a gasp, letting out a choked, frightened sob—*something tugging at his insides, at his very marrow; mud between his toes and Rin telling him, Climb*—the Shodaime is right there, placing a cool hand on his shoulder. "Just a dream, son," the Shodaime says quietly. Sasuke pushes himself up on the bed to check on his surroundings.

Light. Blessed light everywhere.

The time reads 02:17. "Just a dream," the Shodaime repeats.

Sasuke wipes at the tears on his face, the sweat on his brow; he can't even bother to be embarrassed to be seen like this anymore. They've seen him in worse moments. There's really not much left of his dignity to salvage here.

Sasuke lies back down carefully and stares at the bed light until his eyes sting. He could have gone quietly with the knowledge that his brother was at his side at the end. His last memory of this realm could have been his brother pressing a sword into his hand and telling him, *I'm here.* There would have been a peace in that death. He would have died doing his duty for his country. Kakashi wouldn't have had a chance to ask him, *You took it from Madara?*

But—*Climb*, Rin had told him, and he had.

Like a fool, he had.

Sasuke closes his eyes. This time, no one comments on the light.

It takes all of two nights of fitful sleeping and two days of lounging around the motel room for the Nidaime to snap at Sasuke.

"That's it," he snaps, and hauls Sasuke up by the collar of his shirt while he's watching reruns of *KPD Cold Cases.* "You are going to snap out of this—"

"Tobi," the Shodaime says loudly, sterner with the Nidaime than he's ever been.

The Nidaime shakes Sasuke a few times, and it feels as though all of Sasuke's bones are rattling. "You're turning into a complete—"

"Tobirama," the Shodaime says again, louder now.

The Nidaime purses his lips into a thin line. He pushes Sasuke away roughly, but not before pushing his face into Sasuke's and snarling, "You keep this up, Uchiha, and Madara and Pein are going to wipe the goddamn floor with your ass when you see them next."

Sasuke lifts his head. "I killed Madara once—"

"You were lucky to land a decent blow," the Nidaime says. His face is twisted in anger; Sasuke isn't sure how to respond to the sudden viciousness, so he stays stock still and listens. "You were sloppy, stupid, and reckless in battle. It was pathetic."
Sasuke balls his hands into fists. It's one thing to know it. It's another to hear it said aloud. "I was—"

"And while you were there on your knees, your sensei was out there—"

"Tobirama," the Shodaime roars. He grips the Nidaime by the shoulder firmly, tugging him back. "That is enough."

The Nidaime pulls back roughly from the Shodaime and comes right back into Sasuke's space, pushing forward with his whole body so that Sasuke is either forced to stand his ground or take a step back. He stands his ground, and the Nidaime gets so close that their noses are almost touching. "You might have the Sharingan, and you might have the instinct for battle, kid, but trust me when I tell you this: You're an amateur."

Sasuke's Mangekyou whorls to life. The power of it has his whole spine tingling with chakra. "I have fought and won more battles in my seventeen years than most—"

"Really?" the Nidaime asks with a short bark of laughter, rough and humorless. "You're going to tell me of your middling battle prowess? Do you even know who I am?"

Sasuke knows exactly who this man is. He's read his history and heard all his victories from Shisui as bedtime stories. The Nidaime is a legend, the kind of man who can walk into any room and know for certainty that he will be known. Sasuke once craved that kind of legacy when he was young, back when Itachi was still his brother and Shisui still told him stories at night. He wanted to earn that kind of arrogance, that lilting swagger of men who know of their own value in battle.

When Sasuke says nothing to counter the Nidaime's taunt, the man's face twists into a sneer. "That's what I thought," he says in a low, harsh whisper. He pushes a hand into Sasuke's chest, gentle. Sasuke is so shell-shocked that the slight touch has him stumbling back a step. The Nidaime's expression turns even more mocking. "Grow a fucking spine, boy."

And just like that, Sasuke's temper flares. He pushes off his back foot and launches himself at the Nidaime.

It's over before it even begins. The Nidaime twists at the waist lightly, and that's enough to throw Sasuke's momentum off. The ghost grabs his wrist and twists so hard that Sasuke is on the ground, breathing in the stale carpet before he knows what's happened. To make it worse, the Nidaime presses the heel of his boot on the back of Sasuke's head, resting his weight casually as if this were an everyday occurrence.

Sasuke's Mangekyou is painful with his chakra now. He presses his knees into the carpet, ignoring the burn of his muscles at the awkward splay of his legs, and pushes chakra into the ground. His knees sting with the chakra and the carpet sizzles from the heat, but he gets enough momentum to push up onto his knees forcibly. The Nidaime's foot falls away but he still has a bruising grip on Sasuke's wrist, twisting it at a near impossible angle behind Sasuke's back.

Sasuke heaves in a ragged breath. Another. A third—

The Nidaime twists again, and there's a sharp pain at his side just as Sasuke hears a dull thwack. He'd broken a rib.

"Tobirama-sensei," Sarutobi says hurriedly stepping forward. "Please—"

"Amateur," the Nidaime says, and pushes Sasuke away disdainfully. Sasuke falls face-forward from the momentum of the push, jostling his injured rib to the point that he sees black spots sparking before his eyes. He doesn't understand how the Nidaime could do what he had done—it had been
such a simple twist of his hand, and here Sasuke is, writhing on the floor in pain and unable to get a
good breath in. He takes a few more ragged breaths, feeling the carpet fibers sticking to his chin
where the sweat has gathered.

_The Senju Style_, Sasuke realizes finally. Shisui told him once about the style, pretending at the Senju
Style in the courtyard while he guessed at what the Nidaime must have been like in battle. But the
Senju Style is a thing of legend, a distinct technique that the Nidaime invented but never passed on.

The Yondaime helps Sasuke sit up with a cool hand on his shoulder even as Sarutobi crouches by
Sasuke's side. The Nidaime is already walking away, the Shodaime close at his heels. The Shodaime
looks furious, but the Nidaime is in a different world entirely. Sasuke has heard stories of the
Nidaime's temper, the utter _apathy_ the man was capable of during battle. He slaughtered hundreds,
_scores_ of men without thought. Sarutobi grips Sasuke's shoulder firmly. "You should visit Sakura for
—"

"Teach me," Sasuke says. The words are out of his mouth before he realizes it.

The Nidaime half-turns. He angles his head thoughtfully. "Teach you what?"

_To be better_, Sasuke wants to say. _To be anything but what I am_. Instead, he says, "The Senju Style.
Teach me."

He's half-expecting the Nidaime to refuse. No one, not even the Shodaime, ever learned the
Nidaime's techniques. The Nidaime never passed it on to anyone because he didn't want anyone
learning how to counter it.

But suddenly, like sunlight breaking through a cloudy sky, the Nidaime cracks a grin. "I thought
you'd never ask."

It is an eight-week training plan, complete with a daily schedule and nutrition plan.

Apparently, the Nidaime takes the responsibilities of training his men seriously.

Sasuke spends the evening under Sakura's care getting his rib fixed. The very next day, they begin.
The Nidaime leads Sasuke out to a training field outside the city walls, showing off the space to
Sasuke as his own personal training grounds. It's nothing more than a wide clearing surrounded by
redwood trees arching overhead, but Sasuke feels his stomach flutter with anticipation. He feels as if
he's back in the Academy again, waiting to hear what Team he'd been assigned to, who his sensei
was going to be.

"People called it the Senju Style," the Nidaime says on the first day of training. "I never gave it that
name, though. This is just how I fight." For a demonstration, he spars with the Yondaime.

The Yondaime loses.

At the end of their session, the Nidaime holds out a hand for the Yondaime. The younger man takes
it with a grin and gets back to his feet. "Every time," the Yondaime says with a chuckle, and Sasuke
realizes only then that this isn't the first time the ghosts have faced off. If the Yondaime himself can
be defeated with his lightning speed and quick-silver feet, then—

"You think you can learn this?" the Nidaime asks after the sparring session. He stretches his arms
over his head languidly. The question isn't a taunt. It's genuine.

Sasuke considers the question. He'll have to _unlearn_ everything he's learned over the years, but that
shouldn't be too hard. Sasuke's fighting technique is just a schizophrenic combination of moves he's memorized from various opponents and teachers. He's always approached taijutsu as a blunt instrument: how hard can he swing a fist, how much blood can he draw with each attack. But the Nidaime's taijutsu is different. His technique is unlike anything Sasuke has ever seen. It's loose, informal, as if the Nidaime is moving through water. The man doesn't even bother getting into a stance, just angles his body just so and considers his opponent thoughtfully.

Sasuke spreads his feet carefully, angling his toes, hips, and shoulder girdle in imitation of what he'd seen the Nidaime perform fifteen minutes earlier. He relaxes each muscle group individually, starting with the ones in his neck and back and all the way down to his toes. Then he remembers the expression on the Nidaime's face: utter calm. So Sasuke takes a breath and relaxes the muscles of his face, consciously smoothing out the wrinkle between his eyes and the tension in his jaw.

The Nidaime's eyes are bright with approval. "You think you can learn this?"

Sasuke takes a breath. He can't keep the smile off his face; it's the first time in weeks he's felt this light on his feet. "Yeah. I think I can learn it."

They start at four in the morning and don't end until almost seven each night. Each training session begins with at least two hours of weight training, core exercises, and drills that get more and more relentless with each passing day. The Nidaime is unforgiving like Kakashi, and he operates at the same level of taijutsu skill. Like Kakashi, he expects Sasuke to do better because nothing less than perfect is worth his time.

But while Kakashi is only impatient, the Nidaime drips with arrogance. His self-assurance is breathtaking, and Sasuke realizes only then that there is truth to all the legend surrounding the Nidaime's name. He is faster, stronger, and more accomplished in battle than the other Kages.

They begin with upright wooden blocks in one end of the clearing. He makes Sasuke practice with hoops of bamboo, forcing Sasuke to fight with him with his hands bound to ropes and poles. It's brutal, and even dead, the Nidaime delivers bruising punches and unforgiving kicks. Sasuke ends up visiting Sakura regularly in the hospital. After his third strained tendon, Sakura gives him a concerned look. "When I said don't be a stranger, I didn't mean show up every day in the ER looking like you've been run over by a herd of buffalo," she says. "Is Kakashi-sensei—"

"No," Sasuke interrupts. "I'm training on my own."

Sakura spreads her fingers on a distinctly fist-shaped bruise right over Sasuke's liver. "On your own?"

"I spar with some of my men sometimes," Sasuke lies easily. "Am I good to go?"

Sakura looks unconvinced. "You're good to go. Will I see you tomorrow?"

Sasuke pulls on his shirt with a wince. In one corner of the room, the Nidaime is watching the whole proceeding with a wry smile. "Yeah," Sasuke admits. He gives the Nidaime a quick grin. "Probably."

After the first week, the Nidaime steps back from one of their sparring sessions and angles his head thoughtfully. "Minato?"

The other ghosts have gathered on the sideline every day, watching the training curiously. The Nidaime doesn't object to their presence—they're dead anyways, he says with a loud laugh, they can't steal any of my secrets anymore—but this is the first time he's directly addressed them mid-way.
through their training. "Yes, sir," the Yondaime says, stepping forward.

"He's a bit slow, still," the Nidaime says, gesturing at Sasuke with a sweep of his hand. Sasuke has gotten used to the Nidaime's frank assessments so he doesn't bristle from the insult. "You think you can work with him to improve his speed?"

The Yondaime grins. "I can try."

And so the Yondaime gets involved in Sasuke's training. The Nidaime yields his position for two hours every day, and like a guest lecturer, the Yondaime steps in to take up the mantle. He makes Sasuke carry in wheels of different sizes—carts, bicycles, rickshaws—and makes him step through them. Sasuke does endless sprints through the forest, punches a block of wood at close range until he feels the pound of wood against his knuckles almost constantly, and twists his fingers in muscle-loosening exercises until his seals become almost too fast to follow. It's fast, fast, faster with the Yondaime, and all the time with the ghost's constant reminder that he needs to breathe through the speed.

_I've done this_, Sasuke tells him over and over again, because Kakashi has done this to him before Sasuke left for Otogakure. And each time he does, the Yondaime tells him, _Not like this you haven't._

Midway through the second week, the Nidaime presses two cold fingers into Sasuke's forearm and neck and says, "Your chakra control isn't stable here."

Sasuke heaves a sigh. "I know."

The Nidaime's rolls his eyes and pushes a hand into Sasuke's face, forcing Sasuke to stumble backwards. "Hiruzen!"

Sarutobi's response is much quieter than the Nidaime's loud yell. "Would you like me to work with him on his chakra control, Tobirama-sensei?"

The Nidaime grabs the back of Sasuke's neck with a firm grip and pushes Sasuke towards Sarutobi. Sasuke swats ineffectively at the man's hands, but doesn't protest too much because, apparently, that's how the Nidaime likes to handle him: by the scruff. "Do your best," the Nidaime orders gruffly. "Two hours every day until you think he's improved. Teach him some new jutsus while you're at it. I'm getting bored fighting him."

The Nidaime stalks off before Sarutobi can even respond. "I'll do my best, sensei," Sarutobi calls out after his retreating back, and then turns to face Sasuke. "Shall we begin, Sasuke?"

Sarutobi is called the Professor for a reason, Sasuke realizes, because the man is a walking encyclopedia of knowledge. Even the other ghosts gather around when Sarutobi launches into one of his rambling lectures about chakra theory. They conduct these lessons during lunch, when Sasuke constructs a small fire to one side of the training grounds and digs into his food for the day (all strictly monitored by the Nidaime; Sasuke has been eating a full chicken every day under the man's instructions).

Sometimes, the Yondaime raises his hand and asks pointed, well-thought out questions that have Sasuke wondering just what kind of student he must have been when he was Sasuke's age. But Sasuke is a good student too, so he takes notes and reviews them at a later time. He comes back with questions the next day (never on the spot like the Yondaime, the man is on another level entirely), but each question he asks make Sarutobi's eyes crinkle with a smile.

When Sarutobi deems that Sasuke has mastered a lesson, he will begin a round of jutsu trainings.
And here, at last, Sasuke excels like none other. He has the Mangekyou, so one demonstration, and Sasuke has it mastered. He burns through jutsu after jutsu, making the ghosts' eyes grow wide with disbelief.

Sasuke returns to the motel bruised, bloodied, and sore each day. He doesn't complain, though, because the exhaustion means he hasn't been dreaming of mud and darkness. He's even been turning off the light at night. So instead of complaining, Sasuke fills the bathtub with cold water and ice every night and sinks gratefully in to heal his muscles. He's filling the tub with ice after a particularly difficult training session one night in the third week when the Shodaime points out, mild as always, points out, "I would advise you to use hot water for your injuries today."

Sasuke sits down heavily on the edge of the tub and groans in frustration. It's eight o'clock already and his back feels as if it's on fire after the Nidaime showed him some new techniques. All he wants to do is take his goddamn shower and go to bed. "The hot water doesn't work."

The Shodaime gives Sasuke a flat stare. "The hot water does not work," he repeats slowly. Sasuke nods miserably. "For how long, exactly, has the hot water not been working?"

Sasuke makes a vague gesture with his hand. "Always?"

The Shodaime closes his eyes and takes a few deep, calming breaths. When he opens them again, he calls out, "Tobi!"

The Shodaime's head appears through the wall of the bathroom. "Yeah?"

The Shodaime points to Sasuke. "The hot water in this room does not function properly," he says sharply. "The boy here has not thought to remedy this situation."

The Nidaime shrugs. "Not my area of expertise, Brother. If you want to do something about the idiot, he's all yours."

The Shodaime looks heavenward. He closes his eyes, and for a moment, Sasuke thinks that he might be praying. He realizes a moment later that the Shodaime is thinking because a moment later, the Shodaime pins him with a flat gaze and orders, "Up!"

Sasuke hauls himself to his feet and follows the Shodaime out the door, past the other curious ghosts, and back into the streets. The Shodaime makes Sasuke walk halfway across town, all the way to the Eastern civilian neighborhoods of the city. When they finally stop, it's in front of what looks like an old, abandoned factory that's been outfitted to house a bakery on the bottom floor.

Sasuke stares at the window displays. On cue, his mouth floods with saliva and his stomach lets out a loud grumble. He's eaten three-quarters of a chicken, two servings of couscous, four servings of fruits and four servings of vegetables for dinner already, but they'd all been steamed and only lightly sprinkled with salt. His meal plan is filling, sure, but it's extremely unappetizing and bland because the Nidaime deemed that Sasuke's muscle-to-body fat ratio could use some tweaking. The sight of all these baked goods makes Sasuke want to bury himself under his sheets and never emerge again.

It takes all of his willpower to say: "I'm not allowed to eat pies. Pies are not part of my nutrition plan."

"For the love of all that is holy, boy," the Shodaime says, and points a finger towards a sign. It says: APARTMENT FOR RENT. SEEK DETAILS INSIDE.

Sasuke can take a hint. He steps inside to the golden-lit warmth of the bakery. The door jingles his
arrival, and on cue Sasuke hears a woman from inside yell out: "We're closing! Come back tomorrow!"

Sasuke is so distracted by a loaf of raisin bread drizzled with honey that he doesn't respond. The Shodaime thwacks him lightly upside the head. "Tell her that you are here for the apartment."

Sasuke wants to argue with the Shodaime that he will be leaving Konoha again soon anyways—and he won't be coming back this time—so he has no need for an apartment, but the Shodaime has a stubborn set to his shoulders. And besides, Sasuke's back really fucking hurts and all he wants to do is sleep. The best thing to do right now is to give into the Shodaime's demands. "I'm here about the apartment, ma'am," Sasuke calls back.

There's some clanging inside and then a middle-aged woman appears through the doorway. She has her hair tied back with a piece of cloth, so the angles of her face stand out starkly. She's dark-skinned, and when she speaks, Sasuke hears a tinge of a western accent. "You're shinobi."

Sasuke glances down at himself. He's sweaty, muddy, bruised, and his lip is split and bleeding. "My name is Uchiha—"

"I know who you are," the woman says. She wipes her hands on her apron, although it does nothing to dispel the flour coating her hands. "I don't want trouble. I'm renting to civilians."

Sasuke heaves a sigh. There is a very good reason why civilians and shinobi tend to segregate into different neighborhoods. Wherever shinobi go, violence tends to follow. Him, especially.

Sasuke gives one last, longing look at a box of muffins. "Yes, ma'am. I apologize for disturbing you. Thank you for your time."

He's about to turn and leave when the woman calls out, "You want something to eat? I just botched a tray of cookies." She gives Sasuke a wry smile when she notices the surprise on his face. "You look hungry."

Sasuke glances at the Nidaime hopefully. The man narrows his eyes a fraction. "You're running an extra mile tomorrow for every cookie you eat."

If he eats five cookies, that's five miles. Add that to his usual twelve mile run, that's seventeen miles first thing in the morning at four am. Sasuke eyes a box of brownies packaged in see-through plastic. 

_Fuck it. He's not going to die without having eaten another cookie. No need to add to his misery."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, and follows the lady into the back room, which turns out to be nothing more than a large kitchen with a table tucked to one corner by a bay window. Sasuke takes a seat at the table and watches the woman pull out a tray of cookies from one of the three massive ovens tucked to one side of the room.

The botched cookies are spicy oatmeal raisin. They're botched because, apparently, they were supposed to come out fluffier. Or something. Sasuke doesn't catch the details of the recipe or anything else the woman says. He only understands that her name is Mrs. Miyake and she was trying a new recipe her granddaughter suggested for their inventory.

Sasuke devours the entire tray under Mrs. Miyake's wide-eyed gaze. All twelve cookies. It takes less than fifteen minutes. "Twelve miles," the Yondaime calculates with a smirk. "So twenty-four miles total tomorrow. Have fun, kid."

Sasuke burps in response. It's so sudden—and so _loud_—that he mutters to himself, "Whoa."
Mrs. Miyake bursts into laughter. She laughs so hard she has to hold herself up on the edge of the table. Sasuke flushes a deep, deep red, and watches as Mrs. Miyake controls her laughter. "The way they talk about you..." She trails off, laughing still. "You're still just a boy."

Sasuke bristles. "I'm Lieutenant of the ANBU Forces."

"So you are," Mrs. Miyake says, smiling still. "Would you like to see the apartment?"

The apartment is on the second floor of the building. As they climb the stairs, Mrs. Miyake talks. A lot.

Sasuke can do nothing but listen. He learns that Mrs. Miyake and her granddaughter had bought this building at auction after the bank repossessed it from the previous owners. It belonged to a paper company before they moved in; the paper company went under after they were found to have been cutting down redwood trees illegally for pulp. Mrs. Miyake's granddaughter, Mei, is an architecture student, and went about renovating the building. The first floor is the bakery. The two floors above have been redone as apartments for rent.

The apartment is a wide, open space with high rafters and massive windows going along all the walls. To one side of the space is a kitchen, set aside by a curving kitchen island. All the appliances look brand new, but that's about all there is. Everything else is just empty, open space. Sasuke and the other ghosts give the Shodaime a flat stare. "The windows," the Shodaime points out. "Look at the windows!"

Clearly, the man has been apartment hunting for Sasuke without Sasuke's knowledge. Sasuke can't find it in himself to rain on the Shodaime's parade, so he gives the apartment its due consideration. To the far side are two doors. One leads to another open space: the bedroom. There's nothing remarkable about the bedroom. It's just as wide as the living room and has the same massive windows along the walls. There's an enormous walk-in closet, but that's it.

Sasuke walks back out of the bedroom and pushes open the second door. He freezes at what he sees: An enormous shower stall. It's bigger than the one in Naruto's apartment. Bigger even than the one in Kakashi's place.

When Sasuke steps inside the shower stall, he finds that it's equipped with wall jets and a shower head with five pressurized jet speed settings. Mrs. Miyake and the ghosts walk through the door a moment later. "The place is a bit unique, obviously, but it has all the original hardwood floors of the paper factory and there's a lot of potential—"

"Does the hot water work here?" Sasuke asks.

Mrs. Miyake looks surprised at the interruption. "Yes, of course. Heat and hot water are included in the rent."

"I'll take it."

The Shodaime heaves a sigh and looks heavenward. "Thank God."

The Shodaime works magic the next morning and gets Sasuke a day off from training. The Nidaime relents under the Shodaime's calm stare, but doesn't budge on his punishment: "Twenty-four miles, punk."

"Yeah, yeah," Sasuke grumbles, and burrows back under the covers. He's getting ready to waste
away a few hours catching up on sleep, but then the Shodaime shakes him roughly by the shoulder. "Wake up, boy. We have work to do."

"Oh come on, Shodaime. Five minutes—"

"Twenty-five miles, now," the Nidaime says cheerfully. "One more for every minute you delay."

Sasuke gets up.

Work turns out to be shopping. Sasuke picks up furniture from antique stores and showrooms with overeager salesmen. Then, he spends two full hours in a store with nothing but bed sheets, kitchenware, and vacuum cleaners while the Shodaime and Sarutobi argue the merits of aluminum pans vs. stainless steel. When they get to the hardware store, even the Yondaime begins to pipe in, commenting that maybe this shade of blue looks more calming than the others? Sasuke holds up patches of color for the ghosts to ponder, feeling like an idiot the entire time but too tired to do anything about it. And besides, it's not like he can argue with the ghosts in public. They make Sasuke try on shirts and pants, sweaters and button-down shirts. By the time they reach the clothes store, the Nidaime is starting up his own shopping list for Sasuke: kettle bells, medicine balls, blocks, swords, kunai, shields, and resistance bands.

Also: some good whiskey, because every man needs a bottle of good whiskey in his kitchen, according to the Nidaime.

Sasuke wants to put a stop to the shopping spree, but the ghosts are talking excitedly and he doesn't have the heart to point out that he has about four weeks left before he's on the road again.

Instead, he blows through a full month's salary from his backpay and then heads back to the bakery to unpack all of his goods. The Nidaime determines that a good training exercise would be to carry furniture up to the apartment, so Sasuke hauls a sofa, dining table, and all sorts of furniture into his place. Then, he spends hour after hour arranging it all to the Shodaime's liking. He paints the rafters a pristine white so the space looks more airy than before, and then follows up with a deep, adobe-brick red color on the walls of the kitchen. The end result is that the apartment looks homey and welcome. The ghosts look around with large smiles.

"Tell me this isn't better than the motel," the Nidaime dares, elbowing Sasuke in the ribs.

"It's all right," Sasuke says. The Shodaime looks disappointed, so Sasuke amends quickly, "I like it. A lot."

"Good," the Shodaime says, smiling broadly now. "I am glad. It is good to have a home to come home to each night."

Sasuke breathes deep, feels that odd twist in his stomach and chest. Home is a patch of grass on the bank of the Naka River. He wants to lay his head down there and burn to ashes like all his family did before him—his mother, his father, aunts and uncles, and Shisui, too.

Later that night, after letting the ghosts badger him into eating yet another healthy meal, he settles in his new bed in his new apartment for the night.

It feels no different from the motel. He dreams of mud and darkness, wakes gasping and desperate for a sword to hold tight.

The Shodaime doesn't get directly involved in the training until much later, and only because Sasuke makes a minute error during one of his lessons with the Nidaime. They've progressed to the more
advanced techniques, so—naturally—the error results with a broken nose and dislocated jaw.

The triage nurse, Mrs. Wakahisa, is aghast when Sasuke walks into the ER dripping blood everywhere. His relationship with the staff at the hospital has changed dramatically since he first came back from Otogakure nearly three years ago: now, they no longer turn him away. Instead, the older nurses sneak in food and fluff his pillows for him when Sakura isn't looking. He's even learned all their names.

"Oh, sweetheart," Mrs. Wakahisa croons, and ushers Sasuke into an empty examination room, tutting at Sasuke all the while about how he should take better care of himself.

Sasuke lies down on a bed and waits for Sakura. The minute Sakura walks through the door, her eyes go wide. She approaches Sasuke quickly and touches the edge of Sasuke's jaw. "How did you —"

"I fell," Sasuke mumbles, but his jaw is hanging oddly loose and the effort of talking prompts a new spurt of blood from his nose.

"Off a cliff?" Sakura asks loudly, and with one sharp motion of her wrist, resets Sasuke's jaw. Sasuke blinks dazedly at the ceiling, trying to recover from the searing pain traveling down his neck.

"You were sloppy," the Nidaime snarls. He's still seething from Sasuke's mistake. If Sarutobi hadn't stepped in, Sasuke would have had half his face pummeled into a pulp to make sure he won't make the same mistake twice. "You do this time and again—"

"Tobi," the Shodaime says, trying to calm his brother's anger.

"You get distracted!" the Nidaime says loudly. "You keep score in your head instead of focusing on the battle at hand. You get easily angered at your own mistakes and at your enemy. You get emotional—"

"Tobi," the Shodaime tries again.

"—like a child!" the Nidaime continues loudly. "When you are in battle, be in battle. You have to learn the battle calm—"

Sakura's voice cuts through the Nidaime's words. "—your head up."

Sasuke tilts his head up so she can staunch the blood flowing from his nose. Her gloved fingers are gentle on his cheek. "On three," she says. "One, two—" On the third count, there's a sharp tug and Sasuke feels his nose resettle. There's the calm touch of Sakura's chakra a moment later. "I think your nose is beyond repair this time," she says once she's done healing him.

Sakura considers Sasuke's face, and Sasuke looks right back at her. Since training with the Hokages, he's had a chance to see Sakura at least once every other day. It feels like old times, when they were still on the same team. He'd forgotten how soothing her presence is, how steady and unflappable she is even when the world feels as though it's crumbling down around him.

He would like, for a moment, just to sit in her presence and feel the cool, grounding weight of her gaze.

Today, she wrinkles her nose at what she sees. "Not much you can do for an ugly mug like yours anyhow," she says, and snaps off her gloves with a flick of her wrist.

Sasuke touches his nose gingerly. There's an odd angle to his nose now, one that wasn't there before.
To be fair, though, he had been exceedingly sloppy midway through their sparring session. The
Nidaime's annoyance and anger is justified.

"Don't fall on your face again, doofus," Sakura warns him sternly, and presses a kiss to his cheek.
"See you later."

When she leaves, the door shuts behind her with a soft click. Sasuke turns then to face the Nidaime.
He still looks annoyed. "I can teach you for eight weeks or eight years or eight decades," he says.
"But if you don't learn the battle calm, there's nothing I can do."

Sasuke has heard of the battle calm, but only in stories about heroes of past ages. It's not anything
Kakashi talked about, and it's certainly not anything they teach students at the Academy. Uncle Inabi
used to tell Sasuke stories every time Sasuke made a fuss about going to bed. Mikoto, exasperated,
would let Sasuke run loose in the compound and Sasuke would head straight for Uncle Inabi
because Uncle Inabi was as patient as Shisui, if not more so, and he always had a million bedtime
stories to tell. Sasuke would always ask about the same hero:

Sarutobi Sasuke. His namesake.

He faced hundreds, Uncle Inabi would say. But he had no fear, he had no hesitation. A battle calm
overcame him, and no one, not a single one of his enemies, could lay a finger on him.

Battle calm is something Sasuke assumed was an exaggeration told by historians trying to describe
battle while never having been in a single one. He's never felt it, and he's been in countless battles in
his lifetime. But here is the Nidaime, talking about it as if it's a real thing.

The Nidaime picks up on Sasuke's confusion. "Figure it out," he orders, and rounds on his heels. He
disappears through the far wall, leaving Sasuke and the other three ghosts silent in his wake. Sarutobi
clears his throat. "You mustn't take to heart what Tobirama-sensei says in his frustration."

Sasuke feels his neck flush with shame. "Did you figure it out?" Sarutobi gives Sasuke a confused
look, so Sasuke elaborates. "You were his student. Did you ever figure out what the hell he's talking
about?"

Sarutobi smiles. "No."

Sasuke looks to the Yondaime, but the man doesn't have an easy answer either. "Think of Kakashi in
the heat of battle," he offers. "You've seen him fight, haven't you?"

Sasuke has watched Kakashi cut through dozens of opponents, but all he can recall from those
memories is the flat, blank gaze Kakashi has when he moves, the way his posture shifts lightly so
that he's no longer slouched or casual. There's an unnatural, almost inhuman stillness about Kakashi
when he fights—when he really fights an opponent worthy of his concentration. Afterwards, when
the blood was still wet on Kakashi's sword and on his jounin vest, Team 7 always knew to stay
away. It took hours for Kakashi's gaze to regain some of its warmth and humor. Sakura and Naruto
always trailed a few feet behind Kakashi in those instances, watching and waiting for the storm to
pass. Sasuke, though, reckless and heady even in those days, walked by Kakashi's side, trying to
mimic the man's posture and confidence. He never perfected it, and after a while, he stopped trying,
writing it off as just another one of Kakashi's quirks.

"That's your fucking advice? Be like Hatake Kakashi?" Sasuke snarls, anger flaring. He's tried his
entire fucking life to be even a little bit like Hatake Kakashi, and it's gotten him nowhere.

"Language," the Shodaime chides.
Sasuke scowls at the man. "Fuck that shit. How am I supposed to figure out something that's only in his head? What the hell is battle calm anyways?"

The Shodaime presses his lips into a thin line. "I can teach you," he says finally. "If you wish to learn."

Up until that moment, the Shodaime hadn't gotten directly involved in Sasuke's training. He had offered suggestions on Sasuke's dietary intake—and nothing else. Every time Sasuke asked him to spar, the man would refuse. *I'm not much of a teacher*, he said once. Sasuke had pointed out that the Shodaime was the Nidaime's teacher, but the Shodaime hadn't responded.

Now that the Shodaime is offering to teach him, Sasuke won't pass up on the opportunity. He pushes himself off the examination table. "Teach me."

The Shodaime's training takes place before Sasuke's sessions with the Nidaime and the other ghosts. Sasuke wakes up at three-thirty am and heads to the training field. The Shodaime is always waiting for him, and each morning, they go through the same routine. They start with a series of poses in slow motion: each movement of each muscle is made with absolute awareness and controlled breathing. *Tai chi*, the Shodaime calls it. A technique of the Eastern tribes.

And then, they settle down for half an hour of meditation. The purpose, the Shodaime explains, is to dissociate emotion with the movements a body makes in battle. "Your temper can be your weakness," the Shodaime points out diplomatically.

"I'm an Uchiha," Sasuke says slowly so that the man understands. His Clan are fire-keepers. By definition, they are temperamental. Even Itachi, for all his outward cool, was implacable in his anger. "It's what we do."

The Shodaime does not look impressed. "I've been dealing with Uchihas for far longer than you have, boy," he warns. "The point is to control that anger."


Sometimes, though, they don't meditate. They just hang out. The Shodaime talks to Sasuke about everything under the sun (theology, philosophy, and oddest of all, poetry). He tells Sasuke about his own experiences, his father's experiences, and the experiences of his father's father. He talks about how they all led their lives, how they prayed to their God, how they kept their faith and honor and dignity in the worst of times when demons were laying waste to the world around them. Often, the Shodaime recites the poetry of those ages, tells the words that he read at night at the front lines and the comfort he gained from them. Sasuke finds himself listening.

Some days, he finds himself repeating verses of poems that the Shodaime may have recited earlier in the day—never in public, but in the quiet moments he has to himself like in the shower or when he's in bed staring up at the ceiling (And once, when he whispered those words aloud in the quiet of his apartment—*Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless, the lone and level sands stretch far and away*—the Shodaime had added in just as quiet a whisper, *Boundless and bare, Sasuke.*).

Other days, Sasuke finds himself awkwardly filling the silence instead of the Shodaime, telling him about stupid things like a new trail he discovered in the redwoods while on his daily twelve-mile run, or the kind of fruits Kanaye and Yuuta like to eat. The words come out in bits and pieces, but the Shodaime is patient while Sasuke strings together his sentences.

He's not sure how the Shodaime's "training" works. He doesn't do anything but meditate, run through some breathing exercises, and listen to lectures on neoclassical poetry. It's not the worst thing
to hang out with the Shodaime, though, so he doesn't complain.

Still, somehow, as the week passes, Sasuke learns how to still his mind long enough to cast katon jutsus so strong that they change the very temperature of the sky above. His chakra warms the air around him, creates warm air currents that end with storm clouds on perfectly clear days. And then, he counts to ten, breathes deep to control his anger and chakra, and calls forth lightning from the skies.

It takes less than a heartbeat for the lightning to descend from the skies, and when it does, it's in the form of a dragon, crackling bright and beautiful. She feels peaceful, despite all her power.

Sasuke births her, but he can't think of a proper name for his creation. The other powerful katon jutsus are named after the gods themselves, Susanoo, and Amaterasu. Itachi invented Tsukuyomi. Sasuke knows his dragon is just as beautiful and powerful as those attacks, but he can't think of a name. In the end, the Shodaime is the one who christens her:

"Kirin."

The battle calm follows soon after Sasuke finds his way to Kirin.

It happens like a lightning strike, sudden and unannounced during the fifth week of training. Sasuke is half-way through a sparring session with the Nidaime, when it all falls into place and the world slips away from around him. His mind goes blank and his breathing becomes smooth and even. He feels as if he's wrapped in layers and layers of insulation, cocooned from everything around him. His focus whittles down to the Nidaime's movements, the mild give of the earth under him, the press of Spring rain against his temple, the movement of air in and out of his lungs.

He sees the Nidaime's hand coming out to strike, and Sasuke blocks, ducks, twists away to the left, finds an opening that he wouldn't have noticed on any other day, pushes forward, pulls back a hand to gather his chakra in his fist—

He makes contact with the Nidaime's left flank. The surge of chakra makes the Nidaime's pearly-blue outline flicker once before he solidifies again.

On any normal day, he would have been carried away with his success, but today, the joy doesn't register. He can still hear the distinct swish of the air he's pulling into his lungs and pushing back out again, magnified in his ear as if he's panting into a loudspeaker.

The Nidaime moves, and Sasuke moves in reaction, aware of the dimensions of his body and the space his limbs occupy. It's easier—so much easier—all of a sudden to find the minute openings in the Nidaime's defense. He doesn't land a blow each time he presses against these weak spots, but he does force the Nidaime to defend himself more often than he normally might. His fist makes contact once, twice, three times. He strikes out with his right leg and feels the Nidaime's forearm make painful contact with his shin, and in that moment, Sasuke pushes himself off the ground entirely and spins around to deliver another bruising kick to the Nidaime's head.

The Nidaime defends in the nick of time and Sasuke is sent sprawling to the other side of the training ground.

Sasuke pushes himself up, spitting out mud. The left side of his face is stinging from the Nidaime's fist. He's about to launch back into an attack, but then realizes that the Nidaime is not initiating another round. Instead, he's watching Sasuke carefully.

Sasuke stares right back at him. "What?"
The Nidaime grins and shifts his feet and shoulders. He raises a single hand in front of him and gestures to draw Sasuke forward. "Let's see what you've got, Uchiha."

Sasuke gets to his feet. He feels the air shift around him, the soft sigh of rain falling around him. It takes a fraction of a second for Sasuke to mimic the Nidaime, every muscle and fiber of his body falling right into place.

They blur.

In the seventh week of training, the Nidaime orders Sasuke to find Kakashi. "I can't help you with your Mangekyou," he declares, so Sasuke heads off in search of the jounin early on a Saturday morning.

He finds Kakashi in one of the jounin dojos, watching Anko and Kurenai work new recruits through some training drills. Kakashi looks as casual as he always does, but his jounin vest is nowhere in sight and there's a fine layer of dirt covering his left bicep. What Sasuke notices first, though, is Kakashi's Sharingan. His hitai-ate has been pushed up to reveal his eye, and the Mangekyou is a slow-pulsing heat in the room.

Nara Shikaku and Yamanaka Inoichi are standing a little to Kakashi's left. Jiraiya is standing to Kakashi's immediate right, looking as if he too has been sparring. His usual kimono top has been tossed to the side and he's wearing nothing but his undershirt. Sasuke can't help but stare at the bulging chakra pathways on the man's arms. Sannin, he reminds himself.

Sasuke walks past jounin standing in clusters along the sidelines, ignoring their curious glances in his direction. Whatever this is, it's clearly a high-level, jounin-only affair. But it's a Saturday and if Sasuke isn't allowed access to his own goddamn sensei on a Saturday, then he doesn't know what the point is having a mentor anymore. And more importantly, Sasuke isn't one to back down so he keeps his head up, ignores the forty or so jounin staring openly at him, and makes his way towards Kakashi.

Kakashi doesn't look away from the jounin in the training area when Sasuke ambles up. Anko and Kurenai instruct the six new jounin recruits into defensive formations around a flagpole. Sasuke knows this training exercise. Kakashi has walked Team 7 through it countless times. The goal is simple: defend the flagpole.

Anko and Kurenai attack. It takes fifteen minutes, but they break through the ranks eventually. It's a high-level performance, which can only mean that they're training to protect something important. Or someone—Jinchuruki.

And now, finally, Kakashi speaks. "What are they doing wrong?"

Sasuke doesn't have to think too hard to answer. He's been watching the scuffle for the past fifteen minutes and the answer is obvious. "The defensive line isn't holding the space to their backs and left. It's leaving gaps."

"And...Anko is vicious in battle, so I should avoid her in the future?"

The head smack is immediate. Sasuke rubs gingerly at his head, flushing when he feels dozens of people turn to stare at him. Kakashi indicates a woman standing at the far end of the training area.
She has her hair up in a high, intricate braid. There's a fine sheen of sweat on her forehead and dirt smudged all along her neck. "The jounin there with the brown hair? She's a problem, too."

Sasuke watches her for a few moments. He doesn't understand Kakashi's concern. She's obviously more highly trained than the others. If anything, she's an asset. Kakashi pushes off the wall and steps into the ring. Immediately, the jounin in the training area become more alert. With a wave of his hand, Kakashi orders the others to continue their drill. He falls into line next to the female jounin.

"Watch your sensei closely," the Nidaime instructs, stepping to Sasuke's left. "And learn."

Sasuke watches Kakashi take his place in the defensive line. Given the chance, he could hold off Anko and Kurenai's attacks single-handedly, but Kakashi molds himself to his teammates. He supplements their weaknesses rather than broadcasting his own strength. Sasuke understands then. The jounin had been at a higher level than the others, but she had been unwilling to compromise. "Oh."

"That's right, oh," the Nidaime mimics with a low chuckle. He throws an arm around Sasuke's shoulders. "Just because you're not on his team doesn't mean that you're done learning from him."

Sasuke nods once. He knows this already.

"What you need to learn from Kakashi is how to stand at the front of a battalion," the Yondaime adds, "not be one of many in the ranks. You understand?"

"I understand," Sasuke says. Kakashi has always been compared to the Nidaime Hokage. Sasuke never understood the comparison, but now that he knows both men, he understands.

Next to him, Jiraiya huffs a quiet laugh. "I'm glad you do."

Sasuke realizes a moment too late that he'd been speaking aloud to the ghosts. Sloppy. He's spared from having to interact with Jiraiya for any longer because Kakashi's drill comes to an end.

He pauses in the field to talk to the female jounin, gesturing with his left hand every now and then to indicate the others in the team. She listens carefully and nods a few times. A few moments later, Kakashi returns to the sidelines where Jiraiya and Sasuke are waiting.

"You'd have beat the crap out of me if I made a mistake like she did," Sasuke points out when Kakashi rejoins them.

Kakashi's eyes crinkle in a smile. He reaches out to grab Sasuke's face with one hand, fingers digging into his cheeks while he holds Sasuke's face steady. Sasuke stays utterly still for Kakashi to finish his inspection of his Mangekyou. "Sakura tells me you've been walking into walls and falling on your face. Seems like you're beating the crap out of yourself just fine."

Sasuke doesn't miss a beat. "Clumsy me."

Jiraiya gives Sasuke a sidelong glance "Who are you training with?

"Me, myself, and I," Sasuke answers, and this time, the ghosts break into soft chuckles.

Kakashi smacks Sasuke lightly on the cheek once before pushing his face away. "You here to train with the Mangekyou?"

"Yeah."
"Later," Kakashi says lazily. "Make yourself useful while you're here. Go attack the defense line."

Sasuke rolls his eyes. "I have better things to be—"

The head smack this time is louder and sharper. Sasuke rubs at his head, muttering under his breath about concussions and Traumatic Brain Injury, and what kind of piece of shit sensei—

Another head smack, and this time Sasuke stumbles forward a step from the force of it. So instead of complaining, Sasuke pulls off his jacket and sweater roughly, throwing them onto the ground. He'd arrived in his workout gear—sweatpants and a tattered, grey undershirt—so he doesn't bother changing into anything special for the occasion.

"Anko, Kurenai," Kakashi calls out. "Fall into defensive positions. Uchiha here will be offense for the next round."

"Sir," Kurenai says curtly and falls into place. The eight jounin form a loose semi-circle, and Sasuke steps onto the field.

"Try your best, Uchiha. See if you can touch the pole," Jiraiya calls out loudly. Sasuke turns to give the man a flat glare, but it's a wasted effort because Jiraiya isn't even looking at him. He's talking to Shikaku and Inoichi, laughing at some joke.

Sasuke stands in front of the defense line. There's an awkward moment where the eight jounin stare at Sasuke, and Sasuke stares back. Eventually, Anko says loudly, "Whenever you're ready, Lieutenant. Unless eight against one are odds you wouldn't wager?"

There's a scattering of laughter from the audience. Sasuke feels his neck flush with embarrassment. He assumed there would be some sort of signal from Kakashi or one of the COs to indicate the beginning of the drill. He takes a deep breath against the humiliation of the moment and pushes his thoughts aside.

Count, he tells himself, and it's almost as though he can hear the Shodaime saying it.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—

Sasuke feels the pieces fall into place; his breathing even out and his heart beat settle. His muscles relax into easy posture. Sasuke shifts his feet lightly, angling his body so that his left foot is forward. He considers the defensive line and maps out a strategy for attack.

Ten.

He heads for the high level jounin Kakashi pointed out, taking out the two jounin next to her to breach her defenses. He has her pressed into the ground, one knee on her back when Kurenai comes barreling at him. He twists easily out of the way, finds her weak point and attacks. When she falls unconscious, he eases her head to the ground, rearranging her hands and neck gently so that she's resting comfortably on the ground. When he turns on the remaining four jounin, it's to find that they're all staring at him, frozen mid-posture.

Sasuke straightens and waits patiently for them to reorient themselves. Anko steps forward, eyes narrowed. She blurs, and the three remaining jounin follow.

All of seven weeks ago, Sasuke would have met them midway. Now, though, Sasuke waits for them to approach him. He doesn't get into a defensive pose and doesn't draw any weapons even though Anko has two kunai out, and the others are drawing on swords and sai swords. Instead, he maintains the relaxed posture that the Nidaime has taught him and waits.
When Anko barrels into him, Sasuke is ready. He doesn't budge when her body slams into his. Instead, he shifts his weight to his right foot and uses Anko's own momentum to use her as a shield against the others. It's a blur of hands and feet, but Sasuke feels the air shift around him when they move to attack, he can hear the low-thrum whistle of kunai whistling by—it's easy to duck out of the way, easier still to counterattack.

The point of the drill is to touch the flagpole, though, so Sasuke doesn't waste time in breaking through the ranks. He doesn't attack too viciously, just enough to immobilize the jounin. After he's through with them, he sidesteps them and approaches the flagpole without opposition. He touches it with an outstretched hand and turns back to Kakashi. "Can I go now?"

Kakashi is standing ramrod straight. His Mangekyou is whorling. Sasuke can feel the power of his Sharingan from across the room. He's not sure what he's done to earn that kind of scrutiny, so he looks to the ghosts. None of them are acting out of the ordinary, just talking to each other—likely analyzing Sasuke's performance and making notes for later corrections.

"Can I go now?" Sasuke asks again, even louder.

"Clear the field," Jiraiya calls loudly, and steps forward. The jounin remaining on the field limp off, taking Kurenai with them. "Get in position, Uchiha."

Sasuke glances towards the Nidaime. They had a full day's training planned, and the Nidaime doesn't abide delays. The Nidaime considers for a moment. "All right, then. Don't embarrass me."

Sasuke turns to Kakashi next. The jounin has never allowed Sasuke to fight unnecessary fights. He's always held Sasuke on a tight leash, letting him loose only when he deems it worthwhile. There's no point in revealing your hand, he told Sasuke once. Guard your Sharingan and hide your strengths.

Sasuke waits patiently for Kakashi to make his decision. "You need permission from your sensei, boy?" Jiraiya asks, trying to goad Sasuke into action. "ANBU Lieutenant Uchiha Sasuke won't get into a fight without his sensei's permission still?"

Sasuke doesn't rise to the bait, just watches Kakashi.

Kakashi considers for a few moments longer, uncaring of the uncomfortable silence that's settled in the dojo. Sasuke is expecting Kakashi to say no, but then the man makes a small gesture with his hand, just a casual flick of the wrist.

Sasuke turns to face Jiraiya.

Jiraiya takes a few steps back to increase the distance between them. He gets into a perfect defensive stance easily. "Attack."

Sasuke shuffles his weight from left foot to right and then back again, rocking back and forth lightly. He considers his options, and then deciding, becomes still again. He taps his left toe against the hard-packed earth to the beat of his heart. The buzz of people talking around him fades, and Sasuke focuses again on his breathing, the flow of air in and out of his chest. He repositions his body so that he's aware of every inch: from his toes to his elbows to the back of his legs. "Are you ready?"

Jiraiya's face twists with surprise at the question. "Kid, I don't know what the hell kind of stunt you're pulling, but—"

Sasuke lets the moment take over and blurs in attack. He moves the way the Nidaime taught him. There is a crystalline joy in these moments that can only be described as calm, like a still water lake on a perfect summer day. The Shodaime showed him how to reach that place, but the Nidaime
taught him how to move and fight within it.

Sasuke twists and flows out of Jiraiya's reach, breathing evenly and steadily. When Jiraiya lands a strike, Sasuke moves with it, letting his backward momentum dispel some of the force of Jiraiya's offensive. When he attacks, he presses against Jiraiya's weak spots relentlessly, testing each angle and method until he sees the best way to break through.

In the end, it's Jiraiya's curiosity that undoes him. He pauses after fifteen minutes. "Let's see you with a weapon in your hand," he calls out, and Sasuke draws his sword. Jiraiya draws two Sai blades from his belt. "Attack."

Sasuke doesn't get into a stance, though. Just lets the tip of his sword rest against the ground and angles his head as he considers Jiraiya.

"Attack," Jiraiya repeats, sounding impatient now.

"I'm thinking," Sasuke answers—because that's what the Nidaime taught him, to think, to pay attention, to be patient and give careful thought to each of his movements, whether its the expansion and collapse of his lungs or his arm coming up to strike an opponent. So Sasuke lets his shoulders become loose and easy, and shifts his feet to the perfect width where his gravity is distributed just so. He stays absolutely and entirely still, feeling the weight and length of his sword.

Jiraiya slowly gets out of his stance. The surprise on his face is uncensored. "What the hell?"

Sasuke rocks forward so his weight is balanced on the soles of his feet. He twists his hand to grip his sword lightly. It took a moment, but he understands the exact reach of Jiraiya's blades now. He knows how Jiraiya fights now. With a sword in his hand, Sasuke has a chance to beat him. "Ready?"

Jiraiya gets back into a stance. He looks utterly serious and focused with none of his usual boisterous ease. "Yes."

Sasuke gets into a stance that Kakashi taught him. The Senju Style is a taijutsu philosophy and technique, but Sasuke's swordsmanship is entirely learned from Kakashi. Once, the Nidaime had commented on how exquisitely Kakashi handles the weapon in battle. But while Sasuke understood Kakashi's technique, he didn't know how to fight like Kakashi until training with the ghosts.

Now, he knows how to be perfectly still with a sword, how to reorient his entire body to accommodate the new length and edge of the blade in his left arm. He fights like Kakashi now. He knows this because the Yondaime told him once.

Jiraiya must have noticed too because he calls out, "Like teacher, like student, they say."

"So they say," Sasuke agrees, and—

Blurs.

It almost ends in a stalemate, Jiraiya and Sasuke pausing just at the moment before their weapons would have made impact in a real battle. Sasuke is crouching so low to the ground that he can smell the earth and watch the ground darken with the sweat that drips off his nose. He has his sword held up behind him and at a sharp angle so that if he were to finish his attack, he would push it through Jiraiya's left lung and right through his heart. Jiraiya's downward attack, though, is meaningless. It would have made impact—likely ripped through Sasuke's shoulder blade—but that's the extent of the damage given the way Sasuke has twisted out of the reach of Jiraiya's blades.

Sasuke lets his sword drop and gets up to his feet. He takes a step back from Jiraiya because this
close, he can feel Jiraiya's heavy breathing on his cheek. He asks the question that the Nidaime has asked him a dozen times every day for the past few weeks: "Do you concede?"

Jiraiya's mouth flaps open. "What?"

"Do you concede?" Sasuke asks again. He takes a step back and lets the tip of his sword rest on the earth again.

Jiraiya nods once. "I concede," he says slowly, as if he's tasting the words. "Huh. I haven't had to say that in decades."

Sasuke is still in that space, that calm, so he doesn't register his victory. Instead, he sheaths his sword. "Okay."

"Okay?" Jiraiya repeats slowly. "That's it?"

Sasuke breathes in and out and tries to move out of that space in his head. It's always hard for him to snap out of his daze though, and now is no different. "That's it," Sasuke agrees, and looks Jiraiya square in the eyes.

Jiraiya is looking at him with that same brand of surprise still. "Dismissed, Lieutenant."

"Sir," Sasuke says, and returns to the sidelines. He feels the fog lifting from his mind as he approaches Kakashi, who is holding out his jacket and sweater for him to take.

Sasuke pauses before taking his clothes. He can't help himself. He has to know. "So?" Kakashi looks blandly at him, so Sasuke pushes, "Well? What'd you think?"

Kakashi shrugs a shoulder. "Mediocre."

Inoichi lets out a surprised bark of laughter. "Mediocre, Kakashi? A Sannin just conceded defeat for the first time in decades."

"His technique was sloppy," Kakashi explains.

The Nidaime nods in agreement. "We have to work on your precision a bit more."

"I'll get better," Sasuke says, meeting Kakashi's gaze. He's put on weight since training with the ghosts. He's even had to buy new shirts to accommodate the new width of his shoulders. He can feel the dangerous coil of chakra just under his skin and the coiled potential of his muscles. He knows he's gotten better—faster, stronger, smarter—but one look from Kakashi and he feels like a fresh Academy graduate all over again.

"I'm sure you will," Kakashi agrees mildly.

Sasuke snatches his clothes from Kakashi, annoyed now. He's pulling on his jacket when the Nidaime thumps him on the back as he declares, "You will get better with more work."

Sasuke stumbles forward abruptly at the sudden impact, nearly falling into Kakashi as he does so.

Kakashi steadies him with a hand on his shoulder. Sasuke is about to step back when Kakashi grabs him by the back of his neck, shaking him lightly. Sasuke smacks ineffectively at Kakashi's hand, trying to pull free. "What the fuck, Hatake—"

Kakashi pulls him into a chokehold then, holding Sasuke close to his side so that he can rub his knuckles into Sasuke's hair. Sasuke feels his face turn beet red from the public manhandling. He
might have just beaten Jiraiya in a sparring session, but Kakashi is Kakashi and there's no escaping his hold no matter how much he flails and swears.

Kakashi shoves Sasuke away with a push, smacking him lightly on the cheek. "Get out of here, you little shit."

Sasuke rubs at his hair to resettle it into its usual short spikes. "You told me to stick around and make myself useful!"

Kakashi's eyes are bright with laughter. "So I did. Now I'm telling you to get out. I'll train you later."

Sasuke rounds on his heels.

It's not until hours later when he's getting ready for bed that the Yondaime says, casual, "You must be pleased with yourself."

Sasuke spits out a mouthful of foam. "What?"

"It's not very often you get a chance to make your sensei proud like that," the Yondaime explains. He leans against the bathroom counter, positioning himself so that he can watch Sasuke's reaction carefully.

Sasuke makes a face. "Kakashi?"

The Yondaime's lips curl in a smile. "You did good today, Uchiha." He pushes himself off the bathroom counter and heads for the door to give Sasuke his privacy. As he's leaving, he calls out over his shoulder, "Don't forget to floss!"

Sasuke makes a show of getting annoyed at the Yondaime for the reminder, slamming the door shut behind the ghost for emphasis. But once he has the bathroom to himself, he reaches for the floss anyways, trying hard—and failing—to clamp down on the warm pleasure in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

_Ozymandias of Egypt, by P.B. Shelley._

Also, two amazing works of art for this chapter:

_Proud_ by the utterly magnificent Mrbid/Srdid, and _the lone and level (plains) stretch far away_ by the incredibly talented RazzletheDazzle!
Sasuke's last full day of training with the Nidaime coincides with his first day back at work. The Nidaime runs him through a few quick drills first thing in the morning, and then barks at him to go get dressed for work: he can't act like a jobless hooligan for the rest of his life.

Sasuke hesitates in the open air of the training field. "I can take Madara and Pein now." He doesn't intend to ask it as a question, but it comes out as one anyways.

The Nidaime freezes for a moment. "Yeah. In a fair fight, you probably could." He pauses a moment before adding, "Your mangekyou is stronger now too, thanks to Kakakashi's training."

Sasuke lets the answer settle for a moment before speaking again. Kakashi had spent two full days training Sasuke. The point of the training hadn't been to teach Sasuke how to perfect his mangekyou—the Sharingan is an organic thing; it evolves with the user—but to teach Sasuke how to control it. It had been brutal but effective—his orbital chakra pathways feel settled now, his mangekyou less of a parasite and more of a weapon for Sasuke to use. Kakashi did a full evaluation of his mangekyou. By his estimation, Sasuke has at least three, maybe four decades, before his sharingan degenerates entirely and leaves him blind. That's more than enough time for Sasuke to tie up all the loose ends. Madara and—"My brother? I can take him?"

The Nidaime's shoulders slump, all his earlier joy disappearing in an instant. "Yeah. In a fair fight."

"Pein and Madara first, then," Sasuke decides firmly. He curls his hands into fists. He has to take them out one by one. He can do it. It's no different from any other hunt. He's gone on countless missions like this before. And after that's taken care of—"And then, my brother."

Sarutobi clears his throat politely. "Then what, Sasuke?"

Sasuke turns to face the ghost. He shrugs. He's spent so many years working towards the singular goal of becoming strong enough to face his brother, it's strange to have finally arrived. All that's left is to finish the task now. "I'll ask Kakashi for the mission today. Hopefully I can head out soon."

The Nidaime thumps Sasuke lightly on his arm, but it's hesitant. "Go on, then."

Sasuke doesn't spend much time getting ready. His dog tags are a warm and familiar weight around his neck. The Lieutenant armband, though, feels new and heavy.

Hiashi told him that he'd debrief all the COs of his mission on his first day back at work, so Sasuke is prepared. He'd received a message the night before from a genin messenger telling him where to show up and when—the East Tower, 08:30 hours—so Sasuke heads there.

The Senju Room is a large space down the hall from Kakashi's offices. The ceiling is high and arched, and at the center of the space is a long, rectangular table. To one side of the room is a large white screen. At each of the seats by the table is a deep-blue folder, a glass of water, and a small plaque with names to indicate the seating arrangement. Set against the walls of the room are even more seats where several of Tsunade's aides and deputies have taken places. This is a space where serious men and women gather to conduct important business, Sasuke realizes. It's the first time he's ever stepped foot in this portion of the East Wing, so he takes a moment to appreciate the grandeur of the setting.
There are a few Captains and Lieutenants assembled already. Nara Shikaku is in his seat along with his Lieutenant, Sarutobi Asuma. Yamanaka Inoichi is to Shikaku's left, and next to him, his Lieutenant, Mitarashi Anko. Across from them, Hiashi has taken his seat. Neji is standing to his left, bending low so he can speak directly into Hiashi's ear. Neji spots Sasuke before Hiashi does, and he heads straight for him. "Welcome back."

Sasuke glances around all the empty seats in the room. "Are we expecting an audience?"

"A big one," Neji says, standing next to Sasuke to survey the room. "I've been filling in for you in these meetings these past eight weeks."

Sasuke glances sharply at Neji. He hasn't been aware that he was missing high-level meetings. "Have any decisions been made?"

Neji shakes his head. "No. Your report raised a lot of questions, though."

"Well, I'm here to answer any questions you might have," Sasuke offers with a sigh. He'd thought his report was detailed enough and that the COs would quickly come to a decision to send him back out into the field. But of course, he'll have to go through all the red tape first.

Sasuke is about to find his seat when Neji grabs his arm roughly and pulls him close enough to whisper, "You planning on telling me what actually happened in Amegakure?"

Sasuke is quick with an answer. "I submitted my report."

"I've read it," Neji snaps, impatient now. "It's utter shit, Uchiha."

Sasuke freezes for a moment. He'd stretched the truth of his last encounter with Madara, Pein and Itachi. How was he supposed to explain Rin’s miraculous rescue? The secret of Rin’s healing abilities—and Sasuke supposes, the healing abilities of all spirit animals—has never been recorded. Sasuke has searched through the literature, and he hasn’t found a single reference of spirit animals bringing back their masters from the dead. If that knowledge were to become widespread...

But that wasn’t all of it. How was Sasuke supposed to write about how his brother had told him, *I won’t be far behind. I promise. Rest.*

Neji isn’t wearing his mask, and his face cloth is bunched around his neck, so Sasuke sees Neji purse his lips into a thin line. His voice is still a whisper when he speaks. "I’ve worked with you long enough to be able to read between the lines of your field reports, Sasuke. I’m your Deputy. If you’re not going to trust me—"

“T’m not having this conversation,” Sasuke interrupts, trying to pull away from Neji.

Neji gives Sasuke a small shove. "I am. Maybe not now, but later. We will have this conversation, Uchiha."

Sasuke pushes roughly past Neji and takes the seat immediately to Hiashi's right. Hiashi raises an eyebrow at him. "Everything all right?"

"Peachy," Sasuke answers. He flips open the folder and makes a show of reading his own report so he doesn't have to face Hiashi's questioning gaze any longer. He doesn't have much time to himself, though, because Nara Shikaku clears his throat from across the table. "Lieutenant Uchiha. I wanted to congratulate you on your sparring session with Jiraiya. I didn't get a chance last week, unfortunately."
Sasuke looks up sharply from his reading. He deals with one Nara on a near daily basis; he knows well enough to tread carefully around the shadow benders. "Thank you."

"You've been training," Shikaku continues mildly.

Sasuke shrugs a shoulder, aiming for nonchalant. "Part of the job."

Hiashi huffs a laugh. "You've improved quite a bit since I saw you eight weeks ago. Even your chakra pathways have expanded."

"You gave me time off. I made the best use of it," Sasuke says, desperate for an end to this conversation. As if on cue, the door opens and KPD Captain Morino Ibiki arrives with his Lieutenant. Both Ibiki and Ino have their KPD badges around their necks, and they shimmer in the lights of the conference room.

There's a moment's bustle as Ibiki and Ino take their seats, saying hello to everyone that's already gathered. Sasuke is grateful that the attention is no longer on him and goes back to his report. He gets through another full page when Shikaku returns his attention to him.

"I actually felt your chakra from outside the Village every now and then, Lieutenant Uchiha," he says, picking up the conversation where he left it. The other Captains and Lieutenants turn their attention to Sasuke at this. "There were even reports of dragons by some civilian witnesses. Interestingly, sightings of the dragon were followed closely by changes in the local weather patterns."

Shikaku leaves his sentence hanging, looking to Sasuke for an explanation. Sasuke stares back at him. Kirin is still a newborn; he's not ready to discuss her with anyone yet. So Sasuke opts for the most neutral answer he can manage. "Katon jutsus sometimes do that."

Shikaku's expression doesn't change. "Is that so."

Sasuke tenses. Training with the ghosts hasn't been a walk in the park, and while Sasuke had been aware of his improvements, he never thought it would be noticeable enough to raise suspicions. "Is there a point to this, Captain?"

Shikaku holds up both hands. "Learn to take a compliment, Lieutenant."

"Thank you," Sasuke says curtly, and goes back to the brief. The folder contains more than just his report. There are detailed accounts from each member of the team that went to Amegakure, including Kakashi. As an addendum, there is also a brief summary of the Village's encounter with Akatsuki's army.

He doesn’t have much time to read too carefully because Tsunade, Kakashi, and Jiraiya enter a few minutes later. The ghosts are with them. Everyone in the room gets to their feet. Kakashi acknowledges him with the briefest of glances, but nothing more. The Nidaime makes his way to Sasuke’s side immediately. "You're headlining this show, kid. Be ready."

That’s as much of a heads-up he gets because Tsunade is already sitting down and saying, “As you were. We’re just waiting on my legal aides."

Sasuke tenses at this. If there are lawyers involved, Naruto is most likely going to join them for this ordeal. “—will be discussing with Senior Council,” Tsunade is saying. “This is a last minute change to this debriefing session, but I assume that there aren’t any objections to adding a few lawyers to our mix today?”
There is silence. Sasuke has several objections, but they really don’t have anything to do with the topic at hand. And besides, Tsunade’s words sounded more like an order than an honest offer for open discussion. Sasuke is used to dealing with Tsunade alone, so it is unusual for him to see her at the head of a conference table, holding forth as Hokage. He will have to get used to this side of her as Lieutenant now, though. For today’s meeting, Tsunade has her hair up in a loose, messy bun for the occasion. She is wearing a pencil skirt and a coral blouse. She looks lovely and wields her mantle as if it were a second skin. And even though she is perched delicately on her chair, she seems immovable, a mountain of chakra and force.

“This should be relatively routine,” the Nidaime is coaching him in the background. “Stick to what we wrote in your report.”

Sasuke angles his head slightly to indicate that he is listening. The ghosts helped him construct his report, so he knows that it is the best it can be while still concealing what needs to stay secret. “Just make sure that you don’t rush through the parts where you—” The Nidaime places a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder, grips lightly. "Heads up, Tsunade’s talking to you."

“—Lieutenant?”

Sasuke blinks. “Yeah, what?”

Tsunade’s lips quirk up into a smile. She considers Sasuke for a moment, long enough that Sasuke starts to feel his neck flush. The blush spreads to his cheeks, and Sasuke hates that he has to leave his face cloth down for this meeting. “I was saying,” Tsunade says, words coming out slower than usual, “that it’s good to see you looking well. While we wait for my legal aide to get here, I wanted to welcome you back.”

The words are out of Sasuke’s mouth before he can think twice. He thought he had missed something important, but if it’s just this—“Okay.”

From across the table, Ino mutters under her breath, “Oh, my God.” Sasuke knows that she is Ibiki’s Lieutenant now, but it doesn’t stop him from glaring at her. To his right, Hiashi heaves a world-weary sigh and Sasuke feels his face get even hotter.

He doesn’t know the protocol for these kinds of things, so he turns to the Shodaime for direction. The man is standing right behind Tsunade at the head of the table, and even he looks amused. “You should say that it is good to be back.”

“Right.” Sasuke takes a breath and faces Tsunade again. She has two fingertips pressed into the corner of her lips, as if she’s trying to stop her smile from getting any wider. “It’s—uh—”

"It is good to be back," the Shodaime repeats, patient like he always is with Sasuke's lack of social graces. "Go on. No need to be embarrassed."

"It's good to be back," Sasuke grinds out stiffly.

“Hokage-sama,” the Yondaime prompts. He’s standing right over Jiraiya’s shoulder, looking exasperated. “You have to address her as ma’am or—”

“Hokage-sama,” Sasuke adds, feeling more awkward than usual with everyone in the room staring at him. Then, just to be sure: “Ma’am.”

Tsunade actually laughs at this, and Sasuke swears he feels his ears turn red with embarrassment. He isn’t sure if he’s supposed to say anything else, but thankfully, the door opens with a soft knock. Sasuke twists in his chair to look over his shoulder at the interruption, and spots Shizune. She is
leading Tenten, who is wearing the billowing black robes lawyers wear when in court, with her hair pulled up neatly in a high ponytail. Tenten looks windswept, as if she’s been rushing. Behind her, is a civilian man with glasses, also wearing black robes, and a second civilian carrying a small stand of some kind. Then—

Naruto.

He’s dressed warmly in the robes of a Counselor, and is carrying a stack of files under one arm. There’s a pink flush to his skin, and his hair has been cropped short. It makes his cheekbones seem even sharper than usual.

Five maybe six pounds, Sasuke calculates. That's how much weight Naruto has lost since he last saw him a year ago. On Naruto's compact frame, it's enough to make his collarbone stick out sharply.

Naruto has been growing up, moving up and moving on. He was meant for greater things because it's in his blood and because Kakashi taught him his potential. The child with unruly, bright clothes and loud voice has been replaced by a measured professional on his way to bigger things and larger responsibilities.

Sasuke has never missed the old Naruto more than now, because when their eyes make contact, there is only polite recognition there, only a hint of a smile. Sasuke feels his heart thunder in his ribcage, making his palms sweat. It had been easy to ignore Naruto while training with the ghosts, but now—

Now, Naruto moves along the edge of the room. Tenten finds a seat next to Neji and Hinata. Naruto sits with them. The civilian with the stand sets up in a corner of the room, and Sasuke understands her function: a stenographer. He doesn’t pay too much attention to her because Naruto is now sitting directly across the room from him, and Sasuke can see all the details of his face just over Ino’s shoulder.

For those eight months in the darkness, Sasuke had imagined and re-imagined the blue of Naruto’s eyes and the exact bow of his lips obsessively. He dreamed of sunshine, clean air, and Naruto, the three things repeating on an infinite loop in his mind. The memory of Naruto is nothing compared to the reality of him, though, because Naruto catches his eyes again, and Sasuke’s breath catches. It’s only for a moment. In the next instance, Naruto's gaze slides past him and fixes instead on Shikaku, who is talking.

Sasuke exhaled. Uncurls his fingers.

There is a cool touch on his shoulder. “Focus, kid,” the Nidaime counsels.

Sarutobi moves towards Sasuke as well. “Be prepared, Sasuke. Shikaku and Inoichi will be leading the questions I believe.”

Inoichi is Shikaku's Lieutenant and the acting CO of Special Jounin forces. Shikaku is Captain of Jounin. It makes sense that they will be taking the lead here, but Sasuke is still grateful for the heads up.

He counts to ten, so he's ready when Shikaku says politely, “If it’s all right with you Hokage-sama, I’d like the Lieutenant to walk us all through the events of the time he was missing.”

Tsunade waves a hand, granting permission, so Shikaku turns his bright gaze towards Sasuke. “Let’s start at the beginning, Lieutenant, if you don’t mind.”

Sasuke starts at the beginning.
There's a difference between talking to people and reporting to your CO. Sasuke isn't very good at the former, but he's proficient at the latter. He speaks in measured tones, making sure not to rush, allowing just enough details but not too many. He doesn't feel uncomfortable as he usually does when he’s in a room with too many people, doesn’t have to grasp for words, and doesn't care that all eyes are on him. This is easy, because this is what he is: a soldier. His forefathers were all soldiers, and Sasuke belongs to a Clan that values a man’s merit as a warrior above all else. He knows how to do this.

It takes just ten minutes for Shikaku to interrupt. “Just to be clear,” the man says, leaning forward. “You killed Uchiha Madara once.”

“Yes, sir,” Sasuke answers. “He was not breathing, and there were signs of cyanosis.”

Inoichi clears his throat. "Wouldn’t it be more plausible that he had an antidote to your snake’s venom?"

They’re not being difficult, Sasuke knows. They’re just doing their jobs. “Plausible, but impossible. As I described in my report, the snake that attacked Uchiha Madara was a black mamba, and he injects approximately 40 to 50 milliliters of venom with each bite. It takes only 10 milliliters to kill a human being, and death occurs within a minute or two. There's no way to guard against a mamba’s bite before being bitten. Anti-venom therapy must be delivered post-envenomation, and Pein didn't deliver any antidote. He performed seals, and if I understand correctly—” Sasuke glances towards Tsunade. “There’s no seal to neutralize poisons.”

Tsunade nods. “I’ve never heard of any. Shizune, you?”

“No, ma’am,” Shizune answers from her seat. “At the very least, you would need a blood-binding scroll to slow the progress of the venom through the system.”

Tsunade heaves a breath. “But then again, who knows how the body of a man that old works. The fact that he's alive in the first place is cause for concern enough.”

“He died,” Sasuke stresses. “But then he came back. I couldn’t verify the seals Pein performed to revive him.”

“Because at that time, Uchiha Itachi attacked you.”

“Yes, sir.” Sasuke resists the urge to move the muscles in his body. He wants to cover the space over his chest where Itachi had pushed the kunai in, just to remind himself of the intent that his brother (Kin-butcher, Sasuke reminds himself) still carries towards him. It hadn’t been enough to kill him, though, and towards the end, he’d said, Rest. I won’t be far behind and I'm here.

Ibiki steps in at this time. “But Uchiha Itachi failed to kill you.”

It still stings to hear his brother talked about like this, but Sasuke has learned over the years how to keep a straight face whenever his name comes up. He doesn’t think about what the people in this room must be thinking: Fratricide.

“Yes, sir. Madara ordered Pein down, so that I may bleed out. They also wanted to pursue Hatake Kakashi, whose chakra signature was clearly identified at that time. He was a higher priority target for them than I was.”

Shikaku leans back in his chair at this, considering. He is at ease despite the formality of this occasion, the same assurance in his posture that Shikamaru inherited. It's a consequence of their intelligence, Sasuke knows, because men like Shikaku and Shikamaru know their advantage in any
given room. If Sasuke learned anything from Kakashi, it's this: a smart man is a greater threat than a strong one.

Inoichi shakes his head. “You were right there for the picking, Lieutenant. You’re telling me that they were distracted by the Commander? Who was several miles away at that time?”

Sasuke's Mangekyou whorls to life. “Excuse me?” His words are pitched evenly, but the temperature in the room climbs a few degrees.

Jiraiya leans back in his chair, lips quirked up into a half-smile. “Watch it, Inoichi. You're treading on dangerous ground here.”

Sasuke doesn't look away from Inoichi, unable to let go of the earlier insult. “If the most dangerous man in the entire Continent breaches your stronghold, that’s not called a distraction. That’s called a clusterfuck.” It's hard to keep the anger out of his voice. He pauses a beat. "Captain."

Inoichi's lip quirks up in a half-smile. "You must excuse my...poor phrasing."

Sasuke wants to pummel that smug smile off Inoichi's face for having so publicly insulted Kakashi the way he had. On cue, the Shodaime says, "Watch your temper."

So Sasuke wrestles his chakra back under control and waves his hand in a slight gesture of dismissal. "Your poor phrasing," Sasuke bites out, "is excused."

"No harm done, Lieutenant. Let it rest," Tsunade says with a chuckle. She ushers the conversation firmly back to the topic at hand. “It makes sense, I think. Madara must've thought Kakashi brought an army with him."

Kakashi angles his head slightly, gives Sasuke a long, heavy look. “I did.”

They take a short ten-minute break for coffee, which Sasuke spends in the single-stall bathroom at the end of the hallway. It’s either that or stay behind to stare at Naruto like an idiot, so Sasuke shuts himself inside and sits on the closed toilet lid, glad to be outside the heavy air in the conference room.

If Sasuke has to put up with another Lieutenant or Deputy approach him and say, "It's good to have you back," he will set something on fire.

The ghosts are crowded into the bathroom with him, though, so it’s not like he has any actual peace of mind. The space is small enough that the windows are frosting over with their presence, and Sasuke’s breath is visible.

“Don’t rush through this second part. There’s more lies than truth in that report of yours, especially about your second confrontation with Madara, so you have to be careful,” the Nidaime cautions.

The Yondaime gives his own hurried input. “That’s your tell. You start talking faster and skipping over details. Maintain your pace and if you get caught in a lie, just repeat what you’ve already written in your report.”

“But whatever you do,” Sarutobi adds, "don’t use the same phrasing or wording as in your report. It’s too much of a giveaway.”

Sasuke is too cold to speak, so he just nods. The Shodaime steps closer to Sasuke. “Remember, boy, it is imperative you protect the secret of your escape and survival. We have only just started to recover from a war with the spirit animals. The Tailed Demons might seem like a distant memory to you, but the accord humans have with animal spirits is still delicate. There are too many people in
that room, and word cannot spread that animal spirits can bring back humans from death. Am I clear?"

Sasuke has instinctively known to protect Rin’s secret, but it’s only after talking to the Shodaime that Sasuke understood the greater implications of what she’s done. So now he nods and says, “Got it.”

When he exits the bathroom, it’s to find Kakashi waiting for him. The man is slouched against the opposite wall, looking thoughtful. “Finish powdering your nose?”

Sasuke gestures at the bathroom door behind him. “All yours if you need it.”

When he starts walking back towards the conference room, Kakashi falls neatly into the space next to him. “You don’t have to leave every room that Naruto walks into, Sasuke.”

The comment had been mild, but Sasuke still freezes mid-stride. “I wasn’t—” Kakashi looks entirely unimpressed, so Sasuke switches gears. “There’s nothing to talk about, Hatake. Drop it.”

Kakashi takes a deep breath, and then another. “Has Sakura talked to you yet?”


Kakashi only sighs louder. “I’m going to let her deal with your emotional immaturity. I don’t get paid enough to mentor you, Uchiha.” The man taps the side of his head, as if he just remembered something. “Oh, that’s right. I don’t get paid at all to deal with your shit.”

Sarutobi nods in agreement, a serious expression on his face. “Sakura is far more qualified to handle issues such as these. She has always been a sensitive, intelligent young woman.”

“Worst case scenario,” the Nidaime adds, unhelpful as always, “she can just beat the crap out of him.”

Kakashi starts walking back towards the conference room. Sasuke is not going to let Kakashi (or the ghosts) have the last word on that, though, so he catches up with Kakashi and says, “Sakura says you’re emotionally stunted too, you know.”

Kakashi’s stride falters. “She does?”

“Pot, kettle,” Sasuke says, triumphant, and opens the door to the conference room with a flourish.

Kakashi enters, but doesn’t get too far inside. Instead, he turns back around to face Sasuke. “She says I’m—”

“Pot,” Sasuke interrupts, and gestures at Kakashi, making a sweeping arc to indicate Kakashi from head to toe. He points to himself. “Kettle.”

Kakashi’s eyes narrow. “I’m at least better than you.”

“No,” the Yondaime says immediately. “You’re really not, Kakashi.”

Sasuke remembers Sakura and Naruto saying, on several occasions, that Kakashi was as bad—if not worse—than Sasuke in terms of emotional constipation. Sasuke relays this information to Kakashi. “They did not say that,” Kakashi insists, looking annoyed now.

Sasuke only raises an eyebrow. “Sakura said you were worse than a baby. At least babies cry when they’re upset. You just have one-night stands.”
Kakashi rolls his eyes and heads to the side table where someone has graciously set up coffee, tea, and bagels. Most people have already taken their seats, but there are still a few minutes left in the break and there is a low murmur of conversation. Naruto is hunched over Tsunade’s shoulder, pointing to a thick leaf of papers on the desk. Tenten is right by his side, speaking animatedly. (Sasuke makes sure—makes absolutely sure—that he doesn’t stare at the slope of Naruto’s neck, the lines of his shoulders.)

“I’ve been terribly misunderstood by my own students,” Kakashi says solemnly, and hands Sasuke a cup of coffee. It’s black with a teaspoon of sugar, exactly as Sasuke takes it. As usual, Kakashi doesn’t get himself anything to eat or drink. “I deal with my man-pain in a very adult way, you know.”

“No, you don’t,” Sasuke insists, following Kakashi back to his seat. It's next to Jiraiya, who is already in his seat, turned to Shikaku next to him as they both bent over maps of Amegakure put together by Sasuke and the rest of the team that went on the mission. Inoichi is clustered close to them, head bent over his own copy of the maps. Sasuke ignores all of them because he's not going to let Kakashi have the last word on this. His score against the jounin is still abysmally low: 93-14.

Kakashi leans against the back of his chair. “Yes, I do, Uchiha. I eat my pain. I occasionally drink it. It's all very grownup.”

Sasuke eyes Kakashi, unconvinced. “Yeah, Hatake, I can definitely see that you eat your pain. You’re fat as a fucking heifer.”

This startles a laugh from Kakashi, even as Inoichi glances up sharply from the map he’s studying. The Shodaime makes a noise at the back of his throat. “I still haven’t gotten used to the way he speaks to his sensei.”

Sasuke doesn’t pay attention to Inoichi or the Shodaime because Kakashi’s one visible eye is crinkled in a smile. “Right, I forgot,” Sasuke mutters, and sketches a jaunty salute to Kakashi. “With all due respect, sir, and out of concern for your health, your girth resembles that of a bovine.”

Kakashi starts to laugh again at this, deep chuckles that he tries to hide by tilting his face down towards his chest. "Sakura doesn't know what she's talking about," Kakashi insists, laughing still.

“False, Commander. You are the proverbial pot to my proverbial kettle,” Sasuke deadpans.

Kakashi just laughs harder, this time holding on to the chair for support. Sasuke grins as well because it feels as though it's been years since he’s enjoyed a moment like this with Kakashi. He misses the long walks back to Konoohagakure after Team 7 completed a mission, back when Kakashi was still Kakashi and not the Commander of the Joint Forces and had all the time in the world to shoot the shit with Sasuke.

“Go away,” Kakashi says finally, once he’s got his breath. It takes less than two seconds for him to return to his role as Commander. On cue, people look away from Kakashi and return to their conversations. Still, there's a smile in his voice when Kakashi issues a dismissal over his shoulder, “Lieutenant.”

“Sir,” Sasuke says, crisp, and steps away.

He’s settling into his own seat when Hiashi leans over to say, voice pitched low, “It's good to hear him laugh again, Uchiha.”

Sasuke tries not to think about that, but it’s difficult not to. It’s still too close to the surface, the
memories of Kakashi slumped against a tree, of Pakkun saying, *He wants to see you before he goes.*

Shikaku is even better at spotting Sasuke’s bullshit than Kakashi is, which is more of a surprise than it should be. Heck, Sasuke thinks, *Neji* was able to figure out that his report was full of half-truths and outright lies towards the end.

“Let me get this straight,” Shikaku says, leaning forward on his elbows. “You doubled back, created a false trail towards Konohagakure, had a second encounter with Madara, Pein, and Itachi, and then...escaped.”

“Yes, sir.”

Shikaku doesn't flinch a muscle. “You escaped.”

“Yes, sir.”

Shikaku gestures at the map that is being projected onto the wall for this occasion. “Walk me through it.”

This is the second time Sasuke will have gone through this sequence of events. He gathers his thoughts and begins again. “Pein attacked me alone, and the others didn't intervene. He was holding onto a kunai that he had inserted between my ribs here—” He places his hand over his chest-plate, approximating where the scar tissue rises in ugly ripples. “I executed an ungrounded lightning jutsu, and since metal is a conductor, he was exposed to the full effects of the attack. My goal was to stop his heart—”

“And yours, too,” Naruto says quietly, and Sasuke’s narration comes to a dead halt. Naruto looks momentarily surprised by the words he’d said, but he recovers quickly. Ino is the only one in the room to twist in her chair to give Naruto a long, pointed look. The others seem fine with moving along, as if there had been no interruption at all.

Sasuke, though, is staring, matching his breaths with the rise and fall of Naruto’s chest. This is the first time Naruto has spoken to him in almost a year. Sakura had asked him eight weeks ago, *How many times are you going to break his heart?* And Sasuke didn't have an answer ready for her. *Maybe,* she said, *that's why he didn't come to see you himself.*

Rule one: Protect your teammates.

If Naruto is trying to protect himself from Sasuke, then Sasuke will have his back. Naruto is his teammate, and those are the rules. Sasuke can understand why he has placed a distance between them. Shinobi have short shelf lives, but Sasuke goes above and beyond that.

He still remembers being an Academy student, sitting in the quiet of his apartment and contemplating the sharp edge of a kunai between the third and fourth ribs on the left side of his chest. That is where his heart is, he knew from Iruka-sensei's latest lecture on anatomy. A quick, strong push inwards would end it all. He's not sure what made him put the kunai down and walk away, can't remember if it was his hatred for his brother or just the animal impulse to keep living.

Or maybe it was his faith, the belief that he would never want to enter the Great Hall in that way.

But Sasuke’s goal has never been to survive killing his own brother. *Fratricide* is the name for it. He'd named it aloud once for the ghosts, and they'd gone still in the face of the ugly reality of Sasuke's obligations.
Each year Sasuke lives has added weight to his failure, but each year is a year that Sasuke has had Naruto—always, always Naruto. Even in the very depths of the earth, breathing in mud and suffocating on the stench of his own filth, Sasuke has had the memory of Naruto to keep him floating.

He speaks, though he doesn’t mean to. “There wasn't any other way.” Even to his own ears, he sounds as if he's swallowed sand. Naruto still doesn't look at him, so Sasuke says his name (he hasn't said his name in so, so long now, hasn't trusted himself to). "Naruto."

And at this, Naruto closes his eyes and turns his face away completely. He's holding himself so carefully still, so utterly precise, that Sasuke feels his gut churn. There's no going back to what they were before because there is no joy, no future, absolutely nothing worthwhile in what they have. They are broken in a way they hadn't been even after Sasuke pushed a hand through Naruto's chest and left for Otogakure. They'd been able to recover from that somehow because that was the persistence of Naruto's compassion.

Now, though, Naruto looks exhausted. He looks old, brittle, damaged in a way that Sasuke has never seen him before.

_I did that_, Sasuke thinks, because this isn't the first time he's broken Naruto's heart. He's done it before. He's done it again, and again, and again, reckless with Naruto's love as he is with everything else.

*Rule one: Protect your teammates.*

Ino is the one who steps in, not letting even a single extraneous moment of silence pass. Her eyes have a hard edge as she speaks, and Sasuke feels the full force of her friendship and loyalty to Naruto in each word she says. “As you were saying, Lieutenant Uchiha. You executed the lightning jutsu in order to stop Pein’s heart. And then, if I understand correctly from your earlier statements, Madara saved Pein from your attack using an earth jutsu.”

“Yes,” Sasuke says. There was anger in her voice, but still, he's grateful that he can focus on her while he answers. He’s not sure he’d be comfortable facing anyone else after what just happened. “The earth jutsu gave me cover, and while Madara and Itachi attended to Pein, I performed a transportation jutsu and escaped. The transportation jutsu is one that doesn't leave any trace of chakra and allows for the user to cover relatively long distances, so I was able to find my way to safety in the Land of Rice Fields. I traveled to the Land of Water to stay ahead of Akatsuki and took refuge with some of my old contacts in Land of Water. After recovering in Land of Water, I returned to the Land of Rice Fields in search of Uchiha Itachi. I tracked him to Kitahiroshima and—”

Shikaku clears his throat to interrupt Sasuke. “Just a minute, Lieutenant.”

On cue, the Nidaime says under his breath, “Here comes the shit storm.”

Inoichi speaks in the ensuing silence. “I have intelligence that puts you in the Land of Water eight months after your alleged death. Between your alleged death in Amegakure and your return in the Land of Water, there are absolutely no reports of your presence in the Land of Rice Fields or anywhere else for that matter. One minute you're gone, and the next—you're knocking on some poor woman's door in the middle of a snow storm, naked as the day you were born and covered head to toe in mud. Or so the story goes.”

Sasuke keeps his face straight. “With all due respect, sir, I doubt you have accurate sources of intelligence across the entire Continent.”
“Oh, you’re absolutely right,” Inoichi agrees, leaning forward. “But the thing is, the minute you reappeared, people knew of your return. Turns out you're quite famous in the North after your exploits in Otogakure."

Sasuke has to take two full breaths before he can answer in an even tone. He knows what Inoichi is implying and however benign his words, there had been an insult there. Sasuke won't hide, though. He's too goddamn tired to care. "I lived in the north for five years, most of which I spent fighting in the tribal wars. I was Orochimaru's best fighter, and later, I became a Captain of a force of eighty northern riders. We were well known in the north," he says. He doesn't have to list his crimes. They all know what he did for Orochimaru. Murderer, that's another name he's attached to himself. Coward, traitor, murderer, thief. "I had a reputation."

"Quite the reputation," Inoichi says flatly. "The woman in the Land of Water you met. Her name..." Inoichi makes a show of looking through the reports.

Sasuke fills in the blank for him. "Mrs. Shimizu Tsubasa. She's from a village called—"

"Chubu, yes," Inoichi interrupts neatly. "She knew you the minute she laid eyes on you. And so did every villager in the Land of Rice Fields. It was your eyes that gave you away. That and your tattoos."

Shikaku leans forward in his chair. "Speaking of which, Lieutenant. Would you mind showing us your tattoos? I've gotten rather curious over the months since hearing about their...distinct quality."

Sasuke feels a hand on his shoulder. "Breathe," the Nidaime says quietly.

Sasuke counts to ten. This is nothing but a ploy to make him angry and trip up. Shikaku and Inoichi are trying to push him past his limit with these small humiliations. Sasuke will not yield. So he counts to ten a second time, and then a third. Shikaku holds his gaze steady the entire time. Finally, Sasuke moves to remove the armor strapped to his forearm. It falls onto the table with a heavy thud. Sasuke removes his glove to show his right hand. The runes are stark against his skin.

Shikaku leans forward to inspect the ink. "What do they mean?"

Sasuke has a feeling that Shikaku knows exactly what they mean. "Fire-born," Sasuke says, tracing the twisting character close to his elbow. "War-forged." He points to the second character, trailing down the middle of his forearm. "Death-blessed," he finishes, tapping his finger at his pulse point where the last character ends.

"And there's a python on the side of your neck curling around a sword" Inoichi adds. "Is that accurate? May we see it?"

Sasuke tugs the face cloth bunched around his neck aside to show them the tip of the tattoo there.

"This is for your animal spirit, yes?" Shikaku asks. "Her name is...Ryoko?"

Sasuke grips the edge of the table. He hates sharing this with them. It feels as if he's revealing his insides, laying them out on the table for them to gawk at. "Rin," he corrects. "Her name is Rin." And she's beautiful, you sons of bitches, you don't even know what a gift she is—

Inoichi leans back in his chair. "And a dragon on your back. I've heard it's quite elaborate."

Kakashi steps in at this point. He sounds mild, but there's a dangerous undertone to his voice. "Where is this going, Captain?"
Inoichi has an explanation ready. “Just curious, sir. The Lieutenant here has so many rumors swirling around him, I only wanted to confirm which were true and which weren’t.”

Shikaku steps in before Kakashi can react to that, and he does this so smoothly, Sasuke is unprepared for what he says. “So, Uchiha. Is there any part of your report that you’d like to reconsider?”

It’s the most polite way to call someone a liar, but the meaning doesn't go unnoticed in the room. The silence that settles is stifling. The Shodaime takes a breath. “Hold your ground.”

“No, sir.” There was no better explanation that he could offer, so this is the lie he decided on. He will stick to his story.

Shikaku is quiet for a second. No one in the room moves to step in because what Shikaku is implying is a heavy accusation. "Your brother," Shikaku says. "Tell me about him."

Sasuke's mouth is dry but he doesn't dare reach for the water in front of him. "Your brother. Itachi. Uchiha Itachi, aged twenty-three, is a former—"

"I have his rap sheet," Shikaku interrupts curtly. "I'm asking you to tell me about him. As a person."

"He's..." Sasuke trails off, trying to find the right words. All he can think about is how at the very end, Itachi hadn't mocked him or reminded Sasuke about their dead and fallen. He'd said, I won't be far behind. I promise. He told Sasuke, I'm here. If there isn't honesty in what a man says to his brother in his final moments, then what is there?

Sasuke feels his lungs burn with the lack of oxygen. He grips his hands into fists to keep his fingers from shaking. This is shameful, the shit-show that his family has become. It's been his grief for as long as he can remember, but here he is now in a roomful of strangers talking about his brother as though he’s some sort of—

"Rest, Sasuke, that’s what he’d said. I won't be far behind. I promise."

"Lieutenant," Shikaku says sharply. "I asked you a question. I expect an answer."

Sasuke doesn't know how to answer Shikaku's question, so he tries his best. "He's a nerd. He's a real stickler for the rules. He was, I mean." Sasuke breaks off, not because he can't find the right words, but because so many are pushing against his chest. No one, not even Naruto, has ever asked him this question. Now that someone has finally asked—

"He read a lot of books. History, especially. He liked biographies, but not of famous people. He'd read up on weird people, like Taoist philosophers and things like that. He went through school really fast so he didn't get a chance to make a lot of friends, but he had Shisui. They were always together. And he had a really bad temper, but he was always—" Kind, he wants to say. Kind in his own way. Kind to a fault. But he realizes he's been rambling, lost in his own memories. He's said enough.

“He’s my brother.”

Not a single muscle in Shikaku’s face shifts. “Yes. Exactly my point.”

Sarutobi is standing right behind Shikaku, so he's the one that Sasuke looks to immediately. The ghost looks concerned, but he doesn’t have a chance to offer any guidance. “Here’s what I think,” Shikaku continues. “I think you created a fake trail to the Land of Fire, I think Madara and his men followed it, and I think they met up with you—"

“And you think, once a traitor, always a traitor,” Sasuke provides. He’s been down this road before.
He can already see where it leads. He rubs a hand over his face, trying to dispel the exhaustion he feels.

“Hatake Kakashi might be a legend,” Shikaku insists, “but you want us to believe that Uchiha Itachi put a kunai between your ribs and somehow missed your heart. You want us to believe that Uchiha Madara then let you walk away. I think it’s more likely they made you an offer, you considered it, and when you met up with them a second time—”

“This line of questioning is insulting,” Hiashi interrupts, his voice a low snarl, but Shikaku doesn’t take his eyes off Sasuke’s face.

Shikaku rests his forearms on the table and leans even forward even more. “Where were you those eight months, Lieutenant? Amegakure?”

Against his better judgment, Sasuke breaks his gaze with Shikaku and stares at his hands on the table. He is too tired to fight this battle again. Somewhere in the back of Sasuke's mind, that doubt—the same doubt he had when he first returned to Konoha after he killed Orochimaru, the same doubt he's had all the years before that—shifts into conviction: he should have died when he had the chance. There are only so many humiliations a man can take.

There’s no defense for this because Sasuke knows—he knows without looking at anyone in the room—that the seed has been planted. They doubt Sasuke now, because an old, ugly wound has reopened and it is filling up this room with its festering stink.

Still, he can’t be completely silent, because he can feel the weight of Kakashi’s heavy gaze on him and Sarutobi pleads, “Sasuke, you have to say something.”

So Sasuke takes a deep breath. It takes a moment for him to look up and meet Shikaku’s gaze. Best get it over with. He promises himself. Say what needs to be said, and then leave. “No, sir. I wasn’t in Amegakure those eight months.”

Shikaku raises an eyebrow. "Then where were you?"

Sasuke opens his hands, feeling helpless all of a sudden. "I wasn't in Amegakure," he repeats.

Shikaku shakes his head firmly. "You have to understand why I can't believe that."

Sasuke exhales. He remembers mud under his nails, the stench of his own filth clogging his nostrils. He remembers Itachi pressing a sword into his hand, telling him, Rest. He should have. He should have gone his way. He is so long overdue now. He sees it clearly. He should have pressed that kunai into his chest all those years ago; he doesn't understand why he woke up and went to school the next day. "I understand."

Shikaku is relentless. "So, where were you? I'd really like to know, Lieutenant. I'm curious, you see, because you say one thing and yet the evidence—"

"Enough," Kakashi says. He presses a hand flat against the tabletop and meets Shikaku's gaze. "Enough."

The silence that follows is heavy. Sasuke is expecting Shikaku to back down now that Kakashi has finally stepped in, but the man doesn't budge. "You should recuse yourself from this meeting, Commander."

Kakashi goes still with shock. "Don't do this, Shikaku." It isn't a threat, though. There's no anger behind his words. It makes Sasuke sick to his stomach to hear Kakashi pleading like this. "Don't do
"You should recuse yourself, Kakashi," Shikaku repeats. He turns his sharp gaze to Tsunade. "Ma'am?"

Tsunade's expression is utterly blank. Sasuke realizes then that Shikaku and Inoichi had caught everyone in the room by surprise with their line of questioning, even the Hokage. "There were other ways to do this, Captain," she says after a moment. Her voice is barely a murmur, but it carries in the room.

"It's either here, an interrogation room, or a court room, ma'am," Shikaku responds neatly. "I thought this would be the best option."

Kakashi doesn't take his eyes away from Shikaku. "You thought wrong. I should've been informed of—"

"I can either dismiss you, Commander," Tsunade interrupts softly, "or you can refrain from interfering any further."

And now, finally, Kakashi meets Sasuke's gaze. Sasuke tastes bile in the back of his throat. He swallows. *Leave*, he thinks as loudly as he can, because he doesn't want Kakashi to witness this. Doesn't want him to know the extent of his shame. *Leave."

"I won't interfere," Kakashi concedes. Sasuke feels another wave of nausea course through him. *Leave, leave, leave, leave*—"But I'd like it on record that—"

"Leave." Sasuke's voice is barely a whisper but Kakashi stops short anyways. He looks as though he's carved out of marble—too brittle to withstand even the slightest pressure now—but Sasuke doesn't want to imagine Kakashi's expression if he were to find out the whole truth of it. Shikaku wants to know where he was those eight months, so Sasuke will tell him. But he doesn't want Kakashi to hear. *Eight months*, he'd been in that hole. For eight months he held on when he should have just let go.

And then he'd crawled out.

Sasuke understands that his reputation is in tatters and that there's nothing he can ever do to salvage it. He betrayed his country once. A stain like that doesn't fade, no matter how many Medals of Honor he has in his closet. But Kakashi.

Only the week before, the Yondaime had told Sasuke that he'd made Kakashi proud. Now—

"You're dismissed, Commander," Tsunade offers, because it's the kindest thing she can do in this moment.

Kakashi hauls himself to his feet. Sasuke keeps his eyes trained on the table in front of him while Kakashi leaves.

He doesn't look up again until the door clicks shut. Shikaku is watching him, unwavering in his suspicions. "Where were you those eight months, Uchiha?"

The Nidaime places a heavy hand on Sasuke's shoulder, but he doesn't say anything. Sasuke can't look over his shoulder at the Nidaime, so he looks at the Shodaime instead. It's the only man he can look at. The Shodaime looks him squarely in the eyes, jaw clenched hard enough that Sasuke can see a muscle in his neck go taut with the pressure. Sasuke swallows on the bitter taste in his mouth.
"Tell me," the Shodaime says after a moment. "Pretend you are telling me, not them."

Sasuke counts for ten breaths. "I wasn't in Amegakure."

The Shodaime nods encouragingly. "Tell me as much of the truth as you can."

"I was in the Land of Water for those eight months," Sasuke continues. "I couldn't move because of my injuries. That's why no one saw me or recognized me. Because I couldn't move for those eight months. I was too weak. I couldn't even move out of my own—"

He stops talking because the Shodaime's expression freezes in shock when he comprehends the full extent of what Sasuke is saying. *Coward*, Naruto had called him once, and that's the truth of it. He'd been too cowardly to end it when he should have.

Someone, somewhere in the room, makes a hurt, strangled sound. Sasuke thinks it might be Naruto. Thankfully, though, Naruto doesn't say anything. That's the thing about Naruto: for all that he talks, he's always known when to let the silences rest, when to yield the space so Sasuke can choke out the words clamoring in his chest.

Still, Sasuke doesn't look at Naruto or anyone else in the room. He keeps his gaze fixed on the Shodaime because it's so much easier to speak to him than to anyone else. Sasuke lets out a dry chuckle, trying to find a polite way to reveal the truth of the matter. "Mrs. Shimizu was being kind when she told people about the condition I was in, although I'm not sure why. She and her daughters...they had to tie rags around their faces when they cleaned me up because the smell—"

Sasuke stops again. It is so shameful having to admit this. Everyone here must see it now too: he should have died when he had the chance. In Amegakure, in Otogakure, in his quiet apartment all those years ago. He can't remember why he bothered to wake up this morning, what the purpose was.

But he has to say this, for Kakashi's sake, because the jounin had asked Shikaku—pleaded with him—*Don't do this.* He shouldn't have had to ask in the first place.

"I did not betray my duties," Sasuke promises and keeps his gaze fixed on the Shodaime as he speaks. "I did not make a deal with Madara or Pein. I was able to transport out of there, because before finishing me off, my brother wanted to make sure I had my sword in my hand. My family believes in the old religion. I need to die with a sword in my hand for my soul to get into the Great Hall, and I need to get to the Great Hall because that is where my clan is waiting for—"

Sasuke stops again. He can't even find the energy to finish his explanation. When did he get so tired? "My brother didn't finish me off because he thought I was already—he gave me my sword and told me—" Sasuke trails off. He wants to hoard this for himself. It's one of the most precious memories he has of his brother, but it can't seem as though he's withholding information. It'll only cast more doubt on him, and Kakashi by extension. Shikaku needs to understand why Itachi spared him.

So Sasuke keeps looking at the Shodaime. "He told me to rest and that he'd see me soon. He told me. he wouldn't be far behind," Sasuke admits and feels his throat burn with the memory. "He was kind to me. Because—"

*Because—*

"He's my brother," Sasuke repeats, not knowing what else to say. "He's my big brother."

The words come out in fits and starts. He doesn't bother censoring himself or trying to sound coherent. He just wants to leave this room. "It gave me some time to work with. I transported out
with Rin's help." Sasuke rubs a hand over his neck, covering the tattoo there. *I refuse,* she'd said, fierce and unyielding even in those final moments. And then, months later, she told him, *Climb.*

And he had. Like a *fool,* he had.

"I was injured, so Rin—"

"Enough," the Shodaime interrupts. His voice is thick with emotion. "Enough. You cannot tell them anymore."

Sasuke gets to his feet, not bothering for a dismissal. He doesn't make eye contact with anyone in the room anymore and focuses instead on pulling his arm glove back on. He ties his armor securely, and then dares to straighten to his full height. He keeps his eyes trained on the Shodaime still. "I didn't report what happened between my brother and me because he's my family," Sasuke explains. It hurts like a fresh wound for him to admit it aloud. Itachi is his family, all he has left. And this is what that bond has been reduced to.

Sasuke pushes through. "And I couldn't write down what I did for those eight months because I didn't want on record—" *No, that's not it either.* The truth of it is: "I didn't want Kakashi to know what I'd done to survive after I failed my mission." But it's too late now. Surely, he'll find out. "That's why I lied. I didn't want Kakashi to know that I hadn't done the honorable thing and—"

Sasuke takes a breath. "What I'd done to get back—I didn't want him to know."

The Shodaime's shoulders move up and down with a deep breath. "All right."

Sasuke exhales. He has been truthful until now, so it's easy to admit to one more thing to the Shodaime: "I'm exhausted." He takes another shaky breath. He's been waking up with this feeling for so long now. It's nice just to admit it aloud. "I'm really tired."

Sasuke leaves without saying a word.

It takes four beers and three bottles of hard sake for his exhaustion to morph into anger, and that's when Sasuke summons Rin.

He summons her a little over fifteen miles from the Village, in the middle of the redwoods. She arrives promptly, but goes still at the lack of any enemy. There's a curious tilt to her head as she considers her surroundings, catching rain on the golden tip of her nose. "You are upset," she hisses. Then, realizing, "You are upset with *me?*"

Sasuke lets his chakra dance on his fingertips. "Get out of my head," he orders, because he will not have this conversation with Rin’s thoughts intertwined with his own. Still, she doesn't retreat from Sasuke’s mind, so he tries again, this time in human tongue. “Get the fuck out of my head.”
The tug and pull on Sasuke’s consciousness drops suddenly. Rin draws herself up to her full height, a dangerous golden against a field of green. When she speaks, it’s in human tongue. Her voice is like gravel churning. “You blame me for the humiliations you suffered in that meeting with the Shadow-Bender.”

She’d lingered long enough in Sasuke’s mind to find out all she needed to know. Sasuke isn’t the type of man who would attack his own animal spirits, but for a moment, he feels a burn in his stomach, a need to hurt her. His chakra leaks out of his pores, evaporating the rain as it makes contact with his skin and turning the hard earth under his feet into mud. “You wouldn’t let me die in peace, you wouldn’t—”

“Most people would say thank you, had they been as lucky.”

Sasuke feels hysterical laughter bubble up his throat. “Lucky? You think I was lucky? Eight months. I was down in that hell hole for eight months—”

“I can smell the stench of your liquor all the way from here,” Rin snarls. Her chakra expands into the space around her, and the trees surrounding the clearing wither and crumble under her influence. This is her venom: her chakra. It poisons the earth, the very air that Sasuke breathes. Sasuke takes in lungfuls of air, sucks it in like a man drowning and feels the rattle of his lungs. “I will not stand for this insult.”

Sasuke takes a step towards her, and then another. His head is ringing with his anger. He can’t hear anything but the roar of his own blood in his ears and he raises his voice to be heard over the sound. The ground trembles with his chakra. Vaguely, he senses Kakashi’s chakra somewhere nearby, but it is dimmed, as if there is a muffler around him. He doesn't care, not when his insides feel as though they’re burning.

“And what do I have to stand? They call me a traitor, they ask me if I harvested bodies for my eyes, they beat me down, again and again and again, when all I wanted to do is—”

“All you ever want is to die, you coward!”

"Coward?" Sasuke feels his anger crystallize into a single point. He will stand for Naruto calling him a coward, he will stand for Shikaku and everyone else in that room to call him that. But Rin—“How dare you? How dare you—”

“What is the difference?” Rin demands, and with her anger, her human tongue sounds even more guttural than it normally does. She's over two centuries old, but her human tongue is still unnatural to hear. “What is the difference between slitting your wrists and seeking death as you do?”

“It’s my choice—”

“No, it is not.”

“It’s my life!” Sasuke screams. “I decide when it ends!”

Rin shakes her head, her entire body vibrating with her anger now. The earth beneath them is slowly turning black, the rain evaporating in a fine mist away under the brunt of both their chakras. “You are more, you are greater than what Kin-Butcher would make of you—”

“What my brother makes of me? What my brother makes of me?” Sasuke wants to kick and punch something, but all he can do is scream his frustration. "My life is what I make it."
Rin's voice is like thunder. "You will make nothing of it! You only wish to die. All you have ever wanted is to die. That is no life. That is no way to live—"

"There is no life for me to live," Sasuke interrupts, yelling over her words. "You won't let me die. Every fucking time, you won't let me die. You have to let me die, Rin. You have to—"

“I will not!”

Sasuke fists his hand so hard he feels his knuckles strain from the pressure. “You will obey me.”

“I am not yours to command.” Between one breath and the next, Rin transforms into something larger. She hasn't changed her physical form, but her chakra fizzes off her body in large, sweeping golden arcs, creating an outline of her true manifestation.

She means to intimidate him with this display of chakra, so Sasuke returns the gesture. He feels his chakra pulse loose and feels the earth beneath under his feet.

“You are a warrior, it is in your blood,” Rin snarls, and somehow, her voice still carries over the wind and Sasuke’s voice. “But you can become a greater warrior still—"

“That's your ambition,” Sasuke interrupts. “Your ambition, not mine.”

“Your ambition is an early grave,” Rin snarls, and Sasuke hears the groan of dead redwoods falling somewhere in the forest. She is ruining this earth. “I will not accept that.”

Sasuke clenches his fist hard enough that he feels the muscles in his shoulder strain. “There is no honor in this life. An early grave is all I have. It's my only saving grace, and you took it from me. I want to die with a sword in my hands, I want to die with dignity—"

Rin laughs, and for the first time since he's met her, she sounds spiteful. “You talk about honor and dignity, as if you know what they mean, as if you are born with it. You earn those things, boy.”

“How?” Sasuke holds out his hands, pleading. He sounds like a child, but he's beyond caring because this is Rin and she has seen him at his worst. “Tell me how. All I make are mistakes. Every choice I’ve made, every decision that I take is a mistake. I try to correct them, but I'm so tired, Rin. I'm so fucking tired all the time. I'm exhausted. I don't know why I keep waking up in the mornings, anymore. I don't know why I keep eating, I don't know why I keep breathing—"

Rin silences him with a loud snarl. “My ancestors were here at the dawn of time, when this earth was made. Your ancestors swore their allegiance to dragons because the dragons deemed them worthy. That is your inheritance, those are your allegiances. You earn your honor and your dignity by following in their footsteps, by being better still than they ever were. You know this, already. Stop acting like a child.”

Sasuke’s throat is raw from screaming. There isn't any anger left in him now that he's burned through it all. “My inheritance is just a slab of dragon stone in a hut and an acre of land on the Naka River. I burned my kin there. All of them, one after another, twenty-three of them, starting with my mother and my sister—"

"The dead are dead," Rin says. "You cannot shackle yourself to these bodies. They are in the realm of the dead. You are in the realm of the living. You breathe, you move on, you move past them, you move forward—"

"Her name was Tomomi,” Sasuke interrupts, daring to say it aloud for the first time in more than a decade. He doesn't know how to get past this.
Uncle Yakumi had suggested it at dinner one night and Fugaku's eyes turned bright with pleasure. It is one of the last times Sasuke remembers his father smiling. He can still remember the way Fugaku had repeated the name once, twice, and then a third time. *Uchiha Tomomi,* he'd said, and turned to Itachi, Sasuke, and Shisui. *Well? What do you think?*

*Tomi-Momi-Tom-Tomi,* Shisui had said with a laugh, already pulling her into a song. Sasuke picked up the jingle immediately, and for once, Fugaku didn't disapprove of Sasuke's antics. He'd only smiled.

Itachi had rolled his eyes and muttered, *She'll never hear the end of it.*

Sasuke feels a sob claw out of his chest at the memory. It sounds as if he's a dying animal choking out its final breaths.

"I know her name," Rin says. Her words aren't as cutting anymore. She's trying to soothe him. "We have no secrets between us."

Her kindness is repulsive. He takes a step back from her. "You think you know me, but you don't. You only know your ambition and your pride—"

*I know the marrow of you,* Rin snarls, her voice echoing in the forests. *I know the atoms of you.*

There's no way to counter her hubris. So Sasuke holds out his hands. "You can’t keep bringing me back every time. You have to let me die—"

"I will not," Rin roars. "You are worth more than just an early death. I know you. I know your worth."

"There's nothing in me worth saving," Sasuke says, his voice raw with the truth of it. "Just let me die. Please, just let me—"

"I have remade you in clay and soil with my chakra not once, but twice," Rin interrupts. "You feel humiliated about those eight months, but that is the price you pay. You may think it a curse now, but it isn’t. There will be a day when you will stand on a battlefield, and men will know your name. They will know you—"

Sasuke’s chakra uncoils in his belly at the memory of Shikaku’s gaze, and Rin falters in her words. "They’ll know me as a traitor, and a liar," Sasuke corrects. "A man who can’t even perform his duties as a son and avenge his father’s death. They’ll know that I’m a miserable animal that spent eight months in his own filth rather than yield to an honorable death—"

*I will know you,* Rin roars, regaining her anger once more. "They will know you for what you are, and you will remind this world of legends that have been lost. You will do this in spite of yourself. You will do this, not because I delayed your death, but because that is your destiny. You are meant for greater things than what you think you deserve."

Sasuke wants to say something to that, but he can’t. Each breath scrapes raw against his throat. His fingers are shaking from the chakra depletion. He notices now the damage he’s done to the ground, the thunder in the sky and the rain falling around them.

When Sasuke says nothing, Rin offers, “But if you seek your death, I will give it to you now." She arches her neck high, ready to strike. “Is that not why you called me? To die?”

Sasuke gasps his relief. He bows his head and sobs his gratitude. “Yes.”
Rin’s chakra pulses, and Sasuke staggers against the onslaught. Drained of his own chakra as he is, he can’t defend himself against her chakra anymore. He feels the cancerous effects of her presence seeping into his skin. He will wither and die like the trees around him already have.

Rin scoffs. “On your knees, then.”

Sasuke looks up at this. He wipes at the snot dripping down his nose and licks the salt of his tears from his lips. “What?”

“If you want to die,” Rin explains, “Then get on your knees.”

Sasuke meets her gaze. “I'll die on my feet.” Rin is unmoving so Sasuke says, louder now, “I won't die on my knees, Rin.” He draws his sword—he'd brought it here for this very purpose—and grips the hilt. "I'll die on my feet. With my sword in my hands.”

Rin lets loose another pulse of chakra, and the force is strong enough that Sasuke staggers back. Rin slithers forward, a few paces, conquering the ground that Sasuke has yielded. His skin feels dry, and when he looks down at his hands, he realizes that his veins under his skin are turning black. He's dying already. “This is how men die, Master,” Rin says loudly. There's a taunt in her voice. "They die on their knees. So kneel.”

Sasuke spreads his feet further apart to brace himself against the scorched earth. The air around him is sweltering hot despite the rain that’s falling. Each breath burns its way down his lungs. “No.”

She moves forward, and Sasuke feels the weight of her chakra pressing against him. "Kneel.”

He has been looking for his death for so long now, he's forgotten what it feels like to resist, to stand his ground. He'd been yielding to Itachi, to Orochimaru, to his own guilt all these years. Inch by fucking inch, he has retreated until all he had left was the belief that death would come soon enough, and with it, relief.

Now, though, Rin is forcing him to yield even that. “No.”

“Kneel.”

Sasuke feels the thrum of Tsunade’s distinctive chakra at his back, but all he can focus on is the arcs of Rin’s chakra, expanding and contracting with each of her breaths. A few hours ago, he would have been willing to take his death however it came to him. But now he feels something hardening in his belly, settling deep, so deep that even the memories of those eight months and of Itachi standing over his mother’s carcass are not enough to touch it.

"If you wish to die, kneel.”

He lets that feeling sink within him, lets it take root. He has to gasp a few more painful breaths of the scorching air around him, but then, he draws on that feeling. When his chakra pulses, it is weak against Rin and not nearly a counterbalance to her overwhelming force. Still, it's enough. “No.”

"Kneel,” Rin commands again.

This time, Sasuke takes a deep, deep breath. "No," He stabs his sword down into the scorched earth. The earth is so ruined that the blade makes a grating noise as he buries it. He lets go of the hilt of his sword, uncurls his fingers and takes a breath, squares his shoulders and looks Rin square in the eyes. No, he thinks to himself and spreads his feet further apart to find his center of gravity. He will not yield. Not this. He lifts his gaze to meet hers. "No.”
Rin’s eyes slit. Sasuke knows her smile when he sees it. “Do you want to know my name for you? What my sons and I call you?”

Sasuke takes a breath. There's blood in the back of his throat, metallic and tangy, but he ignores it. They call Kakashi Dog-Master and Tsunade the Time-Witch. They call Nara Shikaku Shadow-Bender. Naruto is Fox-Child and Sakura is Plum-Wine.

Itachi is Kin-Butcher.

All these years, and they've never told Sasuke what they call him. “What do you call me?”

Rin angles her head, challenging Sasuke still. “Do you not know who you are?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know my name for you,” Rin says. Her conviction is absolute.

And Sasuke realizes, between one breath and the next, that he has always known what his snakes call him. He's yielded that knowledge somewhere along the way, but it's his now, and he will defend what is his. He is who he has always been, even if he's forgotten along the way: “Uchiha Sasuke.”

“Uchiha Sasuke,” she agrees, switching back to snake tongue, joyful now. When she slithers close, Sasuke reaches out his hand. Rin bends her head to meet him halfway. The crown of her head is smooth against Sasuke’s palm. When their skins make contact, the chakra in the air drops away suddenly.

Sasuke breathes clear air.

He falls.

Kakashi is waiting by his side when Sasuke opens his eyes. He's in a large hospital room, tucked carefully into a comfortable bed. The sun is shining outside, but the curtains have been pulled close so all Sasuke can see is a sliver of the blue sky outside.

Kakashi is sitting stone still in the chair by Sasuke's bedside. He's holding onto Sasuke's sword but there is none of his usual ease and grace around the weapon. He looks even more tired than Sasuke feels. "How's your Mangekyou?"

Sasuke lets his Sharingan flare to life. There's the familiar tingle of chakra. Nothing out of the ordinary. When Sasuke answers, his voice comes out as a whisper. He'd screamed his vocal cords hoarse. "It's fine."

Kakashi leans forward in his chair. He places Sasuke's sword on the bed next to Sasuke, just a few inches from Sasuke's reach. "I held onto it for you while you slept," he says, a little unnecessarily.

Sasuke isn't sure what to say or how to act, so he curls his fingers around the hilt. Kakashi stares at a spot on the bed where Sasuke is holding onto his sword hilt. He doesn't speak for a few moments. "I shouldn't have asked you if you'd harvested Madara's body for your Mangekyou."

Sasuke has been trying to forget that moment for some time now. He doesn't know how to speak about it, so he keeps silent. It's odd for Kakashi to bring it up now, but he always has a way of changing topics abruptly. Kakashi watches Sasuke's face carefully for a moment. "I was worried you'd made the same mistake I did."
Sasuke loosens his grip on his sword. His palm feels sweaty and cramped from being so still for so long. "Uncle Obito gave you his Mangekyou. It was a gift."

"It was a gift I harvested from his dead body," Kakashi corrects. "I could've refused. I should have refused. I was worried that you'd made the same mistake."

Sasuke looks away, trying to escape Kakashi's frank gaze on him. Usually, the jounin is a closed book. His one visible eye is just a blank canvas. Today, though, he looks stripped bare. Sasuke doesn't want to look at Kakashi when he's like this, so he doesn't.

"I worry," Kakashi continues quietly, "that I won't be able to stop you from making the mistakes I've made."

The fact that Kakashi even worries about things like this is beyond Sasuke's comprehension. Kakashi is Kakashi, nothing less.

It takes a while for Sasuke to find the right words. "They're not your mistakes for me to make. They're mine."

Kakashi angles his head at that as if considering the merit of Sasuke's argument. "My father," Kakashi says after a moment. "He killed himself."

Kakashi doesn't react to the shock on Sasuke's face. "After he failed that mission in the Five Year War, he couldn't live with the shame. He was depressed for a long time, and then one day, he killed himself." Kakashi stops his narration as abruptly as he began it. He looks brittle, as if a wrong breeze could break him. Sasuke keeps his eyes trained on Kakashi's face. He will give Kakashi this respect—he will listen and he will honor the memory of Kakashi's father, no matter how painful it might be for Kakashi to share it and for Sasuke to hear it.

It's a moment before Kakashi speaks again. "He was always tired. Like you, always tired. He never wanted to get out of bed in the mornings. I had to wake him up everyday because he was always late everywhere..." Kakashi trails off with a quiet huff of laughter. "And I told you to run laps around the Village."

Sasuke frowns. "That wasn't—"

"It was," Kakashi insists. "It is." He braces himself against his knees, shoulders hunching lightly. "You kept telling me. All those times you said you were overdue, that your time was up. You always said when you died, not if..." Kakashi waves a hand, trying to encompass all the small moments that have passed between them. "You kept telling me. I never listened."

Sasuke presses his hands flat against the bed. "I'm fine."

"You're alive," Kakashi agrees.

Sasuke flushes. He's not stupid enough to make the same mistake twice. "I'm not going to—"

"No, you're not," Kakashi says sternly. He gets to his feet, and now, finally, his expression is back to normal again. There's a familiar slouch to his shoulders. "Rule fifty-eight, kid, heads up," he says. "Suicide isn't an option. It never is."

Sasuke rolls his eyes. "I don't need a fucking rule for that."

"Rule fifty-eight," Kakashi repeats, and Sasuke realizes only then what this is. This is Kakashi trying to teach him the only way he knows how: laying out the rules explicitly, giving him marching orders,
the way he used to on their walks back from missions. This is Kakashi feeling helpless, remembering the memory of his father and seeing the same in Sasuke.

"Fine," Sasuke says after a moment. He will give Kakashi this peace of mind. It's the least he can do. There's no telling if Kakashi believes him or not, but for once, Sasuke isn't lying. So Sasuke tries again, "Rule fifty-eight, Hatake. I got it."

Kakashi nods. He holds Sasuke's gaze steady for a moment longer. He leaves without saying anything else. A silence settles in the room in his wake, but Sasuke finds no peace of mind in the solitude—he can't stop thinking about the careful way Kakashi had held himself when he admitted, *My father killed himself.*

Sasuke doesn't need a rule fifty-eight; he needs just the memory of Kakashi's grief at his father's death. He will not put Kakashi through that kind of pain twice in one lifetime. It's the least Sasuke can do for the man who gave him his Mangekyou.

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The fallout of Sasuke's encounter with Rin is relatively benign, all things considered:

Everyone pretends it never happened. Sasuke is expected back at work the very day he steps out of the hospital.

Tsunade herself gives him the orders, Jiraiya standing immediately behind her. They've always operated as a unit, and in the instances Sasuke sees them together like this, he's reminded of Naruto and Sakura and their unshakeable faith in each other.

Sasuke spent a full week in bed to regain his energy. But before he could go home, Tsunade had summoned him to her offices. Aside from the nurses bustling in and out, Sasuke didn't have any visitors except some of his snakes: Daichi, Kanaye, Hideyoshi, Fudo, and even Yuuta. Rin doesn't visit, but she sends a message through Ishi: *No more.*

It will take a while for Rin's anger to cool, so Sasuke doesn't summon her. He doesn't need to—he knows exactly what her message means. *No more*—no more seeking his own death, no more looking over his shoulder at all the dead bodies in his wake. So Sasuke responds with a message of his own: *No more.*

The ghosts don't show up either. Neither do Kakashi, Sakura, or even Naruto. Jiraiya and Tsunade are the first people he's interacted with in days.

Tsunade tells him about the damage he and Rin caused. It apparently took seven jounin to erect a barrier strong enough to withstand the dual force of his and Rin's chakra. Sasuke hadn't even felt the seven men and women circling around him when he was speaking with Rin; Rin's chakra had been too powerful for him to register anyone else.

It took another cohort of men and women—Naruto and Sakura included—to defend the Village against any lingering effects with a second chakra barrier. Still, there were seven cases of mild radiation poisoning. All but two of those patients have been discharged with a clean bill of health; the remaining two are likely to make a full recovery. The redwood trees surrounding the impact center are dead. It's a crater-sized wasteland; hazmat monitored the area for a few days, and then deemed it safe. A few reporters caught wind of something amiss, but Hinata is very good at her job. It's as if nothing ever happened.

Tsunade also tells Sasuke that once Kakashi found out what happened in the room, he insisted on putting a tail on Sasuke. His instincts proved right, as it turns out. Tsunade and Kakashi arrived on
scene themselves, getting as close as twenty feet to monitor the situation.

In other words: they eavesdropped. Sasuke had been too drunk to notice, and Rin too angry to care.

Tsunade is ramrod straight in her chair across from him while she talks. "The details you revealed in the debriefing session have been classified at the highest level. All records have been expunged. Whatever you said in that room will go no further than the men and women present." She pauses a beat, giving Sasuke enough time to respond. Sasuke has nothing to say because while the damage has been done, something has shifted and Sasuke finds that he no longer cares enough to wallow in his own shame. You move on, Rin told him. You move forward.

Eight months in that mud and filth, and it took half an hour for Mrs. Shimizu and her daughters to scrub him clean.

Forward, Sasuke tells himself.

When Sasuke doesn't say anything, Tsunade continues talking. "The details of your conversation with Rin are known only to Jiraiya, Kakashi, and myself."

Sasuke wishes the Shodaime were here for guidance. Rin had spoken freely to him in that clearance. It wouldn't be too difficult to connect the dots. "And what is it that you know?"

Tsunade is silent for a long while. She considers Sasuke carefully, and in those moments, Sasuke is left breathless at the resemblance—he sees the Shodaime in the stern line of her brows, the unyielding set of her shoulders, and the quiet way she holds herself while in thought. "I don't need to tell you that what Rin did for you—"

"What, exactly," Sasuke interrupts, "do you think she did for me?"

Tsunade tiptoes around the question. "Whatever she did, she cannot do again. And whatever you do, you cannot reveal this again to anyone. You take this to your grave."

Sasuke watches her carefully. She knows. "You have an oath with animal spirits, don't you? Slugs."

A small furrow appears between Tsunade's eyebrows. It's a small shift in expression, and it quickly disappears. "I do."

Sasuke looks at Jiraiya. "And you have your toads." He considers the both of them carefully. "Did you ask your animal spirits? About what Rin did for me?" Jiraiya shifts his weight slightly from his left foot to his right. "What did they say?"

Jiraiya is the one who answers. "They told us that it was an abomination."

Sasuke knows that Rin has broken several laws by bringing him back from the dead. Not once, but twice now. She shifted the scales of the natural world in Sasuke's favor. His soul was on its way, but Rin had stubbornly refused to let go. She filled in the parts of his spirit that had decayed and suffused it with something of her own. This is the measure of her pigheadedness, a token of her love and loyalty for him.

Now, he hears her thoughts and can speak her tongue. He sees dead men. What she did isn't an abomination—what she created is. "You mean I am an abomination," he corrects.

Jiraiya doesn't disagree. "You're not human."

"No," Sasuke agrees, and watches Jiraiya go completely still at the admission. It's the first time
Sasuke has admitted it aloud and it's exhilarating. He has one step in the spirit realm and another in the human. It wouldn't take much for him to step into the other realm entirely.

Jiraiya's next question is more tentative. "Those eight months. Where were you?"

He was at the bottom of a crack in the earth. He was where volcanoes press stone into lava and where tectonic plates collide. He was in the space in between—oceans above and below...

Something. Some other thing, some other place. A force, a pull, a tug at Sasuke's insides. He was where no human should ever be, and he can feel the taint of his soul.

He digs deep and finds that same kernel of resistance he uncovered when Rin told him, *Kneel.*

This is Rin's gift to him, this third birth.

You are more, she said, and Sasuke feels an old heat in his stomach, that surge in his blood.

*Forward.*

"Where were you?" Jiraiya asks again.

Sasuke bares his teeth in a grin. "Hell."

He heads for the Hokage gravesite for lack of anything better to do. The ghosts are there, sitting in a loose circle by the Shodaike's grave. The Yondaime is the first to spot Sasuke walking up, and he gets to his feet to welcome him. "Uchiha. Good to see you up and about."

Sasuke doesn't need to ask. He knows immediately from the Yondaime's careful expression that the ghosts have found out everything that happened with Rin. Sasuke takes a seat on the Shodaike's gravesite, making sure to keep a respectful distance between himself and the Shodaime.

It's chilly, but the sun's shining bright enough to warm him. The Shodaime places a hand on his shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Sasuke answers, and shrugs the Shodaime's hand away. The Shodaime immediately moves back, so Sasuke amends his earlier annoyance. "Your hand was cold, that's all."

Some of the tension in the Shodaime's shoulder eases. "Good."

Sasuke rolls his eyes heavenward. Apparently, they know *everything* that happened. "You don't have to treat me like I'm made of fucking glass, you know. I was just in a bad mood."

The Yondaime's eyebrows shoot up. "You call what happened being in a bad mood?"

Sasuke scowls. "I had an off day."

"You were drunk," the Shodaime says sternly. "You had just been held up in a roomful of your superior officers on your first day as Lieutenant and accused of being a traitor, despite the sacrifices you've made for this country. You were forced to reveal details about yourself and your life that you held close. You felt that you had no one to turn to, so you left the village walls and talked to the only being who could understand what you went through. You were angry, sad, lost, and tired."

Sasuke doesn't let the silence that follows last for long. "Way to make things awkward, Shodaime."

The Shodaime presses his lips into a thin line. "You will not make light of this. You will not push it
aside with your usual nonchalance and facetiousness. I will not allow for it." He pauses a beat. "You were suicidal. You have been for a while. I failed you in not recognizing it sooner."

"We all failed you," Sarutobi says, bowing his head. "Me, most of all."

The silence that follows is absolute. "You didn't have an off day, Uchiha," the Yondaime says softly. "You had an off decade."

Sasuke flushes under their combined scrutiny. He gets to his feet angrily and the ghosts follow. "You're making a mountain out of a mole hill. It was just—"

"No, no, that was not just anything," the Nidaime interrupts. He steps into Sasuke's space and grips him by the shoulders, holding firm. "You were depressed, and you'd been feeling that way for a long, long time. You had to go nuclear with your snake and flatten an entire acre of the forest to get out of that slump. Don't bullshit us, kid."

Sasuke looks away, unable to hold the man's gaze. He stood in a room full of people and admitted the truth to the Shodaime. If he could do it then, he can do it now. "I don't think I feel that way anymore."

"That space you were in, mentally and emotionally? It wasn't a good space," the Nidaime explains. "And it'll take a while for you to get out of it completely. But you have to work for it, and you're going to have to do it for yourself. You can't come out of it for Kakashi, your brother, Naruto, Sakura, your men, or for anyone else. You have to want to get out of that space, and you have to want it for yourself. Does that make sense?"

Sasuke takes a deep breath. It's what Rin had been trying to tell him too, only her lesson had involved nearly killing Sasuke with her venom. "Yeah."

The Nidaime pats Sasuke's chest, approximately where his heart is. "Settle into your own skin, Sasuke. And when you feel settled, when you've got your feet planted on the ground, then—" Nidaime gestures in the direction of Konohagakure. "Then, everything else. You got that?"

Sasuke nods. "Yeah. I got it."

The Nidaime steps back with a broad smile. "Don't worry about it," he reassures. "We'll help you with this. You have us. We've got your back."

The Shodaime grips Sasuke's shoulder firmly. "Everything will be all right, son."

The words ought to sound empty and trite, but they don't because no one has ever said those words to Sasuke before. The Shodaime's expression softens into a smile, and he grips Sasuke's shoulder even more firmly. "Everything will be all right."

The Shodaime's conviction is so absolute, Sasuke can't help but agree. "Okay." He takes a deep breath, feels his ribs expand with the force of the air he sucks in, feels the weight on his shoulders ease just a little. "Okay."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter deals with depression and suicide. I hope I gave this topic the due respect it deserves. Please let me know if that isn't the case, and I'll do my very best to address it
in a more appropriate way.

Also. YOU GUYS. Check out M's incredible take on Jiro and Sasuke, and Srdid's rendering of Sasuke's tattoos. Also, thank you. I read each and every comment, email, and FF personal message. I can't begin to express how much it means to me when I read your reflections on this story. I also take your critiques to heart and try to improve on my work (One of you--you know who you are--called the Hokages "the dead granddad squad" in your comments. I am going to write that into the dialogue somewhere because it made me laugh so hard.)

This chapter was a massive undertaking. Hazel, as always, put in incredible editing to get this polished up. This entire story is impossible without her. As always, please let me know what you think!
Dr. Ueno Nobuyuki is a chuunin psychiatrist who lives in a gated community in the southeastern districts. He graduated from medical school with Tsunade, but unlike Tsunade, he has allowed himself to age. He has snow-white hair and wrinkles so deep in his face, Sasuke wonders for a moment if they are scars from a kunai. He is a chuunin, but he dresses like a civilian: slacks, button-down shirt, and a tasteful blazer.

He is also exceedingly wealthy—not the old warrior clan inheritances and prestige Sasuke grew up in, but new money, the kind with gardeners working on perfectly arranged flower beds around koi ponds, and high ceilings with vaulting, whetstone columns. Apparently, he came out of retirement as a personal favor to Tsunade. Sasuke is his only patient.

Predictably, Sasuke is late—the reason being he did not want to come. He'd prolonged his morning workout, dragged his feet while making breakfast, and whiled away another hour prodding at his eggs while considering Tsunade's hand-written orders on the kitchen counter:

*Dr. Ueno Nobuyuki. 1129 East River Parkway. 10:00. Six weeks of therapy, UN will set schedule. If he clears you, psych eval. If you pass, reinstatement. Until then LOA.*

*Leave of Absence, my ass,* Sasuke had thought at first. But he's here now, staring at Dr. Nobuyuki's moss-green eyes and trying very, very hard not to roll his own.

"—do not tolerate tardiness," Nobuyuki is saying in a calm, measured tone. He is the kind of man who pauses before his sentences and considers the words he is about to say. *First impressions,* Sasuke's mother once told him while trying to cajole Sasuke into a clean pair of jeans and t-shirt for his first day of school, *are lasting ones.*

So far, his first impression of Nobuyuki is that he's a horse's ass. No doubt, Nobuyuki thinks exactly the same thing of him because he's watching Sasuke with the same placid face that Kakashi does when Sasuke's unrelenting bullshit fails to impress him.

"I've had a chance to review your files. The entirety of them, thanks to Tsunade-sama’s willingness to provide me with clearance. Needless to say, this included previous psych evals," Nobuyuki says mildly.

Of course he did. "Titillating read, I'm sure." Sasuke glances towards the stack of folders on Nobuyuki's large, oak desk. It's the first thing Sasuke noticed when he walked in because even from across the room, he could see the red, block lettering stamped onto the worn manila folders: *CONFIDENTIAL.* But instead of the desk, Nobuyuki had ushered Sasuke towards a more informal seating area in the middle of the room. They are bracketed on both sides by bookshelves that rise the full height of the ceiling, but it doesn't feel claustrophobic. Instead, the books feel like mufflers, hushing their conversation under all the dusty weight of Nobuyuki's library.

"Titillating is one word for it," Nobuyuki mutters, not missing a beat. He tilts his head, considering Sasuke carefully. "I'm surprised Hokage-sama didn't refer you to me sooner."

A few months ago, Sasuke would have looked for and found an insult in that assessment. It would have been enough for him to storm out of the office in a fit of temper. But now, he knows better,
because there's a truth to what Nobuyuki is saying. Gods know how he didn't crack sooner. But he'd rather not admit that to a stranger. "I'm sure we can make up for lost time."

Nobuyuki is silent for a moment. "Before we begin, I would like to confirm your clearance level, as the details of it are murky and puzzling to me," he says—so carefully that there are long pauses in between his words.

It's an odd question. "I am—" Sasuke stops, realizing his mistake. "I was a Lieutenant of the ANBU forces. I had Level Six clearance. Now, I'm on leave of absence."

"Level Six," Nobuyuki repeats, eyes focused with such intent that Sasuke feels as if Nobuyuki is having an entirely different conversation than the one Sasuke is. "As is customary for an ANBU Lieutenant."

Sasuke glances back towards the folders. "During peace time, yeah. The ANBU Captain has the authority to grant lieutenants to higher levels of clearance depending on the circumstance."

"Up to..." Nobuyuki prods.

Sasuke shrugs. "Level Eight? Nine if we're in defcon four. Ten if it's an imminent attack, maybe. It's situational." And besides, Sasuke wants to point out, he doesn't care. He doesn't even know what doors open with each level of clearance. Naruto is a Counselor and Senior Aide to the Hokage, and consequently has Level Eight clearance at all times. Sakura has Level Eight because by definition, she ranks as a Captain in the medical corps. Nobuyuki is still quiet, so Sasuke elaborates, "It's the CO's prerogative how high the clearance needs to be."

Nobuyuki leans forward. "And what was the highest level your CO cleared you for?"

"Six," Sasuke repeats slowly. The conversation is going in circles. "Like I said."

"No higher," Nobuyuki mutters, leaning back now.

Sasuke tries to convey his impatience, but Nobuyuki seems lost in his own thoughts for a moment. "Why, do these sessions need clearance?"

Nobuyuki's eyes focus again. "Yes." Before Sasuke can ask a follow-up—why?—he says, "Now, let's begin."

Sasuke is halfway through his hour-long session with the Yondaime when his mind circles back to the conversation with his shrink and he stops mid-strike. The Yondaime approaches him from the sidelines. "You have better places to be, Uchiha?"

Sasuke tugs at the boxing tape on his hands. They're padded well for today because the Yondaime decided Sasuke needs to work on his strike-to-impact ratio and speed. The wooden block in front of him is only a few more hours from splintering entirely under Sasuke's unrelenting barrage. "Patient confidentiality means that what I tell my shrink is between me and him, right?"

The Yondaime's annoyance disappears entirely. "Of course," he answers. "You have rights as a patient, Uchiha."

Sasuke mulls this over, chewing on his lower lip. "So, Tsunade or Jiraiya can't read what happens in my sessions."

"No," the Yondaime insists fiercely. He places a hand on Sasuke's shoulder and squeezes tight. The
chill is immediate, but Sasuke doesn't pull away, even when his hands start to tingle from the contact. "Those sessions are for you. To help you. It's not for your COs."

"But if someone had the right clearance level and wanted to find out what I say in those sessions, they'd be able to, right?"

"No, you have a right to privacy, Sasuke. This is not like your physical evals for fieldwork. This is different. Regardless of clearance level, patient confidentiality is absolute in these situations." It's mid-afternoon, and at this time of day, the Yondaime looks translucent, his features almost too pale to make out in the overhead brilliance of the sun. The Yondaime shakes Sasuke's shoulder slightly for emphasis before finally letting go. He watches Sasuke for a moment. Then, carefully, he asks, "Why do you ask?"

Sasuke turns back to the wooden block. "Nothing. Nobuyuki was talking about clearance levels. That's all." He lines up his fist at the contact point again, a faded 2 that the Yondaime had ordered Sasuke to paint on the wood.

There are numbers clustered tightly on the wood—1 through 10—and Sasuke's job is to hit the exact target in the exact sequence that the Yondaime orders. They're not haphazardly drawn, so what Sasuke is learning in reality are common attack-defense movements in close-hand combat that the Nidaime wants him to learn well. It's basic taijutsu, but there is value in mastering the basics until they are muscle memory. The greatest weakness among higher-level warriors is that they focus too much on advanced ninjutsu over maintaining mastery of the fundamentals. The Nidaime, though, is not that kind of teacher. So the first four hours of Sasuke's training are always basics—repeated with such high frequency that Sasuke shaves off entire minutes from his mile time, and adds layers and layers of muscle to buttress his ever-expanding chakra pathways.

It's not until Sasuke is pulling off the boxing tape twenty minutes later that the Yondaime brings up the topic again. "If you're worried about your confidentiality being violated—"

"I'm not," Sasuke interrupts, tugging off the layers of tape roughly. The tape has congealed almost entirely into one indecipherable mass around his knuckles under the repeated force of his training. "What Nobuyuki said was just odd, that's all."

"What did he say, exactly?"

Sasuke pulls on a loose t-shirt and zips up his duffel bag. It's time for lunch, which means he gets a break back at the apartment. No doubt, the Nidaime already has a specific meal for the afternoon in mind. "He asked me what level clearance I've had before, and then I asked him if my sessions with him needed clearance, and he said yes."

The Yondaime frowns. "That's odd."


The Yondaime sets off towards the Village, deep in thought, and Sasuke falls into step beside him. It's a few yards before the Yondaime speaks again. "I mean, the only thing I can think of is Level Twelve."

Level Twelve clearance is applied to all things Uchiha related, but Sasuke's been assuming it has to do with more important things—Uncle Obito's death, or his Clan's massacre. Not something as asinine as Sasuke's therapy sessions. "That's stupid. What are they going to classify? The fact that I went to therapy? My psych evals?"
The Yondaime shrugs and steps over a tree branch. The ghosts can walk through walls and float midair when they're meditating, but still, they step over trees and duck past people when they're walking with Sasuke. They even wait for him to open doors for them sometimes. Sasuke has never commented on it, but one of these days, he wants to, if only to annoy the Yondaime. "It's probably a leftover protocol," he explains with a vague gesture in the air. "Sarutobi-sensei probably set it up with broad language, something along the lines of classifying all Uchiha-related events. People are probably just following his orders verbatim."

Ahead of them, the Village walls are bright and crisp against the blue sky. This close, Sasuke can't see the parapets, but he can sense the chakra signatures of the patrol. He angles his head towards a particularly bright chakra trace, tracking it going westward along the parapets on the wall. "I only ever got as high as Level Six clearance," he points out. "Nobuyuki seemed surprised."

The Yondaime hm-s under his breath and follows Sasuke's gaze towards the wall, no doubt taking note of the chakra signatures as well. "It's a bit odd, if you think about it," he says as they step out of the tree line. They don't continue onwards, though, because old habits die hard and Sasuke takes a moment to assess the defenses.

They're maintained by recent academy graduates, part of the never-ending D-level mission of maintaining Konohagakure's defenses: the sharp edges of the stake walls jutting out angrily from the ground to dissuade any enemies who want to scale its heights; the warding sigils etched in painstaking detail along the sides of the wall, invisible until they're too late; the maroon-red of Konoha's seal warning against any attackers, Here, behind, lies the full might of my armies. He points to a section of the palisades. Some of the stakes are lilting slightly. "Sloppy."

The Yondaime huffs a laugh. "It's always been sloppy. That's what happens when you ask twelve-year-olds to dig ditches and maintain a stake wall eight feet wide and twelve feet tall."

Sasuke continues to walk towards the walls. "I was never sloppy," he points out. Before the Yondaime can counter, he changes topics. "What's odd if you think about it?"

The Yondaime looks confused for a moment before he remembers his earlier train of thought. "I meant it's odd if you think about it since you're an Uchiha."

The chuunin guard opens the front door with a crisp salute. "Lieutenant." Apparently, the lower ranking soldiers haven't gotten the memo about his leave of absence yet.

At this time of day, there isn't a lot of activity at the walls, but Sasuke still waits a few feet before returning to his conversation with the ghost. "So?"

The Yondaime raises an eyebrow, looking amused. "You don't have clearance for something that concerns you and your family directly, Uchiha. I know you don't care much for village politics or protocol, but surely, that's an oversight worth correcting."

And now, finally, the full oddity of it sinks in. "Do you have Level Twelve clearance?"

The Yondaime laughs now, a full-throated sound that has him throwing his head back. "I died, Uchiha, or have you forgotten?"

Sasuke can't help the curl of his lips. The Yondaime, like Naruto, has an infectious joy—even about death, it seems. "Kind of hard to forget."

The Yondaime sighs, forlorn. "What's the use though? I can't even possess you or do anything they show in those horror movies." And just like that, the topic switches to one of the Yondaime's long,
rambling discussions about how—*exactly*, in great, excruciating detail—he would make Sasuke’s life truly horrible.

He doesn't think about the conversation with Nobuyuki or the Yondaime again until two nights later, when he's out for drinks with Unit 3. Shikamaru is complaining about his new assignment—a simple track and capture that has now morphed into something far more annoying because they can't find a box that contains evidence from a previous battle with the distinct kunai and shiruken their target uses. Apparently, some dipshit had mis-categorized some evidence with the wrong clearance level and now the box of evidence has disappeared into the cavernous hole that is the SCI Archives—

Sasuke snaps back to attention. They're gathered at their usual place, a grimy bar close to the training areas, so there's a lot of shinobi milling about, getting drunk and loud together. There's a strict no-weapons policy, but the tabletop is still gouged with deep marks from kunai and shuriken. "What?"

Shikamaru leans forward to repeat himself, louder this time. "What the fuck is the point of intelligence if it's not properly curated? What is the *point* if on the week before we go out into the field, you can't get your hands on even a fucking picture of a weapon to help ID your target?"

"My question is," Kiba says, tilting his head back to blow out a steady stream of cigarette smoke. "Do we even have enough intel to get this motherfucker or are we just cleanup for some inconvenient situation?"

"You questioning my orders, Inuzuka?" Neji asks, but there's no heat in his words.

Shino steps in before Kiba can answer. "I am. Ever since Sasuke came back from the Land of Water, we have made no progress. Everyone seems to be hiding under a rock and we are not bothering to look. What is it again? Strike once, strike hard—"

"Don't strike again," Shikamaru finishes, angrily stubbing out his cigarette on the tabletop. It’s one of the Nidaime’s most famous quotes, one that he was recorded saying to a room full of his commanding officers in support of going to war with a marauding group of bandits to the north. The retaliation should be so bloody, the Nidaime had argued, no other outlaw group would think to question the might of Konohagakure again. They teach that quote in textbooks on military strategy. "We let the fuckers slip through our fingers."

The fuckers being Akatsuki, but Sasuke's mind is still stuck on a minor detail. "So now what happens?"

Shikamaru glances at Sasuke. "About what?"

"The intel you need? The ones lost in the Archives."

"They go find it," Neji answers firmly.

Kiba groans and drops his head to the table. Tagami, the bartender, has recently refilled their orders to the brim, and Kiba's beer sloshes dangerously in its mug. Shino steadies it before it can topple over. "Fuck, man, I thought I'd outgrown this D-level shit a long time ago."

Sasuke traces the markings on the table with a finger. "What level was it misclassified as?"

"Nine," Kiba groans pathetically. His head lolls to the side so he can look at Sasuke. "Can you believe this shit? We gotta hunker down in the fucking basements."

The basements, Sasuke realizes, where all the higher-level intel is stored. It *is* odd, Sasuke realizes.
The Yondaime is right about that. Kakashi had snuck out that scroll about Uncle Obito's last mission for Sasuke. When Shizune found it, she had looked wary.

An oversight, the Yondaime had called it.

Sasuke turns to Neji and finds that both he and Shikamaru are watching him, alert now, their beer-induced sluggishness entirely gone. "Need a hand digging through the Archives?"

"No need," Shikamaru answers, voice pitched low now. He leans forward. "We'll be fine on our own."

Kiba straightens as well, and under their table, Akamaru stirs. The heat of his body is pressed up against Sasuke's shin, and Sasuke can feel the steady drum of the wolf-dog's heartbeat, the frisson of his chakra just under the skin.

Sasuke could do this by the book. He could request for Level Twelve clearance, but that could take weeks, months even with Sasuke's LOA status. Nobuyuki's questions have been bothering him for days now. And besides, it's not as if he's doing anything better with his time. He might as well take the time to look through the archives and see what he can find. Maybe he'll find something on Madara worth knowing. "A lot of archives to dig through, though," he offers, and looks Neji square in the eyes. "You sure you don't need a hand?"

Neji's milk-blue eyes are depthless in the dim lighting of the bar. Around them, the noise swells and ebbs, clouds of smoke dissipating lazily towards the ceiling. For a moment, Sasuke is expecting resistance. It is against every rule in the book to do what Sasuke is suggesting. A year ago, Neji would have pressed a kunai to Sasuke's throat for the mere suggestion.

Now, though, his eyes narrow only a fraction when he says, voice pitched low and casual—too casual—"Sure. The more the merrier."

It's not too difficult to sneak into Jounin HQ with Unit 3. The other members of Unit 3—Lee, Chouji, Tottori, Jiro, Ken—are surprised to see Sasuke and Neji at their early morning meeting at ANBU HQ. Shikamaru explains away their presence with an innocuous comment: "We're at a disadvantage, what with only eight men in our Unit."

Eight men, for Unit 3, is more than enough. Especially for a task that essentially boils down to paper pushing. Jiro twirls a kunai between his fingers, just a blur of metal arching through the air as he considers Sasuke. "Because we need ten full ANBU to dig through some records."

"A difficult task, going through all that paperwork," Neji says, and stares down Jiro some more. "Unless you object to the extra set of hands."

"No, my dear friends, it is such a joy to have our Unit whole again," Lee says, loud as always. "Let us go forth and conquer the bowels of Jounin HQ. Together!"

"Maybe not so enthusiastic, Lee," Kiba says, throwing an arm around Lee's shoulder. He shakes Lee lightly and pins him with his brown gaze. There is nothing humorous when he says, "No need to make public small favors amongst ourselves, don't you think?"

Lee gives Sasuke a sidelong glance. "None at all," he agrees.

Chouji shifts to get more comfortable, the movement making his chair groan. He's built like a ram, all muscle and heft, larger than Jugo even. "Thanks for the help, Sasuke."

Chouji shifts to get more comfortable, the movement making his chair groan. He's built like a ram, all muscle and heft, larger than Jugo even. "Thanks for the help, Sasuke."
Tottori elbows Sasuke in the ribs. "It's going to be a hoot, Sarge."

They set off together, their conversation mild and insubstantial. None of them say a word when Kiba casually hands Sasuke his face-mask—Sasuke's is too conspicuous, even if he's trying to blend into a ten-man Unit all in full ANBU uniform—and almost in unison, they pull up their face-cloths. A few of them tug on their masks, including Sasuke, but others leave them off. The monotony of their uniforms and the irregularity of their masks is enough to hide Sasuke among the group except for the most interested of observers. The closer they get to the Jounin HQ, the more packed their formation. Chouji takes the lead, blocking Sasuke from view of anyone too inquisitive. Jiro and Tottori flank him on the right, and Shino and Kiba on the left. Akamaru trails them while Neji leads the group, his Deputy Lieutenant armband bright against the dark colors of his uniform.

It's still early morning, so the bustle of people reporting to duty is enough cover for them to take the elevators down to the main floor and get across ANBU HQ.

The headquarters for ANBU and Jounin are two halves of a semi-circular building that stands behind the Hokage Tower. The full building takes up three blocks and is wide enough that ANBU HQ and Jounin HQ have separate entrances on different streets. To avoid attention, Neji leads them through the midsection connecting the two semicircles together, the main entrance of the Joint Task Forces building. The entrance is a wide, expansive lobby. At the center of the lobby is an imposing statue of the Nidaime—the founder of the Joint Forces, its first and greatest Commander, the most decorated CO in all of Konohagakure history. He has been etched out of whetstone black marble, polished to a shine. The artist sculpted the Nidaime in his full battle gear, with one hand resting lightly on one of his two swords strapped to the side. He is angled a little—it's his opening battle pose, Sasuke knows now, the calm, still consideration he gives his opponents—and at his feet are the banners of a fallen opponent.

To the Nidaime's left is the entrance to ANBU HQ. To the right is the entrance to the Jounin HQ. No one bothers to check their IDs as they exit the archway leading to ANBU HQ, but as they cross towards Jounin HQ, they see the usual ID checks in place. It's a single chunin at a desk, bright-eyed and alert even so early in the morning.

Neji leads the way, flashing his ANBU badge at the chunin and walking through without a hitch in his step. The others follow, falling into a loose single-file formation. Sasuke stays in the middle of the line, even as Akamaru falls into step next to him. It has the intended effect: just as Sasuke is pulling out his ANBU badge, Akamaru makes a chuffing noise, baring his teeth at the chunin guarding the checkpoint. The dog's bulk and weight alone are enough to draw attention, but with his hackles raised, he is dangerous enough to make the chunin reach for his kunai holster. Kiba steps in easily—reaching down to place a hand on Akamaru's fur and say, mild, "He's in a bad mood today, sorry"—drawing attention away as Sasuke slips past the archway and into the building.

Tottori, Jiro and Kiba strike up a mild, utterly bland conversation about paperwork as they wait by the elevator banks. Ten ANBU members standing quietly would draw too much attention, so the three pitch their conversation at the perfect volume and speed. No one looks at them twice when Neji jabs at the button for sub-basement 7 once they step into the elevator, even though it is clearly one of the most highly guarded floors in all of Joint Forces.

It takes four minutes for them to get down to SB7, and none of them speak too much until the last jounin gets off, leaving Unit 3 alone in the elevator. "They check IDs at the entrance," Neji says under his breath. "We do a bait and switch. Uchiha, don't pull out your ID. On my cue, Akamaru, Tottori, I'll need a diversion. Ken, Jiro, you are the switch. I'm the bait. Chouji, give Uchiha cover."

Chouji shifts closer to Sasuke. "Behind me," he prompts. Sasuke steps behind the bulk of his body
just as the doors ding open.

The guard at this level is a newly recruited jounin, and he is sitting at a table directly in front of a single door. Unit 3 files out in their formation, and Sasuke pushes his chakra down until it's barely noticeable. Neji is the first to step forward. "Hyuga Neji. This is Unit 3."

The jounin flips through the paperwork. "I have Unit 3 here. Not you, Deputy Lieutenant."

As if on cue, Neji tugs down his face-mask. The veins around his eyes are pulsing lightly. "Excuse me."

Sasuke can't help but grin. It reminds him of their very first mission together, how they had bluffed their way into a mission armed with nothing but Sasuke's bravado, Neji's quiet indignation, and Kiba's well-timed cajoling.

"I got eight Unit 3 members with the appropriate paperwork and clearance to step into the Archives," the jounin explains, not missing a beat. He eyes the group standing behind Neji. "You've got ten men here."

Neji puts his face-mask down on the table with a click. "I," he says very, very carefully, "need to go in—" he jabs a finger at the door, "there."

"Yeah, I can't let ten in—"

"Nine, then," Neji says, dismissively, and this is Sasuke's cue. "Jiro, stand back. I'll go in his stead."

"I don't have your paperwork—"

"I don't need paperwork," Neji snaps, impatient now, and slaps down his ANBU ID. He gestures for the others to do the same, and Sasuke watches as every single member of Unit 3 piles their IDs in a heap in front of the jounin, who is starting to look a little overwhelmed.

"Look you can't all—"

"Wait, wait," Jiro interrupts, stepping forward to dig through the heap. He makes a show of it, messing up the jounin's desk as he rifles through all the IDs. "Sorry, I'm the one not going in. Jiro is the name. You can cross me off the list."

It's like a perfectly scripted play, because Tottori steps in, loud and obnoxious as the situation warrants. "Aw, come on, they get to stand back, and what? I do all the scut work? How is that supposed to be fair—"

Jiro is already pressing the button for the elevator, grinning. "Your loss, man, that's what you get for eating through the budget for the C4—"

Tottori rises to the bait, just as Akamaru starts to impatiently paw at the door to the Archives. "I'm an explosives expert. As in, I explode things. With the aid of explosives, including but not limited to C4—"

The elevator door dings open, and the jounin guard—too focused on Akamaru chewing at the door knob leading to the Archives—misses both Jiro and Ken stepping neatly into the elevator. Ken ducks to the side, falling out of sight as the elevator door shuts close. The jounin turns just in time to see Jiro waving cheerfully goodbye.

"Nine," Neji says, rapping his knuckles on the table. "Jiro just left. The others are on your list."
Satisfied?"

The jounin looks down at the ANBU IDs strewn about and heaves a weary sigh. "Yeah, that's fine," he mutters, and gets to work checking off the IDs against his list. Neji keeps his eyes trained on the man and doesn't betray a single emotion.

The minute the door closes behind them with a heavy thud, they take off their face-masks and grin at each other. Akamaru barks loudly, tail whipping up a small breeze. Sasuke can't help his own answering smile. "Gentlemen. Not bad."

Lee runs a hand through his hair. "That was the first time I've ever broken a law," he whispers as Shikamaru leads them deeper into the room.

Shikamaru chuckles. "You get used to it, Lee. One of the perks of working with Uchiha is that you get used to disobeying orders and breaking laws real fast."

It takes them a full half-hour to get their bearings in SB7. The sub-basement floors stretch the full width of Jounin HQ. Almost a block in length and two blocks in width, the Archive room is periodically interrupted with large columns rising up to the high ceilings. There are no lights illuminating the room overhead. Instead, there are only smaller lights at the top of each bookshelf, casting down a modest arc of light on the contents below. Each book stack has a switch to turn on the light for its stacks, and a small ladder to reach the higher shelves, so it's a slow process lighting their way through the darkness and scanning each book staff.

They fan out to make their search easier, each walking in a different row of book stacks and searching for their evidence box. Distantly, they can hear the echo of someone else's conversation. The books muffle the noise, though, so aside from the chakra signatures, there is nothing to suggest that there is anyone else in the space. The darkness is so absolute that it feels as if the ground may simply cease to exist—only turning on the light for the book staff provides any form of guidance.

Sasuke lets his fingers trail the side of a book stack, searching for the switch to turn on the light to lead the way forward. He can hear the others moving ahead, but he can't find the damn switch no matter how much he gropes around. Neji had insisted they check in their utility packs to avoid any unnecessary searches, so he doesn't even have a flashlight to guide the way. The side of the book staff is completely bare, though, and the darkness stretches ahead of him. Sasuke lets his Mangekyou whorl to life and stares down the length of the row of book stacks. He sees nothing, even though his eyes are stinging with the force of his chakra now. He doesn't like this space, so deep underground the only noise he hears is the soft tread of his own shoes.

It reminds him of Oto-gakure too much, the oppressiveness of it. The lack of sunshine and fresh air. He had sealed Oto-gakure shut when he finished laying waste to it—the people inside, each and every single building, even the street lamps and stalls lining the dirt pathways. It's easy for his mind to play tricks on him in this sub-basement. Any minute now, he will turn a corner and will find himself standing on the street side of Oto-gakure, looking down at the bodies he's left in his wake, the fire eating its way through the buildings, the suffocating stench of shit, fire, and death—

Akamaru's nose bumps into the back of his knees. He's whining lightly in the back of his throat. Sasuke reaches back and grips the fur on Akamaru's back tightly. The chakra signatures of the rest of Unit 3 is far ahead now, at least two or three book stacks ahead. Akamaru nudges Sasuke's side carefully until Sasuke gets the hint. He holds onto Akamaru and lets the dog lead him down the book stack and to the next row. The dog pauses patiently while Sasuke gropes his way to a switch and turns on a light. The next book stack lights up, casting just enough light that Sasuke can see his way. Next to him, Akamaru tilts his head up, tail wagging lightly. His head is tilted at an angle: a question.
"I don't like it here," Sasuke offers by way of explanation, and continues walking down the stacks. There is no rhyme or reason to the organization of these boxes. If there is any, he can't find it. He's scanning the top shelves when he feels the others retreating towards him. When they've all gathered, he jumps down from the ladder to meet them.

Tottori looks angry. "Does anyone have a fucking cigarette?" he hisses out.

"No smoking, Tottori," Lee says solemnly. "There were several signs."

Kiba throws up his hands, eyeing the bookshelves. "We're never going to find anything here," he mutters. "Guess we did need the extra set of hands, Sasuke."

"I don't know how deep this goes," Neji says, looking down towards the darkness. "Or how wide. Does anyone know the dimensions of the book stacks?"

Shikamaru pulls out a piece of paper and unfolds it. He holds it under the light and reads, "Stack 93. JI-JO 82.912." He refolds the paper and tucks it into his pocket. "I was told that it was in the fourth row of stacks from the door. Westward."

"So twenty-five stacks a row, approximately," Shino calculates. He holds up a hand for a moment towards the darkness, and a few seconds later, a bug settles onto his outstretched finger delicately. "The depth is far. Thirty deep from the door."

"Twenty-five by thirty," Chouji whispers, eyes going wide. "That's seven hundred and fifty stacks. Just in this sub-basement level."

Sasuke lets the number sink in. "I'll never find it." He realizes a moment later that he's said it aloud because everyone turns to look at him.

Neji is the one to speak. "What, exactly, are you looking for, Uchiha?"

Sasuke looks at the men gathered around him. These are his men, his Unit. He has put his life down for them, and they, in turn, have done the same for him. When he asked them to break protocol and sneak him in, they did so without a single question. But the task at hand is too great. He will need their help. "Level 12 clearance, I need the files," Sasuke explains.

Tottori frowns. "There's ten clearance levels, Sarge."

Shikamaru shakes his head slowly. "So it exists, then. This Level Twelve."

"What's Level Twelve?" Lee asks, stepping closer and tightening their circle. It's crowded between the two book stacks, but the vastness of the space around them is so great that they're all whispering.

"The Uchiha Clan files," Neji explains without missing a beat. His eyes don't leave Sasuke's face as he explains to the group at large: "Hinata told me about them. Sarutobi Hiruzen instituted a new level of clearance after the Clan massacre. I hadn't realized you didn't have clearance to your own family's files, Sasuke."

The silence that follows settles deep. Chouji is the one to break it. "That's...odd."

Shikamaru's eyes narrow. "Odd is one word for it." In this darkness, his face is cast almost entirely in shadows. This is his domain, Sasuke realizes.

Sasuke feels the solid heat of Akamaru at his back, comforting and steady. "I need to see them."
Neji turns back towards the darkness. "Then let's find them."

It takes the combined intellect of Shikamaru, Shino and Neji to piece together the puzzle of the archives. In the end, the organization is fairly simple. The stacks are organized by clearance level. The deeper they go, the higher the clearance. Within each clearance level, the boxes of files, books, and scrolls are organized by the last name of the CO who signed off on the mission or memo, and within those, each of the files are organized by date. The stacks ascend from east to west, going deeper and deeper into the depths of the archives.

Once they figure the pattern, the group falls back to give Sasuke privacy to find the files. They need to exit together to get through the security check, so they move back to the earlier book stacks to while away the time and create a distraction if the jounin comes looking. "Leave it up to us, Sasuke," Lee says with a firm pat on Sasuke's back. "We'll give you cover. Akamaru will get you if we're running out of time."

The length of the Archives is a full city's block, so it takes Sasuke a few minutes to get from one end to the other. With a destination in mind, it's easy to find what he's looking for. For all the secrecy, Level Twelve occupies only a single book stack at the far west corner. He starts at the top.

There are thirty-one boxes in the bottom three shelves. The upper shelves contain scrolls and when Sasuke rolls one open, he hears the dangerous crinkle of dried paper. The ink is so old that he can barely make out the writing in the light.

Level Twelve was created after the massacre, so Sasuke climbs down the ladder and searches until he finds the box pertaining to that specific date. Unsurprisingly, the box is filled to the brim with KPD crime scene reports. He doesn't bother going through the material—he has read and re-read these files; he has memorized the pictures. The next few boxes are on individuals, twenty-three of them. Sasuke mouths the names of his family aloud as he traces the labels:

"Uchiha Yashiro"—grandpa—

"Uchiha Yakumi, Uchiha Inabi, Uchiha Kyoguku, Uchiha Fugaku—" Uncle Yakumi with his stormy moods, Uncle Inabi with his stories, Uncle Kyoguku with his warmth, and Father—

Sasuke stops at this, lets his hand linger on the name before moving on. "Uchiha Taro, Uchiha Tsubasa, Uchiha Obito—" Uncle Taro with his piggy-back rides, and Aunt Tsubasa with the kisses against his cheek (There's my baby boy!), Uncle Obito just a distant, faded memory gathered second-and third-hand by the ones who knew him better.

There are three boxes at the very bottom of the shelf. Uchiha Shisui. Uchiha Itachi. Uchiha Sasuke.

There's an entire history in this book stack, Sasuke realizes. But he doesn't have time to sort through all of it. Sasuke grits his teeth and heads straight for the most relevant information:

"Uchiha Itachi."

It's surprisingly heavy, sealed with the same sequence of sigils and wards that had locked Namikaze Minato's report on Obito's last mission. Sasuke grits his teeth and gets to work. The last time he cracked this code, it had taken him nearly an hour under Sarutobi's careful guidance. It's easy to remember the sequence, but Sasuke does it carefully to be sure. This time, it takes him just under twenty minutes to open the seal, and when he does, the strips of paper with the sigils slip away with a soft whisper. The cardboard top of the box relaxes an inch, letting out the dusty air inside.

The reports inside are separated by date, so Sasuke starts backwards in time. Most of the reports are
SCI and ANBU surveillance field reports tracking Itachi's movements, but there are reports here by Itachi's own hand, Sasuke realizes. He almost misses the detail because the darkness is so absolute around him, there's barely any light to read by—

The last report in Itachi's handwriting was submitted three days after the massacre.

Sasuke double- and triple-checks the date, but it is accurate. Sarutobi Hiruzen signed off on it, and under his signature is the same date: August 17, 2000. Three days after the massacre.

Sasuke sits down against the book stack, angling the pages up so it catches the light more clearly. It's a standard mission report from Itachi, almost entirely devoid of details. It's almost as if Itachi hadn't bothered to fill in the bottom half of the report, just a perfunctory listing of details at the top half to fill in the blanks. Next to Date of Mission, Itachi had listed August 14, 2000—

But that can't be right, Sasuke thinks, because on August 14, 1998, Itachi had walked into the Uchiha compound with his sword. He had started with their grandfather, Yashiro, and Uncle Yakumi. Uncle Taro and Uncle Inabi had stepped in next, and Itachi—


SCI, not ANBU, even though Itachi had been a new ANBU at that time, one of its youngest, personally recruited by ANBU Captain Hatake Kakashi.

CO: Sarutobi Hiruzen, Danzo Shimura, Itachi listed in his familiar chicken-scrawl, but the words are looping larger than normal. There is an unsteady tremor to his lettering that is making it even more difficult for Sasuke to read. That can't be right either, Sasuke thinks, because Kakashi had been his CO. Why would the Hokage be the direct CO on a mission, and why Danzo, a member of the Senior Council? For a mission on the same day that—

Mission status: Complete.

The large, empty box at the bottom half of the page for the full mission report has only five sentences, slanting downwards in Itachi's shaky handwriting.

Wildfire Executive given greenlight by CO Sarutobi Hiruzen and CO Danzo Shimura.

The second sentence is more cramped, as if Itachi had made an effort to make his report more legible and organized.

Twenty-three CKs.

Confirmed kills. Twenty-three of them. Sasuke's fingers are shaking so hard that he has to lean the folder against his knees to steady it. His Mangekyou is spinning so fast that the words are blurring, and all around him, Sasuke can feel the weight of the earth closing in on him. Like Otogakure, never enough fresh oxygen, just the overwhelming stench of dirt and piss and shit and cigarette smoke—

Tobi, suspected U. Madara (?) - 21 CKs, refer to KPD files for body count. Gravely injured U. Mikoto.

Itachi's handwriting is becoming more and more pinched as he writes, the downward strokes of his lettering trembling leftward so much at the ends that Sasuke can't distinguish one letter from the other. They remind him of those graphs that document the tremors of the earth, or the unsteady zig-zag of a heart going into fibrillation.

The pen drags from the full stop at the end of their mother's name to the next sentence, the line pressing so heavily on the page that Sasuke can see the small tears it created as Itachi began his final sentence of the report.

No collateral damage. Designated survivor: U. Sasuke, as per orders.

Sasuke takes a deep shuddering breath, feels the sweat pooling at the back of his neck, his ribs expanding against the narrow confines of his armor. He rips off his face-mask and lets it clatter to the ground and tugs at the cloth covering his face with so much force that it rips open, and still, he can't breathe. There's sweat dripping into his eyes, he can't see the writing anymore—it's blurring his Mangekyou, he can't control the whorl of chakra anymore—so he swipes at his eyes once, twice, his gloves catching most of the sweat so he can concentrate at the last section of the one-page report.

At the bottom of the page, Itachi's handwriting is nothing more than a stark smudge of ink. Sasuke can see the initial of Itachi's last name, U, but the rest dissolves into illegible scribbles, a dark splotch of ink expanding outwards at the end where Itachi's pen had pressed too hard for too long (Sasuke takes one last shuddering breath, clawing at his armor to get it off, he can't breathe, the world is going dark around him—)

The blank space next to his, intended for the CO to sign off, has two perfectly neat signatures:

Sarutobi Hiruzen
Danzo Shimura

Kiba is shaking him awake even as Akamaru licks at his face. "Wake up, wake up—"

"We have to go," Shino is saying hurriedly, tugging at Shikamaru's shoulder, but both Shikamaru and Neji are crouched over the file that Sasuke was reading, holding it up to the dim light from the overhead book stack. Neji is breathing heavily, and Shikamaru is not moving even though Shino is now trying to drag him bodily up.

Sasuke blinks awake, noticing for the first time that he is soaked through and shaking now from the chill of the floor. He fainted, but he doesn't remember when. He remembers why though, just a moment later, because he hears Neji whispering, "What is this, Shikamaru? What is this—"

Akamaru takes a few steps back and starts to whine in the back of his throat. "Go, we have to go," Kiba urges and hauls Sasuke up bodily. "Now. Tottori can't hold off the guard for much longer, we shouldn't even be this deep in the Archives."

"We leave now, or we get court-martialed," Shino says sternly and holds out a hand for Neji to take.

Shikamaru looks up at Sasuke. It's the first time Sasuke has seen such naked surprise and shock on the man's face. "What is this?"

"We figure it out later," Neji says. "For now, we get out of here."

Sasuke lets Kiba and Shino pull him along the corridors. Behind him, Neji and Shikamaru start to turn off the lights as they retreat. Sasuke stumbles once or twice, but Kiba has a firm grip on him, and a few moments later, Chouji is pulling him towards him even as Lee asks, concerned and almost too loud, Sasuke, what happened, what—

The three of them march Sasuke out, standing so close that Sasuke doesn't even have the space to topple. He hears Tottori's loud intervention to divert attention away from them, Kiba joking that they
got so goddamn lost, and Neji putting on a show of annoyance for the misplaced evidence, by God, can't SCI get it's shit together, this godforsaken hole in the ground is not where ANBU need to be spending their fucking time—

The elevator door dings shut, and then they're hurtling up. The momentum is enough for Sasuke's vision to white-out for a moment, which is when he realizes he's flooding his Mangekyou with chakra, overloading it beyond its capacity so that the chakra is overriding his vision. "Almost there," Chouji is saying into Sasuke's ear, holding him close. "What happened, Shikamaru?"

"We need to get out," Shikamaru is saying to Chouji, overriding Tottori's, "He looks like he's in shock, his Mangekyou—"

They're walking across the lobby, Akamaru growling, play-fighting with Kiba so that no one pays attention to the way Chouji, Tottori, Lee, Shino, and Shikamaru maneuver Sasuke out of the building.

Sunlight.

They make it a full block away before Sasuke stops on a sidewalk and throws up, bringing up nothing but bile. Chouji's warm hand on his back and forehead is the only thing that stops him from hitting the ground when his vision whites out a second time.

"—Kakashi-sensei. His Mangekyou is still active. It's been too long. He could lose his vision, he could lock down his chakra pathways and destabilize entirely—"

"No," Neji interrupts. "We are not alerting anyone outside this room. No one from the superior COs."

"He is my teammate—"

"Was," Neji snarls, vicious. "He's my senior officer, now, my responsibility while I am Deputy—"

Shino steps in before the volume of the conversation gets any louder. "He's awake."

A moment later, Sasuke feels the familiar press of Sakura's hand in his own. "Oi, dum-dum," she says, and her voice is shaky with relief. "I'm going to go get Kakashi-sensei—"

"No," Sasuke concentrates on his Mangekyou and feels the sting in his eyes recede fraction by fraction. Still, he's careful not to open his eyes when he pushes himself up. There's a soft bed beneath him, and a blanket that falls away from his shoulders. Someone has stripped him out of his armor. "Where? When?"

"My place," Kiba answers. "Guest room. It's been two hours. We called Sakura just now cause you weren't waking up and your chakra was all—spastic."

There are gauze pads pressing his eyes closed and wrapping to keep them secure. He begins to unravel it carefully, and immediately, Sakura's fingers push his away to help with the process. Two hours of his Mangekyou leaking chakra. Long enough for damage. Kakashi should be here, but Sasuke remembers the signatures at the bottom of that report. Instead, he asks, "Alone?"

"Yeah. My sister is on call at the hospital. My mom and uncle are on a mission," Kiba answers.

"Anyone else here, besides the obvious?" Sasuke asks. He counts the chakra signatures: Shino, Lee, Chouji, Shikamaru, Kiba, Neji, Sakura, and Akamaru are in the room with him. Ken, Jiro, and
Tottori are scattered about the house—standing guard, Sasuke realizes. Neji has set a perimeter.

Neji is the one who answers. "Naruto is on his way."

Alone enough, then. "Who saw us?"

"Plenty of witnesses," Shikamaru grumbles from across the room. "Too fucking many."

The gauze pads keeping his eyes shut fall away. Sakura presses cool fingers into his temples, probing with her chakra to test his pathways. "Witnesses?" Her voice is pitched low even though they are in a closed room. "Sasuke, whatever it is—"

"My orbital pathways," Sasuke interrupts. His mouth is parched, and he can still taste the dregs of vomit from a few hours ago.

Sakura takes a moment to consider, and Sasuke can feel her distinctly cool chakra traveling down his neck. "I can't tell. They seem fine, but Kakashi-sensei needs to—"

Sasuke opens eyes before she can finish her sentence. She gasps a warning, but Sasuke blinks carefully and breathes—

He can see.

The room is wide and spacious, with windows overlooking a large inner courtyard. The Inuzuka Clan house is nestled into the rolling hills in the northeastern district, surrounded by nearly two acres of property where wolves and humans alike roam free. There is a breeze coming through the open windows, lifting the curtains gently and bringing in the scent of freshly cut grass from below.

Sakura holds up three fingers in front of him. "Three." Her fingers move from one corner of his visual field to the next, and out of habit, he follows it with his eyes. She shines a light into the right eye and then the left, and then back to the right again before ending on the left. She reaches for a cup of water on the bedside table and presses it into Sasuke's hand before sitting down heavily on the bed next to him. He drinks the whole thing in one go and sets it down back on the bedside table.

"Whatever it is you've done," Sakura says firmly, "whatever it is you've gotten into, we need to go to Kakashi—"

"Not really, no. The Commander is not an option anymore," Shikamaru interrupts, hurried in a way Sasuke has never heard him. He gets up from his chair and puts down the evidence box. He looks expectantly at Sasuke. Taking the cue, Sasuke nudges open the evidence box. There are fragments of broken, blood-streaked shuriken, and several bags of evidence from a crime scene. Nestled at the very bottom of the box, though, is Itachi's mission report.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Neji breathes out, eyes going wide. "You snuck it out?"

"Yeah, I did, Hyuga. Because the alternative was to leave it there," Shikamaru snarls, rounding on Neji. "You think we should have left behind the one piece of evidence we might ever get our hands on to prove that——"

"Prove what?" Neji snaps back, even as Kiba sits down on the bed to get a closer look. He reaches for the folder but Sakura beats him to it. It doesn't take her long to scan the short report, and in the few moments it does, she goes entirely still. Kiba takes the opportunity to take the folder from her, even as Shino, Lee, and Chouji walk over to read over his shoulder. The silence that falls is absolute, and Sasuke has no control over it.

He wants to hoard this information, but he's not sure what he would do with it. He's not even sure if
he can trust what he's read, if he's misinterpreting the words. The air around him feels as if it's pressing in, but not with the same unrelenting oppressiveness as the sub-basement. There are a million and one things in his mind, but first and foremost—

"Get out of here, all of you. Get alibis."

"Fuck that shit," Kiba growls. "We're not going to let you take the fall for this when—"

Sasuke holds up a hand. "That was an order."

"You're on a leave of absence," Neji points out mildly, leaning against the armoire in the room.

Sasuke rubs a hand over his face. The chakra loss has left him exhausted, and he needs a moment—just one fucking moment—to process this information. But he has a responsibility to his men. "You stole classified documents out of the Archives. You can and will get court-martialed for this if—"

The front door slams open with a gust of wind, and Sasuke can feel the reverberations in his bones as the whole house shakes:

Naruto.

There's a crackle of energy, and a moment later, Naruto is in the room, his counselor robes whirling around him in a halo even as he comes to a complete standstill. His eyes are wide and his cheeks flushed from the energy he expended to cross town so quickly. The first words out of his mouth are, "Can you see me?"

Sasuke drinks in the sight of him, feels some of the tension in his shoulders finally yield. "Yeah."

The answer does nothing for Naruto's anxiousness. "Sakura said you'd been out for two hours with your Mangekyou."

"It's fine."

Naruto hasn't moved an inch from where he is standing at the doorway, but his body is jittery with energy and unspent chakra. There is a disoriented breeze moving about the room, at odds with the breeze coming from outside. "Where's Kakashi-sensei? He should be here—" He stops short, seeing the expression on Sakura's face. "Whatever the bad news is, can you please just tell me now because I think I'm going to throw up or maybe lose my chakra control and I don't know which is worse."

Kiba holds out the file for Naruto to take. Naruto begins a cautious approach towards the bed. "Read it," Neji prompts gently, and places a hand on the small of Naruto's back to guide him onto the bed.

Sakura vacates her seat, and Naruto takes her place. He opens the file, grumbling under his breath about what kind of bastard would put himself in a medical emergency just so he can pass a mission report onto—

He goes quiet, and then a moment later, the breeze in the room drops away entirely. Even the breeze from outside sucks away, making the room feel almost airless. "This can't be—" Naruto turns the report over, as if looking for a continuation to explain what he's read. "That's not. What?" He looks up, face frozen in between a smile and confusion. "This is some kind of—It's." He looks around the room, trying to find support. "You guys. It's Sarutobi-sensei. Don't be ridiculous. It's not—it can't. Why would he—" When no one says anything he clears his throat. "Where did you get this?"

Shikamaru is the one who breaks the silence that follows. "What's your clearance level, Naruto?"
Naruto's mouth opens but no words come out. He gapes at Shikamaru for what feels like a full minute before his mouth snaps shut with a click of teeth. "How dare you—"

Shikamaru's gaze is unflinching. "I'm just asking what your clearance level is."

"You're asking if I knew." Naruto slams the folder down on the bed. "If I knew that there were extrajudicial assassinations of Konohagakure citizens under direct Hokage orders—"

"Naruto," Sakura cautions, but Naruto's anger has caught fire now and there's nothing anyone can do to stop him.

"It's a legitimate question," Shikamaru counters, cold and calculated in the face of Naruto's raw emotion. "You're the only one here who has the Hokage's ear. You practically live in the Tower. Maybe that's how things are run up there? Maybe—"

"Guys," Lee interjects softly. "We can't—"

"Can't we, though?" Shikamaru demands, pointing at the folder. "I mean, what the fuck is that? Twenty-three confirmed kills, Naruto. Sarutobi-sensei's signature is on the bottom. Pardon me if I'm a little skeptical of your defense of Sarutobi-sensei, right now, Naruto. Because of course, the future Hokage in the room wants to protect the sanctity of the Office of the Hokage—"

"Oh fuck you," Sakura hisses, rounding on Shikamaru. She steps up to defend Naruto without a single thought. "Fuck you and the high horse you rode in on—"

Sasuke pushes himself to his feet, and all of a sudden, the conversation comes to a halt. He feels everyone's heavy gaze resting on him. It takes a moment for him to find an excuse, but in the end, he finds it: "I need to take a leak."

"Second door on the left, down the corridor," Kiba offers, but Sasuke is already outside the room and closing the door before Kiba can finish his directions. The house is large, but Sasuke doesn’t need directions to follow a chakra signature.

Tottori, Ken and Jiro are on opposite sides of the house. Sasuke takes a circuitous path around and tells each of them individually that they are dismissed. "Go home," he advises them. "Be seen. Be conspicuous."

"Alibis," Tottori deciphers, looking worried. "Look, Sarge, whatever it is, we don't care. We can stick it through as a team. And—"

"You don't need to get involved," Sasuke interrupts sternly, and clasps the man's shoulder. They'd gone above and beyond already. And besides, no need to involve anyone else. Rule one, Sasuke reminds himself, protect your teammates. "It's fine, Tottori. Thanks for having my back."

Ken offers a smile. "Any time, Sarge. You're all right, though? Deputy was flipping the shit a bit back there about your dojutsu."

Sasuke makes sure his expression is perfectly bland. "Peachy. Get the fuck out of here." And so they leave, Jiro glancing over his shoulder a few times before the three of them take off in a sprint towards downtown.

Finally—finally—Sasuke takes a deep breath and assesses the situation. He glances up towards the house and takes count of the chakra signatures again. None of them have followed him out, and he's grateful for that. It's not that he faults them for their reaction. It's natural for all of them to react the way they are. The full horror of Itachi's report needs to sink in, he knows, but to him it's not the
Sasuke sinks down on the steps of the porch and stares out at the green hills around him. His thoughts are oddly quiet, and he lets the moments pass by until he feels the stir of Sakura and Naruto's chakras headed his way.

He could stay and talk to them, or—

His hands fly into seals. When he arrives at the last step, he closes his eyes and recites aloud, "Crane seal to finish."

He vanishes without a hitch of chakra into the quiet, comfortable depths of the redwood forest.

They haven't taken down the CAUTION HAZARDOUS SITE tape, but Sasuke pays it no attention and bypasses all the yellow-and-black warnings. The crater in the center is still as withered and deserted as he remembers it, but now that he's not drunk on his anger and liters of alcohol or blinded by the full force of Rin's chakra, he notices just how much damage they'd created.

It is a ring of charred earth wider than Sasuke's training grounds. The destruction is complete: there isn't a single blade of grass where Rin's chakra hasn't razed through. The line of redwoods immediately surrounding the center of damage look unhealthy and sick, as if they are about to crack and wither. For lack of anything better to do, Sasuke sits down in the middle of the crater and lies on his back.

Rin.

It takes a few moments for her to appear, and when she does, it's with a wide yawn. "Yes?" Her hiss lingers as she slithers close to where Sasuke is lying down. "Revisiting your fondest memories, I see."

She looks down at Sasuke. Golden-brown eyes closing sideways shut inquisitively. He feels her probing presence in his mind and knows the exact moment when she grasps the information he has found. Her body sways overhead. "The Chieftain betrayed you."

"Yeah." The ground beneath Sasuke is hard and uncomfortable, but he doesn't want to move anywhere else because it is a reminder of what will happen if he loses his way again. He knows that if he is alone, he will fall into the same downward spiral, and this time, Rin may not be there to catch him.

Because this time, the thoughts circling in his mind are memories of Kakashi by his side, each and every single time the man looked at him in the eyes and knew with absolute certainty Itachi's innocence but did nothing—not a damn thing—to relieve Sasuke of the burden of hating his own brother.

"What a fool I was," Rin sighs, and moves close to Sasuke, nudging him with her body until Sasuke rests his head on the meat of her stomach. She curls her body around his, creating a loose loop with her head by his. "I told you he was the one to trust among the four."

"You couldn't have known."

Rin takes a deep breath, and Sasuke's head moves with the movement of air. "No," she admits. "I couldn't have."

Sasuke watches the skies overhead for a moment. "How long do you think he knew?"
"Dog-master?" Rin guesses. She lifts her head and looks overhead, following Sasuke's line of sight to the clouds drifting lazily across the sky. "Long enough."

Sasuke retraces the steps of his interactions with Kakashi. He has been such a presence in his mind, driving him forward for so long, he can't remember a day when Kakashi's voice wasn't in the back of his mind.

But now, at last, the discrepancies are slotting into their proper place. Itachi's hesitation in killing him, time and time again. The press of his index finger against Sasuke's forehead, the way he had said, *You look like Shisui*, sounding homesick and just as heartbroken as he sounded the day they burned Shisui's body on the riverbanks. The way he had pressed Sasuke's sword into his hand and promised, *I won't be far behind, Sasuke*. He remembers each aching moment he spent teaching himself to hate his own brother.

Rin catches this thought. "Idiot," she murmurs, nudging her face against his. "You never hated your brother."

"Yeah, I did," Sasuke insists, but he knows the lie for what it is, feels his throat close on a lump even as he says the words. There is relief in the truth, and slowly, Sasuke feels it uncoiling in his gut, making his joints go weak with relief even as it feels as though his lungs and heart are being crushed with the weight of all of Kakashi's lies, all of Sarutobi's lies.

He takes a breath and lets the knot in his gut uncoil even further, seep away into the blackened earth around him. At the end of the day, this was what ate at him, what gnawed its way through his soul and festered into a grief that he could never overcome—the rules of conduct, the ancient laws, the very physics of this world forcing his hand to his sword, compelling fratricide, insisting on his hatred towards his own blood when every fiber and atom in his body rebelled against it because Itachi—*Kin-butcher*, they call him—at the end of every day, is *Brother*.

"It was not wrong to love him," Rin soothes. "There is nothing wrong in loving him still. In loving him always."

Sasuke breathes out in relief, feels his body shudder with the intensity of it. Rin tightens her coil around him, holds him still.

He spends two days in the forest. Rin stays at his side constantly, teaching him how to track a two-day old tiger trail. She teaches him how to determine the gender by the width of the forepaw print, the age of the trail by the density of the soil at the edges of the trail, how to judge the size based on the breadth of a single leap the tiger takes. They find a fresh kill as Sasuke catches up—so fresh that the meat is still hot—but Rin doesn't partake.

"You don't take another animal's kill," she warns, slithering wide of the kill. "It's disrespectful. And tigers can be vengeful."

Sasuke glances around. "It's not even here."

"Is that what you think," Rin says, eyes slitting as her gaze swivels towards the far end of the clearing. She sways, rising to her full height. "Step away carefully. Don't turn your back and don't run until I tell you to."

They beat a hasty exit out and spend another day making sure to evade the tiger and slip out of his grasp. Rin assures him that he won't stalk and kill them, but Sasuke can't help but glance over his shoulder every now and then. Humans are easy to track, Yuuta had once said, and he understands
now. Animals don't have chakra signatures, and after millennia of evolution and blending into the lush density of the redwoods, the big cats can disappear at will.

In the end, Sasuke sets up camp in a lake about thirty-five miles from the walls of the Village. He builds a leaning shelter against a crag of wall and settles in with firewood and a few traps to catch game. Rin stays curled on top of the rock, sunbathing, while Sasuke loses himself in the simple tasks of day-to-day chores: finding and gathering food, boiling water to drink, running along the trails, and floating around in the lake on his back.

Rin doesn't mention Itachi or Kakashi or Sarutobi, even though she's no doubt picking up on Sasuke's relentless thoughts on the matter. She gives him space, but whenever he remembers Kakashi and finds his grief overwhelming, she will settle in a loose coil next to him in the shelter, the small space filling with the gold of her scales reflecting on all sides. "It's not the same as before, your grief," she promises him on the fifth night. "You can swallow it whole and not yield this time."

Sasuke rubs at his eyes, hating the sting of tears, because between one breath and the next, he had remembered how he had admitted to Kakashi that he had let his brother escape, feeling ashamed at his failure, sick to his stomach at the memory of Itachi saying *Crane seal to finish*. Kakashi had not said a word, then, even though he knew how Sasuke was crumbling under the weight of having to hate his own brother. He had let Sasuke grieve for his brother when Jugo brought the news of his death alone, without even the consolation that Itachi was innocent. Madara was the one who murdered twenty-one that night; Itachi was following orders. "I feel fucking pathetic."

Rin hums under her breath. "Sometimes you are that," she agrees, but not unkindly.

Sasuke huffs a laugh. "Well, you're stuck with me for this lifetime, at least."

"I chose to be stuck with you," Rin corrects.

"Orochimaru gifted you to me."

"Is that what you think?" Rin’s laugh is a soothing hiss. She doesn’t give Sasuke the chance to answer, though. Instead, she changes the topic suddenly. “My uncle, Manda became sick under Orochimaru’s care. Orochimaru offered my uncle human meat. Human chakra. He became sick with it, stayed so long in the human world that he was turning into something evil.”

Sasuke turns so he can look her in the eyes. "Like the tailed demons."

"Like the tailed demons," she agrees. "But worse. Because my uncle didn't have enough chakra or power to transform into a tailed demon. He was withering. His hunger for chakra grew so big, he turned on his own family. He ate his own brothers. He killed his own mother. Our Clan was large once."

Rin's tongue flickers in and out. Under the steady stream of words, Sasuke catches the strong undercurrent of her grief. "Then, he turned to my children. He murdered three of my keep, two sons and a daughter. You are right that Orochimaru gifted me to you, but I accepted. And when you gave me the order to kill my own uncle, I followed, not because of my loyalty to you but because my uncle murdered my blood."

Overhead, clouds are forming. There is a storm coming, but Sasuke has fortified their shelter so they are well protected from the wind that is bruising the tree line. Sasuke remembers the wind shifting with the power of Rin’s attack against her uncle. When he summoned her to draw Manda’s attack and give Sasuke the space to confront Orochimaru, he wasn’t sure she would obey. Their bond had been too new then; she barely spoke to him in human tongue. But she had followed his orders and
sunk her fangs into the vulnerable meat of Manda’s neck, holding with all her strength as his blood dripped hot and poisonous into the earth below. She held and did not let go until the frantic coiling and uncoiling of his body stilled. "It wasn't difficult to kill him,” Rin continues, “because he was already withering and dying. But none of my brothers thought to rise up against him. They were loyal, so they went to their deaths peacefully."

Rin shifts, so Sasuke pushes himself into a sitting position. She slithers away a few feet before settling again. "The truth of the matter, though..." She trails off, looking out into the darkness beyond their shelter. The rain is coming down in sheets now. "The truth of the matter is, I loved him still, even at the end. I loved him then. I love him now. I love him always."

Rin's grief is so strong it almost knocks Sasuke over. It combines with his own grief and makes it difficult to breathe. Still, he finds his voice to say, "He was your uncle."

"And Kin-butcher is your brother. Dog-master is your teacher, the one who gave you your Mangekyou," Rin points out, turning back to face him now. "It is a difficult burden to bear, this betrayal, but remember this: you have betrayed Dog-master too.” Sasuke remembers Kakashi’s acceptance when he came back from Otogakure, the weight of Kakashi’s sword in his hands and the cool feeling of Kakashi’s face-mask against his skin. The painful sting of his Mangekyou awakening. “Love is not an absolute, Sasuke. It is a commitment,” Rin presses. “You are a grown warrior now. Stay true."

Sasuke looks out beyond the shelter. The lake is echoing with each loud splatter of raindrops, making the storm sound even fiercer than it actually is. His snakes are such a part of him that they are incapable to be anything but fully honest with one another. So he knows that Rin’s words are true, each word carrying the weight and heft of her loyalty to him.

He knows what he has to do, and it is not to hide out in the comfort of the redwoods. Somewhere, his brother is hiding out from Akatsuki, piecing together some elaborate puzzle that starts with a name written into the tight confines of a single sliver of paper: Senju Hashirama. Madara is still alive, and Itachi should not have to face him alone. And Konohagakure—for all that she means to him—has lost her final hold on Sasuke.

"After the storm dies out, then."

Rin nods, satisfied. "Should I stay?"

Sasuke takes a breath. "I've got this."

Rin's eyes slit in a smile. "The epitome of confidence you are, Master."

She disappears with a laugh, her hiss lingering in the small confines of Sasuke's shelter. He falls asleep, unafraid and unburdened.

He wakes up early just as the storm is passing. It doesn't take long to break up camp, but his traps are empty from the night before so he takes the time to hunt breakfast and lunch. By the time he sets back on the thirty-five-mile hike back to the Village, it is noon. He takes his time, setting an easy pace so he can practice the tracking techniques Rin taught him.

He's about fifteen miles from the Village when he feels the crackle of energy. The signature is so familiar that he stops short. Naruto. A moment later, there is another: Sakura.

Sasuke takes off in a wild sprint, pushing himself forward with chakra with such force that the ground below singes with the heat of his energy. He barrels past the guard on the western gate, and
heads straight for the crackling energy from the center of the Village. The closer he gets, the more palpable the chakra feels. Every now and then, he hears the crack and groan of the earth splitting under Sakura's fist.

There is a crowd of spectators at the Jounin training area, and Sasuke pushes past them roughly to get to the front. It's Naruto and Sakura against Kakashi, but unlike their usual training, they are aiming to hurt. It's like flies attacking a lion, though, because Naruto and Sakura are both schizophrenic with their attacks, reckless and without any strategy.

They break away from Kakashi, pausing from their last bout of taijutsu to stare down the jounin. Naruto's lip is split and healing fast. Sakura's hair is out of her usual high ponytail, and both of them are covered in dirt. The usually well-kept training area is pockmarked with small craters from Sakura's failed attacks. Kakashi holds out a hand towards them both. "Naruto, Sakura, listen to me."

Naruto's hands blur into seals and Sakura vanishes. The next round of attacks is successful, but only because Kakashi yields. He lets Sakura trap him with strings and drops to his knees. In the next moment, Naruto is blurring towards him, fist raised. The moment before it makes contact, though, Kakashi breaks free and—

Pulls Naruto into a hug, bending nearly in half to hold him still. Naruto starts to kick and scream, making an odd wailing noise even as he starts to beat at Kakashi's sides. It takes a moment for Sasuke to realize that Naruto is crying, and it is at the same time that the rest of the crowd realizes that this is not a training session, it is something more. A few jounin start to break away to give them privacy, but Sasuke stays rooted to his spot with the rest of the crowd. Sakura appears at Kakashi's side and shove at Kakashi, trying to dislodge him from Naruto. Her shoulders are shaking, and she's half-shrieking, half-sobbing, "Get away—get away—"

Kakashi opens up his arm to draw her into an embrace, but she slaps his hands away once. When Kakashi lets his hand fall, she rushes him again, trying to tackle him with her weight. Kakashi doesn't budge, and between one moment and the next, he pulls her into a hug as well, holding them both close. They stand like that in the middle of the training arena, Naruto and Sakura with their faces pressed into Kakashi's chest, shoulders heaving as they make keening, sobbing noises.

Kakashi looks oddly helpless as he holds on and murmurs something too low for Sasuke to hear, his hands moving in soothing circles on Naruto’s back. The crowd is dissipating faster now, trying to give them space and privacy.

Sasuke is about to do the same when Kakashi lifts his face from where he has it pressed into Sakura's hair and stares straight at him. His one visible eye is wide, and in that moment, Sasuke realizes—

He knows.

Kakashi looks as if he's about to move towards Sasuke, but Sasuke shakes his head, stopping him. He looks pointedly at Naruto and Sakura and back at Kakashi.

*Stay true*, Rin told him.

Sasuke turns his back on Team 7.
Please check out The bowels of Jounin HQ by the incredible Mrbid/Srdid!

And thank you again for your words of encouragement; I was especially touched (and honored) by how the last chapter was received by so many of you.

A final thank you to all those who have supported me via ko-fi. As some of you know, the delay in putting this story out had to do with immigration and funding issues I am having as a grad student. I was prompted to start a ko-fi.com account, which I did under my pseudonym, weialala, and will link elsewhere. The gratitude I feel for your support cannot be expressed, but I will say it again — thank you.

Your patience is beyond incredible. I have never enjoyed sharing my work more. Just one more chapter to go.
Wayward

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The ghosts have likely pieced the puzzle together, so Sasuke doesn’t head for his apartment. He isn’t ready to face Sarutobi yet. Instead, he retraces his steps from a week before. The woman who opens the door is tall, with light brown eyes. There are maroon markings on her cheeks; they make her look dangerous even though she’s wearing an apron that is covered with so much flour that Sasuke can’t tell its original color anymore. Her long hair has been braided over one shoulder messily, and despite her decidedly unkempt appearance, there is something striking about her. Her eyes widen when she sees Sasuke. "It’s you!"

Sasuke has no idea how to respond to that. So instead he clears his throat and remembers his manners. "Good afternoon, ma’am. Is Kiba in?"

The woman’s mouth drops open in mild surprise. She recovers a moment later and opens the door wide to let Sasuke in. It’s only now that Sasuke notices the mixing bowl in the crook of her arm. He steps around her and waits patiently while she closes the door. "Let me get him," she says. Sasuke is expecting that she’ll make him wait and disappear into the house to retrieve Kiba. Instead, she turns her head and shrieks, "Kiba! Visitor!" On cue, a pack of dogs takes up the call and begins howling.

Akamaru arrives first, bounding down the corridor towards Sasuke at full speed. Sasuke doesn’t have enough time to brace himself, so when Akamaru launches towards him, he loses his footing. His head cracks against the ground, but Akamaru seems unconcerned and begins to lick at his face enthusiastically. The full weight of the dog is on his torso, and Sasuke hacks and coughs and tries to say, "I can't breathe, Akamaru," but all that comes out is a wheeze.

Kiba arrives a few moments later. He pulls Akamaru off bodily before giving Sasuke a hand to take. "You look like shit, Uchiha," he says happily, and next thing he knows, Sasuke is being pulled into a tight hug. Kiba holds him for a moment and says, voice quieter now, "You gotta stop disappearing like that, goddamnit." Akamaru nudges his face against Sasuke's hip, tail wagging. "Akamaru says hi," Kiba translates, stepping back.

Sasuke wipes ineffectively at the slobber on his face. "Yeah, I got that."

"Man, has shit gone down while you were out of town—"

The woman clears her throat loudly. "Oi, stupid face."

Kiba’s gaze swivels towards the woman. "Oh, yeah," he says. "Sis, this is Uchiha Sasuke. Uchiha Sasuke, my big sister."

"Hana," the woman elaborates and holds out a hand. Sasuke wipes his hand against his pants, trying to get rid of week-old forest grime. She has a firm grip, and despite the flour on her hands, he can feel the calluses. "You probably don’t remember me, but I met you when you were a baby."

The information catches him entirely off-guard. "You did?"

"Shisui brought you in for show and tell once. Our teacher nearly blew a fuse, but you were a pretty big hit in our class," Hana says, as easygoing and sociable as her brother. Like Kiba, she has a way of putting people immediately at ease with the sheer force of her good nature. It doesn’t make Sasuke freeze up to hear her say Shisui’s name; this is a story of Shisui that he doesn’t know, so he listens,
“Itachi and Shisui could make you say ball on command by then, so we were understandably impressed. Itachi kept trying to convince our teacher that you were above-average intelligent and worth studying as a class project. But then Mrs. Uchiha showed up near hysterics because you were missing, and that ended that little adventure.”

There is nothing but affection in her voice when she talks about Itachi and Shisui. He didn’t know this particular story, but he can just as easily imagine Shisui and Itachi sneaking out of the house with Sasuke in his pram. It’s another piece for him to store away, a memory that he can turn over in his mind when he wants to remember his kin. Sasuke doesn’t know how to thank her for the memory, so he just holds out his hand again for Hana to take. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Hana accepts his hand, not commenting on the fact that this is the second time they’ve shaken hands in the span of a couple of minutes. "The pleasure is all mine," she says with a broad smile. "And pardon the confectionary. My idiot brother wanted banana bread."

“Chocolate chip banana bread,” Kiba corrects primly, and grabs Sasuke's elbow to begin dragging him down the hallway without giving Sasuke a chance to say goodbye to Hana. He pulls Sasuke up a set of stairs and down a second corridor. Sasuke knows that the Inuzuka Clan is one of the smaller ones in the Village, but it seems larger than it is because of the pack of wolf-dogs roaming around. Their properties take up an entire neighborhood in the northeastern district. Kiba’s parents got divorced when he was just a kid, Sasuke knows, and Kiba doesn’t know or care to find out about his absent father—a jounin from the Land of Wind who is now long gone.

One particularly large, silver dog is blocking their path, snoring quietly. Kiba jumps easily over the dog, and Sasuke follows suit. A moment later, Sasuke is in Kiba's room, an open space that looks lived in and welcoming.

Kiba shuts the door and rounds on Sasuke. "First of all, where the fuck did you go?"

"Not far," Sasuke says, and looks around the room. It's larger than the guest room he was in the week before, with a bed tucked into one corner. The rest of the space is seating arrangements around a TV, a desk with scrolls and books piled high. Akamaru has his own massive bed taking up an entire corner of the room, looking almost as comfortable as Kiba's own bed. There are pictures everywhere, and Christmas lights looping over the window frame. "It's June."

"I swear to God, if you get on my case about the Christmas lights—"

"Don’t people in your religion take the lights down after the holidays?"

Kiba ignores the question entirely. "How far is not far? We looked for you." He heads towards the small seating area and takes a seat in a worn armchair. Sasuke takes his cue and settles on the sofa. Akamaru settles by Kiba's side, sitting with his ears perked up.

"Thirty miles. Forty."

Kiba falls back into his seat with a dramatic sigh. He rubs both hands over his face. "Hand to God, a few hours ago, Naruto and Sakura confronted the Commander and it turned into this really dramatic shit-show in the middle of the training arenas and—"

"I was there," Sasuke interrupts. "What happened?"

"You disappeared is what happened," Kiba hisses, pitching his voice low. "They were going to put out a goddamn BOLO on you because Neji is a shit liar and couldn’t run interference anymore. You'd think the man would know how to throw off a trail, but no—"
Sasuke puts up a hand. "Short version, Kiba."

"Naruto and Sakura couldn't hold it in anymore. They had a huge fight with Shikamaru because Shikamaru didn't want them to talk to the Commander yet, which, of course, they did anyway," Kiba finishes in a rush. "Now the senior COs know we know, and no one still knows where you are!"

Kiba gets to his feet hurriedly and leaps for the phone on his desk. He keeps talking even as his fingers fly across the keypad. "Shikamaru was gathering evidence, but he’s been acting so fucking weird that his dad? The Jounin Captain? He shows up at Chouji's door asking what the fuck is up, and Chouji nearly pisses his pants and—Aburame!" he yells into the receiver directly. "He's back. Tell the others."

He slams the receiver down before waiting for a response and returns to his chair, apologizing to Akamaru as he steps over him. Akamaru barks at him and Kiba nods. "Yeah, so Akamaru and I agree that you stink, Sarge."

Sasuke glances towards the door leading to the bathroom. "You mind?"

"Help yourself," Kiba says with a wave of his hand. "Fresh towels in the linen closet inside. Clean shaving blades in the medicine cabinet. I'll put out some spare clothes of mine."

Sasuke shuts the door behind him with a sigh. It's cowardice, he knows, hiding from the ghosts like this, but there is an odd comfort to Kiba's exuberance and energy. The sheer force of the man is enough to push aside most of Sasuke's other thoughts.

Sasuke strips out of his clothes and folds them into a neat pile. The bathroom is clean and bright, and when Sasuke stands under the shower, it's to find that the water pressure is perfect. He turns up the heat all the way and watches the dirt and mud circle the drain.

Shino, Neji, Lee and Chouji are waiting for him when Sasuke steps outside, wrapped in a fresh towel and skin pink from his shower. "Welcome back, Sasuke!" Lee enthuses. Neji glares at him. "Quit staring, Hyuga. You're making me blush," Sasuke says, and catches the fresh set of clothes that Kiba balls up and throws at him. He retreats into the billy steam of the bathroom to put on the clothes. They're ANBU sweatpants and a plain white T-shirt that fits a bit snug across Sasuke's biceps and the breadth of his shoulders.

When he steps outside, it's to find that Shikamaru has joined the others. He looks furious. "The Wildfire Contingency," he says by way of hello. "That's what it was called, but they call the operational aspect of it the Wildfire Executive."

Sasuke remembers Itachi's scraggly handwriting spelling out the words. He takes a breath and sits down on the edge of Kiba's bed. "How do you know?"

"Went digging," Shikamaru answers. "I don't know anything else, though. I don't understand anything beyond what we know in that report. Naruto and Sakura got nothing else, I'm sure, based on that little display we just saw. I told them not to talk to the Commander about it, but no, they go right up to him and start acting out in public—"

"They're allowed, Nara," Sasuke interrupts.

"Allowed what?" Chouji prompts.
Sakura and Naruto are Kakashi’s lodestars. He nurtured them from a young age, and their affection and loyalty to him is absolute to the point of being nonsensical. Sasuke doesn't know how to put this into words, so he settles for a close approximation instead. "To react however they want. So if they want to throw a few ineffective punches and have a good cry on his shoulder, they're allowed." The silence settles a little too thickly in the room, so Sasuke shrugs a shoulder, trying to make light of it. "He always pampered them a bit, anyways."

Shikamaru sighs so heavily Sasuke can hear him from across the room. He digs the heels of his hands into his eyes and goes still. "Fuck, I can be such an asshole sometimes."

Kiba ducks his head, digging his fingers into Akamaru's fur. "We all can."

Sasuke doesn't understand the sudden shift in topic until Shikamaru says, voice pitched low, "It's your family, Sasuke. I lost sight of that. I'm sorry."

"We didn’t react properly when we found out. I’m sorry, too," Neji echoes, and one by one, the others offer the same. Lee moves to sit next to Sasuke on the bed and rests one hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. “What do you want to do now, Sasuke?”

Sasuke looks out the window towards the inner courtyard. “I could use a meal.”

“I could always use a meal,” Chouji says agreeably, and leads the way out of Kiba’s room. They make their way, single-file, down the corridors, taking turns to jump over the still-sleeping silver dog. Dinner is at a roadside kiosk that they eat and drink dry. They leave a hefty tip for the owner and are about to head their separate ways when Kiba touches Sasuke’s elbow lightly. “There’s a guest room if you want,” he offers, smiling kindly.

At home, Sarutobi and the others are likely waiting for him. *Stay true*, Rin told him, but Sasuke isn’t sure how he can ever face the man who signed the orders for Sasuke’s brother to murder his own family.

Sasuke heaves a breath, and says, “Yeah. Thanks.”

He falls asleep that night on the soft sheets of the guest bedroom in the Inuzuka Clan house, a gentle breeze drifting in with the scent of freshly blooming flowers and the sound of howling wolves.

Hana sends Sasuke off with a hefty breakfast. "Our mom will be sorry she missed meeting you,” she says, “so you're going to have to come back for dinner."

"I will, ma'am," he promises.

Hana throws back her head with a laugh. There is something irresistibly beautiful about her, about the joy she is so willing to share and the kindness she so easily shows to everyone around her. Sasuke knows that Kiba is stupidly loyal to his big sister, but now he knows why. Even Shino is enamored by her.

"Ma'am, he says!" She turns to Kiba. "Did you hear that? Look at those manners!"

"Yeah, it's weird, cause he's a total asshat at all other times," Kiba mutters, yawning wide. Sasuke refrains from giving Kiba the middle finger and heads downtown. He had called ahead earlier in the morning, asking for an appointment with the Hokage sometime in the afternoon or later at her convenience. The woman at the other end of the line had put him on hold and returned a few moments later with, *How about at two this afternoon?* Sasuke leaves with plenty of time to spare and a destination in mind. He got the address from Neji, who had looked puzzled, but yielded the
information without a question.

Tenten's office is a few blocks from the courthouse in the top floor of one of the historical buildings downtown. The inscription at the entrance of the offices reads Yukari, Yukari, and Associates.

Like Naruto, Tenten is a lawyer-nin, but unlike Naruto she does not work for the government. When her mission load becomes too demanding, she scales back her hours in court and takes on cases as time allows. Her specialty, apparently, is defending prisoners of war to ensure that they get due process. She is the daughter of an old, respected civilian family. Both her parents are politicians: her mother a Senator, and her father a District Judge. Her office is in her uncle’s law firm, Neji had explained; just ask for her at the front desk.

Tenten’s assistant looks puzzled when Sasuke announces himself, insisting that Sasuke is not on Tenten’s schedule, and that he needs to make an appointment—

"Look," Sasuke says, leaning in close. The boy is a civilian, young and fresh out of college from the looks of it. "Just tell her Uchiha Sasuke is here to see her and it's important. See what she has to say."

The boy gets to his feet and tugs at his suit with a frown. "She doesn't like to be interrupted when she's catching up on casework."

"She won't mind this time," Sasuke promises, and watches as the boy musters up his courage and knocks on the door leading to Tenten’s office. The office space is open and large, with a glass-encased conference room to one side. There are doors all along the walls, each with a small desk in front for the assistants. Tenten’s office is tucked into the very far corner in the back, a frosted-glass door giving her privacy within.

A few moments later, Tenten is striding out of her office. She is not wearing her counselor robes, just a high-collared white blouse with a large, floral pattern. It is an expensive looking outfit that she has paired with impossibly high heels that click sharply against the floor with each of her steps. “Sasuke. This is a surprise,” she says, and holds out a hand to indicate her office. “Please, come inside.” Sasuke takes her cue and steps into the office, Tenten trailing closely behind even as she gives instructions to her assistant to hold all her calls and not disturb her.

The door swings smoothly shut behind them and Tenten indicates the chair across from her sleek desk. She waits for Sasuke to take a seat before she follows suit. Her brown eyes are alert and focused, and she waits, patient, for Sasuke to speak first.

Sasuke clears his throat. “I need a lawyer.”

Tenten’s lips curl into a smile. “I assumed this wasn’t a social call,” she says, and leans back, pulling her braid over her shoulder as she does so. “Why do you need a lawyer?”

There are a million different ways to beat around the bush, but it’s probably better to cut to the bone of the matter with a woman like Tenten. “I want to break a contract.”

Tenten’s body stiffens. Shinobi do not break contracts. The penalty for doing so is court-martialing at best. The death penalty if it is treasonous. For someone like Sasuke who has already broken a contract once, the repercussions will likely be swift and heavy. “Your ANBU contract,” she clarifies slowly. “Because if you want to retire out of ANBU, you only need to take up the matter with your CO. You don’t need a lawyer, Sasuke.”

Sasuke shakes his head. “My contract with Konohagakure. I want to be released from it.”

He’s about to continue, explain why, but Tenten holds up a hand. “You have money?”
Sasuke flushes. “I know your hourly fees are high. But Neji said we could maybe negotiate—”

“Cash, Sasuke,” Tenten interrupts again. She holds out a hand, palm facing up.

Sasuke shifts in his seat to pull out his wallet from his back pocket. He has a grand total of twelve ryo: a ten-ryo bill and two ryo coins. He also has a free drink chip from the last happy hour he went to with Unit 3. He pulls out the ten-ryo bill. “I have a ten.”

“Hand it over,” Tenten says and leans across the table. She drops the bill into one of her drawers. “I am now your lawyer. Everything you say to me is now protected by attorney-client privilege. That means that whatever you share with me, verbal, written, or even sign language, I will guard. No one can compel me to reveal anything you share with me, even under oath. Any notes I take, any files or memos I generate is also protected under attorney-client privilege because it is considered work product. I cannot be compelled, even under subpoena or court-martial, to reveal our communications in any form. But there are a few exceptions. I can disclose our communications if it is to prevent a crime, tort, or fraud. So the best way this will work is if you give me frank and full disclosure. Any questions?”

Sasuke shakes his head no.

“Good, now you can talk,” Tenten says, gesturing with her hand. When Sasuke doesn’t immediately respond, she prompts, voice pitched low, “Sasuke. You just told me you want to break your contract with Konohagakure. You need to tell me why.”

Sasuke glances towards her door. The assistant had made it clear that Tenten’s schedule was packed to the brim today. “This may take a while.”

Tenten leans her elbows on the table. “Don’t worry,” she promises. “You get the friendship discount for my billing rates.”

“What’s the discount?” They’re friends?

Tenten’s features become bright with a smile. “Free,” she says. “I might hit you up for a coffee every now and then, though. I have an addiction.”

Sasuke feels himself relaxing into the chair. “Yeah. Coffee I can do.”

“Let’s hear it then,” she prompts again.

Sasuke takes a breath and begins.

It takes a full hour to lay out all the details. He keeps it as clinical and professional as possible, but his words are still halting as he begins to describe the two versions of the massacre: what he saw and was led to believe, and the details of the report he found in the Archives.

Tenten’s expressions do not shift except for a mild pursing of her lips. She does not make a single sound of sympathy; the only indication that she is still listening is her unwavering focus and the stiff way she holds her body as Sasuke continues to describe the events. He reveals everything to her—frank and full disclosure, she had said, and besides, all his sins have been documented. He has nothing left to hide. So he tells her about his decision to go to Otogakure, the why of it that he hadn’t even discussed at his original trial. He tells her what Orochimaru promised him: A quick death for his brother. He tells her all the crimes he committed in Otogakure, lists them in chronological order and with precise details because he is a Sharingan and a Sharingan remembers. “I never,” he promises, “injured or killed a Konohagakure shinobi while I was in Otogakure.”
He tells her about his battle with Orochimaru and even tells her about Rin, how he survived (and her eyes go wide at this, understanding the full implications of what Sasuke is saying, but still, she does not say a word). He tells her he returned to Konohagakure with Orochimaru’s body, how he had passed Ibiki’s relentless interrogation of him with flying colors, that he was reinstated as a shinobi of this country, as ANBU, as a CO—as Lieutenant. He also tells her about his reconnaissance, how he found Madara and Itachi, of what Itachi had told him.

She was there at the meeting with the commanding officers when he revealed what he had done those eight months after his defeat at Madara’s hands, so he doesn’t bother with the details. Instead, he skips ahead to the conversation with his psychiatrist, how it had seemed odd, how Unit 3 had snuck him into the Archives.

Tenten takes a breath. She stopped taking notes a while ago. “How many people know the contents of that file?”

“Six Unit 3 members. Sakura, Naruto. Kakashi knows we know.”

“And likely the Hokage too, by now,” Tenten says. She considers Sasuke carefully. “You need to articulate to me why you want to break the contract, Sasuke.”

“I just told you why.”

“You debriefed me on your life,” Tenten corrects. “Now, tell me why.”

Sasuke has been thinking of this and nothing else since Rin told him, *Stay true.* “I’m the designated survivor,” he says finally. “But I don’t think…” He looks out of Tenten’s window and sees the very edge of the Hokage Tower’s silhouette in the distance. “I don’t think I want to survive in Konohagakure anymore. I want to—”

He stops speaking so abruptly that Tenten has to prompt him again. “Sasuke?”

“My brother’s out there,” Sasuke finishes, returning his gaze to Tenten. He knows what he has to do. “Akatsuki is looking for him. He needs me.”

Tenten shakes her head. “If that’s the basis of your request, it’ll get denied. You could request the mission if—”

“I have to leave, Tenten.” It sounds like a plea, but Sasuke doesn’t care. He leans forward and grips the edge of the table. “I can’t—I need to. What oath could I give this city knowing what I know? How can this country ask me to stay loyal when they haven’t even—I have to leave.”

Tenten considers the few notes she has taken, chewing her lip in thought. “That’ll be our argument, then,” she says after a few moments. “That the State failed to uphold its end of the bargain. You don’t need to articulate why you want to leave if I can prove that they broke faith.”

Sasuke feels something like hope stirring in his chest. His heartbeat picks up. A shinobi’s contract and blood oath to his Hokage ends with his death. There is no other way out of this bond. But Sasuke refuses to run, not again. He will walk out a free man. “It’ll work?”

“It’s a hard sell,” Tenten admits. “I’ll start the paperwork. If the Hokage denies it, we’ll go to court. The hearing will be in front of the Senior Council, and then a jury of your shinobi peers will make a decision on your petition.”

“So it could work,” Sasuke insists.
Tenten’s face crumbles, the veneer of professionalism slipping for just a fraction of a second. “It’s never been done before, Sasuke. The idea of breaking your oath only exists in theory. No one has ever done it before.”

“But Jiraiya—”

“Is still Konohagakure shinobi. If his Hokage gives him an order, he has to obey on penalty of court-martial,” Tenten elaborates. She watches Sasuke for a moment before repeating, “I’ll get the paperwork started. That’s the first step. The next step is to make the request to the Hokage in person. We’ll do it together when we’re ready.”

“Today at fourteen hundred hours,” Sasuke says, and Tenten’s eyes widen.

“That’s less than five hours away,” she says. “I can’t—”

“You will,” Sasuke insists, and gets to his feet. “And I’ll ask her myself. If she says no, you can take over.”

Tenten rises to her feet as well. With her heels, she’s Sasuke’s height. “Better get to work then,” she says, more to herself than anyone else. Sasuke is nearly out the door when Tenten calls out, “Before I forget, is there anything else you need to tell me?”

Sasuke considers her question, one hand on the door handle. Full and frank disclosure, she had said. It had felt like confession; he’s never understood the specifics of that particular tradition in the new religion, but he sees its merits now. It’s an unburdening, as if the words themselves hold some weight. Speaking them aloud, setting them loose, makes him feel lighter. And who knows, maybe it’ll help his case if his lawyer knows everything.

“I lied to you when I said Rin had healed me,” he begins, and Tenten’s lips become thin with a frown. “The truth is that my body was already dying, and my soul was already about to pass.” He can see Tenten’s eyebrows rising steadily. He knows he sounds ridiculous—like one of those Old Religion fanatics—but there’s nothing left for him to hide from her. “Rin refused to release me from my oath with her. She took me to the spirit world, where all the ninken are from.”

Tenten takes a step towards him, mouth gaping wide now. “She hid me there, in one of her nests. It’s beneath the Land of Water islands. That’s why I always reappeared from the dead on the island. This nest, it’s…” Sasuke gestures wide. “Beneath the volcanoes, beneath the ocean. It’s not a place where humans go, usually, but that’s where she took me to heal. And in that place…”

Sasuke tries to find the right words to describe the magnitude of what Rin has done for him.

“In that place, Rin filled in the parts of my soul that had already passed over into the other world. She filled it with her own chakra and spirit. She’s done it twice now. It took longer the second time because there was more of me gone, but Rin is stubborn so she spent eight months remaking me. At the end of those eight months, she told me to climb. And not to look down.”

Tenten is breathing heavily. Her earlier incredulity has fully disappeared. “Sasuke, what you’re saying is—”

“The thing is,” Sasuke continues, placing a hand over his heart. The steady thump of his heartbeat is a comforting reminder. “There are side-effects.”

Tenten braces herself against her table. “Side-effects?”

There really is no way to say this without sounding ridiculous. But the worst has been done, so
Sasuke throws caution to the wind. “I can see spirits,” he says, and watches Tenten’s mouth flap open. “Four specific spirits, actually. For the past year and a half now.”

The silence settles for a moment before Tenten finds the words again. “Who?”

Sasuke looks out the window. He can’t see the monument from this angle, but he knows it is just beyond, looming over the entire Village.


Sasuke shifts his gaze away from the window. “You said full and frank disclosure.”

Tenten closes her eyes. “That I did.”

“I’ll see you this afternoon,” Sasuke reminds her, because the last thing he wants to do is waste time fielding her questions about this. He slips out of the room and walks past the inquisitive gaze of Tenten’s assistant. He’s only a few feet away when he hears the door open again behind him and Tenten’s voice issuing rapid fire orders:

Every single case on oaths and blood bonds ever tried by the High Courts, she is saying. I want precedent. Get every single paralegal on this. If my uncle has a problem with the diversion of resources, he can talk to me. And get me a goddamned coffee—

When he steps into the sunlight again, Sasuke takes a deep breath and starts to walk.

He wastes the hours of the day walking around town. He goes to ANBU HQ to change out of Kiba’s clothes and into a spare pair of jeans and a clean, light-gray Henley he keeps in his locker. Then, he visits a bookstore down the street and browses the selection until it gets boring, and then heads to a coffee shop uptown to settle down with a steaming mug of caffeine and some pastries while he watches the crowd drift by. When that gets boring, he goes on another rambling walk around the city, stopping by store windows with particularly bright or creative displays. He watches a seamstress pin a dress expertly onto a manikin for ten minutes before she notices and ushers him in with a stern, If you’re not buying, you could at least help, young man. So he holds a cushion of pins, tape, and scissors for twenty minutes and hands them to her when she asks for them. She sends him away with a cupcake from the back-office, and he licks the icing off his fingers as he follows the Naka River from uptown to midtown.

There is a lot to get done, he knows, loose ends to wrap up, but he finds that he doesn’t care. And besides, he’s always liked spending time like this. The city is large, and in a life filled almost entirely by violence, he appreciates his downtime. He goes to a sports bar in midtown for lunch and orders a greasy burger, a beer, and a hefty side of fries that he finishes while watching a game of baseball on TV. Half an hour before his appointment, Sasuke sets off towards the Hokage Tower.

Kakashi is waiting for him on the steps leading up to the Tower. He straightens from his slouch against the column when Sasuke approaches. “You got a minute?”

Sasuke makes a show of looking at his watch because the alternative is to stare at Kakashi in shock. This is the first time Kakashi has ever asked him this question instead of just ordering it. He doesn’t need to ask Sasuke for his time; it’s already his. There’s still fifteen minutes before his meeting time, but even if he didn’t have it to spare, Sasuke would have said yes. “Sure.”

Kakashi surprises him by walking away from the Hokage Tower, towards the Commons across the street. He picks a path at random, and Sasuke falls into step next to him.

The Commons are the large, central park area that the Hokage Tower overlooks. It is three blocks
long and two blocks wide, the space wide enough that it can contain an ice-rink in the winter, a meticulously maintained rose garden, and picturesque paths for people to walk along. Sasuke isn’t sure where Kakashi is leading him until they get there: the smoking-allowed area of the park, which is nothing more than a grassy knoll set aside from the rest of the Commons and equipped with artistic renditions of cigarette poles. It’s busy this time of day, with shinobi and civilians alike, but Kakashi claps his hand and says, polite, “Clear out, please!”

Sasuke tries very hard not to roll his eyes. Trust Kakashi to empty out the one and only smoking-allowed area of the park just because he wants the space. There is no hesitation as everyone stubs out their cigarettes, salutes Kakashi crisply, and filters away. Kakashi waits until they’re gone before sitting down on one of the benches.

“What an abuse of power, Commander,” Sasuke comments mildly, and takes his seat next to Kakashi. He reaches automatically for his cigarette pack in his back pocket, and finds that he doesn’t have a lighter. He’s cut down on his smoking since training with the Nidaime, but old habits die hard.

Kakashi watches Sasuke with amusement. “The job comes with some perks.” Sasuke dangles a cigarette between his lips and cups his hands around it to focus his chakra. The Shodaime made him practice lighting candles without a katon jutsu as part of his training; lighting the tip of a cigarette is not very difficult by comparison. “Neat trick.”

Sasuke knows for a fact that Kakashi can spark electricity between the two fine wirings of a lightbulb to make it glow. Sasuke's trick is child's play by comparison. He’s two deep breaths into his cigarette when Kakashi does the unexpected and tugs down his face-cloth and holds out a hand. “Sharing is caring, Uchiha.”

They’ve shared drinks, meals, and secrets like My father killed himself and Brother was injured. This isn’t the first time they’ve shared a cigarette, but it is the first time they’ve done it in daylight, without darkness or Kakashi’s face-cloth hiding his features. Until now, Sasuke always made sure to look away from Kakashi’s face so that the man could have his privacy. Now, though, he looks openly.

When he was twelve and Kakashi only twenty-six, Sasuke had watched women trip over themselves to get Kakashi’s attention. He’d heard rumors that Kakashi was handsome, that underneath all his prickly nonchalance was a samurai. He sees it now—he saw it in Amegakure, but not in daylight, not like this—and wonders just what could make Kakashi hide his face the way he does. He asks before he can rethink it. “Why the mask?”

Kakashi makes a gimme motion with his fingers. “Cigarette, and I’ll answer.”

“You told Sakura you quit.”

“I did,” Kakashi answers primly and pins Sasuke with a flat gaze.

Sasuke taps out a cigarette for Kakashi, and when Kakashi leans forward, Sasuke lights his cigarette using the same technique he used for himself. “So why the mask?”

Kakashi gives Sasuke a sidelong glance. “After my father’s failed mission, I didn’t want to be recognized as his son.” Sasuke regrets asking now, but there’s nothing in Kakashi’s voice to suggest he’s offended. Kakashi indicates his spiky silver hair. It’s been freshly cut, so it’s shorter than he lets it get when on missions. “Clearly, I didn’t think the plan through. My hair gave me away.”

Sasuke sucks a lungful of nicotine and releases it between pursed lips. He’s going to be late to his meeting with Tsunade, but he doesn’t care. He can’t remember the last time he and Kakashi had time
“I’ve actually contemplated taking it off,” Kakashi comments mildly. “I spent a day without my mask once when I was nineteen. But by then, it had become this whole thing, and people kept staring so… I just kept the mask.”

Sasuke glances briefly at Kakashi. He’s staring out at the park spreading out below them. Across the Commons, the wide, sloping roof of the Tower is a dull slate-gray in the sun. He’s being uncommonly talkative today, so Sasuke keeps pressing his luck. “It used to drive us crazy.”

Kakashi huffs a laugh. Team 7 had spent years trying to uncover Kakashi’s face. When Sakura and Naruto finally saw him without a mask, they had been stunned into silence. Sasuke still isn’t sure where to look; this is only the second time he’s seen Kakashi without a mask. “I had to amuse myself,” Kakashi comments. “I got stuck baby-sitting three preteens, after all.”

Sasuke slouches into the bench and kicks out his legs. He considers the dull red of his cigarette tip. When he reaches out with his chakra, the embers brighten and then dim. “Bad luck, Hatake.”

This time, Kakashi’s laugh is full-throated. “You were a Sharingan, so naturally you’d be assigned to me. I requested Minato-sensei’s kid, and Sakura was a gift.”

He’d chosen Naruto, was grateful for Sakura, and had no choice but to train Sasuke.

Sasuke flicks some ashes onto the ground. “Bad luck,” he repeats. He’s glad that his voice doesn’t sound as small as he feels.

Kakashi smokes his cigarette with the same casual nonchalance that he does everything. Now, though, his slouch becomes stiff. He doesn’t look at Sasuke when he says, “I didn’t want to see Obito in you every day. That’s why I didn’t request you.”

Kakashi still carries his grief for Obito like a raw wound after all these years. Sasuke knows grief like that; it isn’t difficult for him to look at Kakashi when he admits, “My father saw Uncle Obito in me. He hated me for it.”

Kakashi doesn’t flinch at the admission, but it’s a close thing. Without his face-mask, it’s easier to read his expressions. “Hate?”

Sasuke reaches for his cigarette pack and taps out another. “Maybe not hate. But he never looked me in the eyes. Never even looked at me, really. The few times he did, he’d get angry.” Shisui was the one who explained it to him eventually, just a whispered, You remind him of Uncle Obito, when Fugaku’s temper had flared and Sasuke had suffered for it again. He still remembers Itachi’s stiff anger every time he came home to find Sasuke with new bruises, the way he’d say, I’m here, Sasuke.

Sasuke is sure the others in the family suspected, but they had grown up with a strict father in Yashiro. They saw nothing wrong in what Fugaku did. “My brother and Shisui would take me to the redwoods to play for hours to hide me from my father. They took turns with their ANBU shifts so I wouldn’t be alone. We’d camp out when Father drank too much.”

Sasuke can’t help the quirk of his lips at the memory of those nights—Itachi and Shisui teaching him how to make camp, find a water source, set snares and hunt for food. See, Sasuke? “My brothers taught me how to hide out in the redwoods. For however long I wanted. I could always go to the redwoods.”

For Sasuke, Konohagakure was never the wide streets, or the massive, austere architecture. It was
always the redwoods: the comforting press of the trees around him, the light filtering through—the sounds of the redwoods. He runs miles and miles and miles through the redwoods every day, and he loves every moment of it. He's summoned Rin in the thick of the redwoods not once, but twice now, and even that charred piece of land is dear to him. He would see the trees grow again, tall and wide and everlasting, like giants of old.

Sasuke catches himself—he’s talking to Kakashi the way he talks to the Shodaime, uncensored and unashamed of his words—and looks at Kakashi with a wry smirk. Without his face-mask, Kakashi’s surprise is all the more apparent.

Fathers being cruel to their sons is not unheard of in a hidden village. He’s only ever admitted this part of his father to one other person: the Shodaime (and he remembers the Shodaime’s still consideration of Sasuke’s admission, a casual comment writing off his latest defeat in a sparring session with the Nidaime, *I’m used to getting my ass kicked, Shodaime. My father got me started early.*) Still, this is his family; his memories of them are all he has left, and Sasuke can’t fight the urge to defend Fugaku. “He wasn’t a bad father. He just—”

“He was a bad father,” Kakashi interrupts quietly before Sasuke can talk himself in circles defending Fugaku. Had it been anyone but Kakashi saying those words, he would have punched them in the throat. Maybe something more violent, even.

But Kakashi is Kakashi, and he had admitted to Sasuke, *My father killed himself.*

Sasuke absorbs the comment. “We’re stuck with the fathers we get.”

Kakashi nods at this and goes back to looking towards the Tower. “You have Obito’s smile,” he says after a long time. “You have his heart. He didn’t like leaving people behind either.”

Sasuke follows Kakashi’s gaze. Idly, he counts the patrolling jounin on the roof of the Tower. “When did you find out about my brother?”

Kakashi drops his cigarette to the dirt and grinds his heel in. “When I was sworn in as Commander. Only the Hokage, the Commander, and Lord Danzo have Level Twelve clearance.”

Sasuke is seventeen now. He’ll be eighteen in a month. He was thirteen when he left for Otogakure. *Five years.* “You were ordered not to tell me,” Sasuke guesses, and offers Kakashi a second cigarette.

Kakashi takes it with a mumbled thank you when Sasuke lights it for him. “Sarutobi-sensei had written orders for his successor regarding Level twelve. He was explicit about protecting you. Danzo wanted to burn the documents, but Tsunade-sama’s first act as Hokage was to make sure they would be preserved. They were in the Hokage’s personal safe for a while, but she moved the documents to the Archives, placing them in plain sight, because she knew Danzo wouldn’t think to look there. So it could be found again by someone who was looking.”

Tsunade preserved the truth, Sasuke realizes, when it would have been so much easier to let it burn. She had hid what she had done from Danzo, but she had let Sasuke walk right through the door so he could read the truth for himself.

*Why,* he wants to ask, but he doesn’t have a chance to voice his thoughts, though, because Kakashi keeps talking. “I gave you the report on Obito’s mission thinking you would ask more questions,” he admits, and Sasuke realizes now why Kakashi had even bothered with handing him the evidence. He could have just told Sasuke the truth, but he had wanted Sasuke to see the scroll, realize the level of protection on those seals and ask *why.* “That night, I was so sure you would find me to help with the
seals. I thought I could tell you then. If you just asked me, I could disobey Sarutobi-sensei’s orders and—"

“I’m glad I didn’t ask you,” Sasuke interrupts, unable to listen to Kakashi’s words anymore. He’s never heard the man this agitated; he’s never seen Kakashi clench his hands into fists so tight that Sasuke can see the muscle in his forearm jump. He looks at Kakashi until the man relents and faces him. “I’m glad you weren’t the one who told me.”

If he had, Sasuke isn’t sure he would have been able to sit down with him and share cigarettes while they talked about this.

Kakashi takes a deep breath from the cigarette. “It was such a goddamn—” He runs a hand through his hair, eyebrows furrowing. His hand clenches into a fist again, but this time, it loosens. Quieter, he finishes, “Clusterfuck.”

Sasuke has looked up to Kakashi for so damn long that he almost doesn’t recognize this moment for what it is. He’s heard the man’s voice in his mind for so many years, memorized all fifty-eight rules of his with the conviction that if he just follows Kakashi’s orders, he will be protected from his own worst weakness. All these years, Sasuke has held Kakashi to such high esteem, it’s odd for him to finally realize—

He’s meeting Kakashi’s eyes on an even keel now.

Sasuke remembers, suddenly, that Kakashi is only fourteen years older than him—just nine years older than Itachi.

Most of Sasuke’s memories of Itachi are of them running through the redwoods together, playing games that Itachi concocted (I’ll count to ten, Sasuke). Kakashi is not much older than that, just thirty-one—a few months away from thirty-two. He is old by shinobi standards, but young by most others. He was barely twenty-nine when he found out about the Wildfire Executive.

“You were young. Youngish,” Sasuke offers, parroting words that Kakashi once told him a long time ago, just before he gave Sasuke his ANBU mask. He looks Kakashi in the eyes and says, “You made a mistake. People have done worse.”

Kakashi watches him closely. “Have people done worse?”

Stay true, Rin told him, and Sasuke realizes now how easy it has always been for him to do just that. He stayed true to Itachi, no matter how much he’s tried to convince himself otherwise. Now, he will stay true to Kakashi.

“Well, my dipshit neighbor keeps vacuuming after midnight, so yeah,” Sasuke answers, “people have done a lot worse.”

Kakashi’s lips quirk up in a smile, and his slouch deepens a fraction. Sasuke hadn’t realized how stiffly Kakashi has been holding himself until this moment, and he’s grateful that the odd tension between them feels settled finally.

Sasuke looks towards the Tower, making sure that he isn’t looking at Kakashi’s face when he says, “I’m going to ask Tsunade to release me from my oath.”

Kakashi’s sigh is audible. “Fair enough.”

Sasuke is so surprised by his answer that he turns to stare. “You’re okay with it?”
Kakashi takes a solemn breath from his cigarette. “You’re allowed to ask,” he says on the exhale. “But she’ll say no.”

Because the Sharingan is too valuable. But then again, Tsunade had preserved the documents for someone—Sasuke? Who else?—to find. “Tsunade-sama is full of surprises,” Sasuke says mildly, and at this, Kakashi laughs.

“Yes, she is,” he says after a moment. “She’s a warrior worth having as liege lord, Sasuke.”

This is as close Kakashi will ever come to what he wants to say: *Keep your oaths to Konohagakure.*

“She is,” Sasuke admits, but it’s Konoha he wants to be free from. Not Tsunade. It’s these walls. It’s that strip of land by the Naka River where he burned his kin; that slab of cold stone that sealed his Clan’s fate to blood and war. The dragons gave their secrets to the Uchiha to keep. Sasuke will keep them, but he wants to be free of his oaths for once. He wants to be true to no one but himself for a while. He will settle into his skin like the Nidaime told him. He will settle so deep that nothing and no one will move him again.

He can’t say all of that to Kakashi, though, because he’s not sure he can even form the words for what he’s feeling, that weightless expansion of something in his ribcage. Instead, he says, “I’ve hired Yukari Tenten as my lawyer. I’ve heard she’s good. She said we could take it to court if the Hokage said no.”

“She is,” Kakashi admits. “But if your petition fails in court?”

“If it fails, it fails,” Sasuke says. “I’m going to request to be transferred out to Shinobi Counter Intelligence. I want to find my brother.”

“I’ll recommend that she release you. If she doesn’t, I’ll give you the mission to find your brother, *without* orders for returning with him,” Kakashi promises immediately. He pauses a beat and then says, “Either way. Guess this is goodbye.”

Sasuke is so very grateful that Kakashi is the one who says it that he has to take a deep breath before he answers. “Yeah. Guess it is.”

Kakashi nods. “All right.”

Kakashi looks away before Sasuke does. He turns his attention back to the Tower, and Sasuke follows his gaze. They smoke through another cigarette each in complete silence. “I don’t think they’ll ever forgive me,” Kakashi says after a while.

It isn’t hard to guess who he’s talking about: Naruto and Sakura. “They will. They love you too much.”

Kakashi’s one eye crinkles in a tired smile. “They love you too, Sasuke.”

There’s nothing to say to that, so Sasuke glances at his watch. He’s already forty minutes late. He bends to gather the discarded cigarette butts they’ve accumulated. Kakashi starts helping, and together, they walk to the cigarette pole to deposit their trash.

On the way back, Sasuke leads the way. Kakashi falls easily into step next to him. He doesn’t speak again until they’re at the top of the stairs leading up to the Tower. He places a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder, halting him from moving forward. He looks Sasuke straight in the eyes when he says the words:
“I’m sorry.”  

Sasuke holds Kakashi’s gaze. “I know.” He takes a breath, hears Rin’s reminder from a few nights ago about his own betrayal all those years ago. He never apologized to anyone for walking away when he did. And here he is, planning to walk away a second time. He’s never been particularly good at apologizing, but it’s easy as breathing saying the words to Kakashi. *Stay true. “I’m sorry, too.”*  

Kakashi squeezes his shoulder before letting his hand fall away entirely. “Tsunade-sama will be angry we’re late,” he says, stepping back into his casual nonchalance between one heartbeat and the next. Sasuke feels sure-footed again now that they’re treading familiar ground.  

“We should get our stories straight,” he offers, just as casual in his tone as Kakashi. “I vote a third dimension opening up and leading us to a parallel universe.”  

When Kakashi laughs, Sasuke is relieved to find that it’s genuine. They walk together to the Hokage’s office, trying to outdo each other with more and more outlandish excuses for their delay. Sasuke’s suggestions outmatch Kakashi at every turn.  

The score, Sasuke realizes, is closing: 102-47.  

Tsunade’s waiting room is filled to the brim with people—both dead and alive.  

Naruto and Sakura get to their feet in unison, their hands clasped together. They look exhausted, a bone-deep kind of weariness that has settled into the line of their shoulders. Sakura has circles under her eyes, and Naruto is not as perfectly put-together as he usually is. His Junior Councilor robes are hanging undone, revealing the low-dip of the v-neck t-shirt he has on underneath. His green pendant is resting off-center on his chest. He looks as beautiful as ever, but there’s something raw about his features.  

Tenten is also in the room, and when Sasuke enters, she gets to her feet and approaches him. She holds out a large, sealed envelope for Sasuke to take. Her voice is pitched low so that their conversation is private when she says, “You sure you don’t want me in there?”  

“I’m sure,” Sasuke promises.  

“I’ll wait out here,” Tenten insists, indicating the chairs. “If at any time you need me, you have the right to legal counsel.”  

Sasuke palms the envelope. It’s heavier than he anticipated. “Got it. Thanks.”  

The ghosts are clustered in one corner, far away from the living, standing near Pakkun, as if they had been mid-conversation, which—*Odd*, Sasuke thinks. He remembers Pakkun looking directly at Minato in Amegakure, sharing in his grief as Kakashi had been dying, but Sasuke didn’t know that they interacted beyond that moment.  

Kakashi is surprised by Pakkun’s presence as well. He considers Pakkun for a moment, looking as close to confused as he will ever get. “I didn’t expect you here, Pakkun. I was wondering where you went off in the past few days,” he says. And this too is—*Odd.*  

Kakashi almost never summons his ninken unless they’re training together or for missions. They’ve been bonded for most of Kakashi’s life, so they’re close like Sasuke and his Snake Clan, but Kakashi’s pack doesn’t spend nearly as much time in this world like Sasuke’s snakes. He never hangs out like Kanaye or Daichi might; he’s even older than Rin, and like her, he prefers his own
world.

The fact that Pakkun is in this realm, and that too independent of Kakashi for a few days, can only mean one thing. He was with the ghosts. “Here for the show, Pakkun?” Sasuke asks.

“Kakashi told me what happened. So I spent some time finding some answers,” Pakkun says. He talked to Sarutobi, then, but Sasuke can’t bring himself to look at the man, even when Sarutobi takes a step towards Sasuke.

He doesn’t have acknowledge Sarutobi, though, because Pakkun intervenes. “You should go in there alone,” he says, and although the dog is looking directly at Sasuke, the words are intended for the ghosts.

“I need to talk to you, kid,” the Nidaime says, stepping around Pakkun just as Sakura and Naruto move towards him. “Just step outside for a minute—”

“He will go in alone,” Pakkun repeats, and his voice brings everyone in the room to a standstill. He looks directly at the Nidaime for a long moment. The Shodaime says, “Pakkun, please,” and this time, Pakkun lifts a paw and brings it back down forcefully on the floor. He is one of the smallest ninken Sasuke has ever seen, but the force of his step makes the portraits and paintings on the wall shudder. “I will not repeat myself,” Pakkun growls. “He goes in alone. Enough damage has been done.”

Sarutobi dips his head, and for the first time, he looks old and frail. The Yondaime steps forward to put a hand on the Nidaime’s shoulder. He looks worried, but he doesn’t say anything.

“We agree, Pakkun,” Sakura says hesitantly, and takes a step back from Sasuke, giving him space. “We were just going to wait out here…”

Sasuke looks at her and says the words he wants to say to the Nidaime and the Shodaime. “It’s fine.” Sakura and Naruto both nod, but Sasuke repeats himself again, placing undue emphasis on each word so that the ghosts will understand. “It’s fine.”

“Okay,” Sakura says, sounding small.

“We’ll be here,” Naruto offers. “Both of us.”

“Calm the fuck down, the both of you,” Sasuke says, and this time, he intends the words for Sakura and Naruto. He looks them in the eyes, and holds each of their gazes steady until the pinched look between Sakura’s eyes eases and Naruto manages a small smile. “Kakashi and I talked. It’s fine.”

And besides, the worst is already over.

“Sasuke,” the Nidaime repeats, and his voice is nothing more than a whisper. He doesn’t have the chance to say anything else because Kakashi steps in with, “Let’s not keep them waiting any longer.”

Them? Tenten had made it sound as if it would just be Tsunade and Kakashi in the room.

Sasuke follows Kakashi, with Pakkun close at his heels. Kakashi holds the door open to Tsunade’s office for Sasuke, but just as he’s about to step through, the Yondaime calls out his name. Sasuke turns to look at him. “I’ll be right here, Sasuke,” the Yondaime says carefully.

It’s such an odd thing to say that Sasuke forgets the audience for a moment. “What?”
“I’ll be right here,” the Yondaime repeats. He is looking at Sasuke earnestly, with the same expression of kindness that Naruto always has. “If you need me, I’m just outside the door.”

Pakkun presses a paw into Sasuke’s shin. “Let’s go, kid.”

Sasuke holds the Yondaime’s gaze and tries to telegraph his emotions. It doesn’t work, though, because the Yondaime is still wide-eyed with his worry.

"It's fine," Sasuke says again, ignoring the confused looks Naruto and Sakura share with each other, and the way Tenten goes still, her eyes searching the room. Searching for the ghosts, Sasuke realizes.

The Yondaime nods. “I’m right here,” he repeats, and this time, when Pakkun nudges him forward, Sasuke walks in. The door closes behind him with a soft click, and Sasuke turns to face the audience he has.

Them is Tsunade, Jiraiya, Shikaku, and Hiashi. They have taken seats at various spots around Tsunade’s office:

Hiashi is at an armchair at the seating arrangement, head bowed and a hand covering his face. Shikaku is leaning against the far wall, as far away from Tsunade’s desk as the room allows; he starts when Sasuke walks through the door, looking as if he’s about to say something, but Kakashi steps neatly in between them. Tsunade is at her seat behind her desk, while Jiraiya is standing behind her, slouched slightly against the window sill behind him. He’s staring at a spot somewhere on the ground in front of him.

They know, Sasuke realizes. They all know now.

Kakashi guides Sasuke towards the two chairs across from Tsunade’s desk. He takes one and Sasuke takes the other. Surprisingly, Pakkun jumps up onto Tsunade’s table and sits directly in Sasuke’s line of vision, almost blocking his view of Tsunade herself. It’s a rare show of disrespect, one that has Kakashi shifting in his seat. He looks displeased. Even Tsunade looks puzzled by Pakkun’s strange behavior, but she doesn’t say anything.

On the desk in front of Sasuke is the file he stole from the Archives. The tension in the room is so suffocating that Sasuke yields to his instincts. “Word of advice. If you have a top-secret clearance level, maybe don’t make it so easy to steal.”

Tsunade’s lips curl into a tired smile. “Duly noted,” she says, and her reaction confirms Sasuke’s suspicions. She’d intended for Sasuke to find out. She hid the evidence where he would go looking—the most obvious place in the entire Village. A worthy liege lord, Kakashi said of her, and Sasuke knows this to be true now. They haven’t always seen eye to eye, especially when it comes to Naruto. She refused to heal him once.

But she is Senju Hashirama’s descendant, and it’s not just in the lines of her face, it’s also in the sinew of her heart. Sasuke can’t judge her too harshly, he realizes now, because she saw Orochimaru in him, and then she saw Naruto’s broken heart. Despite all that, she lead a trail of breadcrumbs for him to follow, all the way to Level 12. She even gave Nobuyuki clearance and sent Sasuke in his direction for therapy. Did you tell Nobuyuki to ask me about my clearance level? Sasuke wants to ask, but he doesn’t want to acknowledge it openly, not when Tsunade was so careful with her clues.

The silence returns again, but this time, Tsunade breaks it. “You must have questions.”

“A few,” Sasuke mumbles, and leans back in his chair. Tsunade is wearing her full Hokage robes for today, and there is something about her expression, the way she holds herself, the tilt of her chin, that
reminds Sasuke of the Shodaime and the Nidaime. It’s familiar and comforting, so it’s easier than he anticipated to ask, “What’s the Wildfire Executive?”

Tsunade takes a breath and begins.

Uchiha Yashiro, in Sasuke’s memory, was a stern but loving grandfather. Like Fugaku, he disapproved of how Mikoto showed such open affection with her sons. Itachi was growing into the finest warrior in the nation—maybe even the Continent, at the rate he was breaking records—and the Clan had high hopes for him. Hokage was the unwritten word, but at his age, Sasuke hadn't paid much attention to these details. What was more important was all the games Itachi invented for Sasuke to play—disguised as “training” to appease Yashiro and Fugaku, but Fugaku knew better, because Itachi said as much to him (when he’d put his body between Fugaku’s anger and Sasuke, tilted his chin up and said, We’re going to the redwoods now, Father, and taken Sasuke’s hand to lead him away from all that was ugly about Fugaku’s grief for Obito.)

This is how Sasuke remembers Yashiro:

He had glasses that he balanced at the edge of his eagle-sharp nose, and his hair was thick and long even at his age. He tied it back in the loose ponytail of all Uchiha warriors, and every morning, he would drink a cup of coffee while reading the newspaper.

The Yashiro that Tsunade describes goads his eldest son, Yakumi, into breaking faith with Konohagakure and meeting with an Akatsuki contact named Tobi—now they know Tobi is Madara—to stage a coup. After Kyuubi had attacked and the Yondaime sacrificed himself, the Village was particularly vulnerable to another attack. They had lost too many men in the battles and were still reeling from the damage the Demon had wreaked. In the confusion that followed, Yashiro conceived of a plot to dismantle Konohagakure from within. For his efforts, he would be rewarded the Hokage mantle and control over the Village that his ancestors had forged.

Tsunade describes how Uncle Taro, unwilling to break rank from his family, refused to cooperate with SCI and Jounin Forces. Aunt Tsubasa was the same, and so too, were the others. When the battle call was heard, they would all likely side with the Clan as they had for centuries. The Uchiha Clan laws are explicit: Clan before country.

Uncle Kyoguku was the only one who was willing to enlist in the efforts to stop Yashiro. With him, he brought two young recruits: Shisui and Itachi.

Sasuke grips the chair rest hard when Tsunade says Shisui’s name (ball: his first word, and Shisui and Itachi were the ones who taught it to him). Tsunade must have noticed because she pauses, patient, until Sasuke nods at her to continue.

Shisui was murdered—still a cold case, the truth an unsolved mystery—and Kyoguku lost all motivation to fight.

“The responsibility,” Tsunade says in the stillness of the room, “fell to your brother.”

He was thirteen, Sasuke wants to say. What kind of thirteen-year-old can shoulder that kind of responsibility? But he loses his window of opportunity, and Tsunade presses forward. Sasuke’s mind goes oddly quiet as Tsunade describes how Sarutobi issued the orders after getting approval from the Senior Council, how Itachi had carried them out, how he had requested to act as an undercover agent to track Akatsuki’s movements...

Sasuke doesn’t notice Tsunade has finished talking until Pakkun gets his attention with a soft, Hey,
kid. His claws scratch loudly against the wood of Tsunade’s desk.

Sasuke stares at his hands. It’s hard for him to organize his thoughts, but the first question he needs to ask is obvious enough. “Grandfather and Uncle Yakumi were the ones. Why were the others targets?”

“Because the others would have retaliated. Our intelligence and interrogation records showed us that Clan always came before country for your family members—”

“Sarutobi-sensei couldn’t have known that,” Sasuke interrupts.

Tsunade doesn’t falter. She isn’t being unkind, but she has shown no sympathy yet. It’s as if she has draped herself with steel for this confrontation. The Hokage robes make it impossible for her to distance herself from the full horrors of what Sarutobi allowed to happen. She isn’t being cruel; she’s doing her job as much as she is able to without disobeying her own sensei—and how, Sasuke wonders, is she even living with this when she loved Sarutobi-sensei so?

Sasuke tries to imagine being in her place, imagines having to defend Kakashi for the same sins as Sarutobi.

“The decision was made at the time to carry out the executive,” Tsunade continues. “The circumstances forced the Hokage’s hand.” The Hokage, not Sarutobi-sensei. She will not name Sarutobi; she will name the mantle he wore.

There is no way to counter Tsunade’s sure-footed navigation around something so horrific, but Sasuke doesn’t understand yet, not fully. “You could have had SCI carry out the orders. A team of ten. It would have been easier than asking my brother to watch his own family die at the hands of a madman—” Tsunade looks as if she’s about to say something, so Sasuke switches tactics, tries to think of a more humane way that his Clan could have died. “—or you could have ordered my uncles out to a mission somewhere far away, taken care of it away from the Village that way. Or maybe even—”

“It had to be from within,” Tsunade says steadily. “To minimize the damage.”

Sasuke has to look away from her then and over his shoulder. I’ll be right here, the Yondaime promised. And with him are the Nidaime and Shodaime. They will help him make sense of this. He needs to leave.

Tsunade continues to talk: A ten-man covert op team would not have been enough, not against a Clan as large and powerful as the Uchiha. Not against eleven Sharingans. It would have required a platoon, maybe even a larger force. The damage would have been too great, and the fallout too wide. Eliminating each of the Uchiha individually would have taken too much time and the thinning ranks would have raised Yashiro’s suspicions sooner or later.

The Village was in no position to swallow the truth about traitors within their midst, Tsunade explains. The strain between the great families was already at a tipping point. Revealing that one of the founding Clans was considering a coup would have been too destabilizing, especially since the punishment would be so severe. Regardless of all this, Sarutobi Hiruzen was only carrying out the Wildfire Contingency laid down by his CO—

Sasuke looks back towards Tsunade at this. “Sarutobi-sensei’s CO? Danzo?”

Pakkun says, “Sasuke, please—” just as Tsunade answers Sasuke’s question:

“No. Lord Danzo was Sarutobi-sensei’s teammate. Their CO was Senju Tobirama. He was their
genin team leader, their Commander, and later their Kage.”

Sasuke feels the breath leave his body. It’s as if he is underwater for a moment, sounds muffled around him and light becoming murky. “—the Contingency was developed by Senju Tobirama when he was Hokage. It was a fail-safe to protect the Village against the Uchiha Clan. He developed it after Uchiha Madara’s betrayal, with the understanding that the Uchiha Clan posed a threat, and that when the day came for their eventual betrayal, the Clan would need to be dismantled from within to maintain the balance of the other tribes that had gathered under the Konohagakure banner. The Nidaime-sama explicitly ordered Sarutobi Hiruzen to carry out his orders if the time ever came. After the Kyuubi attacked the Village and Minato died, there was intelligence suggesting that an Uchiha controlled the demon and orchestrated the attack. We now know that it was Madara, but at the time, the Uchiha Clan was willing to defect to his cause rather than stay true to—”

Tsunade keeps talking, explaining the decision-making process in greater detail. Under the steady barrage of her words, Sasuke can’t keep his footing. He had walked into this room thinking he already knew the worst of it. He hadn’t prepared to face a truth that led back to the Nidaime.

But that can’t be right. None of this can be right.

“Are you sure?” Sasuke asks. Tsunade looks puzzled, so Sasuke elaborates, “How can you know for sure it was the Nidaime’s orders?”

Tsunade glances at Kakashi, as if unsure how to proceed. Jiraiya gets to his feet from his slouch and steps forward, as if he’s about to say something, but Tsunade holds up a hand. She reaches into one of the drawers behind her desk and pulls out a folder.

Pakkun bows his head. “Don’t, Tsunade.”

“No, Pakkun.” Tsunade pushes the folder across the desk. “He has a right to know.”

It’s a two-page memo, laminated to preserve it over the ages. Still, the ink has faded and the paper is worn with time. At the top is the seal of the Commander of the Joint Forces, slightly different from the one that Kakashi now uses, but still recognizable. Underneath is a looping scrawl of someone’s handwriting.

It is a point-by-point analysis of the danger posed by the Uchiha Clan, the reason for the need for a contingency, and a brief description of how to go about eliminating the threat:

Do it from within so the Clan consumes itself from the inside. Do it completely so no survivors remain and no opportunity exists for retaliation. Do it without drawing attention to maintain the balance of the Clan alliances.

At the bottom, there is a sharp, angled signature: Senju Tobirama.

Sasuke runs a finger over the letters.

He can’t help himself. He asks, “You’re sure this is the Nidaime’s signature?”

He could step outside this room and ask, but he knows the answer already. He just needs to make sure, because in this document, the Nidaime had written about the inherent untrustworthiness in the Uchiha Clan. They are not our allies, he had written, the Uchihas do not share the ideals of honor, integrity, and bravery that is the foundation of this country.

Tsunade’s surprise is uncensored this time. “Yes,” she says slowly. “That’s his signature. Sasuke, I can assure you that these orders were legitimate and authenticated by—”
“It was a different time, then,” Pakkun explains. Kakashi clears his throat at the interruption, but Pakkun doesn’t pay him any attention. These are the answers he was seeking from the ghosts, Sasuke realizes. *Pakkun knows everything*, all that has happened before and after Sasuke met the ghosts. He is here to speak for the ghosts, to defend them. Sasuke realizes then that Pakkun is still talking, still defending the Nidaime. “—the demons were at war; the Village was new. Madara had betrayed Hashirama’s trust. Tobirama had just buried his own brother—”

“But he wrote this,” Sasuke confirms, and holds out the document for Pakkun to see. He feels like he’s suspended in this moment, unable to move forward and back. He wants to go back and undo the moment Tsunade had named the Nidaime. But the proof is in his hands. “He signed.”

“Tobirama did what he thought he needed to do. He had a Village to protect, two wars on his hand. He couldn’t hold the country together with a civil war brewing. He was grieving, Sasuke. Hashirama had just passed and—”

“He signed,” Sasuke repeats and indicates the signature again. “Right here, Pakkun. That’s his signature.”

“He had to.”

Sasuke stares down at the document in his hands. Just last week, Rin had told him that his grief was different this time. That he could swallow it whole and not yield to it. Now this. He can’t focus on the words.

He realizes a moment later that his hands are shaking. “I said the word to him.”

Pakkun sounds tired when he speaks. “What word, kid?”

“Fratricide.” The word slips out, uncensored, and it is such an ugly, ugly word, as ugly as the deed itself. “He looked me in the eyes and said it was justified. He told me it was honorable for me to kill my own brother.”

Pakkun’s defense is immediate. “Tobirama did what he had to, Sasuke. You have to understand—”

“He looked me in the eyes,” Sasuke repeats. “Every single day. He saw what it was doing to me, and he didn’t say a single word—”

“He couldn’t,” Pakkun insists, but Sasuke talks over him.

“Sarutobi-sensei, I get. He signed the orders, and he didn’t want me to know. But why didn’t—”

“He couldn’t,” Pakkun says, pleads. “Tobirama wrote those godforsaken orders during a time of war, three days after he buried Hashirama. You have to understand why he couldn’t tell you. He had no choice—”

“He told me I was justified in murdering my own brother, even though he knew my brother was innocent,” Sasuke says, and his voice is thick. He blinks against the sting in his eyes and is grateful that his cheeks are still dry. “He had a choice in that, Pakkun. If nothing else, he didn’t have to tell me that.”

Sasuke tells himself that this is no different from Kakashi keeping his silence, that it is no different from Sarutobi signing the orders. But the weight of the Nidaime’s secret feels heavier. It settles somewhere deeper.

“Let’s step outside,” Pakkun suggests, voice pitched low. “Just you and me.”
But outside, the ghosts are waiting, and Sasuke isn’t sure how he will face them again. He still remembers the moment, the soft press of snow against his forehead as the Nidaime said the words.

“He looked me in the eyes, and told me it was honorable, Pakkun.”

“Let’s step outside,” Pakkun tries again. “Please, Sasuke. This is not the place or time for this.”

There’s an audience for this, and he’s forgotten them for a moment. Sasuke glances over his shoulder and sees that Nara Shikaku has straightened from his slouch and is staring at him with saucer-wide eyes. Sasuke needs to get out of here before any more damage is done.

The envelope Tenten gave him is on the floor by his chair. Sasuke bends to retrieve it and places it on the table. “Hokage-sama, I am requesting that you release me from my oath to Konohagakure. I give you my word that you will never find an enemy in me or my keep. I ask that you set me free from my blood bond.” Sasuke pushes the envelope forward. Tsunade doesn’t move to take it, but Pakkun does. He places a paw on the envelope.

“She’ll consider it,” he promises in her stead and looks Sasuke square in the eyes. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way.”

“No,” Sasuke corrects. “You’re sorry I found out at all.”

Pakkun sits down heavily. “I was hoping Tobirama’s name wouldn’t come up,” he admits. So that’s why he was here, Sasuke realizes. Not to defend the ghosts, but to try and conceal the full truth of this. “But I am sorry, Sasuke.”

Sasuke doesn’t know what to do with that, so instead he pushes his chair back to get to his feet. He’s about to leave when he notices, now, the small portrait of the Shodaime on the wall behind Tsunade. It’s an official portrait, the Shodaime wearing his full Hokage robes and hat, both his katana strapped into his sash.

Oddly, at the same time that all the pieces fall into place, Sasuke thinks about sparring with Lee. That is what this moment feels like: he takes a punch, and then another, and just when he thinks he has reprieve, some kind of defense against the attacks coming his way, there is another blow that drags him down.

The weight of the truth is so staggeringly powerful it nearly makes his knees buckle. “He knew, too.”

Pakkun follows Sasuke’s gaze. So do the others in the room. Tsunade is the one who speaks. “The Nidaime Hokage wasn’t inaugurated until the Shodaime Hokage had passed,” she explains, enunciating as if she herself is unsure. “Sasuke, I’m not sure—”

“He knew,” Sasuke repeats, because the Nidaime may have signed the document after the Shodaime died, but surely, the Nidaime has told him the full truth since.

“No, he didn’t,” Tsunade insists. “I can assure you, Sasuke, that this directive was—”

“Don’t do this to yourself,” Pakkun whispers, and this time, all his gruff insistence has vanished.

“He knew,” Sasuke repeats and with his next step, the back of his knees hit the edge of his chair. When he exhales, it comes out as a soft oh. Sasuke remembers how he had stood in front of his superiors and been forced to explain where he had been after he went missing in Amegakure. He’d looked the Shodaime in the eyes—and no one else in the room—and admitted, I’m exhausted. The Shodaime had known then, had known in every moment before and every moment after. He had looked Sasuke in the eyes and said, I know you are, son.
“Please, child,” Pakkun murmurs, stepping over both the Nidaime’s memo and Sasuke’s envelope to get closer to Sasuke. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

Sasuke places a hand against his forehead, presses down hard, in the same spot the Shodaime would rest his cold hand every night that Sasuke woke up from his nightmares. The man has kept vigil by his bedside nearly every night since that first day they walked into Sasuke’s apartment. He has seen Sasuke gasping for air, choking on his own grief. He's waited, patient, every time Sasuke staggered into the bathroom to wash off the stench of his own sweat from his night terrors.

Sasuke covers his eyes with his hand to shield the Shodaime from his vision, exhales again, and this time, he hears, distantly, his own voice saying over and over again, *oh no, oh no no,* even as he feels dampness against his fingers.

He thought it was an exchange he could learn to live with: knowledge of Itachi’s innocence for the names of everyone who held the truth from him—Sarutobi, Kakashi.

Maybe even the Nidaime, eventually.

But this truth settles deeper still.

“He loves you,” Pakkun insists, and his voice is thick, too, as if he’s grieving. It reminds Sasuke of the way he’d sounded when Kakashi was gasping his last breaths outside of Amegakure. “Like a son, he loves you.”

Sasuke lets his hands fly into seals. Fugaku had been cruel, true, but Sasuke can’t remember an instance of such cruelty as this. “I had a father, Pakkun. I only needed the one.”

He finishes with crane seal.

If Tenten is surprised to see Sasuke in her office, she doesn’t show it. “Please,” she says dryly, “make yourself at home.”

Sasuke lifts his head from her sofa. It’s a sleek, slate-gray thing that is not at all comfortable—it’s about two feet too short for Sasuke to fit on—but after the meeting, Sasuke could think of nowhere else to go but Tenten’s office; the Shodaime and the others would no doubt look for him anywhere else in the city. He hadn’t intended to fall asleep, but he laid down on the couch and fell asleep almost instantly.

His watch says two hours has passed since his meeting with Tsunade, but Sasuke can’t find it in himself to be upset about wasting time like this. He’s grateful for the rest, because when he pushes himself up, it’s to find that the disorienting buzzing in his head and the numbness has vanished. He only feels tired and sore from falling asleep in such an uncomfortable position.

Tenten sits down on one of the armchairs before slipping off her heels with a sigh. “So that was odd.”

“What was?”

“The Hokage called me in after you vanished,” Tenten explains. She settles into her seat more comfortably. “I thought she was going to ask me about your appeal, but mostly there was a lot of yelling between Jiraiya, Tsunade, and Pakkun about the Nidaime and Shodaime Hokages. And then the Captains got involved, and the Commander was just *quiet* the whole time—” At this, Tenten stops speaking abruptly. She glances around the room. “Are they…?”
“No,” Sasuke answers immediately, predicting the question. “They’re not. What happened?”

“Pakkun wouldn’t answer Tsunade-sama’s questions so she tried to get me to give her the details instead,” Tenten answers. “But I don’t think she even knew what questions to ask. I mean, how could she? It’s almost too hard to believe.” She pauses for a moment, watching Sasuke carefully—looking, Sasuke realizes, for a clue that Sasuke is lying. When Sasuke holds her gaze, she heaves a sigh. “She asked me what I knew about the Nidaime Hokage or the Shodaime Hokage, things like that.”

Sasuke rubs a hand over the stubble on his face. “And?”

“And nothing, Uchiha. Attorney-client privilege,” Tenten reminds him, and bends at the waist to begin massaging her feet. “My God my feet hurt.”

Sasuke glances at the offending shoes. “Why wear them?”

“I like what they do to my silhouette,” Tenten answers crisply. “Also, they match my dress nicely.”

Sasuke frowns. “You can’t fight in those things.”


Sasuke isn’t sure if it’s the post-nap sluggishness or if it’s Tenten, but he’s having trouble keeping up with the conversation. Her question, at least, is an easy one to answer. “Yeah.”

They place a massive order of rice and meat side dishes ahead of time, and by the time they get to the restaurant—one of Tenten’s favorites, apparently—their food is waiting in neatly packaged plastic bags. Tenten makes Sasuke carry all the bags, which is only fair given just how much of the food is Sasuke’s order. She leads the way to her place, a brownstone in one of the more expensive neighborhoods in the Village.

It’s small, but inviting. Tenten ushers Sasuke inside, past her living room and to the kitchen in the back. The dining table is small. It’s covered with papers, notebooks and scrolls. In the end, they end up settling down in the middle of the living room. They sit down on the floor and use the low-set coffee table to spread out their food. Sasuke has never spent more than a few minutes at a time interacting with Tenten, and it’s surprising just how easy it is to share a meal with her. There is none of Sasuke’s usual awkwardness around someone new; they fall into a conversation without much fanfare and the time slips by. Sasuke even tells her about where he buried the loot he stole from the ghosts’ graveyards; she looks so horrified she makes him promise that he will never, ever reveal the location of the loot. “I’ll take care of it,” she says, stern. “Just don’t tell anyone.”

There’s something about her easy acceptance, the way she does not mince her words or try to obfuscate with unnecessary pleasantries or politeness that makes it easy for Sasuke to relax in her presence. She reminds Sasuke of Karin, but with none of Karin’s manipulations. “How much do you really charge?”

“Per hour?” Tenten tilts her head in consideration. “Seven hundred ryo an hour for my time. I have paralegals and assistants on my team who charge at lower rates.” Sasuke whistles low, impressed despite himself, and is awarded with a smile. “You didn’t think I was that good, did you?”

“I knew you were good,” Sasuke admits. He lifts his beer and empties the last dregs of it. “I just didn’t know how big a favor you were doing for me.”

“Another?” Tenten says, leaning over to take Sasuke’s empty bottle. Her braid slips over her
shoulder, and Sasuke finds his eyes drawn to the loose strands of her hair—she had pulled off the tie holding it together, and as the night wore on, the curl of her hair has loosened. There is an angle to her eyes and a sharpness to her cheekbones; a man would have to be blind not to notice her. Tenten snaps her fingers in front of Sasuke’s face. “Focus, Uchiha. Another drink or no?”

Sasuke’s looks away from her collarbone dipping down into the folds of her dress. “Yeah. If you have another.”

Tenten is about to answer when the phone rings, shrill and sudden in the cozy space of Tenten’s living room. She stretches over the armchair to reach for the phone on the coffee table. “Yukari.” Her smile disappears almost immediately at whatever she hears. A few moments pass before she speaks again. “Yes—Is this negotiable, or…? I’ll take it to my client—Thank you.”

She turns to Sasuke immediately after hanging up. “This day just gets stranger and stranger.”

Sasuke roots around in one of the empty take-out containers for a leftover veggie roll he spotted a few minutes ago. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Tenten says, and leans over to place a hand on his knee. “Sasuke. The Hokage granted you another meeting to discuss your petition.”

The news doesn’t sink in at first, and then, all of a sudden, it does. “What?”

“I mean, it’s just a meeting, but—”

“But she’ll hear me out?” Sasuke interrupts. His heartbeat has picked up between one breath and the next.

“I can’t believe she didn’t deny the request immediately,” Tenten says, disbelieving. “Tomorrow at nine. We meet with her and high command.”

The silence settles again as they both consider the news. After a few long minutes, Tenten straightens. “I need another drink,” she announces, and glances down at her wine glass. “But I’m thinking hard liquor.”

Sasuke holds up his empty bottle. “Great minds.”

Sasuke wakes up feeling like utter and complete shit. Tenten doesn’t feel any better judging by the way she groans, “Time.”

Sasuke slaps at the bedside table and finds a clock. He squints at the face. “Fifteen past seven.”

“Back to sleep, then,” Tenten orders and pulls the covers over her head.

Sasuke stares up at the ceiling. He is very aware of the fact that he is not wearing any pants. “Did we—”

“Nope,” Tenten answers.

Sasuke very distinctly remembers the easy slide of her zipper and the smooth skin on her back as he unhooked her bra. He concentrates on that memory until the murkiness disappears: they’d undressed, they’d fallen into bed, and then, just as Sasuke had hooked his fingers under the lace of her underwear, Tenten had looked up at him and said, This is a very, very bad idea. So they’d settled on opposite sides of the bed, Sasuke frustrated and hard, but sleep had come soon thereafter.
So technically, no. But—“Close call.” Sasuke breathes a sigh of relief. It would have been such a monumentally stupid idea to fall into bed with Tenten. He actually likes her.

Also, she and Naruto are very close friends and colleagues.

“Very close call,” Tenten agrees, sounding half-asleep already. “Coffee pot downstairs if you need.” Sasuke stretches, but his hand knocks up against the headboard. “I’ll let myself out.”

“I’m not kicking you out, boy wonder.” Tenten’s head emerges from under the covers. She looks unhappy. “I just really need a coffee to get out of bed, and I forgot to turn on the timer on the machine last night. I like mine black. Two sugars.”

It doesn’t take Tenten long to shower and get dressed for the meeting, and there’s plenty of time for them to walk over to ANBU where Sasuke showers, shaves, and changes into another set of fresh civilian clothes. It’s the same outfit as yesterday—jeans and a Henley, this time white, because Sasuke doesn’t stock his locker with anything beyond the basics that he buys in bulk at the store. This time, though, he takes the time to clean out his locker. He dumps his uniforms and armor into the bin for cleaning services, and packs everything else into his duffel bag: his clothes, spare set of training shoes, his hitai-ate, dog-tags, and ANBU mask. There are also pictures, more than he thought he would ever accrue: Team 7 when they were first formed; the framed picture of Sasuke and Kakashi that Naruto gifted him; Unit 3 at a bar for Shino’s birthday; and a candid picture of Sasuke and Akamaru drooling onto the benches in the locker room after a particularly long mission. Akamaru’s head is resting on Sasuke’s stomach, and they are both utterly oblivious to the world.

He ties his katana loosely over his back. When Tenten spots him coming down the steps of ANBU HQ with his belongings, her eyebrows go up. “Cleaning out already?”

Sasuke shrugs, trying to be nonchalant. He looks back towards ANBU HQ to avoid looking Tenten in the eyes. He’d been Lieutenant for all of a few months, and much of that time had been on a leave of absence. It’s nothing in comparison to Kakashi’s looming legacy. But Sasuke remembers Kakashi’s mask and the pictures of Unit 3 tucked carefully into his bag: there is more than one way, he realizes, to take pride as a CO. “Might as well start.”

Tenten places a hand lightly on Sasuke’s elbow to get his attention. “Breakfast?”

They end up tucked into a booth of a diner with mostly civilians. The food is not the best, but Sasuke is so hungry he ends up eating most of their breakfast menu. Tenten only orders a toast and her third cup of coffee for the morning. They eat mostly in silence, making quick work of their food while Tenten speculates on the nature of the meeting Tsunade insisted on. There is no precedence for this, she explains; Tenten is flying blind.

They’re getting up to leave when Tenten steps close and asks, “Is the reason why you’ve been avoiding your apartment because they’ll…be there?”

“Yeah,” Sasuke answers and drains the last of his water. It’s twenty minutes to nine, and they need to head out if they want to make it to the Tower on time.

Tenten takes a breath before she responds. “You’ll need to go back eventually.”

“Eventually,” Sasuke agrees, and reaches for his wallet to pay for their meal. Tenten is about to protest but Sasuke puts a hand up. “It’s the least I can do.”

Tenten gets a coffee to go before they leave. “If I don’t get more caffeine, I will stab the next person I see with my hairclip,” she promises darkly, inhaling the smell of her coffee before taking a careful
“Do you always weaponize your accessories?” Sasuke asks mildly, and this earns him a laugh before Tenten launches into her favorite topic: weapons. She starts talking excitedly about a new metal that Land of Earth shinobi are using to make their shuriken more aerodynamic. Apparently the density hits the right spot and makes the torsion of the shuriken spin more lethal.

As they get closer to the Tower, though, Tenten falls more and more silent. “I need to be in the room with you this time,” she insists as they make their way past security.

Sasuke clips on the visitor’s badge the security guard hands him. “I can manage on my own, Yukari.”

“No,” Tenten says, stepping close as they round the corner towards Tsunade’s offices. “It’s important that I’m in the room, Sasuke.”

She knows more than anyone else; there is no point in barring her from the meeting. Sasuke concedes the argument and opens the door for her. “After you,” he says, and steps close to usher her in with a hand at the small of her back.

“Quite the gentleman,” Tenten says, looking impressed despite herself.

Sasuke flashes her the jaunty grin he learned from Shisui. “I aim to please.”

“And if you could aim to let me do the talking,” Tenten instructs. “That would please me greatly.”

Tsunade’s assistant is waiting for them and gestures at the heavy double-doors leading to Tsunade’s offices. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” Tenten says and leads the way. She pauses at the door to remind Sasuke, “Remember. I talk.”

Then, they’re walking in. It’s a repeat of yesterday: Jiraiya, Kakashi, Hiashi, Shikaku, and Pakkun. They are all exactly where they were before, and for a moment, Sasuke wonders if he’s reliving the same day over again. The only difference this time is Tenten, and the ghosts. They’re scattered about the room—Sarutobi is sitting next to Hiashi on the couch. The Shodaime and Nidaime are standing over Tsunade’s right shoulder, and the Yondaime is sitting where Sasuke had been the day before. Pakkun is on Tsunade’s table again, and he’s staring directly at the Yondaime.

He forgets Tenten’s warning entirely. “Oh for fuck’s sake.”


The Yondaime gets to his feet. “Uchiha, listen to me,” he says. “We need to talk before you have your discussion with Tsunade-sensei. All of us together. Before any more damage can be done or you make any rash decisions.”

Sasuke was hoping this meeting would go smoothly, but with the ghosts involved, there is no guarantee of that anymore. He looks pointedly at Pakkun, hoping he will intervene. For once, Pakkun does not disappoint. “This is neither the time nor the place,” Pakkun says with a low growl.

“We looked everywhere for you,” the Shodaime says, stepping forward. “Sasuke, we need to talk. Please.”

Sasuke makes absolutely sure not to look at the Shodaime. He keeps his eyes focused on the
Yondaime and Pakkun instead. “Do something.”

“I tried my best, kid,” Pakkun says.

The Yondaime crosses the distance of the room towards him. He places a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder and steps so close that Sasuke’s breath starts coming out in a fog. Next to him, Tenten takes a sudden, wrenching step back, smacking into the closed door behind her with the force of it. Between one moment and the next she has armed herself with two kunai. “Sasuke, I have seen enough movies to know what a sudden chill in the room means.”

“You told her?” Pakkun thunders.

“Attorney-client privilege,” Sasuke says and shrugs off the Yondaime’s touch so violently the ghost steps back. He stalks towards the chair across from Tsunade before the ghost can react. So help him God, he will get through this. He will walk out of this room with his freedom, and he will do this without the ghosts' interference. It had been easy to look Kakashi in the eyes and say, People have done worse. It will take a lot more for him to do the same with the Nidaime and the Shodaime. As for Sarutobi—

Pakkun looks heavenward. “You are the stupidest human I have ever known in my entire unfortunate existence.”

“Sasuke,” Tenten calls from her defensive position by the door. “You are not paying me nearly enough for this.”

Sasuke unties his sword and sets it on the duffel bag next to his chair. “They’re harmless.”

“Harmless?” the Nidaime grumbles as Tenten walks cautiously towards Sasuke. Kakashi, ever the gentleman, yields his seat to her. “Kicked his ass from here to Iwagakure every day for months and he thinks I’m harmless he says, as if—”

“Let’s get started, Hokage-sama,” Sasuke says very loudly.


Tsunade’s mouth drops open. “What in hell is going on here?”

Sasuke looks at Tenten pointedly. Tenten clears her throat. “Hokage-sama, we were told that this meeting was to negotiate the release of my client from—”

“We’ll get to that,” Tsunade says, climbing to her feet. She braces herself on the table and pins both Pakkun and Sasuke with her gaze. “Explain. Now.”

“No,” Pakkun says flatly before Sasuke can respond. “Release him, Tsunade.”

“Don’t do this, son,” the Shodaime says and walks towards him. Sasuke stays perfectly still in his chair and doesn’t take his eyes off Tsunade even when the Shodaime places a tentative hand on his shoulder. “Sasuke, please. This is your home.”

Tenten doesn’t miss a beat. “My client has no obligation to answer any questions unrelated to his petition,” she says crisply. “You are far beyond your authority if you think you can leverage my client’s petition to extract information of some kind—however irrelevant—”

“Counselor, do not test me,” Tsunade says. “I have half a mind to throw this punk’s ass in jail until —”
“Your ancestors built this village,” the Shodaime says. “This is your heritage and your inheritance. Do not let what happened take that away from you—”

Sasuke has to look up at the ghost then. His Mangekyou is stinging with his chakra. Pakkun tries to step in with a quiet, “Not now, Sasuke,” but the Shodaime is talking still.

“I could not tell you,” he whispers. “I did not know how—”

Sasuke gets to his feet. “We need to reschedule this meeting.”

Tsunade looks thunderous. “Sit down.”

The Nidaime steps into Sasuke’s line of sight. The Shodaime was the one Sasuke learned poetry from, but the Nidaime can read Sasuke like a book. “If you’re thinking of running back into the forest to hide again—”

His temper flares to life, like kindling sparking into a fire. Hide? “I’m leaving. I’m going to go find my brother, and we’re going to put that motherfucker Madara in the ground, and then, we’re going as far away from this godforsaken city and this goddamned country—”

“No,” the Nidaime says sternly. “You’re running. You’re hiding.”

Both the Shodaime and Pakkun step in at the same time: The Shodaime with, “Tobirama, please,” and Pakkun with a loud, “Enough.”

It’s too late though. The Uchihas do not share the ideals of honor, integrity, and bravery, the Nidaime had written, and those are the words Sasuke hears in his mind when he pulls his hand back for a punch.

It’s not as embarrassing as the first time Sasuke attacked the Nidaime in the hotel room. For one, Sasuke sees the counterattack coming from a mile away. Still, he ends up on the floor with his face pressed into the carpet and his hand at an awkward angle. “Sloppy,” the Nidaime chides even as the Shodaime steps forward, calling his brother’s name. Pakkun’s voice is nothing more than a growl now, low enough that it makes Sasuke’s hair stand on end.

Sasuke tries to push himself up with his free hand but the Nidaime’s boot is on his back and he is pressed back down so hard his forehead smacks against the rug. “Oh, fuck off.”

“Make me,” the Nidaime says, and Sasuke groans at the widening angle of his hand. Nothing breaks this time, although Sasuke keenly feels the dangerous pull of the muscles along his ribs.

Pakkun jumps off the table and barrels into the Nidaime. He doesn’t do much besides make the Nidaime flicker once, and scrabbles to his feet at the force of the impact when he collides with the bulk of the Nidaime’s torso. “Enough, Tobirama.” The Nidaime only stares down Pakkun, so Pakkun switches tactics. He rounds on the Shodaime. “Get your brother in line, Hashirama. Now.”

The Shodaime doesn’t have to step in because the Nidaime lets go of Sasuke’s hand of his own volition. The Yondaime and Sarutobi are immediately at his side. When Sarutobi reaches out to place a hand on his arm to check for damage, Sasuke scrambles back. “Don’t touch me.”

“Uchiha,” the Yondaime reprimands, but it’s not unkind. “You have to understand—”

“He was following orders,” the Nidaime says sternly. “If you have a problem, it’s with me.”

“Following orders,” Sasuke snarls, and hauls himself to his feet. It’s hard for him to expand his lungs
“fully, but he still finds the breath to say, “Is that what you tell yourself to sleep at night?”

“I did what I had to do,” the Nidaime interrupts. There is no warmth in his face anymore.

“You talk about doing the right thing—”

“Because it was.” The Nidaime does not budge.

No collateral damage, Itachi had written in his report. “Of course. Because the great Senju Tobirama could never be wrong—”

“Sasuke, please,” Pakkun insists, trying to use his body to push Sasuke away from the confrontation. Sasuke holds his ground.

“No, Pakkun. The Yondaime is right. Let’s fucking talk it out.” He feels his chakra stirring in his gut.

“I buried my brother,” the Nidaime says, and it’s almost as if the fur trimming of his robes are shifting with his chakra. The temperature in the room has dropped steadily, and now, Sasuke’s ragged breaths are coming out in puffs even though he’s standing across the room from the Nidaime. Even Pakkun’s breaths are misting over. “He died trying to appease the Uchihas. The wars we fought, the ones that your family prolonged because Madara would not yield, the men I lost…do you have any idea what the world was like back then? The body count? I don’t need your fucking permission, boy, and I don’t have to explain myself to you—”

“You looked me in the eyes, and you told me it was honorable for me to kill my big brother,” Sasuke breathes, and this is what halts the Nidaime’s words. When the Nidaime doesn’t respond, Sasuke takes the opening to press his case. “How is that fair? You get to grieve for the Shodaime by ordering my Clan into extinction, but I don’t even get the courtesy of being told my brother was innocent? You’d rather watch me kill my own brother than tell me the truth? You saw what it was doing to me. You saw, but you’d rather watch me kill myself than tell me the one thing—the only thing in this world—that could give me some kind of peace? What did I ever do to you to deserve that kind of punishment?”

The Nidaime takes a deep breath. The hard line of his shoulders slumps. “Kid. I couldn’t—”

“What did I ever do but follow your orders?” Sasuke has to take a breath. His voice is cracking on every other word, and he can’t swallow past the lump in his throat. The hand the Nidaime twisted is a dull throbbing pain, but it is nothing in comparison to the wild beat of his heart. He was hoping to leave this Village without ever having to look the Nidaime in the eyes ever again. But here he is, feeling as if he’s being gutted, as though he’s offering up his insides for the Nidaime to consider. “I followed every single fucking one of your orders. You said jump, and I said, how fucking high—”

“I had to—”

“You talk about honor and integrity. Apparently, I can never have those things because of my blood, but what about you? What kind of monster does that to another human being, lie to them like that every waking second of every fucking day? You watched me mourn my brother when I thought he was dead. You stood vigil with me for fourteen hours. And you said nothing. And all three of you knew. You and Sarutobi-sensei and—”

He looks at the Shodaime then. Even at this distance, he can tell that the man’s eyes are wet with tears. “You knew what he’d done, and you covered for him because he’s your little brother. I get that, I do, he’s your little brother. But you didn’t have to lie to me. Every fucking day, you told me everything was going to be all right even when you knew otherwise.”
There is silence after Sasuke has finished talking. He wipes angrily at his face before he turns to Tsunade. “I broke my oath once, I know, but I’ve paid my dues. I paid it in blood. I died for this fucking country, and I dug my way out of my own filth to serve and obey orders again. But I just want to go find my brother now. He’s alone out there, and he needs me. He needs backup, and nobody in this fucking Village has thought to send him reinforcements despite all that he’s done for you. Just let me go.”

Tsunade is standing still as a statue. She has one hand outstretched, as if she’s about to move, but nothing happens. “Let me go,” Sasuke repeats. “Please.”

Tsunade doesn’t respond for so long that for a moment, Sasuke wonders if he needs to get on his knees. Pakkun spares him from having to do it. He says, quietly, “Hashirama. Release him.”

The Shodaime squares his shoulders. “Uchiha Sasuke, I release you from your oath to Konohagakure.” He clears his throat before he finishes the words, but his voice is still thick and halting. “The duties of your blood bond have been fulfilled.”

Sasuke looks towards the ceiling and takes a deep, shuddering breath. He has to close his eyes for the words to sink in. He’d thought that this moment might be joyful, but he doesn’t feel anything close to relief or joy. What he feels reminds him of Orochimaru—in his petty moments of cruelty, Orochimaru would order Kabuto to cauterize Sasuke’s gaping wounds with the flat of a heated sword and nothing else to dull the pain.

He remembers then the only thing that is left to do. The zipper of his duffel bag is loud in the quiet of the room, and he has to dig before he finds what he’s looking for. The hitai-ate is light in his hands, worn and still a little muddy from his last mission. He places it on Tsunade’s desk. The Shodaime leans forward and places his hands on the hitai-ate, but his fingers pass through. “I wanted to tell you.”

Sasuke ties on his katana and throws his duffel bag over his shoulder again. He faces the Shodaime and looks him in the eyes. “I would have listened to you.” All those quiet moments in the early morning, their rambling walks when the Shodaime taught him the names of flowers and trees and great poets, taught Sasuke how to string together a sentence and take step by hesitant step away from his own grief and self-doubt. The Shodaime could have told him the truth in any one of those moments. “I would have listened to you. I always did.”

The Shodaime looks helpless, and it’s the first and only time Sasuke has ever seen him with this expression. It doesn’t suit him; he is Senju Hashirama, nothing less, but now he looks devastated. “I was afraid I would lose you” he admits finally. “I was not sure if I could live with your anger and disappointment in me.”

Sasuke can’t stand to look at the man’s bald-faced grief anymore and turns to leave. “You’re already dead, Hashirama-sensei. You don’t have to live with anything.”

He’s almost at the door when Pakkun says, “Sasuke. Don’t leave it like this.”

The door shuts behind Sasuke quietly, and the moment it does, the sound of overlapping voices erupts to fill the silence.

Mrs. Miyake is flabbergasted at Sasuke’s request. “But when will you be back?” she asks for the fourth time, and places a hand over her heart. There is a fine dusting of flour and sugar on her black apron. The ovens are glowing a soft orange with the morning’s batch of fresh pastries. There’s a line of customers outside, but Sasuke had made the decision to intrude and break the news to her.
Sasuke pulls out the business card that Tenten gave him and holds it out for Mrs. Miyake. “This is my lawyer’s card. She’ll make sure my rent is paid out in full until you can find someone to take over the lease.” It’s a month-to-month lease, so he’s hoping he won’t have to worry about it for long. “I’ll leave my furniture, free of charge, so you can advertise it as fully furnished. I know this is last minute but—”

“Oh, child,” Mrs. Miyake breathes, and instead of taking Tenten’s business card, she grips his hand in both of hers. “I’m not worried about the apartment. I’m worried about you. They can’t just send you away from your home like this, can they?”

Sasuke doesn’t have the heart to tell her that he requested to be freed. It’s too long a conversation, and it’s already mid-afternoon. “Orders are orders.”

Mrs. Miyake takes Tenten’s card then and peers at it. “When do you have to leave?”

“First thing tomorrow morning,” Sasuke says. Mrs. Miyake looks as if she’s close to crying, and Sasuke takes a step back to beat a hasty exit.

“You’ll see me before you leave, though?”

“I will,” Sasuke promises, and heads up to his apartment to begin packing.

It takes him longer than he expects. Somehow, without realizing, he has accumulated things: clothes, training equipment, textbooks on military history and strategy, kitchenware, even a shiny coffee maker that gurgles out coffee at four in the morning every day without fail. He sorts through all his belongings as quickly as he can, separating items into those he will take with him and those he will donate. There’s a fine layer of dust over everything in his apartment from his long absence. He does a perfunctory cleanup while he’s moving from one space to the next. What takes longest are his family’s pictures. He pulls down the frames and carefully packs all the pictures away for travel.

In the end, he manages to narrow down his belongings to a single traveling bag: mostly clothes, weapons, and a spare set of shoes.

The bank is his next stop, and it takes some persistence to explain to the clerk—and then her manager—that yes, he intends to withdraw all his savings. They send him out the door with a small bundle of stacked bills. It’s not much, but it’s more than enough to last him for what lies ahead.

By the time he makes it to the stables, it’s almost five in the afternoon. The stable hand—a petulant teenager who can’t be older than thirteen—isn’t impressed when Sasuke asks to speak with the owner. He leads Sasuke to an office in a building a few hundred yards from the stables and opens the door with the barest hint of a knock. There’s a distracted come in, and then the boy is pushing the door open. “Dad, someone here for you. Shinobi.” He doesn’t bother to show Sasuke inside, just flings the door open wide and stalks away, but not before glowering at Sasuke over his shoulder.

The stable owner gets to his feet with a smile. He is a thickly built man with gray hair and stubble. There’s a short knife strapped to his waist and he’s wearing heavy working boots that thud dully against the worn hardwood floor as he approaches Sasuke with an outstretched hand. “Naganuma Arata.”

“Uchiha Sasuke,” Sasuke says, and the man’s grip goes stiff for a moment.

He hides his surprise quickly, though. “Mr. Uchiha. What an honor. How can I help?” He gestures for Sasuke to take a seat. There are two seats across from the man at his table, but one is piled high with ledgers. Sasuke sidesteps this chair and takes a seat in the second, looking around the office
while Arata takes his own seat. The office is large, but there doesn’t seem to be a single wasted space. There are ledgers and books everywhere. The couch pushed up against the far wall has a saddle perched on it.

“I need a good horse,” Sasuke explains. Naganuma’s eyebrows rise up so high they almost disappear in his unruly mop of hair. Shinobi do not use horses: they are too noticeable, leave a trail that even a blind man can follow, and require resources that a shinobi may not be able to spare on missions. But Sasuke isn’t going on a mission. He is traveling far, and he needs to arrive at his destination with enough energy to put up a fight. A horse can shorten the journey and help him carry his belongings.

Besides, there is only one person who would want to track him, and Sasuke just so happens to want him dead. It’s a win-win. “For long distances,” he explains.

Naganuma considers Sasuke. “You’ll be wearing armor?”


Naganuma flips open a book on his desk. “I can put together a list for your consideration. You can come back tomorrow to see the horses—”

“I need one tonight,” Sasuke interrupts neatly.

Naganuma stares, but then he gets to his feet. “I have just the girl for you.”

Michi is an inky-black heavy warmblood with a white birthmark over her left eye. Her coat is so dark it almost looks like an indigo blue in the yellow lighting of the stables. She snorts and paws when Sasuke presses a hand against her snout, her tail flicking eagerly at the attention. “She was actually bred for armor and battle, but did better with distances,” Naganuma explains, running a hand over her flank lovingly. Next to Michi, Naganuma seems diminished. “For long distances, I’d recommend a smaller horse. But given your height and weight, I’d suggest a larger breed. Heavy warmbloods do nicely for your purpose, I think.”

Sasuke looks into the button-black depths of her eyes. The lashes of her left eye are white; the ones on her right are black. When she pushes her head against Sasuke’s chest, her breath is a hot, gusting mist over his face. “She’s perfect.”

They haggle over the price and settle on a reasonable deal that includes all the gear Sasuke will need: saddle, reins, and even a spare blanket for Michi. They part ways with the agreement that Naganuma will have her outfitted for travel tomorrow; Sasuke can come by and pick her up from the stables any time after five in the morning.

It’s dark by the time Sasuke makes his way back to his apartment. He senses the chakra signatures a few blocks away—easily noticeable because in the civilian district where Sasuke lives, it’s odd to spot such a large cluster of high-level chakra users—and is prepared by the time he opens the door to his apartment.

All of Unit 3 is present, along with Sakura, Tenten, Ino and Hinata. Naruto is nowhere to be found.

Kiba indicates the spread of food on his dining table with arms flung out wide. There is an odd assortment of balloons tied to every conceivable surface: most read, HAPPY BIRTHDAY, although there is one violently yellow balloon with a bear saying cheerfully, GET WELL SOON. There is a cluster of pink ones tied to the bathroom knob that screams, IT’S A GIRL. “Surprise!” Kiba turns to the others in the room. “You’re supposed to say surprise!”

Akamaru barks happily. “He would not have been surprised, Kiba,” Shino points out, but Kiba just
scowls at him.

Neji is the one to explain. “Heard you’re hitting the road, Uchiha.”

Sakura gets to her feet. “I thought it might be nice to send you off with a bang,” she says, smiling tentatively.

Sasuke eyes the pizza, chips, and assortment of junk food piled high on the dining table. There is an entire keg of beer to one corner. A warm feeling blooms in his chest, and he doesn’t fight as hard as he should against the smile threatening to break out. “Am I supposed to share the food with all of you?”

Ino rolls her eyes. “We’ve got the pizza place on speed dial, Uchiha. Shut your trap and get in here. I’m starving.”

The surprise party—as much as a party can be a surprise for a shinobi—lasts several hours. They eat their way through all the food, drink the keg dry, and then settle in a loose circle in the seating area. Sakura is pressed up against him, head resting on his shoulder while Sasuke drinks steadily and listens to the others laugh and talk over each other. The night only ends when Sasuke realizes that Sakura’s breathing has evened out. He turns his face into her hair and mutters, “Haruno.”

She wakes up almost instantly, stiffening a moment before going lax against him again. “Sorry,” she murmurs, and presses her face into his shoulder more firmly. “Long shift.”

Lee hm-s under his breath. “And you’re on call tomorrow,” he reminds her.

Sakura pushes herself up and blinks blearily at Sasuke. “When are you leaving tomorrow?”

“Six. Western gate,” Sasuke answers.

Sakura nods. “I’ll see you then,” she promises and gets to her feet.

Lee holds out a hand. “Home?” he prompts, and Sakura nods tiredly.

The others get to their feet soon after and make quick work of the cleanup. The goodbyes aren’t too drawn out—soldiers are used to goodbyes, Sasuke knows—but they linger longer than usual. Neji grips his hand for a long time. “Keep in touch, Sharingan.”

Sasuke shrugs. “I’ll try.”

Kiba throws an arm across his shoulders. “You better visit, Sasuke, so help me God I will hunt you down and strangle you dead with my bare hands.”

“We did track you down once before,” Shikamaru observes mildly. He holds out a hand for Sasuke to shake. “Don’t make us do it again.”

Chouji envelops him in such a bone-crushingly painful hug that he lifts Sasuke off his feet a few inches. The others are more subdued. What surprises Sasuke most, though, is Hinata pulling him into a hug and holding him tight to whisper in his ear, “You have friends and allies here, Sasuke. Always remember that. This is your home and your land, whether or not a blood oath holds you to it.”

Shino and Akamaru are the last ones to leave. Akamaru nudges Sasuke gently with his head. He makes a soft chuffing noise when Sasuke scratches between his ears. “Thanks, Akamaru.”

Shino waits for Akamaru to bound down the stairs before pinning Sasuke with his oddly leonine
gaze. Sasuke gives the man space to form his words because Shino is a quiet man, and when he
speaks, it is always worth listening with care. “I have noticed that some people do not do well with
goodbyes,” he offers finally. “Naruto, for example.”

Sasuke grips the door. “We’ve said goodbyes before, Shino.”

“You’ve run away, Sasuke. Or you’ve been ordered to march. Naruto has had practice with those
kinds of goodbyes. This is the first time you’re leaving.”

Sasuke hates himself for asking, but he does anyways. “Why didn’t he come today?”

“Does it matter why or why not?” Shino asks, tugging his jacket closely around himself. He smiles,
and in an instant, the hard lines of his face melt entirely away. “I assume you’d want privacy,
regardless.” Sasuke doesn’t have a response to that, so Shino just places a hand on his shoulder and
squeezes. “Safe travels, my friend.”

When the door to his apartment finally slides shut, the apartment feels too empty. Sasuke doesn’t
give himself enough time to second-guess himself, just lets his fingers fly into seals. It takes two
rounds of the transportation jutsu for him to hop across the city. His first landing is graceful, but he
nearly breaks down the door with his second landing.

Naruto wrenches the door open a moment later. “Can’t you knock like a normal person, you
bastard?”

It’s not the friendliest hello, but Sasuke will take what he gets. “I misjudged the landing,” he offers,
and can’t help but let his eyes wander down to the narrow strip of skin showing between the line of
Naruto’s shirt and the hem of his worn-looking sweatpants.

Naruto cautiously swings the door back and forth a bit, considering the hinges. “It doesn’t seem
broken…”

“You weren’t at the goodbye party,” Sasuke says before he loses his nerve entirely.

Naruto frowns. “I had work.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” Sasuke presses, trying to find any give in Naruto’s odd hostility. He doesn’t
have much luck though, because Naruto crosses his arms across his chest and leans against the
doorframe, blocking any entry Sasuke could make. Clearly, he’s not being invited in tonight.

“Okay.”

Bad at goodbyes, Sasuke thinks, is an understatement. He pushes his hands into his pockets and
rocks back on his heels, feeling suddenly awkward. “Just…wanted to let you know.”

“I know,” Naruto answers curtly.

For lack of anything better to do, Sasuke hitches a thumb over his shoulder. “I should get to bed.
Early morning.”

“Good night,” Naruto says and steps back into his apartment. The door shuts in Sasuke’s face.

Sasuke stares dumbly at it for a moment. He doesn’t move, though, because he can sense Naruto’s
chakra just beyond the door, standing still.

Count, he reminds himself, and squares his shoulders.

The door opens again, but less violently than the first time. Naruto rests his forehead against the doorway, not making eye contact. Sasuke lets a few seconds pass before making a decision.

It’s a risk, but he takes it anyway. He takes a step towards Naruto. And then another, and finally a fourth, until they’re close. Naruto is still pressed against the doorway, looking at a spot over Sasuke’s shoulder. It isn’t until Sasuke dips his head into Naruto’s space that his gaze flickers up. “I have no goddamn clue what you’re playing at, Uchiha.”

Sasuke gathers all his courage to himself. “Let me buy you a drink.”

The surprise on Naruto’s face is worth it. “A drink.”

Sasuke shrugs. “Ichiraku is closed,” he says. They’ve had meals together before, just the two of them. They’ve had one or two drinks before, too, but Sasuke doesn’t want just that. So he amends, “A date.”

Naruto’s mouth flaps open. No words come out though, and in the quiet moments that follow, Sasuke thinks that Naruto will say no, that he has pushed too far. Instead, Naruto takes a deep breath. “Let me get my jacket.”

Naruto lives close enough to downtown that they don’t have to walk far to find an establishment that is still open. The walk itself is quiet, but before it can get too awkward, they’ve arrived at a bar and are being asked for IDs. For so late on a Saturday night, there is a decent crowd. There are no tables left, so Sasuke leads them to the bar, some people turning to look as they walk by—both shinobi and civilians alike. Naruto is enough of a presence in the media and in the Village that he draws attention wherever he goes. It’s even worse now that Naruto is still wearing his comfortable looking pajamas, with just a snug-fitted jacket thrown on top.

His ass, Sasuke can’t help but notice, looks divine.

Naruto takes off his jacket at the bar with a scowl and hangs it up on the hooks underneath the countertop. Sasuke leans back on his stool to check (being careful not to be obvious about it)—and yes, Naruto’s shirt has ridden up, the band of his sweats has stretched a centimeter lower, and the threadbare fabric of his pants is thin enough that the perfect globes of his ass are plump and round. “Stop staring at my ass,” Naruto mutters. He doesn’t look angry, though, just surprised. “My God, this is a date.”

Sasuke drags his eyes away—such a perfect ass, he thinks, Gods be good—and considers the beer selection written in chalk on the boards overhead.

“I’m underdressed,” Naruto points out when Sasuke deigns not to answer.

Which is true, Sasuke knows, because everyone else here is dressed for a night out. But it’s not as if anyone with half a mind would complain that Naruto is underdressed. For once, Sasuke is better dressed than him—but only barely. He’s still wearing the same clothes from this morning, and he’s fairly certain there is horseshit stuck on his shoes. “You look fine,” Sasuke says as casually as he can, and turns to get the bartender’s attention. They both order: Sasuke an oatmeal stout, and Naruto a gin and tonic.

Naruto waits for his order to arrive before talking. He stirs his drink thoughtfully and stares at the clinking ice-cubes when he asks, “When do you leave tomorrow?”
“Six.”

Naruto goes still, gaze coming up to look at Sasuke in the eyes. “Tsunade, Jiraiya and Kakashi-sensei have been arguing with Pakkun all evening. They won’t tell me what happened in the room, but even Kakashi-sensei looks freaked out and—”

“Naruto,” Sasuke interrupts quietly. “Could we not?”

Naruto presses his lips into a thin line. “What? And pretend that this is just a normal date?”

Sasuke takes a breath. Of course they can’t keep the peace for even a moment. When he’d asked Naruto out for a drink, he’d been hoping for—he doesn’t even know what he was hoping for. It might have been the alcohol at the goodbye party, or maybe Shino’s parting words, but either way, he just wanted—“Why not?”

“You’re leaving tomorrow,” Naruto says, and now, his face crumbles. “You barely speak to me for months and—”

“You didn’t want to speak with me when I came back from Amegakure,” Sasuke points out.

“I buried you,” Naruto says. His voice is loud over the subdued din of the bar. “In an empty casket because they didn’t bring back a body. You were gone for eleven months—”

“I came back,” Sasuke points out. The bartender is throwing them odd looks, but Naruto doesn’t seem to care. He pushes away from the bar and gets to his feet.

“I can’t do this,” he breathes, reaching for his jacket.

Sasuke grabs Naruto’s elbow as he’s walking by, getting to his feet as well. “Naruto, wait—”

“Let go,” Naruto warns, trying to pull away. Sasuke breaks all his rules and holds on, pulling Naruto back towards him. Naruto tries to twist away, but Sasuke counters easily. “Naruto, listen—”

He’s interrupted by a large man—mid-twenties, medium build, a jounin from the Land of Lightning. He’s wearing the armband of a diplomatic attaché on his arm. “Hey, buddy, he told you to back off.”

Sasuke turns to the jounin. “This isn’t any of your business.”

The jounin’s eyes track between Naruto and Sasuke. “I think it is—”

“Seriously,” Sasuke growls, stepping into the jounin’s space. “Back the fuck off.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Naruto snaps, and tugs at Sasuke’s arm. “Let’s go.”

Sasuke reaches for his wallet and throws down a few bills on the counter. The bartender is watching him with measured eyes. He looks towards Naruto and says, very carefully, “Do I need to call KPD, Mr. Uzumaki?”

“No, thank you,” Naruto says, curt, and spins on his heels. Sasuke has no choice but to follow. He catches up to Naruto just outside the door of the bar.

“Would you just listen, Uzumaki—”

Naruto rounds on him. “What do you want?” He throws up his hands. “A quick toss in the sheets before you hit the road? Is that what this is?”
Sasuke’s nails are digging half-crescents into his palms. He has to count to ten before he can answer. “I wanted to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye, then,” Naruto says, but he doesn’t leave. Instead, he just stands in front of Sasuke, chest heaving. It’s only now that Sasuke notices just how bright Naruto’s eyes are under the streetlights. “Is Kakashi-sensei’s crime so bad that you have to go? Is it so bad that he kept the secret from you?”

“I need to find my brother. He needs my help.”

“You always need to find your brother,” Naruto says. “And it is frankly ridiculous that you think that Uchiha Itachi can’t take care of himself.”

Sasuke has no way to explain his reasoning. Only the Shodaime Hokage had understood enough to release him from his oath. “Naruto.”

Naruto covers his face, breathing deeply. “You’re breaking my heart, Sasuke. You’re always—”

It’s easy then to step forward and pull Naruto to him. Naruto doesn’t resist this time, just presses his face into Sasuke’s shoulder and takes deep, unsteady breaths. I’m sorry is what Sasuke wants to say. What he says instead is: “That was a bad date.”

“It was,” Naruto agrees, voice muffled by Sasuke’s shirt. “If you had hit that jounin, you would have started an international incident, you idiot.”

“He was an ass,” Sasuke offers, and Naruto laughs at this. He tilts his face up, and this close, Sasuke can see the full depth of the scars on Naruto’s face. I’m sorry is what Sasuke wants to say. Goodbye is what he needs to say. What comes out is: “Am I really always breaking your heart?”

Naruto wipes at his face. He still hasn’t moved away, so Sasuke doesn’t loosen the grip he has around Naruto’s waist. “Not always, no. You have your moments.”

Sasuke has imagined, in those rare moments when he allows himself to daydream, a different sequence of events. The fantasy always starts with his family. They are whole and healthy. He imagines that he met Naruto in school, that they are assigned to the same team, and that they spend the years growing up together and fighting beside each other. He imagines that one day, maybe after a long evening of training, he’ll screw up his courage and ask Naruto out. Dinner and a movie, maybe. The movie will be uninteresting, but dinner will be ramen at Ichiraku. Nothing special, really, but Naruto will have a good time, so that when Sasuke leans in for a kiss, he won’t push him away. Sasuke’s imagination always gets fuzzy after this—maybe a second date? He’s never been able to figure it out. It’s as if there’s a wall in the way, as if he can’t picture what might lie beyond just the first step of trying to win Naruto’s heart.

Naruto presses his face against Sasuke’s shoulder again, and Sasuke finds himself not minding in the least that he’s standing here like an utter idiot under the streetlight, holding Naruto close in the middle of the sidewalk. He could let the silence lie, but it feels as if it’s been years since he’s heard Naruto’s voice. So he prompts him with something to ease the tension of the moment. “This couldn’t have been the worst date you’ve ever been on, though.”

The tip of Naruto’s nose is cool against Sasuke’s collarbone, and he can feel Naruto’s smile against his skin. “No,” Naruto allows. “You get a solid A for effort, but this might be the end of the road for this particular venture.”

I’m sorry. Sasuke finds himself asking the question despite himself. Goodbye. “What do people do if a first date goes well?”
It’s a dumb question, but Naruto gives it due consideration. “A second date.”

Daring, Sasuke lifts a hand from Naruto’s waist and lets his fingers push slowly through the thick of Naruto’s hair. The texture is finer than he’s imagined given how lush Naruto’s hair always looks. It’s softer, too, and Sasuke lets his hand drop back down to the small of Naruto’s back to pull him even closer. He presses his face into Naruto’s hair and breathes deep, learns the smell for the first time. Goodbye. “And after the second?”

“Third, fourth,” Naruto says slowly. “Fifth. Sixth. Seventh… If things are serious, they settle down.” The concept is so foreign to Sasuke, even though he sees Sakura doing just that with Lee. Kiba and Hinata, too. “They get married,” Naruto goes on quietly. “In church. A small ceremony in the summer, with family and close friends. Three bedroom, two-and-a-half-bathroom starter house with a front yard for the kids to play in. Two or three kids. Maybe four.”

It’s an oddly specific answer, and Sasuke realizes that this is what lies beyond that wall in his imagination. Naruto had imagined the rest of it, filled in the blanks with a sequence of events that Sasuke has never even considered. “I hate him already.”

Naruto pulls back to look up at him. “Who?”

It will kill him one day, this very moment. Sasuke will think back on it and hate himself for it. Oddly, he remembers the Nidaime, the way he had said, I was a coward once. But this isn’t cowardice. This is just what needs to be said, what has to be done. “The son of a bitch you choose,” he says. “Whoever it is. For the summer wedding in church and the starter house with the front yard for the kids.”

Naruto takes a quiet, shuddering breath. “Jealous, bastard?”

He’s trying to make light of the situation, but Sasuke can’t find it in himself to play along anymore. “Yeah.”

Naruto attempts a smile, but it’s a weak effort. “You could stay. I’m willing to negotiate on the details.”

Sasuke takes the chance to run the back of his knuckles against the sharp cut of Naruto’s cheekbone. The edges are smooth, not like any scar on Sasuke’s body. He hadn’t thought they would be smooth. “Tomorrow at six. Western Gate.” Goodbye.

Naruto steps back from the circle of Sasuke’s arms, and Sasuke feels bereft from the loss. “Thanks for the drink. I had fun.”

Neither of them had touched their drinks and it has been a miserable thirty minutes together, but Sasuke lets it pass. He knows what Naruto is doing—the cliché of the line is hard to miss—so he counters it with another of his own. “Yeah. We should do it again sometime. I’ll call.”

Naruto’s smile is still shaky, but he tries for it anyways. Sasuke can’t bear to watch Naruto leave, so he turns away first.

He’s getting really damn good, he realizes, at walking away from Naruto.

He wakes up early and does a final check of his belongings. He carries the donation boxes downstairs and piles them in the back alley where Mrs. Miyake puts out her trash and recycling for pickup every Wednesday morning. She opens the back door even before Sasuke finishes hauling all his belongings down and ushers him inside.
The back kitchen is warm and smells like fresh bread. Mrs. Miyake sits Sasuke down at the exact same table where she had first fed him her batch of twelve cookies, and feeds him a hefty breakfast. She also packs food for Sasuke to carry with him: bread, dried fruits, nuts, and some cheese. Sasuke returns to his apartment for a shower, and hefts his rucksack and sleeping roll over his shoulder. All told, he can carry the entirety of his belongings in both hands.

Mrs. Miyake’s eyes go wide when she sees Sasuke descending the stairs looking like a Northern warrior. He has a long journey ahead, and he didn’t want to wear his usual Konohagakure uniform. Instead, he’s pulled out the clothes that he had traveled with when he returned from Amegakure all those months ago. Northerners are nomadic still, and their clothes have the easy convenience and durability needed for long, hard journeys. Instead of armor, he has leather around his forearms and stretching across his chest: not enough to stop a sword, but enough to dampen the effect of a kunai or shuriken. He’s rolled up his wolf-fur cloak into a roll, but he’s put on the lighter, inner lining of the cloak that Karin gave him. It snaps behind him as he descends the stairs. His sword is tied at his waist for now, alongside the battle-ax that Jugo gave him.

“Going North, I suppose,” Mrs. Miyake says, voice shaky with tears.

“Going wherever I need to go,” Sasuke says, and lets Mrs. Miyake pull him into a long, desperate hug as she whispers a prayer in his ear to take care, child, come back to us soon, come home soon. Take care.

The stables are just coming to life when Sasuke knocks on Naganuma’s office. The man’s eyes go wide when he sees Sasuke with all his gear, but he doesn’t say anything besides, “Right on time, Mr. Uchiha. Good morning.”

Michi is waiting for Sasuke, her coat gleaming in the light of the rising sun. She’s been outfitted with a good saddle and stirrups. Naganuma watches quietly as Sasuke ties up his bag, rolls and weapons to her side, and checks his food and water supplies for the last time. He steps forward only after Sasuke is done with an outstretched arm. “Safe travels, Mr. Uchiha.”

“Thank you,” Sasuke says, and leads Michi out the stables and down the still empty streets towards the Western gate. She’s a brave, inquisitive mare with a good gait and a good nose; she zeroes in on the apple Sasuke has put in his pocket almost immediately. Sasuke lets her eat it out of his hand, talking to her quietly so she gets used to his voice and letting his chakra move lightly across her coat so she can recognize him and won’t spook if his chakra flares. By the time they get to the Western gate, it’s a little past six.

Sakura, as promised, is waiting for him. So are Naruto, Kakashi, Pakkun, and—oddly enough—Jiraiya.

Michi tugs at his reins when he comes to a stop by the group. Sakura is the first to speak. She has a small bag prepared. “You know the drill,” she says. “White for fever, yellow are antibiotics. I’ve packed a first aid kit just in case. Try to use sterile technique when possible.”

Sasuke packs the bag into his rucksack and turns to her. “Thanks.”

Sakura offers him a teary smile. “Don’t be a stranger, Uchiha.” For once, Sasuke takes the initiative and draws Sakura into a hug. Her grip is almost bruising around his shoulders. Sasuke dips his face into her hair, and does what Kakashi always does: he presses a kiss to her crown. Goodbye.

When Sakura pulls back, her face is wet with tears. “I’ll see you,” she says, voice shaking despite her best effort at being stern. “I will see you.”
Sasuke nods. “Sure thing, Haruno.”

Naruto clears his throat, and Sakura steps back. Naruto doesn’t say anything though. He doesn’t even step forward. He just holds out a small pouch for Sasuke to take. It feels almost empty, and Sasuke is about to look inside when Naruto stops him with a hand on his wrist. “For the road. If you want it.” He squares his shoulders and offers Sasuke a hesitant smile. “If you don’t, just… mail it back.”

Sasuke tucks it into his kunai pouch—what is it, he wants to know, but Naruto didn’t want him to open it just yet. They stare at each other for a moment too long, but before it can get too awkward, Kakashi steps up to the rescue. He is slouched as always, but there’s a sharpness in his gaze that reminds Sasuke that Kakashi was in the room when he had his aching conversation with the Nidaime and Shodaime—no doubt, that’s why Jiraiya is here. He’s not sure how much of the puzzle Kakashi has pieced together, but he’s not sure he cares either.

Before Kakashi says anything, Sasuke holds out a hand for him to shake. Kakashi takes Sasuke’s hand in a firm grip. “You got everything you need?”

Sasuke nods. “See you around.”

Kakashi nods, his eye crinkling with a smile. “You know where to find me.”

Sasuke is about to leave when Jiraiya clears his throat loudly. He pulls out Sasuke’s hitai-ate. “This belongs to you.”

Sasuke looks at it uncertainly. “I thought I had to leave it.”

“Usually, yes,” Jiraiya says, pressing it into his hands. “But Tsunade wants you to have it. If you ever change your mind.”

Sasuke considers his hitai-ate. The last time he left, Naruto had held onto it for him. This time, though, he kneels by Pakkun and lays it on the ground. “You’ll give it to him?”

Him being the Shodaime. Pakkun doesn’t need an explanation. “You could give it to him yourself.”

Jiraiya mutters under his breath, Oh my God, but Sasuke ignores him and gets to his feet before he changes his mind. “He’ll convince me to stay,” he says, and busies himself with tightening the straps on Michi’s saddle.

Pakkun doesn’t let him get away that easily, though. “You can’t leave without—” He stops abruptly, which is what draws Sasuke’s attention away from Michi. He follows Pakkun’s sight and sees that in the distance, on one of the empty parapets, the four ghosts have gathered. “Go talk to him,” Pakkun prompts.

Sasuke stares at the Shodaime’s familiar silhouette. On any other day, he’d be finishing up his session with the Shodaime at this time. They’d be returning from one of their early morning walks in the woods.

“Kid,” Pakkun says. “Just go talk to—”

“He’ll convince me to stay.” He has to look away from the ghosts then because he can already hear the Shodaime’s argument in his mind. Kakashi is staring at him openly, as is Jiraiya. Sakura and Naruto are looking at Pakkun oddly, trying to follow the conversation.

Pakkun sighs. “Is that such a bad thing, kid?” Sasuke tugs at Michi’s reins. He’d hoped for a clean
break, but it’s dragging out again, reopening the same old wounds one more time. “What do you want me to tell him, then?” Pakkun asks. He pushes at Sasuke’s hitai-ate on the ground with a paw. “What should I say when I give this to him?”

“Tell him—” Sasuke can’t look up at the ghosts, so instead he looks out towards the Hokage Monument in the far distance. He can only see the Shodaime in profile from this distance. “Tell him I said thank you for releasing me from the oath.” He takes a breath. “Tell him I’m sorry if I disappointed him.”

“You know one of the first things he said when I was chewing him out for this shit show?” Pakkun asks quietly. Sasuke presses his forehead against Michi’s neck, grounding himself with the feeling of her soft coat to buttress himself against Pakkun’s words. “He told me he’s proud of you. He was proud from the very first moment, and he always will be. No matter what you choose to do.”

Sasuke swings onto Michi’s saddle abruptly, unable to listen to Pakkun anymore. Michi must sense his impatience now, because she paws at the ground. Sasuke nudges her into an easy trot towards the gate. The chuunin on duty opens it, the metal groaning into life as it rumbles open for Sasuke to pass through.

He is a few hundred yards out when he looks over his shoulder. The Village gate is still open. He can see Naruto, Sakura, Kakashi and Pakkun—they are still watching him. He can’t tell their expressions this far away. He shields his eyes against the sunlight and looks up at the parapets. It takes a moment, but he spots them standing vigil against the bright sky.

The Nidaime breaks from the rest of the group and comes to the edge of the wall. He is completely still for a moment—Sasuke almost looks away, but then the Nidaime raises a hand.

Sasuke returns the gesture—regrets, for a brief, disorienting moment, that he walked away without saying anything else to them—but he turns away before the regret can harden.

The road stretches ahead of him.

End

Chapter End Notes

I’m not usually one for long author notes, but I thought this story might require it because so many of you took the time to write thoughtful messages and comments—and you have done this over years. The time stamp on FF.net for this story’s publication date is August 2008; on AO3, it is 2013. I was 17 when I started writing this. You have all grown old with me during this process.

I appreciated every single note of encouragement, feedback, and criticism. I promise you, I read every single comment, even though I didn’t respond. Some of you wrote stories and made art for this story. Still others pitched in through ko-fi when I mentioned I was in a bit of a tight spot. Thank you.

Another thanks that needs to be said: Carolyn, who came on board as a beta for the first few chapters, and Hazel, who took over as the editor for the entire series. This work is as much Hazel’s as it is mine.
I've had the entire plot in my head since I first started writing, but I honestly didn't think anyone would be interested enough to sit through all of it. I've said this a few times, but it's worth repeating:

Y'all are an incredible audience to share this work with. I'm (still) having a blast writing it for you; I hope you're enjoying the ride as well. I'll be back soon with more of the Dead Granddad Squad.

-weialala

Works inspired by this one: **One Thousand Nights** by Ajax the Great (Ajax_the_Great), **The Jingo** (The_King_in_White), **Proud** by Mrbid, **The bowels of Jounin HQ** by Mrbid

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