Gray-Colored Happiness

by mylilchickadee

Summary

After returning to Konoha, Sasuke learns that many things have changed, most of all himself. Set shortly after Sasuke's first appearance in Shippuden. NaruSasu main.
This is a COMPLETE EDIT and Re-organization of the original version of GCH (no new chapters).
Mangaverse
Sunlight streams brightly through the open window, bouncing off the whitewashed walls and casting an unearthly glow over the room that is still and quiet and achingly serene.

I wish it weren't.

I blearily open my eyes, responding to a slight movement that I don’t think was part of a dream. It's been so long since he did anything but lie there, it's hard to know for sure. Craning my neck, I look to the blond head resting on the pillow beside me.

There's another small movement.

Then his face contorts into a grimace of pain that makes a shock shoot through my body, mostly surprise, but partly anxious too.

My chest clenches as I watch the slight opening of eyes that reveal a startling blue that mirrors in some way the rising of the sun outside. Subconsciously, I tighten my hold on his thin, frail body.
My pulse thrums in my ears and I desperately try to calm myself down.

I'm not successful.

I shouldn't be so anxious. But something changed and I don't know what it is.

Naruto lets out a soft little moan and I watch the pained expression filter over his face.

Everything must hurt from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. Considering everything that's happened over these past few months, it's only reasonable.

In his face is also a barely hidden fear that concerns me more than it probably should.

But he's not freaking out and running away like he did the last time. I won't let him.

I won't.

I didn't compromise everything just to be abandoned.

Still, I'm glad to be here, alone with Naruto in the quiet of morning long before visitors are allowed. It's probably the last time we'll be given this.

I don't know why I should care.

But my fingers clutch the gentle folds of his shirt, digging slightly into the lean flesh beneath.

He's not going to run away. We all have our demons to face.

Slowly, he tries to fight from his half-sleep; the kind just before waking that doesn't want to let go. I watch him carefully, hearing the rhythmic beeping of the monitor, monotonous so long in its constancy. It speeds up slightly as he begins to rouse. He inhales deeply and breathes in the clean, crisp, sterile air with a confused look on his face all wrinkled forehead and pursed lips.

I suppose he would be confused.

The last he likely remembers, we were in the woods with the scent of dirt and trees, and the sourness of decaying leaves. He would expect the feel of outside, of fresh air, with earth and rock beneath him and the sound of birds above.

This hospital room is anything but that. The mattress is soft and stinks of antiseptic and linen, an overly clean smell. He squirms a little and his pout grows deeper.

Or it could be he's surprised just to be alive.

Naruto's mouth suddenly pops open as if breaking the surface of water and takes in a large gulp of air. He seems to have some difficulty breathing so I ease his posture a little, curving his back, and wonder if I should move away. For some reason, I can't move.

Everything is different somehow.

The passage of time betrays me.

Ten days. Two hundred forty hours. Fourteen thousand four hundred minutes give or take.

Not that I'm counting.
With what seems to be a great effort he peels his eyes open, blinking to make them work, a thing he can't seem to manage properly. That's to be expected; it's been so long since he opened them.

It's been so damn long . . .

His lungs are working a little better now; I can feel the gentle regular swell beneath my fingers. His skin begins to gradually warm to my touch.

He squints his eyes shut again.

With a groan, he raises his hand wearily and rubs his eyes, looking very much like a child waking from an afternoon nap. Blinking a few more times, I think he finally adjusts to the oppressive stark and plain whiteness of the room. He looks shocked and confused but then he snickers very strangely, a trifle disconcerting, a laugh that turns into a cough in a throat that echoes with phlegm.

I move with him again, my arm squeezing protectively over his chest so that he doesn't fall right off the bed. His coughing fit eventually subsides and he settles back into the mattress with a sigh. He looks just as tired as if he's been suffering from insomnia these past ten days rather than sleeping soundly. There are dark circles under his eyes and hollows to his cheeks, but for all that, he looks better.

He's awake.

I feel the whole of my insides twist into terrible, permanent knots. I don't want to speak, since there's nothing much for me to say. I don't know how he'll react to Konoha or to me or to my being here or to anything at all.

Too many things have changed.

Too many haven't changed at all.

He shifts a little bit, trying to get more comfortable and I shift right along with him. His half-lidded gaze wanders around the room until it finally turns in my direction and stops short, his big blue eyes bugging out comically.

He's definitely awake now.

Part of me expected this reaction, but part of me still can't help being annoyed. It shouldn't be such a shock that I'm here. Not after everything we've been through together. We are friends after all.

Aren't we?

No, I guess we're not. Not anymore.

He's still looking at me in that same way and I feel this frustrating ache I shouldn't, this thing I don't understand and so I push it away.

For a long moment he stares blankly; I can almost see the smoke rise from his head as his brain slowly goes into action. Then he scans me up and down curiously, making me feel self-conscious and very much like a bug under a microscope. He gets to the top of my head and stops, an amused look creeping into his face.

Then Naruto, that annoyingly loud-mouthed, troublesome ninja, has the audacity to try to laugh. But it quickly turns into hacking convulsions instead.
It serves him right, so I smirk even as I steady him. Amidst his coughing, he shoots me a sidelong
glance with a mix of suspicion and outright wonder.

Once again getting his fit under control, he lays back to the bed in a tired, boneless heap. And I lay
back down right along with him. He looks down at me as I stare at him. I scowl a little, waiting for
him to do something, say something so that I know that this is real and that he's the same old
Naruto I used to know.

But that's impossible; he'll never be the same again.

Nor will I. Nor will any of us.

But I still want some indication that he's himself, and not Kyuubi or a messed-up conglomerate of
the two like he was. I stare keenly, my hand still gripping tightly, cutting into the tender surface of
his skin.

The situation is growing uncomfortable.

Maybe this was a mistake.

I hate my new uncertainty.

Everything has been turned over into an alternate reality we neither of us understands.

Then I notice his expression soften and instantly I feel more at ease, both knowing why and not
knowing at all.

But I let it pass as I lay my head down on the edge of the fluffy white pillow, about even with
Naruto's shoulder. I haven't taken my eyes off him for a second. He's the only thing I have left and I
don't want to lose him.

Naruto stares back just as intently, the blue of his eyes making me a little dizzy. I swallow hard, my
heartbeat quickening, beating in time with the beep-beep-beep of the monitor, the only sound in the
room besides our quiet breathing. As we lay there side by side, I notice the warmth of Naruto as
my hand rests over him in an oddly possessive manner. Heat seeps through the cotton of his shirt
and into each of my fingers. My temperature seems to rise in response, giving me a somewhat
uncomfortable, somewhat pleasantly flushed feeling.

I start to feel a little sleepy

Then I stop dead, shock and what I can only call mortification, teeming through my veins.

In horror, I realize that my thumb has been tracing little ovals over Naruto's skin, a petting sort of
motion, sweet and way the hell too affectionate.

What is the matter with me!

Naruto's eyes widen, never straying from my face, reacting no doubt to the same thing I have. He
raises his hand to cover mine so that now both of them are lying over the place where his heart
should be.

I can feel the accelerated beating through my palm. Naruto pauses, his eyes searching mine, and
then he clutches his fingers around my hand almost painfully.

I don't really mind. It tells me that he is real and that he is here and that he is alive.
Then he speaks.

"Sasuke?" Well, it’s more like a squeak with a gravel chaser. His voice is coarse and weak from having not been used and comes out only as a pathetic imitation of itself.

But even so, it is Naruto's voice, his manner, and there's no helping the lightness I feel, the little jolt that races through my nerves and makes my hands tremble.

Naruto, the Naruto, the Naruto I've been waiting for, is awake.

After ten grueling days, he's awake.

The edges of my lips curl up ever so slightly and hardly noticeable and yet Naruto, I think, has seen it. He gapes like an idiot, his mouth parted stupidly and his big blue eyes blinking. It would be funny, that look on his face, except it's at my expense so it's not.

I can't remember the last time I even tried to smile.

The beeping of the monitor spikes suddenly, sounding fiercely in the room as Naruto's heartbeat speeds up from nervousness or fear. Possibly both.

I wonder what's going on in his head.

I can't ask.

I can't breathe, can't move, can't even think.

Our eyes lock and I can see in his so many things: shock, fear, relief, sadness. I wonder if he's forgotten what's happened and if he no longer recognizes me.

Carefully, Naruto lifts his hand, apparently much more difficult than it sounds, and puts it to his cheek. There's a gentle pinch and a little muffled, surprised "ouch".

My eyebrows lift curiously.

He thinks he's dreaming.

I guess I can understand that.

He opens and closes his mouth repeatedly like a landed fish gasping for the last dregs of air.

I finally move. With aching, reluctant slowness I sit up, my hand dragging lazily over Naruto's chest, tickling sensitive skin and I hear a small, surprised hitch in his voice.

We’re about to go back to what we were. Just a traitor and a demon, both orphans and both runaways, yet so different and separated by a canyon so vast that we can never reach across it.

Deep down, in the parts of myself I wanted to eradicate, I think I always hated that.

And now I don't want to go back to being an object of curiosity, never seen for myself but for what I represent. I don't want to lose this little space where we are just Sasuke and Naruto, where we are alone and together, needing nothing more. It's a little space that once lost can never be regained.

Reality is a far different entity.

I tuck my hand neatly into the sheets between Naruto's hip and mine and I can still feel the inviting heat of his skin on mine.
Soft morning light fills the room, the sun glinting off his hair and making it shine like gold like a
halo. The brightness burns my eyes.

It hurts.

I look down and see the shadowy outline of my bones through the thin white shirt I'm wearing. I
guess I've lost weight too.

I straighten my shoulders and raise my head to face the sun. Naruto is watching me. I won’t appear
weak. I am Uchiha Sasuke, proud and strong and confident and I will look the part. It is who I am.
The worthless shadow of a boy I've shown the last few days is a useless memory that needs to be
locked away.
I have no use for the child I once was.

Naruto has apparently been rendered into an unheard of state of speechlessness. He tries clearing
his throat again but produces only a wet, phlegm-filled noise. The bed shifts under his weight as he
pushes himself back towards the headboard. Sitting up, he stares at me curiously and for a moment
I wonder if what he and I feel is actually the same thing.

After a brief moment, he reaches towards me; I can see the faint reflection in the glass of the
window.

His fingers are shaking.

He looks both scared and confused, but the fear is stronger, that is clear enough.

Everything about him says he's conflicted and I can't deal with that right now.

So I stand suddenly, a breath before he touches me, avoiding what I'm not yet ready to face. Some
irrational part of my brain tells me not to let him; that if he does, my precious little space will
disappear.

I don't want that.

And I’m not yet ready to face that either.

But I stand up too fast. Lightheaded, I totter on my feet with one slipping forward, awkward and
embarrassing, and I have to dart out my hand to grasp the windowsill for balance.

I'm still too weak.

Goddamn it, I hate this!

I grind my teeth in irritation. I hate being seen as weak. Everyone can think whatever else they
want, just not that. And Naruto . . .

There's a disappointed little grunt behind me followed by a gentle bang as the back of his head hits
the headboard.

The light in the window sears my skin, a ruthless burn as I gaze outside.

My nerves tense.

It was a mistake opening the curtains yesterday. Through the glass I can clearly see the sad
remnants of the burnt and battered section of the village; the broken and splintered wood, the
charred and melted aftermath of a destructive blaze. But it's too late to do anything, pulling the
curtains now would be too obvious. I grip my hands hard, letting the nails cut into the sill, and hope he doesn't see.

"Sasuke . . ." Naruto starts, but his voice catches in his throat.

There is something strange and when I turn my head, I see him fisting the white sheets in his hands and sucking his lower lip between his teeth.

There's nothing to say to the childishly sad and confused expression he wears.

He still looks like the little twelve-year-old kid I remember . . .

And nothing like him at all.

At any rate, I need to draw his attention away from the window.

I stumble to the other bed, clean and crisp and unused, and sit down. I lean over to pull on my shoes because I need to do something with those traitorous hands. Those hands that tried to kill him, that fought to protect him, that held him as he slept. The ones that now tremble annoyingly in front of me. He's still staring.

He keeps giving me that look. The one that says he doesn't know what to make of me and what I was doing.

It's annoying.

Naruto coughs, but I don't look his way. "So . . ." he says, finding a sad mock version of his voice. "How have you been?"

There's a clatter as the shoe slips from my hands and falls to the floor. "Idiot," I whisper to myself. Leave it to him to ask such a stupid question. But it's a relief that he seems so much the same, even if he is twisting the sheets nervously in his hands.

Silence resounds between each pregnant pause of the beeping monitor.

"You dropped your shoe," Naruto states needlessly.

Neither of us says anything more.

It's a strange, strained moment as we sit there on either side of the room staring at the sandal, a sharp point of black in all this whiteness. Naruto raises his eyes to look at me and I move only just enough to reach over, pick up the shoe, and put it on.

That's all there is to say.

Naruto stares with those wide blue eyes and blinks, a scowl coming over his still boyish face. "Wait . . ." he stammers and tries to get out of bed. But instead of actually accomplishing this, he falls backward clumsily, catching his arm in the wires and tubes, accidentally pulling them free.

A horrible heart-wrenching screech rings through the room accompanied by a colorful string of curses.

It's familiar and new and oddly scary and I just feel . . .

My fingers latch onto the dull metal frame of the bed.
My hands are shaking.

Naruto continues his swearing as he struggles with the wires and tubes.

He's angry. He's confused. He's nervous.

Which only makes me feel the same.

Which is supremely annoying.

The sun, bright and round and clear, hits the blue of the sky and a warm golden red light reflects off the horrid white of the room.

Naruto's movement finally stops with a gentle clatter, making the whine of the monitor sound that much louder.

"It's a nice morning." He speaks unexpectedly, his voice cracking quiet.

I take a deep breath and shake my head. Idiot indeed. "Hn."

Outside the room comes the pounding of feet, much like the pounding of my heart, and the sense of chakra coming closer in panic. The door flies open, banging angrily on the other side of the wall. Tsunade, disheveled and panting and a little worse for wear, bursts into the room. She looks directly at me.

"Is he . . ?" She starts, unable to finish, apparently too flustered to sense the answer for herself.

I smirk and reply flatly, using a vague gesture indicating my roommate. "The idiot's awake."

The Hokage lets out the breath she'd been holding, her hand to her ample chest and her eyes closed in relief.

"Hey!" A certain annoying ninja yells into the siren-filled room. I turn to him, sneer still in place, and am greeted with a pleasantly familiar sight: a deep drawn pout and arms crossed over his chest in a huff. That's right. Loud-mouthed, surprising, childish, strong, loyal, never-give-up Naruto is back.

My Naruto.

No, not mine.

In a short moment pulled straight from our past, amidst the old jibes and the familiar roles we both forget we are not alone.

I hold my irritated smirk, but I'm not angry.

I'm not angry at all.

We’re reminded quite suddenly of the other person in the room when said person, in the form of the current Hokage, storms up and smacks Naruto smartly on the back of the head.

"You stupid brat!" She shouts, quickly turning off the machine and plunging us into a deep silence. "Don't you ever do something so idiotic again!" It's unclear whether she's referring to the incident with the heart monitor or to something else entirely. But one thing is obvious. She’s vastly relieved.
"OW!" Naruto yells, putting a hand to his head. The flicker of fear that passed over his face is quickly covered with a carefully placed pout.

I knew it.

I knew this would happen.

"That hurt, you old hag!"

The next thing any of us knows, Naruto is being suffocated by the chest of Tsunade, a thing that is a force to be reckoned with.

There's a smattering of muffled protests as Naruto flails in Tsunade's tremendous hug. I pity him, just a little bit, as I watch from the sidelines. But there are other feelings there too: amusement, vindication, and a little stab that feels like jealousy.

I don't get the chance to consider this, not that I want to, because Naruto is finally free and gasping for some much needed air. And using the precious commodity to curse under his breath.

"Well," the Hokage says rather matter-of-factly, ignoring him. "I think it's time you were properly examined."

That's when she turns to me, an unspoken and undeniable "get out" written all over her face. I glare back defiantly. I'm not very good at following orders.

We're staring at each other, neither of us backing down and neither winning, when Naruto interrupts our voiceless battle.

"Sasuke . . ."

It's a soft half-whining, half-wistful plea.

I look right into his eyes and something twists and flips and breaks inside me.

He wants me to stay.

But I won't be here much longer. Perhaps it's best he learn that now.

So I deepen my sneer and tease him instead. "What, do you need me to hold your hand?"

For an instant his eyes, so big, so blue, widen in surprise and in something else I can't quite place. But then he's back to himself, scowling testily and trying to act tough. "Of course not! Who'd ever want to hold your hand, teme?"

He narrows his eyes at me and I glare back as Tsunade ignores us both, settling herself beside her patient and figuratively "rolling up her sleeves".

"Don't go too far, Sasuke," Tsunade warns, not bothering to look at me. "You're next."

Great. I'm so looking forward it.

I leave them alone; it's better that they don't see I care.

I don't know any other way to be.

And so I turn to go, pausing only briefly with my hand on the door frame to look back at Naruto as
he sits angrily on the bed, that signature pout still on his face.

But beneath the hastily plastered frown, I can see him smiling.

And I wonder: can he see the carefully hidden smile under mine?

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I stand against the bare wall as Tsunade checks that Naruto is in proper working order. There are a million questions rolling in my head and it’s better I just stay where I am.

Two nurses crest the hall corner and speed towards me, alerted no doubt by the ear-splitting siren that the idiot set off when he tripped. Of course it's been turned off now and replaced by a deafening quiet. They’re a little late.

I hate how he can scare me.

I grip my fists at my sides, itching to break the door down and pummel him for making me go through this, for making me look so damned pitiful. I don't care if it seems unfair, because it really is his fault.

The nurses, I notice a bit belatedly, have stopped running and simply walk briskly. Their eyes are trained on me as I stand outside the door. They both glance in my direction, one curling her lip in disdain, the other trying to give me a smile that looks more sick than friendly. A smile that is stopped abruptly by way of an elbow to the ribs by her fellow nurse. They reach me and the "nicer" one gives me a slight nod before opening the door so the two of them may enter. They are in no hurry now, not since they saw me waiting impatiently against the wall. I don't know whether to take this as insult or compliment that they're able to deduce the degree of Naruto's condition simply by assessing my demeanor. But I guess they've learned by now that if he were in any real trouble, nothing could have dragged me away.

Nothing.

I think the insanity of the past week and a half has set everyone on edge. No one is used to me, much less my appearance. In me they now see him, ashen and serpentine, and there's no way to erase the visible connection from their minds.

But that's fine. Intimidation is good. I'd rather be feared than pitied. But that one nurse has that annoyingly sympathetic look in her eye, that "poor boy" gaze and so I glare at her, finding that I actually like the one who outright hates me better.

Hate is familiar, easier to take.

I wonder what they think of Naruto.

As they go inside, I sneak a peek and see him sitting on the bed, a boyish pout in place, arms petulantly crossed over his chest, and arguing as always with Tsunade. He likes to give everyone a hard time, I guess. Perhaps I'm not so special.

The woman reaches over to pry his hands away from his chest, an angry glower on her face, and the silliest, pointless, most idiotic thing happens. They have a slapping match like a pair of unruly children fighting over ownership of the same useless toy. Naruto begins snapping off some long string of incoherent nonsense while Tsunade shoots back with typical motherly things such as: "You need to get checked out" and "Don't give me a hard time, brat". Then, with one final stupid slap, Naruto pushes her away, slams his hands to the mattress and shouts for all the hospital to
I hear, "I'M FINE!"

He says this while covered in bandages and bruises, with dark circles under his eyes and an all-over gray complexion.

Fine, indeed.

Tsunade puts her hands to her temple in what I assume is an attempt to massage away a Naruto-induced headache. I'm quite familiar with those myself.

Somehow Naruto catches sight of me through the tiny crack of the open door. Our gazes lock. He still has that conflict, that confusion. All the things I didn't want to see couldn't be clearer. They burn in my retinas.

After a short moment, he screws his face into this perturbed little scowl and narrows his eyes as if analyzing me. Then he leans into Tsunade and pretends to whisper, "He looks like shit."

The nerves rise up on the back of my neck. How dare he, the stupid jerk! He's one to talk! Apparently he hasn't looked in a mirror yet. I really want to punch him, kick him, and break his jaw. He's got a lot of nerve, he does . . .

"I know." Tsunade answers and I've decided I've had enough. I could just move my foot and let the door shut of its own accord. But I'm seriously pissed off so I grab it with my hand and yank it violently closed, making the slam reverberate throughout the hallway. Several people stop to stare, but I shoot them a withering glare and they quickly go back to what they were doing.

I should just leave for that, I don't have to stand here and be talked about behind my back in front of my face. Naruto's got a hell of a lot of nerve bringing up my condition when he's been in a coma the last ten days. He's the one who almost died.

The one who almost left me.

My stomach drops below my feet, making me dizzy and there's a pinching pain behind my eyes.

He's just lucky that I . . .

So I can't leave. I tell my feet to move, but they refuse to listen.

He still needs me.

That's what I tell myself.

I blink my eyes a few times and make them see clearly again. Then, crossing my arms, I lean back against the wall conspicuous and stupid, but I don't much care.

I'll just wait here for them to finish, even if it takes forever.

Unfortunately, while I'm doing this, that well-known plague of unwanted ninja come traipsing by. News travels fast in Konoha, especially when it concerns Naruto. Some run, some walk, some come alone, some in groups and soon it's everyone, the rookie nine and Gai's team. All except for one exception, that is.

So he does need me.

He has to. Otherwise, what am I doing here?
The atmosphere is heavy and exceptionally awkward, as the needless shinobi are fidgety and nervous and out-of sorts like a pack of bloodhounds that have lost the scent. I just stare with my blank expression at the group of extras hoping against hope that they'll just give up and go home. Or just disappear into smoke. That would work too. Or be captured by ANBU and be "accidentally" throw into jail. That would be even better. It's what they want to do with me.

But of course, to my immense chagrin, this doesn't happen.

Most of them are glaring back, though some don't even bother. Shikamaru is pointedly looking in the other direction, as is Lee. The only difference is that Shikamaru looks bored and annoyed while Lee seems more uncomfortable than anything else. Well, that's fine. It's not as if I care what they think.

I want to go back inside, but I won't. I have to begrudgingly admit that I trust Tsunade, with Naruto anyway. So I'll wait, ignore the barrage of stares and sneers and unflattering thoughts. It's not all that hard. I don't care about them.

It's only for Naruto's sake that I tolerate them to begin with.

Then again, now that he's awake things will start to change quickly.

I turn back to the group to discover Neji glaring at me, trying to stare me down, which is really just sad. Even with hunger and fatigue I won't lose to him, not even in something as pointless as this. I also notice Kiba as he hides in a corner, nearly foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog with his little beady eyes glaring from the shadows. He's not worth my time so I dismiss him. I don't notice anyone else.

Well, that's not quite true.

There is something very strange.

Hinata, that shy, quiet, inscrutable girl, is cowering behind Neji, her hands holding tightly to his arm. It's an interesting turn of events based on what last I knew. But I don't really care. No, what peaks my interest is that she is the only one staring straight at me with anything other than naked hatred. She doesn't even have that exasperating pity I keep being subjected to. She just stares intently, curious more than anything but not unkind, and I feel like she's using the Byakuugan on me, only I know that she's not. She blushes a little bit as she always does, ducks behind her cousin and smiles shyly.

That's bizarre. What the hell was that about?

I blink in confusion.

Neji curls his lip.

Kiba snorts.

Hinata hides completely behind her cousin.

Tsunade opens the door.

Any thought I might have spared to this ragtag group in front of me vanishes, replaced by the more important task at hand. I turn to Tsunade and open my mouth.

"How is he?" Kiba blurts out.
I spin my head to glare at him. He did that on purpose just to irritate me. I make a mental note to beat the shit out of that dog-faced, drooling, flea-ridden interloper later. He flashes his canines at me in mocking fashion.

I narrow my eyes and deepen my scowl.

Kiba sticks out his tongue.

Very mature.

"He’s doing well. All his vital signs are strong," Tsunade says, breaking through the childishness. She heaves a sigh. I finally turn my attention back to her only to realize that though she's been answering Kiba's question, she’s looking straight at me. I smirk. That’s right. I’m the important one here.

Naruto and I, well, we’re different.

It's not the same for them.

I stare right into Tsunade's eyes, betraying nothing and wait for her to continue. "But he's still been through a lot. And he's weak. It will take some time before he's at one hundred percent again. But it's promising. With some time and care he'll be back to his old trouble-making, loud-mouthed self."

It’s a relief.

But it’s also not.

Things can no longer remain in stasis.

Tension eases out of the air and the hallway doesn't seem quite as small as it did a moment ago. Although, because I’m here, there’s still a thrum of anxiety in the air.

"Can we see him?" Neji this time, very formal. Everyone's ears seem to perk up, interested in the answer.

I don't like it. They just get in the way. I look over and see that for some weird reason, Neji is looking at me. Then I see they're all looking at me as if I'm some ticking time bomb ready to explode at any second. I glare right back.

//Kill them//, a little voice in my head says. //Kill them all.//

No, I don't think so.

Not that I'd exactly be sorry for hurting them. But a killing spree might cause a problem.

Still, holding back is difficult.

They are in the way.

"Yes, but only briefly. He's still recuperating and I don't want to put any more stress on him than necessary." Tsunade is acting very "professional" about the whole thing.

Then, as if a silent consensus has been made, Neji opens the door and the whole troupe brushes by me, heading like a mass infection into the room. I simply stand and wait for it to be over. For now, I'll allow it. I’m not in a position to stop it yet. But if I were better, I'd kick them all out with
enough force to make things clear.

Unnecessary little bugs.

Some of them barely even know Naruto and now they go waltzing in as if they're old buddies. I hate them.

I don't want them here.

I don't want them here.

I know I won't like what I'm about to see.

There's a laugh that emanates from the room, loud and clear and very recognizable, which should make me happy but instead pierces my heart with the force of a hurled kunai. The world in front of me has gone blurry and what's that supposed to mean?

I wipe a hand over my eyes, and they become clear again.

When I look up, I see Tsunade still standing there and staring at me with that same pitying, confused look. I hate being stared at. I'm so sick of these looks, of everyone watching me, be it with pity or awe or hate, it doesn't matter. I just want it to stop.

Tsunade releases a disgusted huff is released and then turns and walks away. Her steps echo off the walls and they get both quieter and duller as she makes her way down the hall.

Instead I look into the overly crowded room where they've all crammed themselves in; a mass of bodies filling the formally empty space. Kiba is sitting in an extra chair at Naruto's bedside, by rights my place, and talking animatedly about some inanity that earns him a cuff on the back of the head by some undistinguished assailant. The other chair, the old uncomfortable familiar chair, my chair, has been left blatantly vacant. They're avoiding it as if I have some communicable disease they'll acquire were they to share some common space with me.

I hate them.

Naruto laughs. My stomach twists into knots and I feel like I may need to throw up, although I doubt there's anything left to empty.

He looks so happy surrounded by his friends, by all the people he cares about.

But there's nervousness to his eyes too. Part of him is still afraid. I wonder if they even see it.

To me his anxiety is pervasive, overshadowing everything else.

His eyes dart around a little excitedly and his hands shake just slightly though they are mostly hidden by the bed sheets. No one seems to notice and proceed to prattle on. Then Naruto looks to the doorway and I catch his eye with a piercing intensity that cuts straight through me. I feel as though my emotions are tied to his, my bad mood being spurred on by his apprehension.

But then his hands stop trembling, his eyes grow calm and a soft smile slowly spreads across his face.

The sunlight that frames him, the white of the sheets that cover him, the gold of his hair and that look on his face; it all makes him look so very innocent.

Nothing like a demon at all.
How perfectly inane.

His eyes stay on me as he picks up the one-sided conversation Kiba was apparently having. After a moment, he turns back to the dog-faced boy and smiles wider, the whiteness of his teeth standing out in stark relief. Their chatter continues on, but I'm not part of it. I'm on the outside like always. And Naruto looks perfectly content and at peace when he's with them while I stand in the doorway.  

//He doesn't need you.//

He seems to have forgotten I'm even here.

Maybe I'm the one who's unnecessary.

But it should be fine that way, shouldn't it.

I shouldn't need him; I shouldn't need anyone.

Why do I need him so damned much?

It doesn't hurt.

I'm absolutely fine.

I feel a soft warmness on my arm and I look over to see that Sakura has joined me. She gazes up with concern brimming in her green eyes. It's irritating, but I don't have time to think about it. Not when I hear the question I've been dreading.

Naruto's soft, cracked voice cuts through my thoughts. "Where's Ino?"

There is an awkward moment of silence.

I grit my teeth until my jaw hurts.

Stupid idiot, why did you ask? That's your problem, always worrying, always shouldering guilt that isn't even yours to bear.

There's some general mumbling and then Shikamaru's lazy voice distinguishes itself from the rest. "She couldn't come. There's a lot she's got to do now." His normally bored voice sounds a little strained. "She wanted to be here . . . " he trails off with a noncommittal grunt. He's lying; it couldn't be any more obvious. He should have just kept his damn mouth shut, changed the subject. Hell, anything would have better than such a pathetic, blatant lie.

"Oh." It's all Naruto says.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I don't know how to make myself feel better, much less someone else. There hasn't been a "someone else" to consider, not since Itachi. My brain, my voice, my everything has deserted me, leaving behind nothing but an empty husk which only takes up space. There's a burning behind my eyes, an oppressive heaviness in my lungs.

There's another pause, then someone clears his throat.

"So, so, hey Naruto. Did you hear what Konohamaru did they other day on one of his missions? The D-ranked kind, you remember those? Well, anyway . . . " Kiba goes on to relate some stupid story and for once I'm glad for his ability to prattle on for hours on end without reason.

Naruto looks happier.
He looks happy with all these people, these . . . friends.

And he’s not looking at me.

My presence makes no difference one way or the other.

He looks so happy.

That can’t be right.

//He doesn’t need you.//

My chest feels tight and painful, like someone has thrust their hand inside and squeezed my heart, spurting the blood into my lungs so I can't breathe.

The air here is too heavy. I need new air.

I turn around and leave. Sakura's eyes are on me, confused and anxious and angry, and I even hear the soft, uncertain sound of her voice as she chokes on my name. But that is all. No one else is looking; no one else cares.

Naruto doesn't seem to notice.

I have to get out of here.
Chapter 2

The hall is empty with its crowds of people and stacks of machinery. A cold wind cuts through the clamoring silence and straight to my bones. These annoying hospital clothes do nothing to keep out the chill. I wrap my arms around my waist and turn to walk away.

I don't like it out here.

I can still hear the laughter coming from room 307.

//See how happy he is without you?//

I need to get outside.

I feel like running straight through the front gates, but I won't give those bastards, the ANBU who've been following me, the satisfaction. I know they're watching. They're the only ones who do.

I wonder if they know I'm watching them.

The warm air outside is a welcome relief, heating my bones and erasing my mind. There are not as many eyes out here to judge or pry, no group of self-aggrandizing jerks to throw their expectations at me.

//You're such a disappointment.//

I scoff to myself.

There's a gentle breeze rustling the grass, waving it in hypnotic rhythm. The sun has taken its place in the sky, not so bright and judgmental anymore. The grounds of the hospital are clipped clean, filled with trees and bushes and plenty of shade and I spot a group of kids in a corner laughing and playing in their sad little designated gowns. They must be from the pediatric ward.

But I'll bet none of their brothers, their idols, slaughtered their families, torturing them with
memories every moment of their lives.

I clench my fists at my sides. I don't want to think about it. It's over now. My traitorous, murderous brother has been dealt his punishment as I decided: death.

So now there is nothing.

No vindication, no triumph, no home, no new path to walk down. Just a massive empty desert stretching out before me with no road signs to lead me in the right direction. I'm wandering aimlessly.

With nothing.

There's a small stone bench cradled in the eaves of a tree, abandoned and forgotten, and I go to sit in it. I disappear among the shadows, merely a darker shade of the whole.

My head lifts to face the hospital wall. There. There it is. His room that was our room.

It doesn't matter now I suppose.

//You saw how happy they made him.//

I don't like the way they monopolize his time like they understand a damn thing. Because they don't.

None of them understand.

I hate them.

And for a fleeting moment, I hate him.

Something comes flying toward me and I reach up to snatch it in my hand. It's second nature by now and I'm glad that at least not all of my senses have been dulled. I spread my fingers and see a ball, small and red and shiny, almost the color of blood in the shade.

"Hey! Hey! Mister! Over here!" A high squeaky voice breaks through the air and one of the kids is frantically waving his hands, asking for the toy back. I look at him and then at the ball, lost in some unformed thought. Carefully, I toss the toy and he catches it easily, his face breaking into a grin as bright as the sun. There’s a sharpness in the center of my chest. He doesn't know yet, none of them do. They don't fear or hate me.

//But soon they will.//

I can see it coming.

He reminds me of Naruto.

Birds chirp merrily in the trees, their little songs filling the air. Even here, I'm an outsider. There’s nowhere left to go.

And he'll be all right.

With all the people who care about him, he'll be all right.

My fingers twist painfully into a loose thread of my shirt, the tips turning blue from the loss of blood. They're bony and pale, like a dead man's, a useless pile of bone and skin. What horrible
I lean back into the bench and tilt my head up. The sunshine streams through the cracks between the leaves, tiny pinpoints of light that hit my eye every now and then. I lower my eyelids. I just want to go back to sleep, to the place that doesn’t exist. With a sick, guilty, horrible feeling, a small part of me is unhappy he's awake.

Now everything will change.

//You're selfish.//

I already know this.

There's a soft crunching of grass growing closer, a nonverbal announcement of her approach. It's an obvious and useless gesture, but in its way I appreciate it. Though I would have recognized her chakra anyway. I'm not so bad off that I wouldn't notice that.

The noise stops right in front of me and I can feel the nervous tension leaking off her and filling the space between us. I wonder if the kids can feel it too. Are they too young? Are they even ninja children?

Does it matter?

There are some things that even a ninja cannot fight.

Sakura settles down beside me, but there is no shift in the stone, set as it is for eternity or until another war breaks out and tests the strength of Konoha again. Sakura is twitchy and anxious, as she's been a lot lately. She doesn't know how to deal with me anymore. She tries, but she's unsure. I know that.

I don't open my eyes or really acknowledge her presence in any way, but she knows I've sensed her. She burns a hole in the side of my head with her stare, but I've no driving force to speak with her. There's a light pressure on my leg. With a huge sigh, I look down at her hand resting on my knee. I stare at it.

It's awkward.

I should pull away, but I don't.

I'm so tired . . .
Her big green eyes search and question and I just wish she'd stop. There are no answers.

"Sasuke," she says, leaving off the affectation we've long grown past. "Look at me."

She lets out a breath of air filled with irritation. Then her hand comes up to take my chin and I turn to face her, because it doesn’t matter either way. I shift my eyes away, but I can still see her in the widened vision of my eyes. Her lips are a tight, thin line.

"You really are too stubborn." She pinches the skin at my jaw and hurts just a little. "You should be up there."

I look away. The problem is I don't belong there, in all that happiness. I’m not a happy person.

She can't seem to understand that.

"Don't ignore me!" Sakura shakes her head, her short pink hair bouncing in the breeze. "After everything that's happened lately and now you're just going to walk away?"

There’s nothing to walk away from.

“Don't you remember yesterday and how I risked my career and my life just to get you to him? And now he’s awake and you're here? You are so frustrating!" She sighs wearily. "I just don't get you."

I smirk to myself and finally look at her. Her face is all screwed up into deep concentration. How can she possibly understand, when she belongs here? So I rise, slowly easing myself from the bench and her hand slides off my knee, which surprisingly enough I'd forgotten about. Standing makes me even more tired. Looking around the lawn, I see the kids have already gone. Funny that I didn't notice. My hand rises to my neck without my thinking it. The mark has faded but it's still there. I can feel the small throb, the constant pulse it has and it hurts a bit. I know I'll always carry it with me.

After what happened, even in death Orochimaru will always be with me.

And I can't even hide it.

"It's because he's awake, isn't it?" Sakura's voice startles me from my thoughts and I quickly drop my hand. It's the rest that really shakes them. I'm showing too much of him.

But Sakura's statement makes me lightheaded, dizzy and ready to fall. "That's it, isn't it? When he was asleep, it was OK to show him, but now that he's awake you can't?"

That's close. Not exactly right, a little simplistic, but close.

My heartbeat quickens, the tightness around my chest so strong I think it might squeeze the life right out of me. I can't let this happen. They're not supposed to see me; they're not supposed to know. Sometimes Sakura is too perceptive for her own good. I push her away.

I don't want anyone's help.

I don't need anyone.

I don't.

We're standing there alone in the yard, the warm spring air separating us, eerily quiet but for the chirping of the birds and the gentle wind that passes right through me. "It's like you're ashamed to show us that you're human." She says. "You know, he already misses you. He asked where you
were as soon as you disappeared. And Naruto’s really the only one that matters, isn’t he?” She takes hold of my arm again and I can hear the small broken twist to her voice. "It's always been Naruto."

It has and it hasn’t.

I should be there. I want to be there. But something inside stops me, some cold, harsh sharpness that reminds me who I am.

Sakura shakes me a bit, waking me up or getting my attention, I'm not sure which. Without looking, I can see her smile, soft and sad and placating. "Your chair's still empty. So let's go back upstairs."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

//Didn't you see? He doesn't need you.//

Shut up.

Just shut up.

Everything goes still and quiet for a moment. Sakura raises her hand and gently brushes a loose strand of hair from my face. "He needs you. Not them, not me. You. Don’t you get that?"

I look at her blankly and see in her green eyes the same thing I see everywhere. I'm sick of it.

But she's right, too. I muster my strength and turn to go back inside, a little unsteady on my feet. Sakura sidles up beside me, lending her quiet support, but not making contact.

It's been only a short time, less than an hour that I've been out here and with frightening clarity I realize that there is already an emptiness. I never needed anyone before.

I didn't.

But now . . .

Sakura takes each step slowly, her glances turning to me at sporadic intervals, checking to make sure I'm still all right. I'm not made of glass, I swear I'm not, and all this fussing is just getting on my nerves. I scowl a warning at her and she stops. Then we arrive at the room and I can sense another presence inside. Iruka.

I prop myself against the wall beside the door like a piece of luggage. Sakura regards me quizzically.

"It's alright." I say. "I can wait." That's right. I can wait. It’s better to put off the inevitable.

Sakura quirks an eyebrow at me, that puzzled look once again dancing in her eyes. I know. I'm not myself. It’s confusing.

She rubs her hand on my arm comfortingly before backing away to lean on the opposite wall. I wish she'd just leave. But she doesn't. No, instead she crosses her arms, crosses her ankles and stares, a little wrinkle to her forehead, trying to figure something out. Several nurses and a patient in a wheelchair pass by between us, but I barely notice. They are like white noise, barely perceptible in their white uniforms in the vast expanse of white hallway.

Then there is the click-click-clack of feet as another nurse approaches, this one stopping at Naruto's
door and without knocking pushes inside. He looks good, or at least not any worse. I can’t say the same for Iruka, but that’s not my problem.

I let my body relax, soothed somewhat just by seeing him.

The nurse busies herself about the room, writing things down and checking Naruto's statistics like ticking items off on a grocery list. She puts her fingers to his wrist and looks at her watch, completely ignoring the fact that he is an actual person. He turns up to her and smiles again, the sunlight glinting off his light hair.

He looks better.

Then he turns back to Iruka, skimming right over where I'm standing so I lean out of his line of vision.

It's stupid, it really is. Everything about me seems wrong, awkward, like my brain is signaling me to turn left and I blink instead. I wonder if it's part of the aftereffects, if some of myself was pulled out along with all the rest.

Besides, Naruto's a ninja, and even in his weakened state he probably already knew I was here.

This is just stupid.

I chance a peek around the door again and see him lean into Iruka, this tiny smile on his face and he whispers something I don't quite make out. Iruka turns his head halfway in my direction and again, like some idiot, I hide. I pound the back of my head against the wall, looking up to the garish florescence of the ceiling and it glares back.

The nurse comes back out, softly closes the door behind her and adds one last thing to her clipboard before clicking her pen shut and tucking it into her pocket.

With a sigh, she looks up and I think I might have been mumbling out loud because she gives me the funniest look, clucks her tongue motherly and walks off.

My face screws up, irritated.

Sakura lets out a little giggle.

Now I'm more irritated.

She’s been standing there staring at me with her hands over her mouth in a vain attempt to hide her laughter. I scowl at her and she lets her hands fall, raising her eyebrows and giving me an infuriating little smile that's more like a smirk.

I frown. I sneer at her and then decide I don't care, instead inclining my head towards the door and perking my ears, trying to catch some of the conversation. I don't care if I shouldn't. I don't care if it's immature. I want to know what's going on. Sakura stifles another laugh, but I can hear it clearly even with all the tapping of shoes and P.A. announcements. Fine. She can think whatever she likes. It doesn’t matter to me.

I'm busy.

"... was here everyday." Iruka says.

"Really?" Naruto's voice is oddly soft and I have to struggle to hear it.
"Yes, Naruto!" Iruka lets out a hearty laugh. "I had to sneak back in when he was sleeping. You know, Sasuke can be a little, uh, intimidating, even for me." I smirk at that. "But you know . . ." I put my hand to the doorknob and lean in to hear better. "That's not the only reason I came here when he was asleep. How should I put this? It was more like when he was awake, watching over you, I felt like an intruder." I never said that. I let him stay, didn't I? I even . . . appreciated it. No one ever understands anything! My hand clenches the doorknob. "Though even when you both were asleep, it still seemed that way."

"So Sasuke was here every day . . ." There's an unspoken question mark at the end of it.

"Well." Iruka is louder and clearer, much easier to understand. "He did say something about 'returning a favor'."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess that's right." Naruto's voice is even lower and a little mumbled and almost disappointed.

I stop listening.

Then Sakura pushes off the wall and crosses to the hallway, stopping only when she’s practically on top of me. Apparently she’s never heard of personal space. Tilting her head, she puts on a smile that looks like she knows something and finds it both funny and sad at the same time.

"It meant a lot to him," she starts awkwardly, "that you were there."

I keep my expression impassive, not allowing any flicker of emotion to show through.

"He looked like a cornered rabbit after you left him there, with everyone bombarding him with questions. He kept looking to the door. He was nervous and worried and you should have been there. Especially after . . ." she pauses now as if for dramatic effect, pouting just slightly.

My heart is pounding against my ribcage, but I don't let anything betray my stoic mask.

Sakura sighs again. "Especially after everything you did to stay with him."

I don't think that's what she was going to say.

Sakura puts her hands to her hips and leans back on her heel, assessing me up and down. I don't twitch a muscle. She shakes her head. "You are such an idiot. And a coward."

My nails dig painful and sharp into my palms. She knows nothing.

What difference does it make? I'm not explaining myself.

With a glare and a huff, Sakura reaches out and grabs me by an arm and I immediately try to wrench free.

"What do you want?" I snap. "Let go."

But she just scowls before lifting her head and turning away haughtily. She knocks on the door but there's no answer. Only a moment passes, but before she can knock again, the door swings wide and Iruka appears, looking awfully nervous, smile and all. The next thing I know, we three are standing stupidly in the hall, silent in the exchange of meaningful glances.

This is ridiculous.

I yank my arm free and glower at Sakura, who stares dumbly for a brief moment before once more
smiling that infuriatingly enigmatic smile.

"Well," my former teacher pipes up suddenly. The grin on his face looks a little forced. He turns to Sakura and then to me. "I guess it's time you went back in. Naruto's waiting."

I blink at him, feeling a rush of heat fly up my neck and with an effort push it back down. There's no need for that.

"I have to get back to school. The new batch of students will be taking their exams soon and they're just as troublesome as you guys were. I think it's best that we try to get everything back to normal as quickly as possible." It's a subtle, cruel reminder that things are anything but normal, intentional or not. Iruka turns and gives a last nod to Naruto, saying something, but I don't listen.

The man politely pushes his way between Sakura and I and heads down the hall.

Sakura pauses. Then without warning she lunges forward and gives me a quick hug. I want to push her off, but it happens so fast that I don't get the chance. I think she's grabbing the last opportunity for it. Now that Naruto's awake, everything will be different.

For all of us.

In the next instant, she spins around and runs down the hall, soon out of sight.

I'm now in the hall alone.

The door has been propped open and I can feel the weight of the gaze coming from inside. I remain in the hallway, half-dazed.

A couple of nurses walk by, chatting to each other, both carrying clipboards at their sides. A small family follows, mother and two boys, the little one determinedly carrying a huge basket of flowers he can barely see over. As they pass, I hear the mother tell them that their father is recuperating so they can't stay for long. The little one whines a bit and the older boy smiles softly.

Must be one of the casualties.

My gaze locks on them as they pass and the woman, who had just been smiling happily catches my look and instantly changes, a frown marring her delicate features. She narrows her eyes for the briefest of moments and putting a hand to each boy's back, hurries them away. I can't help but watch, like the way you're drawn to a train wreck and can't look away.

Only I know I'm on the other side looking out.

I'm the oddity whom everyone will be watching. The traitor, the monster, the huge disappointment.

I'm the train wreck.

I have no idea where to go from here, how to pick up the wheels and glass and iron of my former self and put it back together. Because no matter how carefully you glue the pieces, they never fit quite right again.

I can't find the energy to think about that now.

I can feel Naruto's eyes intent on me.

It was easier when he was asleep. I didn't have to face those eyes.
But it's time; I know that. So I swallow hard, take a deep breath, clench my jaw and raise my head. Slowly, my eyes open, bracing myself.

But all I see is Naruto looking right at me, the light dancing in his big blue eyes and a big fox grin on his face. He's still in his bed, the covers pulled up over his lap, and his hands nestled gently within the sheets. He doesn't look angry or disappointed or anything I could have expected.

How long has he been watching me like that?

Perhaps from before I even knew.

His mouth drops open to say something, but no sound comes out. His expression shifts then he closes his mouth, smiles very softly and turns to look out the window to the sunlight streaming in. It's afternoon now and a little storm of dust can be seen floating in the ray of light hitting the cold tile floor. It swirls and dances in the static air, daring something, anything, to make it touch ground. Naruto clutches the sheets in his hands.

I won't leave him this time, not until I have to.

And once I've made up my mind, there's no defying it.

He will be my path for however short that may be.

Then he turns back around, his smile bigger and more sincere, but still gentle in its way.

This time when he opens his mouth, he does speak.

"I'm home."

I almost fall over. All this time and that's what he decides to say?

"Tch!" I walk into the room and close the door behind me. What an idiot. I look toward the other bed, the perfectly made, untouched one that was mine. I've only been up for a couple hours, but I feel as tired as if I've just been on a ten-day mission with no sleep or food. But in a manner of speaking, maybe I have. It hits me like a ton of bricks.

"That's what I'm supposed to say, dobe." I state the jibe only half-heartedly.

I can't change who I am.

Heading to the bed, I kick off my shoes and let them roll into a corner. I sit down on the edge, my mind already half asleep. But then I hear it, a whisper in the air that hits straight to my heart.

"Is it?"

I stop in the middle of what I was doing; my hand holding the sheet, ready to pull it back. I don't look at him. I can't. I don't belong anywhere anymore, if I ever did. It's just a waiting game now, to see what I should do.

He'll be the one to decide and he doesn't even know it.

I hear rustling behind me followed by the quiet creak of the mattress. The sun is still shining, but Naruto has apparently chosen to go back to sleep as well, a strange thing for him to do seeing as he slept ten days already. It seems more like he should be wide awake for the next ten to make up for it. But I guess life doesn't often work the way we think it should.
The sheets on my bed are stretched taut, perfect and clean after having never been used. I pull the sheets far enough back so I can get comfortable, wrapping them tight around me. The bed is small, with a collection of fluffy blankets, plenty enough for one, but it feels big, cold, and empty. Something is missing.

I know what is.

But that doesn’t mean I accept it.

The window on my side is darker; facing west and the sun hasn't yet reached it. The city looks clean and secure and normal with people hurrying about as if nothing has ever been wrong. Like the view from the other side is a trick of light and shadow and nothing more.

I curl the sheets around me even more, but it does nothing to keep out the chill. I shouldn't have opened that window.

I hear nothing from the other side of the room.

Part of me worries, but things are different now. I clench a corner of the blanket between my fingers.

The room is deathly quiet, uncomfortable, and I realize for the first time that that damned interminable beep-beep-beep is back. It sends a chill down my spine. But it's stronger now, steady, or so I choose to think.

The sound is almost soothing when I think of it like that.

I haven't yet answered him.

I take in a breath of air and exhale slowly, deliberately.

"Welcome back," I utter to no one in particular.

I hear a small creak of the bed, a soft rustle of fabric, but I don't actually think he's heard me.

He's probably asleep.

And soon I'll join him. Join him, but alone.
Red hands reach out for me, dripping with their blood-soaked crime, as deep crimson eyes stare from the darkness.

'I know this,' I think to myself.

"Well, of course you do, Sasuke-kun."

I whip my head around to see those familiar yellow slit eyes leering back at me, that possessive, lusting, knowing look. The eyes, the look that I can never escape. His disturbingly long tongue flicks out and grazes my cheek before disappearing back into his mouth. Just like a snake scenting the air.

I can still feel the spot he touched as it cools in the night breeze.

My stomach trips and lurches, but I fight back the bile that rises in my throat.

"This is the choice you made." His smile stretches impossibly wide as he cocks his head like a reptile. "Or don't you remember?"

Of course I do.

Bastard.

His eyes turn down and I follow suit, my eyes going wide as I see what he's seen, my hands painted thick in a warm tingling layer of blood. I look back up to him, mechanical, and his smile grows more sinister.

I turn away only to see my hand held out straight in front of me, cutting right through someone's chest, the flesh ripped open and now clinging to my arm. Sad, blue eyes look to me with tears streaming down baby round cheeks.

"I thought we were friends . ." he choked out, a trickle of red stealing over his chin. I open my mouth to speak, to say I don't know what, but he transforms before I can find the words. And now tired lazy eyes, black hair, and pale skin face me; it is almost like looking in a mirror. His mouth quirks up into a pitying grin. "Foolish little brother . ." And then suddenly my arm has gone through myself, the younger version from back when I was still a genin.
Young and stupid and determined and I haven't changed much.

We two, older and younger, stare at each other blankly. Then he reaches up and takes hold of my arm, pulling it forward slowly, horribly, resolutely, widening the hole in his chest. More blood spurts out, bubbling from his mouth, but I feel the pain, deep and fierce and welcome.

They will never forgive me . . .

I hear a triumphantly cruel ku-ku-ku in the background as my life slowly slips away . . . \+

Something hits me sharply on the head and my eyes pop open.

Staring to the blank ceiling, I fight to breathe, my heart racing, and somehow I can still feel the pain in my chest. I put a hand to my mouth, grabbing the cloth there, as if that will slow the terrible ache. The words continue to echo through my head, the truth of them undeniable.

They will never forgive you . . .

A betrayer, a killer can never be forgiven, can never go back. Yet here I am anyway, in the same room as one of my victims and I don't know how or why. And it just doesn't seem possible.

I don't think I'm really meant to be here.

Sleep claimed me, but I did not rest. Each dreaming moment was filled with nightmare tosses and turns until the moment I awoke.

I've heard tell that if you die in your dreams, you die in reality. Judging by the pain I still feel pounding through my chest, I can believe it's true. And maybe that was meant to be but this outside force slipped its way into my predetermined fate.

The room is dark now, except for the soft glow of the streetlights and the eerie red of the heart monitor. Night has fallen and I have slept for a good long while.

I'm not tired, but the weary stress still weighs in my bones.

Curling up on my side, I gaze out the window to see the streets of Konoha, empty but for the hidden ninja who prowl the gated edges of the city and the perimeter of this room.

There's an almost tense anticipation to their chakra and I wonder who their more anxious about: Naruto or me.

There’s a dull but quick slap to the back of my head that. It doesn't really hurt, but it’s probably what woke me. I roll over.

Naruto's legs and arms are tossed akimbo in an attempt to take over, staking his claim on some unnamed parcel of land, sleeping soundly beside me. In my bed. He's completely monopolized what little space there is, just as he used to back a lifetime ago when we were forced to share a bed in the days of Team Seven.

There's a sharp icy pain that shoots through me, there a moment and then forgotten, but leaving a dull, throbbing reminder of its passing.

I gaze at him, sprawled there on his back, mouth gaping open, the sheets tangled up and knotted around his legs.

It is quiet.
Too quiet.

Way too quiet.

All I can hear is the pulsing of blood in my ears. I can't breathe.

Naruto's arm is resting carelessly by my head, the instigator of all this and I take it, carefully, into my trembling hand. There's nothing to worry about, but my heart's racing anyway.

I place my fingers to his wrist. There's the gentle beat of his steady pulse and I finally let out the breath I was holding, surprised that lack of oxygen didn't make me pass out. Then I move his arm so he hopefully won't hit me again.

He's nothing more than a shadowy outline in the darkened gray of the room, hazy and ethereal as if any second he will blend into the background and disappear, merely another aspect of my recently interrupted dream. But this is a ridiculous thought. This is real. He is here and I am here and for now at least, that's not going to change.

The future is something else altogether.

I guess that at some point he decided to creep over to my bed.

Of course, this means that someone somewhere wasn't paying much attention; he'd have needed to turn off the machine.

He smacks his lips oddly in his sleep and runs lazy fingers through the unruly mess of his hair. Some short incoherent mumble escapes his throat, but I don’t recognize the words. He looks so peaceful and for a little bit, I am jealous. He has an innocence that I will never have, taken and given away as it was years ago, first by my brother and then by myself.

I'm still holding his hand.

Quickly, gently, I rub the palm with my thumb and then let go.

Naruto makes a strangled little whine.

The heat of his body and sound of his breathing help to lull me.

He’s the reason I slept better.

I've grown accustomed to it.

It's like when I was a kid and would sneak into bed with my brother. Shrugging up close, I'd throw an arm over his chest and rest my head on his shoulder. I was the one who went to him.

I was the one who was clingy.

But he let me.

And he’d smile.

I reach my hand over and, grabbing the far side of Naruto's waist and roll him to face me. He smiles sweetly and snuggles down into the sheets like a little animal. I lean my head forward so our foreheads touch and nothing else. He mumbles something soft and slurring I can't make out and shifts a curled hand forward, touching just the edge of it to my chest. He lets out a contented sigh.
So much like a little kid, craving the warmth and comfort of family. I was that way once too.

But I grew out of it while he's only now growing into it.

These are the only times I can let myself be anything but what I am.

I wish, in some dark, hidden part of my soul that I don't understand, that things could be this way all the time.

//But you are who you are and no amount of anything will ever really change that.//

I know.

But for now, I don't need to think about that.

About Sasuke, about the last Uchiha, the keeper of the Sharingan, the traitor, the murderer, the avenger.

The useless little boy . . .

No, I don't need to think about any of that right now.

I am alone and not alone and let the emptiness of unconsciousness retake me.

I’m awakened by something familiar I can’t quite place.

It is gentleness at the side of my forehead, a pleasant pull that comes and goes. There’s soft warmth at my scalp, which combs outward and I swear I can feel the touch even in the tips of my hair. Over and over, the caress that tingles under my skin in long, far-reaching tendrils. Making me lightheaded and drowsy, but not at all tired.

Yes, I remember this feeling.

It reminds me of when I was little and my mother would brush my hair while humming a quiet song. It’s a nice memory that for once does not have the bitter tang of guilt that usually taints them. Reluctantly, I open my eyes.

The room is slightly lighter now, though not by much and it takes only a moment for my eyes to adjust.

Naruto reaches forward again, grazing my temple and threading his fingers into my long bangs, pulling out and twisting the ends delicately between his fingers. He does this again and again and again. It’s painfully slow in its repetition and his eyes cloud over as though hypnotized.

I don’t think he knows I’m awake.

I look at him, the curve of his cheek, the telltale whisker-marks, and the deep blue eyes that pierce the dim light of pre-dawn.

He’s grown.

I turn away. Naruto’s hand slides across my face to rub a thumb under my eye. He seems to do that a lot lately. Some strange sort of reminder, I guess. I look up at him, my eyebrows creased slightly, my breathe more labored than it should be.

I just wish it would stop.
His gaze is soft but serious and he stares straight at me, as if in challenge. I narrow my eyes. The warmth of his hand moves over my cheek and slips off, landing with a quiet sound when it hit the sheets.

"Iruka said . . ." he starts.

I quirk an eyebrow. He pauses a second more before continuing.

"Iruka-sensei says that you brought me here, that you stayed everyday." His brow creases. I nod, both affirming what he's said and encouraging him to go on. "Even until it made you sick, he said. Is that true?"

I don’t know where this is going. "It's not like I can rely on you to take care of yourself, can I?" I tease sarcastically.

His grin grows wide and he brushes the tip of his thumb along my chin.

"Thank you."

I only nod again and, feeling uncomfortable, return my eyes to the ceiling. The room is quiet, peaceful and still so I'm not sure whether I'm not paying close enough attention or what, but suddenly I'm dodging a punch aimed squarely for my jaw. "Naruto, what . . ?"

Turning my head, I watch as the smile on his face quickly changes to a fierce scowl and both his hands pull back before surging forward, pushing me roughly off the bed so that my head hits the wall and I tumble ungracefully to the cold tile floor. "What the hell, usuratonkachi?" I scream at him, gripping the back of my head. Seething, I glare up at him as he kneels on the sheets, his head and arms slumped forward, a sinister aura radiating from his every pore.

"Don't do it again," he rasps dangerously.

I can feel my own anger rising up in me, burning hot, my hands clenching tightly into fists. Is he trying to hurt me? Because I’m already there. "What the hell Naruto? Did you not notice the bandage I have wrapped around my head? I know you're not the smartest person, but really . . ."

"DON'T DO IT AGAIN!"

Naruto screams loud enough to wake the comatose patients on the second floor. His stance grows momentarily straighter, angry chakra swirling around his body. I back up a little. I've seen this before and it's not something I ever wanted to see again. I steel myself, my fingers digging into the tile, bracing for the worst.

But the worst doesn't happen.

Instead, I am suddenly attacked by an overactive blond ninja who flops into my lap, not biting and slashing, but cocooning me like a parasite. One hand grasps my scalp, pulling at the strands of hair, the other clutching my shoulder so tight I'm afraid he might break an already cracked bone.

"What is wrong with you?" I say feebly.

"Don't do it again." It's whisper-soft and barely audible in the snuffling of his tears against my shoulder. Naruto squeezes tighter and I'm not sure how much longer I can manage to breathe.

He's always like this, some emotional little monkey, running from one side of the spectrum to the next, clear for anyone to see.
I'm nothing like him.

His arms are impossibly tight around me, his quiet sobbing echoing in my ear. He's a heavy weight in my lap, but strangely enough, not uncomfortable.

My hands twitch on the tile floor.

I inhale deeply, or try to anyway. Crinkling my forehead as I gather my will, I slowly raise my hands, still shaking, and inch them closer until they are almost touching him. I make light contact, nervous. It's the first real hug I've returned for as long as I can remember.

Naruto roughly shoves me away and springs to his feet, whirling in the other direction before I have the chance to think.

Huh?

My brain spins, while my stomach plummets straight down. Trying to follow Naruto's change of mood is like trying to catch air, it's there but it's not and you're never really sure what it is you're seeing.

//--He really doesn't need you. He's just thanking you, like he would anyone. You are not special.//--

Naruto wipes the back off his forearm across his face, clearing it of tears and sniffles slightly. "Idiot."

I sit up straight.

"Idiot? Me? You're the one who just threw me off the bed for no reason! And made me hit my head for the second time," I stress. "Did you not get the memo that I'm injured? Tch." Which reminds me. "Tsunade didn’t even bother with me,’ I grumble.

I blink at him. Then, huffing, I turn my head away and use the bed's metal frame to stand. "Thanks a lot, dobe. Are you trying to kill me?"

"No." I can hear the pout in his voice.

"Could've fooled me," I mumble.

Ignoring him, I flop myself on the bed, lean back on one arm and assess the damage that idiot caused me. It really did sting, the back of my skull continues to throb and is growing into a dull ache. I run my fingers over the bandages and they come back wet. Pausing, taking a quick glance over at Naruto, who stands scrutinizing me, I sneak my hand around to take a peek as quick as I can. Red. I knew it. When my head hit the wall, a couple of my stitches must have popped. Closing my hand, I tuck it tight to my leg to hide it from him.

It’s just easier this way.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

It can't be that long until Tsunade comes back.

Naruto eyes me curiously, with that frown still on his face. Then he huffs, drops his arms and walks over. Instinctively, I lean away. Because now he's standing between my knees, a bit
awkwardly close, and looking down at me. Just looking. I shift a little and narrow my eyes. Tentatively, Naruto lifts a hand and reaches toward me and I tighten my scowl when my body shudders.

Don't Naruto.

Just . . don't.

//What are you afraid of?//

Nothing. Uchihas aren't afraid of anything.

He lets out a weary sigh, gives me a false smile and settles on the bed beside me. I hate that smile. Fake and skin-deep as if I can't see what lies beneath. I hate this whole situation.

The mattress dips a bit under his weight and I find myself adjusting my legs to keep in place. He's sitting right beside me, close enough to feel the heat radiate off his skin, almost close enough to feel that skin physically. His eyes, intense and blue stare at me for long seconds before looking away into nothing. I make a point to do the same.

There's something wrong, that much is obvious. Naruto puts his hands flat on the bed behind his back, leans his chest forward, and begins swinging his legs. But he's taller now than he was and each time he swings one, it brushes along the floor, making odd little sounds echo through the room.

Scuff-scuff-scuff.

I sit silently and listen.

Scuff-scuff-scuff.

He watches as his feet appear and disappear from view. His throat bobs nervously when he swallows.

He's too quiet.

This isn't Naruto.

"What, nothing to say? Did you forget how to talk?" I tease him, hoping to get some rise, some spark of the old fire back.

He shrugs half heartedly, completely pissing me off.

"When did you get so quiet?" I spit out, more to the empty room than to him. This isn't the right Naruto, the one who was supposed to come back with me.

He took it away and there's nothing I can do.

I hate my brother.

I hate Uchiha Itachi.

//But is that really the truth?//

"Sometime between losing you," Naruto says, answering the question I'd already forgotten. "And losing myself." With excruciating slowness, he leans towards me and rests his forehead on my
shoulder, his eyes squeezed shut. I can feel the feather light lashes flutter on my arm.

And what exactly am I supposed to do?

Gingerly, I reach my blood-free hand over and place it on his knee, just how Sakura does. Maybe she knows something I don't.

"Naruto, don't . . ."

But I don't get the chance to finish. The blond bolts upright and turns that near feral, desperate grin on me. "But I did totally save your ass, didn't I? You can't deny that now. I. Beat. You! Uzumaki Naruto is better than the great Uchiha Sasuke! I totally saved you from Orochimaru before you . . ." He stops suddenly, a choked breath lodging in his throat. He blinks and amends his statement, his smile more forced than before. "Before you proved yourself to be an even bigger loser than you already are!"

Letting out a snort, I curl my lip at him. Just great. Now he's what? Multiple personalities? Yet, it's better. Not perfect, but better. He smiles wider and looks away again and I follow suit, staring into the shadows. He sits back down and a few more moments pass in utter silence.

"What are we going to do?" He asks softly.

"We?"

He turns to glower at me. "Yeah, 'we'. This is going to be trouble, you know. They're not just going to let us off without some serious punishment. We could get locked up, or exiled, or worse!"

I shrug indifferently. It doesn't much matter. It's not as if I lived under the delusion that I'd just be set free. "They can't let me go. But you . . ."

"Didn't you see what happened?" He cuts me off again, waving his arms emphatically. "Didn't you look outside? The fire, the destruction, the," he pauses, swallowing hard, "lines of dead stacked head to foot down the street? And they already hate me. This is just the perfect excuse to get rid of their little problem. It's not like that haven't wanted to for years. I've lived this way a long time, Sasuke. It's not like I don't know the truth."

My nails bite sharply into the palms of my hands. "They can't," I say through gritted teeth. "They can't do anything. It's not your fault. It was Itachi's. And he's dead now. They can't do anything."

"They can do whatever they want." He asserts.

"They can't." The hair at the back of my neck rises, an all-consuming, familiar fire burning through my veins. The very idea that after everything he's done for them, for Konoha, that they'd repay him with punishment is unforgivable. Since Orochimaru, I've worked too damn hard to get him back here to let it just slip through my fingers. Every muscle in my body tenses, ready to pounce, to destroy anything that gets in my way. "If they even try," My eyes bleed red. "I'll kill them."

//--Yes, kill them all. Make them pay.//--

If they even think about laying on a finger on him, I won't hesitate.

I'll rip every bone from their bodies.

"Sasuke." A sad little statement, choked off in the middle.

I turn to him, the rage in my blood still palpable, still blindingly hot, and see the shadow of tears in
the corner of his eyes. There's such sorrow there, such loss, such something I don't know. He looks like he's about to break. "Sasuke." He says again and once more traps me in his arms, soft but definite, tender but strong. He’s such a baby sometimes. "Please. Don't say that."

And I can feel my anger ebb slowly away, simply by his asking.

He’s still speaking my name over and over again in some strange strangled litany. "Sasuke, Sasuke. You're Sasuke. I know you are. I know it."

The pulsing in my neck dissipates, that all-consuming hate cools and that tunnel vision eases away until I can see clearly again. Until I am Sasuke once more. Flawed to be sure, but still me.

But I know, that if anyone dared to hurt him now, I'd do what I did before. I wouldn't be able to stop myself.

Pathetic, useless excuses for humans.

I'd kill them all.
Chapter 4

Tsunade shows up soon after, though it seems plenty long enough for me. My head still aches, this dull, pulsating pain, and I can feel the caked stickiness from the dried blood. Meanwhile, Naruto has somehow managed to fall back asleep and, annoying jerk that he is, does so still latched onto me, breathing out warm puffs of air onto my chest. I would have moved him, but even unconscious, he resisted and it just didn't seem worth the effort.

And now the hokage waltzes in and gives me an amused little smirk.

I glare at her, hard as I can.

Apparently unfazed, she gestures to me to follow her outside. Without changing my expression, I forcibly extricate myself from my leech and push him unceremoniously onto the bed. He utters a small disappointed whimper, struggles a little bit and then curls up around a pillow instead. Nice to know how easily I can be replaced.

Idiot.

I look to Tsunade who is unsuccessfully trying to stifle a smile.

It's annoying how difficult that wasn't.

But ignoring it all, I stand on my own two feet and walk proudly out the door, head held high. I reach the center of the hallway and stop, cross my arms and stare determinedly at the blank wall. A group of nurses pass by, chattering and giving me funny looks, maneuvering their way obviously around me. I don't care if I'm in the way. I'm not moving.

I don't care if there's no good reason.

I'm not moving.

There's the soft click as the door shuts behind me.

"Uchiha." Short, prim, to the point.

My back straightens; the family name is a trigger for me.
"Uchiha." Quieter, but sharp, leaving no room for debate.

So I turn and stare directly at her, this woman, this leader of Konoha. I am neither cowed nor awed by her. She is just a woman with a title. And I'm just a ninja without a home. She really doesn't have any say over me.

Except that I just so happen to be in Konoha.

She purses her lips, her eyes narrowed to slits as she assesses me up and down. Then she glares a bit more, her mind turning over what, I do not know. Nor do I care.

All I do is stare back.

After a few minutes, she speaks. "C'mon," she says, waving with her hand. "We'd better get you cleaned up."

Turning on her heel, she tromps away, not looking back and just expecting me to follow like a whipped dog, or in other words, like a well-trained shinobi.

I wait until she completely disappears from view. Then I drop my arms and follow.

"If you were injured, you should have called someone," the woman chastises once I have joined her. She unwinds the bandages stuck to my newly opened wound.

And when I say "roughly", I mean that she's taking the blood soaked cloth and ripping it free from the scalp it was melded to. *My* scalp, by the way.

I guess I can't expect any better treatment after jeopardizing her precious Naruto. But I don't show pain. It's like an old friend.

"I'm not weak," I spit out irritably, addressing her statement, trying to make it seem like I'm pissed and not in pain.

It's not too hard.

I am pissed.

She hums uncaring under her breath and brusquely takes my head between her hands to examine the wound. Probing it with her nails a bit more harshly than I really think necessary, she clucks her tongue.

"I really can't take the time to constantly watch you to make sure you don't cause yourself further injury. If you're that hell-bent on doing yourself in, I may as well let you." She finally removes her hands and I whip my head around to glower at her.

The whitewashed room suddenly spins, the world turning on its axis and my stomach takes up residence somewhere in the vicinity of my throat. Fighting back the urge to retch, I school my eyes to their placid normalcy.

"If it weren't for Naruto, I'd simply banish you from Konoha." Her eyes bore into me, steely and cold. Now with Naruto out of the picture, it’s no-holds-barred, I see.

"It's Naruto's fault this happened." I state, indicating the reopened gash in my head.

"And how could you possibly blame him?" Tsunade retorts through clenched teeth.
As calmly as I am able under the strained circumstances, I reply. "Because he threw me off the bed."

There's a new twinkle of mirth in her eyes before she speaks. "Oh, I see." It's all she says, but it's clear she thinks it's only what I deserved. She knows I've hurt Naruto and we both know I'll do it again. It's inescapable.

"Are you up for it?"

Up for it? Up for what? What the hell is this old witch talking about? "Huh?"

Her eyebrows raise to her hairline and she humphs at me, lifting her hands to either side. "I think you're well enough that I can try to heal you with my chakra." She closes her eyes and shrugs, uncaring. "You seem to be doing a little better, you may be able to handle it. Or it could be you're still not strong enough."

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. She's baiting me and I know it, but that hardly matters. I'm an Uchiha, damn it! "I'm fine." I answer, gritting my teeth.

She opens her eyes and flashes me what can only be described as a devil's grin before slapping her hands to my head.

It stings, but I make no noise.

I close my eyes and wait. It takes a while to feel anything at all different, and when I do, it's nothing more than a slight warmthness leaking through her fingers. Sneering, I internally gloat. This is nothing.

But then the warmth vanishes, replaced by a tight pain that twists like a knife, small at first, but steadily growing until I feel like not only my head but in every nerve in my body. I grit my teeth, the sweat pouring down my temples and will myself to remain quiet. I will not cry or scream or any of that. No way I'm giving her the satisfaction.

My jaw is held so tight that I think it's trembling, a fact which I notice somehow in a place far outside myself. I'm concentrating so hard on hiding the pain that the process seems to take longer than it actually does.

But then, suddenly, she stops and as I open my eyes, I realize that the pain in my jaw hurts more than the one in my head. Stars sparkle briefly before my eyes and then are gone, replaced by an arrogant looking hokage.

She smiles at me. "Well done. For a moment there, I thought you might pass out again." She pats me on the shoulder with a condescending air and I swat the offending hand away in disdain. Her expression doesn't change as she makes a passing check of my vitals, heart, lungs, sight, before declaring me fit.

The smile is still there when she speaks. "I suppose that means you're well enough to be released." Then without ceremony, she stands up and brushes nonexistent dust from her lap. "Your free time will end today, Uchiha. As of now, you will be put under official arrest until the truth of the matter can be sorted out."

She states it in passing, as if discussing nothing more than the weather, rather than the ominous turn my life has taken.

It's a tad insulting.
"What?" I state acidly. "Are all the ANBU watching me not enough?"

She tenses a second and I can't help but feel a small, if somewhat juvenile, moment of satisfaction. But she quickly collects herself. "Not for official business, no. We just needed to make sure for now that you wouldn't hurt anyone." I scowl at her and she glares back. "Don't try that with me, kid. You do not intimidate me. Now, I'll allow you to go gather your things. Someone will be here momentarily to escort you to your cell." She reaches her hand towards the door and takes a quick, meaningful look back. "I know you won't try anything, with all the eyes that are watching you. You'd best prove yourself smarter than that."

The knob turns in her fingers and the light from the hallway cascades in through the open door. As an afterthought, she adds, "Oh, and tell Naruto that I'll be in to see him shortly."

"Then I'll wait until then." I respond, without further explanation.

She stares at me full on for a minute.

"You will, will you?" She says a bit mysteriously.

I don’t reply as finally, she nods her head.

"As you wish."

She leaves me alone and to my own devices without another word. I suppose she considers it all right since I have no intention of leaving and of course there are all those pesky ANBU milling around.

I reach for the door handle but my hands slips on the cool metal, leaving behind a small red smear. Yes, that's right, the blood. Odd that something so small could leave such a mark.

As I wash it off in the bathroom, an odd feeling of finality washes over me like the water. Now comes the time when all bad men must pay.

It makes no difference at this point.

One prison is much like another, and I've been in one for a lifetime already.

So it is with the detached resignation that I finally open the door to my . . . no, Naruto's room.

"Where were you, you jerk?" Comes the yell the instant the door is open.

Walking up to where he's sitting cross-legged on the bed, I give Naruto a gentle cuff to the back of the head. "There's no reason to shout. I'm standing right here."

He deepens his typical pout, jutting out his bottom lip and giving me what I suppose he believes is an intimidating look, but really just makes him look childish. I ignore his lame attempt and go to get my things, pulling off the flimsy annoying hospital shirt-thing and put on the now over sized robe I arrived in. It stinks of blood and dirt and reminds me of where I've been.

No one bothered to clean it.

"You still haven't answered my question."

Huffing, I resume what I was doing, ignoring him as best I can. Which is no easy task with Naruto,
as anyone who knows him can testify. He continues nagging me by way of a constant tapping on my back.

"I was with your hokage," I tell him, sick of his pestering. The tapping, thankfully, abruptly stops. I look at him over my shoulder. "By the way, she'll be here in a second."

He's looking at me strangely, fear and rage and sadness all rolled into one. I turn my head.

"So she fixed you up then?" he asks.

"What?" I try to ignore the skip in my pulse as I pack my things into a tiny bag.

"Your head." He replies matter-of-factly and I whirl around to face him. He smirks sheepishly and waves a blood stained hand at me.

"Ah." I stow away the last item. There's this nervous tension that swells in the air behind me.

I lift the bag filled with my scant random things and deposit it by the door, blue eyes watching me the entire time.

"What is your problem, dobe?" I ask, exasperated. Because seriously, what is his problem? He's acting even weirder than normal.

"Where are you going now?"

Wearily, I turn to face him, arms crossed over my chest. "Where do you think?"

He blinks at me. Once twice, three times. OK, nice to know those motor functions still work.

"But, you can't mean . . ." He stops mid-sentence with his eyes wide and locked onto me.

"What did you think, Naruto? They'd just say, 'oh, that's alright, we forgive you for betraying us and trying to kill one of our own and almost ruining Konoha by letting Orochimaru get what he wants'? Oh, sure, that will happen. Idiot."

Naruto doesn't counter with some witty, or in his case inane, remark as I would expect. Instead, he lowers his lashes and looks forlornly off into a corner. "I never told anyone about that. I mean, Kakashi has his suspicions, I think, but . . ." He lets the words trail off into nothingness.

"What is your problem, dobe?"

He looks up at me, atypically blank. "I never told anyone you wanted to kill me." He shrugs. "I mean, they know we fought, but they don't know. All the things you said . . ."

It's my turn to blink. And I do so, trying to process this information. "Why?"

He looks away. "I didn't want anyone to hold it against you. I don't . . ." The last part I barely make out and don't think it was meant for me to hear.

All it does is confuse me more.

"Naruto . . ."

He stares off into a corner, into what lay beyond or behind and his eyes gradually change from blank to sad to outright anger.
Then all of a sudden and for no reason, he's shouting. "And what did you mean by that?"

"What?" I ask, when a fist comes at me out of nowhere. But I'm a little more prepared for it this time and I catch the attacking wrist in my hand. "What the . . ."

He's taken some little time trip, back to our interrupted conversation, and giving me whiplash in the process. He's sudden become violent for no reason I can see.

"Stop calling me 'idiot'! You have no right to when you're the biggest ever, Sasuke!" He struggles in my grasp and I manage to keep him at arm's length, though he's trying very hard to tear at me with his claw-like nails. A cold finger races up my spine.

Again.

It's worse than it was earlier. I don't understand why this keeps happening.

"Naruto!" I yell, trying to get the real one to answer me.

He continues to flail in my arms, shouting out as he does so. "And what did you mean by that? What did you mean Sasuke!"

He's switching topics too fast, too erratically and I can't keep up. I have no clue what he's talking about and I don't have time to consider it now, not when I'm faced with a Naruto quickly becoming Kyuubi. If he changes now, it's all over. And that's something I can't let happen. Naruto must remain Naruto or everything was pointless.

I grip his arms as tight as I can, bolstered by the fact that he's still yelling at me. Naruto is yelling at Sasuke and that tells me he hasn't completely lost control.

"Naruto! Listen to me! You have to calm down!" He still struggles in my arms. "Stop it, now!"

"You stupid, selfish, stupid selfish bastard!"

I can feel my own rage welling within me, coupled with worry and a tinge of desperation. I don't know how to deal with this other than with violence and that wouldn't help anything right now.

"Stop it, Naruto! Tsunade will be here any minute! And," Oh damn. I've just remembered the ANBU. "We're being watched. Get control of yourself or they'll storm in here and take you into custody. They'll throw you in jail, or worse. They might even," My voice catches in my throat. "They might even kill you."

He suddenly stops, grimacing at me, his eyes shifting between blue and red, blue and red and back again. I feel my heart beating wildly, panic still pulsing through my veins. But he seems to be calming down.

"Usuratonkachi."

There's a heavy lump in my throat, uncomfortable and unwanted. Slowly, my pulse settles as the red completely disappears from his eyes. The fangs recede and the nails shrunk back to their normal, chewed off shortness and he is Naruto again.

He stares at me a moment without really staring, wearing this unnerving far-off expression. His eyes narrow and his mouth turns downward into a familiar frown.

"What did you mean . . ." He starts, back on the question he asked, as if nothing has happened.
And I think, *'he doesn't know.'* He doesn't know he almost turned into Kyuubi. That's a very bad thing, much worse than I’d previously thought.

He's supposed to have control; he's at least supposed to know.

Naruto . . .

The door swings wide open, no knocking, no announcement and Tsunade charges in, interrupting the unasked question hanging heavy in the air. The both of us look over to her, still somewhat tangled, my hands firmly holding Naruto's wrists. Out of instinct, I tighten my grip, as I often do when faced with something I don't want to deal with.

An infinitesimal moment lasts forever, my hands gripping tighter and tighter.

"That hurts." It’s a barely perceptible whisper.

I glance down and see the flesh of his wrists is turning purple. I instantly let go, knowing there’ll be bruises and wondering why he didn't just pull away.

It's not as if he couldn't.

One thing I've learned over these years of knowing him, Naruto may not be the smartest ninja around, but he sure as hell isn't the weakest either.

Slowly, he puts his hands in his lap and swings his legs over the side of the bed so that we are seated next to each other. So close yet leagues apart.

I look away, schooling my face into its well-worn blankness. No way am I letting him know how it bothers me that he's keeping me at arm's length.

Because it doesn't.

I don't need anyone.

Not anyone.

Especially not him.

//And that's why you practically killed yourself just to stay by his side? Because you don't need him?//

I scowl at the air. I hate being contradicted, especially when it's by a voice in my head. I'm a loner, an avenger. Nothing will change that.

//You contradict yourself.//

My scowl deepens.

"Well, well, boys. Nice to see you back to normal." Tsunade announces.

"Hmph!" Naruto crosses his arms and glares at the hokage. "What do you want now, obaa-chan?" Tsunade's eye twitches, but the sickly sweet, false smile stays where it is. "Just because you're mad at Sasuke, don't take it out on me." She storms up and drills her fist right into his head. "Besides, brat, this is serious! You'd better start treating me with more respect. Particularly when it’s time to face the elders!"
“What is it with all the hitting?” He shouts at her, which she summarily ignores as she pulls up a chair and drops herself down into it. Naruto takes a quick side-glance at me, still glaring. So I glare back, expecting some trademarked Naruto insult. But I don't get one. He simply frowns and stares, creasing his brow curiously and turns away.

His eyes return to Tsunade as she picks up the previous conversation.

"The elders will want to talk with you, Naruto. Extensively. I'm sorry, but there will be an investigation and you will have to deal with the elders. However," Naruto shrinks. "You'll be under house arrest rather then jail. You'll keep the ANBU detail that I'm sure you've already noticed following you.” The last part is grumbled under her breath.

Naruto only nods.

Tsunade raises an eyebrow, but quickly continues. "Your questioning will probably not be for a few days yet; they'll be talking with Sasuke first. And his interrogation will be more detailed and . . . different." A tanned hand shoots out and snatches mine, squeezing tight and I don't think he's aware he's done this.

It's that word.

Interrogation.

"Even so, it won't be easy. There are a lot of questions to be answered, a lot of stories to be clarified. I'll help in any way I can, but it's going to depend a lot on you and how you handle yourself. To say that the elders' worst fears have been, in their minds anyway, validated, is an understatement. This provides the perfect excuse to do what they've wanted to do for years."

She leaves the rest unsaid, but we all know what it is.

And now they know how to do it.

"I won't let them."

I don't even realize it was me who spoke until blue eyes flash in my direction.

"Sasuke . . ."

"They can't blame him for something that wasn't his fault. It was the Kyuubi. The Akatsuki. My goddamned brother who's to blame." I feel like I'm being strangled. "They can't blame him for a situation that they caused to begin with."

Tsunade's eyes widen in surprise before narrowing again.

"I won't let them. If they even try, I'll . . ."

The bones in my hand are ready to break in Naruto's powerful grip.

"Uchiha!" The woman shouts into my haze-filled anger, backhanding me hard across the face. It's the sound that reaches me; I don't actually feel the hit. "I don't want to hear you say anything like that again! You're helping no one with this behavior. Not Naruto and certainly not yourself. The best way you can help is by letting them see that you are not a threat. Are you listening to me? Uchiha!"

But I feel like I'm hearing her from underwater, clouded and unclear, my vision gone to red and
black, this pulsating hate, the room becoming fish-eye and my heart pounding in my chest. My consciousness seems to drift backward and that empty blackness takes over. Everything narrows, as if seen through a tunnel, cold and dark and separate.

This shouldn't be happening.

I'm supposed to be in control.

This shouldn't even be possible!

Someone is shouting at me, but I don't know who it is, I just need to concentrate. I won't let him win, not anymore, because if he does, then these hands . . .

Naruto's voice echoes in my head, the bitterness of memory biting at the back of my brain.

*Is that you Sasuke.* . . .

*Because if it's Sasuke, if it's Sasuke and this will make him feel better* . . .

No! Idiot, idiot, idiot!

It wouldn't make me feel better. It would make everything wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. And I won't lose! *I* am in control. I am Uchiha Sasuke and no one else.

I despise you, you twisted bastard. You have no right to be here. You don't even exist.

The blackness begins to fade, the room coming once more into view, although it's spinning crazily. My hand is killing me. At some point in time, I don't know when, I began gripping back. My breath is caught in my throat, stale and stagnant and full of bad intentions. I swallow it back as best as I can, close my eyes and take a deep breath.

When I open them again, both Tsunade and Naruto are staring at me, she with a tinge of suspicion, he with one of worry. As I turn my head to face him, the bones in my traitorous hands ache.

I almost lost.

When I look at Naruto, his eyes instantly brighten, not clear, but better and he gives a soft smile. How can he be so infuriating? So simple?

How can he be so trusting?

He looks at me as if he knows I will never hurt him when that's exactly what will happen one way or another.

Perhaps what I need to protect him from most is me.

I wrench my hand forcefully free from his grasp.

I hate this.

Raising my eyes to Tsunade, I see that look, of mistrust and delicately concealed hatred. She purses her lips. "Does this happen often?"

I gaze blankly out the wide window opposite me. "No." It sounds like a lie, but it isn't.

I don't often lose control. But 'not often' is probably way more often than it should be. And
considering what I'll likely be put through, it may very well happen again at the worst possible time.

"This could be a problem." Her voice is low and serious, but she's talking more to herself than me. She looks at me, then to Naruto, then back again, assessing both the situation and us. "What about you?" she suddenly asks Naruto.

"Oh, uh," He sheepishly puts a hand behind his head. "Some . . ."

"It doesn't." I cut in briskly.

He turns to me quizzically. "But . . ."

I kick his shin to make my point. "You're fine."

He pouts.

"That doesn't sound like fine to me." The Hokage butts in.

Fighting a glare, I attempt to gather my fragile, nearly nonexistent patience. "As long as no one tries to pull it out of him, or messes with his chakra, or pisses him off."

That’s probably not helping.

Tsunade hums quietly and puts her hand to her chin. Naruto's giving me a confused, thanks-for-nothing pout.


"As . . . reassuring as that was, Uchiha, I think we'd better take some time to try and reestablish the seal. Preferably before facing the elders. As for you," she addresses me. "Maybe something to calm you down, block out the negative impulses."

I narrow my eyes at her. "What exactly do you mean by that? I don't want to be under some crazy jutsu influence or something. That'll only make things worse."

"It's not a jutsu," Tsunade replies, waving her hand tiredly in front of her. "It's just something to help you relax."

"You mean like some kind of drug?"

A devious smile crosses her face. "Something like that."

I don't like the sound of this. I don't like the sound of this at all.

"Please, Sasuke." Naruto leans over me, big puppy dog lashes batting as if that's going to make me change my mind. "C'mon . . ." he pleads. Ugh. Anything to stop that whining.

"Fine." I huff and turn away.

Tsunade smiles almost brightly, but of course, she never smiles exactly brightly. There's always some wicked gleam in her eye, some dark, disturbing ulterior motive hiding behind all her pretty words. "Good. Now that that's settled. Naruto, you're progress is, as always, nothing short of amazing. Another day and I think you'll be fit to go home."
"Good! I'm sick of being in this stupid hospital anyway."

I give him a confused glance. His words lack conviction.

"But you won't be alone while you're here. I don't want a repeat of Uchiha's actions the other day."
The woman raises her hand in a silencing motion before Naruto had the chance to protest. "No argument. Besides, I don't think you'll need one. I'm assigning Iruka to keep you company. It's only one day and I think the can kids can survive that long without him." She smiles.

Naruto instantly brightens up. Of course. Iruka is, after all, Iruka. The closest thing to a father he will ever know.

There's a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Tsunade yells, as if this is her room.

Two jounin whose names I don't know walk in. They're here for me.

I can feel Naruto twitch beside me, but simply stand and grab my paltry bag of useless things.

"I'll take that," One of the jounin says, strict and proper, a female, and snatches it from my grasp.

I easily let it go. There's not really anything there that I want.

From the corner of my vision, I can see blue eyes darting this way and that, the unspoken question screaming into the silence. I approach the two nameless shinobi.

I won't look at him. I don't know if I can.

"Wait," Naruto says, a slight frantic pitch to his voice. "Where are you going? Where are you taking him?"

But they, predictably, do not answer.

"We've already been through this." I say.

A muffled cough and without another word, Tsunade gets to her feet and awkwardly exits the room, silently motioning for the two to follow her. They do so reluctantly and with great reservation. But still, she is their hokage.

I stand poised by the door, facing away, but I can hear him shuffling uncomfortably on the bed, his feet scuffing the floor.

"What did you mean?"

I sigh. Back to this again? "What are you talking about now, dobe?"

"You said," cold and sharp and meaner than I expected. "'Your' hokage. What did you mean? You're not planning to leave again, are you? You better not. Because I'll drag you back again and again, as many times as I have to..."

"Naruto." I stop his rant short. "As I recall, I was the one who dragged you back." He falls silent and I let out a heavy breath, raising my head to the closed white door. "Besides, there isn’t any choice."

"You always have a choice." His pout is clear in his voice, stubborn to the end.
That's a nice, naive thought, Naruto. But it's not reality.

"This is for the best." Maybe, my leaving really was the right choice. Maybe some people can never be friends. Maybe rivals and enemies were all we were meant to be. Maybe the only way for our “friendship” to survive was to not really exist.

"I decide what's best for me," he says with determination.

Waiting a moment, staring at the empty whiteness, the minutes stretch before me. "And what would that be Naruto? What would be best for you?"

There's a small pause.

"To have my best friend back."

I tilt my head so that if I wanted, I could see him over the bend of my shoulder. "That person doesn't exist anymore. If he ever did."

And then I open the door and face two jounin, harsh and unforgiving and waiting for me. One reaches out his hand to grab me roughly by the arm. Aligned like this, flanked on both sides by some of the best Konoha has to offer, we walk away.

I never look back to him, sitting quietly on the hospital bed.

And he never says anything to stop me.

The door shuts softly between us.

-----

The clank of metal sounds flat on the wooden floor. I'm surprised at where they've opted to keep me. It's sunny and warm and apart from the sparse furnishings and barred doorway, it seems more like a guest room than a prison cell.

I can smell a thick layer of dust.

They've both blindfolded me and bound my hands and feet with chakra-laced chains, not trusting me not to attempt an escape. I take a tentative step forward, trying to get my bearings and bump into a bundle of fabric lumped on the floor. Must be my bed. I drop to my knees and the dirt of the old, musty mattress flies up to meet me. A little of the ancient dirt gets into my mouth and chokes me

"Don't try anything." The female jounin from earlier says. "We'll be watching you."

Funny that she should tell me, as if I couldn't figure that out on my own. I still have one thing left to do. One more debt to repay and then I'm done.

Then, well I don't have anything planned for then.

I don't expect there'll be one.

Footsteps retreat down the hallway, soft and echoing, audible still to my ninja-trained ears. I throw the rest of myself to the bed and lay on my back. There’s no noise, now that the footsteps have ceased, not even the sound of my own breathing.

The sensory deprivation makes it easier to think. And remember. Neither of which I'd like to do.
The only thing I know for sure is that I have to protect him. I know he feels guilty, but he needs to get over it. It's the Akatsuki's fault. Itachi's fault.

My fault.

Not his.

I should have been watching him better. I should have been stronger. “I should’ve” many things.

But I'm sick of regrets; they haven’t gotten me anywhere but where I am now.

Alone, chained and in jail, waiting for them to find the justification to execute me. I'm not under any delusions. The once influence of the Uchiha clan has long since faded, overshadowed by the faults of the few left behind. Now there is only one.

And he is not exactly a shining example of trust and loyalty.

I feel it from everyone, even Sakura and Kakashi who say they believe and trust me. But in reality, they don’t.

Not even Naruto.

It all adds up to one final, damning inevitable conclusion. Uchiha Sasuke is a traitor. Selfish, arrogant, unapologetic traitor.

It's all true. I make no qualms about that. Nor any apologies. What I did was right for me at the time. And I can't turn back, so why should I concern myself over things that can't be changed? No, I refuse to.

It was a short life, a wasted one some would say, but it was mine and I refuse to repent for it. There’s only one thing left undone.

I'll do whatever little I can to help him.

It's all I have left, it's what I have to owe.

I don’t know how or why or when he became so important, but he did. I would have thrown my life away in exchange for his time and time again. This is no different.

So, they will not break me.

They will not break Uchiha Sasuke.

The only way it'll work, that it’ll be believable, is if I condemn myself.

So be it.

There is nothing left for me.

So here it is Naruto. My friend, my rival, my most important person. I'll give you this one final restitution.

I just hope that it is enough.
A hollow clank greets me early the next morning, followed by that hideous, spine-itching screech as a plate scrapes along the floor. A milky sort of rancidness meets my nose as I make my way over to the dish. I’m still blindfolded and restrained so it’s not a simple task, but I manage.

"Breakfast." A scratchy voice informs me.

Lovely.

But I take it anyway, surprised and a little thankful that they decided to feed me at all, even if I have to lean over and lap it up like a dog. But the demand of my rumbling stomach overrides my pride for just this moment. It tastes sour and out-of-date, an unpleasant gooey gruel sort of mess. It sits heavy in my gut.

I take back my previous thankfulness. They're probably just trying to make me sicker, make me more willing to talk when whatever they do wrenches my insides. I push the uneaten portion away.

All I can do now is wait as the sun heats up my little box like an oven.

This is most likely the day that will seal my fate, such as it is.

Anti-climatic, when one gets right down to it.

But I am resolved.

I’ll make my own decision, just as I always have.

"Wake up, little boy." says a distantly familiar voice out of nowhere.

I turn to the sound, ignoring the insult.

"Time to go," There's a gruff condemnation in the seeming flatness.

And so I stand, giving him no reason or excuse to hurt or question me. No reason to doubt. The added bonus of course is that he knows I do not fear him, whoever he may be.

I walk up to the locked door and wait patiently, unemotional as he opens it for me, the weight creaking on its rusty hinges. When I walk out, the door slams loudly behind me and suddenly there is a strong, not very friendly, hand gripping my arm, just above the elbow. I clench my hands into fists against the outrage, the only indication that the treatment rankles me.

And then we are walking, hallway by hallway, stair by stair, farther and farther still, down into the depths of the jail, a situation not wholly unexpected, but still does not bode well.

This is the place where no one can hear you scream.

I grit my teeth in grim anticipation.

Before I know it we are there, wherever 'there' is and I am thrust harshly into a cold, waiting chair. My hands and legs are unbound from each other, only to be attached to the chair instead. OK, typical, but low-level procedure. Then my blindfold is ripped off and I am assaulted by an unexpected lightness. It is not dark down here, but brightly lit and the walls, instead of some dirty gray or black stone painted with numerous old stains from previous visitors, are a sickeningly sterile white.

It's a little jarring, just as it was meant to be.
There are two ANBU, quiet and masked, standing at either side of the tiny lone doorway. As far as I can tell, there is no one else besides us five. Those two, me, my traveling companion, and a mousy, skittish type of guy looming before me.

Number four, tall, lanky and uncomfortable, slowly strides forward.

He stares at me, eyes twitching in their sockets as if he is about to have a seizure. He's more nervous than I am. I let my mouth quirk up on one side. I'll bet this is his first time. An interrogation virgin.

How quaint.

My internal victory, however, is short-lived. There is still number four, my traveling companion, the one with the disturbingly familiar voice. And there he remains, hovering like a vulture, the shadow to my interrogator.

His scars are uncovered, like a bleak reminder of what he has been through and therefore capable of doing. Of what very well may lay in store for me. I remember him now, a vague memory from way back when and the chuunin exams.

I swallow thickly.

He smiles, which seems like the calculating grin of a predator right before it latches onto its prey.

A moment passes. One. Two.

Then finally number five, who leans forward and brushes a rough hand gently over my cheek, breaks the silence.

When he speaks, his voice is strangely high-pitched.

"So Uchiha Sasuke. How about you tell me how you got those eyes of yours?"
Chapter 5

His name is Shinta.

A rather cute name for someone in his particularly ugly line of work. But then, one has very little to do with the other.

But I will say this: even for a novice, and despite his mousy appearance, he is quite serious about his work ethic. If "ethic" is even the correct term to be used in this context. It's a bit of a gray area.

I turn to lie on my back, shifting the dust of my lumpy mattress and firing sharp pains through my shoulder and down my spine. The muscles of my neck strain as I stifle a scream. I squint my eyes shut regardless of the fact that I can't see anything anyway.

It's been five days since I first entered this backward place, dirty where it safe, clean where it is not. I'm given plenty of time, like now, to think.

Unfortunately, they're more thorough with their job than I had presumed. Or I am a better actor than I thought. Or a worse one. It's hard to tell what is good and bad these days.

At any rate, I don't see an end to this anytime soon.

Forcing myself to take slow, even breaths, I move as little as possible, desperate to keep pressure off my shoulders. Those joints hurt worst of all and I'd just assume not add to it.

The events of the last few days keep playing themselves over in my head.

At least I haven't said anything that would really hurt him yet. And despite the many things I have already told them, there are some things I will never speak. There are memories too important to sell for any price. Things who's retelling would hurt me far deeper than some trivial physical discomfort.

Still, much as I hate to admit it, they got more form me than I intended and more than I want to recall.

----

The mousy man tilts forward so that his stinking breath fills my nostrils; I doubt he's brushed his
teeth in days, maybe weeks. Finally, he breaks what felt like was becoming a never-ending silence.

"So tell me, how did you get those eyes of yours?"

And there it is, simple as that, the elephant in the room no one has heretofore wanted to talk about. Not since Naruto first saw, back when it was nothing but we two, fending for ourselves against the world and for each other.

But that was different.

He is different.

I know what this nameless man wants. It's the story everyone's dying to hear. The story of how Orochimaru, the Snake Sannin, the leader of Sound, great enemy of Konoha, was finally defeated. However, the truth is they'll be disappointed. It really isn't all that interesting. And as it turned out, not all that difficult.

Relatively speaking.

With all his enormous and terrible power, he had one basic, but fatal flaw. It's kind of funny now to think just how easy it really was.

The widely feared enemy of ninja everywhere, legendary and seemingly immortal, killed by two boys.

Yes, I know. That's what we were. Boys.

But that isn't to say I'll make it easy for them to hear the story. I quirk my lip, giving Mouse one of my patented sneers and answer him, only partly teasing, "They were a gift."

A flicker of annoyance ripples across his face, a clear indication that he is still new at all this. I sneak a glance to Ibiki as he supervises over Mouse's shoulder. The famous shinobi has his eyes closed and looks thoroughly bored as if he is on the precipice of falling into a deep sleep at any given moment. It's probably just another aspect of their game. If he doesn't care what I have to say, he doesn't have to hear it.

I turn back to Mouse and remove any emotions. I am not afraid of him. The trace of irritation he showed earlier has disappeared, replaced by what seems to be condescending amusement. Placating and demanding all at once. He's learning.

I'm not sure whether to be insulted or honored that he's learning with me.

"A gift, you say," he slurs out, smoothing his hand unpleasantly over mine. "Now why on earth would Orochimaru give you those? They'd seem more like a punishment, don't you think?"

"How am I supposed to know how that guy's mind worked," I snap. Ironic, now that I think about it. I try not to be distracted by the creepy way Mouse keeps toying with my finger.

"Now tell the truth, Sasuke-kun. We are all friends here, are we not?" I barely hold back from saying anything about his use of that name. It reminds me of him and the way he used to croon it as if I were a pet. "Unless, of course, you are not really Sasuke-kun."

"What are you talking about?" He pushes my finger back so it stretches painfully, but I don't do anything to show I've noticed.
"Well," he goes on silkily in that whiny high voice of his. "Orochimaru has always hidden behind the faces of others. So tell me, little snake, how are we to know who you really are?"

My anger rises even though I know that this whole act has this precise reaction in mind. But sometimes I don't know the answer to that question myself. Truthfully though, they can't really suspect I'm the snake or I never would have been allowed to roam free in the first place. So this is nothing more than practice. How annoying.

But now is not the time to let my emotions get the better of me. I will show them I am not some weakling to be trifled with.

So my rage subsides. Not through any conscious effort, but simply because this odd, almost outside force pulls it under control. It is a strange, distant, uncomfortable feeling that makes calm spread through my body. I have been trained to do this and my body acts on automatic. All I need do is let it.

I look at the mouse, such like a snake's prey, straight in the eye and answer. "I am Uchiha Sasuke."

The man's rehearsed smile falters for an instant. "That still doesn't answer my question. You see, we'd really like to know." He raises a hand to my face and gently traces the skin below my eye with his thumb, much in the way Naruto has done. As if he has some right. We're not friends. I don't even like the bastard. Not that Naruto should be doing those things either, but that's beside the point and it doesn't matter at this moment anyway because I can now feel what Mouse is trying ineffectively to distract me from. Anxious he is, moving so fast.

But then, he is new at this.

And this gives me time to prepare.

"Tell me the story of these eyes." His rough thumb rubs the sensitive area below my lashes, but I ignore him. "Until you do, you won't be able to go home."


I regulate my breathing, in and out, concentrate on my lungs and heart and direct my focus into this little spot inward just as I've been taught. My time with Orochimaru wasn't a total waste. This is nothing. I've faced far worse, from other enemies, and even more from my most recent teacher.

"Tell me, Sasuke-kun. Tell me about these eyes." So repetitive and annoying. I say nothing.

I feel the pull on my muscles and tendons, so slow that if I weren't expecting it, I probably wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else. Sharper and sharper still, the skin pulled taut, I never let my eyes leave his, concentrating more on the hand on my face than the one pushing my finger until - snap! A short intake of breath is my only slip. I bite the inside of my lower lip to keep my mouth shut as well as to balance out the pain.

My left index finger is now bent all the way back at an unnatural angle, the first bone to break among what promises to be many.

It is a sharp point in my conscious, warm and prickling and throbbing and feeling as if any moment the pain will overwhelm my senses.

But I have been through this before, replayed in my mind and memory. The nerves of my hand know this pain and rather than rebel, they simply remember.
If these men think that's all it will take, they are in for a surprise. But then, I don't think they do. This is just a warm-up, the prelude to my real punishment. And if is all to end in death, as I suspect, than what is the point in fighting it?

But then, I always have my answer, simple and old and never changing.

Because I can.

Because I have my pride.

Because I am an Uchiha.

There needs be nothing else.

This is what I tell myself as the agony from one tiny injury begins to surge through my nerves and take over much more than it should. It may be because I can't seem to feel anything else; all the rest of my system has gone numb.

Little Mouse smiles at me in that contradictory wolfish way and continues to glide his disgusting bony finger over my hand in a silent tease. "Wrong answer," he says in what I'm sure he believes to be smoothly threatening. I clench my jaw and take a slow deep breath. Then I smirk at him.

"If you don't like the answer, then perhaps you shouldn't ask the question." I say with no intention of giving in. Yet. We still have a long way to go. "I am Uchiha Sasuke."

Mouse closes his eyes, shakes his head and lets out a short laugh. And snaps back the next finger. I can feel my breath coming in shorter gasps, my chest trembling with the effort to keep still. Water wells in my eyes, but I blink it back.

I refuse.

Without conscious thought, I have gripped my right hand so tightly that the short ragged nails bite into my palm, a small trickle of blood slipping free.

"You really ought to make this easier on yourself. We will find out the truth eventually anyway."

He finally moves that aggravating, filthy hand from my face and trails it down to my clenched hand. I can tell he feels the fist by how he looks at me, somewhat amused and I suppose in his sick mind, triumphant. He wraps his fingers under mine and pries them loose, though I put up little resistance. The wetness of my blood smears the chair and mixes with the sweat of my hand, making stickiness beneath my palm.

In that eerily familiar way, he traces the edges of my fingers with his own, carefully, as if mapping out and memorizing the contours before he takes hold of the smallest one. "I'll ask again. How did you get those eyes?"

But I don't speak, instead bracing myself again for the break. So I am caught off guard when rather than pushing the finger back, he yanks forward, effectively dislocating it and making my whole arm jerk.

A small startled grunt escapes me and I want to reach out and strangle the life out of him, watch as his face turns blue and purple, his eyes bug out and mouth fall open as he tries to get air. Watch as I steal his worthless life away, knowing that the face of his appointed victim is the last thing he will ever see. And I know, deep in my heart, if I really tried, I probably could. At least I'd get a good chance before the others bore down on me.
//Sounds like fun.//

The mark on my neck throbs louder than normal.

But no, I can't. Be quiet.

The idea makes bile rise to the back of my tongue.

And it wouldn't help anyone right now, so I must bear this and remember my promise.

The pain in my right hand helps balance the one in my left and I find it easier to concentrate on not feeling anything at all.

Orochimaru used to say I had a little bit of the masochist in me.

But it's not that I like it. I can just learn to deal with it.

I think it was his wishful thinking.

Twisted bastard.

I center my gaze back at my distraction and he looks at me, gloating and stupid. I can see behind him, around him, taking in the whole room at once. These yellow slit eyes are good for something after all. The two ANBU in the back remain motionless and emotionless in their white and black masks. Ibiki hovers at the corner, quietly assessing the two of us in the center of the room. I return my attention to Mouse.

Let's see how strong his nerves are.

One side of my mouth quirks up in a lopsided grin. "You know," I drawl. Yes, drawl is the correct word. "Snakes eat mice."

A flicker of confusion and just the tip of fear flashes across his face. "What?"

But I only smile back.

----

The door to my cell creaks slowly open and I sense a familiar chakra has returned, inching its way carefully closer. I remain perfectly still, not wanting this, not wanting to be seen, not wanting to be tended to, but knowing I can't exactly stop it.

She believes, in the little delusional corners of her mind, that she is helping.

I can smell her soap, cloying and far too flowery as she settles herself down on the floor beside my meager mattress. Even though I cannot see through my blindfold, I can sense what she is doing. Her eyes look me over, assessing the way I lay, the cuts and burns and injuries I have, both old and new. It takes quite a while, even with so few exposed, though why she takes so long I don't know. It's certainly not because of some feigned shyness. That ridiculous charade disappeared shortly after the first day.

I hear the quiet sigh of her breath.

Then her hand touches my shoulder, gingerly, but not gingerly enough as a spasm of sparking fire shoots through my body. She quickly pulls her hand away as if bitten and I turn over onto my stomach as if that will afford me some protection. The cool air of the cell helps to numb the ache
just slightly.

"Sasuke." She's denying me of the little rest I am afforded.

I hear her settle down on the backs of her heels, crouched over and leaning in to ghost her unwelcome breath on my face. The heat of her body emanates over me like fog.

"Sasuke," whispered in pretend patience. "You have to get up."

There's hesitancy in the air and then her hand comes back to my shoulder, holding on, not tight but too damn fucking tight, and I grit my teeth, pressing my forehead into the mattress. It doesn't help, nothing helps except the passage of time until the pain fades and I grow used to it. Experience has taught me this.

The difference now is that I have a nagging "friend" who insists on helping.

It would be so much easier for so many reasons if she would just leave me alone as I have asked her to do time and time again.

She tugs a little and makes my stomach convulse in protest, shoving its weight onto my lungs. My breath comes out in short, labored gasps.

"See?" Sakura states as if vindicated, ignoring how she's the one making it worse.

With an unjustified, aggravated huff, she rips off my blindfold and my eyes burn from the sudden brightness that fills them. I rotate the irises, much in the way a reptile does and look up at her from where my head leans into the bed. I can feel the pupil shrink to a thin line and almost disappear. It's always a weird thing, one I haven’t yet gotten used to and hope I never do; to actually be able to feel the movements in my eye. It must have something to do with him.

Sakura flinches, unable to hide the fearful revulsion these serpent eyes tend to instill in those who see them. Good. She needs to remember whom she's dealing with. But she quickly collects herself, pulls her lips into a thin, bloodless line and quirks an eyebrow in silent demand, request, expectation, whatever it is to be called, that I am to sit up. Thank you, no. The throbbing pain in my shoulder demands otherwise. It tells me to stay right where I am. But again, Sakura seems to not concern herself one bit for neither for my comfort or her safety. Reaching down, she takes firm hold of me and somewhat forces, somewhat guides, me to a sitting position. On instinct my arm lashes out, swinging around to push her away.

Which is of course a mistake.

The pain that shoots through my arm now, from my shoulder down my side is excruciating and I can't help but cry out. The slight coppery taste of blood fills my mouth from where I’ve bitten my tongue. Carefully, I pull my arm in near to my body and cradle it, though that does little to nothing to ease the pain.

Sakura only watches curiously and inclines her head as if I am a scientific specimen rather than a real person.

I glower at her; it’s her fault after all. In place of contrition, she merely purses her lips and stares at me.

"Are we quite done?" Again motherly, condescending and I would really like to hit her.

"Go away." I tell her, still glaring.
She only shakes her head. Always so simply, like she knows what is best. But the fact that she tries is the sole reason I tolerate her. She is one of the very few who believed in me, who fought long after fighting was futile. She manipulates this to her advantage.

I am too nice.

Still, I suppose I owe her for that stupid unsolicited loyalty. She’s trying to help, in her convoluted way, even if it really causes more hurt.

//But you so enjoy that pain, do you not? Seeking it out like a puppy. Do you think it will make things better?//

Shut up. I don't have to listen.

But pain is real and knowable and in some way tangible. It keeps me sane, it keeps me grounded. It is like the scars I have carried inside all these years, only made physical. I need it to tell me who I am.

This is the first time it has betrayed me.

Damn ANBU.

But Sakura cares nothing for this as she orders me about, clucking like a hen. "Turn around," she states, as if expecting me to obey. I do not and with an angry growl she gets up and squeezes behind me, propped up on her knees with fingers poised. She places her hands on my back, working through the grimy shirt I now wear to concentrate on my shoulder and attempt to massage things back into place.

"Would you just stop it already?" I spit out. "How many times do I have to tell you to leave before you can actually process it?"

But she is used to my protests and continues anyway, as she always does. "Don't be a baby. You know I've been forbidden from using chakra to heal you. But if I don't do something, the damage could fester and become permanent and then what will you do, unable to be a ninja anymore?"

I let out a disgusted snort. There she goes again, glibly talking about the future as if I have one. But maybe she needs to believe in a fantasy and a little pain is hardly anything to me at this point.

Maybe I should just let it go.

So I grit my teeth and clench my fists as she performs whatever sadistic methods she's chosen, knowing it’s better to just let her have her way sometimes. Sakura is uncompromising like that. After a while, it’s not entirely horrible, almost nice in its fashion. Just as I am letting my mind drift away, surrendering to the familiar pulse of pain, the girl jerks me back to reality.

"Take your shirt off."

What. the. hell?

She hasn't asked this in any of the other times she's visited. Slowly, I open my eyes, and even more slowly, I turn my head to look at her.

"No." I say as forcefully flat as I can.

Once more she sighs, her hands resting primly in her lap. "Look, I can't get the access that I need
with this fabric in the way. Why do you have to be so difficult?"

"Why do you have to be so annoying?" I snap back. "I didn't ask for your help and I don't need it. There's no point anyway." It's the truth. Each day is very like the last, pain and more pain, asking questions I won't answer.

I quickly look away from her watery green eyes, hurt and angry at once.

Then I feel them. Warm hands against the skin of my lower back, sneaking under the shirt and sending a shock wave through my system. Without thinking, I jerk my arm back to prevent her from touching me, wrenching my other shoulder and accidentally (or maybe not), elbowing her harshly in the ribs.

My arm feels like it’s on fire, but I force a glower and look at her over my shoulder.

Those tears are back full-force as she raises her head to me, pouting and determined.

'Get it together!' I tell myself. 'What kind of Uchiha are you anyway, afraid of a little girl?'

Which is stupid of course. Sakura is anything but a little girl and given the situation, fear is not entirely out of line. But weakness is not a part of who I am.

Damn that Orochimaru.

I turn away, my back curled and my hand clasped around my calf for some sort of support. It wouldn't do to show fear in the face of the enemy, and right now, that's precisely what Sakura is.

Gently, she slips her hands back beneath the hem of the shirt, lifting it up and rather than removing it completely, tucks it by my neck and shoulders, so that my back is fully exposed. The cool air hits me and causes goose flesh to rise over my spine. The scars of many years almost tingle with the sensation, some new, some old, and I can count them, each and every one. I remember them all. I hear a short, poorly hidden gasp. It’s the first time Sakura has seen many of them.

Then, scarcely even there, I feel her hands press themselves to my skin. Rough and calloused, but soft in their gentleness, they are both exactly the same and vastly different to all the other hands that I have known. I fight the tightness that takes over my body as she kneads her knuckles into muscle and pulls on the joint of my arm, trying to ease it back properly. Despite the restriction, I think I can feel the faintest hint of chakra. It is risky.

And all a wasted effort.

Her fingers are small and warm and try as I might, I can feel each one distinctly as it pushes into my back, testing the extent of injury, and making it tense worse with expectation.

Every nerve is strained, waiting for the pain and for the betrayal.

'Stop touching me!'

'Just stop touching me!'

My brain itself feels tensed as I keep my emotions inside, not wanting anything to show. I am Uchiha Sasuke. And I am not affected by something so simply plain and stupid.

Sakura stops and lowers her hands. "What's wrong?" she asks quietly.

My eyes pop open, not even realizing I had been squeezing them shut. There is the dull pain of
bruising where I'd gripped my calf and my jaw feels sore. Failure.

Sakura scoots around to sit at my side then raises a hand to carefully brush away the tear that had slipped from eye. I jerk away and whip my head to look at the blank wall.

'It isn't what you think.'

I hate being this way. I really hate it. Even more so because I can't seem to stop.

Crying like some pathetic kid. Always crying, never changing.

I hate it.

My shirt is pulled back down, covering me, and I instantly feel a little calmer. So ridiculous that it should make a difference.

I grip my hands into fists and want to scream.

Sakura just watches.

I don't want to look at her; I can't.

"Why?" she asks me quietly. "You let Naruto. Why not me?"

But I have no answers for her. I shake my head. It can only be Naruto and not even him. The first time he came near me I struck out so fiercely I broke his arm.

I wish he were here.

I hate wishing he were here.

It's cold and empty in this room.

I clutch the worn and old fabric of this used shirt close around me. It is rough against my fingers.
**Chapter 6**

**Chapter Notes**

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Title: Gray-colored Happiness

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Little Mouse looks unsure of himself, thrown by what I've said, but I say nothing more, no explanation, no elaboration. The disoriented look on his face is priceless.

Then he collects himself and plasters on a thick smile. "Is that so?" They are the only words he can seem to come up with.

My smirk deepens.

His eyebrows crease together and he turns and walks away, shares a single glance with Ibiki and lazily pulls a kunai from his pack. Ah, so we are up to this now? No matter. One pain is much like another. I have ways of dealing with them all. His feet are soundless as he nears me, floating across the floor, twirling the blade neatly in his hand. I keep my chin lifted, my eyes on him, waiting for his next move. The pain in my fingers is a constant thrum, burning and even, but I will not allow it to distract me. I have trained for this. That is what a ninja does. That is what a Sound ninja does. And no matter what happens now, that is what I will be seen as, what I will always be.

And so I will embody all that they think that name entails.

Mouse stops in front of me, swaying slightly on his heels and just stares. Minutes tick by and nothing. I wonder if he hasn’t yet decided what to do, or if he’s working up the courage.

Then he makes his move.

He reaches forward slowly with his free hand and pushes away the collar of my kimono, both sides until my skin is open to the clinical air of the room. It is gentle and nauseating, this action of his, and not altogether unfamiliar.

He traces a hand, rough and partially clad in leather, down the naked skin of my chest, an odd and discomfited expression on his face. Subconsciously, my nerves tense, on alert. Then he trails downward with the tip of the kunai, not enough pressure to draw blood, but enough to feel steel against my bare skin. My pulse picks up and my breathing grows erratic, there is no way to prevent my body from readying for what is to come. The look on his face is vapid and confused. He leans in to whisper muffled nonsense to me that I can’t quite make out. My ears are already filled with memories I’d rather not hear. Of other times, much more frightening times, than this.

I can still feel that other hand on me, so disturbingly gentle, a caress across my naked collarbone,
the fingers smooth as if they have never seen work. Cool and comforting, they make little swirled designs as they move downward, over my ribs and across my stomach. My breath catches in my throat, my heart and lungs competing in some race I can’t control. He leans into me, never stopping the fluid movements of his fingers, his long hair tickling over my face and his breath warming my ear. It is sickly sweet when he speaks, like treacle, and my stomach lurches uncomfortably at the silken familiarity of his voice.

"Sasuke . . ." This delicate entreaty is all he ever says at times like this, my name and nothing more; not even the -kun of which he is so very fond.

I can’t stop the response. No one has ever spoken my name in quite that cadence, smoothed over my skin in quite that way, all exposed, soft and tender and soothing. It is nothing like the hits and punches and kicks I’ve grown up with, or the methodical application of medicine I have come to know in my later days.

The most recent embraces that felt closest to this were from my teammates, Naruto and Sakura, and they were tainted with circumstance. And not nearly so intimate.

And long, long before this nest my memories of Itachi. Of when I was little more than a baby and my nii-san had to take care of me, bathe me and dress me and I’d rather not think of those things.

The snake’s hand lights over my abdomen, making the muscles twitch involuntarily. I feel myself start to hyperventilate, not exactly sure why.

He laughs into my ear, breathy and sharp; I can just barely sense the wetness of his tongue as it touches his mark on my neck. Then, in the next instant, his hand drives straight through my gut, his nails ripping skin, fire igniting at each point and I would swear he takes hold of my internal organs, juicing the blood and life from them, spilling the contents over my legs to spatter on the floor. The pain I feel is like nothing before and nothing since, pinpointed by the contrast of sweetness that preceded it.

He is a master of it.

He showed me what a fine line it is between gentleness and brutality.

To my shame, that first time I screamed, so sudden was the pain.

The second time I screamed again.

By the third, I wait in grim anticipation, knowing what is to come. That time, I only cry, the tears a bitter acid that trickles accusation over my lips. Pathetic, useless, weeping little whelp.

I hate myself for it, as he knew I would, and with each subsequent torture, new and varied from the cruel creativity of his mind, I fight those condemning tears that spring to my eyes.

By the twentieth time, I do little more than gasp.

By the fortieth, I have learned the routine and simply wait.

And every time he would smile at me, wide and toothy and disturbing, and reward me, once I was healed by Kabuto, with an affectionate caress I will always associate with him. He’d trace circles over my bandages like a lover, my name the venom that slid over his serpentine tongue. And all the while relishing how I can’t stop the look of fear and anticipation in my eyes. He enjoyed that more than anything else.
I could tell.

I hate that most of all because of how it makes me feel.

Because I kind of like it.

It was soothing in a way that is new and pleasant, even if false.

I was, after all, and after such a long time, truly special in someone’s eyes.

Even if it was for the wrong reasons.

The feel of a clumsy, rough hand dragging across my stomach slowly draws me from my reverie, the very pores of my skin bristling in protest. I know what is to happen next, so when the burn of chakra-heated metal scorches me, I do little more than hiss through my teeth.

The way the iron blisters my skin is slow, as if time itself has ceased just for this purpose, and I can sense with a detached sort of interest when the surface of my stomach begins to redden and melt. Then the kunai is pulled away, dragging bits of skin with it, and the air of the cell hits me like a spike of needled ice. I let out a sharp cry and then gulp in that air, trying to stop the punctuated quiver of my muscles.

But I cannot and my lip trembles.

Beady eyes look up slyly into mine and I give him my best scowl. Or my worst, dependent on one’s point of view.

The recent brand sears through my body, pulsing and throbbing and prickling and feeling much larger than it really is.

Mouse raises an eyebrow and sneaks his way closer, fingers tracing evilly over the newly bubbled skin. My breath catches awkwardly in my lungs, but I force it back.

"Afraid?" he asks, feigning compassion.

I scoff, more like a strangled bark, and screw my face into a look of disdain. "Of you? Hardly." But as soon as I say it, I clamp my mouth shut again, any movement seems to accentuate the growing burn on my stomach, which has overtaken the breaks in my fingers.

Shinta clucks his tongue annoyingly and shakes his head, resting his hand on my arm, cold against the heat of my pain. "Then why are you trembling?"

I am about to retort back that I have just been burned, but I bite it down, knowing it’s only part of the reason. I curse myself for this conditioned reaction, this sick mix of terror and expectation.

I know what is to come and dutifully, like the trained dog I hate to be, I wait for it.

I swallow thickly.

"It’s not because of you."

The words are meant as a shield to protect me from worse things, a fact which does not go unnoticed by my conscientious host. He stands up straight, denying any small measure of protection his body afforded.

My breath is trapped for a dreadful moment in my throat.
"Then," he says dryly. "Tell me, dear Sasuke" so damned familiar like he has the right! "What makes you tremble?"

I open my mouth, but my obstinate head is screaming, 'no, not yet!' They have yet to earn the right to hear the evidence I'll freely offer. It's too soon. It has to appear to be wrenched from me unwillingly in order for them believe. Their opinion of me is that I will be stubborn to the end and I must not let them down.

Everything has to be right so that I can fulfill my promise to do what I can for him. Naruto. The memory of you and the vow I made will sustain me. Because I will stand by my vows.

That's your way, is it not, Naruto? And for now, for this fleeting moment in time, it will also be mine.

----

The wall in front of me was once white, but is now more of a dingy gray, speckled with age and abandonment. There is the sound of rustling behind me, a short, fidgety noise that tells me Sakura is still there watching, as if there were any way I could forget.

The silence surrounds us like a worn blanket, scratchy and uncomfortable and providing negligent warmth, the holes it bears letting every bit of cold sharpness in.

Then she comes closer, halfway crawling on her knees, a piece of gauze in one hand, and a bottle of antiseptic in the other. Carefully, as if I will shatter, she takes one of my arms and meticulously works on it like the medic-nin she is.

"He wants to see you," she says quietly, eyes downcast, daubing at the angry scars on my wrist.

And I want to see him, though I say nothing. I want to see him so much that it aches. It is a need far stronger than I would have imagined; than I could have even conceived of only a few short months ago. I don't like it.

"He's been causing everyone grief," Sakura continues. "We actually had to lock him up for a while to stop him from charging the tower."

Heat rises to my face and colors it pink. It's a little difficult to believe. I understand in a sense why I'm so connected to him. He's been the one true constant in my life. Even when we were far apart, even when I threw it away, there was still that inexplicable pull that binds us together. But he shouldn't want to see me. Shouldn't want anything to do with me. He . . .

. . . should hate me.

I know that.

I watch as Sakura pats medicine-soaked cotton over the welts of my skin. Her face is a study in concentration, her eyes glowing green and the short strands of hair framing her face. She is no longer a girl with wide-eyed dreams and silly notions. I hadn't noticed before.

"Why do you bother?" I ask, knowing she'll hear the unspoken "with me."

She shrugs her shoulders. "Because you let me. Because I know this can't be all there is, that it can't just end here. Everything will be alright," she says, not looking up. "It has to be. We're all doing everything we can to help you, so that it will be alright."
"I don't need your help." I grumble.

"Yes you do." She glides her hand down my arm, making the hairs tingle. She chuckles, almost sadly. "Naruto gave Iruka quite a hard time, you know. I think they finally had to settle for camping outside the front door. No matter what they did, they couldn't keep him away."

I stare up at the blank ceiling, looking for answers that aren't there.

"He confuses me," I say out loud without meaning to.

There’s so much he should demand of me that he doesn’t. But I know I could never give him anything. I have been myself for way too long.

There's some innate defectiveness in me.

And he should hate me. But he doesn't.

I don't get it.

I want to see him.

"You've changed." Sakura continues the useless bandaging of my arm.

"No I haven't." I lower my head. "I'm exactly the same as I've always been."

Sakura regards me a moment, testing the makeshift splint on my three broken fingers with her nail. She sighs. "Maybe you haven't and I just never noticed. Maybe Naruto is the only one who really saw you before. You were always chasing each other, fighting, competing, working together. I was always left out of whatever it was you two had." She corrects herself. "Have. You were always a step ahead, a step to the side, and no matter what I did, I stood in your shadow." She pauses and flashes her eyes back and forth before taking a deep breath. "What exactly is between you and Naruto?"

I chance a look at her. What I have with Naruto is not a thing to be put into words, a simple situation to be given name or identity. It is a connection that has always been there, only recently acknowledged and yet to be fully accepted. But that is not an explanation, not really.

Spending too much time in this barren cell has made me too damn philosophical.

"I don't know," I answer honestly.

It changes nothing.

My mind rolls over his name, warm because he is and I remember how often I turned against that. The pain of memory is like a knife, twisting and turning and staying open, far deeper than any physical wound.

Sakura rubs her fingers over the unbroken part of my hand. "But you will," she reassures. "You'll figure it all out and everything will be OK. I believe that."

But I'm barely paying attention to her.

In my mind I can see his stupid blond hair, messy and sticking out in every possible direction, those eyes that are open and yet hide so many secrets. I can remember with photographic accuracy the way he looked at me, believing when he shouldn't, hoping when there was no hope left.
I don't know what it is about him that makes the impossible possible. It's not the Kyuubi, not his chakra, not some special secret technique that he spent years to master. It is some indescribable but distinct Naruto-ness that belongs to him and no one else.

He makes you see him.

Sakura nods silently and her warm hands move up to my bicep, gently pushing away the fabric of my sleeve and begins applying a stinking salve to the injuries there. She says nothing more and just goes about her work, watching me.

But I am elsewhere, back to when I brought those ANBU to the turning point, to that moment when everything that seemed lost and forgotten was found.

Back to when I once more saw Naruto, only different from before, a glass held up to my face in which my reality showed clear and crisp and sharp.

I suppose I should thank Orochimaru for that.

Without him, I wonder if it would ever have been possible.

-----

I no longer know what the date is, nor do I care. I've spent countless hours in this white-washed interrogation room, refusing to speak and paying the price. I can't recall the exact number and types of injuries I now bear and I think it may be better that way.

If my calculations are correct, I am on day four and somewhere along the line my obstinacy overtook my promise, as seems to be my nature. Only in little bits and pieces have I told them anything of what happened on the day Orochimaru died.

There's a harsh jerk and my shoulder pops angrily at the motion, screaming in pain. My wrists are already purple and bleeding from the rough rope that binds them over my head, supporting my body from the ceiling. I let out a loud, short bark and feel rivers of sweat pour over my face and down the rest of my body. It is far too cold in here and the sweat that drenches me cools instantly, sending a further chill down my spine.

I can barely breathe, my lungs feel full of dirt, heavy and dry and useless, but I do my best to glare. Shinta, who at some point decided we should be on friendly terms and oh-so-kindly graced me with his name, paces in front of me like a predator.

But he is still a mouse, weaving his way through the labyrinth, not knowing that at the end lies darkness down to the belly of a snake and nothing more.

That is not to say, unfortunately, that everything has gone according to plan.

Actually, right now I'm thrilled I can think at all, the consuming agony of my shoulders makes the folds of my brain hurt. Tears mix with sweat, making the two indistinguishable from one another.

My eyes dart over to Ibiki in the corner, who now stares back at me, an almost amused quirk to his mouth. I narrow my eyes at him and pull my eyebrows together slightly. His mouth lifts just a bit more on one side in response.

I think he knows.
Perhaps only Mouse is the one who thinks he’s still in control.

Turning my gaze back to him, I see that he’s stopped moving, set in place like a statue and regarding me seriously with the hint of aggravation hidden in the crease of his forehead. Then he rolls his shoulder and takes a step to plant himself squarely in front of me no more than a half meter away, and swings the free end of the rope in his hand menacingly. Even without any movement, my joints ache in complaint and my body tenses. They have been imprinted.

Mouse’s smile widens in a hint of triumph.

Every muscle screams at me in sharp constancy and the pain of it begins to haze over my mind.

"This would be so much easier for you Sasuke-kun, if you would stop being so difficult and just tell us what happened to your master." He lets the words trickle like syrup, too sweet and sticky. I hate, like many of the things he does, the way he uses that word. Master. In a sense, it is of course true. But he hurls it like an epithet. It is an insinuation I do not appreciate.

But I’m too tired to put in the energy to care.

Somehow, I manage the semblance of a smirk and, looking straight back at him, reply in halting words, "If that's all you wanted, you should have asked ages ago."

In the far corner of the room, I see the sick grin on Ibiki’s face deepen as he closes his eyes and leans his head back on the wall behind him. Mouse, however, is momentarily taken aback and stares blankly. With an obviously confounded cough, he rests his weight onto his back leg and clasps his hands behind him. He puts the practiced smile back into place and looks expectantly at me, as if I am now to just blurt it all out.

I acquire a look of cool contempt, blessing the god-granted numbness that has finally taken over my hands and creeps down my arms, giving me a taste of relief. It is better to feel nothing at all and it gives me the strength to address him in my most belittling voice.

"I believe it is customary to offer something in exchange when you ask for a favor," I say flatly. I need the room to stop spinning, for the pain to end.

Mouse raises his eyebrow dubiously, which I’d love to rip right off, and it is clear that despite his declaration of friendship, the trust is still not there. Yet through that suspicion, I see a genuine spark of interest.

"And," I continue, encouraged. The deadness spreads and blissful nothingness is quickly approaching. "I hardly think you can expect someone to give you what you want when you treat them so shabbily."

Mouse takes a quick glance to his boss who nods without looking, having already expected the gesture. Shinta turns back to me and shifts from foot to foot, considering. "I could . . ." he pauses a moment, looking at my bindings. "Allow you to be more comfortable as we talk."

My answer is a look that tells him this should not even have been a question.

Yes please. I want to be able to breathe again.

He takes a tentative step towards me, then realizing his inappropriate temerity, strengthens his stride and continues forward.
He is skittering right into my waiting hands, like the little mouse he is. I smell the defeat on his skin.

The rope is undone and I fall to the floor in a pitiful heap, screaming out shortly as blood returns to my hands, starting the torment anew. But maybe now I can rest, sweet, blissful rest.

I don’t know what happens in the time that follows, all I can feel is the pain and exhaustion.

It is some while later that I am able to tolerate it and manage to take control of the situation with a little cajoling. Mouse, I have discovered, is as easy to manipulate as fresh clay. He has a long way to go yet.

I sit on the floor and take a nibble of the table scraps set out before me. One bite is about as much as my starved stomach can handle before refusing it. The restraint that now latches my neck to the wall makes me feel like a dog. But that is not the point. The point is, without him noticing, I’ve gotten our little Mouse to switch his tactics.

He’ll figure out soon enough, that he has played along with my game and not his own and then we’ll be back to his old crude and ineffective methods. But for now I have won and my "friend" will always remember that.

I shift a little and that sharp, agonizing pulse reasserts itself. But I think, if I don’t move too much, I can handle it.

"I am tired of waiting, Sasuke-kun. I have kept my promise and more, and now I think it is time to keep yours." My "friend" can’t keep quiet for long and his annoying use of that name gives me pause. I almost refuse the story to let him know who is really in charge here.

Truth be told, it’s that scarred, brooding man in the corner who’s in charge, but that is a debate for another day.

But then I look to the doorway, the two dutiful ANBU standing guard, and see tufts of spiky, light colored hair peeking out from above one of the masks. It is wheat-colored and dull, but it still reminds me of another head of unruly hair.

I will not forget, Naruto. I promised.

So I settle back, pulling a glass along with me and take a healthy drink, knowing by the soothing warmth that fills me that it has some sort of numbing draft in it meant to make these proceedings flow easier. I dimly recall Tsunade saying as much and it is just as well since I could certainly use it right about now. The pain eases and drifts away. Resting my hands on the floor, I stare at Mouse and make him sweat nervously for a few satisfying seconds. It is more fun than it has any right to be.

But I remind myself that is not the game I came to play, tempting though it is. "Anxious, are we?" I tease, my voice hoarse and scratchy. My body feels heavy and relaxed and I languidly raise a finger to wag at the objection I can sense is at the tip of his tongue. "I said I would tell you and I will. Rewards come to those who wait."

The last sounds to me as if it is told in someone else's voice, a thick silky one, but so what. I shut my eyes and sigh, wrapping my arms around myself, letting pleasant, liquid-induced tranquility wash over me.

"Well?" Mouse snaps irritably.
I should berate him for that; he really doesn't listen, does he? And one would think a man in his line of work should learn a little patience. And yet, I still don't care. Instead, I feel myself fall backward into my own past, when I was someone else and yet myself, not so long ago.

And the words of my last day in Sound come tumbling out of my mouth as if running from themselves, trying to be free.

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There is nothing. My heart and mind are calm. Still. Accepting. There is emptiness where once I was and now only sits the vessel of Uchiha Itachi’s demise.

There is a certain amount of peace in knowing an inalterable future. There is no other option, no more uncertainty, no more disappointment. No more wasted days of endless exhaustion from working my bones bare just for one more ounce of chakra or one more second of speed.

No more futility.

Just quiet.

I did not realize until now how much I needed it.

There's a gentle, almost polite knock at the door that under any other circumstances I would find amusing, so out of place as it is in this snake’s lair. The door creaks open and Orochimaru waltzes in assuredly, with the tingle of anticipation sizzling just below his skin. I can almost feel his nerves vibrating, hear the excited hum of the blood in his veins. His long fingers twine together and he turns to me, the thin cruel line of his smile slicing his face in two.

I know what he wants.

It is time.

I slide myself from the bed and slowly walk toward him. We are close in height and I need only tilt my head up slightly to look him in the eye.

I hadn't meant for it to come to this, not really, but I am no fool. I knew this was a possibility, and like all things, it is my choice and I accept it.

He opens his mouth and his pink tongue darts out to swipe across his lips in animal-hungry fashion. My indifference never wavers; my face has been devoid of emotion for two years. Orochimaru has wheedled it all out of me and tossed it away like yesterday's trash. It had little use anyway. It clouds my thoughts and distracts me, getting in the way. An avenger has no need for such things.

My teacher reaches out a pasty hand and lights it gently over my cheek. It is soft and cool like marble. Then he tips his head and smiles wider, his eyes crinkling up in barely contained excitement. He turns on his heel and heads out the door.

Without hesitation or doubt, I follow his thin white form as it takes turn after turn throughout the vast labyrinth of his den.

We enter a room, one at a time, where Kabuto waits patiently, nearly foaming at the mouth with giddy anticipation. It's no secret he is jealous of any attention Orochimaru shows to anyone else. But as I lay down on the cold metal slab, Kabuto's eyes catch mine and there is the shadow of something else. Something deeper and more honest, as if he is putting on some elaborate act. I
would call it regret, but I just can't imagine why such a look would be on his face, so I dismiss it easily.

I close my eyes and breathe slowly, in and out, in and out, and can't find it in myself to be nervous. It just isn't there. Nothing is there but the promise to kill Uchiha Itachi.

Avenge.

Kill.

All this time, not a word has been spoken, as if we are all remaining silent in the wake of death. Which in a sense is true, though I doubt very highly that either Kabuto or Orochimaru cares. And it is an odd, sort of weightless feeling, to be an attendant at one's own funeral.

I don't notice much, paying no mind to the seals that are made, the equipment used, or the specific chakra flow that fills the room. I am no longer a part of this dark material world and I see no reason to pretend that I am.

And so I wait.

And wait.

And wait for what seems like eternity and wonder, oddly disappointed, if this is all that it is. It seems like too much time has passed for the exchange not to have happened and yet I feel not even the tickling of difference.

And just as I am thinking this, it is there. The presence of another in my mind. It is softly probing at first, as if dipping a toe into water to test the temperature. It feels crooked and yellow, like the skin of an unripe fruit or the color of sickness. It is not painful, just discomfiting; too much stuff in too small a space.

Then, it is as if I feel myself shrink, enveloped in this whirling inkiness that seeps over and under, frigid and ready to freeze over at any moment. There is no place it does not touch and I can feel its heaviness, its ill, but at the same time, I feel nothing at all. I try to open my eyes, move my hands, but I realize that I can't; I can't even remember how. I am nothing more than some strange consciousness floating around a body that is no longer mine. The other presence, thick and sour, has taken over, supplanting my mind with its limitless void. It caresses me as it pushes backward, at first gentle, and then harder, forcing me not just away, but out. The coolness of it numbs me; this subtle, tender violation trailing over my mind, far more intimate than any simple touch could ever be.

I can’t stop myself, the seduction is so complete, I fall into its invisible hands, falling backward down into emptiness, farther and farther, deeper and deeper down. With each passing second, I feel smaller, less connected to anything and it does not feel so bad. There will be no more remembering how, that at the end of all my years and sacrifices, I have to rely on someone else.

It's extremely tempting to let myself slip away completely, those fingers easing me closer to that end. I almost tumble entirely into it.

But no.

This is not right.

This was not our deal.
I will not let all my efforts mean nothing. I am an Uchiha; I have my pride.

I capture just enough of myself, that niggling of regret that reminds me this was all for a singular purpose.

To pay Itachi his due.

And so I begin desperately grappling for anything to keep me here. Damn that Orochimaru! He lied to me! He's trying to take over completely, giving me not even a pinch to grab onto. It should really come as no surprise, but I can't let it happen. If there's one thing I hate, it is being betrayed. With calm certainty, I cast out the last vestiges of my consciousness to my hatred of Itachi, my sole purpose in life, but he slips though my thoughts like water. For a moment I stop, stunned. All this time and he is as elusive as ever, even in my own mind.

With growing panic, I reach for anything, anyone I can think of. My parents, my training, my vengeance. Everything I have both lost and fought for. But each one drops away carelessly into the darkness until my mind is wild, not making sense anymore.

I didn't know it was possible to be this afraid.

To be so utterly maddened that at the end of my long journey, I get nothing. Nothing!

I have nothing left to hold onto, nothing to save me, everything I've known failing me one by one.

Half-familiar faces flash through the last weary remnants of my mind. Strong enemies, teachers, classmates, all melding into the blackness until they are gone. I can't remember who they are anymore, I can barely remember myself. All that remains is frustration. I curl into myself, wanting something, anything of my own. All I wanted was my justified revenge. What is so wrong with that? But now here I am, fading away, to discover that vengeance cannot even be kept. I am isolated and alone in these last moments and that is perhaps the most frightening thing I could imagine.

Only I never could have imagined it.

I never would have thought I cared.

Alone is what I have always been.

I feel whatever tiny bit of me remains begin to vanish, a sort of sorrowful melting away until I am by myself and no one to blame but myself. After all that I have done, I will not even get the chance that I gave so much up for to see my purpose fulfilled.

I just want something. Something that is mine, that no one, not even Orochimaru, can touch.

Just give me something.

Something.

And the last thing I see before I disappear completely is a grove of trees stretching upward to the sky and a confident, almost conspiratorial grin framed by whisker marks.
When I "wake up", I am somewhat, and I would say reasonably, startled. I have no eyes to open, no hands to reach out, and yet in a way I could not possibly explain, I feel surrounded by warmth. Comfortable, safe, familiar.

Everything is hazy and I am not quite sure where I am, how or why. I remember Orochimaru luring me out of myself and I remember thinking that it was all over. But then there was something else, hidden deep in my unconsciousness, so far down that I did not know it was there. Without looking, I see brightness, without touching, I feel warmth. There is something special about this place, a treasure that I had to keep buried, even from myself.

It has somehow kept me from fading completely.

Groping blindly, I make my way upward, if that's what it is to be called, searching to reconnect. The bulk of my memories, as far as I can tell, are intact. I am still here, and it is still technically my body. I should at least be able to have access to my senses as originally agreed.

But I don't know how to do this. This little space of warmth and light is pocketed somewhere in the middle of a vast darkness. All I can do is stretch out my consciousness, making it elastic and sensitive and wait. There has to be some clue, a trigger, something that will let me back in. Hopefully, I will know it when it comes.

After a second or a year, I'm not sure which, I get what I want.

A voice, muffled through the fog and vaguely familiar reaches me.

"...doing here? We've got to get out! Come on, before Orochimaru finds us!"

Latchings to this noise, I follow it like a bread trail, causing it to grow louder and clearer. And then I hit something. I know it as what was once mine and so I wrap around it, feeding my self into its center. There is a taint of sickness and malice that infects it, and everything, like a virus. But I ignore it. I can do this and with nothing to lose, I fight my way in until the sound nearly pops with force, the connection made.

"Stop sitting around, Sasuke! Don't you get it? There's no time for this!"

And I know that voice. It is deeper than I am used to, but the telltale whine to it is unmistakable.
Naruto.

When did he get here? Why? He acts as if we are friends and I have just been waiting patiently for him to get me. He still hasn’t learned, even after all this time, that I’d rather be rid of him. He is far too thickheaded. And it doesn’t matter anyway, now that Orochimaru is in control, though he hasn’t yet made a move.

And the stupid little dobe will just keep pestering him until . . .

That bastard.

That is so like him.

I feel more than hear the wicked laugh that echoes through the hollow cavern of this brain.

Then light spills inward, flooding it in a weird sort of binocular way and I see him, all messy blond locks and anxious blue eyes and goofy worried look on his face. His gaze is turned to the door when Orochimaru opens my, no his, eyes. I can feel the cruel sneer that twists his lips. Then Naruto's expression shifts. His throat bobs nervously and he turns his head to face us.

He stops.

Everything stops.

The world has gone still and silent in that one dreadful moment and I can't quite place what I should think of it.

There is something oddly off in the way my mind is working.

Naruto's hands, which had been tugging at my, Orochimaru's, arms, quickly pull away and he takes a shaky step back, distress etching sharp lines into the normally rounded features of his face.

Orochimaru rises slowly and approaches what he considers prey, malevolence singing in his veins. He settles back on one foot and crosses his arms, putting a smirk, more mine than his, on his face.

"So sorry, my dear fox. But your Sasuke-kun is no longer with us."

I am torn between two things: the strange lurch I feel at the totally crestfallen face before me and the thrill when I realize that Orochimaru doesn't know I'm here. How can I help the pride that swells, knowing that I, who was supposed to be nothing more than an empty vessel, have bested him?

But there is a bitter taste to it. Naruto looks like the world has turned in on itself, even though he knew this should have happened. Three years are up. He's always been too emotional, a poor trait in a ninja. Not that it matters.

We aren't friends anymore.

I look at him and although we are nearly the same in height, he looks so small. He stares intently, his eyes boring into mine, Orochimaru's, for a very long time. And then his face transforms, an almost smile twitching at the edges of his mouth. He juts out his chin like a defiant child and his back becomes straighter, making him look surer and stronger, more like the posturing Naruto of Team Seven.

"I don't believe you," he says, with a slight shake to his voice. "Sasuke wouldn't just leave without
finishing what he started. He'd never let that happen."

"Ku-ku-ku!" scoffs Orochimaru, enjoying his little game. "How little you know my boy. Sasuke-kun," The snake flexes his new fingers as if testing them, "Gave himself to me freely."

"No. He didn't." The grin has taken hold now, small but visible and I can sense how very much it annoys Orochimaru. Naruto seems neither deterred nor worried that he is facing one of the strongest ninja alive.

For a moment, there is silence, as Orochimaru seems to consider. But only a moment passes, for he is sure of himself. "Silly boy. You know nothing. Why would you even think such a thing?" He puts forth his best condescending lilt, but to me, on the inside, it seems a bit false.

"Because he is my best friend."

What nonsense. Best friend. What we share is not what any normal person would call friendship. But then, he never was the sharpest knife in the drawer.

I really wish he would stop looking at me like that. Because it feels like he is looking not at Orochimaru, but through him and somehow straight to me.

The very idea is unnerving. Orochimaru doesn't know I'm still here. How in hell could Naruto?

"Best friend?" The snake retains his infamous arrogance. "That's your answer?" His laugh is a hiss with no mirth in it. "But it seems you are still very much attached to the previous owner of this body. And if that is how you feel . . ." He stops to think, snapping his head in that reptilian way of his. "Then perhaps I could help you."

Naruto lifts an eyebrow and sinks back, clumsily hitting the wall behind him. His chakra feels pointed and on edge, not letting down his guard despite the "friendly" repartee. There is a sort of careful optimism in his eyes, but the fox's chakra boils suspiciously just below the surface.

"How?" He whispers quietly. I can practically see the hope rising in his eyes. He needs to believe in something.

It shouldn’t be me.

Orochimaru takes a step forward, then another, and another until he is looking down at Naruto from his slight height advantage, practically on top of him. There's a strange, sick twist to the snake's chakra and for second, everything goes dark. Then light hits me again and Naruto's face is suddenly brighter, warily hopeful, though his defensive stance doesn’t alter.

"Is that you Sasuke?"

Tentative and wary and not like Naruto at all. What is with this idiot? There should be anger and yelling, but every time I've seen him since the Valley of the End, he's seemed sad and reserved. Wake up, stupid! This is Orochimaru you're talking to! I thought you were supposed to fight him, just like you fight every last single person you come across, enemy or not.

You shouldn’t be just standing there.

Your death serves no purpose now. There is no more mangekyou.

There is no reason to die.
"What do you think Naruto?" Orochimaru says in what sounds like my voice. "Are you so stupid you don't remember me?"

Naruto only blinks dumbly.

I thought he'd have something to show me, but apparently not

So I guess this is the end.

Before, I could have gained, power, strength, peace of mind.

But if Orochimaru kills him now, even using my body, all it will mean is that Naruto would be dead.

Naruto would be dead.

What's the advantage in that?

"Sasuke?" Again and again, so idiotically annoying!

Not that I'd care if the dobe dies. Why should I? He just gets in the way. He's always gotten in the way . . .

I can almost feel the heart I no longer own begin to race. My hand, moved by Orochimaru, rises and brushes a whiskered cheek, clearly part of an act. So why the idiot still has that dreamy look on his face is anyone's guess. I can feel the edges of my mouth curl up into a smile, a blatantly false one hiding the malice beneath.

"Sasuke?" Naruto repeats, his throat sounds dry. "Is that you? Wha-what are you doing?"

And I realize, though I'm not sure how, what it was that Orochimaru did when the lights went out.

His normally serpent eyes are masked to look like my black ones. A simple henge and this usuratokachi falls for it?

Idiot.

What was once my hand slides down, smoothing over the tiny hairs in his skin, to reach Naruto's neck. Naruto closes his eyes, lips parted and takes a breath as his cheeks flush faintly pink.

Orochimaru smirks and cackles. "I knew it," he says. "So very obvious."

Knew what?

But the hand at Naruto's throat is soon joined by the other. It is a gentle movement at first, seductive and a lie; it is a touch I have grown to know well. Its true meaning is shown in the grisly smile that curls tight over Orochimaru's teeth. And yet Naruto simply stares, caught between disbelief and, I don't know. Stupidity?

His head leans back, exposing more of his throat and he opens and shut his mouth as if drowning.

Then the fingers begin to squeeze, still in that sweet way, but starting to cut off his airway, tiny bit by tiny bit. Just like with me, Orochimaru is coaxing him to die.

My mind feels fluttery and uneasy.

I can sense two chakras begin to war against each other inside Naruto, his own cool yellow and
Kyuubi’s hot red. Thus far, Naruto retains control, if just barely, keeping the fox back.

Why would he do that?

Naruto's face very slowly turns red, but I can still hear as his breath quietly passes through his teeth. But he isn’t fighting back. Fight back, idiot!

Orochimaru's black mind holds no doubt and he exudes confidence as always. "I know what you want, little fox. How long have you waited?" He presses his thumb deeper into Naruto's soft throat, massaging the pulse. A strangled sort of whine escapes the blond's mouth. "You two are so much alike, with you affinity for pain." Orochimaru leans in, caressing his stale breath over Naruto's ear. "Which will happen first, I wonder? Death or . . .?"

Naruto slams his head back against the wall. "Stop it . . ."

But Orochimaru ignores him and just smiles. "So, tell me, Naruto-kun, how does it feel to be killed at the hands of the one you most wanted to save?"

Naruto gasps out, like it means something. "Sas . . . ke . . ." His fingers dig into the stone behind him and his blue eyes, tinged in red look up at me, weirdly unreadable.

Idiot. Don't just stand there. I thought you were going to be the greatest ninja, the next Hokage.

Is this all you’re made of?

Orochimaru tightens his hold, feeling sickly satisfied with Naruto's reaction and pushes forward so that Naruto's feet slip until he ends up on the floor. Hovering over him, the snake's mind roils and tumbles and bubbles over, savoring the nearness of death like a bloodthirsty beast. His skin is stretched taut over his bones, the tendons in his neck pulled into straight lines, his eyes, in elation, flickering between his and mine until, unable to hold the henge, settling on yellow.

"Why?" He asks, pretending nonchalance, now with his knees on either side of Naruto's legs. "Why won't you fight back? Let's hear you say it."

Exactly what I want to know. He'll just die if he lets this continue. Is he really that stupid?

"Because I don't want Sasuke to be unhappy anymore."

"That's not the real answer, now is it?" Orochimaru says smoothly, but the hands grasped around that purpling neck go inexplicably slack. I don't get it. Any of it. I don't understand how the dobe's simple mind is supposed to work. Orochimaru's grin falters and I feel his power fold inward.

'Meddlesome Brat.' The power of the force that hits me is enormous, hurling me back into the darker depths of my mind. 'How are you still here? You should have been gone already. Well, no matter, you'll understand soon enough. This is my body now. And really, this will only make this that much sweeter. So just sit there like a good little boy and watch, hmm?'

My consciousness, such as it is, numbs with the impact of that unexpected, strange hit. Orochimaru has finally discovered me here and the calm hatred of him is overwhelming. But unlike before, he can't make me leave. His attention is too divided, or I'm now too rooted to be moved. Maybe neither, maybe both.

Honestly, it is irrelevant.

The pressure on Naruto's neck has become almost negligible now that Orochimaru's concentration
has shifted, but the idiot makes no effort to escape.

"Sasuke was always so sad," he begins softly, his head tilted upward and his cheeks still blush. "And I didn't know and I couldn't do anything and all I want right now is not to see him in pain anymore. . ."

"There is no pain." retorts Orochimaru, regaining control and digging the bones of his fingers back into the soft flesh of Naruto's neck. "There is no more Sasuke."

But we both know this is a lie, and from the inside, I can hear it as he speaks. But what I really don't get is Naruto. There is nothing to be gained from this.

"I want to make it so Sasuke can be happy," Naruto continues determinedly. A tear slips free from his eye. "I thought that meant coming home. But that was selfish. Sasuke was never happy there . . ."

"Happy, hmm?" Orochimaru croons. His fingers are fixed on the throat, but not crushing. Instead, they knead up and down almost warmly, moving him closer to death only by pieces. "Why don't you tell him what you really want?"

Naruto lets out a choked little noise between gasps, his mouth baring his sharp white teeth. Even now, when I am beyond saving, when there is no damn point, you won't let me be. You never would.

Regardless of what I do, you just won't let me alone.

Why, Naruto? Why?

"Sasuke." He's becoming weaker again, the tears falling down his face. But still he won't let go.

Dizzy and disoriented by him, I'm so confused that my hands are shaking.

**My hands are shaking.**

And then I realize. Orochimaru didn't slacken his hold, wasn't thrown by your statement. He never would've been.

I was.

I was the one who was surprised, who let go. In that instant, somehow my psyche took back control.

"If you want to help Sasuke-kun so much, then perhaps you could just die." Orochimaru's voice brushes over Naruto's face. "This is what he wanted." He leaves a hot wet path of air over whiskered cheeks. "And you too. How do you feel, dear little fox, with his hands on your throat?"

Naruto arches and the top of his head presses into the wall.

"Maybe I caused some of it," he chokes out, ignoring the snake. I sense a strange pooling of chakra somewhere within him. "But I didn't mean to. I just didn't think. . ."

"He has very thin hands, wouldn't you say?" The snake whispers. "Creamy white, strong but smooth too. They can be gentle one moment and fatally violent the next. I know them well. How about you, Naruto-kun? You know them too, do you not? And the destruction they can wreak." He rubs the fingers meaningfully over Naruto's throat. "Beautiful, are they not? How often have you
thought of them and what they could do?"

Naruto shakes his head as if to clear it and continues with his separate speech. "And maybe I was in the way, not helping, hurting him more, never actually looking at him, too concerned with my own problems. Maybe I took too long to really see Sasuke . . ." he ends in a half-strangled sob, struggling for air. "But maybe this way I can give him my power because I think he needs it. And because if it's Sasuke, if it's Sasuke and this will make him feel better . . ."

I watch as if my heart itself is shattering. Something catches and clicks into place inside of me.

No.

It won't make me feel better.

This is not Naruto, not the one I know. Belligerent and annoying and loud and always trying to beat me, never standing down to anyone. That's the Naruto I know.

This, this person is a stranger.

And I have to know.

I have to.

"Why?" My half-voice grounds out, as if fighting itself and I'm not quite sure who said it. Everything is becoming muddled up so I no longer know where I begin and Orochimaru ends.

The once brightness of Naruto's eyes begins to fade,

"Because Sasuke . . . is . . . precious . . . to me . . ." His voice, stolen of all its power, trails off and dies.

The word ebbs against my memory.

Precious?

My whole being collapses in on itself.

Precious?

Then, without warning and with explosive force, a flurry of images storm through my brain, one after the other. Of a time on a bridge, where without thought or doubt or hesitancy, I gave my life for this stupid idiot. Of another, when, even with the advantage of time and calculation, I had offered my life in exchange for others. Again Naruto, and now Sakura too. Then a memory of running hard to reach him, to take my vengeance, but also to rescue. Anxious and desperate and blind, searching for my friend. And again another, rain pelting down, leaning over an unconscious form with every opportunity in the world to take his life, to end it all. And instead making some lame excuse to justify sparing it. Even when I saw him at Orochimaru's former lair, offered up to me like a sacrifice, vulnerable and waiting, my sword drawn to the ready, I didn't kill him. I could have, I'm sure. But I took my time, allowing him to be saved, giving him the chance to defend himself. But like now, he did nothing on his own behalf. Bared and open and weakened, he simply let me try.

But I barely tried.

And I realize, with sudden pinpoint clarity, that I don't want him to die. Not like this. Not by my
hands that aren't my hands, not when I have no say or power or anything like a helpless stander-by.

I just wanted him out of the way. I wanted him to stop monopolizing my thoughts, pushing out Itachi and revenge and replacing it all with his self. He doesn't have a right, he never did, the little idiot.

I understand why Orochimaru wanted to separate us.

Precious.

I see. As if when I tried to lash out and grab onto my hatred of Itachi only to have him slip away, he somehow took that emotion with him and cleared the clouds from my eyes. No, that's not exactly right. It is still there, it's just been tempered. Cooled and set aside, so that he could step in. My one true friend. Really my only friend, the only one who took the time to actually look at me, even if it was too late.

Or perhaps not.

Precious.

Back then, before all this, I would have given my life for you, over and over again, so that you can keep yours. I suppose it has taken me this long to figure out why.

Connection.

Friend.

Precious.

But I won't let you do it.

You are worth more than I am now.

The small swirl of energy is still present in Naruto somewhere, prepared to strike. If that is how it is to be, then that is what it will be. My fingers squeeze harder and Naruto's face is starting to turn purple, the tears flowing freely, the once present hope now barely more than a glimmer. I don't know what he's waiting for, but I don't want to wait anymore. Looking straight into his eyes, I try to make him understand.

You cannot die, Naruto.

My life for yours.

Over and over again.

That is what you do. For those important to you. Isn't that right, Naruto?

And now I understand.

I can do nothing else.

I gather my will and force it against the black shroud of Orochimaru that smothers me. I did it once by accident, but now when I really try, I will have to do it again. I will.

I am a ninja.
I am an Uchiha.

I am me.

There is a low growl that vibrates against the bones of this skull. The snake’s attention is drawn inward once more, against me. I feel the power of his anger as it tunnels closer, an anger that I knew was there, but had not experienced firsthand before. It is daunting. Raging, unpredictable, and massive. But I am not afraid. It is impossible to fear for a life I no longer have. I push back.

All I am able to manage is a slight loosening of the fingers.

Let it be enough.

Naruto blinks and his glassy eyes begin to clear. His mouth gathers air in short pulls, barely sustaining his life but trying. Red chakra shadows his body like a ghost, humming with energy. Soon, he will no longer be able to contain the fox. But that is alright, there is nowhere else to go from here.

Orochimaru’s voice is deep, his rage turning to pitch, thick and rolling and filling this emptiness. But that gentle, comfortable warmth continues to surround me, a protection that refuses to relent. And I understand.

It was hidden deep in my mind where I put all the things I dislike. Overshadowing Itachi and power and revenge and being shoved back as a nuisance, it’s now what saves me. It was always there, maybe even before we met.

So I hold onto that feeling and gather my strength to fight back even though there is no enemy to see, no kicks to land, no punches to throw. This is Orochimaru’s mind and it holds nothing but darkness. It is a battle of will against will, one consciousness against another with the stronger in conviction to be victorious.

"There’s no way you can win against me, little whining boy," Orochimaru forces the words through gritted teeth, struggling now on both fronts, inside and out, his attention split and therefore weakened.

'We’ll see about that,’ I counter. Taking advantage and with a sudden surge, I make my hands relax more around Naruto’s neck. A tiny bit more color returns to his face. The red aura grows brighter and I know Kyuubi is now lending a hand in the protection of his container. Naruto’s eyes are wide, staring into mine, his mind no doubt moving fast, trying to figure out this new turn of events.

I plead as though the yellow of these eyes could speak.

Naruto, you have to do it. I can’t.

Understand.

There is no other way.

Then, he starts fighting back.

Lifting his hands, he grabs my wrists and attempts to pull them away, his chakra concentrated and his muscles pressing against his skin.

"What are you doing, Naruto-kun?" The snake slurs through his teeth, torn between which of us he should focus on. "I thought you wanted to be killed by your best friend."
"No. I don't. I don't want to die. I just want Sasuke back. That's it. That's all I want." His tone is breathy and fierce as he pulls in some of Kyuubi's strength to help push Orochimaru off with one move. "And you're not him!"

Orochimaru balks, his control slipping while we two attack him at once. There's still some fight left in me. Like swimming upstream through rapids, I force my way into control and with a short burst, my hands are pulled free, making Naruto collapse into a heap of coughing, gasping ninja against the wall.

"See?" Naruto pants. "I told you."

Orochimaru snarls. "And that is all he has. He was a weak little boy who couldn't even make proper use of the gifts that were bestowed on him. Gifts that should have been mine." His sneer widens. "And soon, they will be. Your friend grows weaker by the second and soon will be gone altogether. Perhaps I was too hasty the first time, but I will make no such mistake twice."

"You're wrong." Naruto wearily lifts his head. "Sasuke is stronger than you. He can beat you. I know he can. And now, he should too."

Orochimaru glares down scathingly, but is unable to move while I trap him from within. I look at Naruto, his bright blue eyes bloodshot and teary, yet happy somehow, as if he has been presented with the world. His neck is bruised with the thin ugly impression of finger and his lips are tinted blue from lack of oxygen, all by my hands.

My fault.

My fault.

I will not lose.

The power of Orochimaru's rage swells, bearing down on me on all sides, and it's all I can do to just hold him back. Every nerve in my body trembles, wavering between our controls, and the power of our clash drives my body stumbling backwards. A searing pain shoots down my back from where I've hit the solid bed frame behind me and I crumple to the floor.

"It's already too late." The creepy voice grinds through my teeth like glass. "This is where it ends, but at least you can end it together, hmm? Very considerate of me, I think, to grant you this. Be grateful."

"Sasuke!" I catch the desperation in Naruto's voice as he crawls over to me. Then there are hands cradling my cheeks, keeping me here, keeping me balanced. "Don't give in to him! I know you're stronger than that!"

He is so close to me, but I can't seem to reach him. I can barely hear him over the rumbling growl in this brain, barely stay conscious. But I'm not letting go, not now.

I have to do this.

Naruto quirks his head, rubbing his thumb absently over my cheek and gives me a lopsided smile. That angry chakra now crackles like electricity around his body, itching to strike out. "You have to win, teme. I haven't gotten the chance to beat you yet."

I try to laugh at him, but it gets stuck in my throat. Orochimaru is dragging his way back to the surface and I can actually feel myself changing, as if his image is trying to push itself through my skin. I raise my hand and clutch Naruto's arm, digging my nails into his flesh; he is my only hold
to this world right now, all else has fallen away and failed me. I clench my jaw again as my body begins to convulse, that cackling ku-ku-ku confidently working its way back to the forefront. I'm getting weaker, I can feel it and I don't know how much longer I can last. Every muscle feels stretched and thin, pulled too far for too long and at its limits, ready to snap.

The air of the room is tinted bloody red from the aura that envelops Naruto, an unsettling sort of premonition.

I ease his hand from my face and cup it in mine, glancing quickly between the open palm and his red eyes.

You have to understand, Naruto. This is the only way to end this. I won't be able to hold it much longer.

The dobe looks down at his palm, brow furrowing, his lashes hiding his eyes from me. It takes a breathless moment before he makes a fist and shakes his head as he looks back up.

"No, Sasuke. I won't do it. I can't." His look never wavers, nor does his answer.

He won't listen to me. He never listens to me.

A drop of water escapes my eye and slips over my cheek. Stupid! It's the only way. The only way. This has to end otherwise I really may kill you.

It took almost all my strength just to move my hand.

Naruto quickly flips his strong, calloused hand and laces fingers with mine, gripping hard while the other hand lifts my chin. His warm chakra tingles over my skin. "You can do this, Sasuke. Don't prove me wrong, you selfish bastard." His words get tripped up with hiccups. "Besides, I've got a few tricks I've been dying to show you. And you're going to be so surprised! So don't disappoint me."

My head jerks as if no longer attached to my neck. I am losing control.

"Ku-ku-ku. Let's see them." Once again, Orochimaru's voice hisses through my lips.

Naruto leans forward and touches his forehead to mine, ignoring the snake. "Sasuke . . . " The bones of my fingers are on the verge of breaking.

I squeeze back, to let him know I'm still there. But I'm at the end of my rope. There's nothing more I can do. Stupid, stupid Naruto. Orochimaru has had plenty of experience, plenty of practice at this and I'm already weakened from the effort. It's too hard for me to reclaim an overcrowded body.

Just then, as if on some unheard cue, the door bursts open. Three Sound ninjas come barreling in from nowhere, stupid, low-class and weak, and before they even have the chance to speak, Naruto's, or rather Kyuubi's, chaotic energy leaps out and instantly dispatches them. He never even turns his head, the chakra acting on its own as the frustrated combination of both ninja and fox.

As Kyuubi has told me, he is not to be taken lightly.

What a pointless effort those fools made. It's clear that besides a few select elite, Sound is filled with trifling ninja. I look to the three fallen. One twitches helplessly on the floor.

Sound must be teeming with Konoha shinobi by now.
A small, almost unnoticeable tic catches my attention, directed at the dead. Then Orochimaru launches himself at me with near abandon, as if he is suddenly desperate to end this quickly. I cast my gaze once more at the recently beaten ninjas. There's that little tug again, and like a light going off, I know what to do.

I know how to get rid of Orochimaru.

I can beat him and it is so ridiculously simple.

All this time, I was trying to push him back, into the recesses of my mind, but he can't go there. That's my place. I need to push him out, into something, but until just this moment, there was no place for him to go. Those idiots showed up rather conveniently. Almost too conveniently. And if not for Orochimaru's little lapse, I may not have realized it.

'Don't even think it, little boy.' Any trace of smoothness has evaporated. 'You are weak, never even knew how to use what you had. I taught you everything. Do you think that I don't know what you're thinking now? It will never work, Sasuke-kun. It's too late. I win.'

'No you haven't, not yet,' I reply uselessly. He already knows it.

I swallow hard and though shaking uncontrollably, my tendons ripping, I place both hands on the floor beside me and begin hauling myself over to that body. Each pull is like a stab to my chest. But there isn't much time, I've got to get there before he dies. My movement is slow and uneven, half or more of this body in Orochimaru's control, and it's not until I am yanked backwards that I remember that I am still holding Naruto's hand.

"Sasuke?" He lifts an eyebrow in question.

I muster what I have and look at him. Too difficult to speak, I put everything into that look, trying to make him understand.

He stares at me, his forehead crinkled curiously and I stare back.

Naruto.

You have to help me.

I hate it, but I can't do it alone.

My voice refuses to work. I can feel the shift in power, as mine becomes more brittle by the second.

"It's all over now." Rasps Orochimaru instead, his lip curling into that grin of his, sure of his victory.

But they are my eyes. Yellow they may be, but I point them meaningfully to the half-dead ninja on the floor and you have to understand, Naruto.

You have to.

Please.

Drawing on everything I have, one small word that means everything finds its way through my lips.

"Naruto."

And that's all he needs. The next moment he practically picks me up and begins the long trek
across the small room. The roar that escapes from my mouth is no longer human, Orochimaru releasing the frustration of having a long sought for prized snatched from his grasp.

"This is not over!" He screams, his famous restraint breaking. "I will not be beaten by two little boys who don’t even know how to use their own power!"

It’s an odd, separate sort of feeling to have someone shouting with my voice and fighting with my body while Naruto is pulling me across the floor to meet a dead man. But the snake has been weakened too, despite what he says, and I manage to contain him, giving Naruto the chance he needs. Soon my hands, covered with Naruto’s, are pressing down on the shallow rising and falling chest of the nearly dead man.

"You, dear Sasuke-kun," Orochimaru has that old silky tone, though now with a tinge of fear, "Are not strong enough. You don’t even know how."

"You are, Sasuke." Naruto’s voice is warm against my ear. He’s behind me, holding my hands down, his chin resting lightly on my shoulder. "He’s the weak one. You know that now, don’t you? You don’t have to know what you’re doing. It’s your body. Just take it back."

He’s right, I know, but I can’t even spare the energy to nod my head. Everything is focused on pushing Orochimaru out, into this much more receptive form. I concentrate all my power, my chakra, and my will, on ejecting the unwanted guest.

I lean my head down to make contact with the man’s and find scant resistance there. I think about being myself again, being able to use my mouth and eyes and arms as I should. I think about Orochimaru simply gone, away. Nothing complicated. Only that I want to live.

That I don’t want to let go of the hands holding mine.

My vision shrinks smaller and smaller until it turns black, and there is a moment of suspended animation, followed by such a jolt that I am thrown back, feeling the weight of Naruto cushioning my fall. Several minutes pass in a daze. Then I start to regain my senses, flexing the fingers that are once again mine and standing on the legs that finally follow my orders. There is soft shuffling and surge of chakra on the other side of the room that draws me.

I feel dizzy and lightheaded as I turn.

That nameless ninja is on his feet, tottering and gripping his ribs, looking like the walking dead he very nearly is. One eye is sealed shut and the whole left side of his face is burned black. Wobbly, angled legs try to support him and there is a constant flow of blood that seeps through his crossed arms and dribbles to the floor. Standing opposite this mangled corpse are multiple Narutos, each with a chakra of red-twisted yellow as the group calmly collects it all into a single hand. There is a whip of wind, gathered from the four corners of the room as the real Naruto raises this new strange jutsu. He looks different than I remember, more in control, but also a bit scary because he is so calm. There is no yelling as he always used to do, just acceptance that he will win. His eyes are dead cold, the bright blue dulled to steel flecked with red and there is something about that look that I just don’t like.

Everything about him feels wrong.

Orochimaru only sneers, stinking of decay, and lets his confidence roll off him. "Think you've won?" He coughs up blood that then trickles over his lip. "You can’t ever win. You will never be rid of me. You will always be haunted by his hands on you and remember that they were mine."
Naruto says nothing in response, just springs forward with the chakra like swirling death at the end of his arm and attacks. But Orochimaru doesn't look at him but rather at me, his eyes narrowed and his lip lifted on one side, knowing that this is it. He's gone through too much chakra and this little would-be ninja had none to give. All it will take is one.

Yet he wears the face of a victor.

And when Naruto hits Orochimaru, driving through his gut and cutting out his insides, I feel it. My stomach churns and retches and I double over, spilling a wave of crimson onto the floor, making a pool into which I fall, deep and rich and sticky and staining my hair. My head is spinning with the loss. Everything looks blunt and cloudy. Then suddenly Naruto's face enters my blurred vision, eyes back to that familiar cerulean hue and his mouth open wide as if screaming.

But all I hear is the buzzing of blood that sounds in my ears.

Then everything turns black.
"That's it? You're going to tell me that that's all that happened?"

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"Are you lying?"

My eyes become slits, harsh and unblinking, and if I could, I'd launch forward and shut that loathsome mouth of his. But I can't.

"No." Not really.

He begins to pace across the room thoughtfully, twirling a kunai lazily between his fingers. "So you're telling me that you, you, defeated Orochimaru just by wanting to?"

There's a small heat that rises to my cheeks. If he won't believe me, I can't help that. "Essentially."

His feet stop their track in the floor, and with his index finger poised at the tip of his blade, he regards me. I can feel his scrutinizing gaze, his brain assessing the truth of what I've said, as his forehead creases in uncertainty.

That look is really grating on my nerves and I have nothing to lose anyway. I really want to attack; at least it would bring me some small satisfaction. Besides, anything I do is unlikely to affect the outcome one way or the other.

For me, that is.

But for Naruto . . .

I hold my tongue, with great difficulty. The unspoken words taste bitter in my mouth.

Shinta walks forward then suddenly drops to a crouch before me, swinging that damn knife distractedly in his fingers.

"Did you ever even try to escape? Or did you just stay there, content as Orochimaru's little pet?"

My eyebrow twitches. I still don't like the insinuation he keeps trying to make. So subtle, this one,
about as subtle as a ton of falling bricks in the middle of the wilderness. And that's a bit of a sore subject for me. Perhaps if I say nothing, the annoying little bug will leave me alone.

I glare.

He stares back.

My breath stalls angrily in my throat. Mouse's lip curls up in a sneer.

"You did, didn't you?"

I don't answer.

He leans in closer, his breath no better a smell than it has been any other day. Clearly he and hygiene have never been introduced.

"Didn't you?"

The stench wafts over me like fetid swamp fog.

"Didn't you?" He repeats yet again, that damn smirk on his face.

My eye starts in some crazy, uncontrolled tic, pulsing above my cheek. He just keeps staring at me. My jaw is tight, straining, my teeth grinding against one another.

"Yes."

His vapid smile deepens and he graciously pulls away. At least now I need not be subjected to that horrible chemical warfare otherwise known as his breath.

"And what happened?" The smirk plays over his lips as if he can't control it.

I grit my teeth, forcing the words through. "I failed."

"Oh?" His voice takes on the lilt of friendly interest as if we are discussing the weather rather than a life or death situation. "And you thought you would win?"

"Obviously." Idiot. I should have won. Honestly, I'm not quite sure why I didn't. "I should have been strong enough."

I hadn't really intended to say that out loud.

"But you weren't."

The truth cuts deep.

"I would've been," I snap. I would've, with just a little more time.

It burns, worse than the injuries he's given me, burns like a shame that will never heal. I thought I was strong enough. I really did. And I almost was.

Almost.

The story of my life. Told in an endless spiral, looping in on itself with no break and no escape. Almost there in time, almost the fastest, the strongest. Almost special.

Almost good enough to be called Itachi's brother.
Almost my father's son.

And it hurts. Always a day late and a jutsu short.

"But you lost." It is a statement not meant to be answered and Shinta doesn't wait for one. Instead he rises to resume his mindless pacing. "And when was this?"

No point in hiding that, it's the reason I resigned myself to my fate, in a fashion. No time left and no more choice. "The day before the transfer."

My interrogator hums under his breath and the room goes silent. Nothing to be heard, not even the breathing of the other ninja hiding out in their darkened corners like sneaky, sniffing rats. The only noise in my ears is the sound of my heartbeat.

"So then how long was Orochimaru in control before . . . " His lip curves again as if he has hold of some tempting secret. "Uzumaki saved you?"

My shoulders tense instinctively and I wince at the pain. The effects of Tsunade’s serum are starting to wear off, but I’m not done yet. I need to set the record straight. I was not "saved". Uchiha Sasuke does not get "saved". "Helped", "aided", I suppose I could suffer that indignity for now. But "saved"?

Never.

My nerves are jagged at the thought of anyone ever believing such nonsense. But then again, there’s little point. My future has already been written. But maybe, maybe, it can still help Naruto. I need to balance out the scales. One last thing.

I swallow my pride and it is a poisoned pill that lodges deep in my throat.

"I don't know," I tell him, answering his question. Let them believe what they want. I really don’t care.

"You don't know?" He stops, turns, and quirks an eyebrow. "You must have some idea. Minutes? Hours? Days, weeks?"

My jaw aches. "I don't know."

Mouse looks oddly like he's won something. He inclines his head and grins like the cat he is not. "Well, then. Let's go back, shall we? Why did you try to escape him? Or don't you know the answer to that either?"

My hand trembles at my side, tingling with the desire to rip out his filthy throat. A metallic cackle sounds deep within my brain.

//Why indeed?//

Shut up.

//Of course you are incapable of real change, aren't you?//

Shut up.

//Still the same soft pathetic fool.//

Shut. Up.
My breathing has grown labored, my hands clenched tight to restrain the urge to attack. A stream of sweat trickles over my face and drips off my skin to hit the floor as accusing drops of rain.

The color of my eyes begins to fluctuate, yellow to red, and the way I see the world changes. I can sense the heated mass of my chakra, even held back and stunted as it is and use all my willpower to keep it in check. Little Mouse's uneasiness is palpable in the air, thrumming in my veins and my black blood sings with his anxiety.

It is an effort to make my voice work. "There was nothing more he could teach me. Or would teach me." That's enough for him to know.

Since that day I saw them again: Sakura and Naruto, something had begun to subtly change in me. Or return. Or whatever. I don't know. I knew I wanted to leave Orochimaru. It just took me that long to make my move. I had to squeeze every last bit of knowledge I could out of the snake before I left, otherwise all the time would have been wasted.

And I can't have that.

No matter what lengths I had to go to, I would make sure my time and effort was not in vain.

Maybe I waited too long.

Maybe it was what Naruto said, always bothering me with "best friend this" and "best friend that".

Maybe it was the way Sakura looked at me like she didn't know quite who I was.

Maybe all these things.

Maybe none.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

It's a puzzle I can't make work, the pieces all there but refusing to fit. I close my eyes and concentrate, making the red settle and bring back the now natural yellow.

When I open them again, Shinta is staring at me with a look of awe and fear in his beady little eyes. I smile at him.

His stance falters just a little.

Then he conspicuously clears his throat, looking nervously over to the shadowy scarred man lurking in the corner. Ibiki simply nods and Shinta comes to attention, his words stumbling as badly as his feet.

"S-so..." He stutters and I smirk. Scowling, he coughs again, shaking off his nerves. "OK. Then why don't you tell me what happened afterward. About the months you and Uzumaki disappeared?"

I blink at him. Well that's a whole other story, isn't it? But this is what I've been waiting for. The opportunity to remind them that Naruto is Naruto and not the fox.

It will be tricky.

Most of that time is between Naruto and me. It concerns no one else. It just isn't their business.
But I open my mouth to speak and let the words do what they may.

It is twilight when I first rouse, or maybe dawn, the half-light of the beginning or end of day filtering through the trees, littering their dappled shadows across the grass. The air feels cool but dry, with a trace of warmth just behind it slowly fading away.

Twilight, I'd guess.

Slowly, I blink a few times to clear the gummy sleep from my eyes and see . . . gnarly bark. A tree. Yes, lovely.

I put my hand to my temple and press hard as if that will somehow alleviate the headache that is trying to shatter my skull into a million tiny pieces. But my brain will not cooperate, swelling and throbbing against its bone cage.

I hear myself groan, low and guttural and pained. The last thing I can remember is the gluey taste that is still in my mouth, a mix of bile and blood. My gut is the only thing that really hurts aside from my head and it feels old, tender, and bruised but not stinging. I run my fingers over the area, testing gently.

Definitely bruised.

And surprisingly enough, there's a gash there, now bandaged, that I can't recall getting.

I roll onto my back and the world seems to spin much too fast. Everything is blurry yet clear, sharp and cloudy and I feel like I can see way too much. As if my mind is playing tricks on me, filling in a landscape that isn't there.

It makes my head hurt so I close my eyes.

I don't even know where I am.

The last I remember was Orochimaru, no longer human and myself much the same. I remember agreeing to that stupid bargain like it was worth something. And then Orochimaru defaulting on our deal.

I remember fighting because that is what I do.

And then at last, there is Naruto.

I bolt upright, my head reeling, twisting on my neck, the hammering of my brain making my teeth hurt. Pressing the palms of my hands to my eyes, I practice. Practice the way I have many times before, gathering the pain and locking it away deep inside myself where it can no longer affect me. Much in the same way I do with all other bothersome things.

I take a deep breath.

"Sasuke?"

I know that voice.

"You're up!" The tenor of it suddenly changes to become far too cheery and familiar, as if we have simply set up house in some little copse of trees, greeted by singing birds and friendly squirrels and everything is just perfect.
In other words, he is acting like the same idiot he has always been.

I can feel the pressure of Naruto's misplaced joy as a presence that weighs heavy in the air. I really don't want to deal with him. He'll whine and moan and ask for things that I'm not going to give him. That I can't. But he is there still, and he is a presence that cannot be ignored.

So I turn to him and open my eyes.

And see very quickly, in this order: Naruto with a huge grin and an armful of foraged vegetables. Naruto with a sad confused pout with an armful of vegetables. Naruto with an angry scowl dropping the vegetables. A fist hitting my face.

Some people may like being woken up with a dash of cold water and a kunai to their throat. I don't know who these people are, but despite opinion, I am certainly not one of them.

In fact, waking up this way tends to put me in a very foul mood.

So this is exactly what I'm in when Naruto does just that. And it is not helped when some of said water gets into my throat and chokes me. I turn my head to the side, feeling the sharp slice of metal through my skin. Blood seeps out the open wound, making the water pink, but it doesn't hurt.

Naruto jars my shoulder, shoving it to the ground. "Don't move!" he yells, banging my shoulder again.

The last bit of water escapes my mouth, finally allowing me to speak.

"I have to move if I'm choking."

"I don't care!" His voice is brittle and breaking. "Look at me."

But I don't. I don't follow his orders.

He grabs my chin, digging his fingers in unnecessarily and forces me to face him. He leans in close, threateningly, his breath ghosting over my skin. It is stale and sour from too long outdoor and, away from common luxuries like toothpaste.

"Give him back to me."

I'm staring at him but I can't quite see clearly. I feel like I'm looking through a fish-eye lens.

"Who?" I ask blandly, trying to get my bearings.

But his blue eyes tinge faintly purple, the pupils narrowing to strange cat-like slits. "You know who I'm talking about. You can't have him. He doesn't belong to you. Give him back."

Since I have no clue what the idiot's talking about, I pull my lips into a thin line and simply stare. That's your answer, dobe.

There are sharp points of pain as his nails dig into the soft muscle just below my jaw line. He leans in even closer and I can see the throb of tenseness in his neck, smell the salty tang of his sweat. A droplet slides over his forehead, down the bridge of his nose and falls off the tip, landing on my cheek.

I ignore it.

He speaks.
"Sasuke. Return him to me."

A moment's pause.

A moment more.

Then I pull my arms together, gather chakra to them and push, hard, against Naruto's chest, trying to force him off with no effect. Heat swells in my veins, boiling over my blood and setting every nerve in my body on point. My bones themselves burn with fury.

How dare he.

How dare he!

I try to pool my chakra again, but like my eyes, it's all screwed up and it refuses to work right. All I manage is to barely jostle Naruto, but he doesn't budge.

I grip my hands instead, take hold of his jacket and pull him closer so he can feel the justified rage coursing off me. I push the words carefully through my gritted teeth.

"I don't belong to anyone."

Then through sheer force of will, I gather my strength and sharply push him off so he stumbles, falling down on his backside. Still scowling, but confused now too, he gets to his feet. I can see that familiar fight in his eyes. That idiot determination. He hasn't grown at all, still the same immature kid he was back in the valley of the end.

He wants this fight as much as I do.

And I'm not in the mood to wait, despite my uncooperative body.

I reach back behind my shoulder to grab my sword only to find empty air. It better not have been left behind, that sword is an extension of me. And if Naruto has confiscated it, I'm damn well getting it back if I have to cut his arm off to do so.

Regardless, right now I'm weaponless and my chakra still fells skewed and cracked. Trying it now, like forcing a jutsu when I don't have the energy, could do more harm than good.

And now I have to find Itachi.

Guess it's taijutsu, then.

Well, maybe that's not so bad.

I race forward and swing my leg around, catching Naruto hard in the ribs. He falls back, but quickly scrambles to his feet, retaining his balance without skipping a beat. He rockets his fist forward, getting me in the jaw somehow. He tries to repeat it, but this time I block, and he tries again which I also block, but when he sweeps his leg across my feet, I misjudge the distance.

I begin tumbling back, but instead of leaving this as a mistake, I use it to my advantage. Swiftly, I grab his shoulders and use the momentum to yank him forward as I raise my knee, driving into his gut. He chokes loudly and I repeat it, harder this time, then immediately pull my arm back and punch him squarely in the eye with all my anger, all my pent-up frustration, all that wasted time that meant nothing.

He should never have come, interfering where he wasn’t wanted, trying to own me like I’m an
object.

He catches me in the eye and I throw a punch as well, but sloppily, somehow making contact.

I didn’t want his help. I wanted to do things on my own, achieve my revenge on my own.

I swing again but wildly and he blocks it, whirling his leg around and hitting my side, right at the tender, unhealed wound. My hastily bandaged injury splits open and blood begins to seep out and over the cloth.

I don’t care.

I’m too frustrated, beyond all imagining, that my head hurts, twisted and knotted and I hate him.

He should have discarded those bonds like I did.

I should’ve killed him back then. Back when I had the chance.

All he is is in the way.

Always in the way.

I should have killed him.

My fighting has become erratic; I can’t seem to concentrate. Too easily, Naruto blocks everything I throw at him. Too stupidly, he does nothing more now than defend his self, not even giving me one punch back. His eyes keep flitting confusedly over my face and our surroundings as if he can’t quite recall how he got here.

I just need him gone. Relying on him with Orochimaru was rash and stupid and over. Because I don’t need him. I don’t care if he lives or dies.

I don’t need anyone who just looks at me as something to own.

I’ve had enough of that.

I wish he’d just go away.

Because I do not want him here.

All I need is my revenge; my hatred of Itachi. Nothing else matters. My life has always had but one sole singular purpose.

He’s staring almost worriedly now, though I can barely tell. My vision is stretched and blurry and my body too tired from fighting for so many years.

My next punch is weak and lamely misses as my vision spins out of control. I practically fall right into him and he couldn’t get a better chance than this, offered up and gift-wrapped, but he doesn’t take it. In lieu of attacking, making the final strike, he grabs my wrist and throws me against the nearest tree, my skull bouncing painfully off the trunk.

It shouldn’t hurt this much, I shouldn’t feel so damn tired, and now blood is pouring out my stomach at a much more rapid rate.

I inhale deeply, slowly, calming my breath and remember my training. This is nothing. Nothing at all. Soon, I no longer notice it. My vision runs clear, though still oddly fish-eyed, but as long as I
can see, I can fight.

But all that is there is Naruto, looming over me like a badly dressed, spiky-haired specter, his eyes in a strange angry puzzlement.

I scowl at him, this perpetual idiot before me.

"Let go."

But he doesn't, he just blinks a few times, stumbling over his thoughts before speaking.

"But-but you can't be." He purses his lips a moment. "Sasuke isn't like this. He's quiet and calm and creepy, not all wild and out-of-control . . ."

I'll kill him for that.

"Who are you?" Naruto asks, sounding as if he's genuinely curious.

I refuse to answer such an inane question. I wrap my fingers around his forearms and crush down.

"Let go."

But the moron clearly isn't listening. He's deep in thought, a rare and scary notion; I can practically see the smoke rising from his head.

I could take him easily, even bleeding and chakra-impaired as I am, but I don't.

And why is that?

"Wait," he says suddenly. "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait." He raises his hands to my face, cupping my cheeks and runs his thumbs over the sensitive skin below my eyes. He's staring intently, unnervingly, and the blue of his irises seem much stronger than they ever have before. "Maybe you are Sasuke. From a long time ago. The whiny, irritating, girly-brat that became my closest friend."

His eyebrows pull together. "I thought he was gone."

I dig my nails into his arms, breaking the skin and thrash out my leg, catching him sharply in the shin. My anger boils inside me, one I have known for so many years, yet somehow different, blacker, sharper. Whiny? Irritating? **Girly?** I ought to snap his scrawny, stupid, pointless little neck.

"How dare you, usuratonkachi!"

I clip him again in the shin and he jerks slightly but otherwise pays it no mind. No, the idiot has that dumb grin on his face, dopey and too big, the one I shouldn't remember.

And he doesn't pull away. Instead he leans in closer, his skin brushing along mine, closer and closer, until his arms wrap around me and his face leans into my neck. And for some reason, I can't seem to move.

"Sasuke."

The warmth of his whisper floats over my throat right near my curse seal. The mark seems to flare for an instant but that can't be right. Then I feel a warm breathy softness pressed against my skin for a brief moment, but it is gone so quickly I'm not sure it was real. Naruto tenses a second and I feel the sharp, sudden intake of his breath. But in the next moment, he leans in and squeezes tighter.
I just stand there.

Almost reluctantly he pulls away and looks at me, that idiot smile on his face and his eyes are wet with unshed tears. What a baby.

I glare at him.

He takes a deep breath and lowers his head. I still simply stand there, idiot like him and I don't know why.

"Sasuke!" He shouts suddenly and steps dangerously near. He sneaks his hand under the scant protection of my clothing, his fingers spread out intrusively over the bloodied bandage on my abdomen. "Your wound is open."

And something inside me snaps. Before he has time to react, I lock onto his wrist and twist his arm as violently as I can. I hear the nasty series of breaks, the brutal tearing of flesh, but no other noise from Naruto. It’s as if he has been struck too stunned to speak. He backs up awkwardly, looking at me with a hurt expression while his blood and mine stains the hand hanging limply off the end of his broken arm. The pain in his eyes isn’t physical, but something too hard for me to comprehend. Kyuubi’s red chakra begins to sneak over his injured arm.

Well that's what he gets for touching me. I told him to let go. Idiot. It's his fault. His fault. I turn from him and fall to my knees, clutching my bleeding stomach and breathing heavily. My heart is racing and it shouldn't be. I should have all this under control, nothing should affect me anymore.

I lean my head on the ground and wonder why it is this should make any difference.

And why it is I can't seem to leave.

The hands that move up my arm bring me back to the present time. I continue to stare straight ahead and she finally eases her hands off me.

"You've been gone a long time," Sakura says, turning to dig through her medical bag. She takes a quick, sly look at me through the wisps of her flyaway pink hair. "What were you thinking about?"

I glare blankly at her for a second then go back to stare at the filthy, damaged wall. "Nothing."

She lets out a short laugh and sighs. "An awful lot of emotions you showed over nothing." She says it with a small tease to her voice, but when I look at her, her smile is sad but not mocking. With a shrug she explains. "You're not as good at hiding your feelings as you used to be."

My eyes shrink until they are almost closed, and my mouth pulls into a flat, thin line.

She smiles again and flicks the end of the hypodermic needle she's just pulled from her bag. A small bit of clear liquid sprays through the air. "This might hurt a little bit."

Placing the point at my upper arm, she breaks the skin easily and pushes the medicine in without any further warning. It feels strangely thick and heavy as it fills my veins. I raise an eyebrow to her.

Sakura only shrugs again and shoves the emptied needle into a small plastic bag before putting the whole thing gingerly into her sack. The medicine is still traveling down my arm; I can sense it, like a snake winding its way through my system.
"What was that?" I ask, feigning disinterest.

The zip of Sakura closing her bag echoes through the barren room.

"Something very similar to what Tsunade-sama has been sneaking into your food." Sakura raises her eyebrows to me when I give her no acknowledgement. "I assumed you noticed."

I nod as my eyes droop slightly and the thickness of the medicine in my blood begins to feel less like an intrusion and more like a warm, comforting blanket. So I was correct and it was the Hokage that slipped that stuff to me before. But similar? More like ten times stronger.

Then Sakura smiles, rubs my arm affectionately and pulls down the sleeve to cover the recent needle-mark. I have the sensation of swaying, but I'm not moving, at least I don't think so. My mouth is parted slightly as I take in long, deep, satisfying breaths. I don't feel tired exactly, just immeasurably, enticingly, pleasantly relaxed.

"Well . . ." Sakura says and I can only guess she's trying to fill the obvious silence. Taking the bag in her hand, she starts to stand up when there is a short, sudden knock at the door.

We both turn our heads, Sakura quickly, me a bit more leisurely.

"Visitor!" A low voice barks, sounding annoyed for having to speak even this one short word.

There is a loud, reverberating clank as the locks are undone and the door swings open with a squeaky whine. Sakura scrambles to her feet, bag forgotten. I remain seated, hazy, and simply turn my head.

I don't know what to feel.

Naruto.

He looks okay. Pretty good actually. It would make me smile if I were the sort of person that did such things, but I'm not, so instead I do nothing.

"Naruto." Sakura stops short after taking a small step forward. Naruto leans back as the man with him mumbles something into his ear that I can't make out. The blond head bobs once and then he enters the room. The heavy door slams shut loudly behind him, final and judgmental and ominous.

Sakura fidgets nervously with her hands as she watches him, but he only smiles at her, that kind open smile that is his and his alone.

"Hi," he says.

"Hello," she answers.

Scintillating. Is it me or there is a sudden awkward tension in the air?

The two of them stare at each other a while, a little shifty and nervous, Sakura more so than Naruto. Bringing her hand to her mouth, she clears her throat and moves closer, raising her other hand to Naruto's cheek. Her lips turn up, but it doesn't look especially happy.

"You look a lot better," she says.

Naruto breaks into that wide trademark grin of his and replies. "Of course I am! I'm the great
Uzumaki Naruto! Nothing can stop me."

Sakura indulges him with a soft laugh.

I'd roll my eyes if that were the sort of thing I do.

But it's not.

So I don't.

The girl drops her hand to her side and backs up just a bit. Something, some kind of secret exchange is going on between them through the silence, purposely leaving me out. A part of me becomes sharp as I watch them. The two of them, together, the exact thing Naruto always wanted and there they are and he's so happy with her and why am I here again?

Right, that debt.

The jerk's not even looking this way. Technically speaking, this is sort of my room. Any “visitors” should be for me. And yet here I am, sitting like superfluous furniture, not being visited. Not that I care, because I don’t. Those days after Orochimaru and before now were a fleeting dream and nothing more. And now things are back to how they’re supposed to be.

So “visit” all you want.

I don't care.

I don't.

There's a faint cackling in the back of my brain, apparently amused.

You can shut up any time now, thank you very much. I'm not really interested in anything you have to say.

I stare quite determinedly at the dirty wall in front of me.

"Well, I'm glad you finally made it." It's Sakura's voice, somewhere behind me. "But, if you don’t mind my asking, how?" She sounds honestly perplexed.

Naruto laughs. It sounds flat, forced, disingenuous. "I have my ways. Nothing can hold me back when I make my mind to have something. You know that."

"Yeah." Her answer rings of regret.

The two of them move closer together.

"I, uh, I just gave him a shot. A pretty strong one. I didn't know you were coming, otherwise . . ." The unfinished sentence hangs in the air. "So, he's, well, let's say he might be a little off."

Then there’s silence and I don't know what's happening but I don't turn because it is absolutely no concern of mine.

//Jealous?//

I frown. I'm not even going to dignify that with a response.

The wall is in fact rather interesting. There are an impressive number of cracks in it. One would
think they'd repair it; otherwise a prisoner passing through might find a weak spot and manage escape. They would be ninja, after all, if they were jailed here and ninja are very resource . . .

"Sasuke."

It is Naruto speaking gently and I can’t be sure whether it is a question or a statement, but either way, my immediate response is to turn around. Damn it! I shouldn’t be answering a summons like some dog. Whatever’s going on back there has zero to do with me anyway.

When I look over, I see him. Standing almost expectantly, his hands are fisted nervously at his sides, his smile gentle and his eyes this soft, airy blue. Sakura stands by the door, bag in hand, looking back over her shoulder. But she is nothing more than a blur in the background. Hardly noticed. Perhaps not fair, but true. All I really see is him. Of course, he is the brightest thing in the room, this vibrant garish splash of color that draws all attention, so it really is unavoidable.

For some reason, I get to my feet, not slow, not fast, just a regular pace and approach him. It’s as if I'm drawn to him, his warm, healing chakra pulling me closer. It seems wrong, unnatural and yet absolutely right.

Maybe it's because I'm nearing the end and appearances no longer matter.

//Appearances always matter.//

No, that isn't it. It's something different, something other. That damned bond I didn't want and couldn't break.

Before I know it, I'm standing right before him, he with the silly foolish look on his face. Yet he appears tense, more anxious than I’ve seen him in recent days and I can't help but wonder why.

//I thought you didn't care.//

I say nothing, but feel my head fall forward, setting my forehead on his shoulder and I somehow feel better than before. His presence is like a balm to my senses.

That or it's the medication.

Definitely the medication.

"Sasuke." He whispers my name into my hair so that only I hear it and places his hands lightly on my arms.

There's a sharp, harsh knock somewhere outside myself, breaking into my consciousness, but I remain still.

"Guard!" Sakura barks sharply.

Again there is the metallic clang of a lock and the door opens. Without a word to either of us, Sakura leaves and the door slams hollowly behind her, leaving Naruto and I alone.

A few minutes pass as we stand there and soon everything begins taking its toll. My knees become weak and sag and my body starts leaning in closer to him.

"Whoa there," he says, his words making my hair flutter. His hands on my arms tighten near the shoulders and Sakura's

medicine sure must be working because it doesn't hurt. Naruto slowly guides us over to the sad
little mattress and drops us onto it with an audible thump.

My head is still on his shoulder and I turn it slightly so I can see his hands resting conspicuously in his lap.

"How have they been treating you?" He asks after a minute in a low voice.

"Like a revered elder." I deadpan. He apparently hasn't gotten over his flair for inquiring after the obvious.

"Did," he starts, then stops, seeming to consider. "Did you just make a joke?"

"It's called being sar-cas-tic." Must I really explain these things?

His body shakes slightly with a small laugh and he shakes his head. "You made a joke," he says decidedly.

Wrong, idiot. But I don't feel like correcting him.

My nose is tucked up to his neck and I can smell the heat and sweat that mists off his skin.

"You've been training," I say.

"I have." Is his atypically short answer. Then he takes my hand, the one with the bandaged fingers, into his. Cupping it firmly between his two, he whispers "I'll show you," as if telling me a secret that no one could overhear.

He takes a deep breath and I feel the spike of chakra, a little of his, but mostly Kyuubi's, flowing through his arms and down to his fingers. I roll my head so that my ear is on his shoulder and watch the red glow engulf our joined hands. It's a hot, almost burning sensation then I feel a strange sort of shifting in my bones. It tingles but doesn't hurt much and the pain is gone nearly as soon as it started. Naruto lets go and carefully unwraps the bandages, discarding them. Hesitantly, I flex my fingers and they work perfectly, just like before, as if they were never broken. There isn't even any swelling.

"Neat trick, huh?" He states a little proudly.

I stop moving my fingers and crease my brow in vexation.

"When did you learn that?" I ask.

Naruto stops and his chin brushes my hair as he turns his head to look at me. I can tell he's pouting. "Aw, c'mon. You can't be mad. This could be useful. Whenever you or I or Sakura or anybody gets hurt, I can fix it. It's not that hard. I just concentrate and channel Kyuubi's chakra outward."

"Naruto . . ." I warn.

"I mean, I can't heal everything. At least not yet. Just little things like fingers and toes and stuff. But eventually I will and it could be really helpful. It's not dangerous or anything. I told you. I've been working at it, you know, keeping Kyuubi under control and all. You're not mad, are you? Why would you be mad?"

"Hn." I don't like the fox. And I don't trust him. I don't like Naruto depending on him so much; it's not safe. I can feel his aura, prowling behind Naruto's, biding his time, waiting for his chance.

He reminds me of things I'd rather not remember.
"Stop worrying." Naruto says, a little sadly. "I haven't had any problems since the hospital. Well, okay, no big ones, anyway," he reluctantly admits. "I've been working with Tsunade-baa-chan and Ero-sennin and they've been talking with the elders. Well, more like shouting. But anyway, things look all right. And they're all looking for another sealing jutsu to work with mine. Kinda like yours only better. But I'd still be able to use him when necessary and . . ."

"And it worked so well for me." I cut in.

"Yeah, well," Naruto grumbles. "That was your fault."

My back tenses defensively.

I know that.

I don't need any reminders. And there's nothing to be done about it now. The past is the past and I wouldn't change it anyway.

I start to pull away, but Naruto grips my newly healed hand and jerks me back. I fall to my old position more easily than I would like and did I mention how groggy this medication makes me?

"Don't, Sasuke. Don't pull away. Just don't . . ." he sighs heavily. "Don't be mad, OK?" When I don't respond, he pulls on my hand and repeats. "OK?"

"Hn." It's too much effort to argue right now. But I also notice he never said he didn't mean it.

He sighs once more and my head rises and falls with the movement. My hand is still in his and he absentely begins rubbing his thumbs into my palm. It is gentle and firm and I'm not sure he knows he's doing it, but it's actually kind of nice. His hands are awfully warm and the pressure to my palm relaxes me more. I feel over-sensitized, maybe from the medication, and can feel in his hands the calluses and the texture of his fingerprints. His hands are much bigger than mine. Fatter, anyway. Darker and a little dirty, as apparently he didn't bother to clean up before he came here.

I hum quietly in contentment, which I didn't mean to do, but of course he notices.

He stops for a second, tense and stunned, but soon returns to that same slow, languidly pleasant motion. I don't know why it feels so nice or why I'm letting him touch me like this. Or better yet, how he can even stomach to touch these horribly ugly, cruel hands after they have hurt him time and time again.

I close my eyes.

He leans in a little closer and utters, low and raspy, "You like that, do you?"

"Hn."

I can feel his smile when he turns to stare at his hands as they move up to my fingers.

"You're so quiet and compliant, Sasuke," he says in an ambiguous tone. "I should get Sakura to put you on drugs more often."

He chuckles, but I ignore him in the way I am accustomed. He continues to massage my hand and it is so soothing that I adjust my position to get more comfortable. I tilt my head into the crook of his neck. The pressure on my hand becomes deeper, slower, even as his breathing grows harsh. The roughness of his tough skin rubs into mine and I can't say I don't like it.
Then suddenly he stops and we both stay motionless for a while until he draws a deep breath and holds it. Finally, he lets it out in a long shuddering pass. The vein in his neck throbs against my cheek at a heightened pace and without warning he lets out a little whine, throws my hand away from him, pushes me off, and jumps to his feet.

I almost fall flat on my face. I open my eyes and glower fiercely at him as he nervously drills a two-meter gully into the floor. He comes to an abrupt halt and turns to me, flexing his hands over and over at his sides.

"Sasuke," he starts anxiously. "We need to talk."

I arch an eyebrow.

Taking this as his cue, he goes on. "I, uh, I." He looks straight at me then his eyes twitch oddly and shift to the side. He swallows noisily and then faces me, wearing a completely different expression. "I want you to tell them."

That's not what he was going to say.

I continue to stare.

"Don't give me a hard time about this, Sasuke," He pauses thoughtfully before going on. "Tell them, okay? Just tell them everything. I don't," his nervous hands tighten into fists, gripping the cuffs of his jacket. "I don't want you to be hurt anymore."

I narrow my eyes. "Not your decision."

He pouts. "You're being stupid."

"I'm being stupid?"

"Yeah." His voice grows stronger with supposed conviction. "Yeah. Why are you doing this? To prove what? That you can? It's stupid. Just stupid."

I continue to glare at him, maybe it is a little of that, but not all. And he should know that.

Naruto stands rather stupidly himself in the middle of the room, stock-still, hands at his sides like a soldier. "You don't need to do this," he says adamantly. "I don't need your help. I'll be fine on my own."

"Who ever said I'm helping you?"

"Well, you are, aren't you?" He almost sounds disappointed.

I don't answer.

He sighs. "Just tell them. Sasuke, they'll just keep hurting you until you do. I can take care of myself." The blue of his eyes is intense, glowing and boring into my skull and I wish he'd stop with his hero complex already. "I'm going to tell them," he states plainly. "I'm going to protect you."

I jump to my feet too quickly and pretend my head isn't spinning and that I didn't just almost lose my balance. "Protect me? Protect me? I don't need your damn protection!"

"Yes you do." His mouth turns down dramatically. "And if you'd stop being such an idiot, you'd see that!"
"Who are you calling an idiot, idiot?"

"Look in a mirror!"

The palms of my hands burn from the scraping of my nails. If this is what he came for, he shouldn’t have wasted his time.

I won’t bargain for a life I don’t have. I drop my voice to a threatening whisper.

"I'll do what I want."

Naruto huffs like a frustrated little kid who can’t get his way. "Why do you have to fight me on everything?"

I say nothing, only scowl.

"Why are you such a bastard, Sasuke?" He sounds caught between resignation and frustration. He kicks his foot childishly at some collected dirt on the ground.

His eyes take on a darker hue, deeper and sinister and they become small in a way that looks wrong on his otherwise rounded face.

"Maybe I should have left you there, with him, if you loved being there so much."

That’s a low blow, crueler perhaps than he even realizes, but I won’t show it. I run my tongue along the roof of my mouth to choke back the bitterness.

"Maybe you should have."

He looks straight at me, his emotions fluctuating wildly. The blue of his eyes intensifies, purples, and grows large.

"Why do I even bother?" He grows louder, letting his aggravation, his rage take over. "Why should I? You’re not worth it, you know. You’re not. I really don’t know why I should bother. I don’t know why I should fight, should almost die. You don’t even care, do you? You never did, only about yourself and your vengeance. You’re just doing this so you don’t have to feel guilty anymore. Well, guess what? Feel guilty. You are.” It’s better his way. Better for him to hate me, even though it hurts in a way I can’t describe. "This is all for your own selfish reasons. You want to pretend you’re doing the right thing, like some sort of sacrifice. But doing the right thing for the wrong reasons make the whole thing worthless. You’re just scared of living after what you’ve done." He takes a deep breath. "I don’t know why I should care. I don’t know why I should waste my time! Go ahead and throw your life away! It makes no difference to me! I only spent three years of my life getting strong enough to get you back, that’s all. I only almost cost me my life. And Sakura’s and Kakashi’s and Yamato’s and a lot of people and you’re so not worth it, Sasuke. You’re not. I don’t know why I have to go through all this. I don’t know why I—"

He stops suddenly, slamming his jaw shut with a clack of his teeth. His eyebrows twitch anxiously as if he surprised himself at this outburst. Then slowly, carefully, his eyes cloud over, becoming like steel, flat and emotionless.

"I hate you."

It hurts more than I expected.

Like my heart can’t beat, my lungs can’t breathe and every one of my bones is crumbling in on
itself. My blood has all dried up and everything is stretched too far, too tight, but won't break and give me release.

I bite the back of my tongue briefly to remind myself who I am.

And fall back to the reply I have repeated many times before. "I don't feel anything for you."

He seems to swallow a violent hiccup and nods. "I know."

Does he know it's a lie?

Disdain, hate, friendship, anger, jealousy, awe. There's not a time when I don't feel something for Naruto. It was too much, in the way, and I had to get away.

I should never have felt anything.

Only Naruto doesn't allow for that. And that's why, that's why . . .

"I'll do what I want," I repeat. I'll be the one making the choices. "You can't stop me."

He sniffs, wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt. "I hate you. Why now? Of all times, of all chances, after everything! Why now?"

And now he's blubbering, like I'm supposed to feel bad.

"Enough. Just go." This is getting tiresome. I'm beginning to wish he'd never come. "Stop bothering. None. of. it. makes. a. difference."

He takes an awkward step back as if I were physically threatening him, which oddly enough, I'm not.

"What do you mean?"

He can't honestly not know. I scoff derisively. "You're still so naïve, Naruto."

"Don't talk like that." Once again, a little sad, a little disappointed.

"I'll talk however I want." I curl my lip. "Besides, I thought you hated me." I'm impressed how flatly I got that out.

"Stop talking like that!" His yell bounces in the air and hits me in the back of the head.

"Why are you such an idiot?"

My skull throbs as it bangs the wall Naruto has thrown me against. His hands grip the neck of my shirt, his elbows pushing on my bruised ribs. The day is still in effect so all I feel is pressure with just the pinch of pain. I look at Naruto as he frowns at me, his eyes tinted red, his teeth pointed and his whisker marks carving deep into his face.

It always ends up like this.

Fighting.

At each other's throats.

Did I honestly think things could ever be different?
No, maybe not.

"I want you to live, okay?" his voice flutters hot over my face. "What's so wrong with that? I want you to live and stay here. In Konoha. With . . . us."

"You're delusional."

"I'm not! Stop trying to act so damn noble." He then hurls a particularly sharp barb. "It doesn't suit you."

I suddenly feel completely calm, collected and in control. "Get off."

"Not until you promise me!" He's being irrational.

"I'm not promising anything."

Naruto pulls back his arm, the anger swelling off him and I simply close my eyes, waiting for the fist to make contact. The air whistles beside me as the force of his power is drawn in one, concentrated straight line. The wall by my head cracks, a long jagged line extending from ceiling to floor, the aftershocks resounding in my spine. When I open my eyes, Naruto's head is bowed, his body shaking from rage and the scent of blood from his hand fills my nostrils.

His shoulders heave from the effort and I watch them go up and down, up and down.

The heat of his rage warms me.

The repetitive sound of metal on metal, of jingles and clanks and rusty hinges permeates the room, an offset to Naruto's heavy breathing. The door opens and a man I have not seen before enters.

I straighten up, ready to go to whatever "new" questions they have in mind, but what happens, rather truthfully, surprises me.

"Uzumaki Naruto, it is time."

My eyes widen and flash back to him, but all that I see are the yellow and golden strands of his hair. Then his hand drops and he raises his head. He looks so much older, like the past few seconds have somehow aged him several years.

A pathetic "wha . . . " is the only thing I'm able to force through my mouth.

He gives me a crooked smile and looks nothing at all like the way he should. "You're right, Sasuke." It's creepy, how quiet he sounds. "None of it does make a difference. I thought I told you." Slowly, he walks over and stands beside his armed escort, his back to me. "You didn't honestly think I'd get out of this unscathed, did you? Now who's being naïve?"

I stare mutely as the man takes Naruto by the elbow and leads him away. I get one last, mournful look from Naruto before the door closes with a dull clang that resounds in the shadows of my mind.

//Ah, useless as always.//

Is this it? Will that be the last I ever see of him and like every other damn time we waste it fighting?

Was all the time spent in that room for nothing?

Suddenly finding my muscles and bones again, I rush the door, throwing the full of my weight
against it. It does little to nothing to move the cold hard barrier. Sakura’s drugs are strong; I don’t feel a thing.

It isn’t fair.

Pounding my fists on the door, I scream through it as best I can. "Naruto! Hey, dobe! Don't do anything stupid! Do you hear me? Naruto!"

The sound of my own voice slaps me in the face in the empty room, but he makes no answer. I don’t know if he can even hear me.

I can’t let it be for nothing.

This isn’t the way the story is supposed to go.

I resume slamming my fists against the door in a furious onslaught as the feeling that this is my fault; that I should have watched what I said better, sinks like a stone into the pit of my stomach. They're going after him because of me.

"Guard! Guard! Let me out! I have something to say! Are you listening? Let me out!"

I slam the flat of my hand on the door and the pain is starting to filter through now, but I don't care. "Hey, you! I said I have something to say!"

But the bastards don't answer, don't move, don't do anything; just stand there like maddening silent stone statues.

I continue to shout until my voice is hoarse, continue to punch and kick and throw my shoulder against the door until I'm bruised and bleeding and all of Naruto and Sakura's work is undone. I continue for what feels like, and likely is, hours, but no one cares. I continue until all my energy is spent, until I can no longer move or breathe and I'm so tired that all I can do is slide to my knees, my head leaning on the door, my arms hanging uselessly at my sides.

I stare at the sliver of floor in the crack beneath the door as it slowly tinges with the red of my dripping blood.

My gasping breath smacks me in the face in a staccato of dusty foul accusation.

Why. Why do we always end up fighting every single time?
To say the atmosphere is tense would be a major understatement. Oppressive with the heaviness of betrayal and distrust after the sourness of lost friendship would be more accurate.

Quite accurate, I think, as root through Naruto’s things in search of some spare bandages with which to rebind my wound. Once I find it, I notice that many of the things in Naruto’s bag are from Sound. Reluctantly, I have to admit I’m impressed that he had both the foresight and the presence of mind to grab it on the mad dash out.

I sneak a glance in Naruto’s direction and see him standing against another tree, his arm hanging twisted and dead at his side, a red glow winding around it. His eyes are unwavering, hurt and angry, his lips turned down in a frown.

He’s looking straight at me.

I go back to the bag and replace what is left once I have managed to re-bandage my wound. I can feel Naruto’s eyes on me, two accusatory pinpoints driving into my back.

Taking the straps of the pack in my hand and watch a line of ants march their way up and down the tree in never-ending succession.

Heaving a sigh, bag still in hand, I push myself to my feet and head towards him.

I do not feel guilty.

His expression and stance do not alter as I approach. Methodically, I rest the pack down at my feet and look at his arm. It looks like a spiral break, shattered in several places and despite the efforts of Kyuubi, it has got to hurt. I reach towards him and he reflexively bats at me using his good hand with a noticeable flinch and an intake of air. He sniffs slightly and resets his immobile gaze. I glare at him and try again, this time taking hold of the hand that attacks me and squeezing a silent warning that he is not to do that again. Finally, he relents and looks away. Going back to what I had started, I skim my hands over the breaks, assessing the damage as best I can and carefully ease the bones back to their proper places with what cursory knowledge I have. I know from experience how much this hurts and I’m not surprised to see a few pained tears escape his eyes.
Upon being set, I brace the bones with a branch, slowly winding the remaining bandage around both flesh and wood to keep it stable. It’s the best I can do, but he ahs the fox.

Lightly, I run two of my fingers along the inside of his arm, feel the heated pulse of healing until I brush the palm of his hand, his fingers twitching in response as they should. That is good, at least. When I look up, his cheeks are flushed red and his eyes give a twitch as he looks at me. Most likely, he has a fever. That, and he’s trying desperately not to show how much pain he’s in.

"Thanks," he mumbles quietly.

"Hn." I turn away. Rather than deal with that, I just say the first thing that comes to mind. "I was surprised you thought of grabbing all that stuff."

For a long time, silence is my only response.

"Oh, heh." Finally, he lets out a pitiful laugh. "That wasn’t me. Kabuto gave it to me."

My head spins around to look at him. "Kabuto?"

Naruto nods silently. "Yeah, he sort of threw it at me right after he told me which way to get out." He shrugs and lowers his head. "Though I didn't think I'd need it so soon."

He rubs his hand absently over the brace, immediately dragging my thoughts back.

The arm looks at me angrily, its skin and muscle encased in a red glow.

I hadn’t meant to do that; it was instinct. But I don’t say that. "That’s what you get for coming after me."

The blush on his face changes to the deep sharpness of rage and I expect him to yell and scream and charge, but what he says is oddly quite calm.

"You asked me to follow you."

I look at him, my forehead crinkled in irritation; trying to figure out what in the world he could possibly be talking about. "No I did not."

"Yes you did."

Let us catalogue all the things I’ve ever said to him. "I did not."

"Yes you did."

Has he always been this infuriating? Wait, it’s Naruto, so yes. "No, I didn’t."

"Yes, you . . ."

"Listen!" I’m shouting by now, knowing it’s stupid, having yet another fight with him, but I can’t seem to veer off our inevitable course. "I never said anything like that. In fact, I distinctly remember telling you I wanted nothing to do with you!"

"But that’s not what you said," he persists, annoyingly defiant.

"I never once told you to follow me."

"You did!"
"When then?" Exasperated, I challenge him to abandon his made-up fairy tale and join the rest of us in reality. "Tell me when I ever said that!"

"When you called me your closest friend!

The air goes quiet but for the wind and the humming of insects, and I frown at his determined face, a little dumbstruck. That doesn't translate.

"You can't . . . You can't say something like that and just leave." Naruto picks up his abandoned thread, his face all pink as thin rivulets of sweat slide down his temples. He begins walking towards me. "You can't expect me not to follow. Not after everything we'd been through, not after everything you said. You can't possibly know how much that meant to me. How much it still does. Sasuke, you, you're the one I . . ." His voice softens as he reaches a hand to my face. But suddenly changing his mind, he makes a fist and drags it across his eyes. "You're my best friend."

He lets out a strangled sigh.

"Not anymore," I reply coolly.

Naruto drops his hand and raises his head and agrees with me, deadly serious. "No, not anymore."

'Good then,' I think. 'So he understands.' But I don't feel better for it. I shake it off. I long ago rid myself of useless bonds and especially useless heart.

Yet it still stings.

I nod at him and turn away, finalizing the deal. I return to where I was looking for my missing sword. The sound of crunching leaves and cracking twigs comes closer, but I don't stop what I'm doing. From the corner of my eye, I see Naruto sift through a flowering bush and come up with my blade. Holding still, I watch as he unhurriedly walks over and offers it to me. I eye him warily then lean back on my heels and take it, sliding it smoothly into the back of my belt. Once it is seated proper and final, Naruto speaks.

"Stay."

It is spoken so quietly I pretend I don't hear it.

"At least until your wound heals." I don't think I've heard his voice so muted or soft before. "Please. Stay."

For a moment, I sneak a glance to where he stands, but my head is lowered and all I see are his dirt stained feet. Part of me, the part I hate most of all, wants to stay. It tugs and ties me so securely to him that I don't even want to understand it. I turn my head away with a grunt.

"Why should I?" I ask. "Why should I even trust you after this morning?"

"There was a reason for that." Defensive.

"Hn." I stand up, still not looking at him and take a step. A hand grabs firmly onto my arm and forces me around. I scowl at Naruto as his lips turn down into a disappointed pout. After a second, he lets go, digs through his leg pouch and pulls out a shuriken. Looking it over, he then rubs the flat side along the front of his shirt before shoving it into my face.

"What?" I ask blandly.
He jerks his chin at me. "Look."

I eye him skeptically, but take that shuriken anyway and do as he says. It takes a full minute for me to even realize that I'm looking at a reflection of myself. Because they are his eyes looking back at me, putrid and pale yellow with a line cutting them down the middle. I can't seem to help it when my hand begins to shake.

//Ku-ku-ku. I told you you wouldn't be rid of me so easily.//

It is the first time I hear his voice.

Of course I leave that last little bit out when I tell my story to Mouse. Better that no one knows Orochimaru is still with me. They'd never believe me then. Even so, Shinta is looking at me with a bend to his lip and a strange glint in his eye.

"So you and Uzumaki are close, then?"

"Something like that." I say.

He is an idiot.

"Hmm." He looks me over with a calculating eye. "Though I suppose it doesn't come as much of a surprise, considering how you acted when you returned to Konoha."

I just sneer.

Shinta backs up and shifts from foot to foot, his simple gaze fixed on me. Folding his arms across his chest, he then says "So continue. After that what happened?"

"Nothing of interest." I say, bored with it all.

But even as I say this, those days return to my mind like the playing of a filmstrip. Nothing of interest to the Mouse, but maybe some to me.

I remember how I would lay down to sleep alone, only to find Naruto curled beside me, his broken arm stuck straight out at his side and when confronted, he'd reply simply that he was "cold." Even after he'd healed, I'd still wake up with him beside me and several fights later, I finally gave up and let him have his stupid way.

I remember his nearness.

And I remember how he'd run off and catch fish and trap rabbits and come back and cook them over the fire and smile happily as if we were on a camping trip rather than a battle for survival. And, as we traveled, the closer we got to Konoha, the more anxious he became, tossing furtive glances at me when he thought I wasn't looking and twining his fingers nervously in his pockets.

I recall how easily he made the decision to follow when I told him I wouldn't return to Konoha; that I was going after Itachi.

And how I didn't mind when he did.

Or how it felt nice, despite everything, not to be alone.
We’re resting within a cave, deep in the heart of the country with a fire dancing merrily in the dark enclosed space. A layer of leaves at the cave opening captures all the heat of the flame inside, making it almost toasty and a welcome change to the usual outdoor coldness. I stare at the fire as Naruto stares at me, oddly blank, oddly quiet.

He sighs and chunks a pebble over the ground in my direction.

"Well," he says. "I guess I'll get some sleep." He regards me a while before flopping down, rolling to his side and curling into a ball. "Goodnight."

"Hn." I never really look directly at him.

The fire crackles happily and I become lost in the flickering lights before me, seeing the cold red of Itachi’s eyes, the yellow of Orochimaru’s, and the deep crimson of spilt blood. I see my past and my short future, all the same color.

Naruto shifts noisily on the other side of the cave. "It's warm, tonight, isn't it?" He sounds almost disappointed.

"Hn." I kick up the fire with a stick then toss the brand inside.

Slowly, I lie down on my back, look up to the dark featureless ceiling and close my eyes.

Several minutes later I open them, scowling. I adjust my position and try again. Nothing. I roll to one side and look out meaninglessly into the orange-colored darkness. I close my eyes and frown. Still nothing. I switch to my other side and see him: curled up, eyes closed, but clearly about as asleep as I am.

After a long time, I let out a long, deep, disgusted sigh and get up.

A moment later, I stand over him and gaze down, uncomfortable and annoyed.

It shouldn’t make a difference.

But I find myself sitting by his curved back, aggravated with myself. Finally, I settle down, once again looking at the blank ceiling that I can barely see in the firelight. Beside me, Naruto rolls over to face me, still in a fetal position, his hands nestled by his mouth, now with the hint of a smile. Turning my face upward, I close my eyes, feeling Naruto's presence beside me as he scoots closer. Hesitantly, he reaches over his hand, lighting it on my shoulder, barely there. My back stiffens, holding my breath and willing myself under control. But it’s not so difficult after all. He’s not Orochimaru. I take a breath and carefully allow myself to relax. Naruto dares to move closer until I can feel the length of his body resting alongside mine.

I don’t push him away.

He’s very warm.

He stinks of grass, dirt and sweat.

It doesn’t take long for me to fall asleep. And while it doesn't feel precisely right, it doesn't feel wrong either.

It was the first time we even tried to sleep apart in some weeks.

How quickly it had become habit.
I blink back into the proper world.

Shinta is gazing at me with amused curiosity, his chin in his hand.

"Well," he slurs slyly.

A blush rushes to my cheeks but I swiftly quell it. I don’t know how much of that I said out loud, but as long as I didn’t mention Orochimaru, I can handle it. I look over to Ibiki, who hides his emotions well, but I can tell his interest has been peaked by the one eyebrow raised up.

I whip my head around to glare at Mouse.

"I have nothing more to say."

His lips curve into a feigned smile. "But Sasuke-kun, we're just getting to the good part."

He's trying to annoy me and doing an exemplary job of it. But he won’t taunt me into saying anything more.

Shinta stares at me, pretending to smile, but the medication has worn off and there will be no more mistakes. I try to get up, but the chain chokes and snags, so I'm relegated to just glaring.

"We're done here." I state.

His smile twitches and he no longer looks amused when he walks forward. He looks like he wants to press further, but a gesture from Ibiki stops him short. For a few minutes, I am subjected to that scarred stony stare from the man in the corner.

I say nothing.

Not too much longer and I am released, only to be moved back to my one room cell to fester in my self-wrought humiliation.

They try again, to get me to talk about it, and again, but I have refused every time and all they can do about it is break a few more bones.

I don't even feel it anymore.

And if I am to die anyway, I will do so with my secrets intact.

-----

I know now what I must do.

The fact is, they will not, they cannot, just let Naruto go without any sort of answers, not after what raged through Konoha that day. He’ll be subjected to their questioning. But I can ease that burden, or so I think. It will not take much.

I do not believe they really want to hurt him.

Naruto has the protection of Tsunade and Jiraiya and much of this village, despite these recent events. I know this because I know Naruto and the power he has over people to make people want to help him, in conflict with their better judgment.
I am caught in the same trap.

But I am on my own. Solitary. An avenger. Even those few who might be willing to be on my side have no great influence.

That is how it should be; the path I carved out for myself is still intact.

And it is all forfeit.

Calmly, I get to my feet, still facing that solid, immovable barrier. Hours have passed by as I knelt in the mire of my memory; hours of silent contemplation. The sores on my hand no longer burn from exposure to air; they have cooled and begin to scab over.

"I want to talk to Ibiki."

Him and no one else. Because he is quiet and stern and proper and I know that although he can, he will not resort to torture so quickly. He will listen first.

In a weird way, I trust him.

There is no response from the other side of the door.

"I'm ready to talk."

I speak steadily, a flat and reserved stream without even the trace of madness I had before.

There is silence for a long time, but I do not press. I can be patient too. I waited eight years for vengeance. I can wait a few minutes for a decision.

As the coolness of night seeps through the cracks in the wall, I finally get my answer.

"Very well." The metal unlocks loudly as I take a step back to allow the guard entrance. He opens the door to reveal himself and I see that it is that straw-haired ANBU, his mask fully in place, and it is somehow fitting.

"Come along." His voice is soft but deep, with a slight lisp, sounding too gentle for his occupation.

We walk in silence, he properly behind me, ready to strike should I make a false move. But I have no intention of doing that and we arrive at the designated room without incident. With a curt nod, the blonde ninja leaves me to myself.

The room is different than the others, sparsely set with a table and chairs and an old light that swings precariously on its chain.

It is so quiet that I can hear my organs at work inside me.

I spend the time thinking about what I'll say and what he'll ask. Today was a ploy to get me to talk, and so I will, though the answers may not be to their liking.

But they are the ones they will get because they are the only ones I can give.

I am nothing more and nothing less than Uchiha Sasuke.

----

I can feel him, sneaking around like a thief in the sleepiness of my mind.
His presence invades me, slithers through me and is yet undefined as a solidified form.

He is everywhere.

Like water seeping in to the crags of a mountain, he cannot be caught and cannot be followed. He wants me to be like him, having not yet relinquished the idea of making me his.

His influence creeps into the cracks of my dreams and memories. Into the list of lapses I would like to rewrite.

But I have power now and strength I did not before.

Things would be different now.

I wouldn’t now be stuck in the middle of nowhere, chasing down the devil that once was called my brother, with a second devil skulking in the depths of my mind like a disease.

I hate him.

It’s all his fault.

I could've had a life, a childhood, and a future, if not for him. He has robbed me of all I had and left nothing.

Itachi.

How I hate him.

For ignoring me and defending me. For being's father's favorite and the pride of the Uchiha. I hate him for being what I most wanted to be.

I hate him for murdering them all.

And for sparing me.

His image appears before me, his expression that same uncaring, bored one he has always borne. Looking through me as though I am nothing more than a fogged up window.

How I hate him.

//Then let us do something about it.//

Orochimaru’s malevolence filters through me and for once, I agree. I am tired of waiting. Itachi should die, that murdering, manipulative bastard who took everything from me right down to my hopes and happiness. Took everything including himself.

My rage is like a blaze, swirling around my body in flickering flames, feeding on my hatred, on Orochimaru’s sick ambition, growing with each passing moment in which Itachi ignores me.

He has never even considered me worthy of his contempt. All my boyhood striving to be him, yearning for his attention and I was never more than a pebble in his shoe.

My chakra strikes, binding him, constricting around his body and still he does not acknowledge it. Pay attention to me!
//Squeeze tighter, my pet. Until his eyes pop out from their sockets and his ears bleed. Make him pay attention.//

I am no one's pet, least of all Orochimaru's, but I follow anyway. But those sharingan eyes are still not on me. There is a fire there, a need and a desire that glows through his apathy.

But not at me.

Even as I wring the life from him, his interest is never towards me. To him I am an annoyance, easily dismissed.

Oh, how I hate him.

How I hate him.

My chakra pulls tighter.

"Sasuke." The words emit from his closed mouth but do not sound like him.

A trick. A trick of the mangekyou I have not before encountered.

But I am an Uchiha too. I will not be fooled.

"Sas . . . ke." The voice is not right, but it is one I know. A familiar voice, a familiar face, but they do not match.

//Kill him.//

"Sasuke, please." It no longer comes from Itachi's direction, but from outside, muffled and far away. "Wake up."

The body wrapped in my dark chakra changes, shifts and I am no longer looking at Itachi, but Naruto, his fingers digging into the flesh of two large snakes coiling about him.

And then I realize that my eyes are open, that what I'm looking at is the real world. That I am killing not Itachi, but Naruto.

He looks at me, his eyes shaking, his hands grappling at the serpent winding around him.

Without a thought, I dispel the creatures into smoke, frantically scrambling away until my back hits solid rock. My hands are trembling, my breath coming in short ragged gasps, and my heart beating so hard and fast it feels like it may rip apart.

Naruto bends over the floor choking.

I had lost control completely. That was me and not me and it didn't even take any conscious action to summon those snakes.

That was Orochimaru.

A cold sweat breaks out over my skin as I pull my knees up to my chest.

"Sasuke." Naruto crawls towards me covered in dirt and sweat, cautious as one would approach a dangerous animal.

"Get away from me!" I shout, letting my anger veil my mounting fear.
"No." He edges closer until he is directly beside me.

He raises a shaking hand and places it lightly over the center of my chest. I can feel the pulse of his blood in the pulse of my heart.

"Calm down." He soothes, though his words quaver. "It'll be all right. Just calm down."

"Don't touch me!" I snap my head around and look at him for the first time. I lower my voice dangerously. "Or I'll kill you."

He looks straight into my eyes with tenderness and smiles. His hand has stilled. "If you were going to kill me, you would have done it already."

But I can yet feel that churning rage that hides in the back of my mind. It could resurge at any second. At any second, he could break loose and kill whoever lies in his path.

I can't stop my racing heart.

Naruto's hand slowly glides upward, over my shoulder to the back of my neck. He tilts my head forward so that our foreheads meet and closes his eyes, his lashes light against his tanned skin.

My breathing is heavy.

"There's no reason to be afraid," he says, gently rubbing his thumb at the base of my ear. "Because I'm not."

His other hand creeps up to cover the one that trembles in the dirt at my side.

"I know who you are, Sasuke."

He opens his eyes and looks at me, too close to make anything out. There is a strange sort of fluttering curve to his lip.

"You're my closest friend."

My heart continues to pound in my chest.

"And I trust you."

-----

He regards me with an eye that has seen much and knows more, but looks at me with such blankness that I'm not sure he's figured me out yet.

He leans back, his hands sliding off the table and landing on the arms of his chair. There is a creak as he rocks onto the back legs, the wood groaning under his weight.

"So, Uchiha-san," Ibiki says, the first to address me with any sort of respect. "What is it you had to tell me?"

As if I'd make such an amateur mistake.

"Ask me what it is you'd like to know."

His lip curls over his teeth, his doughy, marred face rolling into an unnatural position. "You already know what it is we want to know, so how about we just stop with the games. Then we can
get this over with and we can all have a nice day, hm?"

Nice day? Yeah, right. "No, I don't know what you want from me." I reply coolly.

Ibiki cracks his neck to the right before crossing his arms over his chest. "Look. I really don't care about you and Uzumaki. You two can do whatever you want in unseen places."

My irritation pushes against the walls of my throat.

"I'm going to guess that whatever happened in those intervening months was nothing more than a boring journey." He leans farther back and the chair squeaks in protest. "I don't even care how it is you tracked Uchiha Itachi or the rest of the Akatsuki. I'm sure plenty of people do and will be sure to ask about it all later, but I don't. All I want to know is what happened when you found them."

I keep my eyes focused on him, as I debate what to answer. Simplest is best I think.

"I killed them."

Ibiki taps a finger on his arm. "All by yourself?"

Of course not. But he already knows that. "No."

"Then who helped you?"

"Helped" is not really the appropriate word, but I’m not going to challenge it. "Naruto was there, "I say evasively. "And I believe a cell of ninja from Konoha were as well."

"You 'believe'?" His face remains impassive.

"I never actually saw them." True. And of course the crux of the problem. Naruto and I were the only ones present when the bottom fell out.

The room falls even quieter and Ibiki sets his chair back on all four legs with a clap and rests the flat of his forearms on the table.

I wonder which question he'll ask first. Despite my best efforts, the waiting makes my nerves rattle and it’s an effort to remain outwardly calm.

The air pulls out of the room in quick, heated rush.

"You saw what happened to Konoha?" He asks in a far too casual manner.

Of course I did, everybody did. I scowl at him, grinding the back of my teeth and silently nod. Ibiki stalls a few moments more before going on.

"When did Uzumaki change?"

At least this is a relatively safe question.

"I'm not sure the time," I hedge. "But not too many Akatsuki were left by then."

His gaze is cold and black. "Who was left then?"

I swallow, sliding the tip of my tongue up the back of my canine tooth and feeling the sharpness. "Uchiha Itachi."
"And no one else." It is more a statement.

"The others were occupied."

"Ah, yes. Of course." He settles back into the chair as if this is a revelation he needs time to absorb. "Occupied with . . . Uzumaki?"

My jaw cracks. "Yes."

His fingers now flat on the table begin to tap out a rhythm like a secret code. "Where precisely were you at this point?"

"Standing across from Itachi." This is true.

"Just standing?"

"Yes." This is not precisely true. Neither was the part earlier where I said most of the Akatsuki were gone. Most of them were alive and well and with us in that room. I don't know why I said that.

//You're a compulsive liar?//

Be quiet.

"And the others were with Uzumaki?"

"Yes."

"About how many would you say?"

I think for a moment, trying not to trip over my hastily drawn up lie. "Two."

"And what were they doing?"

"Trying to seal the Nine-Tails into some statue." I press the palms of my hands to the chair as discreetly as I can manage. This part is also true. With certain conditions, but close enough.

"So then Uzumaki was fighting this?"

"He tried." My nerves pulse with anxiety. We're getting too close.

"But he failed."

"Yes." Not exactly.

"How hard was he fighting?" His fingers have stilled, making the quiet that much more pronounced.

"What kind of question is that?" There's a trembling inside my chest telling me with panicky conviction. They know. I take a deep breath. "I can't tell you what someone else is feeling or thinking. He was surrounded, injured, tied up, and exhausted. But yeah, he seemed to me to be fighting as hard as he could. Harder than maybe he should have been able." Okay, half-truth. I'm hoping he can't tell.

"And you were . . . just standing there?"
"Yes." Basically.

"You did nothing to help your friend?"

"No." Because all I ever do is hurt him. I can't seem to do anything else. They pitted one of us against the other like carefully played pawns. Most of my chakra had been expended just getting to that point, as had Naruto's. We had managed to take a few Akatsuki down, but in the end it hadn't been enough.

There was nothing to spare for Itachi.

Not then.

Ibiki switches to tapping his foot now, an annoying makeshift timekeeper.

"And Uzumaki fought up until the end?"

"Yes." Outright lie. But I can't tell the truth. I just pray he doesn't notice.

"How long did it take?" A rather morbid, unimportant question, I'd say.

"I don't know. A while." True and untrue. It felt to me like excruciating days, but it was likely only a couple minutes.

Because I know precisely when Kyuubi came unsealed.

Right after Itachi used tsukiyomi on me.

That's when Naruto let them.

The little idiot.

"And then what happened?" he asks.

I can't hide the slight sneer to my lips, remembering how they got just what they deserved. "Something the Akatsuki wasn't planning on. The fox got free and then tried to finish what he started." My sneer falters as I remember what else that means.

_Naruto_ . . .

"And you," Ibiki stops to consider. "Didn't stop him?"

As if I could. Regardless of what connection may once have existed between the Nine-Tails and the Uchiha clan, the fox is not one to be easily controlled and by then I could barely stand. Besides, I was still facing the one thing I had fought and bled over for eight years.

Itachi.

I wasn't about to just walk away. Not for anybody.

"No." I say simply.

"So then he just killed all the Akatsuki?" He steeples his fingers in front of his face thoughtfully.

"No," I answer, a little more harshly than I'd intended. "I did."

"Hmm." Ibiki scrutinizes me with the narrow dark eyes that peak up and over his hands. After a
moment, those hands drop to the table with a flat thud. "And do you know how many Konoha shinobi it took, how many civilians died to prevent the Nine-tails from, as you say, 'finishing what he started'?"

Bastard. I know what he's thinking.

But it's not Naruto's fault. It was Kyuubi, though Naruto feels responsible anyway. In a way, he is. They’ll hate him for it.

It was all so unnecessary. The fox wasn’t needed.

"Anyhow," I go on, unable to stop myself. "If you'll recall, Konoha didn't stop him. I did."

The scarred man somehow manages to look amused. "Oh really? And how did you do that?"

In my rush to defend myself, alleviate the shame of not being able to prevent it, I had forgotten that they actually didn't know that little fact.

"You see," Ibiki continues, not waiting for an answer. "The last we saw, the Nine-tailed fox had ravaged a quarter of the village before suddenly stopping and taking off."

“Naruto was the one who stopped it.” I add, feeling a bit defensive on both our behalves.

"Was it?"

My foot grinds into the floor. "Of course it was. Naruto never wanted to attack anything. He loves Konoha." Spitefully, I mutter, "Though I can't imagine why."

"And you don't?"

"What? Love Konoha?" Ibiki nods gravely in response. "Why should I?"

He stops for a minute, rocking on the non-rocking chair, staring at me and thinking. Finally he stops, his expression unwavering and speaks. "You do realize that you threw away all the good will this village had for you when you abandoned it, don't you?"

"Tch!" I scoff. "Their 'good will' was based solely in their selfish reasons." They want control of the Uchiha kekkai genkai and by then I was their only choice. Most, I'd wager, don't even know my first name, that I am the coveted "last of the Uchiha". "Uchiha". That's the only part they care about. Not me.

To them, there is no "Sasuke".

It has always been that way.

Where were they when I was seven years old and needed them?

Nowhere.

But it only made things easier. It gave me no ties to Konoha because it had none to me.

"Then what made him lose control?" Interrupts Ibiki.

No ties until now, that is.
"I don't know, maybe the group of psychopaths trying to rip the fox out of him?" I snap sarcastically.

The man looks at me with small eyes, flat and hard. "He said it was because they were torturing you."

He says it with such matter-of-factness that it takes a moment for it to register in my head.

That idiot.

That complete, huge, self-sacrificing idiot.

"He's lying."

"Oh? And why would he do that?"

Because he's brainless? "I don't know."

The man nods, absentmindedly, apparently accepting this anti-explanation. "What finally stopped him?"

My nails scrape along the arm of the chair as I try to phrase it right, without sounding utterly ridiculous. But there’s no way out of it. "He recognized me."

My sight clouds over as those few fateful minutes play back over in my mind, the image of Kyuubi laying waste to the land his vessel loved until suddenly, inexplicably, turning into the darkness.

I had thought maybe he was seeking me while I called to him in the woods with my hands stained in blood.

And, as before, I just stood there.

Only this time I stood in the way.

Kyuubi came bounding through the forest straight toward me, the trees splintering between his toes, the grass catching ablaze where he touched ground. But as he drew closer, he did exactly as I thought he would.

He stopped.

Kyuubi, Naruto, recognized me and stopped, a second before crushing me.

And we faced each, man and beast and man, reading down into the true depths of each other.

It didn't take long for the fiery shadow to melt into a small, pathetic, huddled blond form at my feet.

It was days later that I finally was forced to take him to Konoha.

I didn't want to, for both our sakes.

But I had no other choice.

He was dying.

And this time, I didn't want him to.
I can feel dark lopsided eyes studying me so I look up.

The smile on my interrogator's face looks like it is forced into a place it doesn't belong.

"I see," he says cryptically. "And it didn't seem strange to you that he didn't appear to recognize anyone else? His friends? His comrades, those whom he'd actually lived and fought with all the years you were with Orochimaru?"

Honestly, I'd never thought about it before. But it is strange. "No."

The pressure in the air rises as minutes tick by in uncomfortable silence. This little conversation of ours has been both more roundabout and less confrontational than I'd expected.

Ibiki lowers the sides of his mouth in a frown. "So while Uzumaki was attacking his friends and burning his home, what were you doing?"

"I told you," I reassert with asperity. "That was Kyuubi, not Naruto. They're the same, but not. When are you all going to get it right?" They did it to him and they don't even understand how it works?

"It wasn't his fault. Stop blaming him for that."

"You didn't answer my question." Ibiki says.

I twist my feet around the legs of the chair and grip my hands, feeling the tendons pull sharply. "And?"

"What were you doing while Naruto attacked the village?"

Stop asking about me. It's not about me. It's about Naruto. Naruto.

"He didn't choose to carry the fox, you know. You forced it into him. The Akatsuki forced it out. Stop referring to that thing as Naruto. It's not him."

"What were you doing?" He repeats, completely ignoring what I've said.

I swallow my irritation.

Ibiki folds his hands together and schools his face into mock disappointment. "Well, if you won't tell me, I'll just have to ask Uzumaki."

"He doesn't know." I sneer in self-satisfaction.

The man shrugs, unconcerned. "We won't know for sure until we try."

They're no different from Orochimaru and the Akatsuki and yet they fancy themselves to be superior. Hmph. Konoha.

//And what can you do about it?//

I growl out a response. "I was fighting who was left."

"And who was left?" I ignore the arrogant smirk on his face.

Inhaling slowly, I try to act calm. "I don't know. Some Akatsuki guys. I didn't catalogue their names."
"I see." He pushes his chair back and stands up. He makes a circle around the chair, then stops and places his hands on the back of it. "And Uchiha Itachi was among them?"

My short nails cut into the soft wood of the furniture. "I already told you he was."

"Did you fight him?"

"Of course." I wasn't wrong.

I wasn't.

//So sure about that?//

"And what exactly happened?"

I wasn't wrong. No matter the reasons, what the circumstances, there is no excuse, no explanation that I will accept. The pain he put me through, what he planned for Naruto, for Konoha . . . for vengeance . . . he deserved what he got.

"What happened?"

Eight years ago is in the past.

It doesn't change the monster he became.

//Or what you did.//

I wasn't wrong.

"Sasuke, tell me what happened."

"Sasuke"?

He called me "Sasuke"?

Every nerve in my body snaps like bow strings strung too tight.

"I killed him!" Like an explosion, my voice shatters the air. I didn't want to think about him, about that, ever again and yet here I am, forced into it by this, this Leaf shinobi. "I killed him, all right? What did you want, for me to bring back his fucking head? He's dead!"

I wasn't wrong!

//Ku-ku-ku.//

Ibiki's face is blank as he says in total seriousness, "A head would've helped."

I look at him, blank, the exertion of my outburst still heaving my lungs. I couldn't do that. Not even to him. At one point, he was my brother. It would be like chopping off my own head. I don't give a damn what he said . . .

"I have nothing more to say."

The scarred interrogator tilts his head and looks at me, tapping the tip of his finger on the back of the chair.

I don't care what else he wants to know. I don't care about the remainder of my promise. I am done.
My head is drowning with blood and memory, and I feel ready to fall any moment.

I'm sorry, Naruto. I can't keep my promise.

I can't.

//And now you will have another's blood on your hands, won't you? Finally, you'll become the killer you should have been.//

I squeeze my eyes shut, keeping everything in and dreading what is next when Ibiki shocks me with a simple, "OK."

I blink at him wordlessly and moments later am led away.

Days go by without incident or interest in my little one room cell.

I have seen Ibiki once more to "fill in the gaps", but for the most part my original story stays. And nothing more.

Sakura has stopped by, but has kept infuriatingly hush-mouthed on the topic of Naruto. I haven’t heard a thing.

Not knowing is starting to drive me crazy.

//That wouldn't take much.//

It’s as if the walls are closing in on me, my cell shrinking smaller and smaller with each consecutive hour, and the air pressing down.

Naruto better not have done anything stupid.

//And what exactly could a useless little boy like you do if he did, hm?//

Whatever I can. I can explain again that it wasn’t Naruto’s fault. Or remind them of all he’s done for them.

//Konoha only cares for what it can manipulate to serve its own will. Anyone who challenges that is called a threat and hunted down like a dog.//

By that logic, Naruto should fit their mold perfectly.

//Still so naïve.//

Or I could tell the whole story of Itachi. That should distract them.

//Ha! You haven't allowed yourself to remember. What makes you think you could ever speak of it? Itachi truly won in the end. Weakling.//

Shut up.

//Ku-ku-ku-ku. No matter what you do, Itachi will always be the real genius. That's what you get for being too soft.//

I look down to my hands, balling the hateful instruments into fists, the veins stand out blue and green beneath my skin. I shift my eyes away.
I don't want to be a genius like that.

//And that is why you lose.//

I do not lose. I do not accept defeat.

I see things differently than Itachi.

The door opens abruptly then, but I keep my eyes averted because suddenly I don't want to see. All this time in strung anticipation and now I'm not so sure I want to know the answers. The footfall is a deep, hollow note like the ending bellow of a dirge.

"Uchiha Sasuke."

I recognize the voice as that of the blond shinobi and choose, for no particular reason, to take this as a good sign. Slowly, I turn my lowered head in his direction and raise only my eyes to look at him.

"You are to come with me."

I get to my feet and allow the man to bind my hands and put a blindfold over my eyes. The time has finally come and I am not afraid.

I have already done what I set out to do.

Just as with Orochimaru, this cool acceptance washes over me of its own volition and maybe I have always known that each step I have taken will eventually lead me to the same place.

Perhaps that is why my own death no longer frightens me.

The ANBU walks beside and slightly behind me, his hand at my elbow quickly and assuredly guiding me along.

Each footstep seems final and softly permanent, the awareness of my fate oddly comforting.

But there is still one thing left.

I open my mouth and ask quietly, "What's happened with Naruto?"

But instead of answering, he says, "It's not what you think."

His voice sounds almost friendly as he gives my arm a small squeeze. Perhaps I don’t really want to know.

We walk a little farther, the hand on my arm somewhere between nervous and awkward reassurance.

He is a strange one.

A few moments more then he speaks with a voice eerily flat.

"You're going to see the elders."
The air in the office is thick with anticipation and unasked questions.

Light, cruel and harsh, invades the many open windows to curl up, over and around me like some sort of iron chain. Its terrible intense brightness makes the Hokage look like nothing more than an ominous shadow as she sits at her desk like a queen, there to cast down her judgment.

Has it always been this damn sunny in Konoha?

"So, Uchiha," the woman finally says, an amused lilt to her voice. "You’ve heard what the elders have to say . . ."

"Yes." My jaw aches with stiffness when I open it.

"And what do you have to say about it?" Her question slides fluidly over my answer as though I never opened my mouth.

I look at her steadily, the pupils of my eyes as thin as they can be.

"No." My answer is resolute. "I'm not doing it."

I can see her smile even in the shade of her hands.

"I thought you would say as much." She lowers her arms to her desk so her hidden expression becomes clear, the sunlight glowing around her. The smile she wears is almost sinister. "But I don't believe you have seriously considered it."

"I don't have to consider it," I reply blandly. "It's unreasonable."

Her expression remains implacably the same. "It is not unreasonable at all. You cannot expect to get something for nothing and the elders have been more than reasonable. Uchiha," she shakes her head as her smile fades. "Sasuke. You need to really, seriously think about this. And the consequences. It is an extremely generous offer, much better than you have any right to expect."

My eye twitches. And the muscles in my calf strain from the pressure of pushing my foot into the floor to prevent me from attacking. I can feel that ice-cold hatred suffuse and cloud my mind.
My breathing becomes heavy and ragged with the effort to squelch that rage and of all the times that I could use a little medicinal aid, now would be opportune.

A buzzing nervousness sneaks out from the back of my mind, the need for something to soothe me, but I choose not to dwell on it.

I wish that . . . but it doesn’t matter. He’s not here.

"I can't do it," I say simply, because it is true. I know deep down inside the center of my self that I cannot suffer those indignities. I cannot do what they want.

It isn't worth it.

"I can't do it." The repeated statement sounds odd to my ears.

Tsunade closes her eyes and shakes her head before running her fingers through one side of her hair to smooth it out. "It is not so difficult. You certainly could agree to it. You're simply acting like a little child and refusing to because you can. You are the one being difficult."

So? "I'm not doing it." I shift to put the bulk of my weight on my other foot, trying to ease some of the tightness in my shin. "I am sixteen years old," I say forcefully, letting the outrage of what they have asked truly sink in. "I already passed the first two stages of the chunnin exam and was well on my way to completing the third."

"But you are still, technically, a genin." She spreads her hands wide and plants them palms down to her desk. I can see the curious tilt to her head, and her serious expression becomes visible as the rays of sunlight dip behind a building.

Technically or no, I'm not degrading myself. It is an insult, meant to humiliate me. "No," I reply, letting a little of my anger bleed through.

The Hokage sniffs loudly through her nose. She shakes her head again and looks to the side with a thoughtful expression. Then she turns to face me straight on. "You may have power, but you neither have the discipline or control. You do not have the understanding of what that kind of power should be used for. You're too self-centered. Sending you back to genin training will help you learn that. And if not, you can stay there forever."

The hairs on the back of my neck rise hotly. "I have discipline and control." I twist my mouth into a cruel sneer. "Or do you think Orochimaru would be a kind and forgiving teacher?"

She contemplates this uncomfortably while studying the outlines of my face. Her hands come together slowly, clasping when at last they meet. Taking a deep breath, she finally speaks. "That may be so. But you still haven't learned what it truly means to be a ninja. To protect your teammates no matter what, to follow through with your assignment regardless the obstacles. You simply left your comrades behind, both in Leaf and in Sound. Ninja are tools to help, protect and save others, not a means to an end. And yet you have only ever been a shinobi for yourself. It is not about fighting and strength and power. Those are just the actions a ninja takes, not his purpose."

My pupils shrink sharp and I hear *him* in the back of my mind hissing like a snake and knowing as I do how much of that pretty little speech applied to him. He had interest in the knowledge of ninja but not the practice. In that sense, I suppose we are the same.

I never pretended otherwise.
"Maybe I don't want to be a shinobi anymore," I retort smartly. I do not know whether it is the truth.

"You already are a ninja." Her face is hard and stern, harboring not even a hint of doubt. "Whether you want to be or not is irrelevant. It is in your blood, not just because you are Uchiha, but also because you are Sasuke. And he has always been a shinobi. Don't fool yourself into thinking otherwise."

My heart jumps into my throat at this, caught between anger and something completely the opposite. But that changes nothing. I can't go back. "No. I won't do it. On a team with kids! They can say that it's so I 'can learn' all they want, but it's just a test to see if I'm willing to demean myself enough to go through with it!"

I cross my arms to keep me from lashing out at her just to satisfy my frustration.

//And why not attack? That would be fun.//

'I am not listening to you."

//Ku-ku-ku-ku.//

'And stop that laughing. It's stupid.'

"Well, of course it is," the woman says with a good-natured laugh of her own, waking me from my pointless internal conversation. "Of course they want to see how far you're prepared to lower yourself in order to stay. If you're not willing to do even this simple thing, then they know any contrition on your part is purely superficial." She inclines her head, still grinning like a cat. "And there is absolutely no point in getting a superficial vow from a ninja."

I don't care for her logic; it won't make me agree.

Yet there's this nagging pull, asking me to stay.

Would it really be that bad?

//Yes.//

Yes. But unbearably, impossibly bad?

//Yes.//

Yes. So it is better to simply let it go and let them do their will. I have long been prepared for the worst.

So be it.

//Come now, my boy. What about all that rage? It would be such a waste to give it up now. And fighting would be so much more enjoyable, wouldn't you say? At least then you could get a little of the revenge you owe Konoha down and settled before taking your last pitiful breath.//

'Don't you mean your revenge?'

//Perhaps.//

'Oh really. Don't you mean for me to attack and be weakened so you can find the opportunity to take over?''
"Perhaps."

I snort to myself. So predictable. As if I would fall for such blatant nonsense.

"And yet, you are considering it."

I shift my weight uncomfortably because he is right.

"Well then. What about the other parts of the deal? Ready to forgive all that then? Not that I mind, of course. . ."

And then remembering another stipulation, my anger, like a beast inside me, begins to swell out of my control. Because that, that is not under their jurisdiction.

And I just cannot comply, plain and simple.

"Besides," Tsunade says back to her own topic, a small smile still on her lips. "It is not all that uncommon. Some ninja never rise past the rank of genin, as you well know. The only difference between them and you is that you would be on a training team instead of a fully functional one. You have an undeserved superiority complex. Even so, you have too much power to simply let it go to waste. During the days when you are in genin training," I scowl at her and her eyes crinkle in delight, "we would need to seal most of your power to prevent it from getting out of hand. But on other days, you would be receiving individual specialized training, at which times we would unseal it. Somewhat."

I feel a rush of giddiness inside that distracts me. Not that I want or need anymore training, but I'd like to use the skills I've worked so hard to attain without the unnecessary chokehold.

"Just like an obedient dog. How easily you are swayed. Do you really want another Konoha seal branded into your skin? Do really want to be tied to this place? And what about the rest, my pet, have you forgotten about that so soon?"

I release and then re-clench my hands, feeling the tightness in my tendons and skin.

No, I haven’t forgotten their invasion into my private life.

"Am I supposed to just lie down like a dog-"

"Ku-ku-ku."

"-and do everything those wrinkly old bags want from me? Everything?" My teeth gnash roughly against each other as I fight to keep my cool.

"Wrinkly old bags they may be," the woman says, seemingly serious, but for the twinkle in her eyes, "But they are the lords of our country and deserve our respect."

Pursing my lips in disgust, I turn away, scraping my raw nail along my palm. Respect? For what? What have they ever done than claim a title they are in no way entitled to?

"Order ninja around like common servants to hunt down cats and pluck weeds?"

Exactly. Should they ever do anything to warrant my respect they shall have it, but until then they get nothing. Respect is a thing to be earned, not just freely given.
"You're thinking of that other condition, aren't you?" She doesn't have to clarify for me to know precisely what number on the list she is referring to.

My head rises up to look her straight in the eye. "They can't just expect me to do whatever they want. It's not like there aren't other factors involved. I can't just make . . ."

"No. Although technically, it shouldn't be too difficult, just not guaranteed. But for you, yes, I suspect you may have a difficult time." I don't get a chance to consider her words or her curious expression before she goes on. "And it does teeter on the boundaries of propriety and reasonability."

I snort.

"But they are not completely out of their rights."

"What?" I actually take a step forward, the first since entering the room, my hands burning at my sides, threatening but not threatening as the Hokage simply sits there. "How can you say that? Saying that my job is under their control is one thing. But this is my personal life. They can't tell me what to do."

She shrugs noncommittally. "It is not normal, but given your situation and how much reason they have not to trust you, they can impose whatever conditions they like."

"But," I say, knowing how stupid I sound. "How can you say that? Saying that my job is under their control is one thing. But this is my personal life. They can't tell me what to do."

She just stares at me, waiting for my seething anger to boil over into outright rage. But I won't let it. They'd all just love it, wouldn't they? Any excuse to be done with the matter. And she sits up there like some sort of royalty, handing down verdicts as though she is better than the rest of us. Her fingers begin drumming against the solid wood of the furniture as she leans her chin into her free hand, smirking at me. "Funny how sixteen is either 'too old' or 'too young' dependent on the situation."

I can feel my face become burning flushed, my anger curling and coiling like a spring.

//Or a snake.//

I feel entirely too tightly wound; I'm afraid to make a move that might set that spring free.

//A little anger is healthy.//

'What do you care for my health?'

Across the room, Tsunade gets to her feet and crosses in front of her desk to lean back on it slightly, her hands holding her weight there, her legs crossed at the ankles.

"Listen, Sasuke." Her voice is steady as is the infuriating arrogance of her face. "You just have to agree to it for their sakes. And for your own, unless you truly prefer death to life in the Village Hidden in the Leaves. You have to at least try. Whether or not you choose to follow every condition afterwards is your decision."

Calming my thrumming nerves, I fold my arms over my chest and scoff. "As if you care."

"You may not believe me, but I do care." She inclines her head, her eyes softer, searching, and I
could almost believe her. Almost. "You made a lot of mistakes," she goes on. "But I do not think you meant to make them."

I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean. My gaze shifts to the floor, to the wall, to the pictures that hang there, anything to avoid looking at her. There’s fake sympathy in her eyes and I don’t need it.

All she has ever shown since I arrived here is contempt. Hatred for being selfish, for almost getting her precious little boy killed, for somehow being that important to him . . .

And now, now she acts almost as if I am one of *them*. One of the *Leaf*. . .

//It suits her interests, nothing more. Do not be fooled by her little act, my pet. She is in the pockets of the elders, a worthless kowtowing bitch, and the elders only want what they can use.//

Yes, I know that. And yet . . .

//And you want to believe in a lie?//

I want to believe in the truth.

I flex my fingers nervously.

But I cannot change who I am. "I won’t do it," I say resolutely, not meeting her eyes.

"And why not?" Without looking, I can tell by the timbre of her voice that her expression has changed.

"They don't have a right to govern my life." I insist.

The pulse of the air pulls in sharply.

"They have every right!" The piercing curtness of her shout shakes the walls and sends the dust flying. "You are a shinobi. A ninja. Or were once, at any rate. *Your life is not your own*. It belongs to the village to do with as they see fit. And that means in *every aspect*."

My eyes lock onto my brief future as it quickly floats by.

"So I don't have a choice then?"

She sighs heavily. "You always have a choice, Sasuke. But you have to understand that the choices you make have consequences." She looks at me meaningfully. "Be sure to make the right one."

"What if I’d rather face the consequences?" I ask quietly. "What if I’d rather make the other choice?"

"Then you are a fool." She pushes off from the desk and circles back around to her chair. "A bigger fool than I took you for."

My gaze darts in her direction, shooting daggers, if such a thing were possible. "And wouldn’t I be the bigger fool, as you so eloquently put it," my voice barely escapes the rasping confines of my throat, "if I were to subject myself to disgrace and humiliation and slavery to stay in a place that holds nothing for me?"

I can feel the hotness of my blood, churning slowly like molten lava through my veins. They are no different from Orochimaru, or the Akatsuki; to them people are nothing more than instruments, to
be used and disposed of.

Tsunade scans me up and down, her mouth a thin stripe and despite her well-practiced jutsu, I can see the frown lines cutting deep into her face. She is on the fence; I can see it as clearly as I balance there myself.

But then her expression changes, softens, and the jutsu remains intact, making her look young and sweet and new.

"And what about Naruto?"

And with that simple name, I feel myself fall off.

//Pathetic.//

"Naruto," I say, feeling the word roll over my tongue thickly. "He's OK?"

The minute that passes in silence between us stretches like a torturous year.

Then she smiles, a little sadly, but honestly.

"He is fine."

The relief I feel is far deeper than I could have ever expected and I almost crumple to the floor with the release of it.

//Truly, truly pathetic.//

"Are you just going to leave then?" Tsunade asks me, her words hushed. "And forget about him? And Kakashi and Sakura? They've all been on your side, though you don't deserve them."

"As long as I know they're OK," I say, and gather my shredded pride to stand up straight. "That's enough."

Her eyebrows crease up into her forehead, her eyes taking on a skeptical hue. "Are you so sure of that?"

But I don't get the opportunity to refute her when there is a hard knock at the door. Not taking her eyes off me, the Hokage barks a brisk, and a little short-tempered "Come in!" and the door opens.

She continues to stare at me a bit more before finally turning her attention to the newcomer ninja.

"Ah," she says, lowering her head and taking a seat. "Ibiki-san. What perfect timing."

"Hokage-sama," he replies stiffly.

The sound of his name followed by that voice I know so well, sends an involuntary and very exasperating chill down my spine.

//Ku-ku-ku-ku.//

They can't have changed their mind; that would have made this whole meeting pointless. I've already told them everything.

//Everything?//
All that they need to know. They cannot have any more questions.

//If it is so irrelevant, then why not just tell them?//

The miniscule trembling of my bottom teeth becomes annoying, so I slam my mouth shut. My stupid nerves need to get under control. I never was like this before. Not until after . . .

'It's your fault.'

//Ku-ku-ku. Does it help you to believe that?//

After a long, analytical gaze, Tsunade turns from me to direct her attention to the scarred threat beside me.

"Ibiki-san." She speaks with utmost professionalism. "I would like your opinion. Please."

I choose a small spot far-off in the distance and concentrate on it.

"Uchiha has been trained well." The statement seems to boom through the office. "Perhaps a little too well. Most men would have broken before that. He held out much longer than I expected."

I stand a little taller, hearing the reluctant, begrudging respect in his words.

But then my shoulders sag, hearing the lie in it.

It could have been, should have been worse. A lot worse. I know this. I have experienced it countless times before. What the Leaf did to me was mere child's play.

"Were it not for his connection with Uzumaki, he may very well be holding out still."

The sides of my mouth turn down sharply. Yes, the Leaf may be gentler, but it is more devious. And that is why, no matter what name they wear, they are all the same.

Tsunade simply nods and motions with her hand as if to say "go on."

"He's keeping something to himself." I can sense Ibiki's dark, penetrating eyes on me. "And I'm not sure exactly what it is. But I do not believe it is something we," he turns his gaze back to Tsunade with concealed meaning, "need to concern ourselves with. I believe whatever it is affects himself and his relationship with his brother. But we have what we need for now. The rest, whatever it may be, can come later."

My eyelids flutter anxiously. 'What we need for now'? 'The rest later'? That's all wrong.

"But you believe that Uchiha Itachi is dead?" The question seems to weigh heavy on the Hokage's shoulders.

Ibiki turns again, his gaze once again boring into me.

"Yes. Itachi is dead. On that point, I have no doubts."

I try not to let the anything show on my face, but I do allow my muscles to relax slightly. When I do, there's a strange sort of tingling that threads through me and I have to shake my left arm to get proper feeling back. They aren't questioning the truth of my answers, just the completeness.
If they were smarter, they'd question both.

And the confidence sours. Why aren't they questioning it?

There is huge sigh from the Hokage, her face very pensive while the light glows around her.

Maybe they don’t want to know. It would put you in a very tricky situation, wouldn’t it, Hokage-sama?

Her face, however, remains passive. "And you have nothing else to add?"

Ibiki stares a moment, out into nothing, and I try not to let it bother me. At last, his beady eyes focus on Tsunade and he says succinctly, "No."

The woman waves her hand, almost relieved, and dismisses him. "Very well. Thank you, Ibiki-san."

He nods tersely and leaves, sparing only a brief glance for me.

This is too easy.

"Uchiha." Said shortly, it recaptures my attention. I turn to her and see her eyes drawn to my hand, which I am stretching at my side. Abruptly, I stop, but a trace of the prickling remains.

Tsunade's lips pull into a smile that does not look at all friendly.

"Have you reconsidered yet?"

Looking at her coldly, dispassionately, I let the question go by unanswered.

She leans back. "Think very carefully. A few concessions."

I huff irritably under my breath.

"A few concessions and you'll be allowed to stay, at least for some amount of time."

I narrow my golden iris eyes, thin and unrelenting. "Yes. A few concessions." I pause thoughtfully. "What did you say to the elders?"

Her smiles strains at the corners, but she doesn’t reply.

"I am not stupid." I try to look through her. "Your hand is heavy in this. Why?"

A wave of fear and anger ripples over her face before smoothing back out. Her mysterious smile is back; she will tell me nothing.

"Are you going to hold me captive here until I reconsider?"

She shrugs lazily. "Maybe."

I stand still, take a breath and stare back out to that speck in the distance.

"And if I do agree, then what happens?" I'm stalling for time.

//You are not seriously considering this are you, my pet?//

'Stop calling me your pet, you freak.'
"You know the terms." She clears her throat and locks gazes with me, back in her element. "If you refuse now, there is only one option. There won't be any second chances. But if you stay and abide by their rules, well, you just never know. Is it really so much to ask?"

Yes. And even if I did agree, it would only extend this worthless life, not save it.

Her eyebrows pull together tightly. "Are you really and truly sure there is nothing here you want to hold onto?"

A flurry of images flutter over my mind’s eyes.

Naruto.

My closest friend and the only reason I came back here to begin with.

That doesn't make it my home, though.

//What nonsense.//

But can I do this? Am I willing to put myself through all this just to keep my friend?

Is he worth it?

I look to Tsunade.

Is he?

The sun peeks back out into the sky and pierces me in the eye. I blink it away.

I turn my head to the side and mumble. "Fine."

My parasite huffs.

//How could I expect any different for a little boy who never changes? Well, I suppose we could just attempt an escape later. You did it once, I'm sure you can manage to do it again.//

Tsunade's frown brightens to a smile, a little too happy, if you ask me, and way too relieved. "Good. Very good." She picks up a stack off papers and straightens them. "Then I suppose it's time you settled in."

"Settled in?"

Her mouth twists unpleasantly, the look of the unmitigated victor on the battlefield. "Of course. You didn't think we'd just let you live alone, did you? Besides, you've still got a bit of healing to do before you enroll back in classes," she giggles maliciously, "and someone will need to oversee that. And also make sure you don't fall into any unnecessary trouble."

"I've been on my own before. For quite a long time as I recall." Growling under my breath, I shoot her an especially nasty look.

But she just smiles and makes no further comment, as if I have said nothing.

"I’ve made the necessary living arrangements for you." She stacks the papers into the "in" box sitting on her desk. I wonder how she has any clue which documents are new or old, in that vast disaster area of papers and scrolls and pens. "Your roommate should be arriving any minute now."
"Roommate?" This can't be good.

"Ah." Tsunade's short word is the only warning I get before there is a swirl of wind and leaves in the localized tornado materializes in the space beside me.

"Sorry I'm late," says a voice I remember all too well. "But see, there were this old lady and this cat . . ."

Sullenly, almost willing it false, I turn around to see, but there he stands: his big silver hair sticking out to one side, his one eye closed in a happy crescent and that smug smile concealed beneath his mask.

He raises his hand in greeting.

"Yo."

You have got to be kidding me.
The apartment is neat and tidy with everything up and put in its place.

Almost as if I was expected.

I grimace.

"I cleaned up a bit." Kakashi is way too cheery as he stands behind me, answering a question I never asked.

He brushes past, heads straight into the kitchen, and makes a great deal of noise in his search for pots and pans. Something about that doesn't seem quite right for a man of jounin level.

He gestures offhandedly down the narrow hallway. "You can use the room you did last time." He raises his masked face and smiles that irritating smile at me. "It's been waiting for you."

My grimace twists angrily. "Don't talk about that." I need no reminders of the mistakes I've made.

"Oh, sensitive are we?" I don't have to look to know he's still grinning like an idiot. "If that's the way you want to play it, Sasuke..."

He lets the sentence dangle as if I could play it any other way. I shoot him a particularly mean look from the corner of my eye as I go down the hallway, but he just hums some inane little song.

My sad little bag stares up at me indifferently as I stand in the open doorway of the empty room, which is now to be mine. Tossing it unceremoniously to the feebly made bed, I wander to the bathroom to check my image in the mirror.

It is quite horrible. The shirt I wear is the one they gave me, torn and stained and bearing its age in its once-was-black gray. My hair hangs dull and listless in thin, twined strings that frame my too pale face. The only color there is from the purpled bruise over the right cheek and the scars that cut my chin, bisect my eyebrow, and slice my eye so that it swells unattractively. How nice that this is how I appeared when I stood before the Hokage.

Perhaps it is appropriate.

My eyes wander to the small raised welt across my throat that shines gray and white. I raise my...
hand to touch it. Lifting my middle finger, I graze it along the length of the scar and it tingles. It’s strange and almost too smooth, the cut clean from where Naruto made it.

I drop my hand.

I turn on the faucet and dip my dirty hands beneath the running water. I haven’t had a proper bath in weeks and it takes a long time for the water run clear. As quickly and efficiently as I can under the circumstances, I wash the grime from my face so that I don't feel completely filthy. I would really like a bath, but the tub here inexplicably has a big "out of order" sign on it and the alternative is not much to my liking.

I’m not going to wear the ones from Sound.

So I exit the bathroom only slightly cleaner, with Kakashi standing there, creepily expectant.

"Hands all washed and clean?" He asks brightly. "Good. Dinner's ready."

I follow him to the table, not thinking about just how disturbing that was.

We sit in silence for a while, partly because there is nothing to say and partly because I never knew that Kakashi was this accomplished a cook. He’s never made anything like this before that I can remember.

There’s too much silence in the room; too much attention directed at me. I shovel a bit of food into my mouth.

This is all too, well, "normal" is the only word that comes to mind. It doesn't feel right.

I look at Kakashi slyly over the top of my dinner and see that stupid smile still there, revealed clearly through the fabric. I chew loudly.

"Why," I start and then raise my head to look him squarely in the face. "Why am I really here?"

His grin doesn't change, if anything it becomes even wider. "You needed a place to stay."

My mouth turns down and I bite the inside of my cheek. "You know what I mean."

He tilts his head curiously, keeping the chopsticks poised in front of him, but not actually eating anything. He’s not answering my question.

"It all seemed a little too easy." I elaborate, my eyes dilating oddly.

"Is that what you think?"

I drop my chopsticks to my plate and fold my hands in front of me, just like I did as a boy to keep my emotions in check.

Kakashi sits there, frozen in time, which is perhaps the creepiest thing among many he has done so far. My eyes narrow as the pupils flicker somehow.

"Why am I really here?" I repeat.

"I'm not part of the Hokage's inner circle." But I can tell by the look in his one eye that he knows something. Then, quick as lightning, he lifts the mask and takes the bite of food and even though I'm sitting right in front of him, unblinking, I do not see his face.
OK, maybe that’s the creepiest thing.

I pick up my chopsticks and continue to eat, just so I have a good excuse not to look at him.

He’s still eating in that creepy way and he’s still staring at me. It’s all very uncomfortable.

"Do you have a lot of guests here?" I ask for no particular reason.

"Not really." He smiles happily. "You’re the only one in quite some time."

"Then why do you have an extra bedroom?"

//Why exactly are you making inane conversation?//

"Who says it’s extra?" He quips dumbly. I ignore that and he goes on. "I like to be prepared. You never know when you might need a spare room."

I shove a chopstick-full of food in my mouth, having nothing more to say.

"You’re going to have to take it easy for a while," he then says. "You’ve got a lot of wounds that still need time to heal. We should probably set a schedule to change the bandages . . ."

"I’d rather have Sakura do it," I blurt out defensively. It’s habit to use her and habit is good.

"Sakura, is it?" He sounds vastly amused and I sneer at him. Then he sings a few bars of idiocy under his breath.

I am no longer hungry and the chopsticks slip easily from my hand. Without missing a beat, Kakashi catches them up along with the plates and dumps the whole lot into the sink.

His voice drifts over the flowing water. "Is there anything else you need?"

I pause a scant moment.

"A bath."

"Yes, well, I was about to suggest that." He crinkles his nose; I suppose he thinks it's charming or some such nonsense. It's not. "You are carrying a million scents on you right now, none of them pleasant." I glare at him. "Well, it's easily enough handled. There’s a bathhouse down the street."

I drop my chin into my hand and grumble. "Why don't you just fix the bath in here?"

"That wouldn't be as much fun, now would it?" I don’t want to know what that means and I don’t want to go to a bathhouse. It’s too public.

I squirm awkwardly in my seat.

//Of all things, you are afraid of an innocent little bath? Ku-ku-ku.//

Kakashi laughs, actually laughs! "Not to worry, Sasuke. At this late in the day, there are rarely more than a couple people there and I hardly think they'll pay you any attention, regardless of how you look. And," he adds pointedly, "I've managed to procure you several changes of clothes."

I had not expected that.

I face him, a little wary and suspicious, but all he does he wear that same galling grin beneath his
mask. Everything has been prepared for me, almost as if Konoha assumed I would stay the moment I stepped through the city gates. I scowl, not liking the implications. So I push myself from the table and without speaking another word, pack myself up to leave.

----

My skin is nearly the same nondescript color as the bandage that Naruto wraps carefully around my wrist. We haven't spoken in a quite a while.

I keep my head lowered, watching Naruto's hands unwind the long strip of cloth over and over and around my hand.

We are getting close to our goal, step by slow step. I can feel it in my bones, a beacon attuned exclusively to Itachi, lighting up like a thunderstorm the nearer we get.

I'm getting sick of all the Akatsuki members barring my way as if they are something of importance. At this rate, by the time I finally do find Itachi, I'll have nothing left to fight with.

I clench my hand in frustration and accidentally wrench my fractured wrist.

"Ow," I say.

Naruto's hands stop and cup protectively around mine. "Sorry," he murmurs.

I don't correct his misconception.

He takes one last pass of cloth under my wrist before tucking the end securely into place. Then he quickly clasps his hands around the injury, gently as though it is a butterfly newly born of chrysalis and too delicate to touch. He doesn't want to let it go, but neither does he want to hurt it. The presence of his almost-touch is cool and comforting around my overheated skin.

I lift my head to look at him, but he's not looking at me. His golden hair sticks out more chaotically than usual, an aftereffect of the recent fight he hasn't yet attended to. A small bloodstain shows through the hair at his crown. He got hit soundly during the battle, but the crack has already healed over.

"Why do you do that?" He asks quietly. I'm about to let the question simply pass, but he's opening his mouth to repeat it.

"Do what?"

"Jump in when I'm fighting. Push yourself too hard." He raises his eyes sheepishly up to me and though wavering, still maintains my gaze.

I simply look at him for a while before dipping my chin and allowing one eyebrow go up as if to say "and what about you?"

He scowls, his lower lip pushing so hard against his upper that the two form a very distinct upside down "v".

"I'm not talking about me," he grumbles. "I know why I do it. But I don't get why you would. It doesn't seem to fit."

The silence lingers, sniffing around us for quite some time. It's an odd sort of silence, not exactly tense, but filled with all the things that cannot possibly be known or understood between us.
Naruto is still cradling my wrist and I don't do anything about it. Then he slides his hand slowly up to my elbow, causing all the little hairs on my arm to stand up on end. The silence fills me like a spirit, pumping at my heart and making it beat a thousand times faster than it should. Steadfastly, I retain my position as if this is a game and the moment I acknowledge Naruto's action, I lose. The hand he held cupped to the underside of my wrist now moves, glides beneath my palm and fans out my fingers in line with his until they rest seamlessly together. My eye flinches at the corners from the pain.

This new fascination with my hands that he's developed mystifies me. This is the first time he's done this palm-to-palm thing. I just don't get it.

Naruto takes his hand in a graceful arc upward, mine along with it, so that from fingertip to elbow, they are perpendicular to the floor. In the same time it takes for this slow, easy movement, I rotate my head back around to meet his eyes. His stare is fixated as he looks at me, one eye fully exposed, the other revealed only through the gap of our spread fingers.

Unintentionally, my eyes flick to our hands, so very different from one another yet bred for the same brutal purpose. His fingers almost disappear behind my longer ones, but his hand is wider, showing their golden pink palms to me on either side of mine. My pale white hand, partially obscured by bandage and slightly singed skin gives the optical illusion of cutting through his like a black hole. It’s an odd sensation.

I feel the steady, rapid pulse of his heart in my palm.

I look back to his face and see that his expression hasn’t changed.

"I know," he says mysteriously and my heart flutters for a mere instant as if this something of great consequence, "why I do it."

And then there is the pounding silence, sounding suspiciously like the beat of Naruto's heart.

-----

The temperature of the water is pleasantly warm as it washes away the tension I held in my muscles for far too long.

My skin is so scrubbed clean that it’s almost to the point of being pinkly raw. The burns and cuts littered over me prickle and sting at exposure to water, but I bear it for the sake of cleanliness.

I lean my head back to the edge of the tub and cautiously eye the two wrinkled old men in the corner who seem to have fallen asleep. Then I decide I don't care.

Not too long after, I get out and dry quickly, grasping onto this much needed privacy for as long as it lasts.

The cool contrast of the open air bites into my wounds, so I quickly shuffle through my "illegal" bag and pull out a set of boxers and a roll of bandages. Sitting there in my underwear, still dripping somewhat, I take a deep breath before beginning the operation.

The first few are not too bad. They are small or nearly healed, so I can make quick work of them without much trouble. But they grow steadily worse making me wince and groan. The newness of them, the remembered, revisited hurt begins to become an issue. By the time I reach what I know will be the worst, my breathing has become heavy and sharp.

It is humiliating.
Deliberately, I begin unwinding the roll of bandage slowly to prepare myself. When I initially took it off the bandages before the bath, the first few passes were simple enough, only cloth to cloth, but once I reached the center, the pain was nearly unbearable. The bandage had adhered to my skin and each pull had tugged a little more raw skin free.

The soap and water hadn't exactly numbed anything. But I had to do it. I can't tolerate feeling all dirty and disgusting and infected like that.

It's exhausting and for a brief moment, I rest.

Out in the nearby hallway, there is some loudmouth causing a commotion.

The door flies open and there is one final hearty laugh before the room goes suddenly silent.

"Sas-sasuke."

He's O.K.

A rush of relief hits me, immediately followed by a rush of irritated embarrassment.

Inwardly I groan but I do not turn, only grip the fabric tightly in my fist until I no longer feel my fingers and will him to go away.

Then there's another voice yelling an intelligent "Hey, c'mon," at which point I will harder.

A strange scuffle ensues, back behind my shoulder where I can't see, and the door creaks on its hinges as Naruto's voice pitches in anxiety.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey," he stammers. "Could you go back and get me my bag?"

"Your bag? Man, Naruto, this is a bath in case you didn't notice. You don't need your bag!" The second person sounds amused and taunting and very, very stupid.

Kiba.

If he takes one step in here, I'm not sure what I may be forced to do.

The tussle over possession of the door continues.

"No, no, just go get it, OK?" Naruto sounds almost desperate. "I really, really need it. I'll owe you one, I promise. Pleeease." He uses the whine that can get anyone to do anything, just to make him shut up.

"Alright, alright. Don't have a cat." Dog boy grumbles and the door slams loudly behind him.

I look over to the two old men and see that they haven't moved, even through all the ruckus.

I hope they're not dead.

That would be unpleasant on so many levels.

Naruto's feet slap softly along the tiled floor as he steps closer but it is not until he kneels before me that I actually look at him. I notice his seal has changed from what I remember, not that I commit such things to memory. There are extra characters surrounding the swirl that pulse a gentle blue, but I quickly pull my gaze away because I shouldn't be looking to start with. The towel around his waist barely covers him, but I don't want to think about that either, so I don't. Instead I
look at his strangely blinking eyes, which have tinted slightly purple.

The he smiles softly and holds out his hand. "Let me do that for you."

When I don’t hand over the bandages, he just takes them and delicately places them on the floor beside me, picking up a jar of salve instead.

But my nerves get the better of me and I snatch the jar away from him. He looks dejectedly for some reason but doesn’t protest. Very carefully, ignoring him, I apply a thick layer of the healing ointment over my wound. The coldness of it against my warmed skin burns before it soothes. I hiss shortly through my teeth.

Blue eyes flicker up to me momentarily, but quickly look away and he nervously scratches the whisker marks on his cheek. I place the end of the bandage down to my skin, taking one pass around my abdomen before my energy fails. Cautiously, Naruto glances back up, flicking his gaze between my hand and face until he finally takes hold of the fabric, even more delicately than before. He looks at me questioningly, and then begins to wrap the bandage slowly, his arms winding around me at intervals, his body leaning in, leaning out. It’s almost hypnotic. The warm nearness of him is a comforting reminder of the simpler times that were, when the only warmth we had was each other. It makes me sleepy and I want to lie down right now and pull him down beside me, wondering how different it would feel if we slept like that, closer than we have before. I wonder if his skin is as smooth as it looks, so completely unlike mine.

I hold my hands stiffly at my sides and swallow hard.

His eyes flash up to me, likely catching my nervousness. They are worried and big, anxious that he is hurting me and he bites his lower lip between his teeth.

I glare, as much at myself as at him and he stops.

Once the bandaging is done, he tenderly smoothes his hand over the end, sealing it in place. I swear I can feel his fingertips through the cloth, but it may just be my imagination. It makes me uneasy. My eyes squeeze shut and my teeth grit and I know it’s Naruto, but that doesn’t seem to make a difference.

Because this is different.

I take a deep breath.

Then he stands, the weight of his presence leaving me.

Silently, he circles around and begins to replace the few bandages that remain across my back, the ones I couldn’t reach and intended to let stay. He is very methodical, much like any other medic-nin, and when he finishes the last one, his hand remains there, feeling my shoulder only through the thickness of gauze.

I do not move. The light touch of Naruto’s hand is the only thing that has felt truly real over the past few foggy days.

He glides his hand, feather-light, tickling and searing my skin until threading it slowly through the hair at the back of my head. My eyelids fall shut. I shouldn’t allow this, but I do. My mouth parts open to let out a long shuddering breath in remembered sensation.

Then his hand is gone and the room suddenly seems far colder than it did before.
Time starts again.

I sit up and look back at the old men, wrinkling their wrinkles in the hot steaming water.

Their positions have changed slightly, so I know they are not dead.

I mumble a short, half-hearted "thanks" and start to get dressed.

Naruto's "you're welcome" sounds a little surprised as if he too has just woken up.

The clothes I find in the bag are not a great fit, but I suppose they'll do. The shirt is much like the ones I wore as a boy, black and baggy, with the Uchiha fan emblazoned on the back. The pants are like Kakashi's, so much so that they might have been his once, a notion I'd rather not think about too hard.

I can feel Naruto's eyes watching as I dress, which makes me feel funny, but I'm not sure it's a bad feeling and that makes it worse.

I pack up my bag and head to the door.

"What did he do to you?"

The question is spoken soft and shaky, but as there is no other sound in the room, it reverberates. I pause for a second and then choose to ignore it.

But it is repeated.

Now I stop dead in my tracks, crushing the strap of the bag in my hand and collect myself.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what," Naruto states a bit irritably. "Orochimaru."

I inhale calmly. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Yeah?" He steps closer, his feet padding softly over the floor, and lays his hand lightly on my shoulder. "Then why are you so afraid of people touching you?"

"I'm not afraid." This is a stupid conversation.

"You're trembling."

At that, I look down and see that, yes, my traitorous hand is shaking like a leaf in the wind. I pull it into a fist.

"Sasuke, did he," Naruto swallows thickly. Then he whispers like a secret, "Did he touch you?"

Suddenly, I feel the flame of rage as I spin around, swatting his hand from my shoulder. So that’s what everyone thinks. Even Naruto.

//How unfair that I am accused of a thing which I never did get to sample.//

'Shut up, you repulsive monster.'

"No," I say, fighting the anger that claws at the edges of my eyes. "No, Naruto. All he did was remind me that kindness is just a cover for cruelty." My vision tightens. "I should thank you for
reminding me again. I'd almost forgotten"

I turn on my heel and walk away, collecting the tattered remnants of my pride and wrapping it tight around me.

"But Sasuke," he stutters lamely. "I didn't mean . . ."

But I never hear what it is he "didn't mean" and I don't care. I'm not a victim.

Naruto should know better.

All those months together.

He should know me better than that.

But I guess I'm the one who should know better.

"See you tomorrow," he calls quietly after me.

I pause a moment, whispering to myself, "No, you won't." In the silence, I know he'll hear me. Then I swing the door open.

"So it was you, was it?" Kiba slurs snidely from where he sits on the floor, his legs sticking out in front of him, blocking the hallway.

I glower down at him, recalling my earlier promise to pummel him and the wolfish grin on his face only strengthens the inclination. But then seeing he is clad only in a towel, I reconsider.

He stands himself up with a grunt and his beady eyes survey me, amused, those fangs still showing sharply in his mouth.

Then he snorts, shakes his head and walks inside.

"Here's your bag, Naruto."

Naruto's answer is slow in coming.

"Shut up, Kiba."

And the door closes.
"Ah, all nice and squeaky clean and smelling fresh?"

That's the annoyingly bright greeting I receive when I return to the apartment.

I scowl at him.

Kakashi claps his hands and rises from his place on the couch where he'd been watching the door like a hawk. "Ready then?"

I do not move from my spot. "Ready for what?"

He walks by me and takes hold of the door I have so recently entered through. Then he smiles that infuriating smile. "To get your seal of course!"

Raising an eyebrow to him, I try to convey how much I do not appreciate his chipper attitude.

But his expression doesn't change a bit as he steps into the cool night air. "Chop-chop, Sasuke! We don't want to keep them waiting."

I don’t bother saying that I’d just assume keep them waiting forever. Nor do I make mention that he’s the last person to be doling out advice about tardiness. I just drop my bag and follow him out the door.

The entire way, Kakashi hums under his breath and for all his concern over being late, he strolls rather lazily.

Fine with me. I've had enough of seals. Pretty soon there won't be any room for more. The effects will probably start crossing and explode or something.

"The seals won't interact," Kakashi says in that aggravating way he has of reading my mind. "And this one can be turned on and off."

He looks back over his shoulder with that crescent moon smile. “By a licensed professional, of course.” I glare at him as hard as I can.

We enter Hokage Tower in silence and darkness, and climb a winding staircase to a large room
hidden somewhere in the center. People are already, waiting in the shadows like specters, each of
their hands held steady in a different sign. On the floor are two inked circles drawn inside several
larger ones, with long lines stretching out to meet each of the lurking shadows.

"Uchiha Sasuke has arrived," Kakashi announces loudly and needlessly.

"Good." One of the shadows detaches itself from the whole, her long blonde hair falling down over
her shoulders. "Let's get this over with," Tsunade says. It's late and we'd all like to get to bed."

Kakashi nods solemnly and leads me to the center of the room, directing me to sit down between
the two smallest circles. Without question or explanation, he takes my hands and places them palm
up on either side, centered within the circles.

The ritual is very similar to the one used on my other seal. The printed symbols pull up and embed
themselves deep into my skin, muscle and bone. It is like a thousand tiny needles driving deeper
and deeper into my flesh until they clear the other side. It takes only a few minutes but I am left the
same as I was the last time, blurry and dizzy, with my body ringing out in pain.

But I don’t pass out; not this time. I struggle to my feet, wobbly and weak, and walk out on my
own.

By the time I get to Kakashi's apartment and into my room that I black out, nearly as soon as my
head hits the pillow.

When I finally wake up the next day, it is far past morning as the flicker of light through the blinds
tells me.

I didn't know just how tired I was.

But then, it has been so long since I’ve slept in a real bed, fluffy and comfy and warm.

Discomfiting as it is, I'm surprised to wake up alone.

For some reason, I had imagined Naruto was here with me. In my sleep, I had thought the soft
wornness of the cotton sheets had been his skin beneath my fingertips. It’s strange and
disappointing and I’m not going to think about it further.

It’s nearly twelve hours after the moment I laid down, a marathon of a nap, but I'd still be inclined
to close my eyes if it weren't for the annoying yellowed paper taped to my forehead.

I rip it off.

*Good morning Sleepyhead Sasuke,* it says.

That name had better not stick.

*There is food in the fridge when you get hungry. You are welcome to it, as long as you make a list
of what you use. Feel free to look through whatever is in the common area, but do not go in my
room. This is for your safety. I will be gone most of the day, setting arrangements for you and your
new schedule. I have left a list of things we need when you get the chance to go out. Get some rest.*

I'd like to know how exactly I'm supposed to "get rest" and "run an errand" at the same time.

There's also a "p.s." which reads: *Don't try anything sneaky or embarrassing. The ANBU are
watching you,* followed by a stupid looking smiley face acting as a punctuation mark.
Does he really think I need reminding of the ANBU? I may not have seen them yet, but I can feel their menacing presence deep in the marrow of my bones.

Grumbling, I roll over and get up, crinkling the paper disgustedly in my hand and tossing it into a dark empty corner of my room.

Looking in the bathroom mirror, I see that I really don't look any different from yesterday, except maybe a little cleaner. I could do a henge and hide my yellow eyes, but that would just be a waste of chakra.

I'm not going to hide like a coward. These are my eyes now, the village may as well get used to them.

//They are still mine.//

I groan inwardly and get dressed.

Sitting in the living room, I eat my breakfast, plain wheat cereal, and begin to peruse some of the old nasty scrolls Kakashi has stacked up in shelves one on top of the other.

They're not as interesting as I had hoped and I end up getting more dust than information from them. I lean back on the couch with a sigh and spot Kakashi's shopping list sitting on the kitchen counter. I consider. Then I reconsider. It's not like I'm doing anything else.

----

It’s raining.

I dislike the rain.

And umbrellas, despite their claim, never quite keep you dry, as evidenced by the water I drip all over the grocery floor.

The small grocery is exactly as I remember from the long past days when I was a different person.

The Uchiha compound is not far.

Nearly all the items on Kakashi's list have been tucked tidily into my basket, with only the eggs remaining. At least real cooking will going on in the apartment. Not like with Naruto.

I swear, he'd catch the fish, but then he'd have no idea what to do with them other than burn them to a charcoal crisp over a fire!

I let out a short laugh to myself.

Naruto . . .

//You sound like a lovesick puppy.//

I purse my lips tightly.

'I do not.'

//Then why do you always say his name like that?//

'I don't say it in any particular way.'
Hmm, is that so . . . Still too soft, like a child. But do not fret, Sasuke-kun. I shall fix that.//

'Oh, shut up.'

Picking up a carton of eggs, I check each one carefully to ensure that none are cracked and just as I am placing it into my basket, a man steps out of the past and approaches me.

"Excuse me, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

What?

I look to the pudgy, fidgety man in front of me. There is a thin layer of sweat glistening over his chubby face, making him shine like a beacon under the harsh electric lights.

I remember this man. Harada, I believe. I am sure it is the same man I knew as a child, only fatter. The only thing thinner about him now is his hair. He used to smile at me and sneak extra treats into my bag. I was the only child he knew that wasn't fond of sweets.

I remember him as a friendly and cheery man.

How things have changed.

"I'm about to leave," I say calmly and indicate my now full basket. "I just need to purchase these."

Harada nervously twists his sausage fingers together. "No," he whimpers. "Without the groceries."

I narrow my eyes but keep my voice placid and level. "I can pay."

"Oh, oh." He frets stupidly and his piggy eyes shift to his left. I follow his gaze and notice that at the end of almost every aisle, there is at least one person peeking out from between the stacks.

"You see," he goes on and I turn back to him. "You're making the other customers nervous."

I look back over to partial faces peering out at me. It looks more like they're preparing at any moment to form an angry mob, fully decked out with pitchforks and torches.

//What did I tell you? Konoha!/\n
I take a breath and face the fat, jumpy little man. "Fine." I reply through clenched teeth and reiterate my previous demand. "I will just pay for this and then be on my way."

"Oh, oh." Harada stutters and now the sweat is dripping off his face, making an unsightly puddle on the floor.

"No, see. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave without your groceries and to never come back here again." He leans in, as if to share a secret, and adds in a hoarse whisper, "My customers don't like that you're here and I have a business to run. You understand . . ."

I shoot him a nasty glare, giving the same to each of his customers in turn.

I understand, all right.

The Village Hidden in the Leaves.

I can feel it again. Looming, coiling anger that tightens like a snake inside me.
//Go ahead. Just one. No one will miss one little shop keeper.//

'I am not like you. I follow my own path.'

//Yes, of course. Funny that they seem so much the same . . .//

The metal handle of the basket bruises my palm, yet it feels somehow separate from me. My eyes flash red for only a second before I get back under control.

But the once friendly Harada has already seen it, his eyes wide in terror as the pool at his feet widens.

"Fine," I say, hard but controlled. Placing the basket at my feet, I turn on my heel.

Harada suddenly drums up the nerve to speak.

"I really am sorry, Sasuke-kun," he whispers in a squealing, unconvincing tone.

I look straight ahead. "Do not ever call me that."

I hold my head high with what little is left of my pride still intact. As I leave, I catch in the corner of my eye the slightest glimpse of that strange white-eyed girl peering at me from behind a pile of oranges.

----

The onion in my hand feels papery and heavy and smells very strongly of eye-burning sharpness. I drop it into the basket.

The market vegetables fill my nose with the overflowing aroma of sweet and spice and acid. The mushrooms smell deep like earth as we sort meticulously through the pile. I've always enjoyed all the different scents and textures that I experience when we go out shopping, ridiculous as that sounds.

Mama runs her fingers softly through my hair. I tilt my head up to her and scowl, but she just smoothes down the back of my head and smiles that special smile. The hair pops back up again when her hand drops and I jut out my lower lip in protest.

I'm a big boy now, already five, and I don't need my mother fussing over me in public like I am still a baby in diapers. I turn my head away sharply in indignation, but she laughs lightly behind the curled ball of her hand, doing a poor job of hiding her amusement.

The truth is I like when she runs her fingers through my hair. It is calming and comforting and makes me pleasantly sleepy. I like Mama's special smile and all the little things she does just for me.

Just not in public.

"Mo-om!" I whine, keeping my voice to a respectable whisper. "You can't do stuff like that. I'm a ninja."

"Oh?" She asks, her dark eyes sparkling. "Well, you're not a ninja yet."

I deepen my frown and cross my arms.

She smiles and brings a tomato up to her nose, breathing in its ripeness. She places it in the basket
beside the onion and its little scallion kin.

"What do you think your father and brother would like for dinner today?"

"How would I know?" I grumble, and turn away.

Mother chooses some fresh herbs, puts a hand to my back and gently leads us to the front counter, never saying either a word of reproach or understanding.

Yet I can feel the smile in the way her fingernails brush lightly over the neck of my shirt. I keep my arms crossed and raise my head high; retaining what little dignity is afforded me.

"Well, Well. And how are you today, Mikoto-san?"

The man at the cash register greets my mother brightly, like an old friend. My mother inclines her head politely and deposits her groceries on the counter. At almost the same time, I put my chubby little fingers onto that counter and peek up over the edge. The tabletop is high, and at five, I'm still short, not having yet gone through a growth spurt, so I can hardly see over it.

"Ah, and who do we have here?"

The big man leans over, peering at me at the counter's edge. He seems mammoth from where I am, like a mountain with a head precariously perched on top. He has small dark eyes in a large face, but he looks friendly, with the wild tuft of brown hair that seems to spring from the crown of his head. He is bulky, but not fat and I guess he's acquired all that muscle from lifting a lot of the crates here in the market.

"This is my youngest son," Mama says and smiles down at me, her hand still at my back and her eyes crinkled shut. "Say hello, Sasuke."

"Hi," I say begrudgingly, my lower lip sticking out. I'm still upset at the way Mama always treats me like a baby.

"Well, let's see if we can't get a smile on that handsome little face, why don't we?"

The man reaches a large hand into a basket that sits nestled beside the register and pulls out a handful of brightly wrapped little packages.

"Oh, no, Harada-san." My mother interrupts. "I'm sorry, but Sasuke doesn't like sweets."

Harada's eyebrows shoot upward and almost disappear into his hairline.

"You don't say."

Mom rubs the back of my head again and I frown.

The man smiles. He turns around and seems to be rummaging through something and mumbling.

"Ah, here we are! How about you try one of these?" He says this brightly as he holds out a small bag. "Rice Crackers" the label reads, and after a moment of skeptical consideration, I take it from him.

"Thank you, Harada-san," My mother says. "You're vey kind. Say 'thank you', Sasuke."

"Thank you," I mumble and peruse the package in my hands. I rip the bag open, inspect one of the oddly shaped crackers and pop it into my mouth.
It is hard but crispy, as much air as cracker with a hint of sweetness hidden within its starchy flavor.

"You like 'em?" The man asks.

I just shrug my shoulders.

He chortles good-naturedly, shakes his head, and begins ringing up mama's purchases. "Not too many kids don't like sweets," he muses. "You're an interesting one, little Sasuke."

I ignore the insulting "little" remark and continue to snack.

"So, Sasuke-kun. Are you going to be a ninja too?"

I stop, look up at him wide-eyed and nod my head vigorously.

"He'll be another one like Itachi-kun, I suspect," Harada says, packing the groceries carefully into a sack. "You must be proud, Mikoto-san."

Now I grin widely because I like to be told I am like Itachi, rather than to be recounted of the many differences between us.

But when I turn back to look up at my mother in pride and happiness, the smile she wears seems wrong, tight, and not quite what it should be.

"Yes," she says in a very small voice.

"Yup, yup," the grocer says, oblivious. "They are of the Uchiha clan, after all."

But Mama's not really paying attention so I tug lightly on the end of her sleeve. She looks down at me as I offer her one of my rice crackers. She smiles, sweeter this time as it reaches her eyes. Mama takes one of the crackers and puts it in her mouth, then pats me on the head. I gaze happily up at her.

Mama is silly.

Then, without warning, she leans down and plants a small kiss on my forehead before I even have the chance to defend myself.

"Mom!" I cry, wiping at my forehead with my fingers as if I can erase the embarrassment.

But she just smiles, like some sort of fox up to its old tricks and Harada laughs.

"Now, now, Mikoto-san. You shouldn't do such things. He's a big boy now."

And I want to assert a "that's right!", but Harada didn't sound entirely serious.

Mama pays the man and we head down the street for home, stopping by the fish market to buy something fresh and I get to carry it, wrapped up in crisp brown paper and string.

So many people say hello to mother, so many people like her, that I feel special and perhaps a little bit jealous. I edge a tad closer to her side as we walk. She smiles at me and I at her and our previous, insignificant spat is a thing of the far-distant past.

Then a young couple walks up and greets Mama and she responds by giving a small bow and congratulating them. Not knowing what to do, I follow suit, careful not to let the fish slip from my
hands and onto the dusty road.

The three adults exchange pleasantries, the couple nervous and giddy and holding hands. The man constantly fiddles with his hair and gazes upon the girl with a grin like an idiot. Then they all say good bye and the two stumble off, practically tripping on their too close proximity to each other.

Mama and I continue on our way home, but I take several backward glances at the couple, wondering just what could be wrong with them.

"Mama?" I venture cautiously. "Why'd you congratulate them?"

"Well," she says. "They just got married."

"Oh." I scrunch up my nose and take another look back. "You and father are married, but you don't act like that."

"Well, your father and I have been married for a while. Akiko and Jun are newlyweds." Mama answers indulgently.

"So that means they act crazy?"

Mama laughs then, shaking her head in amusement. "It's not crazy. Newlyweds often act like that because they're so happy."

My eyes go wide and I almost recoil in horror. "You mean you and Father were like that?"

"Yes, in a way."

I can't picture my father being anything but serious; the image just doesn't fit. But if Mama says so," Ew."

She laughs harder then, her laughter like music tinkling down to my ears. Tears spring from her eyes and she rubs them away with the tip of her finger and the bag she carries crinkles in her hand.

I pout. It isn't funny.

"Oh, Sasuke. Someday, you will be like that, too."

I clutch the fish tightly.

"Not me." And I shake my head vehemently as if I can shake the idea off.

"Yes, even you." Her big, dark eyes gaze down at me and I can see her resist the urge to ruffle my hair again. "Someday my son, you will find a girl that makes you act strange just like that. You'll feel weak and nervous and excited and anxious, so that you stumble over your feet and can't think of a single smart thing to say. Just like Jun with Akiko."

I snarl and my lip curls up to my nose. "But girls are so noisy and giggly and . . . and girly."

"You think that now, but that will change."

The salty sea brine of the fish wafts up into my face with the warm morning air. I don't often see the girls in my class and I don't especially like them. I suppose I don't hate them, but getting all goofy like Jun-san?

I don't think so.
"Why?" I finally ask, unable to get my mind to wrap around the concept.

Mama looks down at me, tilts her head, and considers. "Because that is how things are."

"Why?"

"So many questions today!" She chides. Then she looks off into the distance and sighs. "Because boys and girls belong together. And you will grow up and get married and have children of your own, and then one day you will have this same conversation with them."

Children of my own? Mama is weird. But then, I am only five, so it's possible I don't know everything yet. I screw up my face.

"Do I have to?"

Mama stops then, right there in the street and looks at me thoughtfully, her eyes very serious in a way I have never seen before.

"No," she says carefully. "You don't have to. But you probably will. It is how things are. I wouldn't go making up my mind about it just yet, if I were you. Chances are, you will meet a girl and get married one day."

The fish is soft and squishy within its brown paper packaging. I've never thought of any of these things before and they seem strange to me. But if I have to marry someone, "Then I'll marry you, Mama."

I can see by the pulled line of her mouth that she's trying not to laugh. She crouches down beside me and when she speaks, it is calm and sober. "No, Sasuke. I think it is best that you choose someone a bit closer to your age."

"But I like you best of all."

"Maybe right now." She brushes her hand over my cheek. "But like many things, that will change. So you wait for the girl who is the one made just for you."

"For me?" I ask, completely lost.

She nods. "You will know her because you will feel it from the tips of your fingers to the ends of your toes. You will feel it in your heart and your soul until you can't breathe or concentrate because every thought circles back to her so that you can scarcely think of anything else. It will seem like all the rest of the world simply disappears. Because all you see is her."

My eyebrows crush together over the space above my nose. I can't understand a thing she's saying.

"When you feel her presence in the flush of your blood, you will know. That is the girl for you. And you will marry her and start a family and be happy. That is my wish." Her thumb glides over my cheekbone. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mama."

She smiles then, sweet and sad and knowing. "No you don't. But you will," she says sympathetically. "Come now. Let's not talk of such serious, faraway things anymore. We have a dinner to make for your father and brother."

She stands up then and reaches her hand towards me. Smiling brightly, I take it and though it is
bigger than mine, it somehow always feels small, soft and delicate.

"O.K.," I tell her and we walk the remainder of the way in silence.

I still don't understand much of what Mama was telling me. I just can't picture it, any of it.

But then, I am only five.

And if Mama says so, then it must be true.

-----

On my return trip through the village to Kakashi's place, my feet splashing in the puddles of water, I notice how everyone is looking at me with some form of negativity: hatred or fear. Or else conspicuously averting their gazes. It makes me feel like I'm in a freak show, an object of both curiosity and revulsion.

Shoving my free hand into my pocket, the one not carrying the useless umbrella, I pull my eyebrows together and stare ahead. But in my circular vision I can see them all. Eyes and not eyes, and all attention aimed towards me.

I do not like it.

//That's Konoha for you. Always ready to judge and never there when you need it.//

Each step I take feels like a conceded defeat that falls heavy in my soul.

I'm a ninja and he's a grocer.

I think I could've taken him.

All of their minds are made up. They're all like that. All. I owe them nothing.

Without really thinking about it, my hand strays over the bandage at my stomach, feeling the outline of it beneath my clothes.

His hands, rough and callused, were gentle when they put this here. And he helped me, without being asked and without demanding something in return. He is nothing like the rest of them.

My skin radiates heat through the layers of fabric.

He said "tomorrow."

//Ku-ku-ku.//

I shake my mind clear and drop my hand. All there is for me is the street before me.

"Uchiha-san."

The voice is quiet and shy and through the constant murmur of villagers, it’s hard to distinguish. But I’m certain I heard it. I come to a stop and turn around.

What meets me are wide colorless eyes, long dark hair and a nervous barely-there smile peeking over the bulging grocery bag she carries in her arms as if it were a child.

Crossing my arms sternly, I erase all emotion and look at her, daring her to make some remark
about my present state. What other reason could she have for stopping me in the middle of the street?

I don't even know her.

"Hyuuga-san," I state flatly.

Her smile wavers a little and she clutches the bag a bit closer as though it is a shield that can protect her. Her shoulders rise and fall slowly with the intake of a long breath. Then she throws her head back defiantly and walks forward until planted directly in front of me. With a bit more force than I deem necessary, she shoves the bag into my face.

I quirk an eyebrow and look at her as if she’s gone insane.

She clears her throat quietly. "You w-wanted this, right?"

My eyebrow drops down until my face is a blank.

"I don't need your pity."

"It's not pity," she says evenly, gathering her courage. "I expect you to pay for it."

I scan her up and down a moment, weighing her intentions.

"Why," I ask suspiciously, "would you do this?"

She bites her lower lip nervously. "I-I have my reasons," she says. "I will get something out of this. It's not an act of charity."

Yeah? “And what’s that?”

Her delicate white fingers dig into the brown paper, crumpling the bag at the edges. "I don't know yet."

Interesting. And not seemingly a lie.

For the moment I choose to trust her, hoping it is the correct decision, and slowly reach out to take the bag. It crinkles obnoxiously. She yanks her hands away quickly as though she had been holding a bomb.

Her smile is still shaky as she takes a step backward, her hands clutched girlishly behind her back. Then, rethinking her position, she scoots forward and juts out her hand palm up expectantly.

I smirk, but search my back pocket for the money.

She takes it silently, hastily pockets it, her eyes never leaving mine.

"You're not going to count it?" I ask wryly.

"No," she says.

"Hn." I admit I don't quite know what to make of this. She is veritable stranger, the two of us known to each other only by name and reputation.

"Don't expect this to happen again." I advise defensively. "I won't need any more help."
"No, I w-wouldn't think so."

My eye twitches convulsively and then with nothing more than a curious look to the doubly curious girl, I begin walking away.

"I'm glad you're here!" She yells to my retreating back and although louder, her voice is still small. I incline my head to look back over my shoulder. "You don't know me."

"I kn-know. That's why I'm glad."

Having nothing to reply, I adjust my stance so that I may see her more clearly.

The girl is twining her fingers anxiously, but when she catches my gaze, she quickly hides them behind her, a gentle pink flush flashing over her nose and cheeks. Her voice is a little less shaky.

"He tried with me," she says hesitantly. "And with Sakura." She then gives me a rueful smile. "With me, it was a disaster from the beginning. With Sakura..." Her mouth twists into a partial frown. "Well, that was unfortunate. But th-that's why I'm glad you're here."

I don't know why she’s telling me this, but the idea of “he” and “tried” cuts through my ribcage like a knife.

"See, I want to understand."

This cryptic pronouncement is the only thing she says before giving me another shy smile, the blush lingering over her cheeks.

"Understand what?" I ask.

But she doesn’t answer. She just tips her head, bows slightly and turns around, leaving me alone, awash in a sea of unfriendly faces and on a path to a home that isn't mine.

-----

My mind is filled with confusion and anger, the two emotions battling it out fiercely in the open landscape of my thoughts. I haven't the faintest idea what it is that Hyuuga Hinata wants to "understand" or what it is she expects from me.

My brain is too muddled with Naruto “trying” and irritated that I should be concerned with it at all.

//There is a simple answer, my pet.//

'I don't care to listen to the ranting of a madman."

//You do not like the truth.//

'Shut up."

//So jealous all the time. Of Itachi, for Itachi. Of Naruto, for Nar...//

'That's enough."

//Ku-ku-ku.//

What Naruto and I have goes beyond any simple friendship or brotherhood, and certainly beyond
any thing those girls could have had with him. He is mine. My friend, my rival, my reason . . .  

"/My", "my", "my". You are so jealous; you are positively green with it.//

And why not?

Crushed eggs leak out the side of the shabby shelter of the paper bag on account of my jealousy.

I'm selfish, I already know that and I don't care.

Naruto is mine. He was all I had for a long time. Everyone hated him, including me, until I hated him so much he became my best friend. Even then, I'm the one who trained with him, fought with him, ate with him long before any of them would even acknowledge his existence, let alone call him "friend".

I was here first.

That ought to count for something.

So yeah, I'm jealous.

What's so wrong with that?

Absently, I walk over to a garbage can to sort out the broken eggs. When I look up, it is with an acute sense of dread when I realize where I am. Letting the bag lie where it is, I drag myself forward as if in a trance.

Slowly, I walk down the street, remembering each dilapidated building when it was still new and hearing the voices of people who have long since stopped speaking. I see them everywhere, the ghosts of home and family that have haunted me all these years.

In the center of it all, I come across the simple stone slab that I used to pore over so often all the days of my childhood. My hand reaches out, the fingers tracing the names etched into rock and memory for no one but me. Auntie, uncle, cousin, mother, father. All Uchiha, all dead, all liars.

"They knew." Itachi's voice. "They knew and never told anyone so that they could remain innocent. Tell me, little brother, what sort of ninja is that?"

But I have no better an answer now than I did then.

//And you are no different.//

I am different. I never hid my intentions from anyone. Yet they sit named here, bearing an innocence they did not merit.

But that is also unfair. The worst crime they committed was keeping a secret.

But they are my family and I cared for them and no matter what the circumstances, they didn’t deserve to die.

My fingers glide lightly over the name Uchiha Mikoto and my heart gives a little lurch. How could I ever, ever hate her?

How could Itachi?

But these are pointless questions.
I should never have come here, to Konoha, to this cursed place. I should have dumped Naruto at the hospital door and fled, disappeared into the night before they had the chance to realize I was here.

That would have been better.

But I couldn’t.

I pick up the abandoned bag and walk away, hoping to leave this tainted past behind and knowing I never will.

-----

"Sasuke dear, could you come here please?"

I hop from my bed and race into the kitchen to find my mother hefting a large laundry basket over to the table.

"Mo-om," I immediately whine, having hoped for some insane reason that she was asking for help with something important, rather than simply with chores.

"Do not whine, dear. It is unbecoming." She chastises me with an atypical tightness to her lip. "Can you get the other basket, please?"

Dutifully, I rush over and pick up the smaller tub, overflowed with fabric, in my diminutive hands. I carry it over to the table and look with interest at the multitude of clothes fresh from drying.

"What's all this for?" I am genuinely curious. "These look like fancy things and today's nobody's birthday or anything."

"Ah, but I want everyone to look their best." She smiles curiously down at me. "Your brother made jounin today."

I'm so surprised that I nearly drop the basket and stare at my mother with eyes grown wide. In the nick of time I recapture the basket and slide it down carefully beside mother's.

"Really?" I ask excitedly, although my jubilation cools quickly to worry and quicker still to depression.

"Yes," Mother laughs, though it sounds a bit false. "The youngest one this year." Then she sobers. "What's wrong?"

"Father must be very proud of him," I reply dejectedly.

Mother's hand is soothing as she rubs it through my hair. "He's proud of you, too."

"No he's not." I kick at a nonexistent stone and trudge to the other side of the room for no other reason except that I can.

"You must never say that." Mother kneels down behind me, and her gentle, familiar presence fills up all the empty space like the heat from a fire. I pick at a loose piece of wood on a lower cabinet drawer. "How many times have I told you how often he speaks of you when we are alone?" She rubs her hand along my shoulder. "He thinks very highly of you."

"He never talks to me. Never has time for me." I say it flatly, hiding any unnecessary hurt I feel. It is only a fact, so I school my tone after Father's and Itachi's. Emotionless, strong, professional.
"I don't like it when you talk like that." The words form a rebuke, but her voice aches with regret.

I turn to her and her hand falls to her knee.

She looks at me a moment, a little sad, but then that secret smile forms over her face.

I can't help but smile back.

"But I'll bet you don't have talks like this with Itachi, do you?" I give her a sly look.

"No," she says with a sadness I don't understand. "I don't."

I pout, not knowing what to do.

I want Mama to be happy. She's looks much better with a smile.

"Don't worry, Mama," I proclaim defiantly. "I'll make you proud too. You'll see. I'll make jounin and be just like Itachi-nii-san."

I grin widely at her, certain that my aspirations will lift her spirits.

Her lip trembles slightly and then she throws her arms around my tiny shoulders and I think "success!" I know how to make everything better.

I will be a prodigy like my brother.

I will be among the best of the Uchiha.

Then Itachi and I will train together and Father will acknowledge me.

And Mama will be happy.

But the small shake in Mama's shoulders and the way she holds me tells me that she's crying. I raise my hands to her back, as if my minuscule, insignificant hands could give her any kind of comfort.

"I'll make you proud," I assure her, because I don't know why she's crying. "I'll be just like Itachi."

Her body convulses minutely and it seems like such a long while passes that all the clothes must have gone threadbare before she speaks again.

"No, Sasuke," she rasps through her watery throat. "You stay just as you are. Do what makes you happy, not what other people want."

She smoothes her hand repeatedly over my hair and then kisses the side of my head.

"You just stay my sweet little boy."

-----

I am weary and overtired by the time I arrive at Kakashi's apartment, for little reason other than that reliving the past is exhausting. I feel like going to sleep and never waking up.

"Hey, teme! Where've you been? You're late! I've been here forever!"

Naruto scowls down at me from the building door, scolding as if any of this is my fault.
So, I guess this is what he meant by “tomorrow”.

In truth, much as I hate to admit it, the sight of him and makes my whole body feel lighter.

Instead of showing this, I just walk up to the door and unlock it, saying, "How can I be late when I never knew you were coming?"

Stepping past him, I make my way inside, leaving the door open in an unspoken invitation that he quickly takes. Using his foot to close the door, he rushes in and begins anxiously circling around me, peeking into my grocery sack as if he intends to find some sort of hidden treasure.

Ignoring him, I begin storing the items, many of which I have to wrest from Naruto's hands since he has mysteriously chosen to inspect them. Apparently he has never seen a cabbage before.

"How come you only have seven eggs? I wish I could get just seven eggs. A dozen is so many . . . ." 

Snatching the offensive carton mid-sentence, I duck my head into the refrigerator to put it away and to hide my slight coloring. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh!" he yips excitedly and runs off to pick up a couple packages I hadn't seen him bring in. "I told you I'd see you," he goes on. "So I brought lunch. Though you were so long in getting here, it's more like lupper."

"Lupper?" I ask, putting the last of the things away.

"Yeah," he says brightly. "It's a little too late for lunch, but too early for supper, so 'lupper.'"

I look disgustedly at him then take a seat at the table he's sitting at.

"Hey, be nice." He's wearing a little pout. Then, without skipping a beat, he claps his hands together and with a big grin yells, "Itadakimasu!"

And with a great deal on fanfare, he rips into his bag and pulls out a still steaming bowl of his favorite food.

"I don't really like ramen," I tell him, dropping my chin in my hand.

"I know." He lifts the other bag toward me, not stopping in his frantic consumption. "That's for me. This is for you."

Raising my eyebrow skeptically, I take the small, nondescript brown bag and look inside.

Tomatoes.

A whole bag of small, bright red tomatoes.

I look up at him with a bored, questioning expression. "Tomatoes?"

He stops eating to glance at me earnestly. "It's the only thing I could remember you like. I picked the best ones. You're really difficult to shop for, y'know." He sticks out his lower lip.

I shake my head. "Idiot."

"Hey! Be more appreciative! I didn't have much money! I didn't have to spend it on you. I could've gotten myself more ramen."
A sick feeling settles down to the depth my stomach and I look back down to the little tomato cluster staring up at me mournfully.

"What happened to your savings?"

There is a very pregnant pause.

"They took it."

His reply is so detached that I have to look at him. His eyes are downcast, staring into his ramen as the steam rises slowly up to his face and the chopsticks lay unused at the side.

"They took it," he repeats quietly. "To pay for . . ."

"They took mine, too." I cut him off before he can continue.

His head snaps up and a somewhat shocked expression replaces the sad one. "I didn't know you had any savings."

"I don't really. But the Uchiha clan did."

He blinks his eyes stupidly before rushing headlong into outrage. "But that's family money! They can't take that."

I shrug.

Naruto gazes down into his bowl again and disinterestedly pokes at it with his chopsticks. "What are you paying for anyway? I'm the one that ruined . . ."

"For all the shinobi sent to search for me." He needs to stop doing that.

His nose bunches up and he turns thoughtful, his hands halfway poised in the bowl. "Then that means," he starts dubiously, "That you're paying me with the same money I'm paying them. So, in a way, they're only getting half as much as they think. Why do they bother at all?"

I'm not quite sure that makes sense, dobe.

But then he plasters on that annoying fake smile I hate and says, "I mean, I understand taking my wages for reconstruction, but why yours, too? I mean, if you think about it, they wouldn't be paying you anyway, so . . ." He laughs, very awkwardly.

I hate when he does this, I really do. "It's my fault."

His eyes go wide.

"It's not your fault!" Distress etches into every facet of his face. He looks back down into his bowl, the ramen it contains already forgotten. "You told me not to and I did anyway. I know it was the stupid thing to do, but I, I didn't want to see that; I couldn't. He would have destroyed you Sasuke, and this time I'm not sure you could've been brought back." He wipes his sleeve messily across his face. "I couldn't let that happen. Not after everything we went through. And I just ended up trading one mistake for another. But I couldn't lose you, Sasuke. Not again. Not for anything."

And there are no words to say, none that I can find through the muffled sounds of his sniffling or the tears that fall in heavy droplets into his bowl, salting it more than is necessary.

My heart aches with a guilt I have always hidden because it is so much less complicated that way. I
know that it is my fault, all of it. Maybe I don't regret it exactly, but I accept that it is there now.

He looks so miserable and I can only think of my mother, Mikoto. When I looked like that, for far less great a reason, she would fold me in her arms and smooth my hair and hum quiet words to soothe me.

I want to do the same for him, I think, though the thought is a new and strange one. Part of me wishes I could be that different person. But I can't. It’s so far beyond the walls of what I have become that I can't even recognize it. And even if part of me wants to do something, the fact of the matter is, I can’t make my body move. I wish I could say it's because of Itachi's betrayal, or the loss of my family of the emptiness left when no one was there to comfort me.

But it is none of these things.

I can't do it because I can't.

'What, no snide comments from the captive audience?'

But the audience remains silent and that is somehow worse.

I swallow and cautiously reach my hand over to his across the table. His crying stops with a short hiccupping gasp. The tension in his hand eases as he looks over to it and, very carefully, I thread my fingers through his and give it a light squeeze.

He raises his head and after a moment, gives me the smile I prefer, one that is true and honest and perhaps I can do something after all.

His digs back into his ramen as if his hunger has instantly returned, polishing it off and pulling out another from his bag, all one-handed because he refuses to let go of mine.

And the only thing I think, much as I did so long ago in Sound, is that I don't want to let go of this hand.

I don't want to know why.

But then Naruto does let go so he can attack his lunch with more enthusiasm. And that's all right because I need not hold his hand physically to still have it.

It looks like there might be yet another bowl in Naruto's bag.

Three bowls of ramen to a bag of tomatoes.

Dobe.

I take a bite of tomato, acid and juicy and ripe, and look at Naruto's big grin overflowing with noodles.

I have spent worse lunches.
There is no warning this time when she jabs the needle into my arm. The injection feels a little different from the last time; I only sense the punch of the needle, the warmth of the liquid and nothing more. Mechanically, she slaps a bandage on so hard that it stings.

Sakura neither asks nor explains as she lifts my arm, her fingers digging into the skin, and rotates the shoulder painfully. I grunt and my brow creases briefly before returning to its normal state.

She clucks her tongue disapprovingly at me. "Stand up."

I glare at her, not in the mood for this.

"Wipe that look off your face," she says as she leans towards me. "I'm not going to do anything weird, I promise. I just need to check your injuries."

My scowl grows deeper. With that expression, there's no denying who her teacher is.

Another minute of staring down at me passes before she grabs my shoulders in a futile attempt to pull me up. Without thinking, I clamp my hand on her neck and shove her back, making her stagger clumsily and crash into the short table. Gathering her dignity, she crosses her arms and taps her foot, raising a delicate eyebrow.

"Fine, then. Do it yourself."

I stare at her, my hand still at her throat, and do not back down.

Somehow, her eyebrow lifts higher.

The pace of her tapping foot increases.

With a grumble, I get to my feet with my discarded shirt clutched tightly between my fingers, and glare down at her.

"Well?" I ask irritably.

After a few seconds, she blinks. Then, with a very nervous cough, she clears the fog from her eyes, grits her jaw and makes her expression go flat.
Her hands are a bit cold and clammy when she applies pressure to my injured ribs. I inhale deeply in an attempt to calm myself, repeating over and over that this is Sakura. My breathing becomes slow and regulated and is like a metronome in my head, keeping me firmly under its control. At my sides, my fingers clench and unclench in a therapeutic habit.

I'm going to have to get used to this.

Not being able to deal with this is . . .

//Pitiful.//

Yes, I know. Shut up.

Then the kunoichi adjusts her hands to check another fracture, poking and prodding and in all ways anything but gentle.

She is upset.

She pushes her fingers especially hard onto one of my cracked ribs and I utter a flat "Ow".

Her hands immediately stop and she pulls her body away with such force that she almost misses the table she's trying to land on.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she sputters, looking down to the floor and raising her hands in a placating manner.

The rib throbs a bit more than usual.

As I watch, she drops one hand to her lap and with a massive, exasperated sigh, kneads the other into her temple.

It appears she is not actually mad at me. I hope she keeps whatever it is to herself; I have enough problems of my own.

"How do . . ." she starts.

I am so unlucky.

"How do you stand it?" Her teeth are gritted, much in the same way her fingers dig into her scalp. I wait for her explanation, but she doesn't offer one. "What?" I venture.

"What?" She yells. "Them!" Sakura throws up her head and waves her hand irrationally at the window. "How can you stand them?"

Ah, I see. I give a complacent tilt of my head.

She scowls at me. "Oh, you're just as exasperating! You're probably just too stubborn to let it get to you."

Her lips purse tightly until they are white without blood. "How am I supposed to treat you properly?" she asks, her voice pitched with irritation to an unnatural level. She begins to flail her arms erratically. "With all these people watching? And with all these damn restrictions? It's ridiculous!"

I think it's the first time I've ever heard her curse.
Suddenly, she stomps over to the window and slides it open with such vehemence that the glass cracks.

Planting her hands firmly on her hips, she shouts out into the air. "We can all sense you, you know! I thought ANBU were supposed to stay hidden!"

Maybe she forgets how much strength she has because when she slams the window shut, it vibrates for a second before the remaining glass shatters free and rains down onto the floor.

Her pink hair flies up playfully, but her pinched eyes show not even a hint of amusement.

Neither does the vein pulsing in her forehead.

"They want us to know they're there," I tell her blankly.

She gives me an especially nasty look and walks back to me, her expression changing by degrees the closer she gets.

Her eyes rove my chest, but distantly, and she absentmindedly skims her fingers over the bandage at my belly. My heart pounds a harsh alarm and I seize her wrist, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"So you saw Naruto," she says.

My hold slackens, letting the blood flow back to her hand.

//Saw him indeed. You can't seem to think of anything else.//

I scowl.

She lifts her gaze to me and the green of her eyes glows brightly. "How was he?"

I release her hand, but it still hovers oddly in the air as if stuck there.

"How do you know I saw him?"

The brightness of her eyes dims to a soft jade as she smiles this small, sad, gentle smile.

"I recognize his work."

Finally, her hand drops down to hang like a dead weight at her side. Her head tilts slightly so she can gaze at a nowhere spot somewhere in the corner of the room.

"Well, I'm the one who taught him, aren't I?"

But is a question asked of her self and not intended for answer.

She sighs once more and combs her fingers shakily through her short hair.

'He tried with Sakura.'

I grind my teeth, the jealousy gnawing like a thousand insects at the marrow of my bones.

Oblivious, she waves her hand dismissively. "I don't even know why I'm here."

Taking her gesture as a signal, I hurriedly pull the shirt over my head, a comforting barrier, and feel a bit better.
And bitter.

'It's your fault I'm like this.'

//My dear boy, you were well on your way long before I got you.//

Sakura drops herself on the table while I take the more properly intended couch. She stares off silently into a non-existent distance for a long time before turning to me.

"He's been such a crybaby lately." I don't need to ask whom she's talking about. "I swear, the tears come out at the drop of a hat." She slumps her shoulders, resting her elbows on her knees, looking more like a boy than the well-behaved lady she pretends to be. "Ever since he came back, he's pretending a lot more and doing a worse job of it. Have you noticed?"

I shrug, unconcerned. "He's depressed."

I duck, narrowly evading the fist aimed for my head.

"Of course he's depressed!" She shrieks, her voice way too high as she stands up. She stamps her foot and I hear the recognizable sound of wood splintering. "Do you know how much of the town was destroyed? How many people were killed?"

I shake my head; I'd rather not be reminded.

She frowns. "Well, Naruto knows, doesn't he? So does everyone else in the village. If you think they hated him before, you should take a good look at it now. They blame him. As if he doesn't do enough of that himself."

My brow furrows and I look away.

I had known it would be that way, known but still hoped it would be better; that it would be different.

That they would understand the difference between Naruto and Kyuubi.

//Silly boy.//

Maybe.

"It's not his fault," I say, a mixture of anger and guilt.

Sakura falls into a crouch before me and places a gentle hand on my knee. It feels a little weird, but it doesn't bother me as much as I thought it would.

"Everyone who knows him knows that." She smiles. "At least there are more of those than we thought. But as for the others . . . The only reason he's still here is because of Tsunade-shishou. She can be very formidable when she wants to be."

No kidding.

She shakes her head and when she stops, her expression turns dark. "If not for that damn Akatsuki . . . Well, at least they're gone now, right?"

Yes, but the truth of what he, my long-lost brother, did, of Naruto and of me, remains a devoutly kept secret.
And that’s precisely as it should be.

Except I know that . . .

"It's my fault."

I don't realize I've spoken aloud until Sakura's head snaps up. She narrows her eyes. "Then do something about it."

Looking to her, my pupils expand almost to ovals just shy of normal. "What am I supposed to do?"

Sakura’s eye twitches and she digs her fingernails into my skin before bolting to the other side of the room.

// Why must you cling to that useless kindness of yours? It will be your downfall, my pet. Mark my words.//

'I cling to nothing.'

//Hmmm . . .//

I don't.

With her hands fisted at her sides, Sakura flips her head back and shouts to the wall, "Why are boys such IDIOTS?"

I'm surprised she didn't make a hole in it.

In an instant, she hurtles back toward me, her hands gripping my shoulders and shoving me into the springy cushions of the couch. They swell around me as I scowl at her.

"You figure it out," she grinds through her teeth, burning with fury. "You're the only one that can. You still don't understand how much he missed you, or what he went through. No, you were too concerned with your brother and your revenge to be bothered with any of us. But you, for some stupid, mysterious reason, are the only one who can make him happy. Everyone else has tried, but it always, always, always comes back to you."

One side of her mouth turns down and she blinks furiously.

There is something off in what she's saying, but I can't quite figure it out.

The next words weigh like defeat. "Just cheer him up, OK?"

'He tried with Sakura . . .'

I am conflicted, those four simple words racing circles in my head, wanting to know and wanting to pretend I never heard them.

Even so, I hear her words too. I'm the last person who should be given the responsibility. Even I know that.

Yet I'll try.

Just so I can see him . . .

//See him indeed.//
My eyes thin to slits.

'Why can't you just go away?'

//Oh, but Sasuke-kun, your life is sooo fascinating.//

Sakura gently pokes my knee with her forefinger

"Hm?"

"I said, I heard you had some trouble in town."

She’s still here.

My eyes flash red a moment and Sakura smiles, unaffected.

"What do you mean?" I ask, disinterested.

The girl closes her eyes briefly when she shrugs and I can't help feeling like she's playing some sort of game.

"I heard you couldn't buy groceries."

My eyes constrict along with the pupils they contain and my jaw pulls taut. This is not the way to behave after asking a favor.

"Oh," I say nonchalantly. "And where did you hear this?"

"Hinata."

The Hyuuga girl.

//Did you expect her to be any different?//

Catch me in an embarrassing situation and then exploit it for fun?

//All of Konoha, all the same.//

Did I make a mistake in trusting her?

//How many times must I tell you? Trust no one but yourself. Konoha villagers are all the same. Selfish, manipulating, short-sighted, small-minded . . .//

". . . gossiping little . . ."

The echo of the slap rebounds harshly on the flimsy walls of the apartment.

"Don't you ever say that!"

I narrow my eyes, the sting of the hit still resonating over my skin.

I didn’t know I was thinking that, let alone spoke it aloud.

Shifting my gaze, I look at Sakura through the fringe of my long dark bangs. Her face is flushed red with her eyes glinting dangerously. The hand that struck me continues to tremble.

"Hinata only told me," she says, struggling for control, "Because she was worried and thought I
should know." Her eyes still glow brightly. "She didn't tell anyone else."

I continue to glare at her behind my curtain of hair.

"Don't ever talk about her that way again." Sakura's tone leaves no room for question, threatening in a way I've never heard before.

“Fine,” I say.

//Admitting you are wrong? Tch-tch-tch.//

'That was more you than me anyway.'

Although that's a far more unsettling thought.

Sakura holds my stare for a while and then nods. I'll keep my word. Carefully, Sakura lifts her hand and gently cups my throbbing cheek. I do nothing.

"You deserved that, you know," she states quietly.

"Hn." She is being too nice.

Gently, she slides her hand up to grace it over the cut through my eyebrow and then over the one on my eye making it spasm slightly.

"You know," she starts awkwardly. "These are probably part of the reason people shy away from you. You look awful."

I grumble vaguely.

She continues to trace her fingers lightly over the scars, her eyes going hazy and I get the feeling she's not looking at me anymore.

"I could fix these for you."

"Leave them."

Her head drops away, followed by her hand, and with a quiet acquiescence, she stands up. She flings her pack over her shoulder and heads to the door. Her skirt makes a quiet rustling sound when she wipes her hands over it to smooth out nonexistent wrinkles.

She's making a new and fairly obvious point not to look at me.

"So," she begins, still brushing her skirt. "I'm going to visit Ino."

The silence stretches out uncomfortably between us.

Sakura's hands have stopped and now rest stupidly on her thighs as her eyes wearily meet mine.

It seems she has come to a decision.

"Would you like to come?" She sounds uncertain.

"Has Naruto seen her yet?" The words are out before my mind has fully formed them.

"No."
My mouth pulls taut.

The idiot.

I look to the window now empty of glass. A breeze carries a few leaves inside the room and deposits them onto the floor. Sakura has been very destructive today.

I stand and turn to her as she waits with an anxious yet hopeful look on her face.

"Fine," I say. "But I want to stop someplace first."

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The Yamanaka Flower House is no more.

What stands where it once was does a poor rendition of standing. There is rubble circling it, black and crumbled, and ash flies into the air with each piece that is tossed outside. The roof has caved in, letting sunlight slip through the crack and making the inside of the shop nearly as bright as the out.

The rest of the street looks very much the same.

A piece of the flower shop goes careening over the front wall to land in front of Sakura and I with a loud thump.

Sakura looks over and smiles a little stiffly.

That's when voices from the wreckage carry out to us in street.

"No, no, not there. Move that over there. Yeah, that's better. Umm . . " Ino. Bossy but shaky, a little strained.

"Aww. I know I said I'd help out, but I haven't eaten since morning. When's my break?" Chouji. Whiny and worried, but trying to sound upbeat.

An indistinct grumble. Shikamaru. It's hard to tell what his mood is since he didn't actually say anything.

Instinctively, Sakura grabs my hand with what it intended to be encouragement and smiles at me in a way that looks she's about to be sick. "Ready?"

No, not really.

I nod gravely.

She squeezes my hand for a moment before letting go and then walks toward what I am guessing was once the door. I follow.

"Hello Ino!" Sakura yells with unconvincing brightness.

I guess they are getting along now. In a way, they remind me of Naruto and me, when I really think about it. And I have lots of room to think because the place has gone deathly quiet.

The look Ino shoots me could fry an egg.

"What is he doing here?" She barely gets the words out.
"Um, well," Sakura fidgets like a little girl, casting anxious glances between the two of us. "I just thought that . . ."

"Get him out." Ino's mouth is still hardly open, the statement jammed between her teeth.

"No, but, Ino . . ." Sakura can't seem to figure out what to say. Did she even think anything through before coming here?

The glare I'm receiving is formidable, but I’m not intimidated.

I am no coward. I do not back down.

And I came here with a purpose.

So, picking my way through the debris, I approach the blonde girl wordlessly. From the corner, I see a deep scowl mar a normally pleasant face as Chouji chomps forcefully on a bag of chips.

It takes a while for me to cross the distance, both because it's precarious and because everyone's watching.

The atmosphere crackles around me, blistered with hostility.

Ino doesn’t back up or move at all, only keeps her furious eyes on me until I stand but a meter away.

She raises an angry eyebrow in challenge.

"Can we talk?" I ask plainly, fighting to remain polite.

She doesn’t retort or yell or do anything besides stand there.

Everything has gone eerily quiet from so many people holding their breath.

Ino looks not at all inclined to change her mind.

I hate this, it feels way too much like groveling, but I made a promise to myself. I need to know where things stand. Not with me, on that score I couldn't care less. But for Naruto . . .

I barely force the word out, a mere grating whisper, yet it rings like a shot in the silence.

"Please."

I think I hurt my jaw.

The crinkling of the chip bag ceases and Sakura lets out a short gasp.

The pale blue eyes shrink slightly and then the girl begins laboriously making her way to a doorway shaped patch of sunshine in the back of the room.

I wait, not quite sure what I’m meant to do.

Ino stops and grips her hand on the broken-down counter for balance.

"Coming or not?" She spits out venomously.

She continues towards the door and, taking my cue, I follow.
The back porch of the flower shop seems oddly untouched, the sun bathing the small plot of grass much like it would any other day. Ino is sitting on the steps, looking angrily up to the sky.

After a moment, I sit down beside her.

I imagine Ino would be relieved, as would I, if I changed my mind and simply got up and walked away. But I cannot do that. She has given me this chance and it would be a crime to waste it.

I take a deep breath and just dive in.

"Have you spoken with Naruto yet?"

"No." Her answer is short, but her bottom lip is quivering.

"Are you going to?"

"What's it to you whether I do or not?" She says crossly.

I pause.

What is it to me?

I grip my knee and feel the raggedness of my nails scratch through the fabric.

"He," I chew the inside of my cheek, not knowing how to phrase this. "It wasn't him."

There's a moment's silence then, "I'm not an idiot." Her voice still has that strained, held-back quality. "I know the difference between Naruto and the Nine-tails."

Emboldened, I look at her. "Will you see him?"

She inhales shakily. "Knowing the difference and being able to deal with it are two completely different things, now aren't they?"

"But," I start sharply. "You don't blame him." It is halfway between a question and a statement.

Her head turns so slowly in my direction that it's scary. "No," she says. "I blame you."

The fury, the smoldering hatred that ignites her eyes multiplies tenfold.

I continue to stare.

"I. blame. you." Her words are harsh and defined and I know that the outbreak is coming.

It happens faster than I expected and she is up to her feet, her face a splotchy red. "You. You and your brother. The 'noble and gifted clan'." She snorts. "If it weren't for your kind, none of us would have had to go through this. We would still have homes. We could all be living our lives the way we used to. And my," she chokes up momentarily here. "My parents would still be alive!" She shakes her head irritably, her long hair flying. "No, I know whose fault it is. The Uchihas!" She hurls the word like an epithet. "Crazy older brother and self-righteous younger! We were better without you! All of this is your fault! It's a good thing the rest of the Uchihas are already dead." She drops her voice to a pitiless whisper. "Or else I'd kill them myself."

"Ino!" Sakura's shout cuts through the condemnation as she rushes onto the steps.

But I put my hand up and she halts with a sudden jerk.
I look at Ino for a moment, her face flushed, her eyes on fire with tears that cling to the corners. Everything about her posture screams of barely holding back. She knows she can’t beat me, even as I am, but soon even that knowledge won’t be enough.

There is pain in my long locked away heart at the cruel reminder of all I have lost and all I have done. And there is that familiar coiling, the twisting and churning of rage that begs to be let loose. It takes all my will to hold it in check.

This is not about me.

In a strange way, at this precise moment in time, Ino actually understands me better than anyone else, though she doesn’t realize it. She is now the mirror image of my childhood self.

And I find somehow that I don’t hate her.

She was insignificant in my life so her hatred can have little bearing on me.

//As does her life. Let us release some of the sweltering rage, my pet. Stop denying it . . . //

I let the sharingan spin down.

My insignificant parasite scoffs.

This is how it should be.

I walk past Sakura to the doorway.

"Sasuke." Sakura's whisper lingers in the heated air.

I put my hand to the doorframe and lower my head. "Just," I say, gripping the charred wood tight, causing some of it to crumble under the pressure. "Don't hate him."

Then I walk one way even as Sakura scampers the other. The only sounds I can differentiate from the incoherent mumbling of the girls are Ino's resolute "no" and "never".

I make my way back through the remnants of the toppled building. Burnt pieces of shelving hurtle towards me as Chouji throws them over his shoulder without even looking.

When I finally march outside, I take a large weary breath and start to cough.

I look in the direction of the curling smoke and see Shikamaru lounging on the ground; his head tilted back to the sky and a cigarette sticking up from his mouth.

"When did you start smoking?" I ask.

He doesn't acknowledge me, only takes a long drag from his cigarette. Not really interested anyway, I step into the street.

There is a disgusted sigh.

"Have you ever played shougi?"

I tilt my head to look at him, but if weren't for the fact that we're the only two here, I wouldn't have known he'd spoken.

"Yes," I answer carefully. "But not since I was a boy."
"Ah." He takes the cigarette from his mouth and blows a thick cloud of smoke into the air.

A long while passes before he says, "In Konoha, who would you say is the king?"

"The king?" I repeat.

He puts the cigarette back to his mouth. "Yeah, the king." He cracks an eye to look at me for the first time. "Tell me who the king is, and I'll tell you why I smoke."
The apartment is silent. As the grave, as they say.

I am sitting at the kitchen table, watching the sun slowly dip down behind the forest, painting the sky in purple and red. I wait and tap a shuriken repeatedly on the wood.

Tap-tap-tap.

Hours have passed since I first sat here, hours of revelation, hours of seething irritation.

But I can be patient.

I can be very, very patient. I have learned this.

While out with Sakura I hired a handyman to fix the damaged floor and window. He checked the bathtub, too. He was very thorough.

It's getting dark now and I begin to wonder if my roommate knows I know and is now avoiding coming home. Yeah, I doubt that.

I wait.

I can be patient, oh yes, but I am not a patient person.

Blood trickles from a cut in my left hand. I am gripping the shuriken too tightly. I only know there’s a cut because I see the blood.

There is no pain.

I drum the metal against the table.

//How very entertaining.//

Tap-tap-tap.

//It is rather fun to watch you get all wound up.//

The kitchen has gone dark.
//And what are we planning to do, hmm?//

There is now a small patch of crimson seeping into the table.

//Kill him and make your escape?//

I drop the shuriken flat, covering it with my spread fingers.

'That is your plan, not mine. I have already killed the one I wanted to.' Bile rises to the back of my throat but I force the acid down, pressing my hand harder into the cold metal. 'I don't want to kill anymore.'

Just then, I hear the sound of a key entering a lock. The door opens, a light flicks on, and a head peeks inside.

"I'm-"

The shuriken whips by his cheek, making a dull thud when it lodges into the wall.

"-home!" Kakashi finishes, unruffled.

He enters the room and shuts the door, leaving the weapon in the wall as if it were never there.

"So, Sasuke, what are you doing, sitting in the kitchen in the dark, hmm?" he says, standing lazily on the other side of the table. "Waiting for me?"

I was, of course. But, indicating a pile on the table, I ask, "What is this?"

Kakashi does not move a muscle. "Looks like trash."

My head is throbbing painfully. Delicately, I lift a corner of the rag nearest me. "Do you know where I found it?"

Nonplussed, he answers, "In the bathtub drain?"

My eye twitches. He is a child. The small bit of fabric slips from my fingers and falls noiselessly to the table. "And why would you get an apartment with an actual bath and then clog the pipes so it doesn't work?"

"Maa-maa, Sasuke. You sound like a father." Kakashi hoists himself to the table, setting his feet on the chair in front of him, and whips out his favorite Icha Icha book.

And I realize that I do sound like my father. Angrily, I drop my chin to my hand and stare at the window, but it only shows me my reflection.

"You are far too easy to trick, Sasuke."

//You are, you know.//

I glare at Kakashi in the glass.

"You wanted to see him, didn't you?" He is very calm.

I shift my eyes to look directly at him and say nothing.

"Naruto, of course." His visible eye is a happy crescent that somehow watches me.
He places a hand on my head as if I am a child, and smiles. I bat the offending thing away.

"Don't be so stubborn," he chides in a friendly manner. "I knew you would never do it of your own free will."

He sighs dramatically and leans his head back to look to the ceiling as if beseeching god for guidance.

"And what did you do? Tell Naruto that I would be there?" I accuse, half jokingly.

"No," he says. "I told Iruka."

I get to my feet, the chair making a horrible scraping sound as it pushes out behind me. My fingers grip the edge of the table, one of them smearing a trail of blood into a deep red line.

"I am not some thing you can mess with."

Kakashi turns to me, that rare serious look on his face. "You always feel better after you see him."

I scowl. "Don't play around with my life."

Kakashi looks at me a long time before responding.

"You'll get it all wrong if I don't."

There is not a trace of mockery or jest in his statement. He truly believes it.

And that, of all things, does not give him the right. If he had wanted to make sure I "didn't get it wrong", he should have done something before.

It's too late now.

"It will be how I decide it." I promise him.

And when I turn to go to my room, I see him shaking his head disgustedly, whispering, "When are you going to get it?"

----

Kakashi's words ring prophetic.

Sort of.

I didn't see Naruto yesterday and then I didn’t sleep well.

Or at all.

I just tossed and turned and nearly strangled myself with the sheets, a battle interrupted only intermittently by the checking of the clock.

11:23 am.

12:04 am.

1:16 am.

At 1:42 am, I decide I may as well give up the fruitless fight and attempt to do something
productive.

I get up to take a walk.

At 1:42 am, Konoha is deathly quiet. The streets are dark for the most part, pinpointed only by the smoky lights cast by the few establishments that thrive on late night customers.

A fair number of drunken miscreants stumble to and fro and with fake, scantily clad women draped over their arms.

I pass them by without blinking.

While I walk, I keep all my senses attuned to my surroundings; testing how many people I can pick up on my internal radar.

But my radar, such as it is, seems a little off. I am overtired from no sleep and Kakashi's words have the annoying tendency to revisit my mind at the precise moment I am trying to avoid them.

What exactly did he mean by all that? 'You'll get it wrong' he says, as if he has the faintest clue what "right" would be for me. He needs to stop interfering in my life; it's getting old fast.

'You always feel better after you see him.'

That doesn’t mean anything special.

I'm just used to him, that's all.

We spent a lot of time stuck together when I was hunting Itachi, and that was only because the dobe refused to leave me alone. It's just habit.

Nothing more.

//Ku-ku-ku. Still such a child, dear Sasuke-kun.//

I need to stop thinking about it.

Kakashi, sadistic as he is, just likes to mess with my head.; I can't let it get to me.

//But he does. They all do.//

Now I'm annoying myself.

Quite a few ninja are out and about this night, if one knows how to look. Some leap over the rooftops, a popular mode of transit, bringing missives to and from Hokage Tower, the one place of supposed repute that is still lit. Several more are crowded in alleyways and side streets, whispering secrets and intently watching the people, mostly me, who stroll by.

I close my eyes.

At the very edges of my perception, I get a vague glimmer of something, of hidden shinobi. I've always been good at that, I think. Only, it wasn't this strong or precise before, not until Orochimaru . . .

Anyway, there are three.

Three ANBU are shadowing me, their wayward charge, as I wander the night out of boredom.
Naruto could be out there too, wondering like me what Konoha can possibly have left to offer.

I stop for a moment and stare up at the stars.

Then I grimace and head back.

-----

When the clock strikes 8 o'clock, I wake again from a fitful, unproductive, and very short sleep, filled with stupid, pointless memories.

I stretch and yawn and get dressed, ruffling my hand through my hair as I step into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Sleepyhead!"

Ok, let's review.

Number 1: No one has any business being that cheery in the morning.

Number 2: What did I say about that nickname again?

"Do not give me that look. If you didn't decide to go gallivanting all over town in the middle of the night, you wouldn't be tired now." With a twinkle in his eye, he dumps a pile of golden flour disks in front of me.

"What's this?" I ask, with a disdainful curl to my lip.

"Pancakes!" He declares this as if it is a great and wonderful thing.

"I know they're pancakes!" I snap. "What are they doing here?"

"Looks like they're just sitting on a plate."

I huff irritably through my nose. "You know what I mean."

"Oh, I just thought I'd try something new and different today. You might want to try something different too." He pats his hand on my head again. "Now eat up, you're still a growing boy."

Before I have the chance to slap it away, the hand is gone.

I reluctantly take a bite of the pancake.

It's not bad.

Don't get me wrong; it's not good either. But caught under Kakashi's watchful eye, I manage to swallow it all down.

I glower, but he smiles and says, "Well, I'll be gone most of the day again. So be good."

I ignore the patronizing comment, saying instead, "Were you following me?"

The dishes rattle in the sink. "I don't have to follow you."

"Hn." I stand up and shove my hands in my pockets, going to the door even though I have no destination in mind.

"How about you check the training grounds?"
"Why?" I ask suspiciously.

But all he answers is "Have a nice day!"

-----

There he is: the kid with the stupid "sticky-up" hair and the t-shirt with the swirl on the front. I notice him all the time now. Now that I have nowhere else to look.

He is sitting on that swing again, watching all the other kids with their parents and their brothers and sisters as though it is the best thing in the world.

He bugs me.

I don't know why, he just does.

I walk up to him. He turns his face up to me and pouts, his eyes pulled into thin slits.

"What do you want?" he snarls.

His hands are gripping tight to the rope of the swing as if I'm going to steal it out from under him.

I don't say anything.

I kick him.

He just makes me so mad.

"Ow!" He grabs his shin and his lip sticks out farther. "What'd you do that for?"

I kick him again.

This time he doesn't ask, he just launches himself off the swing and uses both his hands to throw me to the ground.

I pull back my fist and punch him sharply across the jaw.

His head whips to the side for a second. Then he turns back, grabs my shoulders, and slams my back into the ground. Hard.

I lift my leg and knee him in the stomach so that he crumples, his body sliding off to the side.

I don't know why I wanted to do this. I just had the sudden desire to hurt him, and maybe get hurt myself in the process.

I stand up and glare down at him, lifting my foot, prepared to stomp down. But instead, his foot comes crashing into my knee and I stumble backwards, falling onto my backside.

He jumps again, grips my shirt and pounds a fist into my mouth, making my teeth hurt. I feel the trickle of blood where my tooth has cut my lip.

Physical pain is easier.

I reach up and start battering my fists into his chest and his face screws up in pain. He grabs my arms and uses his weight to hurl us into a roll. We tumble over and over, flying through the dirt, kicking it up everywhere and I end up on top of him, the dust sticking to my sweaty skin and
clinging to my hair. I pull my arm back and catch him squarely in the nose.

My mouth is filled with the taste of my blood and I spit to the side to empty it. When I look down, I see a line of red streaming from the kid's nostril and big, dumb, blue eyes staring at me.

But he's smiling.

I fall back onto my heels, setting him free, and he scoots away to sit a little distance apart.

I wipe the back of my arm across my mouth to clear it of blood.

He's watching me.

I don't know why, but that makes me uncomfortable, so I stand and walk away, leaving him to sit in the dirt, alone.

I don't even know his name.

But I do feel a little better.

And I think, maybe he does too.

-----

The yells and crashes and explosions of chakra reach my ears long before my feet reach the training grounds.

I stop short, a few meters from the edge and look, with some fascination, the images in front of me.

Several trees have been felled; their wooden carcasses now lay strewn over the burnt grass that leads to a giant crater. Smoke, like ghostly messengers, spiral up to join the clouds in long trailing tendrils.

The main ground is empty but for one person, Naruto, but that is quite enough. He is so involved in what he's doing that he hasn't even sensed my approach. That, or he's gotten better at hiding his reactions. Anyway, he keeps repeating the same moves again and again, keeps using his chakra as if trying to expel every last drop from his body. Kage bunshin, rasengan, dispel. Over and over in a continuous loop, yet never seeming to get any weaker. The edges of his chakra burn red, flashing out in all directions like misbegotten fireflies. He looks worn-out, his knees bent, his back curved and his breathing heavy and harsh.

Still he goes on.

Kage bunshin, rasengan, dispel.

Still I watch.

His rasengan grows skewed, splintering at the seams.

The pace slows, bit by tiny bit until at last it peters out completely.

The last time Naruto tries to form the rasengan, it fails. The ice blue energy crackles feebly for an instant and then spins out into the air, disappearing without a trace.

He smiles at it, looking relieved.
Then he falls backward, the dirt clouding up around him when he hits ground. Sweat spills from his pores and when he drags his arm across his face, I'd swear there are tears mixed in with it.

His smile looks twisted now.

He covers his eyes with his forearm, his lips parted, taking in large gulps of air as the sun bears down heavily on him.

I continue to watch, I don't know how long, until his breathing settles and finally he is at rest. Cautiously, I approach and sit down beside him, soundless as a spirit, and wait.

His lips curve up into a very slight smile.

Something must have happened to cause this. It’s early morning, but it doesn’t take long for villagers to be cruel.

//Konohagakure is always cruel.//

Maybe it’s nothing in particular. But a person doesn't try to practically kill himself with training without reason.

Time passes unmarked as we stay like this and when I reopen my eyes, Naruto is grinning up at me like an idiot.

He is still lying on the ground.

His eyes seem unnaturally blue; I don't think I've ever seen a color like that anywhere else.

A broken branch snaps off with a horrible crack, landing on the outskirts of our invisible circle, but he just smiles wider.

He is trying too hard.

I stand up and brush some of the dirt from my pants, more from habit than any real need since they will be covered in dirt again soon enough, if I have my way.

Naruto continues to stare.

I meanly narrow my eyes, even as my heart chooses this moment to lodge itself in my throat.

Looking down at him with the most bored expression I can muster, I cross my arms. "Want to spar?"

Naruto's grin bends a bit devious.

He grabs the hem of his shirt and peels it up, baring his stomach, which shines under the sun with skin golden tan and sweaty. I can see the outline of his hipbones from the way his pants are pushed low. Why does he insist on wearing such hideously orange clothes? Black might be nicer, or blue to match his eyes . . .

Almost the entirety of his seal is exposed, the extra symbols that circle the main are pulsating a deep, hypnotic, cobalt hue.

"Taijutsu?"
Startled, I blink awkwardly to his face. His one eyebrow is cocked and he's wearing a happy, satisfied smirk that is a bit disconcerting.

I return the look blandly and raise my hands to show off my newest seals that oddly resemble compasses.

"Of course."

------

"If you were hurt that bad, you should have told me!"

"Afraid to fight me again?"

"I'll take you on any time, teme!"

"Hn."

"You are such a jerk. I'm sure you're going to blame me when you get the news you're going to be incapacitated for months because you just had to pick a fight."

"I didn't know you knew such big words."

"In-ca-pa-ci-ta-ted! Jerk."

"I'm fine."

"Oh, really?"

"Stop that."

"Are you telling me that doesn't hurt? Aha! You winced. That means it hurts, stupid!"

"If you don't stop, I'll show you 'hurt'."

"Gah! You're wound's ripped open. Oh, gross, it's all like pus and stuff. Sasu-keee . . . How long ago did that happen? Why didn't you tell me?"

I groan.

Naruto pouts at me when I snatch the hem of my shirt free from his hands. Exactly what does he think he's doing in the middle of the street? His pout turns into an all-out frown as he stares at my stomach, picturing the stained bandage beneath. I look away quickly, allowing my long bangs to cover any sign of a blush.

It's embarrassing.

"It's fine, dobe," I admonish. "Stop looking at it."

"But . . ."

"You're making me uncomfortable."

For some reason, the idiot smiles.

He's right, though. All my old injuries have been strained by our little training exercise. But I knew that going in.
It’s not so bad. And despite the look on his face, Naruto does feel better. The turmoil I saw brewing in his eyes earlier is gone, at least for the moment.

"You know," he says. The day has cooled down appreciably since I left the apartment. "You didn't have to come and eat with me."

"I was hungry." This is true. "Fighting tends to do that." Idiot.

"But you don't like ramen." He is so whiny. I am sick and tired of his mood swings.

I just shrug.

He scans me a moment and then puts his hands behind his head, his lips curling up happily. "It was a great spar, though wasn't it? Just like old times."

I'm not sure I agree with either count, but I don't bother arguing the point. The past has a tendency to look brighter when the present and future are so bleak.

I take a step that sends a pain shooting from my ankle up the full length of my leg and curse irritably under my breath. My mind feels numb and my body drained, and something about that doesn't seem quite right.

"All right, c'mon," Naruto frets, slinging my right arm over his shoulder.

I jerk away. "What do you think you're doing?"

He holds tight and scowls at me. "Stop being an idiot! You're obviously hurt. So c'mon, I'll help you home."

I glare at him because I am not some weak little kid who needs help from anyone, least of all the most stupid of all shinobi. It is just when I am about to enlighten him of this fact that I notice.

It is silent in the street, too silent for the middle of the day, and the absence of sound soaks into everything like water into a sponge.

And it is not for lack of people. The road is nearly choked with them. They are everywhere I turn, staring and glaring and motionless but for the way their heads turn to follow our passage as though it is the most interesting parade to ever pass through the Konoha. More than a few mutter something to their friends or children or parents and quickly duck inside a building.

One man stands defiantly by a fruit stand, tossing a persimmon lazily in one hand, as if gauging for just the right moment to make contact.

I let my eyes spin a crimson warning and like magic, the silence of the street now bristles with fear.

They're looking at him.

Instinctively, I tighten my grip on Naruto's shoulder.

After all the sacrifices he's made, after all they've put him through and all they demand of us, this is how quickly they turn.


'Konoha . . .'
I spit to get the word cleared from my tongue.

I look to Naruto as he adamantly stares straight ahead, impassive, though the corner of his mouth twitches nervously.

I curl my arm closer to his neck and lean in, my mouth near to the line of his jaw. My dignity sticks in my throat, but I make myself speak. "You're right, Naruto. I don't feel well."

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows.

I press my hand flat to his chest. "Let's go home."

-----

'Take deep breaths, Sasuke. Very deep breaths.'

I hear another piece of china become victim to Naruto's clumsy, anxious tidying.

There's some more clatter followed by the clear ring of metal bouncing off the polished wood floor.

"Are you still here?" I roll my head onto the back of the couch and slide an eye open to look back over at him. He's standing in the middle of the kitchen holding a giant spoon like a candle and gazing at it as though it bears the only light in the world.

"Do you want some tea?" He asks of the spoon.

"Tea?" I respond, as the spoon has, for some mysterious reason, chosen to hold its tongue.

"Yeah, tea."

"Are there any dishes left?"

He scowls at the spoon, because it should not tease him like that, and his knuckles go white and pink from gripping the utensil.

"Green." It's the only tea I really like.

He smiles at the spoon for giving him an answer and then carefully puts it back in the drawer. I turn back around and stare at the blank wall in front of me, wondering, to some extent, why he's decided to annoy me more than usual by inviting invited himself in and thus forcing me to "entertain."

Yeah, I don't "entertain."

The apartment carries a strange quiet that filters through me, increasing my impatience the longer I stare at the wall.

//Such a simple boy, Sasuke-kun. Too soft. I always said you were.//

The teakettle whistles shrilly.

I hear the slosh of water and then Naruto is beside me, handing over a cup, its steam swirling sleepily to the ceiling.

I take a sip and immediately choke, splattering the liquid into the air as I shove the cup back into
Naruto's hands. "This is full of sugar, dobe!"

As I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth, his eyes go wide and he quickly takes hold of it, switching it with the other.

"Sorry, sorry! That one's mine!"

What the hell is the matter with him?

Moron.

New cup in hand, I look at the contents skeptically and then back to Naruto. He gives me a sheepish smile.

I take a taste and find to my great relief that this portion is sans sugar.

Naruto gives me a big smile as I settle into the couch, and then sits down beside me. He takes a swig from his cup, but midway through, he stops, startled, and pulls the tea away, coughing.

"Too sweet?" I tease.

Then, to my surprise, a deep blush rises to his nose and cheeks just before he whips his head away.

"No. That's not it."

Well, whatever. I take another sip from my pleasantly bitter tea and stare back at the empty wall.

//Silly, stupid boy.//

This is indescribably awkward. Sparring with Naruto is one thing, spending time with him when he is so abnormally quiet is quite another.

The nervous tension is not making anything easier.

Not that I show it, of course.

I'm good at that.

//Are you?//

'You always feel better when you see Naruto.'

Not always.

Really wishing that I were back at the training grounds instead - fighting is so much simpler than whatever the hell this is -, I pick up a stray book that was lying open on the table. My eyes scan over the words, but my brain does not bother with the laborious task of processing any. It seems boring anyway.

And it's far too difficult to concentrate, when Naruto, the king of weird, won't leave me alone.

Lately, his odd behavior has grown exponentially, starting with the first time I saw him through Orochimaru's eyes. He's more erratically emotional than I remember somehow, and he keeps watching me and acting thoughtful and . . .

I suddenly snap my head to the side as I notice Naruto's hand.
It is a sort of tingling, not-there feeling, which is why I didn't notice it before, but when I look, I see it firmly resting on my left arm.

I pull away. "What are you doing, usuratonkachi?"

The tea sways threateningly in my cup.

But he latches on stronger and moves closer, a blush staining his whiskered cheeks like a fever.

"What are you doing?" I repeat.

Not even considering the question, he wrestles both book and tea from my hands, places them on the table and shoves my left arm out of the way. Dumbfounded, I glower at him.

"You're hurt," he says by way of explanation. "You've been all twitchy and groaning since you got here; you probably didn't even realize you were doing it. I shouldn't have agreed to spar when you're not healed yet. And I can't do much, but at least this . . ."

"I'm not made from glass, moron. I don't need you to . . ."

But my breath catches when his hand sneaks below my shirt and the fingers slide over the bandage covering my newly ruptured wound.

I'm fine.

"Naruto . . ." I try to warn though it doesn't come out with quite the proper inflection.

I can't be expected to know what to say when he's acting so weird. Stop being so damn unpredictable.

He just looks at me as though I've said nothing, spreads his fingers over my wound and sends chakra, warm and healing, into my skin.

I try to assure myself that this is just medical treatment. Except Naruto has a very strange expression on his face.

OK, this feels nothing at all like medical treatment. I think I may be getting a fever too.

My right hand shoots out to grasp his arm by the elbow, the warning unmistakable. "I didn't ask for your damn help, dobe." The little frightened synapses that are lighting in my brain show themselves in my quavering voice.

His eyes never leave mine. The eyes with blue so scandalously intense . . .

"Shh," he whispers, pretending he hasn't heard me. He raises his other hand to my neck and tilts my head forward, pressing his lips to the bare skin of my forehead where a hitae-ate should be but isn't.

I'm not a five-year-old. Stop acting creepy!

It is something my mother would do, not Naruto. And yet it doesn't feel even remotely the same.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I seethe, but I can't do anything else without betraying the tremor in my limbs.

I can't seem to concentrate, my mind refusing to form cohesive thoughts. It is too concentrated on the warmth of his hand on my belly and the touch of his lips on my brow.
"It's OK," he says.

I should stop this.

It makes me feel stupid and small, the way he's speaking to me, but I . . . don't know.

I don't know what's wrong with me.

Something just seems off in the nerve endings of my brain, like the fight has been stolen from me so that my mind has ceased functioning in its regular logical parameters.

The blistered, broken skin of my stomach joins together, weaving itself into a unified whole.

Naruto's chin now leans on my forehead, his breath continually ruffling my hair. My face is tucked close to his neck so I can smell the effects of his training, sharp and pungent. The hand on my belly slides upward, over my skin, just before the fingers hover at the top seam of the binding.

Panic grips me just as my fingers grip into the hard, toned flesh of his arm. No, not panic. Irritation. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

He stops. With the hand still at the back of my neck, he maneuvers my head so he can whisper into my ear.

"It's OK. Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you."

Having him this close is not helping.

Not one bit.

I leverage my free hand into his shoulder and try to shove him off.

"Naruto," I hiss, gaining some sense back. "Stop treating me like a child."

"Mm-mm."

"Naruto, if you don't stop . . ."

He rubs his fingers deep into the base of my skull, and I gasp from the feel of it.

"If you really want me to, then do something about it."

So I drive my nails deep enough into his arm to draw blood, but he simply chuckles and lets the warning go unheeded.

"Stop." But it doesn't sound like I mean it, even to myself.

Slowly, he pulls his face from my ear, his soft cheek grazing along mine. I brace my hand hard against his shoulder joint.

"Then stop me, Sasuke," he murmurs huskily and pushes his fingers under the bandage so that there is no longer anything separating his skin from mine. He soothes his hand over the healed burn.

My breath comes out as a short, popping noise and when I open my eyes, I see that his irises have gone red like mine.
He smiles. "All better."

His breath flutters over my face, the spiced scent mixing with the sharpness of his sweat, the combination making me dizzy. It's his fault I can't seem to think straight.

I try to sneer, but it comes out all crooked.

He begins to massage his thumb deep into my scalp where head meets neck, and my eyes drift shut. My fingers still hook onto his elbow like a steel trap, but I'm no longer sure whether it's to stop him, or to stop him from leaving.

I'm a bit at a loss while he seems to know exactly what to do. But he's just healing a wound, that's all. No big deal.

It's not like anything all that different than we've been before.

Like the forest.

Like the hospital.

It doesn't have to mean anything.

I am still Uchiha Sasuke; that doesn't change.

And I can admit that I enjoy the rough, callused texture of Naruto's hands and the tingle of heat when his skin touches mine. We've known each other a long time, so . . .

"Sasuke," he whispers.

. . . it doesn't mean anything.

Neither do any of the thoughts spinning around in my head.

'He tried with me . . .' so what?

I pull on his arm, his fingers creeping close to my hipbone.

'He tried with Sakura . . .' and it didn't work.

I hear his breath hitch.

'You always feel better when you see him . . .' is there something wrong with that?

I let my grip loosen so my fingers merely cup the sharp bend of his elbow.

'You're jealous . . .' because he's my closest friend.

His hand dips further until the tips of his fingers just barely peek out from the bottom edge of the bandage. My stomach flutters.

It doesn't mean anything.

"It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you, Sasuke. You're safe."

I just can't breathe, that's all. Every time I try to catch my breath, it runs away from me.

But that has nothing at all to do with him. It's only that I'm still not properly healed.
"Sometimes kindness is just kindness," he says softly.

Kindness is always a lie.

This is different; this is dangerous. I know this and yet I do nothing to stop it.

"Sometimes people want to be close to you, just to be close to you."

My heart is pressing hard against my ribcage, beating along the cracks in my bones, but I can't seem to make it hurt. My blood pumps fast through my veins and my skin burns as his fingertips press harder into my stomach.

Something new begins to coil inside me, creeping out from the fringes of my self, where everything other than hatred and determination has been locked away.

But I just can't let go of the Uchiha Sasuke I have created.

Because he is safe too.

I still hear Naruto's strange, murmured, nervous nonsense words.

He pulls my head down to rest on his shoulder, wrapping his arm all the way around my head to tuck the hair back behind my ear. His arm slides up and around the small of my back, pulling me closer.

I feel trapped.

"I just want you to . . . trust me."

He's acting way too strange.

But I do trust him, as much as I trust anyone.

And yet still, this isn't right; this isn't me . . .

Sometimes . . . maybe . . . somehow . . .

I wish it were.

But I don't want to think about anything anymore. My mind has grown weary from circling things it doesn't comprehend.

He meddles with my reason, mixing up my thoughts and feelings so they no longer make any sense.

Naruto, Naruto, Naruto.

Every time I'm near him, all my better judgment just abandons me.

I hate that.

I hate him.

I hate not knowing who I am anymore.

His breath tickles my ear, he is so damn close, and he whispers something more, but the only words I can make out are a hushed "Sasuke, I . . ."
It is a bleary-eyed, cottony awareness that I wake up to. My mind is still blundering through the fog of unfinished dreams and half-formed thoughts, so I can't be sure that I'm actually conscious.

I'm lying on my side on the couch, alone, and the sky has gone dark though I can't really see it. All I see is the dim layout of the living room and a reflected light shining at me from the glass of the closed window.

". . . told him yet?" Is that Kakashi?

"No. Not really. Not exactly. I don't know." That voice reminds me of Naruto's, only very serious. "I'm still not sure."

I blink my eyes, but they stubbornly refuse to focus.

"You can never be sure."

"But . . . what if it's like with everyone else?" It is such a quiet, solemn voice. "They're all different now. And after I finally got some respect, I have to start all over."

"You'll earn it again. They'll understand."

I hear the strangled sniffling of tears and a doubtful "Maybe . . ."

"But that has nothing to do with him. You know that."

"Yeah, but, what if, what if," there's a suffocating pause. "What if he hates me?"

"I don't actually think that's possible."

A muted step falls on a cold, polished floor.

"Listen." Now my old teacher sounds far away and under water. My vision has gone blurry. "He's not smart about these things. And he tends to think backwards, making everything more complicated than any normal person would. But he's also changed in some way. And if you really want something, don't give up. You should know by now, things are not always what they seem, especially with him. He doesn't even understand himself."

"Yeah . . ."

"Just follow your heart, it's what you do best. . ."

-----

The air outside is cool and crisp beneath the clear night sky. I could count all the stars if I wanted to, only I don't want to.

I lean my elbows on the porch railing and a gentle breeze ruffles my hair, blocking my view for a moment.

Despite the temperate conditions, the atmosphere feels heavy and expectant.

I snarl into the distance.

"You can come down if you like," I call.
Noiselessly, someone drops to the porch behind me, his chakra rippling an announcement in the air.

I hadn't really thought my offer would be taken seriously and now that has been, I'm not sure what to do. I take a deep breath and turn to face my visitor, a small shock running through my system when I see him.

I know that face, so to speak.

"So what did you do to get stuck with such a lucrative assignment?" I drawl snidely.

The straw-haired ANBU shifts without sound and says nothing.

Turning my head to the side and leaning my elbows back on the railing behind me, I let the fall of my bangs obscure my face.

"What's your name?" I'm honestly not sure why I'm talking.

It could be because he’s a stranger and there’s a certain amount of freedom in that.

Clearly, he is not going to answer my question.

I look to him again, examine the shape and nature of his mask, and almost instantly am reminded of a toy I once owned as a boy.

"Kuma, then," I say.

He tilts his head in question, but as I am not about to tell him that I have essentially named him after what can best be described as a "teddy bear", I simply nod my head and repeat, "Kuma."

He seems unbothered by his new handle.

I give him one last, quick glance from the corner of my eye and then go back to looking off into space.

My mysterious watcher remains unmovable, untouchable, and smelling of tree sap.

"You have very interesting friends," he says out of nowhere.

"Do I?"

"Yes," he says cautiously, slowly gaining strength. "I’ve never seen such people. You’re lucky."

I laugh derisively.

"Of course," Kuma observes. "People like you never know how lucky they are."

The accusation hits me not as hard as it could have simply because I am accustomed to it.

I slide my hand down my face, so that my chin can rest neatly in the palm.

"You're wrong."

I know how lucky I am. It's the same as being unlucky.

That's why it feels wrong.
That's why I don't trust it.

That's why . . .

It scares me.

"You should . . ." he starts, but then stops abruptly.

I turn to face him, curious despite myself.

But he is staring fixedly at the porch slats, or so his mask would tell me. He then shakes his head and hoists a foot onto the side rail. His head turns in my direction, the small, beady black circle eyes searching through me as if they could see into my very soul.

"I didn't get 'stuck' with this assignment." He pauses as if debating whether to go on. "I requested it."

My eyes go a little wide as I take a step forward.

And then he is gone.
"Ne, ne, Sasuke!"

That moron is making far too much noise for a stealth mission and I will not add to the clamor.

"Hey, wait up, teme! I'm talking to you!"

I don't answer.

There is an infinitesimal moment of blissful silence.

"Ne, Sasuke?" He's a little more subdued now. "Is there anyone, you know, that you like?"

"No."

I don't miss a stride in the forest's path.

"Nobody?"

I can't tell if it's hope or disappointment that I hear, and I wouldn't know the purpose of either, so I don't dwell on it.

Again, I don't answer.

"I don't mean like like; it doesn't have to be a girl. . .not necessarily. . .I mean anyone, you know, that you don't hate, that's a friend. Or maybe more. . ."

A girl? Tch! Every girl I've ever known has been needy and whiny and clingy and annoying. This is such a pointless conversation.

I trudge on.

"We're. . .friends. . .right?"

My step falters minutely, but I valiantly gain my rhythm back and press on as though nothing has happened.

"So that means," he swallows audibly, "That means you like me, right?"
I sigh.

"Go home, Naruto."

The previous energetic jog behind me slows to a sluggish crawl.

"You," Naruto starts faintly. "Don't want me here?"

I continue walking forward, screwing up my forehead because the truth is, I don't know what I want anymore.

Besides revenge, that is.

I always want revenge.

Naruto is still following along in my tracks, but slower now, hesitant and listless.

He is maddening.

I pick up speed, my movement still silent and call out.

"If you're going to persist in following me, the least you can do is be quiet. You tromp around like a herd of elephants."

And then all I hear is the natural rustling of leaves and the birds in the trees, though I do sense a cheerful quickening in Naruto's step.

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There's a knock at the door.

I pay it no attention, but it quickly escalates to pounding, and for the sake of keeping the place intact, I go to answer it with a reluctant sigh.

Naruto stops, his fist in mid-knock, and blinks at me stupidly.

I back away from what can only be an awkward exchange.

But he just smiles, oblivious, and pipes up brightly, "I came to pick you up!"

I look at him like the idiot that he is.

Taking this as his cue, he adds, "For the party."

I shut the door and go back to the living room.

The door opens again and Naruto lets himself in, apparently unruffled and too dense to get the hint. "Well, it's not a party, really. No one would be in the mood for a celebration right now. It wouldn't seem right after everything that happened. You know, with all the destruction and all . . ." he coughs uncomfortably. "Anyway, it's more like a dinner, a get-together, a . . ."

"Gathering of idiots?" I supply.

"You're coming," he retorts, his mouth set into a thin line.

"Oh?" I limp further into the living room.
You're blushing.

'Uchihas do not blush.'

Suddenly, he is crouched by my feet, his hands cupped around the hastily taped ankle I injured yesterday. As soon as that familiar prickly sensation hits me, I yank my foot away violently. Distancing myself from a repeat of yesterday is in my best interest.

He pouts up at me. "I'm not carrying you," he says.

"Well, that's convenient, because I'm not going."

"You are."

"Don't touch me."

"Fine then, I won't, jerk. But you're still coming. Everyone will be waiting for you."

I give him a look as though slugs have just crawled out of his ears.

"OK, maybe not everyone. But Sakura will be there. And Kakashi."

I guess that's where old one-eye's been all day. "I see them all the time."

"I'm going too."

"I see you all the time."

His lower lip juts out over his upper like a spoiled child. He's acting the same way he always has. Clearly, yesterday was some sort of fluke.

"I wanna go. C'mon, Sasuke. One night, that's all I'm asking. A couple of hours. Why do you have to be so damn selfish? I really wanna go. It's not often I get the chance to see everybody, what with missions, and rebuilding and . . . and they're just trying to be supportive. We all need this, a little bit of normalcy to learn how to deal with each other again. I really need this, you know? There aren't too many places I can go these days, and actually see people who are . . . nice. I really wanna go."

"Then go. I'm not stopping you."

"I want you to go too."

Once again, he's using those horrifyingly vivid blue eyes on me, now teetering on the verge of tears. It won't work. There's no reason for me to go.

//Afraid of everything still, hmm? Well that's fine, my pet. I'll just use that to my advantage someday. Hatred suits you much better anyway.//

'I'm not listening to you anymore.'

//Ku-ku-ku.//

"C'mon, Sasuke. Please?"

Begging isn't going to sway me.
"I really wanna go," he asks once more.

Why should my decision have any impact on his? "You're old enough to go on your own, dobe."
His bearing is that of some little, lost, kicked puppy.

"I would mean a lot to me. Please?"

There's a plea in his request and that is so not a Naruto thing to do that it throws me off. He's not even using the whine he usually would, and the deeper resonance is more sincere, as if to say if I don't go, he won't either.

That he needs me.

He needs me.

And without realizing it, I have agreed and am shoved discourteously out the front door.

As we make our way to this whatever-it-is stupid thing, there's a new skip to Naruto's stride and a burst of way too happy bubbly-ness in his mood.

And no, I don't know a better way to phrase that.

His outlandish behavior ought to be drawing even more attention than usual, and that's saying a lot. But it's dark and people are too concerned with themselves at the moment to care.

I limp quietly beside Naruto, wondering how I got coerced into participating in such a ridiculous, pointless charade. Most everyone that will be there hates me. I'm not ignorant of this.

The crowd starts to thin and as it does, Naruto's easiness evaporates into the cool night air.

"Hey, Sasuke?"

He moves closer and the arms that used to be behind his head now swing at his sides. "Do you . . ." His eyes skitter around anxiously.

"Do I what? Finish a sentence, idiot."

I take my hands from my pockets and nervously run the fingers through my hair, letting the strands fall down in orderly fashion. My head falls backwards at the same time as my hands.

"Um, Sasuke, can I, uh, ask you a favor?" Naruto stops, clears his throat.

I turn to face him in the now vacant street. His eyes are fluctuating between deep blue and dark red, an effect that most often happens when his emotions run high.

The light over our heads flickers for a moment and in the flash I see a masked ninja duck out of sight.

I smirk.

Naruto moves closer to me and I cock my eyebrow in question.

"Do you remember what I asked you once?"

"No."
But he goes on, not listening. "Well, I, uh, I've had an answer for a while now, but I just want to know . . ." His gaze shifts everywhere before settling, unsettlingly, on me.

The tip of his tongue darts out to wet his lips, and after he presses them together, they shine in the sputtering light.

Slowly, Naruto brings a hand up to my face, but when the light gutters again, I recoil and quickly swat the hand away. He snatches onto my wrist and pulls back while I twist my arm outward. He torques my elbow with his other hand, catches my bad ankle with his foot, and I find myself slammed to an alley wall. My wrist is now held firmly on one side of my head while his free hand presses into the wall on the other. I am essentially trapped.

There's no possible way this would be happening if I were in top form. He's taking complete advantage of the situation.

//Is that really the truth?//

'Yes, it is. Now go away.'

//Aren't you just making excuses?//

'Leave me alone!'

Shadows cut Naruto's face in half, sharpening the rounded edges to something older and slightly sinister. His pointed bottom teeth thrust out past his top, all of them white, almost fluorescent in the darkness. Then he leans into me, his eyelids drooping over his red-tinged eyes and his jaw slowly eases back to its proper place, expelling a breath of warm air over my face.

I frown.

"Naruto . . ." I warn dangerously. "I thought you wanted to go to your little party."

I try to pull my wrist free, but not as seriously as I should.

I feel weary, with the burden of this all unknown in the air.

He is so close; I can smell the heat, and the crispness of his soap, emanating off his skin.

"Get off me, idiot. I don't have time for this shit." I struggle against his restraint, but he presses back with more force and scrapes my hand into the jagged stone wall, pinking it with blood.

"Would you just shut up for a second," he bites out testily. "You're making this more difficult than it should be. And it's not like you couldn't have known what I was doing. I mean, I've been testing you for months and you didn't seem against it or anything . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

My eyebrows pull in low and I gnash my teeth together.

After a moment, the harshness of Naruto's eyes melts into confusion. He lets free a quiet snort and a tiny smile flashes over his lips. The color of his irises softens to a deep indigo, the pupils going glassy, and the set of his jaw slackens. My taut vision begins to grow fuzzy.

His attention never wavers, if anything, it intensifies, stealing into me like a thief.

"You really are beautiful." He sighs like this is some sort of epiphany.
And then I scowl, for two reasons. Firstly, I know it's a lie. I know how to use a mirror and the reflection I've seen is too thin, too sallow, and the bruise over my face has now evolved to an unattractive melding of pea green and mustard yellow.

And secondly because,

"I'm not a girl."

He grimaces and forces out an uncomfortable laugh. "I know, OK? I know," the smile falls from his face as though the stitching has come loose. "But I don't know, either, OK?"

"That doesn't make any sense."

"I know it doesn't," he says cryptically. "But it's not like I just woke up one day and said," he stops, shakes his head. "Do you think this is easy for me? 'Cause it's not. I mean, you're a guy. A guy, but I just . . ."

He tips in more and the pupils of his eyes seem to swell unnaturally.

"I just want to try something."

I feel the heat of his breath puff over my face and fill my nostrils with a slightly sour smell. A pulse of alarm and something else mounts inside me, making my hand propel forward to the base of his skull and yank his head back.

His lips purse irritably and he tries to pull forward.

My grip tightens, my fingers latching onto hair, tugging them hard from the root, but his only reaction is to just growl at me, low and inhuman.

The grasp he has on my wrist tightens so much that I can feel the heavy bluish swelling in the fingers when the blood supply is cut off. His other hand drags slowly to my bared neck, the thumb rubbing into my jugular with nails that have gone sharp, scraping and digging into my skin. The contrast of the two movements is jarring.

My eyes instantly swirl sharingan, focused only on his and the fire that burns back at me, locked in a battle I don't think I can either win or lose. I feel trapped in the sort of push and pull of same magnets, caught in the confusion of the wanting and not wanting and the not even knowing what it is to want or not want.

"Naruto," I rasp. "Stop this."

"Stop what?" The tone is so much lower than I've heard before. The side of his mouth crooks up. "You don't really mean that, do you? Just like last night."

This is a Naruto I don't know and I suspect there's a little bit of Kyuubi's influence in there too.

My heart is hammering against my breastbone and all I can hear is our combined heavy breathing.

Naruto's leg creeps forward, brushing mine until his knee hits stone and I feel the strong flex of his muscles even through the barrier of fabric.

The heat from him is growing hotter – or is it me – and when his nail slices straight into my neck, breaking skin and letting a trickle of my warm blood slide into the curve of my collarbone, I feel it like electricity rushing up my spine.
I can't get enough air.

The smile Naruto gives me is predatory. He growls again, the sound rising in hunger from the depths of his chest and I feel the vibrations in every nerve of my body.

His other leg nudges along my other side and I realize in horror that somewhere along the way, I handed control over to him.

My hand grasps tighter and some of Naruto's hair gives way, caught between the spaces of my fingers, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"Sasuke . . ."

His voice hums deep and throaty in a way that resonates in my chest. I feel drunk, out-of control, and there's a whooshing in my ears and a swooping in my stomach and I think it's my resolve leaving.

Naruto's smile widens, baring his sharp teeth, and shoots wet, hot surges of breath over my mouth. He tastes the same as he did on our first genin day . . .

Not that I remember.

I wrench back on his hair harder than before, yet somehow he keeps getting closer and closer . . .

I wet my dry lips.

"Hey, Naruto!"

We both stop short and I wrest my hand so swiftly from his head, I'm sure I left a bald spot.

Naruto lowers his head to the side and curses unintelligibly. Then he gives me a peculiar, meaningful look before turning around to face the intruder.

Wait, "intruder"?

"Hey, Kiba!" I can hear the artificial happy smile and the underlying disappointment in his reply.

Immediately, Naruto takes off in the direction of dog boy and I finally allow myself to breathe as I sink into the shadows.

I don't think I've been seen.

Oh god I hope not. Of all people, Kiba would never leave anything alone and I really don't feel like dealing with any more idiots right now.

"What were you doing there?" Kiba cranes his neck over Naruto's shoulder, trying to get a better look, and I fall further into the darkness. "I thought you were supposed to be getting Sasuke?"

"Heh, heh, well," glossing over the first question, Naruto charges bravely on. "Sasuke said he would follow later!" He punctuates each word far too loudly to not be obvious.

Moron.

Kiba gives him a look that says he thinks Naruto has just gone crazy.
For once, I wholeheartedly concur.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing, nothing! Let's go!" Naruto shoves dog boy forward with both hands. "Boy, am I starved! I can't wait to eat!"

"You have some serious problems."

I feel myself agreeing again.

How disconcerting.

Agreeing with dog boy.

Naruto laughs it off and keeps pushing and it is not until I can no longer hear their echoes that I let myself relax.

I knock my skull against the wall and slide down until my knees meet my chest. Exhausted, unsure and so aggravated that it bites at the back of my brain, I search the far distant stars for answers.

I feel mad and humiliated and a little bit in shock.

What the hell possessed Naruto to go and complicate everything with this, this . . . idiocy! What is it about him that affects me so much that my thoughts blur into nothingness?

I should kill him.

I don't know what to do or feel or think. It's a first for me, really. My mind is both too full and too empty to make any kind of rational thought possible.

I will kill him. He has no right to make me feel this way, to feel anything.

I don't want to.

It's like I'm walking a very thin line and I don't know which side to cross over to.

But I do know one thing.

Naruto was about to kiss me.

And I was about to let him.
Well, this is exactly how I wanted to spend my evening: shunned and avoided like an infectious disease. I'm so glad I let myself be dragged here against my better judgment. Now I can be afforded the singular honor of standing alone like an idiot while that jerk races off, fraternizing with the enemy.

//This is all you could ever expect.//

Not that I care, because I certainly do not.

I adjust the collar of my shirt. He begs me to come, pleads just short of an ultimatum, and then proceeds to ignore me?

//Of course, my pet. Did you expect any different?//

'No. Yes. I don't know. Not from the rest of them. From Konoha, I don't expect anything. But from Naruto, I thought, maybe, after everything, that he would be different.'

But then why should he be?

//And that is what you deserve for always being so stubborn about your little fox.//

'But no, Naruto isn't like that. He's not like that.'

//Stop trying to convince yourself, Sasuke-kun. If that were true then why are you alone now? If you meant anything at all to him, then would he have abandoned you?//

'No. Yes. No, oh just shut up!'

Dog boy, his ever-faithful friend bug boy, and fuzzy eyebrows all move as one and converge on Naruto like a barricade. And he doesn't mind, no, of course not. He wants to be loved by everyone.

//So you see. I speak the truth. You are the one too soft and simple, denying it.//

Shino is watching me. At least I think so, though with those dark glasses it's tough to be sure. Though judging by the way Kiba had to catch his attention, I'd say it is a good bet. But Naruto doesn't know or care that I've arrived and am alone, crammed up by the buffet table. He just stands
around chatting and laughing and reciting inane stories.

He's not even looking this way!

//Jealous, jealous, jealous.//

'I am most certainly not.

'I'm pissed.

'Royally and justifiably pissed.'

I watch the spiky blond head nod excitedly as he lets out a loud, offensive, and somewhat high-pitched laugh. The others laugh right alongside him and anger pours through me, making my head hurt.

He should be looking at me.

//Sasuke, Sasuke, Sasuke, my pet. You will make yourself sick with all this envy.//

'What difference does it make? It's not like I actually want anything from him. It's just how things are supposed to be.'

//Oh?//

And it isn't like I want to attend some pointless charade of normalcy. No, what I'd really like to do is beat the living daylights out of a certain blond dimwit at the next possible opportunity.

He's not paying a lick of attention to me.

I hate him.

//Ku-ku-ku-ku. Do you now?//

"You keep staring like that and you might set something on fire."

The softness of her voice makes it hard to tell whether the girl is joking or serious. Because if I really wanted it to, my stare probably could set something on fire.

//That sounds like an entertaining way to liven up this dreary night.//

"Uchiha-san," she says politely with a smile, handing over a glass.

"Hyuuga-san."

She smiles again and briefly looks over to the crowd that has been the subject of my most recent scorn.

//As it should be. He makes you weak; he always has.//

'I don't need to be told that.'

She gestures lightly with the glass in her hand. "He l-looks much happier."

"Oh?" Of course he does, look at all the stupid little friends surrounding him.

"Y-yes." Hinata turns toward me. "More than he has in, um, a long time."
"Hn." I take a sip from the glass. My eyebrows rise slightly, but my eyes themselves stay disinterested.

"Sake," she leans in, shy and conspiratorial. "Have you e-ever had it?"

//You seem to forget yourself whenever you think of the fox. And you think of him too often.//

'No, I don't.'

//Oh really?//

I nod slowly, turning back to stare at Naruto and let the liquid wet my parched throat, falling into my empty stomach. "It was one of Orochimaru's favorites."

I say it blandly, conversationally, imparting a fact of no great importance, but she winces anyway.

"I-I see."

//You show so much emotion over him.//

'I do not. I have no need for feelings.'

//Yet you still insistently cling to them. That is why you hurt now.//

'Nothing hurts.'

Cupping both her hands protectively around her glass, Hinata takes another sip, reminding me of a little girl with a late night glass of water.

Scanning the room, I note that most of the company here is underage and those that aren't . . .

"Battle me, my rival! If I can't drink more sake than you, than I will do five hundred laps around the village! On one foot!"

"Ah." A pornographic page flips.

. . . are not exactly what I would call "mature".

//Cut your ties with the boy. His influence is not to be trusted. And it will get you killed.//

'What is that supposed to mean?'

//The council's stipulations, my dear.//

'I don't care about the stipulations.'

//And yet they are there. And you are here.//

I keep my gaze trained on Naruto: his bright eyes, even brighter clothes, and the wide strained smile. It is as I am drawn to him, incapable of looking anywhere else. I concentrate so hard that when I take another drink, I'm almost surprised when it tastes like sake.

//Yes, I wonder what that could be.//

Hinata immediately starts to worry when the unsolicited observation makes me choke. Because somehow I can still feel the effects of Naruto's nearness and the way I almost gave in to it, almost crossed that damn line I didn't even know was there until tonight.
I can still taste his breath.

//Do you see? You are always thinking of the little fox. He is wrong for you, can't you understand? He will drag you down. Do you not want to be strong, to have power?//

'I . . .'

My insides twist painfully, remembering Itachi and the moment when all my work came to fruition.

'I don't need to be strong anymore.'

//You are an avenger, Sasuke-kun. You always need to be strong.//

"Uchiha-san?" The Hyuuga girl sounds just short of terrified.

I look up, not to the girl but to the root of all these problems and notice him staring back at me. His face shows a trace of concern mingled with amusement. I hate him.

It is only a moment though before his attention is drawn back to all those other people and not on me. Nowhere near me.

I glare at him with all my hate, all my frustration and rage, because this is his fault.

Stupid Naruto.

//Indeed. Cut your ties with him and do what you must to stay in Konoha.//

'Usuratonkachi. I hate him.'

I pause.

'Wait, why do you care if I stay in Konoha?'

//No reason.//

Somehow, I doubt that.

Naruto laughs again, facing away from me so that he can talk with dog boy and bug boy and . . .

Turning around sharply, I slam my hands and the glass on the table, trying to control the wave of fury that ripples just below my surface. Hinata twitters over me, but at a safe distance, probably afraid that if she comes too close, I may spontaneously combust.

That's not too far off the mark.

//And I repeat: that would be much better than letting the fox get away with dismissing you. Where is all your overwhelming hatred?//

The girl's mouth is parted slightly as if to speak, but she doesn’t voice anything. But there are questions I don’t want asked. Recollecting myself, I stand up straight and look at the Hyuuga girl.

Really look at her.

She's pretty I suppose, with her long black hair, pale skin, and violet eyes. She has a modest temper and is gentle and shy. I guess if I really try, I could see why someone might like her. I could see Naruto liking her.
"What did you mean?" I ask her.

"W-what?" She flinches visibly, shocked by my suddenness.

"Naruto. And you." I'm not saying anything more. Even this much is degrading.

//You are too possessive when it comes to the boy. "Degrading" is definitely the correct word.//

'No one asked for your opinion.'

//It is not opinion; it is fact. If you do not like it, then change it.//

"Oh." She pushes the tips of her fingers together the way she used to do when we in class years ago, if I recall correctly. "We . . .d-dated, I guess you could say. N-not for very long. A few weeks. I already told you." She looks up at me over the crest of her eyelashes. "It was a disaster."

I nod as if this solves any of the number of things it hasn't solved. "Why?"

"He," she takes her time, choosing her next words carefully. "W-was looking for someone else."

//Why should you care? Have you forgotten how he has tricked and ignored you?//

'No, I haven't.'

//Then do something about that, retaliate for how he has treated you.//

The Hyuuga girl assesses me with nothing but pure innocence, her pupil-less violet eyes watery with concern and maybe she is genuine.

"Have you talked with Sakura?" I ask abruptly.

//Cease speaking with this girl. Have you suddenly become sociable? I think not. If so, there are more valuable matters to discuss.//

'I have no idea what you're talking about. And I don't care.'

Hinata is flustered for an instant, blinks, then answers, "N-not for a while now."

I nod and turn my head, taking another sip from my glass.

"I-I'm sorry." The girl blurts out nervously. "I didn't think that . . . I j-just thought that Sakura-chan would . . ."

"I didn't mean what I said." The liquid in the glass absorbs my words as I gaze deeply down into it.

I want to explain that it wasn't really me who said those things, but "him". "Him, him, him", who won't ever leave me alone. "Him" whom I can't get rid of.

And not me, not really.

//Are you so certain of that? The words did come from your mouth, after all. You should not go back on your word.//

'As if you know anything about reliability.'

//And you do?//
Either way, I'm not explaining it; that would be madness.

//In that, you are correct. Are you trying to get yourself killed? Silly boy.//

"Wha . . ?" The Hyuuga girl blushes, utterly confused.

I don't answer. The two people who are swiftly approaching catch my attention: Sakura, in a red dress, and Neji, with a calculated stare. Sakura beams at me as she waves, a bit surprised.

//Do not become distracted. Concentrate on the boy and how he has deceived you.//

'Leave me alone.'

Neji arrives first, placing his hand at Hinata's back and making the girl blush deeper as she crumples into his overbearing presence. He says nothing, though his stance is protective, suspicious, and he looks about ready to lead Hinata away, but a gentle brush of her hand against his arm stops him.

Interesting.

//Who cares? Concentrate on your anger, your hatred, your avenging spirit. That is what is important.//

"Sasuke," Sakura says upon arrival, saving us all from any further awkwardness. She nods politely to the two Hyuugas.

"Sakura." I am the only one to speak. Neji replies with a nod and Hinata seems to have been struck mute as she glances between the two of us, words dangling on the tip of her tongue but never given voice.

Sakura's eyes skim over me and back to the corner and I don't need to be told to know what exactly she's looking at. "I'm really glad you came."

I scowl.

Naruto doesn't care.

//Precisely, my pet. And you should pay him back for that sentiment tenfold.//

'How many times must I tell you to be quiet?'

//It will make no difference. These are your own thoughts.//

"Tch!" Sakura wags her finger at me. "It's true. You need to get out more. Staying cooped up in that apartment all the time isn't healthy. What happened to your obsession with training, anyway?"

It died alongside my brother.

//Ah, yes. And what about the perfect son? The genius, the pride of the clan. The one better than you?//

'Itachi."

//Yes, you must remember him and the way he treated you as well.//

'It doesn't matter.'
"Hn." My eyes rove over the various people milling about, like flies around sugar, buzz, buzz, buzzing, and never landing. "And being surrounded by animosity is healthy?"

'Itachi. He made me want to be like him, made me think he cared, and then . . .' 

"Well," Sakura says, thoughtfully. "Yes. It's better than doing nothing. Besides, now that you're back to stay, they'll have to get used to you eventually."

//Yes, my pet. Good, good, remember.//

Neji adds a wordless, indecisive comment.

'He hurt me. When all I wanted was for him to . . .' 

I look over to Naruto again, but he's not where he was and I can't find him as if he's just walked out of my life.

Like everyone else.

//Don't stop, now, my dearest little pet. He taunted you, said you could never surpass him, said he would spend time with you and never did, didn't he? He acted like he cared, but when the time came, he just left. Sound familiar?//

Hinata pipes up. "Th-that's right!" We all focus on the normally timid girl. "Everyone will be seeing you from now on and . . ."

I cock an eyebrow.

How naive.

I tip back the glass, letting a little trickle back over my tongue.

This is nothing but a temporary reprieve. They're all so irritably naïve.

//You were hurt time and again. But no longer. You put an end to that, didn't you?//

'Yes. I killed him. And he deserved to die. Deserved it. His last breath was wasted with lies.'

"Well, at least you're here," Sakura says with a sigh. "Even if you are being miserable."

'I won't believe it."

I give her a nasty look and she just shrugs.

//And you cut your ties with your brother, as you should with the boy. Give the fox what he deserves.//

'He deserves nothing.'

"I heard you spent some time with Naruto the other day. I don't know what you did," the pink-haired girl smiles. "But thank you."

"Whatever," I hiss, hoping that they'll think the sudden, stupid coloring to my cheeks is an effect of the alcohol.
//Not true. He has taken all that you thought you had in that simple little mind of yours and twisted it to the point of breaking.//

'Nothing's ready to break.'

//Oh, I think it is.//

Neji gives his lip a sardonic twist that I do not appreciate at all.

I look away, allowing my gaze to wander the room once more and note the way no pair of eyes meet mine but one. Wide, deep blue stares straight back into mine, completely oblivious to the commotion surrounding him.

My irises pulse angry crimson for a second and then I turn away. Naruto better have gotten the message, the "stay the hell away" couldn't be any clearer.

//Better, better. Now we are on the right track.//

I decide to leave.

Sakura glowers at me, but I turn anyway, until I am facing the exact opposite direction and, unfortunately, Naruto.

He's smiling again, that false, dopey, nervous smile, and staring rather intently at my throat and the cut he made. Reflexively, I hike up my collar as far as it will go.

I'd like to punch him.

//And back we are to him like a boomerang. Will you ever learn?//

A flush covers the bridge of his nose and his Adam's apple bobs when he swallows.

"What do you want?" I ask harshly.

He shakes his head laughs uncomfortably, and looks up to my face. "You made it."

I say nothing.

"Well, y'know, I wasn't sure you'd come after I almost . . ."

I shoot him a threateningly glare and inconspicuously stomp hard on his foot and just when he's about to complain, I think he's finally caught up with his mistake and clamps his mouth shut.

//Do you see how useless he is? How he tries to make a fool of you?//

'No, he's just an idiot, that's all.'

//Stubborn, Sasuke-kun. Still so unwisely stubborn.//

His eyes open wide when full realization at last hits him.

Dimwit.

And it doesn't stop there. Oh no, the five-steps-behind idiot begins staring at my mouth. I pull it into a thin line, accentuating each word sharply.

"What. do. you. want."
//To hurt you, of course.//

I grumble silently to myself.

//Come now, what other possible reason could he have? You can't believe anyone would ever care about you? You are nothing more than a name and a mission. No one truly knows who you are, nor do they want to.//

'He's not like that.'

//He is. Sever the ties with him before he hurts you, just like all the others.//

Naruto wakes up for the second time and then looks everywhere but at me. I can feel the six other eyes of the group watching the interchange with intense scrutiny.

Get on with it, moron!

//Even if you insist on it being unintentional, it makes little difference. All relationships only lead to pain.//

Naruto clears his throat and puts his hand on the shoulder of the guy next to him.

My blood begins to boil over. Whether because of Naruto's monumental stupidity or because of the presence of the person I inherently hate, I don't know. Either is perfectly valid.

//What did I tell you? Stop being so indulgent. This . . friendship of yours is not so important as he claims, not to him.//

"I, uh, well, you know Sai, right?" Naruto grins, so insipidly. "He just got back from a mission today, just in time to make it to the party, like you."

I remember him, of course.

We've met before in the depths of Orochimaru's lair, at the ends of lies and conspiracy. We even had a lovely conversation. 'I'm supposed to kill you,' etc, etc. Yes, the wonderful memories. And why exactly is it that Naruto thinks I'd want anything to do with this thing?

//The boy is only playing with your head. He has already made the comparison between the two of you.//

'This isn't a game!'

//Oh, but it is. You should understand that by now.//

This is my replacement. There is no reason whatsoever that I would want to know him.

And despite the rumors I've heard floating around, we do not look anything alike.

I grip the glass in my hand.

"Hello, Sasuke-kun."

I whip my head to Naruto. What the fuck, usuratonkachi?

//First move. Don't you see what he's doing?//
Naruto smiles at me as if this makes anything better. Don't even think about it, I'm not falling for that cute little grin.

Wait a minute . . .

//Second move.//

My serpentine pupils shrink the way they sometimes do and I blink.

"I see you still wear the badge of your stupidity and cowardice." Sai, that useless waste of air, gives me a vapid smile and taps the skin directly under his eye.

The cup in my hand shatters, showering the three of us in glass and the tiny remnants of alcohol.

Sakura groans. Hinata lets out a short gasp and Neji only hums curiously under his breath.

//Ku-ku-ku-ku! Now remember, Sasuke-kun. What is it?//

'What is what?'

I spare one last menacing look for Naruto, shake my hand free of liquid, now tinted slightly pink with blood, and storm out.

I hear Sakura call after me, but I don't care. I ignore both her and the gallery of looks I'm receiving.

"Naruto, you idiot!" Sakura shrieks.

"What- OW!"

//The truths you have learned.//

'About what?'

//Stop behaving so dense. It does not befit you. Trust, compassion, camaraderie.//

There are all just illusions.

-----

The cold night air hits me like a lash and aggravates the already stinging lattice of cuts in my palm.

I stalk away from the pointlessness, content with anger as my sole companion, and head back to Kakashi's apartment. I have had more than my fill of socialization.

'They are all things I do not need. Trust is always betrayed. Bonds only lead to pain.'

//Finish what you started those three years ago. Any way you can. Just get away from the boy.//

"Wait! Sasuke!" I hear the soft padding of Sakura's feet, which just goes to show how anxious she is.

'I should never have come back. It ends now. This time I'll make sure to burn my ties. I do not need them.'

//Precisely. Good, good. And why is that?//

"Will you wait a minute!" Sakura grabs my arm tightly. "Come back inside, please?" Her green
eyes glow in the darkened street. "You came all this way, didn't you? Just stay a while. You know how Naruto is, he never thinks things through."

No, he never thinks period.

'Everyone I cared about has turned on me. Died, killed, abandoned, tricked. '

"Forget it, Sakura," A familiar male voice says. "That's just how he is. If he's not the center of attention, he gets all moody."

'Lied.'

"Naruto!" Sakura yells.

"No, you're wrong, Sakura. He's the one who stormed out like a spoiled brat, not me."

Slowly, I rotate my head and see Naruto in his stupid orange jacket with his stupid blond hair, as he leans against the side of the building, glaring at me with those stupid blue eyes.

"Excuse me?" I ask dangerously.

"You heard me," he answers. "The great Uchiha Sasuke always has to be the best, the strongest, the apple of everyone's eye. But now that you're not so special anymore, you get all upset. You're not the only person in the world, you know. So stop acting like an asshole."

I throw Sakura away from me with a force so unexpected that she stumbles away with a gasp.

"Me?" He has got to be kidding. "You're the one who asked me, no, fucking begged me to come. If you'll recall, I didn't want anything to do with this."

//That's right. Hold tight to your anger. Rid yourself of these weaknesses//

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Naruto scoffs. "I didn't realize getting out of the house was such a trial."

//He made you care. And then abused it. Just like your brother did.//

Naruto jerks his head and glances to the side. "I don't know why I bother even trying with you."

//Just like Itachi.//

Naruto sticks out his fat lower lip in a pout, looking at me from the corner of his eyes as if he is blameless.

'Itachi.

'All I wanted was to be like him, to be seen by him, to be cared for by him, but all he did was lie to me and ignore me and destroy my life, abandoning me . . .'

There's no way he's playing the wounded party here. He has no right.

//And what of the fox? He wheedled his way into your supposedly cold heart and then trampled all over it at the first opportunity.//

'He did. '

//Make him pay. Make it stop. Isn't that what you want? To make it stop?//
'Yes.'

Without any warning, I allow the first wave of my anger fly forth, sprinting forward and ramming my fist into Naruto's face. I connect with his jaw and feel the satisfying crunch of bone beneath my knuckles.

He takes a step back.

"What was that for, teme?" He yells, affronted.

"Maybe you should have dodged it, loser!" I challenge.

//He tricked you, my pet. Used you like a pawn. What does that make him?//

'It makes him nothing. I don't want any sort of connection. I will sever it.'

He's got that annoying, self-righteous expression on his face and it just makes me want to hit him more, to beat the arrogance right off him.

//No less than he deserves.//

He has no business acting innocent.

He started it.

The remainder of my fury washes over my body like a second skin. It is a protection I am intimately familiar with.

"You're being a bastard," Naruto says, as if he has done nothing to warrant my anger.

The rage bubbles outward, infusing my chakra, and I attack.

"Better than being you," I spit out, aiming a kick to his midsection.

He grabs my ankle and drives his bent elbow down into my knee and I feel the flash of pain, but almost immediately it is gone. He cannot hurt me.

//Yet hurt you he does. Time and again. When all you wanted was to care and be cared for, yes? But the only thing it leads to is pain. Does that not remind you of someone else?//

'Naruto . . .' 

I block the punch he throws and use the same move he did, clutching his wrist. But he twists backwards, thrusting his leg out behind him and snapping into one of my cracked ribs. A searing pain flares through my body like fire.

His strong hand slips from my grasp.

Sakura is screaming somewhere, but the outside world has become shrouded in a thick, impenetrable fog. All except Naruto.

//If he really cared, would he have abandoned you in favor of all his other little friends, hmm? Would he have told you he wanted to spend time with you and then leave you?//

'Naruto is . . .'
I launch forward again, pulling out a kunai I stole from Kakashi and aiming for Naruto's throat. He deftly reaches his hands back over his head and flips over to land on his feet.

//Is he not the cruelest of them all? Is he not even worse than another who made you care and hope only to leave you all alone?//

'Naruto is . . .'

//Yesss?//

He begins a set of seals, but I'm not letting him take advantage of any of his unlimited, expanding chakra. A carefully trained barrage of shuriken (also pilfered form Kakashi) stops him as he dives clear and ends up banging his shoulder into a small tree trunk.

'Naruto is . . .'

//He feigned kindness, then almost killed you. And will certainly abandon you. It is the same.//

Naruto's eyes narrow at me, threatening retribution.

'Naruto is . . .'

//He will betray you, toss you aside like nothing. He does not think you are worth it.//

Even after all these years, the pain is still sharp.

//He will leave you. All alone and lonely. He will hurt you.//

'Naruto is . . .'

//He called you his brother.//

He stands up, his eyes a cold, pitiless void. Black like death and emptiness. There's a piercing pang in my heart because I have seen those eyes before.

//So who does that make him?//

I have seen those eyes before in the face of a murderer, his sword dripping blood, and the bodies of the dead strewn carelessly around him like dolls.

I know that darkness.

I know this feeling.

'Naruto is . . . Itachi.'

//Ku-ku-ku-ku-ku.//

The blond soars over my head, pitching a torrent of kunai down on me like a sudden fall of hail. I deflect them with a knife of my own and the sharp clang of metal sounds like the chiming of bells.

'They are the same. They make me think they care and then just leave me behind.'

The moon shines behind him from where he stands on the roof, casting his face in shadow as he looks down on me and he has no right to look down on me!

"Sasuke, forgive me, I will teach you next time." As if I could ever forgive him, there never was a
"next time".

"Let's be friends, Sasuke, because we'll always be friends. I would do anything to get you back. And yet at the first chance, he teases and discards me.

//Yes, my pet. Your "brothers".//

There's a big, indistinguishable blur that surrounds the building and I think it might be the superfluous party attendees.

"What is your problem?" Naruto shouts down stupidly.

"You!" In one great leap, I join him on the rooftop.

The usuratonkachi has the gall to turn to me with that condescending sneer on his face.

//Itachi. And now Naruto.//

'Yes. He makes me believe that he is different, makes me believe that he cares, that he . . . but no, it was a lie. A twisted, fucked-up joke for him to play on me. A prank, like all the other pranks he pulled when he was a kid.

'If not for Kiba . . .'

//Yes, he interrupted the fox's little plan, didn't he?//

'But wait . . .'

//Hmm?//

"Because I asked you to come tonight?" Naruto screams in outrage.

There's another flurry of fists and feet and knife and star and I have found my regular rhythm of dodge and attack, of fighting against Naruto's regular moves.

"What, did I interrupt your important little brooding session?"

Something doesn't feel right, as if my mind is not my own, melted and molded into something else.

//Do you not trust your own thoughts?//

'Yes, but no, this is Naruto. Stupid, maybe. Thoughtless, definitely. But not cunning, not cruel. That's not him.'

//He cornered you, mocked you and then abandoned you, cast you aside like trash. What is that if not cruel?//

I don't answer and I feel oddly separate from myself, the link between mind and body eroding with my inability to focus. My bad ankle starts to throb again and slides on the roofing tile. Naruto takes the opportunity to project forward; digging his callused fingers deep into my shoulders, and knocks the both of us off the building.

The wind whistles shrilly in my ears as we descend.

'No, wait. If Naruto wanted to play a joke, wouldn't it have been better to let Kiba see? He would have a witness to my humiliation; they could've laughed at me right there.'
My vision is turning blue and black.

//Do not be fooled. That wasn't part of the plan.//

'But wait a minute! I don't know. Let me think.'

We collide with a wooden table and it ruptures into a thousand pieces beneath us, the splinters of wood flying everywhere.

His chest meets roughly with mine and his hands slip free.

//You do not need to think. You already know. There is no such thing as kindness, as closeness for its own sake. He is a liar. There is always a motive.//

Naruto quickly recovers, seizes my shirt and throws me against a nearby wall. Using the wall for balance, I kick forward, pushing hard on his hipbone so that he releases me and trips back several steps.

//Kindness is only there to hurt you. And he manipulates it well.//

'But, wait . . . no. Naruto wouldn't. He-he wouldn't!'

His tanned fist flies at me, the knuckles white against the darker skin, his mouth pulled into a grimace. "God forbid anyone ask you for anything that doesn't completely revolve around you!"

I stare at him.

The light of the moon reflects eerily off the sheen of sweat that coats him.

//Oh? Then why did he introduce you to that . . . boy?//

I shake my head, trying to clear it.

//That boy. That reminder of how much he doesn't need you. He already has someone to take your place. Why else would he show him to you?//

'Yes. Right.'

I dart out of the way and Naruto's fist meets only rock, the dust of his impact snowing down on him in gray and tan. When the silt dissipates, he whips around to look at me and the blue of his eyes is startling against the dust that sticks to his face.

'He doesn't need me; he doesn't really care. He can't. I'm nothing more than some pet project.'

//Yes, yes, my dear. Do not lose your focus now, when we are so close . . . //

In a brief instant, my eyes blur and in the darkness Naruto's features change, his eyes deepening from blue to a bottomless, unforgiving black.

'I am the one in control of my life, not him. He doesn't have the right to try and undermine that, to confuse me, and make me seem weak.'

//But you were not in control, were you? He was manipulative, just like your brother. Because he can be.//

I knock the feet out from under him, but as he falls backward and hits ground, the image disappears
in a puff of smoke.

When did he make that clone?

'I thought Naruto was different.'

//But he isn't.//

'I wanted to trust him, but . . . no.'

The shadow reveals itself an instant before he attempts to strike, attacking from behind, in what should be a blind spot. I grab a fallen kunai from the ground and whirl around. The edge of the weapon is like a sword and slashes up his arm in one smooth motion.

It slices through his tough exterior effortlessly.

//He is worse.//

'It hurts.'

He lets the blood trickle over his hands and drip from his fingertips.

His eyes show me nothing but a deep-seeded contempt, the intense indigo in sharp contrast to the brightness of blood.

I'm breathing hard.

"Bastard," he hisses.

//He will be like all the others. You will be alone again.//

'It hurts.'

His chest heaves harshly up and down as his shoulders hunch over like an animal preparing to charge. Repeatedly, his fingers curl into fists and I notice the play of joint and bone and skin.

A rivulet of sweat slides down the side of his face, gleaming in the dim light and clearing a small line to reveal the tanned color beneath.

The seething chakra that surges off him is warm like blood.

//Hurt him back, Sasuke-kun.//

My chest feels tight as deep red hatred swirls toward me.

'It wasn't supposed to be like this.'

//But it is.//

'It hurts.'

//Yess . . .//

Naruto takes a half step back, the power flooding through him now, and then he kicks off the ground, speeding in my direction.

'I'm sick and tired of hurting.'
He will leave you."

'No. I’ll kill him first. I will; kill him and be done with it and then all of this will go away.’

"Lovely, my pet. This is how you should be."

I meet him head on and the force of our collision knocks the breath from my body and expels his over me. Its sourness now hides a bittersweet smell.

We crash down but our movement continues, rolling over and over in the dirt and dust and splintered wood of our battle.

"Destroy him so he cannot hurt you anymore."

‘He deserves it. For using me. For making me feel.’

He even had the audacity to claim he understands.

"You can never understand!"

We finally come to a stop in the center of the street and the gathering crowd emits a constant drone that thrums in the open air. All of them there. All of them for him.

All of them so much more important than me.

I straddle his hips and hold him down with one hand firmly pressed to his ribcage.

"Then tell me! What the hell is your problem?" Naruto screams hotly into my face, clutching tight to the front of my shirt.

The force of his anger wafts over me, the sharp scent of his sweat fills my nostrils.

"The problem is . . ." I say, pulling back my shaking fist, my heart beating fast. "The problem is, you dragged me here and then just ditched me to go with all your goddamned friends!"

"Wha . . ." His big blue eyes blink at me in the complete absence of sense.

"Destroy it, my dearest. Rid yourself of the weakness you still cling to. Shred that connection until there is nothing left."

And I didn't know I was going to say that, but it's out now. And it's the truth and I just don't care. I just want it to be over. I am tired of feelings and pain and rejection and I don't want to feel anything anymore.

My hand hurls forward, smashing directly into his face. And then again and again, over like an endless cycle and I can't stop, the aching rage has taken control. The burn of it is flowing down through me like the tears I won't shed and filters to the clenched fingers of my fist. With each successive hit, I hear the hard thud of his head on ground and feel the blood of his face and my hand mix together, everything going red, red, red . . .

Then Naruto's fingers tighten on my shirt and he yanks down, crashing his forehead against mine. For a fleeting moment, I am blinded and I arch out of the way, trying to avoid a second attack. My heart is heavy in my chest, weighing me down with its painful bitterness. And then we are both on our feet, glaring at each other and there have to be people milling in the blur around us but they do nothing and I can't see them. All I see is him.
The left side of his face drips blood, the eye halfway shut, and his lips twist into the sick semblance of a smile. His teeth are blindingly white within the outline of his dirt-smudged face.

He pulls back slightly and then darts forward just as I do the same . . .

The impact sends me flying backward, flipping over my feet until I come to a halt flat on my back in the dirt.

"Stop it, you two! Now!"

Sakura stands in the space between us, breathing like she's just run a marathon. She slowly puts the arm that hit me the leg that kicked Naruto back to their proper places. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, a drop of our blended blood slips past my lips. I haul myself to my feet.

"Please," Sakura implores. "I don't want to hurt you. But I will, if it will prevent you two from hurting each other."

She looks so small standing there.

Beyond her is Naruto, across the vast expanse, a distance I cannot possibly cross, and he lets the splattered blood on his face dry like the evidence of my crime.

//No, it is no crime; it is justice. Fair and right for what he has done. For what he will inevitably do! Be rid of him. If you had done so with your brother, you would not be doubting it now.//

Naruto's irises flash alternately bright and deep.

I can see the anger welling clearly beneath his bruised cheek. But under that there's hurt and confusion and . . .

Itachi never looked like that.

//No! No, no! We were so close!//

The solid ground I stood on crumbles beneath me.

What have I done?

What have I done?

The voice in my head goes suddenly silent.

My world falls in on itself, crushing me beneath what has become a mix of reality and lies.

I am weak. Weak and lost and I can feel the shame of it in my bones.

Naruto is radiating rage, but he is still Naruto. I sense no trace of the fox.

Wanting nothing more than to flee, I spin on my heel and shove my hands in my pockets to disguise the trembling. This was a terrible mistake and I just sat back and let it happen like the child my brother always said I was.

But I won't apologize. Uchiha Sasuke never apologizes.
That is how I have made him.
I feel Naruto's presence smoldering behind me.
I'm just not ready for this.
My short life is complicated enough and I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it.
I'm not ready.
I start to walk away.
"Sasuke!"
"Let him go, Sakura," Naruto says bitterly, a small crack in his voice. "We don't want anyone like him here anyway."
And I just keep walking as if that didn't hurt.
There is not the slightest rustle of wind when Kuma lands in front of me. Sudden appearances and disappearances are a common occurrence in Konoha, but I falter when I stop because my nerves are still raw.

I lean my weight back on one foot and stare at him in his inscrutable mask.

"You need to be more careful," he says blandly as if we are talking over breakfast.

I lift an eyebrow.

"All these things with the Uzumaki kid. Just now, the alley, yesterday . . . They do not trust either of you or your relationship. I don't know how much more you can get away with before we'll be forced to inform the council."

Then, as instantly as he came, he is gone.

As if the situation weren't complicated enough.

The council of elders.

I take a deep breath, a bit more shaken than I'd like to admit, my heart thumping loudly in my ears and my hands clutching tight to the insides of my pockets.

The shadows in the street now seem ominous.

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The knock at the door is soft, almost timid.

Which means it isn't anyone I know.

"Sasuke?"

I stand corrected. I’m not in the mood for company. Kuma’s words weigh on me.

I should stay away from Naruto, there’s no debate about it. For both our sakes.
"Sasuke, let me in."

Perhaps I should have.

But if that’s the case, there’s no reason left for me to stay. After tonight, there are no pieces left to glue back together.

It's all gone.

Maybe I should go too.

"I know you're in there."

It wouldn't be any great loss. Konoha might grieve over the sharingan, but we were already a dying clan.

"I'm fully capable of breaking this door down."

And I’m not concerned with their regrets.

If Naruto hadn't decided to screw everything up, we could've stayed friends, or brothers, or whatever he wants to name it, and the time spent until my last days at least would have been simple.

"I'm giving you to the count of three and then the door's coming down. One . . . two . . ."

"Allow me."

"Kakashi-sensei!"

The lock clicks and the door swings open, ushering the two of them into the sheltered confines of my contemplation. Sakura looks around a little anxiously, unable to see me directly, while Kakashi quietly pockets his keys and heads straight in my direction. He sits down on the couch but doesn't speak, not even when Sakura finally joins us, crouching down on the rug in front of me.

"Sasuke?" She purses her lips, but I don't bother actually looking at her. "What is your problem?" She suddenly snaps. My forehead knits sternly. "Do you want to get killed or something? Or is it Naruto you want thrown into prison? Which is it? Because starting a fight in the middle of Konoha is about the quickest path to both."

I don't need salt rubbed into the wound.

"The fox didn't show," I inform her flatly. "It's fine."

Her big green eyes blink in confusion before glancing up to Kakashi. She squints irritably, an indication that he's either grinning like a madman or not paying attention at all. Hard to tell.

She looks back to me, expression unchanging, and sighs. "Let me see that."

I have no idea what she's talking about.

She sighs again, dramatically this time, because of the heaviness of her burden. She takes my left hand and begins to superficially inspect the palm. "Ugh," she says eloquently. "How can you always fight so recklessly like this? Doesn't this hurt at all?"

I watch as she sets to the laboriously task of picking out the shards of glass embedded in my hand.
"Not anymore."

Sakura tuts at me and shakes her head, resuming her work. "That was really stupid, you know." She places a tiny shard on the table beside her. "And you should definitely know by now that Naruto's not the brightest when it comes to tact."

I snort.

That isn't the main problem here.

"He just wanted to include you, that's all. To introduce you to all his friends." Her small, deft fingers continue to pluck the glass piece by tiny piece from my palm. "It's probably his way of assuring that you're really home. He doesn't think about the consequences of his actions. It's always been act first, think later with him. God! How many pieces do you have in here?"

"Hn."

Silently, she removes the last piece and pulls out some gauze from the apparent endless supply in her ready-pack and cleans the wounds, patting them gently with the cloth.

"Well, at least none of them are very deep."

"Hn."

She pats my hand a bit affectionately and looks up. She raises a her fingers and gently brushes the bangs from my eyes, a dreamy, unreadable expression on her face. I let her do this, but when she strays too far, the tip of her nails grazing my cheek, I push her away. She just smiles then and runs her fingers nervously through the ends of her own hair as if nothing has happened. "What a mess," she moans and promptly collapses onto the floor.

I hear a sheet of paper flip, followed by a disapproving growl from Sakura. Her scowl clearly says 'do something!' to the man sitting behind me, even I can see that.

The paper simply rustles again.

Sakura's look becomes downright scary.

But everything's already destroyed.

Everything.

"For what it's worth," Kakashi says idly after a while. "He didn't much like him when they first met."

Sakura looks at me and nods her head a tad too vigorously. "That's right! He couldn't stand Sai when we first met. We even had a discussion, Naruto and I, about how similar you two were," I shoot her a glare that shows her how much I don't appreciate the comparison, "And he just went on about how you two didn't look at all alike and how much better looking you were and wait, scratch that, forget I said that last part!" Sakura blushes a color remarkably like her hair.

Kakashi chuckles softly behind me.

I quickly get to my feet and turn around, keeping my head lowered to hide my face.

"I'm going to bed."
"Oh, all right," Sakura replies dazedly. "Good night."

I stomp off to my cell, a.k.a. my room, hearing Kakashi laugh, sigh, and turn another page in his book.

But they both seem to be forgetting something.

Naruto couldn't stand me when we first met either.

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I'm trying to deal with a little of the frustration from the past few days by laying waste to some inanimate objects in the training fields. There are some certain people that I would prefer to do this to, but we can't have everything.

I am right in the middle of smashing a tree when Kotetsu suddenly drops down out of nowhere.

"The Hokage wishes to see you."

And then he is gone.

Apparently he can't stomach being in my presence for more than a millisecond.

I expel a heavy breath of air.

Once I'm in the village proper, I take one jump up to the rooftops and make my way to Hokage Tower.

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The fifth Hokage of Konohagakure considers me a long while as I stand stoically in front of her. Being the leader of the village and therefore supposedly the strongest, the woman exudes a massive chakra that permeates the air. But at the moment, it's the student flanking her that seems the most formidable. The glare Sakura is sending into the open space charges it with hostility.

Tsunade carefully folds her hands on the desk, pinning her light brown eyes on me. "Uchiha-san," she says formally. "It has been brought to my attention that you had an altercation the other day."

It's not a question, so I don't say anything.

"Is this true?"

"Yes."

She raises an eyebrow.

"And you do recall that you are on probation until such time that it has been declared otherwise?"

"Yes."

"So then, if you are aware of the delicate nature of the situation, would you care to explain why you would risk it all by instigating a meaningless fight?"

"He was being annoying."

"Ah, yes." The woman has a mischievous bend to her lip that I don't much like.
But then, Kuma's warning last night referred only to the council's lack of information, not the Hokage's. "And you remember the discussion we had the last time you were in my office?"

As if I could forget. "Yes."

"Hm." She carelessly shoves a few papers to the corner of her desk. "And do you not think that your actions may have endangered your situation?"

Sakura's eyes shift for the first time, glancing quickly to her teacher with a twitch and then, deciding better of it, goes back to staring into the air.

"Those were his actions." The vagueness on both our parts could refer to almost anything.

Sakura is watching me now, her forehead knit in confusion as if she is suspects something in our evasiveness.

I transfer my weight to my good ankle since the sprained one is smarting.

"Very well," Tsunade says seriously. "But remember, the decision is always yours. Make certain it is the right one for you. There is time yet."

I narrow my golden snake eyes and wonder just what her angle is here. It's almost as if she's pushing me towards... but that would be disastrous.

//Surely there is something in it for her.//

I'm ignoring the little parasite; he is nothing but trouble.

'Practice, Sasuke. Find your center. This is what that training is for.'

//Not very nice, Sasuke-kun.//

"In any event," the woman continues. "It has been suggested to me that perhaps you are feeling a little confined."

There's a news flash.

"And also that keeping a ninja confined is never a good idea. It tends to make them restless and leads to stupid mistakes like the one that occurred the other night."

She has made the subtle shift to concentrate on the fight.

"With this in mind, I have approached the council of elders and have convinced them that a speeding up of the process is in order."

The elders are involved and somehow I'm not getting more than a talking. Wonders never cease.

"You were not scheduled to be joining a genin team until next term, after all your injuries had healed naturally and the elders were satisfied that you were not going to flee or turn traitor again. But, as it happens, it looks like you require a bit more to occupy your time than sitting around Kakashi's apartment."

"Which means what?" I struggle to speak with civility.

She gives me a tiny smile. "Which means that you will be joining a genin team sooner than we expected. This term in fact, set to begin in a week's time."

She glosses over that little bit of news as
it were nothing. "It is a fortunate turn of events, as there was an uneven number of genin and we were considering a team of two, which is not an ideal situation. But with you now available, we will have just the right amount. And better yet, according to Iruka-san, there are two perfectly suited to you. Your jounin leader has even agreed to the change in plans. Yes, all the pieces have fallen perfectly into place."

Oh, happy day. I get to team up with a couple of rug rats. I feel like a pawn in a giant chess game.

Tsunade gives me another of those Cheshire grins and says simply, "Sakura."

The pink haired girl steps forward. "Yes, Tsunade-sama?"

"Go with him. You know what to do. Make sure he is in full working order for next week."

"Yes, Tsunade-sama."

Sakura walks towards me, barely giving me a glance and, keeping the tight line of her lip, moves to the door.

"You are dismissed." The Hokage states plainly and looks to her papers, with no real intention of actually addressing them.

Sakura and her barely pent-up rage are waiting for me by the stairs. She gives me a curt nod and walks off and I can only assume that I am meant to follow.

It doesn't take long to reach our destination and the hospital materializes suddenly on the side of the street.

"Haruno Sakura," the pink kunoichi declares upon entering the building and waltzing up to the front desk. "I need to use . . ."

But I don't listen to the remainder of the conversation. I'm too busy glaring at the nurse behind the counter that won't take her eyes off me.

Sakura suddenly re-enters my vision. "Come on."

I follow as if I was attentive the whole time.

After a rather mazelike trek, Sakura guides me into an empty room somewhere on the second floor. Fully prepared this time for her to work her medical ninjutsu and be done with it, I sit on the crisply made examination table and wait.

//An improvement, I suppose. I taught you to be aware of reality, Sasuke-kun, not afraid of it.//

'I am not afraid and I don't care for your approval.'

Damn it! I don't want to be talking to him!

//Ku-ku-ku.//

"Bunch of short-sighted, self-important, meddling old hags," Sakura grumbles.

I smirk to myself and watch as she digs furiously through a medical cart. After a while, she leans on it, nothing in her hands, and heaves a sigh.
"Do you know . . ." she shakes her head, turns around.

"Do you know what they had me doing? What they wanted me to do?"

She stands in front of me and begins to assess the damage, the deeper explanation for what she's said not offered. Instead, she just continues to murmur incoherent and irate words as she sets to the time-consuming process of healing all my little cuts and breaks and dislocations.

Despite my efforts, I still feel the anxiety seep through my veins. My body automatically braces for the pain it anticipates. I clench my hands into fists, irritated, and focus on the action to lure my mind from other things. It is so stupid.

I know the pain will not come.

I feel the gentle shift of bones as she mends my ribs and arm, which I didn't even know was fractured. The experience feels entirely different from Naruto's clumsy attempts. Sakura's chakra is sure and attentive, a sort of soft, gentle warmth that eases past the layers of skin.

This is what a skilled healer can do.

She moves to my shoulders, and that takes some time as the joint has been wrong since I left the prison.

With adequate concentration, the nearness of her, the touch of her hand and chakra does not bother me too much. It isn't comfortable, but I don't have the overwhelming desire to stab her either. It might be because she is angry and somehow anger is safer, more understandable.

The medic-nin runs her fingers over the healed portion of my stomach and clucks her tongue. Her fingers linger there a moment, her eyes taking on that distant look she now sometimes wears, before her lips turn up into a sad smile. She trails her hand affectionately over the healed skin, but then just moves on. Gathering her chakra, she mends the sprained ankle, which takes considerably longer than I would have thought, then to my surprise, moves to the other leg, spending a great deal of time on the shin and knee.

Her head continues to shake in that quiet, disapproving way as she carefully attends to my right hand.

"It was too strong," she mumbles. "I knew it. Way too strong. Doing more harm than good."

I flex my fingers minutely, wordlessly getting her attention. She lifts her head with some displeasure and as I look at her blankly, she thins her lips.

"What?" I ask.

"You can't feel that?" When I indicate that I haven't a clue what she's talking about, she lowers her head and repeats her cryptic statement. "It was way too strong." Still she shakes her head. "You have more injuries than you should and they're mostly worse than they should be. But when I'm forbidden to administer a proper check-up, I don't know how I'm expected to know this."

She presses her fingers to the bare skin of my arm.

"What do you mean?" I ask, for no particular reason. "The only thing that's really been bothering me a lot lately is my sprained ankle."

She looks up at me incredulously. "Sprained? Sasuke, that ankle was broken."
I give her a skeptical look in return. That isn't possible. I've had broken bones before, they don't feel like that. I wouldn't have been able to walk.

She starts explaining. "They had me basically numbing you, in the same way a soldier pill works, but slightly less controlled and longer lasting. So that you wouldn't feel pain, or at least not much. Which is beneficial on the surface . . ." she moves to my left arm, pauses. "Too strong."

Her words fade into the crinkled confusion of her face. Her eyes are very . . . green. Sort of the way Naruto's eyes are very blue. I'd never really noticed before, but they're kind of nice.

She guides her chakra-infused hands the length of my arm, her face screwing up more as she observes the progress, her medical senses seeing what I cannot.

"Sasuke, make a fist."

"What? Why?"

"Just do it." It’s said softly, but is a demand nonetheless.

I do as she asks, but rather than alleviating the situation it makes it worse, judging by the way her expression tightens.

"Wiggle your fingers."

Again, I comply. It's just easier that way.

"Now just your thumb."

She hums thoughtfully.

"Bend your elbow."

This seems to help. Her forehead loosens a little as she moves her hands to concentrate her chakra at my forearm. She's practically sweating with concentration as she slowly moves her hands downward until she reaches my fingertips. After another couple minutes, she releases the jutsu and lets out a breath of air.

"Well, that's better." But her face doesn't appear to agree with her mouth.

"What is?" I ask.

Her pink hair swings with the movement of her head. "That was an unusual and serious injury, but I can't figure out where you got it." She sucks her lip between her teeth. "Well, I guess it doesn't much matter, since it's fixed now."

My left arm – I have a feeling I know what caused it, but that brings up the memory of my . . . of Itachi. I flex my fingers to reassure myself and they feel perfectly fine.

Sakura likes to worry over nothing.

She pulls away and without any preamble, heads to the door. There’s a confidence to her gait that wasn’t there three years ago. It's good to see and I mark it in the detached portion of my mind.

"You'll have scars, there's nothing I can do about that." She shrugs her shoulders. "It's been too long." As an afterthought she adds, "You'll need to get your hitae-ate back."
"Why don't they issue a new one?" I distractedly fix my shirt.

Sakura holds the door open. "I suppose because they already gave you one. They didn't tell me. Only that you'll need it before going back to genin training."

I dislike the way she says that so off-handedly. But my body feels better than it has in months, thanks to her, so I don't mention it.

We stop at the reception desk on the way out and Sakura fills out a long form with line upon line of information. Swiping off her signature with a healthy flourish, she hands the paper to me and taps the bottom line insistently with a pen.

"Sign it."

Warily, I take the two items into my hands. "What for?"

She rolls her eyes. "They want documentation that you've been properly treated and are fit for duty. Formalities. I'm sure the council wants paper evidence that they haven't abused you." She gives me a long-suffering look. "Just sign it."

But instead of just signing it, I actually read over the document. It is as she says; a paper trail with which the elders can cover their asses, and nothing of great concern. I dutifully sign the papers, to Sakura's visible relief.

We exit into the warm afternoon air and pick up our abandoned conversation where it was dropped.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to get it," I say, stuffing my hands into my pockets.

Perhaps, with some ingenuity, I could persuade Sakura to use her influence with Tsunade to get me a new one.

"Hm?" The girl asks distractedly.

"My hitae-ate." I give her a sideways glance. "It's long lost by now."

The last I recall, it had fallen free, along with my last ties to Konoha, back on that day in the Valley of the End. On that day I first tried to kill Naruto.

It's gone now. It should stay that way.

"No." Sakura slows to a strange stop in the middle of the street and I follow suit, turning to face her. "It's not lost."

A small twitch in my eye is the only indication I give that this surprises me.

"Naruto has it."

-----

/+"Sasuke . . ."

I look up from the table where my writing papers are and glance around the room. "Mama?"

"Hmm?" She asks sweetly, turning from the stove and the pot she's stirring. She smiles in that special mom way, but her image is wavy, as though I am looking at her from behind a veil of heat.
I shake my head at the questioning tilt to her head. "No, nothing."

It couldn’t have been her. The voice I heard was masculine. But father is sitting across from me, sharpening his knives, his head lowered and he would never have spoken to me anyway. I go back to my paper.

"Sasuke, come here . . ."

My head shoots up again, but mama is busy stirring her pot and father is busy sharpening his knives and it’s clear that I’m the only one that hears anything. I look around: mother, father, table, stove. Then I see it. The hallway entrance zooms up until I am suddenly standing in front of it.

"Sasuke . . ."

My body moves on its own, pulled by the voice, and when I look back, the kitchen is far away, with my mother stirring and my father sharpening and all of it hazy and undulating and fading to blackness. I turn back around. There is nowhere else for me to go but forward. My feet are tiny and pale on the old wooden floor and the hall is pitch dark, but that’s all right because I know the way.

"Sasuke . . ."

And then a small shaft of light appears out of nowhere and engulfs me. It blinds me so that I have to throw my arms up to guard my eyes from the glare. I have to blink a few times after I lower them to take in my new surroundings. It is warm where I am now.

"Ah, there you are."

My brother. My idol. My “everything I want to be”. He’s sitting on the floor, packing things into a sack; preparing for another mission.

I pout.

"Aniki."

He almost smiles, almost consolingly. But only almost. It’s a look closer to the blankness that he usually gives me; it’s the look he gives people to convince them he’s made of stone.

"You are angry, Sasuke." I cross my arms. "But I do not have time to play with you every day. I have responsibilities."

"You always say that." My voice is high and childish.

He gestures for me to come closer and I do because I always do; because I always hope it will be different, but he just flicks me on the forehead, the same as every time. I rub the spot with my little fingers and frown.

"Itachi-nii-san." I whine.

"I got you something."

My eyes go wide and after a while, I remember to blink. Itachi never gives me anything.

"Don’t stand there like a frog, go get it." He turns back to his pack, stuffing things in that look less like mission supplies and more like angry clouds. "It’s over there," he says vaguely, but somehow, I know exactly where "over there" is. I walk to the corner of his closet, pushing aside the long furry tails hanging from the rack until I find a small, unmarked gray box. I pick it up and it is
surprisingly light, as though there is nothing in it at all. I walk back over to Itachi, the package held carefully in my tiny hands.

I stand in front of him. His bag is now slung over his shoulders, although it seems to be hovering in midair and trying to escape through the open window behind him.

"Well," he says. "Open it."

But when I look down, there is now a hitae-ate wrapped around it with a symbol I can't place and some crude lettering etched in over that.

"But it's for you."

"Oh?"

He takes the box and slowly rotates it so that the name faces him. He unties the hitae-ate, leans over and secures it around my head. It beats as if it's alive.

Carefully, reverently even, Itachi lifts the lid of the box and peeks inside. The pack over his shoulder begins flying wildly. He looks down into the box and almost, almost smiles, except that Uchiha Itachi never smiles.

He sighs. "It's just what I wanted."

He raises his head and his bottomless black eyes, just like mine, bore into me and he asks, "Would you like to see?"

And somehow I know I don't, but the life of the hitae-ate on my head is seeping into my bones and I feel my jaw clamp shut and my head nod a silent "yes."

And so Itachi turns the box back around, lid propped open and begins dumping the contents onto the floor. Two skulls and their rag dressed skeletons tumble out first and I want to scream but I can't because my scream is full with the blood that pours out of the box like a waterfall. Soon, there is a lake of it, wide and so deep that I'm drowning, and when I try to open my mouth for air, it fills with stuff, salty and metallic and too thick for regular blood as though it has been left out to congeal. It is flooding my mouth and nose and I need to breathe and I'm struggling, upward and upward, but I feel so heavy and the blood is so thick and dark that I can't see where I'm going. My arms are too small to pull my body up and I'm flailing more than swimming. I'm beginning to see stars, sharp and painful in my head and eyes and I know this is it, this is where I die, but then I finally break the surface. I spit and choke out as much of the blood as I can. The smoky air that enters my lungs burns with the fire it came from and it is dark, so dark, a sea of crimson in an endless void and I look about frantically but there is nothing.

"What is wrong, Sasuke?"

I spin around, a sick splash of blood whipping across me and see my aniki high above, floating on the plain gray box, completely clean. The clouds from his bag have escaped and are now crawling their way over his skin, tattooing deep into his flesh.

There is a horrible bubbling sound and skulls begin to pop up from the lake, the black hole sightless eyes all turning their gaze towards me.

"Why?" I cry, now somehow able to speak. The tears that fall from my eyes are like the blood that I have swallowed. "Why, brother?"
"Why what, Sasuke?" He asks without a trace of emotion. "It is you with the blood on his hands, not I."

I look down, lifting my hands from beneath the surface and they are red, dripping with the blood I stand in. I try to wipe it off, but the red just digs in deeper and there is no water to cleanse me.

I look up at Itachi and see only disappointment and those are my father's eyes and I have always hated them. The pain hits my chest and squeezes and constricts so that maybe my heart will finally give way, but Itachi only shakes his head, so gravely disappointed.

"And you did it for what? For the one that cursed us?"

And then the fire comes and burns it all./+/

-----

I sit up in bed so fast that I make myself dizzy. My lungs hurt from breathing too hard and maybe screaming too, I don't know. My heart is beating so hard that I'm afraid it might burst. Sweat pours down my face and my back and the sheets I slept in are damp with it.

Under the paleness of moonlight, I look at my hands and could swear they are still red. Red with the color of blood, of life, of death, of sin. And I think I'm going to be sick.

Throwing the covers off of me, I rush out the door, pass Kakashi in the hall and run into the bathroom. I don't even bother shutting the door, just stumble over to the sink, splashing water over my face and choking on it. What little was still left in my stomach burns my throat on the way back up.

Or maybe that's my guilt coming back to visit me.

Heaves wrack my body, though there is nothing to empty out, the muscles of my stomach forcing in to hit my spine and the bile of my memories burning like acid. I wish it were that easy to rid myself of them. I would give myself some ipecac and be done with it.

My memories make me weary and I crumple to my knees like a deflated balloon, leaning my head on the sink.

The room suddenly fills with a brightness that hurts my eyes. The tile of the floor is cold against the heat of my body and my sweat makes my skin begin to stick to the porcelain.

I can't catch my breath. The pain is still there.

Kakashi stands in the doorway, his hair a little messier than normal, and only half dressed from sleep, though his mask is firmly in place. In a perfectly surreal thought, I wonder if he sleeps with that thing on, even when alone. It is such a stupid thing to think about that I almost laugh, except laughing hurts most of all and I can't make myself do it.

My old teacher takes a step into the bathroom and even with only one eye exposed, his scarred sharingan still shut, I can see the concern bordering on fear. He places a hand on the counter and crouches down beside me, still a good distance away.

He seems about to say something, but I cut him off.

"Don't," I croak and he nods silently.
He stares at me a while and runs a hand soothingly through my mess of hair. I don’t have the energy to fight.

The force of my illness has caused my eyes to water, the drops falling slowly one by one into the tainted basin, the stench of my spoiled memories wafting up into my face.

But I'm not crying.

There's too much there and I'm afraid that once I start, I won't be able to stop.

I don’t want to see him.

But there are only two days remaining until my genin training, and though I'm not looking forward to it, it's better than nothing. It's structure.

I have to get the damn hitae-ate back.

//Ah, the conflicts.//

'Are you still here?'

//So mean, dear Sasuke-kun. Of course I am still here, we are one and the same.//

'I won't listen to you anymore.'

//Oh, but you will though. You cannot help it.//

----

Both Kakashi and Sakura have been badgering me nonstop about the hitae-ate as if they have nothing better to do with their time. I've been seeing old one-eye a whole lot more in recent days than I'd like. He's adopted the bad habit of lurking in doorways and empty halls. He’s waiting for me to reveal all my secrets, but he’ll be waiting until the world ends.

I open the curtains to the ramen stand, but no Naruto.

"May I help you?" The proprietor asks without lifting his head.

"No thanks." I quickly let the fabric fall.

I've checked every place I think he was likely to be, except for the training grounds. But that's a bad idea what with the fighting and memories and isolation . . .

But the two-day deadline is looming on the horizon like a fast approaching storm and my options are running thin.

So I go.

And I do find him, but he’s not training as I expected. Instead, shovel in hand, he is refilling the giant crater I found him laying beside on that day. He's tossing the dirt with a lot more enthusiasm than is probably required, all the while grumbling agitatedly under his breath.

I stroll up to him as if it is the most normal thing in the world. Because it is. We have met on this training ground many a time. This has no effect on me. All is perfectly normal.

I've made my presence more than adequately known, so the fact that he continues in his task
without even a glance in my direction is a blatant rebuff. 

I don't like being ignored. 

I grip my hands in irritation. "Naruto." I say the name as tonelessly as possible. 

He pauses briefly in his actions, his back tensing momentarily before continuing on. 

"What do you want?" He says the "you" as if it is a fly in his ramen. 

"I need my hitae-ate." I want this over as soon as possible. 

"So?" he spits, his anger mounting. 

"I heard you had it." 

Another shovel of dirt lands on the steadily growing pile. 

"I don't see you for almost a week and that's all you have to say to me?" His pace picks up. "After that shit you pulled?" 

"Me?" I snap irritably. 

"I don't know what your problem is, but I'm tired of it. Deal with whatever is bugging you and move on. Make up your mind already. One minute you're being nice, nice for you anyway, and the next you're attacking me for no reason. I never know how you're going to react, so I have no idea what you want me to do. What is it you want me to do, Sasuke?" 

"You're one to talk," I remark, but he's not listening. 

"Why do you have to make every single thing so goddamned difficult? I thought, I thought there was something there. The other day. You were being . . . receptive. Nice. And then the day of the party, you take a 180 and how am I supposed to know what to do? I hate feeling this way. I don't want to feel this way. You are such a pissy little bitch, Sasuke." An especially large clump of dirt flies toward the pile. "God, this would be so much easier if it were Sakura, or Hinata, or hell, anyone else. But no, I had to fall in love with the world's number one arrogant, bipolar bastard!"

My mind goes startlingly silent. 

I cannot believe he just said that. 

How can he just say that? It's ridiculous. And that's not something you should say out here anyway. In the middle of the training grounds while shoveling dirt and ranting and mentioning it like you're doing nothing more than discussing what flowers to plant in the big pile you're collecting and . . .

But he's going on. 

". . . energy on you. I've had enough of these mixed signals. Just make up your mind already!"

He turns to me then, sticking the shovel deep into the ground so that it stands up on its own. Naruto stares unabashedly and for all intents, completely unaware of what he's just said. 

That works for me. 

Avoidance is a good path.
"I need my hitae-ate back."

The only evidence he shows that he knows what he's said is in the almost imperceptible pinching of his eyes.

"What's that to me?" He leans heavily on the handle of the shovel.

"Sakura said you had it."

"Not with me."

"Fine." I shift my weight. "Let's go get it."

"Now?"

My head tilts in disgust. "When else?"

"All right." He agrees reluctantly and releases the shovel and it continues to stand straight, unmoving. Naruto walks past me, a little too close to be accidental, but I ignore that too and am about to follow when he stops suddenly. He turns to face me once more, his expression pulled taut but unreadable.

His lips draw to one side and he stares at me a while before shaking his head. With a deep sigh, he begins to search through his weapons pack.

"Here." He shoves a piece of fabric toward me as if he is doing so under duress.

I approach cautiously and the ends of the fabric fall free, revealing my old hitae-ate. The scratch Naruto made is still there, although there was clearly a feeble attempt to polish it out. Now it looks even more like the battle worn headband of a missing nin.

I don't think about anything that just happened, instead I reach out to take it. In that instant, he moves his hand so that his thumb brushes roughly along mine. In that same instant, I feel the sudden, unfamiliar influx of that "something" that rushes though my body when Naruto does such things. I start to pull away, but Naruto moves faster and clamps tight on my hand. His face is serious and determined. He tightens his grip until it hurts, as if he is trying to break the bones in my wrist.

And I don't back away.

The harder he grips, the harder I pull, and the stronger the pull I feel toward him. My world seems to empty so that the only thing I feel is the sharpness of Naruto's fingers on my wrist, the pain throbbing and warm and real. Like a gnawing beast inside of me, I crave what we used to have, to return to the time that I knew the scent of his skin, the taste of his breath and the feel of his short, spiky hair between my fingers.

Part of me wants to let him fold me into himself as we once did, when I thought there was nothing to lose and nothing to gain.

But I can't.

Especially in light of what he's just said.

The pain will eventually come and it will be worse.

I can't give him what he wants.
Scowling, I yank my hand back.

This is not how it's supposed to be. It can't be. It shouldn't be.

It isn't.

The strange longing pull that tugs at my chest is a figment of my imagination.

"I don't have time for this," I murmur, unsure why the words have escaped.

Naruto pouts in that childlike way of his.

Then I tie the hitae-ate through one of my belt loops, tuck my hands into my pockets and quietly leave the conflict of the training field.

"This isn't over."

I'm not sure whether or not I am meant to hear Naruto's last grated words, but I do.

They sound like a challenge.
The scene before me is a familiar one. It is a flip through the pages of my past to the day that very nearly spelled my ruin and maybe still does. The day I joined Team Seven.

The brats that chatter and run rampant around the room look smaller than I can conceive of myself ever being.

For the most part, they've dismissed my existence, as I sit stuck up in the back corner of the room as close to the wall as I am capable.

I prefer to be as far away as humanly possible from screaming, screeching little pockmarks of energy and besides, I'm taller and can easily see over their tiny insignificant heads.

Iruka has yet to arrive and, same as the last time I found myself in this situation, this grinds relentlessly on my nerves.

Hazily, my gaze starts to lose focus under the strain.

The classroom becomes overlapped with another image, one of test tubes and jam jars filled with bits and pieces of human bodies. It is the lab in Orochimaru's underground lair. I have visited it enough times to know.

My hands are frantically packing things into a sack, a mishmash of vials, papers, and medical components.

It's a bit unnerving.

Is this a memory?

//When were you ever in the lab, my pet?//

'All the time. But I was always the experiment, not the experimenter. I never touched the jars.'

//Ah, those were good times. Very informative, very informative . . .//

Sick bastard.

The children of Leaf are still present, but appear to be seated behind dirt and stone walls as if they
are in prison, the two images in front of my eyes meshing together into one. I toss the sack filled with supplies over my shoulder and do another quick scan for anything I may have missed. Sliding my hand across the lab table, I notice that my hand is black with death and decay. It’s an arm I don’t recognize. No matter what I was put through, I was kept relatively whole.

//I wanted my container strong and compliant, but perfect and beautiful too.//

'Right. Sure. Whatever.'

//I would have liked your skin to have remained completely smooth, unblemished, with that perfect paleness in tact, but alas, you did not heed my wishes.//

'Stop sighing inside my head. It's creepy.'

An alarm of some kind rings and my ears perk up. I know there is no time to spare, so I set the place ablaze and flee as fast as my feet can carry me.

I hear voices, shouts and demands, interlaced with the chattering of children, but I can't make out the words, not that I need to. It doesn't matter, I only need to escape. So I run, weaving the tunnels as I have done many times before, heading to the surface.

The sound of voices grows louder, but so does the roar of the fire. I'm not worried. Once I get to the exit, I can make it to the safety of the trees.

And I'm almost there. The small circle of light that leads outside is glowing at me from a distance. Not much longer now and I'll be there.

My legs burn with the effort and my lungs stretch in protest. I had not expected the need to leave so soon. I keep running.

The circle of light grows bigger. I pump my legs harder, pushing against my limits and the light takes up the whole of my vision. I am about to be free, to see the familiar cover of trees. I am about to get away . . .

"Attention class!"

My heads bobs embarrassingly, the images wafting away like smoke and the kids reappearing as they were before.

Iruka now stands in front of the room with a line of jounin, some I recognize and some I don't, standing beside him.

My heart is beating fast and I’m out of breath, but I remain unnoticed.

I fold my hands in front of my face.

That was . . . weird.

What the hell was that?

//Interesting.//

'Unsettling. '

//No, interesting, my pet. Quite interesting.//
'And since when do you enter my dreams?'

//I need not enter. I am there already.//

Darkening my eyes, I watch Iruka with feigned interest.

"Attention!" Iruka repeats his command and the persistent chatter finally dies down.

"All right now, listen up. I am going to announce the teams you will be divided into for your training. Each team has been specially selected to balance out each member's individual strengths and weaknesses. These are the people you will be training with for some time to come. Your life may very well rest in their hands and theirs in yours. Always keep this in mind. A group is only as good as all its individual members combined. Work together." He gives a pointed look to every person in the room, making sure to make contact with each one's eyes. I may be paranoid, but I feel like that look lingers a little too long on me.

"OK! Team One!"

The names are called and then the first jounin steps forward and, with a silent gesture, indicates for his team to follow. Three stand up, four walk out.

"Team Two!"

The names continue and each kid is about as exciting as the last. The class slowly begins to dwindle.

"Now, Team Four! Inuzuka Ouka!"

A tiny girl with short black pigtails and an excess of exuberance shoots her hand into the air, answering the call with such enthusiasm that she almost falls out of the chair.

"Kanamori Tetsuo!"

A boy with close-cropped brown hair barely shifts the head he has resting on the desk. A small grunt emits from his mouth.

"Uchiha Sasuke!"

Somehow, I knew it was going to be me.

The room is suddenly abuzz with questions and curiosity, but I have adopted the characteristics of rock. Several eyes rest on me, wondering no doubt if I am the mysterious person whose name they've only now heard for the first time.

Iruka clears his throat and raises his voice to talk over the crowd. "Team Four. Your leader has opted not to meet you here. Instead, you are requested to go to training ground four for your introduction."

This causes another stir, but again Iruka, having years of experience dealing with rude children, valiantly continues on. Soon, all the students except for Team Four have left with their respective jounin leaders. Now only four people remain: Iruka, the two brats, and me, leaving no question as to who "Uchiha Sasuke" must be. My former teacher nods at me with knotted brow, I don't know what that means, and leaves. The little girl spins around in her chair, scrutinizes me with an angry glare and then suddenly bursts into a bright smile.
"Hello!" she chirps. "You must be Uchiha Sasuke!" The little dog that sits in her lap yips.

I close my eyes for patience.

"Do you think we should head out to training ground four now?"

I keep my eyes closed for further patience.

"Do you?" The change in her inflection leads me to believe that she is now asking super lazy brat.

She receives another grunt for answer.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

A fair question.

I take a deep breath, get to my feet and walk to the door.

"Oh, oh! So you know where that is, right?" Her voice is high and tiny like a bird's.

"Hn."

I open the door and she excitedly follows, her dog running circles around her, and by some miraculous intervention, lazy brat manages to peel himself from the table and drags his cement-laden feet across the floor.

"So, so, so hey!" The bundle of energy bubbles, picking up the puppy and depositing it on her head. "I've never seen you before. How did you get into our class if you've never taken the genin test?"

She is both painfully chipper and (almost) refreshingly uninformed, a strange combination. That's an Inuzuka for you, I guess.

"I am a genin," I answer irritably.

"Oh, really?" She puts her finger to her lips in curiosity, without a trace of judgment. "Then where's your hitae-ate?" She taps the metal of her headband as if I do not know what one is.

In response, I tap the hitae-ate that hangs from my belt loop. She peers around to see it on my other side.

"Oh! How come you wear it there? Shouldn't it be on your head?"

I don't reply. I'm far from the first to wear my hitae-ate someplace other than my forehead.

She's undeterred by my silence.

"Why does it have a scratch in it like that? It doesn't look very good. All beat up and with the leaf crossed out like it's not important." Wide brown eyes gaze up at me. "Why didn't they give you a better one?"

I stare straight ahead as the child practically skips alongside me.

"Ouka, was it?" I ask. She nods happily. "Ouka-chan," it's very hard not to call her that, she's so tiny she could vanish any second. "How old are you?"
"Ten!" She answers excitedly. The dog barks. "I just had my birthday two weeks ago."

Ah, so I am put with the special ones.

//A genius more genius than you.//

The oldest with the youngest.

//A genin at ten. Not bad. A little diminutive for my tastes, a little plain, and then there's the dog, but the child has potential.//

'Leave her alone.'

//Attached already, Sasuke-kun?//

'Hardly.

'You can't do anything anyway.'

//Or is it jealous?//

'Who would be jealous of that?'

//You, my pet. But do not worry. You shall always be my favorite.//

My eyes screw up.

I take a quick glance behind me to our lumbering third member.

Lazy brat only quirks an eyebrow and yawns hugely.

This is ridiculous. Am I expected to be a baby-sitter on top of everything else?

We finally reach the training grounds, but they are completely devoid of any sign of human life. Neither Ouka nor Tetsuo appear bothered by our apparent lack of leader. The boy simply lays down face first into the grass and the girl stands attentively beside me, keeping up an endless chatter.

"So, hey! How old are you, Sasuke-san?" Miniature Ouka asks.

I don't answer.

"Well," she says, considering. "I'd guess about fifteen."

"Oh?"

"Yup!" She smiles brightly. "You look older than me, but a little younger than my sister and she's seventeen." She clasps her hands behind her back and sways. "I wish I was seventeen because then I'd be old enough to do whatever I wanted."

"A ninja never has that option."

"Hmm." She inclines her head. "But we chose to be ninja, didn't we?"

"Did we?" Sometimes I wonder, if not for circumstance . . .

"No."
Both Ouka and I turn to lazy brat, who was lifted his head slightly so that his chin rests on his folded arms and his eyes show resentment. He looks right at me for a moment and then hides his face in the dirt again.

All seems to return to boring normalcy until the puppy on Ouka's head begins to growl.

"What is it, Kohana?" She asks.

Then suddenly the girl 'eeps!' and latches onto my leg. In the next instant, I sense it. The soft whir of movement, the weight of murderous intent. Quickly, I grab Tetsuo under one arm and with Ouka glued on securely, I leap out of the way, listing to one side with the added encumbrance of a child on my leg. We three as one just barely evade the rain of kunai and shuriken that embed deeply into the ground where we just standing.

I release the hold I had on Tetsuo and he lands gracefully on his feet, suddenly alert. Cautiously, Ouka lets go of my leg and steps slightly into my shadow. Little Kohana growls, but it sounds more cute than menacing.

My sharingan spins and I look from each branch to the next, looking for the signs of imminent danger.

"Damn!" Our illustrious jounin leader lands soundlessly in the middle of the tiny metal forest she created. "Missed."

The woman sneers at us, superior and uncompromising, her coat billowing behind her and her hands on her hips.

I really should have been expecting this.

//How nostalgic.//

My sharingan spins down.

"All right then! This is how it's going to work! I am your leader. You will listen to what I say. I don't care if you don't understand or if you disagree, your duty is to follow orders. I expect no argument on this. Do that and we might just get out of this alive."

I shoot her an icy glare. A little melodramatic there, aren't we?

But she is not finished.

"Now! We are Team Four. I expect great things from Team Four. I want us to be first in everything. If our assignment is to track down and defeat an S-class criminal, I expect us to capture them in record time. If our assignment is to retrieve an old lady's cat from a tree, we shall do so swiftly and return the animal in better condition than when it ran off. Understood?"

Silence is her answer.

"Good, then. Let's get started!" The woman leans over and begins plucking her discarded weapons from the ground.

"Um, excuse me?" Ouka's tiny voice rings in the air, her little hand raised in front of her.

Our captain lifts her head to the girl and shows the same daunting expression she's worn through the entirety of her speech.
The little girl is not intimidated. "Who exactly are you?"

The woman's mouth twists into a sinister smile. She stands up tall. "I am the person who you'll be following the next months. I am Mitarashi Anko." She lets this sink in like an impressive revelation, but as I am apparently the only one who knows her, there is no obvious effect. She clears her throat. "I trust you already know each other? Any more questions?" The look she gives us says there won't be, whether we were planning any or not.

She stashes the last of her weapons. "You there! Doll child!" She waves her finger accusingly at Ouka. "What's your name?"

"Inuzuka Ouka, Mitarashi-sensei!" The girl responds cheerily with a cute smile. The dog yips.

Resistant, that one.

"Come at me."

Ouka blinks in bewilderment. "What?"

"I want to test your skills." Anko's mouth pulls into a toothy smile. "Come at me."

Timidly, the girl steps forward, giving me a nervous look, but I'm not here to help her, it's every ninja for their self. As soon as Ouka is in front of Anko, the woman attacks. The whole repertoire, it seems, instantly flies at the little girl and her little ninja dog. A strange thing, but Ouka manages to dodge the brunt of every one, almost as if she can see the attack a moment before it hits. Almost as if she has the sharingan. But of course, my eyes work differently, and are far superior to hers. Still, the child is exceptionally fast and alert. I'm beginning to see how she became a genin at such a tender age.

Of course, the constant stream of high-pitched shrieking detracts from it a bit.

As does the incessant barking. Like master, like pet, I suppose.

And her offense is nonexistent. The dog is doing better than she is. Finally, bored with her test, Anko lands a kick on the girl's stomach that sends the rag doll child tumbling over her feet until the trunk of a tree cuts into her path. In a noble attempt of retribution, the dog clamps its teeth on Anko's arm, but it too quickly goes the way of its master, soaring across the field.

Without a second glance, Anko faces those who remain. "Next! She shouts. "You! Boy! Wake up!"

Tetsuo slouches lazily and gives the woman a droopy-eyed gaze. "Kanamori Tetsuo. Let's get this over with."

Anko snorts, but accepts the request readily. I can tell that she's toning it down for the kids, not even bothering with much ninjutsu or genjutsu. She's putting in just enough effort to be better, but not so much that they're beaten in six seconds flat. Tetsuo is not bad considering his age, but he's nothing special either. I watch him twist agilely out of Anko's grasp and just when it looks like he's done for, he changes into a log and the real Tetsuo takes to the trees. Anko joins immediately after, rattling the branch and knocking a few leaves free. They float down around them like confetti.

In all this time, Tetsuo hasn't used a single weapon. I don't even see a leg pouch or any other pack in which to store such things.

Odd for a ninja.
Then, while I watch, he begins to form seals, a series I've never seen before, and the leaves falling down around them start to shimmer. I turn on the sharingan.

Tetsuo bolts forward, snatching the leaves as he goes and hurls them furiously at Anko. Only they're not leaves anymore. They have been transmuted into metal, the points of the leaves as sharp as blades.

//Unique jutsu. Very handy.//

'This isn't a fishing expedition.'

The main flaw in the technique is that it appears to drain a lot of chakra. One use and the boy can barely stand. He receives a sharp wrench on his arm for the effort and Anko tosses him carelessly to the forest floor. Ouka has just recently roused, moaning and massaging the back of her neck. But she soon forgets her own injuries and rushes over to her fallen comrade, the leaves floating down, back to their natural green.

Anko turns her challenging gaze on me.

"Well, well, well," the woman says. "No introductions needed here, I think. Let's see how much you've changed in three years."

I leap to the branch beside her, keeping my sharingan activated.

Anko's mouth pulls up into a condescending smile when she looks into my eyes. "Orochimaru's test subject."

"You're one to talk."

She laughs, completely without mirth.

//Ah, yes, sweet Anko. Such memories. Shame about her, but such things happen.//

I am trying to shake off the incompatibility of "sweet" and "Anko" together when she strikes. I jump out of the way and onto a neighboring branch and her senbon meet only tree.

She spins and attacks again, using a bit more force and skill than she did with the kids, but she's still holding back.

I smirk. That's a mistake.

But at least this is a challenge I can enjoy.

I missed this.

Her movements are quick and unexpected because I've never fought her before and her style is a little unique, though her chaotic rashness reminds me a little of Naruto. I haven't been training as much as I used to and I've only recently been fully healed so this fight is already taking its toll.

Anko shows no signs of letting up, and wanting to end this quickly, my instinct is to use a ninjutsu. It's been a while, but I'll start off with something that I've known for years, a Housenka no Jutsu. I gather my fire into my mouth and make the first hand sign, noticing a weird tingle in my fingers. My renowned leader is approaching, her mouth curved maliciously as her hands form her own set of signs, and I don't have time to think on it. The tingle begins to burn with the second sign and by the third, my seal activates. Or so I assume since it's a bit hard to think through the pain. It feels
like every bone in my hand and up to my shoulder has shattered and shot out of my skin, carving tendon, muscle and nerve. It is agony, worse and different from any other pain I've experienced, and I'm familiar with many. But this one makes me see stars in blackness, dropping me to my knees. My arms feeling like shredded husks at my sides. Ouka and the dog are dashing towards me and I curse loudly, I don't know what, but it is enough to freeze them both in their tracks as the girl turns a lovely shade to match her name.

My breathing is hard as the pain slowly, too damn slowly, subsides. I've broken out into a cold sweat, the water dripping down my face and slipping beneath my collar.

Anko drops quietly to the ground in front of me, arms crossed, sneering expression back on her face, whatever technique she intended to use gone without a trace.

"Guess you haven't tried to use your charka much lately, hmm?"

I manage to twist my mouth disdainfully, my chest still heaving, and pretend there are no such things as seals.

"Hmph." She jerks her chin at me, indicating the seals on my hands. "You can defend yourself. But you have to earn the right to attack."

-----

The next few days are mostly occupied in the unpleasant company of troublesome children and a masochistic teacher. Otherwise I try to spend my time alone, at least on the blessed occasions when my parasite remains quiet.

//--So heartless, Sasuke-kun.//--

Now is apparently not one of those times.

//--It's more enjoyable to take part.--/

'And to try and find some way to abuse the situation.'

//--Perhaps.//--

'Just try it. We'll see how far you get, snake.'

//--Do not tempt me, my pet.--/

In the store, I stow my begrudgingly proffered change and head down the street, receiving not even a glance from the cashier, but that's not unique. In the seedier section of Konoha, the businessmen neither know nor care who their customers are, just so long as they are customers. Hard to believe there is a seedier section of Konoha, but there you have it.

Retrieving household supplies has become one of the duties relegated to me in exchange for the privilege of living with Kakashi rent-free.

Personally, I'd rather pay the rent at my own place. I don't like knowing someone is there constantly watching, waiting, and listening. It is like being in prison, although I suppose that is the point.

With Naruto, it was different. Easier and more complicated, comfortable but . . .

That's a wrong train of thought.
"Teme! Hey, Sasuke-teme! We've been looking for you!"

Fate is a cruel mistress.

"Hey, c'mon! Stop!"

I'm not stopping.

"Hey."

The soft warmth of his breath against the back of my neck startles me even as it sends goose pimples racing down my spine. The shiver echoes through my veins and spikes when I swear I feel him exhale purposely over the edge of my ear.

I tense and whip around and could convince myself I imagined it, except that the mischievous glint in Naruto's eye tells me that I haven't.

Internally, I kick myself for allowing him to sneak up on me to begin with.

"Kakashi and I were just discussing you." Naruto states this as though nothing is amiss. He jerks his head backward, gesturing to the other man. "Right, Kakashi-sensei?"

The culprit stands there nonchalantly, his exposed eye curved up into that exasperating crescent.

One day, I really will smack it right off his face.

"We were working out a few issues Naruto was having." The meddlesome jerk takes a few paces forward as he explains. "But I believe we've settled it all out now, haven't we, Naruto?"

"Yup!" The blond grins at me, letting his eyes squint shut. "And then we came looking for you."

"He was very adamant about that." Kakashi sings this as if it is just wonderful.

Med-dle-some.

How many times must I say I do not want to deal with this?

//You do realize that you've never actually said this out loud?//

'Oh, shut up.'

With bags in hand, I turn and trace my steps briskly back to the apartment without even a "good-bye" to the comedic duo.

"C'mon! Stop being like that!" Naruto pouts. "I forgive you, OK?"

Forgive . . . what?

The instant thudding of anger in my brain threatens to overwhelm me. It makes me flush and hot and the color that rises to my face now is all about rage. I whirl on Naruto and do the first thing that comes to mind: pitch a tub of detergent at him so that it smarts soundly against the idiot's skull.

Maybe that will knock some sense into him.

"Ow! That hurt, damn it!"

Yeah, like I care.
"You're a ninja," I bite out. "Deal with it."

"Maa-maa, you two." Kakashi's consoling tone breaks through Naruto's rant. "Is that any way to behave when you clearly want to . . ."

"Kakashi-sensei!"

The panic in Naruto's voice is unmistakable.

I make my escape.

After what has to be eons at least, I arrive at the apartment, beating Naruto and Kakashi, who have sidetracked into another discussion. I let my bags fall to the floor in order to search for my keys.

And that's when I am assaulted.

Naruto hurtles at me, pins me to the door with his hands on either side and presses in. The keys escape my fingers.

You too, apartment keys?

//You are going soft, Sasuke-kun. And as always, it is the fox that makes you this way. Pathetic.//

'I don't have time for you right now!'

//Then get away from the boy. Be strong again, in control.//

Naruto's chakra rolls around and inside me, enveloping my sense and making me dizzy. When he is close like this, baring his power, it is difficult to think. He worms his way into me, invasive and unwanted, and the flush I feel is anger and nothing else.

It isn't.

"Don't tell me," his voice winds hotly along my neck, "that you don't feel that."

This isn't at all like the fumbling dobe I've known. There is a depth to his voice and manner, and I think the sharper chakra I feel is from the fox. Heat swells off his body and why is always so hot?

//Ku-ku-ku. Distracted and weak, because of him//

'Shit up.'

//You must face facts eventually, my dear.//

I swallow and force out a jibe, keeping up with my established persona. "What is it with you and pressing me against walls, idiot? Do you need help from inanimate objects now?"

"Ah, so there's been wall-pressing, has there?" For no good reason, Kakashi offers his unsolicited remark.

"There's no 'wall-pressing'!" I protest.

//Ah, but there is.//

Naruto isn't paying attention.

I can see the flash of his teeth, the knife-sharp white canines shining in my peripheral vision. He
chuckles.

His breath smells of spices.

"You're pretty when you blush." He leans in close. "Even prettier when you smile." Then he whispers, so softly that I barely hear him. "But I'll bet you're prettiest when you . . ."

That is it!

I finally recover my free will and drive my elbow back into his abdomen, hear his grunt, and turn to face him, folding my arms sternly over my chest. Naruto gives me a twisted, unsettling grin.

He talks about me, but he's the one with fifty personalities.

"I'm not blushing for any inane reason your pathetic mind might concoct, dimwit," I snarl. "I'm pissed."

The left side of his mouth twitches. I can feel the cool metal of my keys by my foot, but there isn't enough room to pick them up without making the position more awkward than it already is.

But then Naruto crouches down, giving me an unobstructed view of Kakashi leaning on the outside banister and reading his latest volume of Icha Icha Violence.

It's a bit disconcerting.

Not as disconcerting, however, as when Naruto straightens up and nonchalantly hands over a tub of detergent, the same one I brained him with in the road.

"You dropped this back there."

Blindly, I take it and I realize, with some satisfaction, that I am now equipped with a wall to place between us.

It's my detergent deterrent!

Ha-ha-ha.

I don't know what the hell is wrong with me.

Close proximity to stupidity apparently makes it rub off.

"I just wanted to let you know I'll be gone for a while," Naruto says, suddenly chatty. When I don't respond, he frowns and goes on. "They're sending me on a mission for a few weeks because, you know, the other day."

I wonder if he really does know.

"Fine. You've told me. Now give me some space."

'/It's about time you started listening to me.//

'No one asked for your opinion.'

Naruto's brow furrows over his ridiculously blue eyes.

"You didn't mind being this close to me before." His voice is raspy. "In the forest or the hospital."
He tries to move his hand closer to my side. "The other day . . ."

I block him with the detergent.

"That was different."

I wasn't thinking straight at the time, hurt and tired and worried.

I thought he was dying.

I thought I was.

"I've already decided," he says. "And once I decide, I don't give up."

OK, great. Can I go now?

"It took a long time to get you back, but I did it. It took a long time to sort things out and even longer to accept them. But I did that too. So if you think your attitude will stop me," he bends his arms to get nearer, "then you don't know me very well."

Naruto curls into me and I hold up the detergent barrier, but the backs of my fingers still meet his chest, feeling hard muscle, and below that, the beat of his heart.

He smirks.

He tilts his head so that we are only a small distance apart. I force my head back into the safe solidity of the door, half-expecting it to melt into mud and betray me too. Naruto's breath is thick and warm and he releases it deliberately so that it washes wetly over my face. He gives me a crooked smile and rather than moving straight forward as I expect -- No, I'm not analyzing that -- he detours to my ear.

"Sasuke . . ."

His voice is low, husky and deeper than I've ever heard before.

Something about it makes my eyes fall shut as I let out a shaky breath of my own.

I feel the electric ripple of his chakra as he moves.

"Ahem."

My eyes fly open.

Still studiously reading his pornography, Kakashi says simply, "I'm still here, if you will recall. As are the ANBU. Are you really sure you want to put on a show?"

"I don't care." Naruto pouts as he says this.

But this fortuitous exchange frees me from whatever genjutsu Naruto has mysteriously cast. Air flows quickly into my lungs and I blink to stop the world from spinning so erratically on its axis. Then I shove Naruto hard with the tub of detergent and feel vindictively triumphant as he dances out of the way.

Taking the opportunity to grab my keys, I unlock the door, quickly tossing my thing inside.

I am furious.
This idiocy should never have been allowed to start and I will finish it.

I am stronger than this. I am stronger than Naruto. He cannot trick me into handing over control in any way.

I don't care about his big blue eyes or his stupid blond hair or his lightly tanned skin, or the warmth of his breath and body. I don't care about any of this.

I don't.

He’s a friend, if that’s possible. Maybe even my best friend, but just a friend.

And if I follow the elders' demands, maybe I can keep it that way.

//Even now, my dear. Even now it is about him. Will you ever learn?//

I won’t let this go down a path we can’t travel.

I step inside.

"I'll miss you!" He calls out cheekily.

And I shut the door.
It's been over a week since I saw Naruto last and while that shouldn't bother me, it does. It's not as if we haven't been separated before; I'd call three years a more than reasonable length of time.

But on the other hand, the last few months have been spent almost exclusively in his company and I always felt like he was nearby. But now, he’s someplace far away. Or at least it seems that way.

Either way, his absence is resolutely planted in the forefront of my brain.

That's why I can't stand him.

"Hey! Uchiha! Stop daydreaming!"

My team leader's scathing voice flies up to me on the rooftop and shatters any stream of thought I may have had. I scowl at her. She scowls back. Her arms are crossed over her chest as she stands pompously on the ground, watching us like a demented animal. I ignore her and go back to hammering.

The restoration of Konoha is going slowly.

Not because of a lack of labor or even materials; it’s more that no one has a burning desire to do it. And it is swelteringly hot and muggy. It is the kind of weather that just sucks the energy and ambition right out through your pores. On the highest points of the house, the air presses in on us in all directions.

And it's *always* sunny in Konoha.

I wipe my brow with the back of my arm, my hair hanging in stringy strands and practically dripping with sweat.

I never understood how these menial jobs helped us to become better ninja.

I still don't.

In that, Naruto and I actually agree. But unlike him, I take my job seriously, even when it is menial labor. He'd complain and moan and then not even do the simple task correctly. He'd allow himself to be dragged off by a dog bigger than he was just to prove a point that he didn't actually end up
proving.

Idiot.

A plank of wood catapults toward me and I capture it neatly in my outstretched hand.

Slowly, I bring it down and see the two men crouched low on the far end of the roof glaring at me. They are older men, older than me anyway, civilians brimming with resentment. They're just two of many.

It is not the first thing to be thrown at me today.

I doubt it will be the last.

My tiny teammate beside me leaps to her feet.

"Hey!" Ouka yells indignantly. "What was that for? We didn't do anything to you! We're just trying to work here, like everyone else!"

It's almost sweet the way she's included herself in their hatred.

"Be quiet and go back to work," I say, pushing the projectile to the side.

Ouka spins on me, her hands on her hips and her mouth pulled angrily to the side. Her little dog growls at the offending pair and then barks once before resuming its growl. The girl is trying to intimidate me, but it's hard to take something that diminutive and baby-faced as a threat.

Not, of course, that she couldn't be. Appearance has little to do with ability.

She isn't, though.

Intimidating, that is.

"But it's not fair!" She whines, reminding me of another infamous whiner.

"It's not important." I don't look at her.

"There's no reason for them to throw stuff at us!" She protests and I expect her to stamp her foot, but she doesn't.

"It's not you," I tell her and return to repairing the roof.

The girl pauses a moment and gazes up at the sky thoughtfully as reality finally clicks into place. "You mean it's just you?" Carefully, she gets on her knees and lifts a nail in her stubby little fingers. "What did you do to them?"

I snort.

There are many answers to that question but in the end only one matters.

I disappointed them.

Just like I always disappointed my father. Or how Itachi disappointed me.

//Konoha does not forget easily. And it is quick to condemn.//

'Can't I spend one day free from your useless commentary?'
Ouka raises her eyebrows curiously, but then just goes back to work. Naruto, I'm sure, would have pestered me relentlessly until I gave in.

It is difficult to rid yourself of something that is a part of you.

He's talking about himself, I'm sure.

I hammer determinedly at the board held beneath my fingers.

Silly boy.

I reach for another nail, only to discover that my stash is gone. Glancing around, I realize that I'll have to procure more from those non-cooperative jerks.

But as I put my hand to the roof for leverage, there is a happy "yip" sound below me. Looking down, I see the dog sitting there, a bunch of nails held in her mouth and her tail whapping excitedly on the roof. She opens her mouth and deposits the saliva-coated nails to the empty space beside me. She barks again and then lets her long tongue loll out the side of her mouth like a flag as her tail continues on happily.

"She likes you," Ouka says, smiling at me. "She's a very good judge of character."

I look down at the scruffy black canine with the light brown feet and muzzle. This is a good judge of character?

"Hn." I settle back down and pick up a rag to wipe the slobbery nails clean. "She's a stupid, furry, little lump."

The lump yips again happily, circles me twice and then settles down beside her master.

The girl giggles and scratches the dog behind the ears. "Good girl," she coos, and then looks at me. "You can't fool me."

I lift an eyebrow and look at her through the long fringe of my bangs.

"You try to be all mean and nasty, but I know you're not. Not really." Her jaw sets into a grim line. "You can act however you want. But Kohana is never wrong. And neither am I."

I sneer at her and begin to hammer another piece of roofing into place. I really hate it when people try to tell me who and what I am, as if they know better than me.

Stupid little girl.

"Just like we know Tetsuo-kun is not a bad guy, either."

Her eyes look off into the distance, focusing on the lazy brat "working" alongside us; the one with the hand poised mid-hammer. It's almost impressive that he's fallen asleep in that position.

Just as I turn my head, a rock goes flying through the air, ricocheting off the back of Tetsuo's head and wresting him up from whatever dream he was having.

His body jerks awake and he spins around to face his assailant.

"Wake up, lazybones!" Shouts Anko. "You're not getting paid to sleep!"
Tetsuo's face turns six shades of red until it is almost purple and a vein throbs angrily in his temple. "I don't see you working," the boy mumbles acidly.

Given the drastic change in the normally complacent boy's attitude, I'm going take a wild stab and say he's not what one would call a "morning person".

Even without looking, I can feel Anko's irritation like a presence in the air. "I'm supervising!"

I snort.

Ouka giggles.

Tetsuo actually gets to his feet. "Supervising?" He grips the hammer handle in his hand until his skin turns white. "You're just trying to get out of doing anything."

"Tetsuo-kun." It's the Inuzuka girl this time. "Just do what you're told."

I return to work myself. "The sooner you get done, the sooner we can go home," I remark blandly.

"How come she doesn't hafta work, too?" The boy complains in a low grumble, gesturing with his hammer. Though I notice he hasn't gone back to work either.

"I'm the leader." Anko states the three words coolly. "And what did I tell you about Team Four? The best, the fastest. I'm here to keep you in line, so shape up!"

Tetsuo pouts. "If you were helping us, it would go faster and we could get outta here earlier."

"Same could be said for you," Ouka mumbles under her breath, mildly hammering a plank into place. "Kohana!" The dog woofs to attention. "Get him!"

Dutifully, the puppy lets out a loud bark and races for lazy brat, teeth bared and ready to attack. Sorry to say, but even in this guise, she's not all that fearsome. And all things considered, I don't think the animal is going to really attack, maybe nip gently at Tetsuo's heels or something.

Not much of an incentive to move, if you ask me.

"No," the jounin yells just then and everything seems to freeze mid-motion, dog included. "Just you will have to stay, Kanamori Tetsuo-kun." As if a restart button is pushed, we all turn to the woman. Her lip pulls tightly to the side as her eyes thin and her hands go to her hips. She smirks up at us. "Inuzuka and Uchiha have done their work. They will get to go home. Only you, Kanamori, will have to stay until you are finished."

Tetsuo's eye opens a fraction. "That's not very team-oriented."

Anko shrugs, entirely unconcerned.

The boy grumbles, turns around, and joins us at long last, albeit at an excruciatingly slow snail's pace. It's almost painful to watch.

"Kohana." The pup perks its ears to its master's call, then darts over and begins running in circles and barking as if we are celebrating something.

Ouka gives me a big smile as though this is all some great game and lets the little fur ball continue.

Well, isn't this just my dream come true. A dog that won't shut up, a boy that won't work, a girl that won't stop smiling, and a perverse leader that watches from on high.
Just perfect.

The afternoon passes with little change to this sadistic setup.

Under the blistering heat, I can feel the sunburn begin to form over the back of my neck. My bangs are starting to stick to my face from the sweat. The two men from earlier have abandoned us and now no one is closer than two houses away. I'm sure it's because of me, I can still feel the animosity in the air, but it's easier this way. Tetsuo and Ouka are blissfully unaware. Anko is sitting lazily on a log beneath us, eating dango and when the hell did she get that and not bring us any?

Even Naruto would have shared.

I shake my head.

Out of nowhere, the little girl is crudely summoned.

"Hey! Ouka-chan! Ouka-chan!"

I know that voice. Unfortunately.

The tiny child jumps to her feet and races to the edge of the roof, leaning precariously over the edge. "Kiba-nii-san!" She chirrups happily.

I drive the next nail in with especial gusto, barely missing my hand.

"Ha! I thought I heard you were working around here somewhere! How's your 'training' going," he teases.

"It's going just fine!" Ouka crosses her arms. I guess I should be thankful I'm not the only one he annoys. "This is very important work I'm doing, you know!"

"I didn't say anything!"

I scoff.

Ouka puffs out her cheeks and glares downward. "Everyone has to do jobs like this, you know that!"

"Not me!" Kiba shouts proudly. "My greatness was recognized from the beginning!"

"Oh, really? But I've heard plenty of stories about you too!" The girl's face cruelly twists into an expression I wouldn't have guessed possible. "About a certain mission . . . with a mouse trap and a potted plant?"

Dog boy blanches. "Wh-where did you hear that?"

"Oh, somewhere. I don't remember anymore," the girl answers, purposely vague.

I could almost start to like her.

"Hey, enough you two!"

Anko's crisp voice breaks through the noise of the street. She immediately directs her ire at the intruder. "We're busy here. You've said your 'hellos', now get going!"
Ouka smirks as Kiba coughs awkwardly and manages to collect himself. "Yeah, yeah, yeah," He grumbles. "Well, see ya, Ouka-chan!" There's a very pregnant pause, and I almost know it's coming when I hear the "Bye, Uchiha" in its mocking lilt.

I turn my head with controlled slowness so I can glare down at the useless moron.

"You two know each other?" Ouka, her irritation gone, sounds somewhere between confusion and keen interest.

Kiba shows his dogteeth in an unattractive grin. "You could say that." His beady little eyes practically twinkle at me.

I narrow mine, letting their golden hue glint in the sunshine.

Didn't I vow to pummel him?

//Ah, yes. That would be more productive than this. However, we need to be careful. No point in causing worse problems.//

'And I'm supposed to care what you think, why?'

//Because I am bored.//

'Then be bored. You are quickly becoming worse than these rug rats.'

Yet when dog boy gives me a snide little grin, I feel my pupils thin to lines and can almost sense every snake in the vicinity answer my unspoken call, slinking out from their holes and hiding places.

"Out!"

Anko's harsh command leaves no room for argument.

"All right, all right," Kiba concedes reluctantly, raising his hands in placation. He turns to leave, but just before he does, I catch the smallest glimpse of him winking one of those ugly little eyes at me.


I feel my chakra rise around me, black and twisted and it's not quite right, but it doesn't feel wrong either, and I languidly get to my feet, the power winding through my veins in long, sinuous trails . . .

"Uchiha!"

I look down to my jounin leader and her expression brooks no opposition.

"Back to work," she says sharply. Her hand absently brushes her neck before she angrily pulls it away. Her gaze sticks to me, searching and suspicious.

//She always did have that annoying, uncanny knack of sensing my presence.//

'Then disappear.'

//Tch-tch-tch. So cruel, Sasuke-kun.//
I kneel back down as though nothing untoward has occurred.

//We will have to be cautious around her.//

'No kidding.'

I see from the corner of my eye as dog boy scampers down the street like an anxious whipped puppy.

He is rapidly growing into the bane of my existence.

But seeing him does bring to mind another overactive, noisy ninja. One, despite all the fights and misunderstandings and whatever else, I still want to see. He is the most important person to me, for good or for bad.

I'd even be willing to eat some ramen, if he really wanted to. I can picture it now, the silly dobe. My mouth twists into a half smile.

I'm looking forward to it.

I hammer another plank, covering the last of my assigned area.

And then I remember that Naruto isn't here.

-----

I stumble across Sakura quite by accident one day after completing my daily "mission", a term I use rather loosely. She is sitting on a bench just outside the academy, her eyes and mouth droopy in half-sleep as a tree casts its dappled shadow over her body.

It has been two more days. Two more days of hammers and nails and wood and animosity. And while the rebuilding is going well, it is something less than exciting. I need something better to fill my time.

I take a deep breath.

//Missing the little fox, are we?//

I shove my hands in my pockets.

//Ku-ku-ku-ku. How many times must I tell you: he is no good. He is dangerous for us.//

'And how many times must I tell you how much I don't care? As if I'd be concerned what's dangerous for you anyway.'

//What is so for me is the same for you. Best you understand that.//

I walk up silently to the drowsing girl and at the exact moment she is about to keel over, I kick her lightly in the foot.

Sakura starts awake with an unseemly jerk. She blinks, furiously trying to accustom herself to the brightness.

"Sasuke!" She cries and straightens her hair and dress and face to put up some appearance of order.

It is so different from the way Naruto says my name. When he says my name, I feel like he is
talking to me, that it means something and not just a random formation of letters. Sakura still says it like she's either afraid or flattered by the ability to use the word.

"Tired?" I ask her sardonically.

"Heh, heh." She puts her hand behind her head and sticks out her tongue in a gesture that reminds me way too much of him. I need to clear my head. Stupid Naruto. "Tsunade-sama has had me working overtime," Sakura explains. "What with the battle from before, our numbers are depleted and there are only a few medic-nin left in Konoha. And to top it all off, there's been a strain of the flu going around, and since we need all the able bodies for reconstruction and defense, well, I've been busy."

"Hn." I look down the street. "You look terrible."

"Aren't you the gentleman?" She says the words teasingly, surprising me in the way she holds any irritation in check. If I were Naruto, she'd have hit me by now and I be flying across the road to crash into the fence on the other side.

I shift my eyes to look at her.

She sits smiling, the dress she wears seeming to be a little too small for all her new curves. It is apparently a fairly literal case of the student turning out like the teacher.

//She has grown.//

Uh...what?

"I haven't seen you since the day you stopped being my 'patient'." She tilts her head. "How have you been? You look good."

"I'm rebuilding," I say, not really answering her question, but in a way, maybe I did.

'What's with this nonsense all of a sudden?'

//No "nonsense". I merely appreciate beauty in all its varied forms.//

'You get weirder and creepier by the minute."

My parasite has been growing increasingly strange over the past few days: a new, unexpected, and frankly disturbing, development.

Sakura yawns, trying to hide her unladylike actions behind the back of her hand.

Icock an eyebrow.

"I'm tired," she says indignantly by way of defense.

"Hungry, too," I state as I go back to gazing about the street.

"I'm not hungry." She mumbles, but at that moment her stomach makes a loud grumble, loud enough for the Hokage, up in her office, hidden behind a mountainous stack of papers, to hear. Sakura flushes a deep pink.

"I was busy," the kunoichi insists again huffily, her face turning sour at the excuse.

I shake my head tiredly and grab her wrist, and though she gives a protesting yelp, I pull her
through the street, expertly weaving the crowds until we reach the familiar barbeque place. In a 
weird way, she is the closest thing I have to Naruto at the moment and I want to be near that 
familiarity.

And maybe I'm willing to admit, as much as I resent him for it, that I sort of, maybe, kind of, 
possibly miss him.

Just a little.

//Ku-ku-ku-ku.//

Sakura and I quickly take our seats at a booth in a back corner with little light. The waitress smiles 
coyly at the two of us, apparently with no clue who I am, and winks once before trotting away. 
Sakura smiles tolerantly at her, but I refuse to look even remotely in the idiot waitress's direction.

As soon as she is gone, Sakura looks at me and leans in, shielding the side of her mouth as if she is 
conveying a secret.

"So, is this a date?"

I turn my head in her direction and curl my lip. "No," I answer shortly.

She waves me off. "I know. I was just kidding." But there is a tinge of disappointment in her overly 
cheerful reply.

I've made it perfectly clear that I have no interest in her. Not in that regard, never have and 
sincerely doubt that I ever will. And she's made it clear over the past weeks since my return that 
she's fine with that. So I don't get her behavior now.

"I just thought you were hungry," I state, once the food arrives.

"Enjoy!" The waitress shouts energetically, looks between the two of us and then saunters away. 
Sakura keeps her hands firmly clutched beneath the table ledge. "I think she has the wrong idea."

The smell of the dish engulfs us in a bouquet of savory spice. Unconcerned, I take up my 
chopsticks, pull some of the food onto my plate and begin eating.

"Eat!" I demand and the pink-haired girl jumps before also taking up her chopsticks and joining 
me.

We continue like this for a while until the point where our hunger is basically abated, and then 
slow down to actually taste the food.

It's not an uncomfortable silence, but it's a silence that we are both increasingly aware of.

"You know," she says to break it. "I haven't seen him in a while, either."

Naruto, as always.

"Like I care."

"So you say." She takes up a slice of beef between her chopsticks and regards me carefully as she 
chews. "You look much kinder these days," she observes.

I shoot her a nasty look.
She laughs. "It's not an insult." She plays a little with the food on her plate. "You act much kinder, too. Before, you would never have taken me here. Before, you would have left me as I was, sitting there half-dead and just let me fall over asleep, in a puddle of my own drool."

"Thanks for the imagery," I say wryly.

But she doesn’t understand; I can’t change. I’m the same Sasuke I always was.

//Hardly, my dear. You are a pathetic sham of what you once were.//

I knead my fingers against my temple.

'Is one day too much to ask?'

//Yes.//

"Regardless," Sakura goes on, undeterred. "You're different than you were. Or maybe," she inclines her head, considering me thoughtfully, "You were not yourself back then."

"Stop analyzing me."

"I wonder..."

She's not listening. Though she shrugs and goes back to her food, I am not fooled. I know that girl's mind is working nonstop.

//Is that such a bad thing?//

'What is with you?'

//Simply making an observation.//

'Hard for me to concentrate when someone keeps making unsolicited "observations" in my head.'

//And what would you need to concentrate about?//

Sakura looks at me with interest, and then looks dazedly out the window. I take a bit of beef in my chopsticks.

Sakura's eyes cloud over as she watches the milling crowds in the street and I know she's lost in the past, some hazy, faded memory, and not really with me at all. "We came here a couple times," she says.

I put the food into my mouth.

"On actual dates."

I begin to chew.

"Naruto and I."

I almost choke.

Sakura doesn't notice; she's too busy staring off into memory. I pound my chest with the side of my fist until it clears and then take a drink of water.

"When I first agreed, I was still in love with you, or thought I was." She lets her chin fall into her
folded hand. "And Naruto was so persistent. He can be so persistent."

"Yeah," I say, knowing first hand how true this is.

Sakura turns her head slightly in my direction and smiles ruefully. "But it's always different with you. With me, almost as soon as I agreed, he seemed to lose interest. It was like the chase was more important than the win. Ah, I don't suppose it matters." She drops her arm, crossing it with the other on the table. "At the time, it didn't bother me all that much. I mean, the only reason I ever agreed was because I thought he was the closest I'd ever get to you."

"He's nothing like me," I respond bluntly.

She snorts. Then she raises her head and looks straight into my eyes. "I guess. But I also think I know you a bit better now, too." Her shoulders twist. "And it's still the closest I was going to get."

"Sakura . . ." I start, but I have nowhere to go from there. Luckily, I don't have to.

"No," she interrupts. "Don't say anything. I'm over you. I really am." Strangely, she puts her hand over mine. "It's just that," she sighs and shrugs her shoulders, never finishing her statement.

I pull my hand away.

"Am I making you nervous?" She asks coyly.

I narrow my eyes.

//She still cares for you.//

'And how is that your concern?'

//Do you want to stay in Konoha or not?//

I blink in comprehension.

'Not that way.'

"I hear you've been having some trouble with him lately," she quips then, trying to lighten the very heavy mood.

Apparently my life is an open book. I simply scowl out the window. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Kakashi." She shrugs again.

I growl. "He talks too much."

"Not really," she states, unperturbed. "So?"

My eye makes a little spasm. "He's being pushy."

Sakura raises a delicate eyebrow. "Really? And I would have thought you would be the pushy one."

I snap my head back to her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing," she lies and then stares blankly at the food on her plate. "Sometimes, just once, I wish it would be me."
I have nothing to say to that.

But the now very welcome waitress saves me from the uncomfortable conversation.

"Everything good here?" She inquires brightly.

"Yeah, fine." I snap. "Can we get the check?"

"Oh, um, sure." Flustered, the girl swiftly sifts through the papers in her apron until she drops the correct one on the table. "You can pay up front, if you like."

And then she dashes away as fast as her feet can take her.

"You could still use a little work," Sakura says, gesturing. "I think you scared her."

I grunt. "You done?"

"Guess so," she mumbles, crossing her chopsticks over her plate.

"Either you are or you're not." I suddenly can't help being irritated. I dislike when people dredge up all this emotional crap.

"I'm finished," she says.

I take the ticket in my hand and slide from the booth without looking back. Sakura follows silently as I approach the register. Fumbling anxiously through my pockets, I pray that I have enough among the bits and pieces of leftover change I've painstakingly squirreled away over the past few weeks. I manage to gather up the sum from my monetary flotsam and pay in full.

"Thank you, Sasuke," the girl says quietly.

I shove my hands into my pockets.

This would have been more fun with Naruto. At least I could have teased him and that's always enjoyable. And regardless of recent events, he probably wouldn't have burdened me with so much unwelcome psychological baggage.

"Despite your attitude I enjoyed dinner." She says, then quickly leans in and pecks my cheek. I purse my lips unhappily. Sakura wags her finger. "Now, don't wipe that off."

That would have been better with Naruto, too.

I did not just think that.

-----

"Would you please eat like a normal person?" I scold exhaustedly. "At least when we're in public. People are watching."

"Am eashing mormal." He tells me around a mouthful of dangling noodles. He slurps the stream up noisily, splattering broth and bits food all over the place. "Who says I don't eat normal anyway? Maybe you're the one who doesn't eat normal. Look at the way you hold your hand all dainty-like. That's not normal!"

"Everyone's looking at you, idiot. Not me." I swallow some of my udon soup like a proper person.
Naruto looks around irritably, finally noticing that he is indeed the focus of attention. "Well, that's just 'cause they can see how great and good-looking I am."

"Hn." I finish the last of my meal and lay my chopsticks down gently. My moronic companion catches sight of some giggling young girls congregating in a corner and he frowns, sliding closer to me. A slight red glow begins to grow around him and a part of it forms a tail that whips back and forth like that of an angry cat. His normally blue eyes tinge scarlet as his fingers dig into the rim of the table.

I sigh. He keeps doing this lately, allowing the Kyuubi inside him to rear its ugly head at the strangest and most inopportune times.

I notice a bit of scallion that went flying has taken residence on the side of his mouth and it is really annoying.

Idiot.

"Come here."

He's ignoring me. His translucent tail lashes back and forth and a low purring growl emits from his throat.

"Come. Here." I demand, slower and punctuated this time, grabbing his chin between my thumb and forefinger when he still does not comply.

"What?" Naruto shouts, before thinking about how loud he is.

I shake my head and pick up a napkin from the tabletop beside me. Naruto flinches, baring his teeth when I raise it to his cheek, but I hold him steady with my hand. "Hold still," I command and then clean away the mess from his face.

He is such a little child sometimes, but at least the red chakra disappears almost instantly.

"Learn how to eat like a normal person," I reiterate. I release him and turn to look through my pack. After all I've been through, I have very little money left and none to spare over this nonsense. "Pay the check," I instruct, closing my pack.

"Uh, O.K." His cheeks are tinted pink.

I stand up then and stalk off, past the chatting customers, past the giggling girls and I don't bother to see if he's following. The horde of girls silence for a second as I approach, but when I turn to regard them blankly, they start to twitter again. Giving them a disgusted, nasty glare, I continue to the door.

"Sasuke!" Naruto is so loud. "Sasuke, wait up!" He grabs my wrist tightly, but I yank free from his grasp, whirling on him angrily.

The girls get louder.

Naruto turns to them then, and takes a slow, purposeful sidestep toward me. The girls quiet and huddle into one cringing mass. Naruto's hand reaches back towards me. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

And leave the restaurant.
A few minutes pass before I realize he still isn't following. Facing the building again, I notice there is a heavy pall over the entrance, along with a glimmer of red chakra that leaks through the doorway.

I do not have time for this.

Unfortunately, I don’t have the time to avoid this, either.

If this idiot lets loose in the middle of this town, it will reveal my location as easily as if, well, a nine-tailed fox demon let loose in the middle of this town. Grumbling, I head back and see the Kyuubi tail swaying ominously behind Naruto as the girls cower in a corner, the rest of the crowd gone quiet. I quickly take Naruto’s upper arm and pull him toward me.

"We’re going," I whisper into Naruto’s ear, leaving no room for debate. He is so close now that I can feel the anger blistering his skin. I have no clue what he could possibly find to be angry about.

As I exit, I pull him with me, and in typical, clumsy Naruto fashion, he stumbles and crashes into me. The contact causes the fox to essentially disperse into the air.

Naruto gasps.

I let go of him and continue walking.

"Stop it," I say.

"Huh?" Naruto takes his spot beside me as though nothing has happened.

"The fox," I explain. "You keep letting him out."

"Do I?" He crosses his arms and pouts to the sky.

"Yes. You caused a scene."

"Nothing happened."

"You nearly caused a disaster."

"I did not. Everything's fine." He argues, but despite his outward bravado he sounds shaken. "You’re overreacting."

"Naruto," I speak very slowly, as if to a child. "If I hadn’t gotten to you, you might have attacked those girls."

"Girls?" Naruto questions. Then he continues on, with disdain. "Oh, those girls. Well, that was because . . ."

I tilt my head and lift an eyebrow.

He laughs nervously and waves both hands in front of him. "Never mind."

I grunt and face away. "Don’t let it happen again."

"I won’t." He sounds like a spoiled little boy. "Wouldn’t have happened if you wore normal clothes," he mumbles under his breath.

I really want to ignore that; I really do. But in the same way he somehow magically tricked me into
letting him tag along in the first place, into dragging me into a town (such a bad idea) in the second, he also pulls the words from me when my brain screams at me to stay silent.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing." I can feel a concentrated gaze on me. "Just, that thing you wear," he elaborates helplessly. "It shows way too much skin. Talk about improper..."

"It's my uniform."

"It shouldn't be," he insists. "You don't work for Orochimaru anymore, right?" Inwardly I wince as the little voice begins to cackle. "And anyway, it's stupid. It leaves way too much exposed. If I had a kunai, you could easily be dead right now."

As proof, he lays the palm of his hand more or less where my heart should be. My heart picks up its steady rhythm to something closer to a gallop. His hand is warm and rough-skinned from training and it stays there a moment before Naruto snatches it away as though scalded, his face a bright pink.

"See?" he says insistently, looking sideways to the ground. "No protection."

The shadow of his hand burns uncomfortably into my chest, but I ignore that.

"And your ugly orange jacket offers so much more?" I snarl.

"Better than nothing," he snipes back.

"Idiot."

"Hey!" He shouts heatedly and then suddenly adds in a completely different tone, "Ping-pong!"

Conversations with Naruto give me whiplash.

He cannot possibly be serious. It's ping-pong.

But he starts to tug relentlessly on my loose sleeve, gazing at the flashing green sign which repeatedly displays the words "ping-pong, ping-pong" in a tacky curtained window. He looks almost longingly in that direction and tries to head for it, dragging me along. I, however, have no intention of budging.

"Look!" He says, pointing at the sign, as if it is within the realm of possibility for me to miss it. "Ping-pong." Like I didn't hear the first time and now that he's made it perfectly clear, I will launch into a speech extolling the many and varied virtues of ping-pong and 'Oh! You said ping-pong! Race you!'

Yeah, I don't think so.

"Come. On." My arm sways up and down with the persistence of his hand. He tries using those big blue eyes on me, so full of pleading, just shy of tears – over ping-pong! – and it won't work.

"This isn't some vacation," I drawl acerbically.

"Yeah it is," the idiot asserts. "You agreed we'd take a break."

"Only because you wouldn't shut the hell up." Hearing the constant whining refrain of "please, please, please" for several hours on end is enough to make anyone give in.
"Well, being an uptight bastard is hardly taking a break. Besides, it doesn't matter why. Break is break. Vacation is vacation." He sticks out his tongue. "You need to lighten up."

"Hn." No, what I need to do is stop wasting valuable time and find my brother.

Instead, I suddenly have a full-grown ninja latched onto my arm. "I'll make you, if I have to."

As if he could. His mouth turns down sharply, making his whisker marks that much more pronounced. I lower my eyelids halfway and look away.

I can see Naruto’s cheeky little grin even without looking as we enter the gaming hall. I mysteriously find myself on one side of a bright green, netted table with a small wooden paddle in my hand. I raise it to the side of my head like a flag and stand rigid.

"Ready?" Naruto asks enthusiastically, hunched over as though this is a battle over the fate of the world.

I don’t answer.

He laughs. "You're so losing." Then he shakes his head, tosses the ball into the air and swings his paddle, firing a tiny white ball at me. It bounces once, goes over the net, then bounces lamely off my end of the table and falls on the floor.

"Uh, you’re supposed to hit that."

Which I know of course, but I’ve also never played this particular brand of uselessness, a fact that I have no intention of mentioning.

I pick up the ball and hit it and the little plastic thing goes sailing through the air and embeds in the wall behind Naruto's head.

"It's supposed to bounce too, you know." He tries to pry the object from the wall as he explains. For a moment, he simply stands opposite me, ball and paddle in hand, his mind slowly working. "You've never played before, have you?"

I stare at him.

He smiles. "O.K., O.K., just hit it back and make sure it bounces on my side." He lob the ball at me with a gentle strike of his paddle and I tap it back, content that it does what it's supposed to. When the ball reaches Naruto's side, he takes aim and swipes so hard at the ball so that it flies over the miniscule net, bounces off the very edge of the table and drops to the floor. I watch it roll to a stop, then look up at Naruto.

His grin is wide and arrogant, the whiteness of his teeth glinting under the florescent light.

Oh, it's on now.

I retrieve the ball and we start the game anew.

It is, as it turns out, precisely as I thought: a completely pointless game. It doesn't require enough strength or agility to provide any true benefit. And the way that Naruto seems to excel at it only serves to irritate me. Yet the sun has gone down and the stars are twinkling in the window and we are still playing.

I let the ball drop uncontested to the floor and carefully place my paddle flat on the table. Time
has completely gotten away from me, wasting precious hours on this useless nonsense.

I'm supposed to be hunting down the cold-blooded murderer of my family.

That's what I'm supposed to be doing.

Naruto is a bad influence.

"Hey, I was just about to win! Are you giving up already?"

I turn and leave.

Naruto catches up to me a moment after I enter the dark, unfamiliar street. He throws his arms around my shoulders and I'm forced to stop.

"What?" I ask irritably.

He smiles as he hangs off my back. "Nothing. Just . . . thanks." His smile grows wider and he gives an awkward little shrug.

"Hn," I look down the empty stretch of road.

"Where to now?" He asks.

"I'm tired."

He shifts a little to my side. "Me too."

We walk a short way down the street in silence. Then he leans in and whispers, "So, before, does it mean that I can eat however I want when we're alone?"

I don't answer.

He grins with his arm still draped over my shoulder, making me bear some of his weight, which is entirely unnecessary.

But I don't bother to move it.
The cave is unfamiliar; a hard thing to pinpoint about a basically nondescript curve of rock, but it is true. I am certain I have never been here before. There are small stalactites dripping a substance I hope is water onto the stone floor around me.

I am out of breath, but somehow giddy and excited, and not really tired at all.

I hunch over a makeshift worktable covered in a myriad of vials of multi-colored liquids, picking one up in my black, gnarled hand. I pull the stopper and sniff it - it smells acrid. Then I carefully pour the contents into another vial. The concoction begins to smoke, but this is exactly what I want.

There is a clack of shoe on rock and I look up, seeing the shadowy outline of a figure lurking in the cave entrance.

My lips curl into a smile.

I have been waiting for him.

----

"Feeling any better?" Kakashi asks brightly as he seats himself on the table. The moon glows brightly in the window behind him.

I blink back into reality, trying to not let the new weirdness of waking dreams concern me.

I glower up at the man briefly and then return to sharpening my weapons as if I have been doing so all along. They are all laid neatly in a row, the perfect, sharp ones and the dull, dirty ones. Kakashi picks one up and starts twirling it on the end of his finger.

"I'm sure if you asked, Sakura could provide you with something to help you sleep." He grins as if he's being helpful.

"I don't need it," I growl.

The grating whip of sharpening is a rhythmic background to our conversation.

Kakashi inclines his head thoughtfully. "You haven't had more than three hours good sleep a night
since you came here," he says matter-of-factly. "You're still a growing boy and growing boys need their sleep."

I don't acknowledge him, concentrating only on the shine of the kunai.

"Of course," he continues. "Talking about it would be a help too."

The force with which I pull the stone along the blade is so harsh I almost slice my fingers. The gritty sound of metal against stone reminds me of my sword, the constant companion that abandoned me. I drive the kunai straight into the soft wood of the table.

"Are you going to return these any time soon?" Kakashi quips, twirling the kunai meaningfully.

I grab his hand fiercely and quickly pry the weapon from his fingers. "They're mine." I spit out and put the kunai back in its place.

"Oh?"

"If you paid more attention to your supplies and less to my personal life, you'd know that."

"Your personal life, hmm." He hums as if considering the notion but then just pulls his trusty brown paper bundle from his pocket. He carefully unwraps it and reveals the Icha Icha book he got the other day. He is keeping it protectively covered in the store packaging because he is an even bigger freak than I had previously thought.

All my weapons are sharp and battle ready, so I meticulously replace them in my pack.

Without lifting his eyes from the book, Kakashi decides to ask, "Training going well?"

I zip up my pack and don't answer.

"Now that your status had been reinstated, we can start your alternate training soon."

"Alternate training?" I ask despite my better judgment.

"For your eyes," He points at his covered sharingan as if I do not understand what "eye" means and looks straight at me with that uncommon frankness. I stare back. Then without warning he breaks into that stupid looking, crescent-shaped smile. "And so you can let off a little steam. Who knows, I may get some information out of you yet."

//That does not sound beneficial.//

No, it doesn't.

"Whatever," I grumble and stand up.

"It's not healthy to keep everything bottled up." He hops down from the table and follows me as I head down the hall. I shoot him an especially malevolent glare as I enter my bedroom. He just smiles stupidly at me.

I squeeze through the small space made by the open door and hope he doesn't try to follow.

----

My life has become exceptionally boring, a thing I would never before have thought possible. It revolves around the mundane of eating, sleeping, and "training".
In some ways, it’s not all that different from when I was a genin the first time.

Except then I had focus.

Now my focus has been broken and buried with my brother’s bones beneath a mound of dirt and stone and ash.

I throw another rock across the clear lake water.

If Naruto were here, he’d probably turn this into a competition because that is what he does.

Pointless.

But still . . .

Through all the moments of my life, there are only two people with whom I spent honest happiness.

Naruto.

And my mother.

I drop a stone flat into the water, hearing the plop and watch the ripples radiate out in their perfect, concentric circles.

In those months between Orochimaru and Itachi, although I neither wanted nor asked for it, Naruto in his own stupid and unique way kept me grounded.

He’s been gone too long.

Something’s wrong.

The surface of water stills until it is like glass, any evidence of disturbance completely erased.

Hinata is like a ghost when she sits down beside me, letting her legs dangle over the edge of the dock while mine are folded neatly beneath me.

It’s strange.

Sneaking a furtive look over at her, I see her basking in the morning light, the sun playing down on the arched length of her neck as she tilts her head back, her eyes closed. Her arms support her weight behind her as her large coat billows around her like some sort of fabric cocoon.

//Interesting.//

‘What?’

//Do you not sense that?//

‘I have no idea what you’re going on about.’

//Tch-tch-tch. You make me ashamed to call you my pupil.//

Yeah, I’m broken up over that one.

She turns to me then, just her head, and graces me with the barest upturn of her lips.
"Want to spar?" she asks, uncharacteristically calm.

"What?"

"Y-you know, spar." She releases her arms from behind her, pulls up her knees and rests her head on them, while never taking her gaze from mine.

The milky whiteness of her eyes, tinted delicately violet, stare straight into me. I wonder how much those Hyuuga eyes can truly see.

I tense.

//Not that much.//

'And you know this how?'

Internally, I can almost feel the shrug.

//She's being polite.//

'Meaning, if she wanted to, she could.'

//Perhaps. But she would not understand what she was seeing. I can hide very well. Especially with your help.//

I don't like the idea of working with my parasite to keep our secret, even less how easily it comes, but I have no choice.

I nod my agreement to Orochimaru and Hinata takes it as acquiescence.

"Good," she heaves herself to her feet and looks down at me. "N-no one will train with anymore." She purses her lips. "It's v-very annoying."

I hadn't intended to train with her, but now that I have inadvertently agreed, I think it may not be so bad an idea. I've never really tested my skills against the Byakuugan.

Once we reach the training ground, Hinata faces me, back straight and declares, "N-now, d-don't go easy on me. Despite what everyone thinks, I am not so d-delicate yet."

I let one side of my mouth curve up.

As it turns out, Hinata makes a rather good training partner. At least for the way I am now, with only partial access to my natural resources, restricted almost exclusively to taijutsu, the sharingan and the most basic genjutsu.

It forces me to think differently, more acutely. I have to carefully consider where to conceal myself when battling an opponent who can essentially see me regardless of where I go. Plus, she is a close combat expert and while normally I can more than hold my own in that venue, fighting the gentle fist is altogether different. I have to use long-range attacks, but the only techniques left to me are weapons.

All the restrictions make the battle frustrating, but in a surprisingly good way.

It's kind of a thrill trying to work my way carefully through her formidable defenses.

And I think I've finally found her blind spot. I am halfway to launching my attack when she
suddenly collapses to her knees. I haven’t actually done anything yet so I land softly and cautiously approach her.

//Could be a trap.//

'Perhaps, but somehow I doubt it.

"Hyuuga-san?" I ask, unsure even why.

//And now you care for this girl, too?//

'I do not.'

//Then what is the concern in your voice?//

I ignore him, because there is no concern and no cause for it, as I kneel down beside the Hyuuga girl. Her face is twisted up, her hands to her belly and then without any warning, she expels the contents of her stomach all over the ground.

Well, that was unpleasant.

Her colorless eyes widen before she spins away, her hair falling down to hide her face.

"O-oh, my g-goodness," she says, appalled. "H-how embarrassing."

I just crouch beside her, careful not to be too near the regurgitated breakfast, at a loss what to do. Reluctantly, I ask, "Are you O.K."

She gives me a sour expression and leans back on her heels, her hands covering her stomach.

//Ah, of course, it is early.//

'What?'

//She is "delicate", you silly boy.//

I watch her hands flex slightly over her belly and when I touch her shoulder, somehow, with the aid of Orochimaru perhaps, I feel the second presence.

I pull my hand away, get to my feet, and regard her. "You're pregnant."

//See? It is not so difficult.//

"It's n-not infectious," she states a bit indignantly.

"But," I say, thinking of my own situation, "You're only sixteen."

//You're rather fixated on that, aren't you?//

The girl shrugs and looks to the ground. "Mistakes happen," she says with an odd sort of calm.

"But you were drinking the other day," I point out, as if this proves anything.

"But I d-didn't know then!" She asserts vehemently, raising her wide eyes to me as though desperate I understand this.

I nod dazedly, looking off into the distance.
I don't know what to say. It's not a comfortable situation and there's no reason for me to care.

But then I remember the looks, the furtive glances, and those four ominous words blaring like a siren in my head. And there's a piercing jealous anger that almost blinds me.

//Tch-tch-tch. Disappointing.//

I clench my fists fiercely at my sides.

"Is it . . ." I grind out.

"It's not Naruto-kun's." She answers even before I get the question out. "That was a long time ago. Besides, we n-never . . ."

The anger drains out of me as though through a sieve, but the anxiety remains.

So what if had been Naruto's?

What is that to me?

//Nothing. Or at least it should be. In fact, it would be fortunate.//

Naruto shouldn't be having a child right now, that's why. He's sixteen, for god's sake.

And besides, he doesn't belong with this silly girl, he belongs with . . .

"H-help me up?"

I blink and see Hinata looking up at me with that sick, pinched expression, her hand outstretched. After only a moment's hesitation, I take the hand and pull her to her feet.

"Th-thanks," she says, the shyness fully reinstated, though she smiles.

I end up walking her home in silence. There are too many thoughts jumbled in my head for speech.

Like what was that stab of jealousy?

And why does the anxious desire to see Naruto linger still, making my heart beat erratically in my ears?

-----

I dreamt of him last night. It wasn't anything special, just a weird mix of where and when and how we once were, traveling and fighting and hunting.

It was at first anyway.

But then it changed, though the change made little sense. Gone were the images and the distinct memories, leaving only the vaguest impressions of smell, touch and taste.

And all of it so overwhelmingly Naruto.

And at the end of it, the only thing I was left with was the almost suffocating longing to be near him.

His absence itches at the back of my brain and the underside of my skin.
Three years ago, I had no qualms about leaving. It was simple.

But now it is all different. I am like some pathetic little kid who can't brave the world without his security blanket. His blond-haired, blue-eyed security blanket.

I hate it.

I’ve gotten too used to him being there.

I rub my fingers against the smooth expanse of sheet.

He is so much warmer, more comfortable than this pale imitation.

But the worst part I think, as I curl into my pillow, is that for the first time I realize that this feeling, this connection, is not exactly what I thought it was.

-----

I don’t want to be in the front row. It seems wrong. The front row is the most important seat, designated for immediate family. It is the most grieved place of honor. There had to be closer family members than me.

But then I look around and see that I am the only family member. The teeming sea of people that looks back at me are nameless and may as well be faceless for all I know of them.

Instinctively, I look up to my right and start to say in a small voice, "Ani . . ."

But the man who looks down at me with a sad, crooked smile is old and fat and unfamiliar.

And I remember, as if I have been thrust into the sunlight from long nights blundering in the dark, what it was that happened and who it was that made it so.

Suddenly, I want to cry so much it burns. The tears claw at the backs of my eyes, struggling to escape. My nose feels clogged, but a dribble of snot leaks down over my lip. I wipe it away with the back of my sleeve and it makes my chin and throat clench raw with unshed emotion. But I am the last now, the only remaining heir of the mighty Uchiha and I must hold myself strong enough for all of them. I lower my eyelids and trap the tears inside the black and red of my memory, to live beside mother and father and everyone I knew and didn't.

My brother has stolen my grief and with it my tears, so I cannot let them fall until the day I meet him again.

I don't yet know what this means, but I know with a certainty I cannot name that the tears should not come until after Itachi.

'Grow stronger,' he had said. 'Learn to hate.'

My aniki.

And this is the very last time I will call him that.

-----

This has become something of a routine, these late-night discussions between Kuma and me. I try not to let it vex me.
Tonight I am sitting patiently upon the living room floor while he stands uncomfortably outside; leaning on the edge of the balcony door as if crossing the threshold to the inside is against the rules. It probably is.

"You can come in, if you want," I offer, only because it's awkward otherwise.

He doesn't move and all I see is the faint shadow of his left side reflecting on the door.

I put down the scroll and move to the next, but it tells me nothing more about the history of Konoha than what a child learns in his first year of school. Around me are numerous scrolls of every size and subject and I sift through each one for answers that simply can't be held in leaves of paper. They weren't there before, they won't be there now.

"I'm sorry."

I had almost forgotten he was there.

"Hn." I have no idea what he's sorry for.

"I implied that you don't appreciate anything." He explains. "I made assumptions."

The scroll rolls up with a snap as I move to the next.

"I forgot you aren't Itachi."

The words on the page become meaningless shapes that float in a vast sea of yellow-stained paper.

"You knew my brother?" I quickly correct myself. "Itachi?"

"We met," he answers evasively.

"What . . ." I start, but then stop because I'm unsure I really want to know.

"He was very serious," Kuma says, having guessed my question. "He never smiled. Instead he always wore this look somewhere between arrogance, confidence, and a complete boredom."

I nod, because this all sounds like Itachi, but I don't think Kuma actually sees the gesture.

My watcher sighs then, a funny and melancholy sound. "It was so annoying, embarrassing, to have to take orders from a thirteen year old kid."

I never really thought about Itachi being on a team before. I pick up a particularly old scroll, tattered and brown at the edges, that seems more like a collection of notes hurriedly written down than composed information. It's about the fledgling village and its beginnings as the epicenter of Fire Country.

"The village should be ours," Itachi told me once with that resolute look in his eyes that states he's right.

I already know that story.

"That's why I requested this assignment." I lift my head and see two pinhole, black, bear eyes staring back at me. "After knowing Itachi and what he did, I wanted to meet the one he left behind."

I keep my mouth shut.
"So I forgot you weren't Itachi." He says it simply, admitting a fact but not a mistake. There is no apology in it. Then he turns away.

"No," I reply. "I'm not."

I'm not Itachi. Be he never was what I thought he was, so how can I be sure?

I don't know who I am anymore, either.

Itachi . . .

"Little brother" he called me. One of the last things he said.

"Little brother."

So then tell me, big brother, will you ever give me any peace?

-----

I don't recall the when or where, the who or how, I just know that I heard it somewhere. And the next thing I knew, my feet carried me here and just how that occurred is a blur too.

So now I'm standing, eyes closed, arms folded, and my weight resting on the railing while I portray an outward sense of calm. Boredom would be better, but even I don't think I've achieved that.

//Such a shame.//

I don't bother addressing the parasite. I'm hoping that if I don't, he'll just leave me alone.

//Wishful thinking.//

Strength of will. I imagine that he is locked up in a box with no bars and no doors and no air holes and maybe he'll just suffocate and die.

The door to the Hokage's office opens and with a rush of anticipation, I open my eyes as well. And there he is; the one I've been waiting for and he's not really all that special.

Is he?

"Old hag," Naruto mutters under his breath, running his hand through his hair and cursing the ground as if it could do something to better his situation.

Finally, he looks up.

It's strange. It's only been a few weeks, but he looks different to me. Or maybe it's me and this is the first time I'm seeing him. Or maybe my new eyes are playing tricks on me. But none of it matters because he smiles.

I feel a vein throb in my throat.

"Waiting for me?" he asks.

"You wish."

My arms feel out of place so I drop them to my sides.
"You hungry?" I feel enormously stupid. This is Naruto, the same person I've known for years and yet I can think of nothing intelligent to say. And why does it seem that everything I do lately revolves around food? Maybe it's just me.

//--It is not.//--

Naruto's eyes sparkle mischievously as he looks at me.

"If it's ramen!" He answers cheerily. "It's been weeks since I've had any ramen!"

I snort. "Whatever."

He sidles up next to me and I can smell him as if he is the only scent in the air. Pungent, sour, but with that distinct intensity that can be no one but Naruto.

He looks at me, cocks his head, and wrinkles his nose. "I just got back from a mission. I haven't had a chance to clean up or anything. I should probably get a shower first."

"It's fine." There's no way I'm telling him I actually kind of like his smell.

He gives an unconcerned little shrug and we head off.

The ramen stand is relatively empty, for whatever fortuitous reason, so we take the two stools in the center of the bar.

In short order, we make our requests and the old man jots the information down in his head. While we wait, rather than striking up a conversation, Naruto places his cheek in his hand and stares at me intently.

It's annoying.

//--You're nervous, not annoyed//--

Right now, I'm both. Picture the box, Sasuke, picture the box.

"How did the mission go?" I need some relief from Naruto's stare and Orochimaru's intrusive commentary.


"Then you're not going to tell me why you're almost a week past schedule?"

"Miss me?"

I glare at him, his lip quirked up cutely, anxiously, and my brain screams at me to say "no", but what comes out of my mouth is a tentative "Maybe."

Naruto is shocked into silence. And me, well, my face is growing so warm I have to look away.

The silence between us is awkward.

"Um," Naruto hedges after a bit. "How about you? What kind of missions have you had?" He sounds proud there at the end, as if he has just stumbled on some buried treasure.

I face him, my composure now adequately back intact. "I'm a genin again, remember?" I say
pointedly. "What do you think?"

"Ha! Probably rescuing cats and stuff like that!"

And he looks so damned happy, there's no way I can tell him the truth.

"Something like that."

Our dishes arrive, the proprietor smiles, and I find myself nodding at him gratefully. His smile is still the same as when I was a part of Team Seven and I guess I'm relieved that he acts as though nothing has changed. With Naruto, one could argue that he didn’t want to lose his best customer. With me, there’s no such excuse.

When I look back to Naruto, I notice he has moved a little closer to me. He gives me a nervous quirk of his lip and an unreadable stare in his darkened blue eyes. Then he lets out a nervous shaky breath and turns to his ramen.

"Let's eat!" And he dives in with abandon.

I snort and carefully begin on my bowl, letting it cool a bit before eating and doing so like a normal person. I act as if his sudden nearness is not the only thing on my mind.

"Another one, please!"

I smirk as I chew, barely into my first bowl while Naruto chomps voraciously into his second.

"You didn't tell me who your teammates were," He says around a mouthful of noodles.

Some things never change.

"Just a couple of brats you don't know."

"Well, duh." He rolls his eyes. "That's why I'm asking."

I refuse look at him.

"They have names, don't they?"

"Hn." I glare at the stove behind the counter, but the way Naruto keeps poking me in the arm with his chopstick tells me he's not giving up any time soon. "Kanamori Tetsuo," I grumble obstinately, just to stop him. "And Inuzuka Ouka."

"No. Way." This little tidbit of information is apparently of vast amusement to Naruto, as I knew it would be.

"And who's your leader?"

"Anko." I thoughtfully stir my ramen.

Naruto grins widely and I expect him to burst out laughing, but instead he simply says, "Makes sense."

I check to see if he's making some sort of joke, but he seems oddly sincere, so I keep my mouth shut.

"Another!"
The sound of Naruto ordering yet one more bowl of ramen makes my stomach plummet suddenly to my feet. I don’t think I can afford this.

Naruto moves even closer and now payment is the last thing on my mind. His face is awash with delight as he consumes bowl number three, but I push my own bowl away, barely eaten.

"You want a different flavor?" I wordlessly wave off the owner’s question.

"Not hungry?"

I look at Naruto and his ever-growing stack of empty bowls. "I'm not a human trash compactor like you."

There is no scathing, smart-mouthed retort. He just grins. And moves his leg. As if this is an ordinary, everyday thing to do. He presses it along mine until we are touching knee to ankle and the silly, insignificant contact sends a thrill racing through my body.

Is it significant?

I don't know anymore.

But I don't jerk away like I normally would, like I would have a few weeks ago. Like I should. Because as much as things aren’t different, they are. No one else could ever make me feel as angry and jealous, excited or content as he can. Not even Itachi.

//You are over-thinking something that has a simple answer.//

'This wasn’t an invitation.'

//No matter. You need not waste your time considering when there is nothing to consider.//

I curl my lip.

//Konoha has given you but one option. Take it.//

'I thought you hated Konoha.'

//And so I do.//

'Then that makes no sense.'

//But this is not about me, it is about you.//

I snort. 'Everything you do is about you.'

And that’s what bothers me. There’s reason to his chaotic madness and unprecedented behavior; there must be. But his thought patterns are so curling and swirling like a snake that there's no way for me to straighten them out.

A loud bang on the countertop jolts me from my musings. Naruto faces me; hand on the counter, with a tower of empty ramen bowls stacked behind him. I'm not even going to count them.

"Done?" I smirk, hiding my growing concern over how to pay.

"Let's go." He smiles and lifts his hand. Beneath is money, enough to cover the bill.
My face is tight when I look at him, showing my disapproval, but he's unaffected, saying only, "You can get it next time."

"You can't just . . .," I begin to protest, out of pride, out of habit, but I don't finish. Naruto's not paying attention; he's already leaving.

"Thanks!" He shouts to the owner as he lifts the short curtain. With a nod to the same, I follow.

I end up letting it go because I have nothing valid to argue with anyway. Naruto remains oddly quiet on our trek top nowhere and that gives me too much room to think.

He walks silently beside me, his blondness glowing brighter in the sunshine and his skin looks more tanned than it was before he left. I wonder idly if he was in Suna.

It seems like forever and no time at all since I saw him last and though I feel better he’s back, I also feel worse.

I am completely lost. Nothing in my life makes sense anymore, and yet nothing has truly changed. Naruto is still Naruto, I am still me, and Konoha is still Konoha.

"You're very quiet today," he says.

"Hn."

"Exactly!" He clasps his hands up behind his head. "Not that you're ever that talkative, but c'mon!"

The whisker marks are deeper than they were, or at least seem like it in contrast to the golden hue of his skin.

I shouldn't be noticing these things.

My hands are shaking.

//If we were to find some worthier companion, things could get back on track. Promises to fulfill, Sasuke-kun.//

"You seem really distracted or something." He turns to look at me. "Something bothering you?"

"No," I answer a little too sharply.

His eyebrows rise skeptically, but when I turn my head away, he does the same.

Hiding beneath the protection of my bangs, I sneak a look back. He takes in a deep intake of air and I notice, for the first time, that his lips are a slightly different color than the rest of his face. He peeks back at me and turns up his mouth. The curve of his jaw is softly rounded, but in a way that shows the harder line lurking beneath.

Yeah, I need to stop thinking. Right now.

//The only useful idea you've had all day.//

The edge of the forest comes into view as we approach the isolated outskirts of town.

Naruto brushes his hair from his face and I notice his fingernails are dirty.

I clench my hands until it hurts.
The gnawing, clawing, burning, biting need to touch him bubbles within me like an overdue eruption.

Then Naruto smiles at me and that sends my heartbeat racing.

So maybe it's that. Or the heat, or maybe it is my abnormal nervousness, but I do something inexplicable and unexpected and very, very stupid.

I tackle him.

"Whoa!" Naruto's eyes are wide as he falls backward, crashing down into the dirt and grass with an offended "oof".

I'm not exactly sure what I'm doing, just that the need to do it wholly overwhelmed me. I needed to touch him, and attacking is quite honestly the only way I can understand. Beneath my hands I feel the hardness of muscle and bone when I press down on his shoulders. I'm on my hands and knees straddling him and trapping his body with my own. His hair still sticks up uncontrollably, defiant in its refusal to obey the laws of gravity. Pulling his mouth down at the corners, Naruto frowns angrily up at me.

"What was that for?"

But I have no answer. My head is full of cotton. My eyes twitch and I can hardly make out anything that makes any sense, least of all my own actions. I know my breathing is strained, but there's no reason for it that I can name.

A change slowly comes over Naruto's face, the angry lines smoothing out until the only ones that remain are the three whisker marks on his flushed, baby-round cheeks.

The color of his eyes is almost a slate gray, like the sky just before a storm, when everything in contrast seems to glow neon and I don't think I've ever seen them turn that shade before.

//Yes, yes, I know. You think he's cute.//

"Uh, Sasuke?"

I dig my fingers deep into his muscle and his eyebrows rise. But otherwise, he doesn't move, remaining pinned under me and strangely compliant. Not like every other time in recent days when he was the one who broke into my shields, past my guard, catching me unawares and unprepared.

But this time, this way . . .

"Now I'm in control."

I like that. I’m not vulnerable, just like I shouldn't be, not back with Orochimaru or Shinta or Ibiki where I had only my wits to affect an outcome. Here, now, with Naruto, I am in charge.

I sneer. "So how do you like it?"

Naruto looks at me a moment, but then swallows shallowly, his body still yielding and replies with a nonsensical, "Yeah."

He stares straight through me as he timidly raises his hands, but I catch them in my own and slam them to the ground beside his head.

I'm down to my elbows now and our faces are close together, not close enough to touch, but close
enough that I can sip the airy remains of his breath.

He is breathing thinly.

Nervously, he licks his lips. "So," he whispers, his eyelids fluttering. "Can I?"

"Can you what?" I return in a vain attempt to sound normal, though that battle has long since been lost.

"Kiss you."

My heart is pounding against my ribcage because I think I may actually want him to. I don’t know what would happen if I did. I feel like I’m falling into a deep dark well.

I lean in closer until we are scarcely a hair’s breadth apart and murmur "No."

His face screws up into a confounded little pout.

But I can’t give him permission.

Because I want to but I don’t. Or I think I do, but I can’t. Or won’t. There are no assurances for me to hold onto and no solid ground to stand on.

So Naruto will have to make the decision.

And he does.

The muscles in his neck strain slight and sharp as he tips up to me, his eyes falling closed, and he gently presses his lips to mine.

The electric shock in my brain from my parasitic intruder is almost physically painful.

But I have other things on my mind besides Orochimaru's virulent protest.

Naruto's lips are chapped as he parts them slightly, flicking his tongue out to slide along my lower lip. It is a gentle movement that I barely feel, but affects me all the more because of it. My vision begins to blur.

In my head Orochimaru's protesting voice echoes persistently and it sounds an awful lot like mine.

Naruto presses his palms up harshly against mine and his short nails dig into the back of my hands. I drive back, gripping my fingers, the force, the minor pain, is arousing.

Yet my rational side still reminds me of all the demands made of me, the expectation, obligations and threats that hang over my head.

Insistently, Naruto leans upward, sliding his warm, velvety tongue along the seam of my mouth. Everything else disappears until all that remains is the feel of him, his hands, his lips, his tongue, and the desire I can practically feel leaking through his skin. A gentle breeze whips up, filling my nose with his powerful scent like pheromones.

My need, my yearning, spikes until I am dizzy.

But it matters little what I want.

Then Naruto whines deep in the back of his throat, sending vibrations rippling through my body,
all the way down to my blood.

Ah, fuck it.

I close my eyes.

And kiss him back.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

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Title: Gray-colored Happiness
Chapter: 21 of 42

It's not what I expected.

Not that I expected anything, because I didn't.

This is entirely unexpected.

Where was I?

There is a delighted sort of squeal, a bit girlish and I'd like to laugh at him, but with the next moment I can't. Because suddenly I can feel and taste Naruto deep in the back of my throat and it is enough to make me light-headed.

It is not rushed or violent as I suppose it ought to be with all the pent-up tension and conflicting emotions that have always existed between us. Instead, it is clumsy and inept and messy and somewhat embarrassing.

It is my first kiss.

Not counting the accidental one forced on me three and a half years ago.

Both have been with Naruto.

Funny that.

I'm not going to say it's perfect and everything I ever wanted and waited for because it's not. It is a mix of many things but none of it is that perfection sort of dreamy romantic crap. And I am hardly a dreamy romantic.

Yet it is what it is and I suppose because of the awkward, uncomfortable clumsiness of it, it is a variety of perfect.

And now I am being sappy.

I am never sappy.

He still has the salty, spicy taste of ramen, but there is another flavor that lingers just below the surface. Deep and rich and earthy and like nothing I've ever tasted before and I think that it is the
unique flavor of Naruto himself.

His tongue feels thick and heavy in my mouth and the low noise in his chest changes, growing guttural and I'm not so sure it's altogether human anymore. He slowly slides his tongue along mine, his breath and voice hard against me and . . .

He seems to know what he’s doing, but I don’t and I'm not sure how I feel about that. Someone else has had this; someone else has sampled what should be mine.

Naruto should be mine.

Always mine.

I simply follow my instinct and his lead, though it still irks me. Naruto, better at something than I am.

It’s terrible that I’m sure it’s true.

But still, it is thrilling and sweet and almost a little sinful to be kissing my best friend.

And very, very weird.

And I just, I just . . .

I don't know.

The groan this time comes from me, rolling over our entwined tongues and I just don't care.

We come apart with a wet pop as Naruto drops away, sending a sudden warm burst of air over my face. Opening my eyes, I feel foggy and faint; my breath coming in short, ragged gasps and every nerve in my body is humming in a way I have never felt before. Naruto gazes up at me with those big blue eyes shining in the shadow of his face and his mouth drawn into the biggest, widest, goofiest grin I think I have ever seen.

I wonder what I look like, dazed and panting like an idiot.

He whispers huskily into the space between us. "Sasuke . . ."

I have nothing to say.

He tries to reach up to me, but that’s too much so I drive his hands harder into the dirt beneath them. Slowly, I push our conjoined hands up above his head, feeling his nails break skin and drag blood along his fingertips as he pulls them up to my knuckles. My breath catches in my throat.

That new, unfamiliar sensation is coiling down in the depths of my self, white and sharp, and it makes it very difficult to think about anything else.

My heart is pounding so loud and fast in my chest that there's no way he can't hear it.

The small cuts in my hands throb weakly and a tiny amount of blood trickles over them, just enough to drip into the grass and stain it slightly pink. Naruto just lays there, his hair splayed out around him, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he struggles for air.

He looks really good like that . . .

I lean down close to him, our lips almost touching but not, and breathe in the last of the breath that
escapes him.

His hands keep pressing harder against mine and I know he's fighting to touch me.

And I want him to. I want to feel his hands on my skin, but at the same time, at the same time . . .

Part of me wants him to stop.

Part of me anticipates him hurting me.

And part of me, the part I desperately want to deny, wants him to drive his nails deep into my skin until I feel the slice of them through my flesh.

It is wrong and I'm not ready for this.

I'm not ready for him to see what I really am because it’s different and worse, than what he thinks.

If he looks at me, he'll see all that's wrong and dark twisted there, so I lower my forehead to the ground beside his face, sliding my cheek against his. His skin is much softer than I would have imagined. The first inklings of hair tickle my face as his warm breath brushes the edge of my ear.

It is an achingly peaceful moment that I just don't want to end.

And then, inexplicably and without warning, Naruto releases a great peal of laughter as if he has just been witness to the funniest joke in the world. It is loud and coarse, echoing off the great expanse of trees and it is just so Naruto. The vibrations of it ripple through my cheek and body and I smirk at his audacious idiocy. And the palpable tension of the situation seems to drift away into nothing. Good-naturedly, as much as I can be in such a situation, I punch him in the shoulder and he recaptures my hand with his own, twining our fingers together, pale white contrasting starkly with golden tan.

Eventually his laughter subsides and ends in a sigh that ruffles my hair.

He takes a breath and brings our linked hands to his face, tenderly kissing the injured knuckles. It is a gesture so . . . affectionate that it completely alters the atmosphere.

Then the whole world goes still.

Because Naruto begins to slowly drag his tongue along the back of my hand and laves up the small traces of blood like some sort of animal. I should be disgusted, I know, yet I turn to watch, unable to look away. His tongue feels so . . .

And that coiling within me twists tighter and tighter, deep within my gut, sharp and sweet and so close to pain but not. He stops with one last fleeting kiss and the feeling lingers briefly before painfully filtering off as if it no longer knows what to do. He brings our linked hands down to his chest while his other pulls free and begins stroking the side of my arm. I am in such shock at the moment that I don't think to let any of it bother me.

Because it should, shouldn't it?

My eyes are wide when I turn to look at my hand driving into the dirt.

"Sasuke."

His voice startles me because it sounds normal, so much like the old Naruto. The Naruto I wanted so much to see; the Naruto that I . . .
I swallow back the saliva that has pooled in the dip of my mouth and lift my head to face the trees.

And everything stops, like the crash of a runaway cart into a solid brick wall.

Staring back at me from the interlocking curtain of leaves are circle black eyes surrounded by a face of white and black and red. The stare is intense and calculating as if tabulating every nuance of the moment.

'Any more and we will have to inform the council.'

And my crystalline future shatters into a thousand jagged pieces, lodging straight into my long dead, yet rapidly beating heart.

It all went downhill from there.

------

I've never really thought about it before.

Being gay.

Of course to be fair, I've never really thought about being straight either. I've never truly considered anything because there wasn't "anything" to consider. There wasn’t any time for it and there wasn’t supposed to be future past Itachi.

The fact that he's male doesn't really bother me.

The fact that he's Naruto is annoying because Naruto is annoying.

But none of that is it. I can’t allow there to be anyone.

If I let him, Naruto could rule my every action, hurt me at every turn, and destroy me from the inside out.

Everything in me is twisted up and rotten and what should go together just doesn't anymore. He wouldn't understand.

And I don’t want him to.

This is doomed from the start.

I pull away, keeping my eyes on him as I lean back on my heels. When I flick my eyes back up, the mask and any trace of the ANBU wearing it has completely vanished, off no doubt to inform the elders.

It changes everything.

//Sets thing to rights, you mean.//

My mysteriously absent parasite has returned at the worst possible moment. What a knack he has for that.

'Your opinion. And I see no reason why I should care about that.'

I move back to sit on Naruto's thighs, his legs stretched out beneath me. He follows, his hand on my chest as if a string attaches us, until he too is sitting up. Then he releases me and puts his hands
on the ground behind him, resting his weight backward.

He is still wearing that goofy grin.

"What," he asks. He is breathless.

I show him my displeasure. "Don't get the wrong idea."

He smiles bigger, his eyes crinkling closed. "I think it would be pretty hard to get the wrong idea."

A growl issues from my throat. "This was a mistake."

"Oh, I don't think it was that bad," he says offhandedly.

'That bad'? My eyes slim to nothing as I try to restrain my mounting rage.

But he just grins and laughs and leans forward, cupping my chin in his two hands. "In fact, I'd say it was pretty good. And besides, we have plenty of time." He whispers the last two words softly over my mouth, "to practice."

And he catches me unawares to kiss me once more, his lips plump and warm and there it is again, rolling and wrapping and enveloping me, the sudden desire to swallow him whole or let him swallow me.

It doesn't much matter which.

Without conscious thought, I grip his thigh, my fingers cutting through the fabric of his pants. I push forward until his head falls back under mine. His neck arches harshly as he fights to keep contact while still retaining balance. I'm up to my knees now, taller than him, my mouth working to press his head as far back as it will go. One of his hands has moved from my face so that his fingers can lace through my long bangs. I can feel his tongue mapping out the contours of my mouth and I push back with mine, neither of us giving ground.

There's a little bit of pain at the back of my neck where his nails bite into the sensitive skin near my spine.

I keep pushing as if however close I can get is never close enough.

But then once again there is the need to breathe.

I release him almost violently, the separation making a smacking sound, and scowl down at him. His face is flushed pink, but the blue of his eyes seen through the drowsy slits of his lids glows. One side of his mouth quirks up, showing me the white sharpness of his teeth.

I feel the deep rise and fall of his chest with hands that have somehow made their way beneath his shirt. Quickly, I pull my fingers down across the taut muscles of his belly and hear the hiss he makes through his teeth.

I fall back to my heels and roll to my feet in one smooth motion.

Naruto watches curiously from the ground.

"No," I state.

"No," he asks, puzzled.
"No," I repeat adamantly, taking a step back and feeling the atmosphere pitch. "You can't kiss me."

He chuckles and lowers his head, shaking it in disbelief. "I think it's too late for that. I already did."

Tilting his head, he peers at me from under long blond lashes. "And you kissed me back."

Panting still, I stare at him. "Well, it's not happening again."

"Why not?" He questions cheekily. "That last one," he rubs the back of his neck, "hurt a little bit, but, um, yeah. You know." Raising his head, he suggestively runs the tip of his tongue roughly beneath that razor canine.

I wonder what those teeth would feel like . . .

No! This is enough of this.

//Quite indeed.//

'No one asked your opinion. Why don't you be a good boy and go back to your little room?'

//Now that I don't have unpleasant foxes taking up my space, I don't need to.//

"It doesn't matter what you think," I snarl. I wave my hand at him. "Whatever you think this was, it wasn't. It was nothing more than a momentary lapse of judgment. An effect of the heat and way too much change and rule to my life. So don't get the wrong idea."

Naruto's eyebrows shoot up near his hairline. "What are you saying, Sasuke?"

I groan at his stupidity.

"Do I have to spell it out for you, dobe?"

A thousand different thoughts and emotions flicker over his face until comprehension finally settles there.

He leaps to his feet and I take a calm step backward as he bears down on me. "You're going to tell me this means nothing?" He shakes his head vehemently. "Who the hell are you trying to convince? Not me, I hope, because I was there. I felt it and it sure as hell wasn't just me who wanted that."

He's yelling now and I suppose he thinks he has the right to be angry. But he doesn't understand. Just because I let him kiss me doesn't mean anything’s going to change.

//Let him kiss you' is a very broad interpretation of what just happened.//

'Shut up.'

//I'm only pointing out that you're the one creating this particular predicament.//

"You're the one trying to kid yourself." I tell Naruto flatly. "It was just another accident. And it won't be repeated."

The lines of Naruto's face carve into his cheeks and his irises flash crimson, just like the air around him. It is only for an instant and then it is gone.

Kyuubi.
I bring it out in him more than anyone else. So it’s best all around not to let this go any further.

//Well, if that is the case, then all is well and good. Now perhaps we can move onto something productive.//

"I saw it, Sasuke," Naruto says cryptically.

I have no idea what he's talking about.

"I saw . . ." He pulls his mouth down into a frown. "You wanted it just as much as I did."

My eyes catch the small part to his lips, and a hint of his teeth beyond. I see the slight remainder of blush on his cheeks and the tousled mess of his hair.

Maybe I did.

But it changes nothing.

//Exactly, my foolish little pet. Exactly.//

"You can't think," Naruto suddenly says and I had almost forgotten he was still there. "You can't think that now that I know I can have you that I'll give you up."

I scowl at him, but say nothing.

I feel suffocated as I know the cage I’m trapped in keeps constricting smaller and smaller.

-----

"You must come with us."

Those are the first words I heard upon arriving at Kakashi's apartment.

They are also the last.

I never actually made it through the door, the three heavily armed ANBU were already waiting for me, bariring my way and demanding my compliance.

Of course, it might be for the best.

I only nodded and they took a triangular formation around me to prevent even the thought of escape.

I won't deny it; the thought did briefly cross my mind. But I've gone down that path once before and look where it got me. Right back where I started, only worse. There’s no hope of freedom.

Since my entrance into the non-descript room, the same one I met the elders in upon my return, I have seen neither hide nor hair of anyone. They have left me here to sweat it out.

But they have, as usual, underestimated me. Nothing they do can be worse than what has already been done. Considering everything, executing me at this point would almost be redundant.

It would be easier to just let it happen.

//I reject that idea.//

'You don't get a say.'
"Do not be foolish. You can accomplish nothing if you are dead."

'There's nothing left to accomplish. Except for maybe ridding the world of you and my death would take care of that rather efficiently.'

'So cruel, my pet.'

'Stop that.'

'You are handling all of this far too well.'

I sigh and stare at the blank wall. He's right of course. The interfering little bastard.

'Because I don't know where to go from here'. This time is just spare change. And now Naruto's in the mix, complicating things . . .

'That is no reason to throw your life away.'

'I never said I was going to "throw it away".'

There are no windows in the room, and no door, only a small set of chairs and a table. There is no way for me to accurately know how much time has passed aside from the ticking in my mind. It feels like days, but can hardly be an hour.

'You should use your time effectively to come up with an appropriate game plan.'

'Game plan?'

I stand conspicuously in the center of the room, letting them know I have no intention of accepting whatever meager comfort they have to offer. The will neither lull nor sway me. I am Uchiha Sasuke and Uchiha Sasuke follows no one but himself.

'Noble sentiments. But tell me my dear, where will those sentiments get you?'

'They will retain for me my pride and my honor.'

I resist the urge to rock onto my back foot and cross my arms.

'The Uchiha have no honor. They relinquished that long ago, since before the days of your brother. They had power, influence, and reputation. But no honor. They bargained that away for a grudge and a secret. Do not try to claim such petty ideals now.'

'I have my honor,' I assert vehemently.

'Stop deluding yourself. It will get us nowhere. What you have is your life and nothing more.'

'No.' I feel the side of my face convulse. 'They have that.'

'Only if you let them.'

'Let them?'

I snort aloud. And what has defying them gotten me? The Uchiha name is tarnished too badly now and too many people associate it with "traitor" and "murderer" to be able to erase it. Regaining the status that used to go with that name will take more work than I am prepared for. So without any attainable goal left, I find it hard to muster the resolve to battle for this useless life. Genin?
Confined to Konoha? What am I supposed to do with that?

//There is always the chance to change things, to gain power and influence. But only if you live. Until then, follow their demands. Once you have gained their trust, they will not suspect and that is when you can make your move.//#

'What move?'

//Take control of Konoha. Take your proper place. Show them your true power.//#

I curl my lip and fight the desire to laugh out loud. 'Is that all? You really have lost what little brain you once possessed. That is your ambition, never mine. Do not confuse us; I am nothing like you. What would I ever want with Konoha?'

//Is it not yours by right?//#

The expressionless pale face with the features like mine appears before my mind's eye. "Konoha should be ours. We are the clan with the most frightening power."

Is that what made him insane?

'Leave him out of it.'

//Oh-ho? But he has everything to do with this. He has everything to do with everything. Do not forget, my dear little pet, I was there.//#

My jaw jerks closed, clacking my teeth painfully together.

'You know nothing.'

//I was there.//#

I find myself checking nervously to the still damnably closed door.

'I am not him. I do not want to be him.'

//But you spoke of honor. Do you not speak of the clan's honor? Of the Uchiha? Of Itachi?//#

'So?'

//Think. How do you expect to achieve any honor in the short extent of your lifetime? Too much damage has been done by those whose "honor" you want to reclaim. Life is extremely brief, my pet. How well do I know that cruel and inconvenient fact?//#

'And what do I care about your sick obsessions?'

//But I was speaking of you. Last of the Uchiha and the coveted sharingan. How much privilege do you think they will return to you? No, it will take much more time than you will be given in your life. So much more time. You will need an heir.//#

'I do not want one.'

//You did.//#

'When? What are you blabbering about? I never did.'
//And what of your mother? Dear, sweet Mikoto-san. Do not deny it, Sasuke-kun, I will not be fooled. Do not forget that I am here always, intertwined with your psyche, and free to delve through any and all of your memories.//

The very thought disturbs me, though I know it to be true. I fist my hands so tightly, trying to divert my mind, until I cease to feel anything altogether. A prickling sensation runs up my left arm.

//You loved her.//

'You don't have a right to talk about her.'

//You looked up to her, adored her, and cherished your time with her, though you apparently never acknowledged it. Such a petulant child, always chasing his brother or father, never appreciating his mother. Tch-tch-tch.//

'Shut up.'

//So then, do you mean to tell me that you do not want what you had with your mother? You do not wish to pass on her kindness and good intentions? You mean to tell me that you do not miss it?//

'Stop talking about things you know nothing about.'

I flick my eyes again anxiously to the door, but still not even the barest hint of movement.

//Cease with this foolishness. It could be so easy. And then you could make amends, is that not what you want? To set things right with your dear, departed, neglected mother? Do you not wish for a child to foster as you were?//

I actually laugh aloud at that. Anyone watching must certainly think I've completely lost the last shred of my sanity. Even as just an apparition in my head, I feel Orochimaru balk at my unexpected outburst.

'You're the fool,' I say, no longer vulnerable to his pretty and misguided manipulation. 'All this time and how little you know me.'

There is a lengthy pause. A thinking, calculating, introspective pause.

And then, //I know you better than you admit. You will try. Of that I am sure. Because you will not know what else to do.//

I leave the statement alone because I don't care anymore. He’s clearly delusional and that's nothing new. Besides, there are layers and lies to his every action and it’s best not to entertain even the idea of them.

I allow him to settle himself back into the recesses of my mind and brood, upset by my denial of him and his misguided notions.

Suddenly, I feel much better and a satisfied smirk steals its way across my face and it is then that the elders finally decide to grace me with their presence.

The two old folks regard me blandly, no doubt carefully orchestrating a means to their personal agenda. Though they are meant to look out for Konoha’s welfare, keeping her best interests at heart, I have the suspicion that they are often petty and self-motivated.

Konoha and I are not exactly on good terms so I can’t exactly dredge up any concern.
They’re mishandling me, as well as the power I have at my disposal.

The two useless old bags of bones regard me silently. As if they are so great, so wonderful, so goddamned powerful. They lord over us the power to decide our fates and it has gone to their twisted little heads.

They deny me everything. Steal it, rip it to shreds, and lock it away as if they have the right.

Everything.

Elders.

They are ancient and withered and gray. That doesn’t mean they are wise.

If I could, I would demonstrate for them just what Uchiha Sasuke can do. With the chirruping of a thousand tiny birds, I would show them what it means to cross me.

//Tut-tut. Such a deliciously pleasant idea, my pet. And although you should cultivate this side of your character, perhaps now is not the best time. Rashness has always been your major flaw.//

'That is quite enough from you.'

//Patience, my pet. Patience is what will get me what I want.//

'What you want?'


"Please," the old woman says ingratiatingly. "Have a seat."

'I'd rather stand."

She gives me a pulled smile that tells me this is the wrong answer and replies, "As you wish." Then she primly sits down beside the old man already seated in one of the chairs. Her pale wrinkled hands rest lightly over each other in her lap. She looks up at me, acting as if this has given her the position of power.

"We have been hearing quite a lot of interesting things about you," she says sternly, her mouth still stretched wide.

I turn my gaze to the old man who simply sits there, alternately staring at me or meaninglessly out into space.

"Oh?" I ask, with a distinct lack of interest.

"Oh, yes," the woman continues, not moving from her carefully arranged position. "You seem to be adjusting to your change in situation surprisingly well. You have displayed a greater capacity for patience and tolerance than we had been led to believe."

Gee, thanks. Can we get past the false praise and get to the real point, already? I would like to get past the false praise and get to the point.

"There have been slip-ups of course, but given the circumstances, you have even shown a decent amount of self-control. We would have expected you to snap long before now."

Apparently they’re still unaware of my fight with Naruto.
This could perhaps be the most infuriatingly artificial woman I have ever had to contend with.

//Patience, my pet. Show some of that patience you are apparently so well known for.//

'Aren't we the comedian?'

"However," the woman begins.

Ah, here we are at last.

//Silence. I'm trying to listen.//

'Like I care.'

//Quiet.//

'You shut up!'

The elder goes on, unaware of my internal tiff with the parasite.

"You have also displayed a deplorable lack of judgment and good taste when it comes to the company you keep."

I do my best not to lunge headlong at her throat.

A bony, gray hand waves beside the woman's implacable face. "The association with the Haruno girl is fine. We approve. In fact, we would say she perfectly fits your needs. She has been deemed suitable."

Like a breeding mare. I'm sure Sakura would be flattered.

And I'm still not sure whether the "we" she keeps using is referring to the two of them, or if she's decided to put on royal airs.

"The Hyuuga girl is tolerable, though not a good candidate."

This keeps just getting better.

"But the fraternization with the Kyuubi boy was one we'd hoped you would put to an end."

I know we were leading up to this, but at the same time, I am utterly shocked.

"You can't tell me whom to be friends with."

"We can," she intones dangerously. "If you push us. The Kyuubi boy is out."

"His name," I grit through my teeth. "Is Naruto."

Her smile stays in place, though the wrinkles framing her eyes cut deeper. "He is a nuisance. A plague upon our town and it was against our better judgment to let him roam free to begin with."

I bite the back of my tongue. "Are you threatening him?"

She pauses a moment, the lines in her lips looking like a thousand tiny scar marks. "We do not threaten, Uchiha Sasuke. We merely state fact. The Kyuubi should not be allowed to live; he is a danger to everyone he comes in contact with. That includes you. You would be wise to remember that."
"I can handle myself."

"Yes," the woman slurs carefully. "I'm sure you think you can, even against a demon."

"Then you tell me," I say boldly. "If he's such a demon, why did you let him free?"

"That is none of your concern." She speaks far too quickly and throws me a curt look as if I am to blame for her loss of composure. Her spindly fingers grasp each other over her fat thighs. "You should only concern yourself with yourself. That is quite enough. To aid you in this, since you are clearly incapable of doing so properly, we will ensure that Uzumaki Naruto is occupied and well out of your reach and sight for quite some time. His new assignments will begin within the next few days so you have until then to say your farewells. Hopefully, it will be long enough for you to come to your senses."

"But he just got back!" I protest childishly, although I have already bid my "farewells".

//Keep quiet. This works out perfectly. Why must you insist on making everything such a mess?//

"You have created your own circumstances."

"Then send me instead," I suggest almost desperately. "I am a much smarter and quicker ninja than he is and we all know that my skills are being wasted here, tending children and chasing after strays."

"You know very well that was not part of your agreement," the old woman says through pursed lips. "Besides," she smooths her hands across her lap. "You can't very well accomplish anything if you are miles away."

I narrow my eyes. "Accomplish anything"? Ha! They have only one thing they want me to "accomplish".

//And is it so bad?//

'Why are you pushing this?'

"And Uzumaki has his own regulations he must follow. He knew that full well when he agreed to them. This will come as no surprise to him." She shakes her head officiously and adds, "Anyway, we did not say he was going anywhere, only that he will be preoccupied."

I delicately lift my eyebrows to disguise my relief. "But what does that have to do with . . ."

"You have a responsibility." It's the old man this time. His voice sounds raspy with age and filled with well-worn bone weariness. "Uchiha males cannot dally with other men. Just as Uchiha females cannot dally with other women. It is simply not done. Uchihas are meant for only two things: to serve and to breed. Now that you are the last, your purpose bears more importance than ever."

My knuckles hurt, bone-white from fisting my hands so hard. "I," I state with a calm I do not feel. "Am not a horse."

"Ah," the old man sighs, resting his folded hands high on his chest. "Uchihas are like finest of rare Kiso stallions." He closes his eyes and leans his head on the back edge of the couch. "But they are still horses."

"You have not been following the rules." The woman interjects as though no one else has spoken.
"Yes. I have," I respond a bit churlishly.

She simply inclines her head.

"We are upping the timetable."

"What?" I am too surprised and angry to concern myself about protocol. "You can't do that!"

The expression the old woman wears makes all her previous ones look kindly. "You are still here only by the Hokage's interference and our good humor. You had best remember that."

I want to counter that it has nothing to do with "good humor", a thing this old hag has clearly never been on speaking terms with, and everything to do with their desire for the sharingan, but I keep my silence.

"We want results," she states plainly. "But we do not demand miracles. We are reasonable people. We do, however, expect to see evidence that you are abiding by your obligations. If not, we will be forced to take matters into our own hands."

I just stand and stare. I never had much of a choice. Die or lock myself in Konoha's cage . . .

Is there really any difference?

"We are done here," the old woman says abruptly. "You have been informed of the change and we are tired."

I'll just bet they are. Running people into the ground is tough work.

"Leave us."

With little option, I grit my teeth, and exit the way I came.

-----

The bowl of vegetables stares at me in high-and-mighty judgment. They are bright and colorful and obnoxious even in the darkness of the room.

I haven’t moved from this spot in hours. I know this by the clock that ticks and sounds off the empty walls, refusing to shut the hell up.

My arm has become numb, having supported my head for such a long time and my leg feels slightly prickly from the uncomfortable way I'm sitting on it.

Everything should be calm and resolved. But the only thing I feel is anger. Deep, intense rage that simmers below the exterior, barely contained by my bones and muscles and skin.

I feel as if I move, it will all come bursting out like wildfire, unable to be controlled.

It’s all so unfair.

Except that it isn't.

Things were different before Naruto decided to interfere in the predetermined path of my life.

They were simpler then.
I like simple. I like black-and-white.

I don't feel like moving. Or making the decision. I'm tired of making choices.

The peppers continue to stare accusingly.

Just watch, I'll chop you up into tiny pieces and toss you into a stir-fry. I'll chomp on you and tear your fleshy little hides to specks. And I'll enjoy every last bit of it.

Stupid vegetables.

There is the click of a switch and the light turns on, bathing me in its sickly yellow light.

"Ah, Sasuke. I sensed your warm and fuzzy chakra from three blocks away," Kakashi sings in that bracingly bright manner. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I reply shortly, not looking at him.

"So it's Naruto then." He walks past me and opens a cupboard.

I hate him. I really do.

Almost as much as Naruto.

And the elders.

And the Hokage.

And basically everyone at this moment.

I narrow my eyes, remaining silent.

Kakashi decides that this is the best time to hum some unmelodic song I think he's just made up for the pure joy of annoying me. He grabs some beef from the refrigerator and with that idiotic one-eye crescent smile, picks up the peppers from the bowl. I hear chopping followed by the sizzle of oil heating in a pan.

The smell calls to me, sharp and tangy, but I don't turn.

"Have you eaten yet?" Kakashi asks while happily frying traitorous vegetables.

"No," I reply, realizing that with all the events of the day I haven't eaten for over eight hours.

"Are you hungry," he asks, sounding like he's trying to tempt a pet. "Would you like something to eat?"

"No." I grind out, aggravated that he won't leave me alone. But my stomach disagrees and makes that stupid grumble-whine it does when it wants food.

"Hmm . ." Kakashi strolls over and plunks a plateful of steaming beef and vegetables in front of me. He then sits in the chair opposite and immediately pops a piece of meat in his mouth with his chopsticks, deftly hiding his face with his hand.

That's still creepy.

"Too bad I made enough for two."
I scowl at him, royally pissed off. At him, at Naruto, at myself, at those damn elders. The hatred of the whole world works on my head like a vice. But my stomach starts pressing up against my spine, begging to be fed. So I look down and see those peppers, diced and cooked and steaming and you're not so big now, are you?

An angry snarl pulls over my lips and I snatch one up and shove it into my mouth, gnashing my teeth into it with relish.

I told you.

Stupid vegetables.

Take that!

Kakashi raises an eyebrow curiously, but then goes back to humming and shoveling chopsticks of food into his mouth.

Konoha's little homemaker.

At least this time he didn't wear the pink frilly apron.

-----

The shuriken soar gracefully through the air, one, two, three, four, five, six, before hitting the targets that border the training field. Three stick perfectly, the others are a little off. Ouka lands on silent feet in the center of them and scowls as she spins to look at her weapons, as if the misses are their fault and not her own. Kohana pushes off the last target, following each of her partner's throws in succession and ends beside her in wagging puppy glee.

The dog is faring better than the girl.

I exhale with exasperation and shake my head.

She really ought to be better by now.

With a flick of my wrist and a quick turn, I throw my kunai and make the target every time, slipping in alongside Ouka's, metal to metal where hers landed properly.

She turns on me and pouts very girlishly, pulling her little lips into a frown.

"It's not my fault!" She squeals. "I'm not good at throwing. Hand-to-hand combat is my strong point."

Well, I'll give her that. If she has a "strong point", it is hand-to-hand.

Another set of shuriken whiz by, ending as true as mine in lightning fast succession. Both Ouka and I turn to lazybones Tetsuo who hasn't bothered to move from his treetop perch. Despite his outward appearance, he's actually pretty good. Almost as good as I was at that age.

Almost.

"You guys are jerks!" The girl yells, stomps her foot and crosses her arms indignantly. Kohana yips happily.

"You need practice," I point out, carefully pulling my weapons from the trees.
Tetsuo scoffs and begins twirling a small branch between his fingers. I'd toss his shuriken up to him, but since they'll turn back to leaves soon, there's not really a reason. He could probably be a good ninja, if he ever put in the effort.

Ouka, on the other hand . . .

"Teach me!" She cries, gripping my pant leg and looking beseechingly up at me. I growl. "C'mon! You've already had lots of practice, so what's the big deal?"

I pull out one of her shuriken and throw it out behind her. Ouka doesn't even flinch, but Kohana barks, leaps, and catches it carefully in her teeth.

"Please?" Ouka whines.

"Why don't you ask Mitarashi?" I suggest.

The little girl purses her lips, turns her head and looks over at our leader standing idly at the rim of the grounds and grinning wickedly.

Ouka turns back to me. "I don't think so."

I give the child a disgusted look.

"Pleeease?" Not only has the whine heightened in pitch, it is now combined with a constant pulling on my pant leg. My god, I never realized kids were so annoying.

"Why don't you, Uchiha?" Anko intercedes helpfully. "Perhaps you will have better luck."

I snarl.

Grabbing hold of Ouka's bangs, I yank her head back slightly. "If I help you, and I'm not saying I will, you have to do what I say, without complaint. Understand?"

Even though her forehead is slightly pink from my grip on her hair, she smiles and nods enthusiastically. I let go.

"Gather your weapons."

"Yes, sir!" She chirps with a mock salute. Then she dashes to the five remaining corners and gathers up her shuriken.

And while I watch her, I see the shadow of my child self from those many years ago. I recall the days of practicing with Itachi, when all I wanted was his approval. Whatever he advised, I followed, whatever he said, I listened.

And I wonder if he ever looked at me and saw what I now see: a little child full of energy and ambition and wanting nothing more than to be recognized. I wonder if he ever cared, even in the corners of his mind, but it's something I'll never know.

I am not my brother.
"Welcome to your training, Sasuke," Kakashi says brightly, looking at me with his hands on his hips like a big moron.

I just want to get on with it. Now that it is here, my nerves are practically thrumming with the need for release. I haven't really been able to flex my muscles in a while and it is an exercise long overdue. Now that I finally, finally, have the opportunity, I don't want to waste any of it. I am a ninja. It's about time I reminded people of it.

Kakashi begins circling like a shark and lecturing like an old man. "The ANBU corps has erected a barrier so you can’t escape. Do not even try." He pierces me with a look, but I’m not intimidated.

"Got your old friends to do your dirty work?” I jibe.

He grins at me.

"Now today we won't be doing anything special and before you begin griping about this, let me tell you the reason. You've spent the past few months, or so I'm guessing, not doing much serious fighting. In all deference to the sprightly youth of Konoha, I doubt your genin team is offering much of a challenge. And for all the while before that, I'd assume you were too busy tending our wounded little Naruto."

I grunt unintelligibly. Kakashi nods.

"So first you need to get reacquainted with the better part of your chakra and re-hone your sharingan. So we will start very simple, O.K?"

Whatever.

I'm itching to do something greater than tangle with little brats.

Kakashi stops walking and plants himself directly in front of me. "Put out your hands."

I comply, knowing that at last I'm going to get these seals released. Waiting anxious and impatient, I look at the strange circular etchings on my palms. For not the first time I think about the
weirdness of seals, each designed to such specific tasks and I wonder if this one was created especially for me.

I smirk.

I'll bet it was.

Kakashi holds his hands palms down over mine. His eye crinkles up in that infuriatingly cheery way and I give him a nasty glare for his effort. Then he gently presses his index finger to the innermost circles of my seals and slowly traces them. It tickles a little, just before it begins to burn like the fires of hell. The side of my face spasms uncontrollably at the sensation, but I restrain myself. Compared to what else I've been subjected to and the seal's reaction when I tried to use forbidden chakra, this experience is child's play. I do my best to ignore Kakashi's hands along with the searing pain in mine. Still grinning from ear to ear like a total fool, his mask stretching like a second skin, Kakashi repeats the motion with each of the outlying markings. After forever, he takes his hands away and the purple glow that surrounded our hands disappears.

My chakra, familiar and hot like fire, plunges wildly through my system. It is like meeting an old friend and I didn't remember until now how different it feels to be whole. With everything else going on, I got used to existing without it far too quickly.

//So true, my pet.//

I groan.

//Well, far be it for me to state a fact so obvious you'd have to be blind not to see it.//

"You should feel normal in a couple minutes," old One-eye explains, thinking my groan was over this. "Your body just needs to readjust itself to your chakra."

My eyes narrow and I'm about to correct his misconception when I realize I don't really much care.

I test out my hands, working out the stiffness that the seal's release caused. They have that prickly feeling like when muscles fall asleep, and it takes a while before they are set right. But when they are, I fist them tight, recalling with the action the old strength.

It is invigorating.

I look up to Kakashi and sneer.

//Ah! Now this is it! This is the power I remember! The power that I crave, that I earned. That should be mine. It rightfully belongs to me!//

'Enough with the craziness.'

//Ku-ku-ku-ku.//

Kakashi claps his hands with a loud smack and rubs them together as if he means to start a conflagration. "Ready to begin?"

I let my sharingan whirl.

"Very good," he says, unperturbed. "We are going to start with your reflexes."

And before I can nod agreement, he is at me. It is a flurry of motion, strikes and dodges, quick and erratic and it's all I can do to keep up. We range all over, from grass to trees to air, with no corner
left untouched. As I move, I sense my old abilities return to me and with each hit and each defense, I get faster, stronger.

Gracefully, Kakashi flips over his feet and lands to stare at me, still smiling.

I smirk. Even as fast as he is, this is too easy. It is not truly that different from the training I've done with Anko and the brats. Either way, I can see that shadow of his movements a split second before he makes them.

He stands stolidly in front of me like a tin soldier, arms at his sides. My breath comes just a little harsher than normal, but that is good.

The harder this is the better.

//Yes, yes, my dear Sasuke-kun, always become better. Always strive for greatness.//

Kakashi lifts his right foot lightly off the grass and then launches. Quickly, I cross my arms in front of my face and just barely manage to defend. I push my arms outward, forcing his hand away and drop down immediately to swing my leg across the ground to sweep his leg, but he avoids it easily.

He's moving faster.

He’s so quick in fact that my sharingan gives me warning only a millisecond before he attacks.

But it is enough.

The image in front of my eyes blurs and vibrates, the present and future overlapping sloppily. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. The sharingan is putting up a protest to such vigorous use after months of relative inactivity. Fighting children somehow doesn't really call on me to use it fully. It’s almost like I’ve gone back in time to when I first gained it, and the sharingan and I are again trying to work things out.

Kakashi tries the same trick he used on me the day we met, but if he thinks such a move will work twice, he is a fool. So when his hands burst through the hard earth beneath my feet, I am no longer there to capture. I am so light on my landing that the leaves on the tree do not stir. But when I look down to ascertain my opponent's whereabouts, he is nowhere to be found. Frantically, I examine the area, my head whipping this way and that and my eyes are working wildly and why the hell can't I find him!

"Boo."

I spin on my heel to face Kakashi as he leans towards me with his hands on his hips and an amused little expression on his face. Startled and extremely annoyed, I take a step back and let myself drop gracefully to the forest floor. Before I get the opportunity to fully recover, Kakashi is attacking again. He's moving faster and faster, trying to trip me up. The sharingan is spinning erratically. The images in front of me are a little off, showing Kakashi's movements a bit too far to the left or right so that when I try to counter, I barely manage to make it.

The battle becomes frenzied until all the images in front of me mix into one indistinguishable mess. The scene stops being a part of reality and goes unaccountably red. The world is drenched in blood, the shadows dark as night and it is whirling and quaking and my stomach clenches in on itself. I feel nauseous. And then, almost without noticing it, the images in front of my face blend out until Kakashi and the trees and grass are no longer there, replaced by the old broken down walls of a dilapidated wooden building I have never seen before. The walls are made of cracks and splinters more than of solid wood and insects crawl in and out of many tiny holes. There are piles of dust
nestled in corners in some half-hearted attempt to clean.

It is raining.

I hear the gentle pitter-pat on the roof, smell the mustiness in the air.

There’s an anxious tremor running through my body as I rock back and forth, sitting on the floor with my arms around my knees.

A perpetual murmur is in the air, an accompaniment to the rain. It is alternately short and long, like a percussive rhythm, randomly gaining and losing strength to some unseen musical score.

It takes a while before I realize the sound is coming from me.

Only it’s not me.

My hands spread out before my eyes, one white, one shriveled black, and I see how the oily black skin is starting to creep up past the wrist and onto my arm.

My mouth stretches into a feral grin. My lungs rattle with the intake of a deep, shuddering breath.

I am alone, my companions have left me for now, but I know it will not be long. It will not be long . . .

Then the pain hits me with sudden familiarity and it is so much like the first time I received the curse seal that it is almost comforting. But this other, the other whose hands these really are, doesn’t know it. And as the searing pain rips through his body, he screams.

My jaw cracks soundly from the force of Kakashi's blow and I fall on my backside with a loud thump.

In that same instant, my sharingan disappears and the world looks the way it should, colored in green and brown and blue. I shake my head fiercely as my nerves pinch tight and when I flex my fingers, I can still feel the pain.

Then it is gone and just like that, my left arm has gone numb.

A shadow suddenly casts itself over my body, so I raise my head. With the sun behind him, Kakashi is dark and relatively featureless when he looks down at me.

"Not bad," he says cagily. "But not good, either. If we're ever going to awaken your deeper powers, your reflexes need to be sharper and you especially need to stop letting your mind wander all the time."

But all of this barely registers.

The parasite in my head is practically cackling and if it were possible, he'd be jumping around in giddy excitement.

I can't seem to regain control of him, nor my body and senses.

"Well, I suppose that's enough for today," Kakashi muses, looking up to the sky. When he lowers his gaze, he is all friendliness again. He offers a hand to help me up, but with disdain I slap it away and get up on my own two feet.

Orochimaru finally stops, but his emotions are still high.
'What's with you? I snarl.

//Nothing, my dear. Nothing, Sasuke-kun.// He sounds breathless.

'Somehow, I don't believe you.'

//That is no concern of mine.//

"Were you thinking about the situation with Naruto again?" Kakashi asks me conversationally.

I whip toward him with a scowl.

"You know, if there's no one else, you can always talk to me." He actually sounds like he means it.

"There's nothing to talk about," I snap.

I wouldn’t talk to him about Naruto, there’s no way in hell I’d tell him what really just happened.

-----

As I carefully replace my kunai to its holster, I brush the little bits of dirt and grime clear from my pants. It is the only evidence I bear that I’ve been training. I am not winded, not drained, and far from pleased. Especially after my recent and all too brief session with Kakashi, it is painfully obvious just how much Team Four is not bettering my skills in any real way.

//That is not the point of them.//

'Yes, yes, I know. There is no need to repeatedly remind me.'

//Then quit complaining. It is very distracting.//

'I'll complain if I want.

And what exactly are you getting distracted from?'

Tetsuo, as per usual, has thrown himself to the ground in a fit of exaggerated exhaustion, with both his arms and legs stretched out around him like a star. Ouka is breathing heavily as she kneels down beside her canine partner and picks twigs and bits of grass from Kohana's coat.

Anko, such as she is, regards us all sternly, her mouth pulled to one side. Once I am done tidying myself, I fold my arms over my chest and stare back. I try to make it blank and uncaring, but let's face it, there's always a fair share of disgust mixed in. I feel more like a babysitter than a ninja.

Anko shifts back to one foot lightly, the whole time giving me an intense and unwavering once-over. Without outward indication, I push my parasite back into the dark emptiness of my memory and he goes without (much) protest, knowing that he has little choice. Unfortunately, I cannot force him back without his cooperation, not entirely.

I know. I've tried.

"All right!" Anko barks suddenly, causing Ouka to jump (the girl has really got to work on that), and then scans over us like we are zoological displays. "Training for today is over. Go home!"

Ouka jumps again and Tetsuo slowly begins the laborious task of pushing himself to a sitting position. I simply turn to leave.

"Except for you, Uchiha. I need to talk to you!"
I stop in my tracks and slowly turn around to face her. Tetsuo finally manages to drag his idle self up and plods his way from the grounds, unconcerned with everyone else as he always is. On the other hand, Ouka scoots her way closer, her wide dark eyes searching me as if asking my permission to leave. Kohana, the silly little pup, whines pathetically and directs her watery dog eyes up at me. I look down at the pair and do nothing and say nothing, but the girl worries her lip between her teeth for a second before nodding.

"Kohana," she says quietly and she and her miniscule companion leave the training ground. It’s odd and uncomfortable the way the girl has somewhat learned to read me.

Anko continues to bore her little eyes into me as though by doing so she can tunnel through the many layers of my soul and find what she’s searching for.

I twitch my lip into a snarl.

'Good luck with that.'

"Uchiha," she says over the distance between us. She pushes out one foot to the side so she’s planted squarely between the two and puts her hands firmly on her hips. "How have you been?"

Much as I hate to admit, I gawk at her. Only slightly, but still. It is such a mundane, stupid question that makes no sense (she sees me every day!) and it reminds me so much of a certain troublesome blonde, that I am instantly put on guard.

"As well to be expected," I answer acerbically. Thinly polite, but ultimately sarcastic.

She hums lightly. "Yes, well." It seems she hasn't exactly thought this through, whatever it is. Then she growls at me, angry as if this is my fault. "All right, let's just cut to the chase. Have you been sensing Orochimaru anywhere? Following you, perhaps?"

'Calm, Sasuke, calm.' I do a quick double-check on the parasite's cage to ensure it is still safely locked and its inhabitant undetected.

"No," I answer, not precisely a lie.

She gives me as doubtful look. "Well, I have," she sates bluntly. "Every once in a while, I sense his presence hovering nearby. I don't think I need to tell you how not good that is."

She doesn't go on so I simply say, "Oh?"

"Now," she says thoughtfully and begins to pace, "your report stated that he was dead. Uzumaki's report stated he was dead. Hell, even Kakashi's report stated that he found the broken remains of Orochimaru's body!" She throws her arms out in disgust. I snort, amused at the way in which she refers to my and Naruto's forced interrogations as "reports". She glosses over my wordless comment as if it hadn't been made and forges on. "So what do you make of all this?"

I shrug subtly, giving no decisive response.

Anko taps her finger against her mouth. "But we both know that the dead body of Orochimaru means absolutely nothing. Did he try to perform a soul transference while you were there?"

No point in lying. If she's familiar with the reports, then she already knows the answer. "Yes."

"With whom?"
Again, no point. "Me."

Her eyebrows lift slightly, half-mocking, and she nods her head in confirmation. "So then." She steps closer and crosses her arms. "He didn’t succeed."

I can't reply to that without lying or giving my secret away, both ill-advised options at the moment. Luckily, she's more musing to herself than actually speaking to me.

"Did he have time for a second attempt?"

"No," I say quickly. "I doubt he would have the energy to even try."

This is also true, but my stupid parasite, stupid, stupid parasite, surges up in the recess of my brain in indignation.

Anko flinches and looks at me suspiciously.

'Keep quiet!'

With a little bit of effort, I thrust the clearly brainless fool back into his hiding place. My throat bobs visibly as I swallow.

"I see . . ." she murmurs, but she doesn't sound at all convinced. She opens her mouth as if to speak, but then changes her mind. Her pensive expression remains.

"Well, you had better let me know if you sense him or your seal flares or anything. I don’t tolerate lies or secrets within my unit. Is this understood?" She hurls the instructions more like they are threats.

I'm sure they are.

"Yes," I answer.

"Yes, what?" She curls her lip. She is having too much fun at my expense.


"All right, all right." She claps her hands together and seems suddenly bored. "Dismissed!"

I nod, retaining as much politeness as I can.

But as I am walking away, she shouts out, loud enough for the whole village, or at the very least the teams practicing in nearby fields, to hear. "And you might want to consider getting yourself some new clothes! You are growing after all and I know you're living with Kakashi, but if you continue to wear his pants, people might start to come to their own conclusions!"

I almost make a worse than rookie mistake, a Naruto mistake, and fall flat on my face. Almost. I do have more control than that.

Who’s talking about what?

It's not as if I want to be living with old One-eye. It's not like I was given much choice in the matter. Or any, to be precise.
I fist my hands very tightly and regain my equilibrium.

Right on cue for this disastrously bad play entitled "Sasuke's Life in Konoha", a couple of rookies dash through the outer boundary of the field, glancing at me, giggling and twittering like the useless children they are.

Well, somebody's probably going to start talking now.

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I don't particularly like shopping.

I've never given it much thought before today, so I suppose that's something to consider. But the rifling through racks, the constant changing in and out of clothes, each worse than the last; it all doesn't suit me.

"Oh, Sasuke-kun! How about this one?"

Or maybe it's the company I don't like.

"What do you want?" I shout, past the point of patience. Actually, I passed that point about five outfits ago.

Kakashi pouts at me and pretends that he's on the verge of tears. "Oh, no! And all I wanted to do was see how this would look. I'm sure this color would be perfect for you." He dabs at his eyes with one of the sleeves. "What did I do to deserve such a disobedient child?"

What I'd like to know is where this play-acting streak of Kakashi's came from. Unfortunately, since I have no real money of my own, I had no choice but to borrow from him. His one stipulation was tagging along to torment me. He's been taking this surrogate mother thing too far from the moment we arrived.

I glance around the shop and spy a sea of disapproving mothers, the real ones, scowling at me. So I grit my teeth and snatch the item from my troublesome former teacher.

"Fine!" I yell.

Kakashi claps his hands together and grins. "O.K., O.K.! That's quite enough for now, so get in there and let's see how they look!"

I don't know how much more of this I can stomach. Just to get away from this nuisance, I take hold of all the clothes and tromp into the dressing room. The pile of garments I am expected to try on is seriously ridiculous.

I sigh and try on the first.

//Hmmm . . . no.//

'Argh! And now you're giving fashion advice?'

//And why not?//

He sounds offended and I have the almost overwhelming urge to roll my eyes. That being said, I have to agree.

"Sasuke-kun! Are you done yet?" Kakashi is an idiot. "Come out here so I can see!"
"No!"

"I want to see it!"

"No!"

"Oh, why not?"

"I don't like it!"

"Oh, I can't trust your opinion. Now get out here right now!"

"No!"

"Sasuke-kun," he purrs in a way that tells me he is up to no good. "If you don't come out here, I'll just have to find something else, to do with my time. Like, say, discuss your love life in front of all these people?"

Oh, he wouldn't . . .

"Alriiiiiight." This is too suspicious. "Oh excuse me miss, have you met my little boy? He's just beginning to bloom! In fact, I think he might even have found that special someone and it's another bo. . ."

"Fine!"

I throw open the curtain violently and stand waiting in the outer room, furious and flushed.

"Well, that's not bad," Kakashi advises thoughtfully. And did I mention he's completely alone? That bastard!

Doing my best to ignore this, I clench my jaw and inform him, "It's a hoodie."

"Why yes it is."

"Kiba," I say with disgust, "wore a hoodie. When he was twelve."

"So that means no one else can wear one?"

"Not me."

Kakashi puts his hand to his chin critically. "You are so difficult, Sasuke. Alright, fine. No hoodies. Now try on the next one."

"Are we going to have to do this every time?" I growl.

Kakashi smiles happily.

I swing the curtain closed and change as quickly as I can.

//That's a nice one.//

'Are you serious?'

//Always. And what is wrong with it? I think we should look as nice as possible.//

'There is no "we".'
"That is so goddamned creepy!"

"Sasueeee . . ."

"What?" At my wit's end, I push back the curtain and glare at my childish guardian.

"Ooo." That's all he says and now I know for sure that I don't want this outfit.

"My, that is very nice," says a random woman I've never met that now peeks over Kakashi's shoulder to examine me.

Kakashi assesses my new ensemble up and down with a very analytical eye. The flush to my face spreads starkly across the bridge of my nose.

"Oh, look how handsome he is!" The woman coos appreciatively and I try very hard, very hard, to concentrate my glare solely on the main problem here: Kakashi. Much as I despise it, it would be best if I don't antagonize the general Konoha rabble.

"I was right," he says. "It is an excellent color for you."

"It's red," I state.

"Why so it is!"

The unwanted woman interjects. "With that dark hair and pale skin, red is lovely on you." Does she have nothing better to do? I think I prefer when people simply shoot me repulsed stares.

"What, are you working on commission?" I snipe.

The woman takes a step back, putting a hand to her chest as though wounded and begins sputtering incoherent nonsense.

"Now, Sasuke . . ."

"I don't want red!"

And I swing back behind the curtain.

"So tell me, dear pet, what exactly do you have against red?"

He's teasing me, I shouldn't fall for his bait . . . 'I don't like it.'

"Hmm, yes, well. But you must look good if you are to accomplish the elders’ mission. You are going to accept it, aren't you?"

I don't answer.

"Of course you will. And so, you must do whatever necessary to get it done. Wearing red will be the least of unpleasant things you must face."

'I don't have to explain myself to you!'

Without another acknowledgment to anyone, I recollect my composure and change again. My
nerves are so raw and I'm expecting another disaster that when I look in the dressing room mirror, I'm quite surprised.

I believe I have found it.

The pants are a deep, rich black, that while not glossy, are not flat either, the way that black sometimes is. They hang low but securely on my hips, and are baggy enough to be comfortable, but not so much as to be a hindrance. There are wide elastic bands at the ankles that are not exactly attractive, but functional and there are plenty of pockets and places for hiding weapons. The shirt is ordinary. It has no pockets or other unnecessary decorations, a plain scoop neck, and sleeves that end just above my elbows. It’s dark, a blue somewhere between navy and royal, which changes faintly in the light. It is made of thin, breathable cotton and is skintight.

I wonder what Naruto will think when he sees me in this.

I nod to myself.

//Not bad.//

'So glad you approve,' I say sarcastically.

"I'll take this one!" I shout over the closed curtain. I grab the bottom hem of the shirt to pull it off.

"Well, let's see it, then!"

I grumble. "It's the one I want, so there's no reason."

"I'm not paying for anything without seeing it first."

I take a deep breath, pull the shirt back down and step outside irritably.

Kakashi looks at me a second and then whistles lowly.

"Oh, my." Apparently, the woman has returned and has decided to start staring again.

"Are we done now?" If I keep driving my nails into my palms so hard, I'm going to cause permanent damage.

"Yes, yes, fine." Kakashi waves at me as if he is disgusted and, as much as I'd like to call him on it, I'd rather just be out of here as soon as possible.

I change quickly.

We, or rather Kakashi as he incessantly points out to me, make the purchases and even though I got a very nasty glare from the cashier after requesting the Uchiha symbol embroidered on the back of all the shirts, I’m feeling pretty good. At least I won't have to wear any more suspicious cast-off things that do nothing but add fodder to the ever-present Konoha rumor-mill.

As we walk back to the apartment side-by-side and silent as usual, Kakashi keeps taking repeated furtive glances in my direction. Like a bloodhound, he somehow seems to know that something is bothering me beyond clothes.

But after the past few days, how could it not? Naruto, Anko, Orochimaru, the elders, exactly how much am I supposed to put up with unnoticed?

"Tell me," he says.
I consider a moment. These thoughts have been gnawing at me like a dog at the marrow of a bone. And if the past is any indication, Kakashi won't let up until I talk. I do my best to gather my thoughts.

"When I trained with Orochimaru," I start then stop.

"Go on," he encourages.

I take a deep breath. "When I was with Orochimaru, it wasn't always jutsus and fighting and techniques. There were times when he was almost kind. A sort of kindness, but still, and no one had treated me like that in a very long time." I swallow. "And then, he'd hurt me."

//Ah, such memories. Lovely red blood like the lovely red shirt.//

'Shit up, you sick bastard.'

"'Another sort of training', he'd say. And it was worst of them all. *Because* he was kind."

//Pathetic.//

'Cant you be quiet for one damn minute?'

Kakashi has said nothing and I'm not sure he's even listening. I sort of hope he isn't.

"I can't stop it." I say. "My mind knows the difference, but my body doesn't. I know it's not the same, I do, but . . . when the pain doesn't come, it doesn't feel," I wrack my mind for the elusive word, "right."

I clamp my mouth shut, shocked I've spoken that much without really explaining anything. Frustration and humiliation infuse me, and all I can do is sigh.


I cut him off, not wanting to hear the question that dangles at the end of that sentence. "Why does everyone think that!"

//Had I known . . . .//

'Enough of that already!'

The sun sets and darkness descends around us like an ill omen. "That's not the problem, all right?"

I look off to the distance while an interminable time seems to pass. Despite the people chattering around us, I can't hear anything but the almost imperceptible tapping of our shoes.

"It's me," I whisper.

Kakashi lets out a long breath of air in delayed realization. "Ah . . ."

And suddenly, like some damn idiot, I'm talking again.

"And I think I might need it. The pain." I can't look at him. "It's all a mixed up. I *don't want it*, but I'm not sure I could ever get . . . close . . . to anyone without it there too."

My face practically flares with heat.
"So, then," Kakashi begins and then pauses to cough uneasily. "When you were being questioned by Ibiki or training with me, did you have a . . . problem?"

I exhale heavily, half-expecting this question, but still disgusted. "It’s not that bad," I object. "I don’t get off on it exactly. It’s more that I can’t think of one without the other. That’s why Sakura is tricky sometimes. Like I think she’s going to turn on me, even though I know she won’t. And then there are times I’m not sure what I want and things really get messed up but that’s usually with . . .." I cut myself off. "It would be better if no one was nice at all."

//Put in a lot of time thinking about this, haven't we, my pet?//

'It's your fault. I could have been normal, if not for you. Not afraid, not twisted up. I hate you."

//Do not flatter yourself, Sasuke-kun. You would never have been normal.//

"I see." Kakashi breathes thoughtfully when we stop outside the apartment building. "Well, if that's the case, I have this Icha Icha Violence book . . . "

"It's not a joke!" I yell, my face burning red with anger. "Don't you understand? Nothing can ever be normal! Not for him, not for me. Certainly not for us."

//There is no "us" for you and him. Ridiculous.//

Kakashi looks appropriately contrite as he watches me carefully. Shamed by my outburst, I shove my hands in my pockets and turn my head to look at the inanimate companions around us.

The silence is brutal.

"Who's to say what's normal?"

I clench my jaw, refusing to face him.

"Listen, Sasuke," he says more gently. "The fact that you're thinking about this at all says something. Do you realize what you said? 'Us'. You and Naruto. You're acknowledging, in whatever truncated way, that you care about him. Moreover, that you've thought about actually having a relationship, maybe a life, with him. That's huge. And a far bigger step for you than I could've hoped."

//Indeed. A step backward, into your grave.//

I drop my chin to my chest and stare at a pile of leaves at the side of the road as if they may at any moment jump to life and do a little dance.

"You don't get it," I retort spitefully.

Kakashi sighs.

"What don't I get, Sasuke?"

"Anything."

"Then tell me."

"There's no point in talking about any of this to begin with," I say, trying to divert the talk from
uncomfortable subjects. "I don't want any bonds."

"And why not?" Kakashi speaks with the patience of a suffering parent.

"Because they're stupid," I say, knowing it sounds childish and not caring.

Kakashi sighs again with weary heaviness and seats himself on a nearby bench. "Let me explain a few things," he says. "First off, bonds are not stupid. You are. 'Bonds' are what make us stronger, they make us better ninja because we have something to protect. Now, I know you have been hurt in the past, but that doesn't mean you can assume that you'll be hurt again. But," he concedes, "you probably will be. But you can't just cut yourself off because you don't want to get hurt. That's part of what connection is, part of what it means to care. It can't be perfect and happy all the time. But it's the bad experiences that make the good ones better."

//Tch! Sentimental nonsense. Do not listen to this drivel.//

I snarl wordlessly.

"And secondly, whether you want bonds or not, you already have them. Your 'not wanting them' doesn't change a thing. And I think the past few years have proven that matter how hard you try, your ties aren't going to simply break."

//Everything can be broken, if wrenched hard enough.//

I lift my head and face Kakashi, looking stubbornly at the bench he sits on, the curve and color of the wood, the way the legs spring up between dirt and grass. Anything to avoid looking at that dumb, troubled eye.

"And most important of all, I don't think you want them to."

"Don't tell me what I do or don't want," I grumble. "You think you know so much, but you don't. Everyone thinks they know so much; that they can just read me like a book, but none of you knows a goddamned thing. You don't know anything about what it means to be me!"

//"None of us"?//

Kakashi shakes his head, but speaks softly, almost inaudibly, into the darkness. "But I have to tell you these things, Sasuke. You won't know otherwise. You're the one that doesn't understand. You think you're this big mystery, but you're not as hard to figure out as you like to believe. You want these relationships so much it blinds you. Especially with Naruto. I see the way you look at him. I saw how you were back in the hospital when you first arrived. I even heard how you protected him with Ibiki."

//Yes, that was foolishness. Fortunately, luck was on your side with that particular mistake.//

I shoot Kakashi a particularly nasty look.

"You can't deny it. I don't know what happened to make you change so much so quickly, to revert to the cold-heartedness you nurtured under Orochimaru, but it's nothing more than a veil you hide under. You care about Naruto, maybe even . . ."

"Shut up," I warn quietly. Kakashi's one eye scrunches up and he looks up and to the side like he is searching his memory banks for a specific file.

"Is that it?" He wonders, almost to himself. "Is that what you're afraid of?"
"I am not afraid of anything." I say steadily. "I just don't like wasting my time."

"Waste your time?"

"It doesn't matter." I lean back on the tree beside the bench, one foot propped up on the trunk. "I don't know why I said anything. Nothing's going to change," I say. "So why even bother?"

"You're making this far more complicated than it needs to be. I accept that you have issues." My forehead furrows. "But you've always had issues. And honestly, I find this an easier one to deal with. You've opened up, at least a little, and that's the first big step. You know how he feels about you, don't you?"

I purse my lips.

He hums irritably under his breath. "I'm sure you do. Everyone does. Everyone saw it long before he did. It's been blaringly obvious for some time that his attachment to you goes far deeper than he originally thought. Than anyone originally thought. So tell me, honestly, how do you feel about him?"

//None of this matters. You were trained to feel nothing, silly boy. What happened to all of that?//

I concentrate on the pile of leaves so long that they begin to go out of focus, becoming a blurry mess of shapes that could as easily be foxes as leaves.

How do I feel? I'm attracted to him, as rivals or friends or whatever; I guess I always have been. But that's not exactly it. There's something else, like the rest of the world falls away because it's just not important when I'm with him. I feel everything both more and less.

But that's not an answer.

The answer is I don't know. Because, "It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters."

"It doesn't," I reassert.

"Sasuke," Kakashi says with the slightest trace of annoyance. "I don't think anything has ever mattered more."

Now I do turn to him. He sounds so certain and his one visible eye shows that determined darkness it only rarely displays. He thinks the answer to this question is the only thing that matters. And I realize something in that instant that changes everything.

"You don't know," I state in slight disbelief.

"Don't know what?" He has that uncommon ability of never appearing surprised.

He knows something; he must, but not what's most important. I push off the tree trunk, running my fingers through my hair and groan. I let the futility of the situation and this conversation wash over me and stop before falling clear. At last, I look at him stonily.

"How much it doesn't matter," I answer.

Shoving my hands back into my pockets, I resume my journey to the apartment's front door.

I never should have said anything.
"Regardless what you think, it always matters." Kakashi is on his feet now, watching me, but the truth is he doesn't understand. How could he? No one can. I'm alone.

And that's just how I like it.

"There are things you don't know," I say, holding tight to my waning patience. "Maybe you should think about that the next time you try to give advice."

"Maybe you should listen to good advice when given to you," he admonishes.

I narrow my eyes at him and open the door.

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Like every other horrible day, the sun is shining down on the village of Konoha. And while this makes the little children race around like hooligans, it simply makes me irritable. I walk through a crowd of them and suddenly Naruto pops up out of nowhere.

"Hey," he says.

I nod cautiously in answer.

He's smiling way too much. It just seems odd that he'd be in such a good mood so quickly after his foul one.

"So," he says. "I'm gonna go check out some new weapons. Wanna come?"

I tilt my head away from him suspiciously. "Why?"

"Why not?" His grin doesn't fade. "I know it's not all that exciting, but we could figure out what to spend money on, if we ever get any again. And we could do something later if you want."

"Don't you have a mission or something?"

"Not right now. And I'm not going anywhere, exactly," he responds vaguely. "Besides, that's why I'm here! I don't want to leave on bad terms. I just thought that now that we're together that . . ."

Wait there a second. He's talking as if we've made some sort of agreement, as if the latter half of the other day was nothing more than a daydream.

My face grows hot.

"What?" His eyes seem to twinkle as he asks. "Never been with anyone before? Yeah, I'll just bet you haven't!" He laughs, like this is some sort of big joke, the damn usuratonkachi, and that's the exact wrong thing to do.

//Ku-ku-ku. He is right, though.//

I turn swiftly on my heel and stalk away.

"Aw, c'mon! Don't be like that!" He tries to take my hand as if we are on familiar terms. I pull away and spin on him.

"We are not together," I stress and for some reason, it hurts a little bit.

He blinks those big, stupid eyes at me. "What? Why?" He takes a step forward and I take one back,
a dance with no music. "But I thought, after the other day. You do remember the other day, don't you?"

"You're the one that doesn't remember," I point out. "I told you to forget it. It's not going to happen."

It is the first time in my life, I think, that I truly understand what the word "crestfallen" looks like. It's staring at me right now. It doesn't suit him.

"But I . . ." he stammers, his bottom lip sticking out in confusion. "But I didn't really think you were serious."

"Not serious?"

"Yeah, you know, I was pissed at first, but then I thought you were being all overly bitchy emotional like you always are." He crosses his arms in a huff. "You do that all the time and then afterwards, you act like you never said anything. That's why I gave you a day to cool off." His face is turning that splotchy pink that skin gets when distressed emotion runs high. "I didn't think you really meant it."

Biting the inside of my cheek to help maintain my cool and collected demeanor, I tell him, "I meant it. I mean everything I say." I state it so well that for a second, even I believe it.

But of course, I do mean it.

//You certainly should mean it. You have other matters to attend to that are more important than a useless little crush.//

I have no time or patience for this.

"But Sasuke," his voice is soft and imploring and the way he says my name . . . He takes a step forward and I flinch, but hold my ground. I can feel the heat flush through my veins as he gets closer. He won’t understand and I’m not explaining. It would only make things worse, with him playing the martyr or some such nonsense and I’m not allowing that.

//He is no victim, he is harassing you, do you not think so? Come now, Sasuke-kun, get rid of him.//

'I don't need your advice.'

Naruto reaches a hand up to my face and I don't move even though I know we are standing in the middle of town and people must be watching. But I can't see them; they are far away and outside. Naruto and I are in a different place, quiet and tempting and familiar and I know I have to abandon it. Yet, there is a part of me that longs for it.

Is that stupid?

//Yes, yes. How many times must I tell you? Yes, my pet.//

Of course it is.

Naruto's hand touches my cheek and makes me seem way too much like a blushing schoolgirl, which I am most certainly not.

//He is a dangerous distraction. Stay away from him.//

"Stop it," I command softly.
"Why?"

I scowl at him but he just grins, if a bit apprehensively.

Gently, Naruto slides his finger up and over to the cut in my eyebrow, now permanent, and then to the other eye, smoothing the pad of his finger over the eyelid and downward so that my eye closes. His skin is a bit rough and scratchy and it prickles, especially when it reaches the smooth, sensitive scar at my throat.

//Remember how he gave you that little token? He did not trust you. Do you really think you can trust him?/

I'm having a very difficult time breathing properly. I open my eye to watch Naruto stare pensively at the scar he gave me as he slides his finger over it again and again. I can almost feel myself falling.

//Remember you are being watched. The elders have their rules. For now, you must follow them.//

'Why do you care so much what they think?'

//Safety, of course. You must buy time.//

'Buy time'? I'm not sure what that means, but it can't be good. I flick my eyes to the side and the whole world comes into focus.

There are people everywhere: gawking, pointing, and whispering. And all of them wear this same disapproving, angry look.

How I hate them.

This is absurd.

Naruto needs to let go. He needs to accept that there is nothing I can do. Some bonds have to be broken.

I grasp his wrist tightly and his blue eyes fly up to me.

"I already told you," I state as plainly as possible with a tremulous voice. "Several times, in fact. Whatever you think this is, it isn't. Whatever you want to happen, won't. So give it up."

His bottom lip sticks out fatly in a pout and it's kind of cute the way he does that like a little kid. I scowl at him.

"You can't possibly mean that," he says.

"I do."

His gaze narrows and he looks at me. I try not squirm under its intensity. His eyes bore straight through mine, as though they can read my mind. After a lengthy pause, he asks, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I answer a little too quickly.

"I don't believe you."

I hold his wrist tighter as if I don't want to let go. "Believe whatever you like."
My heart twists painfully in my chest when I look at him, so I swiftly glance over the top of his head to see the citizenry of Konoha. I know what they want of me.

//They are nothing but sheep. Easily fooled. And once fooled, you can regain your life, your status, and your power. Is that not worth it?//

Is it?

"I will then," Naruto says firmly and my eyes return to his. "There's something else going on here, don't think I don't see it. I know there is because the other day, you . . ." But he stops, screws up his face and just stares.

There is worry and confusion and hope in that stare, and it is all about me.

My hand is trembling and still not letting go. But this isn't just about me. Despite all that has happened, I'm sure Naruto could worm his way into their affections if I wasn't in the way.

//--And what about you? How about worrying about yourself and achieving your final goal? "Revive your clan", that was it, was it not?--

'You don't even know what you're talking about.'

In a way, my actions could be considered noble.

They're not.

//--The clock is ticking, my pet.//--

Naruto's still looking at me and . . .

God, his eyes are so damn blue.

Soft and sweet and looking only at me . . .

I can feel myself slipping and I can't seem to stop.

"Wait."

My parasite growls.

Naruto blinks at me, understandably confused. "Wait?"

I lower my head and dig my short, unkempt nails into the tender skin at his wrist. "Just, wait."

I feel out of sorts, nauseous and dizzy and that world that came into crystal clear focus feels like it's pressing down on me like a lead weight. Forever passes us by, there in the middle of the street, in the middle of Konoha. And I'm not entirely sure why, but I can't let go of his hand.

"All right."

My heart skips a beat. I raise my head.

"If that's what you want," Naruto says with a cautiously optimistic look in his eyes, "Then I will. I've waited a long time already but, for you, I can wait."

He smiles softly at me then. "I'll still be here."
And it sets my breath fluttering in my chest. When he looks at me like that, like he looks at no one else, I no longer have my convictions.

I really need to think. *I really* need to think.

Because Naruto is looking at me and I don't know where I am anymore.

And I sure as hell don't know where I'm going.
The familiar dilapidated row of houses stand side by side as a condemning testament of what had once been. How long ago was it that I lived here? Played here? Died here? The memories are as clear today as if they were made yesterday. I could almost believe that someone will walk out at any moment to greet me.

I could almost believe that I am still innocent.

The Uchiha compound has been a ghost town, complete with cobwebs and creaks and dark mysterious windows, ever since that day. The lives of the people vanished so quickly that their spirits forgot to follow.

But I'm still here, still an Uchiha. Yet the neighborhood gives me no welcome.

Like my brother, I have committed an unforgivable sin.

Still, each building remains fresh in my recollection, too integral to my "was" to forsake my "is".

That one there, with the torn and tattered awning and the broken down stand, was once Auntie and Uncle's little shop.

"Hello, Sasuke-kun! Off to the academy already?" Uncle would say. "Well, you'll do well, I'm sure!"

"Of course he will!" Auntie would laugh. "He's Itachi's brother after all!"

How I felt the swell of pride when she said that!

Or was it Uncle who said it? I can't seem to remember anymore.

"If you come back later, I'll have a treat for you." Uncle smiles at me. He always smiled at me.

Auntie and Uncle were older, their children already grown, but they treated me like I was their youngest. They’d held such deep interest in my short life that seemed more than simple politeness.

What would they think now?

But I can see them already; their ghosts are plain as day, shaking their heads, turning from me for
the last time, and disappearing behind the door.

I move on.

This one is the old Yoshiro's house. I can't help hiding an unwilling smile. It is in shambles now, broken and twisted like the crotchety man who owned it; with black window eyes that stare down on me. As a child, it frightened me. The old man would storm out with the deeply etched scowl and the skin like old leather and just glower. He never said a word; words were not to be wasted on little boys. He never liked Itachi and barely noticed me.

I know what he thought of me then: not much.

I can easily surmise what he’d think of me now.

Before he can turn from me, I turn my back on him.

The only still somewhat intact spot in this whole rundown procession is the Uchiha symbol that hangs over the Nakano Shrine. I can still recall the talking and laughter that filled the thick walls and the whispers from secret meetings I wasn’t supposed to know about. All Uchiha stopped there at one time or another; it was an unspoken obligation.

Even Itachi.

It's the first time I can remember being scared.

Of them. And Itachi.

Yet I hadn’t believed my brother was capable of doing something so inherently wrong. In my naive child's eyes, it was inconceivable.

Now I know better.

Or do I?

The self-important phantoms watch me as I pass; so smug as if even in death they are wiser, until they too vanish.

House after house I pass, recalling snippets of experience now fossilized to rock hardness. Some of these people I knew, some I barely noticed.

All of them, every last one, gone.

They turn away from me and slowly the memories begin to fade like chapters to the background of my childhood.

There weren't many of us, not really. Our clan had never decreased, or so Itachi told me, but there were few of us to start with it seems. I'd never thought about it back then, but walking the path of my past, I can count the clan's members on my fingers. Even without the crimes of my brother, I was the last.

I was the youngest of my generation and all those of marrying and childbearing age had not yet borne any heirs, nor seemed especially inclined to.

I stop.

Could that be?
But it was. Maybe that is why so many seemed to pin their hopes on my sloping shoulders.

I’ve failed them.

And now here is the final house. The worst one; and the best. It has been years since I entered its haunted halls, but I think that now I must. Their spirits are closest here and I want, no I need, to speak with them.

I take a breath for courage and set foot inside.

There are still shoes lined up neatly behind the first stair.

For a moment, the pain is so acute; I almost break down right there upon the wooden flooring.

But no, I cannot do that.

I step over the pathetic reminders of yesterday and enter the main house. One room after another brims with agonizingly happy memories that make the fraying string inside me snap. I can't look at Itachi's room; I'm afraid I'll remember too much of how he was and not what he became and never be sure which was the lie, if either.

I no longer know what to feel when I think of Itachi.

His blood is on my hands and in my veins and I know I was right; I know it with everything that is in me and yet . . .

I pull my hand from the door as if scalded and walk away before I can change my mind.

The next door's contents are a mystery to me. In my seven short years, I had never been inside. It’s like a secret treasure chamber glimpsed only through the cracks of partially open doors.

I take my first peek inside with a funereal sort of reverence.

It’s ordinary.

There’s nothing special or magical about the room except that it once belonged to my parents. It remains neat and tidy from its last day of cleaning and is now blanketed in a thin layer of dust as if for protection. I walk over to a corner and pick up one of my mother's shawls that lay daintily folded there. I bring it up to my nose. Once, it smelled like her: flowery, fresh, and sweet.

Now it only stinks of decay.

I let it drop carelessly to the floor.

With a final glance, I exit the room and head to the kitchen. Of all the corners of this house, this was my favorite. The only place I could rely on seeing my father, and Itachi, was here at this table.

I pull a cleansing air into my lungs, lower my eyes, take a seat, and prepare to commune with the dead.

When I open my eyes, I can see them sitting across from me. Father is stern and judgmental as always and mother, well, mother is smiling.

"Hello, Father," I say. "Hello, Mother."

They don’t answer.
I begin to pick out the dirt from a crevice in the table, renewing a bad habit I had when I was young.

"What do you think?" I ask. There's no reason to explain. I'm not crazy; I'm fully aware that they're only projections of my mind. And since they're not really there, they know why I'm here even when I do not.

They make me feel seven years old again.

I've been thinking a lot. But the only conclusion I've come to is that I'm completely confused.

And completely screwed.

I drop my head into my hands and tug violently at my hair. My two shadow-parents hover over me and it's as if my imagination has come to life; I can practically touch them.

"Tell me what I should do," I implore the inanimate tabletop or the ghosts of my parents; I'm as likely to get an answer from either of them.

None.

"I don't even know what I want."

I want to be near Naruto. Whatever that means. He's my best friend, at least I think he still is, and the person who means the most to me.

If we could manage to be friends or . . .

Do I want to kiss him again?

Maybe.

Though even if I did, Konoha's illustrious administration wouldn't stand for it and would force a permanent solution.

But Naruto would understand. Tch. Of course he would. He would let me be free to chain myself to a life I have no desire for. Hell, he'd probably force me, to do the "right" thing or some other such nonsense.

One thing remains clear: I want to stay in Konoha because I want to be where he is.

I sigh. It's almost a relief to say it.

I raise my head. The two shady specters continue staring at me.

What would father think if I were to tell him of the unforeseen path his younger son may be taking?

He looks at me with those cold, dark, disapproving eyes, his jaw fixed firm and his mouth pulled into an emotionless line.

I know what father would think.

He would be displeased, just as he always was. The one glimpse I got that he might not consider me entirely worthless was so transitory I'm no longer certain it was real. He died so soon after that he never got the opportunity to take it back.
It was always Itachi with him.

Even in the chance that he might have disapproved of Itachi, it was still and forever the elder, better brother.

I consider his hands. I remember them tough and bruised and weather-beaten. They were hands made for fighting, for punishing, and for killing. They were not designed for gentleness.

And yet, he might be proud.

His younger son defeated the elder; surpassed him in desire, perseverance, and drive, if not raw power. What has undone me would make me in his regard.

"Now I can call you my son."

That is what he would say.

Tears brim at the edge of my vision, but I will not cry. I refuse to be some weepy child.

And so it was with my father. Keeping me a breath away from frustrated tears, and then looking down on me for having brought me so low.

I turn from him to face the cabinets and drawers and sink, mere rotting remnants of their former selves.

I want nothing more to do with my father. I am sick of his judgment, heartsick of seeking his approval. All I ever wanted was for him to be proud of me, to look at me. But he frowns still, even from the grave.

With a small exertion of my will, I dispel him and his shade to where he can no longer torment me.

My breath is shallow and shaky. I still half-expect for my life to have been nothing more than a bad dream and upon my waking will fall into the void that swallows nightmares.

But it is all too brutally real.

I look back and father is gone, along with my resentment and regret. Perhaps now I can finally make my peace with him.

But she remains, as kind and smiling as ever. She tilts her head in that way that asks without speaking: What's the matter, Sasuke-kun?

And how am I to answer?

I rise from the table and wander through the labyrinthine halls that lead to the garden. Her transparent eyes follow me.

The once well-kempt lawn is now a wilderness gone awry. I can scarcely see the skeletal remains of its former glory and if I hadn't known it was once crisp and pristine, I would not have guessed it. Tall stalks of grass hug the raised wood floor as if waiting for the moment I leave to mount a coup d'état upon the house.

Mother, that figment of my memory, stands placidly beside me. From the corner of my eye, I see her spectral hand reach towards me in her usual attempt of comfort. I could swear I feel the soft warmth of her small hand on my head and close my eyes to it. I lean into her touch but when I try, it floats away like smoke, wrapping around me once before melting into the air.
I am so desperate for any sort of intimate touch that, harsh or not, the more substantial, the better. If she would strike me right now, I would welcome it. At least it would be real.

When I open my eyes again, the overgrown yard has been transformed. It is as it once was, the grass a deep emerald, while mother stands in the middle casually hanging laundry up on the line.

"Why the troubled face, Sasuke?"

I am six years old again, covered in cuts and bruises and rushing back from self-imposed training, a little child with nothing to offer but promises.

"I wanted to be like them," I say aloud.

She drapes a clean white sheet over the line. "But you're not."

"I know."

She takes the empty basket into her hands and balances it expertly on her hip. "Tell me what's wrong, Sasuke."

I sit on the edge of the wooden porch, the heaviness of her request forcing me down. "I am supposed to have an heir," I tell her.

"Yes," Mama says, taking a place beside me. "That's what's always been expected of the Uchiha house."

Suddenly transformed back to my teenage self, I appeal to her. "Why is it forced on me?"

"I don't understand."

But of course not. She’s nothing but a memory who knows only what was and not what is. I sigh. "Did you have a choice?"

She muses on it a moment, looking out into the yard, her eyes distant and glassy as she tries to remember. "I didn't not have a choice."

"What's that mean?"

Her gaze returns to me, her soft black eyes are kind and understanding. "I wasn't the one who proposed a marriage with your father, nor he with me. Our parents arranged it. But the Uchiha must pursue strong bloodlines. They must ensure the continuation of the clan and such things are not taken lightly. I suppose I could've refused, but I had a duty as well. She smiles at me then, her reassuring just-for-me smile. "And it wasn't bad. It worked out well for us. I did love your father and by the day of our wedding, I was every bit the eager, blushing bride."

The facts of my parents' engagement were already known to me, but mother had never actually spoken of it so concisely before.

Her small mouth tints pink with the upturn of the edges. Her thick, glossy black hair frames her face and the sun twinkles in her wide, open eyes. What sits beside me now is the fusion of my best memories.

Is this how she truly looked?

She is so young.
And she'd already borne both Itachi and I. So who am I to claim a youth I never truly had?

Do I not also have an obligation?

"And me?" I ask.

She is a ghost, so her answer is half predictable. She lifts her hand and smoothes alongside of my hair, her touch like a breeze in my ear. "It's what I've wished for you," she says wistfully. "A family of your own, little grandchildren for me to spoil and play with. You have always carried all my hopes."

Biting my lip, I nod my head, not sure if I am agreeing and if so, to what.

"And Itachi?"

Her hand stalls. Her smile twists into that twinge of sadness she often displayed in the last year I remember her.

"I do not entirely understand your brother."

It's all she says, but I could never have expected more. Mother rarely spoke of Itachi and when she did, it was constantly woven with uncertainties.

But it doesn’t matter what she thought of Itachi. I only know that when she looked at me, she saw the future. My future, her future.

The clan's future.

Without me, there won’t be one.

And now that she can do nothing about it, do I dare deny her?

"What if . . ." I begin. She inclines her head, all smiles again as if nothing has happened. "What if I didn't?"

"Then we would be no more," she states flatly in a tone so unlike her. "There would be no one left to carry our secrets or hopes or memories into the future. We would be nothing more than stories told to little children, misunderstood and eventually forgotten."

It is a harsh statement, but I cannot deny its truth.

I wonder if she knew of the Uchiha curse before she decided to have children. And two of them, at that. It's as if she was tempting fate.

But she had to have known, they all did. It seems everyone but I knew.

I wish I could really talk to her now, to find out why she would chance it, despite the likely consequences.

My throat has gone desert dry and I swallow to wet it again. What exactly am I supposed to say to her, even if she isn't here? "But what if I didn't?"

Her lips pull even thinner. "Were your father and I bad parents?"

I blink stupidly. "What?"
"Why wouldn’t you want children? Why wouldn’t you want to marry?"

"Well, I . . ."

I’m thrown. Such animosity is not what I expected, not that I expected anything. Would mother have ever asked such things? Yes, I suppose she would. But her inflections, her intonations, are a complete mystery to me now. She was so good-natured.

I stumble over a nonsensical answer, shaking my head, "No, that's not it. It's just . . ."

"A wife and a family for you," she says kindly, almost vacuously. "To refill these halls with new hopes and old worries. The life that your father and I led. That is what I wish for you. It's what I always wished."

Her smile is just shy of melancholy as if she can already see the children I haven’t yet fathered. The children I do not intend to father.

How disappointed she would be.

I don't think the possibility of no future generations ever entered her mind. There’s a way to get that, clinical and impersonal, but selfish or not, I won’t do it. It has to be all or nothing. I think they elders would agree.

It can’t be any other way. I would want to make the best of everything, to give my children all that I had and didn't. I don't want to be a father like mine. After everything, I don't want to be him.

More than anyone, he sculpted his sons into what they became.

For good or bad, he has helped make me what I am.

"Uchihas do not dally with other males . . . It simply isn't done."

This is about so much more than just a child that of the Uchiha. It is about regaining the control, the authority the council has lost in my absence. Reasserting their designs for the clans of Konohagakure as if we are nothing more than chess pieces.

On the other hand, the Uchihas are caught in their disastrous mobius strip that will forever curve back to death and treachery. The elders know this, but are willing to chance it just for a kekkai genkai. I can only assume they think that this time, maybe they can control it.

But they can’t.

So if they want the sharingan so badly, then they deserve everything that comes with it.

They deserve another Itachi.

I can't believe I'm even considering this.

"Something is wrong with you, dear."

Mother is staring at me with her old, benign expression as usual and her words are not judgmental, merely honest.

I lean my elbows down on my knees. "I know," I reply.

There is something seriously wrong with me, beyond the obvious. I've known it for a while now,
but I can't place it.

But the Uchiha Sasuke I was for so long seems to have followed the same path as all those who came before him and disappeared and died.

I turn back to my mother, taking a deep breath. "What if," I start and then stop. But disgusted with my temerity, I forge ahead. "What if I didn't want children, wife, or a woman at all?"

The ghost of my mother smiles complacently and says nothing.

It's the only answer I'll receive.

-----

With absolute certainty, I know I have been here before. In this exact place, in this exact situation. As they say, the players may have changed, but the game remains the same. Tsunade, a late replacement, evaluates us all coolly, her pale eyes never wavering from where we stand. Tetsuo is bored, yawning, and gazing out the window at the birds flying by while Anko stands sternly beside us, for once without a snide remark or snarky comment. Ouka is the most animated by far. After finally nailing all of her targets during practice yesterday—and about time too—she believes she is now capable of a greater mission.

Something about this seems familiar.

//Cease with the sarcasm, it is unseemly.//

'You would know all about that. And where did you disappear off to anyway?'

//Oh, here and there.//

I return Tsunade's stare with practiced disinterest, my one eyebrow raised, challenging her to change the rules.

//She has no power to do so.//

'I'm well aware of that.'

"Please, Hokage-sama!" Ouka clasps her hands in prayerful humility as she whines a whole-hearted plea. "All we've done are jobs a ninja isn't even needed for! How are we gonna get stronger if we don't get real missions?"

"I'm not in the practice of bowing to childish wishes," the Hokage announces.

I snort.

Tsunade shoots me a warning look.

Anko steps forward. "Hokage-sama, if I may?" Tsunade nods her assent. "These three have been training hard. They have shown great progress, especially Inuzuka and Kanamori and I think they are up to the challenge." She then crosses her arms and lifts her head defiantly. "I respectfully add my support to Inuzuka's request."

The Hokage drops her hands to reveal a long-suffering frown.
"Is that so?" She asks. "And yet, Mitarashi-san, you were well aware of the limitations set on this team before you agreed to this position."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." Anko moves her hands to her hips. "But I had hoped, with the demonstration of the past few months, that things would have changed."

For a moment, I think Tsunade appears apologetic, but the look is so fleeting, I can't be sure it was ever there. "You can't expect miracles, Mitarashi-san." Her glance sweeps over me briefly before returning to Anko. "And unfortunately, there are no mission requests at present suitable for a two-person genin team."

"But Tetsuo will come if we make him!" Ouka cries out, disillusioned, and sends the boy a threatening glare. "Won't you?"

"Eh?" The boy responds cleverly.

"It’s not Kanamori-kun that is the problem." Tsunade spreads the papers on her table into a fan and pretends to review them. "Now, I'll keep my eyes open for a suitable mission. But until then, request denied."

She heaves a great sigh as if the weight of the world is permanently lodged upon her shoulders. Then she lifts her head and looks directly at me, lifting any doubt, as if there ever was any, as to whose fault it is that Ouka's wish cannot be granted.

Ouka's big, round eyes stare at me for a long time before I turn and walk away.

It’s somehow worse that they weren’t angry.

-----

Kuma has claimed for himself a small corner of my porch. I do not understand why he would be so attached to it, it's not very big.

Tiny, really.

Enough for a couple of people and a couple of chairs to cram in; if the people who lived here were so inclined.

We're not.

But he sits on the rail as if it is a chair, perched delicately like a bird.

I stare out into the darkness, not inviting him to speak. I'm not out here for conversation, or even company.

Kuma observes me with a detached sort of intensity; I’m the worm to his bird and he is simply waiting for the right moment to capture me.

He glances away.

"We didn't have a choice," he justifies, his tenor voice offering the answer to a question I would never have asked. "We have our obligations too."

//Oh, and just when we had better things to concern ourselves with than silly little fox boys, he has to dredge it up.//
There are too many clouds out tonight for stars and even the moon dips lazily behind one of the fluffy bodies.

"I am honor-bound by my oath as an ANBU," he persists.

//Of course, honor. Konoha is overflowing with honor.//

'Shut up, you.'

In the distance, the twinkling lights of Konoha nightlife try to replace the stars with misplaced obstinacy.

Kuma slips off the rail and lands noiselessly on the porch.

"I suppose it's none of my business, but," the expressionless mask studies me, the eyes behind it examining me like a specimen. "I know what the council has asked of you."

//Ku-ku-ku.//

My head lists to the side as I listen to the harmless tiny garden snakes slithering around in the grass, invisible to everyone but me.

//And I, my pet. Do not forget about me.//

I wish I could.

"And what," I query blandly, "Would you suggest I do?"

"Me?"

The blades of grass fold softly beneath the reptiles' long, smooth bellies. "Did you have another reason for revealing this bit of information to me? Did you want to ridicule me? Or was it threaten?"

I have no real basis for the accusations, but I hardly care.

//There is a basis, my dear. He is of Konoha and that is reason enough to think the worst of him.//

'That's your bias.'

//We are carved of the same stone, dear Sasuke-kun. Above all else, remember that.//

If it could, I'm certain the bear mask would have frowned. As it is, I can hear the disapproval loud and clear in Kuma's voice.

"Despite what you think, I'm on your side. As much as I can," he is quick to amend. "I'd help you if I could, but my hands are tied. The council is powerful. Even the Hokage can't stand against them."

//This is true indeed.//

I frown.

"Then what," I growl the reiteration, "Do you suggest I do?"

Kuma hesitates.
The clouds part across the moon and the night glows brighter, making his teddy bear face shine eerily in the black light.

"I don't know."

I grunt and look away.

"But," he counters and I hear without really listening, "I think you should seriously consider what you can least live without."

As if I have not done that already. "And if one decision leads to death?"

"You don't know that."

"It is what I've been told."

Kuma pauses before commenting carefully. "I don't believe the elders would go so far."

I snort. "Not much to base a decision on."

"No," he concedes. "But it hardly changes anything. A choice between a short life with the possibility of happiness or a long miserable one is still a decision."

//He is right on that account.//

"Hn." Not much of one.

//Stop behaving like a child. The wise decision is life. It is always life.//

"Why don't you just tell him?"

The moon dips behind the clouds once more and Kuma's incessant line of questions makes it seem like he has some vested interest in my life.

"Do you know him? Naruto?" I clarify needlessly.

My parasite snarls in annoyance.

Kuma does not answer.

The night is seasonably warm and the moisture in the air tickles along my bare skin.

Sighing, I lean back against the side of the building.

"If I told him, he'd step aside." I inform the ANBU. "He would remove himself from the picture so I could do everything the elders asked of me. I can't make an objective decision if he knows, because he'll make the decision for me."

//Better that than this constant wavering. And at least then it would be the correct choice.//

"Perhaps you give his feelings too little significance."

"And perhaps you don't know him," I say quietly, "Like I do."

My enigmatic companion rises upon the rail again, thin and delicate, defying the heaviness of his mask.
"Perhaps," he says.
And disappears into the night.
-----
"Little brother."

The sheets twine a tourniquet around me when I roll over, cutting off the oxygen supply to the wiser half of my brain.

"Foolish little brother."

The sound of his voice shatters the peace of the empty room. He's probably offended that I didn't speak to him at the house, that I left that door closed.

"Foolish, foolish little brother."

The gentle tap of his finger on my forehead wakes me abruptly from my sleep with the sudden onset of half-remembered times. My room is dark and resonates with the music of bugs and night birds and the heaviness of Itachi's presence. I rub my reluctantly open eye with the back of my fist.

"Trouble sleeping?"

Itachi's apparition stands serenely in the corner of my room, oddly undefended, but with the typical lack of expression evident on his face.

His mouth cracks into a sick interpretation of a smile.

I sit up.

"What do you care?" I ask, knowing full well that he's not there.

"You're my little brother," he replies blithely. "Shouldn't I care?"

"You don't." The words are bitter and I spit them out quickly to rid myself of the taste.

Itachi only smiles at me but as usual, it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Leave me alone." My retort has little bite to it.

"I can't do that." He sits on the edge of the bed quite close to me, but there's no shift in the mattress. "You won't let me."

I can't look at him and I can't look out the window. The pain is blistering and scratchy on the backs of my eyes so I close the lids to keep it at bay.

"I don't want you here."

His hand is cold and clammy when he pats my head. "Then accept that we're not all that different. Accept that I am, and always will be, your brother."

"We're nothing alike."

"We both do things for reasons no one else could possibly understand. You, for instance, killed your only brother for selfish reasons."
"Justice," I state calmly, "is not selfish."

Itachi rubs my hair. "Of course it is." The sensation of his hand suddenly disappears. "But that wasn’t your true reason."

I say nothing, only squeeze my eyes shut and pray that he vanishes. There is silence in the room for a long while and I think, irrationally, that he has finally let me be.

"Why did you choose him over me?" The question is a spear that lances my heart and spills my blood upon the blankets.

"Why did you choose him, a curse, our curse, over your own flesh and blood?"

To some questions, there are no answers.

"You did." His voice is mild, the way it was, so long ago. "You killed me not for revenge, but for him."

The darkness enfolds my body, sucking what little happiness there is from me, like the last dregs of tea from a cup. I wonder what future it reads in the leaves.

"I didn't," I whisper lamely.

"Come here."

But I don't. I can't trust the lies of a monster that no longer exists.

"Does it give you nightmares?"

"I don't have nightmares."

Then the darkness solidifies into him, his arms wrapped around me, his legs on either side of mine and I am small again, a silly child with no pride and nothing to be proud of. His chin rests atop my head and his arms curve all the way around me. I never realized before just how thin they were. They were constructs of bone and flesh that constrict my future and bind me to the past.

"Do you remember when you were small, very, very small, little brother," he whispers into the air, "and you'd come to me in the middle of the night seeking shelter from your nightmares?"

"No," I say, but of course I do.

"And I'd hold you like this until you fell back asleep?"

Always the past.

And even then a lie.

"No," I insist.

"I would hold you until all the monsters had been chased away." He laughs softly as if it is a charming, pleasant memory, stroking his knuckles soothingly over the side of my arm.

It isn’t real.

He’s not real, not here, not kind, not the protective older brother I adored.
But long ago, he was.

He was.

I know this as clearly as I know everything else.

"Shh, Sasuke," he soothes and the warmth of his presence lulls me. "Just be calm. I'm here, I'll protect you. Now go to sleep. I'll protect you . . . "

I clench my jaw and choke down the last of my memories until Itachi is no longer there.

Because there are no such things as nightmares.

And the only monsters left are the ones I carry with me.
I rap politely on the door, honestly unsure whether or not I want anyone to answer.

//Better they should not.//

'You don't even know why I'm here.'

//Of course I do. Though that makes little difference, you should never visit this place.//

I scoff and the door cracks open hesitantly. Once there is a wide enough gap to peer through, it swings open more quickly.


I merely nod my head and cross the threshold of his apartment. The door shuts quietly behind me, as though to prevent waking a colicky baby.

//Enough with this nonsense and your useless feelings. Regain your pride.//

'I have my pride, you idiot, that's the whole point.'

Iruka rushes past me, a bundle of jittery nerves, and peeks over into an adjacent room as if to make sure no one’s watching.

But it's too late for that. With Naruto and I involved, somebody’s always watching.

//It would have been better had you remembered that before you caused this catastrophe. However, there is yet time to mend it.//

"Here," my former teacher says politely, offering up a hard kitchen chair. "Sit down. It's good you've come."

I take the seat and look at Iruka expectantly, keeping my mouth shut so I won't get caught saying something I shouldn't.

Iruka takes in a deep breath. "So, I haven't seen much of you lately. Have you been holding up O.K.?”
"It's . . ." I am about to say "fine", but then reconsider, "occasionally bearable."

//Ku-ku-ku.//

"Ah, yeah. Good. That's good." He's clearly not listening, instead preoccupied by whatever keeps drawing his attention in the other room. Then he leans in conspiratorially. "Look, I'm sorry, but I need to ask a favor."

I raise my eyebrow in curiosity.

//This cannot be good.// The parasite pauses. //No, no wait. This could work to your benefit.//

I ignore the creature; who knows what ridiculous scheme he's onto now.

"Could you talk with Naruto?" Iruka whispers. "I know things have become a little strained between you two, but when it comes down to it, you're the only one he really listens to when he's like this. I've tried, but all I'm hitting is a brick wall."

//Forget it, don't do this favor.//

'I thought you were all for it.'

//Not when it involves that misbegotten fox boy. You cannot afford to make any more mistakes. You must survive, and to do that, you must have an heir. And to do that, clearly you must keep your distance from him. He's a bad influence. Come, my pet, it is not a hard concept to grasp.//

'And yet here I am, against your wishes.'

//Now you are being difficult.//

'Hn.'

"Did something happen?" I ask and I realize that it’s a fairly pointless question. Obviously something did or else Iruka wouldn't be acting like a rabbit that's stumbled into a wolf's den.

"He was doing so well, too," Iruka answers mysteriously. He drops his head into his hand and sighs. "I thought things were getting better, but then he came back in a temper and . . . It wasn't anything he hasn't been dealt before. I'm sure you know how the villagers treated him in the past, of course you do." Iruka shakes his head. "It had eased off in the past few years, things were better when he returned from training, but then, since the . . . accident," he explains judiciously, "The situation has gotten bad again. Clearly, somebody said something to him, but I don't know what it was. I hate asking, but can you please help?"

I find it odd that a man who didn't back down in the face of a schoolroom of undisciplined young ninja would appeal to one of his former students for help. Everyone is changing, it seems.

//This is not your responsibility. Refuse and address the important issues. Leave this man to deal with his own messes.//

I stand up quickly. "Where is he?"

//Fool.//

Iruka only gestures with his head, but of course I didn't need to ask.

Without excusing myself, I leave the kitchen and the man inside it to confront my fate.
Naruto is curled up in a corner of the living room, knees pulled to his chest and facing the wall like a child punished for some misbehavior. All that's missing is the cap.

Gracefully, I sit down behind him so that our backs face each other.

Orochimaru groans with aggravation.

That's just one of the perks.

Naruto does nothing, which leaves it up to me and I like silence. Reluctantly, I speak.

"Hey."

Naruto grunts softly.

//Oh, what fascinating conversations you two always have.//

I sigh and lean my head back, almost meeting his but not. What would he think if I were to turn around, reach over, and touch his shoulder?

//That you are strange.//

'It's not that strange.'

//It is for you.//

'Hn.'

I bite the inside of my lip and stare at the ceiling. I don't know what on earth possessed Iruka to enlist my help in this. I should never have agreed.

//Perhaps you have a fever. At least that would explain the suicidal behavior and your refusal to listen to my good advice.//

'No. That's not it.'

"What happened?" I ask flatly.

After a few minutes of unresponsiveness, I jab Naruto in the ribs with my elbow.

"Hey!" He snaps much more sharply than I would have expected. "Mind your own damn business!"

So, that's how it's to be.

//There's no use trying then. Let's not waste any more time.//


I feel the contraction of Naruto's shoulders, the stiffening of his spine. "Nothing," he says without conviction.

//See now, there you are. No reason to stay. Let us leave and follow more worthy pursuits.//

"Yes, very convincing," I say. Not entirely sure why, I lean back until the edges of our shoulder blades touch. And suddenly I feel like the world has stopped spinning so fast. A moment later, tension eases in Naruto’s back.
How stupid a thing is that?

//Immensely stupid. So, yet another reason to stay away from him: he kills your brain cells. May we go now?//

Pulling one leg up to my chest, I wrap my arm around it, trying to shake away the prickly feeling. I must have been holding it in one position too long.

I hear the dull sound of Naruto's feet when he slides them out and hits the soles of them against the wall.

A long time passes in this fashion, unmoving, unspeaking, and I see no reason to change it. I could of course force the information out of him, or at the very least, release some of the anger he's bottling up by instigating a fight. It might help, but something tells me that this time it's not the right approach.

//Well, if is doesn't involve fighting, you're pretty much useless. Let's go and accomplish a mission you actually can succeed at.//

'If fighting's all I'm good for, then I may as well stay. The "mission" you're so concerned with won't happen.'

//Certainly it can. If you approach it like a mission.//

'Well then, this is a mission too.'

//That is not what I meant.//

'It's what you said.'

I release a heavy breath of air and turn my head in Naruto's direction. But before I can even open my mouth, he speaks.

"Today, a woman spit at me," he murmurs. He elaborates on her appearance as if this will explain why. "She was young, pretty, probably a very nice lady under normal circumstances . . ."

He pauses, and instead of prodding, I let him find his own time.

"She says I killed her husband."

I see.

//She is right.//

'She's wrong.'

//He will get you killed, too, if you let him get too close.//

I consider it seriously for a moment.

'And it's my choice.'

//Tch! Noble words, but you are incapable of backing them up.//

"Naru-" I start.
"There was a girl with her," he cuts me off abruptly, but his voice remains soft. "Maybe three, four years old. Not older. She had light brown hair pulled back with two little barrettes on the side of her face. She just stared at me with these big black eyes." He stops and I know that he is forming a crooked smile. "She was cute. She didn't cry, didn't frown; she didn't do anything, really. I would've thought she would. But she just stared, probably too young to even understand the idea of death and that her father won't be coming home. She didn't know that I'm the one that took him from her. But one day, she will."

I turn awkwardly toward him, but only see the back of his head. "It's not your fault."

"Yes it is!" He spins on me, his body twisting one way, mine twisting the other, forming a graceful sort of spiral. "I'm the one who attacked Konoha. I'm the one who destroyed it. All those people . . ."

"No," I assert irritably. "That was Kyuubi. And people who can't tell the difference can just . . ."

"It's the same thing," he insists. His one arm is held at an abnormal angle as it supports his weight, and he throws his other hand over his heart, pounding it in an exaggerated display. "He's right here. All the time. We are the same thing. His thoughts are my thoughts, his actions are my actions."

"You are not Kyuubi," I repeat, losing my patience. What then would Konoha think of my situation?

//Ku-ku-ku.//

"If you’re the same, then that's like saying that-" I almost say "Orochimaru and I are the same", but catch myself before I admit something dangerous. I cough and Naruto looks at me confusedly. "Look," I say, "That's like saying you have no mind of your own." I curl my lip into a sneer. "And I doubt even a demon could hold you back. Besides," I go on, "Do you really think you could just stay here if people really believed you were only Kyuubi?"

But Naruto shakes his head. "But it was my fault. I had no faith in you. I'm the one that let-"

Before he gets the chance to destroy everything, I pull back and hit him square in the face, hard enough to make the back of his head bounce off the wall behind him. My heart hammers in my chest. I can feel my lip tremble in anger as Naruto stares at me, utterly and completely dumbstruck. But I didn't know what else to do to shut him up.

Idiot.

If the ANBU found out exactly what he did, if they found out he let Kyuubi out; that he had the choice and chose to risk attacking Konoha, there's no way they'd let him wander freely.

There's no way they'd let him live.

The fact that he's alive is my only guarantee that they haven't discovered the truth.

I'm not about to let him throw it all away.

//Just let him confess. Then all your problems will be solved.//

"Idiot," I say shakily. And I almost feel like I'm going to cry, panic and exasperation merging into a single indistinguishable knot. But I don't cry, not Uchiha Sasuke, so I grit my teeth and hold back.

Naruto is a different story. Sitting there, cupping his injured cheek, he stares at me with wide eyes
and I know the tears are coming long before I see them.

They start as a blank stare and sniffling, escalate to water-filled eyes that turn iris and pupil into an indistinguishable mass, and end with him launching at me. Only he doesn't cry, not really. He just sighs deeply over and over and snuffles sloppily into my shirt.

I don't remember him being like this before.

I don't know what to do. But Naruto's body is trembling and in order to keep balance, I have to put my arms around him. I shift a little bit so I don't fall over and for some reason, Naruto's breath catches and he hugs my shirt more fiercely.

I methodically begin patting the back of his head, because my mother would do that for me and it always worked.

It's kind of nice.

//Ugh.//

Eventually, Naruto slows to liquid hiccups and I look down at the top of his head, running my fingers through his spiky hair.

"Big baby," I chide, and am surprised to hear no malice in it.

My hold on him loosens as he pulls away, his head drooping. He draws his forearm across his face to clean it on his sleeve like a small child.

//If you keep referring to him as a child, then you already have plenty of experience. Perhaps you ought to have a real one, rather than nurture this one that will never grow up.//

My fingertips barely graze Naruto's shoulders and no longer serve any practical purpose, but I don't move them. He raises his face and looks at me with his eyes bloodshot and blinking. His face has gone splotchy with emotion that has knocked his hitae-ate askew.

He is pathetic and hopeless and so miserably adorable. He’s so damn needy and what he needs is me, so how am I supposed to choose anything but him?

//Very easily. You can choose life.//

He leans back and with nothing left to hold onto, my hands fall uselessly to the floor. He snuffles, swipes across his red-rimmed eyes with the back of his hand and looks at me again. He stalls and his lips stretch momentarily.

"You look nice," he says.

Lifting my eyebrows blandly at the out-of-the-blue comment, I look down at myself. "Well, I did." There is a big tear and snot stain blemishing the front of my brand new shirt.

"Oh, uh, sorry," Naruto mumbles and looks away.

I should say "it's fine", it's the polite thing to do, but it's not all that fine and I'm not polite, so I keep my mouth shut. It's a new shirt, just arrived this morning complete with a shabby representation of the Uchiha fan - but a representation nonetheless - and it’s the first time I’ve worn it.

It would have been nice if it had stayed new.
'As if I have any.'

"I can wash it for you," Naruto offers, sucking noisily with his nose.

I refuse. I’m fully capable of doing my own laundry.

"But I don't mind." Reaching a hand forward, he sets it on the ground and begins crawling over to me like an animal.

I try to back up. "I don't care."

"C'mon, you can't go walking around like that." He grabs a section of shirt near the waistband and starts tugging upward.

I counter his move, pulling it back down. "Stop that!"

"No. I. Want. To." His hands grip tighter and he begins pulling harder and I'm afraid he might actually rip my new shirt.

"Get off." I huff, struggling in this ridiculous battle over the stupidest thing in the world.

Nothing coherent escapes his mouth, just the grunts of his effort to relieve me of my stained clothing. And somehow, after a minor tussle he achieves his goal. What can I say? I'd rather he have the damn thing than have it torn to pieces, which is what would've happened if he didn't stop.

The idiot staggers to his feet and looks down triumphantly as I practically lay sprawled across the living room floor. His expression changes subtly as he looks at me just a little too hard.

I scowl at him.

Naruto blushes furiously, turns away, and almost trips over himself in his mad dash out of the room.

I sit up straight and cross my arms indignantly over my bare chest.

He is acting infantile and prudish, the first of which he definitely is, the second which he definitely isn't. It's not like we haven't seen each other before, we were on enough missions with limited space, and public baths are common enough; we were in one not so long ago! Not to mention my old uniform, which Naruto liked to point out didn't conceal much.

I never even thought about it before.

But for some reason, at that moment, I felt indescribably and vulnerably naked.

Iruka enters the room a few minutes later, observes me sitting on the floor and crooks his head.

"Would you like something to wear?" He asks nonchalantly.

"That would be nice."

The man nods his head and leaves in search of that unnamed "something", acting as if finding someone half-dressed in his living room is an ordinary, everyday occurrence.

For all I know, it is.
Iruka returns only briefly, just long enough to hand me a zip-up jacket and then leaves me alone again. The awkwardness hovering in the air is rather palpable.

I shrug into the dark green jacket and remain on the floor.

I'm still stuck in the mode of "waiting". For what I should do and whatever it is that comes next.

//Yes, we need to find a way to crack that.//

When Naruto reenters the room, he is smiling like an idiot and offering up an apologetic laugh. He looks over to me in the corner and seems almost disappointed before the stupid smile is back, a little more reserved.

"Well, it's washed," he informs me brightly. "It'll be a while before it dries, but you don't have anywhere to be right now, do you?" He sounds pathetically hopeful.

"Not really," I grudgingly admit.

//Argh!//

"Okaaaaay . . " he says, his hands behind his back and his toes tapping conspicuously in front. "Where'd Iruka-san go?"

"I don't know."

"Ah." He looks around anxiously before pouncing on the TV remote control. "Wanna watch T.V.?" He finally asks, flipping the control nervously between his hands.

"Whatever," I reply flatly.

I may as well stay until my clothing is dry. “Zip up jacket” is way too close to “hoodie”.

He plops himself gracelessly onto the sofa and I walk over to sit down with a bit more dignity. There’s a fair distance between us.

//And let us keep it that way. Better yet, let's widen it and leave. There's no purpose to staying.//

The television turns on with a click and a hum. Naruto instantly begins flipping through the channels without rhyme or rationale and turns to face me.

"So, was there a reason you came over?" He asks curiously.

There was, but it was never very solid in my mind.

//Ridiculous.//

I shrug, not entirely an answer, but I don't think it makes much difference. At least this way I don't have to worry about accidentally saying something stupid. "Why are you in such a good mood all of a sudden?"

//So much for not saying anything stupid.//

"Do I need a reason?" He grins and continues to idly flip through the television stations, all the while keeping his eyes trained on me.

I glare back, not amused.
It's just like Naruto to be bawling his eyes out one minute and grinning like a fool the next. I just don't get him.

//No one can. He is a meaningless mystery. Let us bother with him no more.//

I clench my jaw and glare over my eyebrows in the direction of the constantly flickering television set. "Why don't you find something and stick with it already?"

The clicking stops instantly, landing randomly on an inane game show where the average, everyday person tries to prove their ninja-worthiness by performing a series of useless athletic tests. I smirk. So realistic.

Naruto sets the remote carelessly behind him and squirms around in his seat, not paying attention to the program at all.

He's still looking at me.

"Watch the show, dobe," I warn. His behavior is making me uneasy, though I don't show it.

He turns to face the set, finally, but in the same move has become inexplicably closer to me. I try very hard to ignore that. I'm doing a commendable job of it – some idiot has just fallen on the very first obstacle and into a muddy pool of water and why is the water always so disgustingly dirty in these shows? – and let my mind go blank.

Then Naruto puts his hand on my leg, warm and uninvited.

I look down at the offending appendage. "What do you think you're doing?" I ask calmly.

"Uh, nothing?" He answers with a question.

"Oh, really?" I delicately remove the hand by lifting it by the index finger as if it is one of my poisonous snakes. "Then what is this?"

//Your snakes?//


"Naruto," I growl with exhaustion.

"Oh, c'mon!" He shouts irritably. He puts his face so close to mine that I can smell the milky-sourness of his breath. "I just wanted to know if we're still waiting."

I refuse to face him, the whole thing is ridiculous

"It's been a day," I remind him slowly.

"A day's a long time." His voice has gone low and rough, and I notice that somehow both his hands on either side of my body, caging me in. His breath is warm upon my face and our noses nearly bump. But I don't pull away. I can't.

This is the reason I came here after all: for a little clarification.

I'm aware of that.

//This is a very bad idea.//
'You only make it more appealing by saying so.'

//Oh really? And do you not recall how quickly his emotions change? He will tire of you and leave you eventually, just like everyone else. Have you forgotten how you must protect yourself from such things?//

Naruto keeps pushing forward, but I don't need anyone to tell me what to do or guide my decision.

//Anyone but me.//

I feel like I’m running in circles.

//There is no worry if you make the correct choice, you foolish boy.//

I am running in circles.

And then I realize that my fingers have somehow traveled up his arm and to his muscular bicep, which I can feel even under the sleeve of his obnoxious orange jacket. His blood pumps strangely beneath my fingertips. He tilts his head and I breathe him in, the remnants of his breakfast, the tang of his sweat and winding though that, the scent of laundry detergent. Aside from my hand, near as we are, there is no other contact.

"Well?" He asks, replacing his hand on my leg. "Are we waiting?"

'Yes!' I want to scream because I haven't settled everything properly in my head just yet, but instead I close my eyes as he rubs his thumb on the inside of my thigh, and I am pushed voluntarily back onto the couch cushions.

I open my eyes again and Naruto is gazing down at me, all of a sudden unsure.

//Precisely what I have been telling you. This is a whim for him and nothing more.//

'You don't know that.'

//I've been around a long time, my pet, and I know human nature far better than you do.//

The announcer on the television is far too excited, chanting a contestant's name like a cheer.

The answer to Naruto's question is not a simple "yes" or "no"; it can't be.

Naruto blinks his eyes many times and smiles shakily. My mouth has fallen open as if I am underwater, and for some reason I can't get my lips to form the basic word "stop". His wrist is gripped tightly in my one hand while my other falls away when he moves his own free hand up my torso. Even through the thick layer of fabric, his touch is like fire burning to my bones.

This is all wrong. We're jumping too fast without any adjustment for the landing.

Since when did Naruto, of all people, of all the idiots in the world, begin to have such an affect on me?

//Since forever. You are a sieve, all the information I give you seems to flow right out again in an instant. So let me repeat: the boy makes you weak.//

What happened to my common sense?

//You lost it long ago, my dear. Perhaps it is time to regain it.//
Naruto sits himself up to straddle me and I can see his face clearly in the afternoon light. His hand is trembling as he slowly guides it over my shoulder and to the top of the metal zipper at my throat. He wavers there for a moment, examines my face, smiles, and then takes hold of the pull.

Then he yelps because my jagged nails are cutting straight into the tender flesh of his wrist. "What was that for?" He snipes.

I flick my eyes to the side, to the seemingly great wide open that surrounds us. Iruka could walk in at any moment.

But that's not what makes my nerves hit a fever pitch.

I'm not ready, I'd like to say because I'm really not. But that's such a lame, girlish response, and before I can think of a better answer, Naruto just plunges ahead without thought to the aforementioned "waiting".

The chinking sound of the zipper is soft compared to everything else, yet I can hear the unlocking of each key as if there is nothing else to be heard.

It is so laborious that I'm thinking Naruto might back out of whatever foolhardy action he's decided to take. And since I've apparently been struck dumb, I'm hoping common sense will get the better of him.

//Lost cause.//

But it doesn't and the last clink of the zipper is final and almost ominous.

The air in the room is chilled and drifts like frost over my skin. Or maybe it's Naruto, whose touch sears me, making everything else cold in comparison, as he slides it up the center of my chest, pushing the sides of the jacket away. My eyes dart aimlessly and erratically around the room, unable to meet his.

I feel inordinately stupid and nervous, lying on Iruka's couch with no shirt on and Naruto leering over me.

And horribly exposed.

But I can't seem to get control of the situation.

I clack my teeth together and swallow back the large amount of saliva I seem to have produced over the last few minutes.

"What do you think you're doing?" I planned to sound angry, but I can't catch my breath, so I sound eager instead.

"You were like this a minute ago, what's the difference?" He retorts grumpily.

I want to inform him that there's a world of difference, but again that sounds very weak.

I'm on that damned fence still, not knowing which way to fall.

Why isn't he stopping? Why isn't he listening to me? But then I haven't really said anything, but he should know that this is moving too fast. About a hundred kilometers too fast.

What the hell happened to waiting?
I haven't had time to reconcile anything.

He's being too gentle.

He's not being gentle enough.

He needs to stop touching me.

Why isn't he using both hands?

I have no idea what to do.

I can more than handle myself in a fight. Or a mission or school.

But when it comes to situations like this, I am so completely at a loss that I come out looking like even more of an idiot than Naruto. And that's saying something.

But he seems to know just what he's doing and I'm floundering like an idiot.

I really wish Iruka would walk in right now. As embarrassing as that would be, at least then I'd be saved.

How pathetic.

Saved.

//Pathetic, indeed. Do you see what he makes you? Indecisive, weak, overly emotional. He takes away what is worthy about you and will only betray you in the end. What futility this is!//

Naruto slowly brushes his rough fingers over the many scars that decorate my chest as if cataloging, counting, and memorizing each one. He has tended to most of them; he should know them better than I do. Most I got when I was with him, battling the Akatsuki and the time after, when there was no opportunity to heal them properly. The others I received in Konoha, where they want me to bear my scars as a reminder of what they can do and what they can refuse. They are ugly flaws marring my skin and I both hate and need them.

Naruto maps out every one as if it is something special.

"I wish I had been there," he whispers. His face abruptly pulls taut and his eyes flash red. His index finger circles and circles and circles a wound near my left shoulder.

Well, if this is all this nonsense is about, then fine. I can deal. I just need to tell my overactive nerves that.

The air in the room is growing warm, much too hot, though really it's me and I wonder irrelevantly whether I'm flushed pink.

He pays special attention to my Itachi scar that runs from the crook of my neck to just below my ribcage.

"This one is my fault, isn't it?" The tip of his rough nail glides down the center of the healed cut. I can't even describe the feeling it sends coursing through my blood.

"I'm sorry," he says, then leans over and just *breathes* along the old scar.

I am about ready to bolt out of the room before I'm forced to hit Naruto again, giving him a nice
pair of matching black eyes. But I restrain myself.

My heart is thrashing within its cage and I'm beginning to get that tingling, squirming sensation deep down in my belly.

I pull on Naruto's hair so that he will look at my face rather than my stomach. His fingers sit delicately upon my skin and our eyes lock like the last tumbler falling into place. I feel like my vision had gone blurry and sharp and it no longer makes any difference what is before me.

//If that is the case, then fathering should present little difficulty.//

I'm not some passive girl and I don't like Naruto forging ahead as if I don't have a mind or will of my own.

But at the same time, I don't like having him so close and have it not be enough.

With my grip on the back of his neck, I tug him down hard, smashing our lips together in a silent statement of my authority.

He smiles around my mouth, which spills over with the taste of him.

So I guess the answer to the question "do I want to kiss him again" is yes, very much so.

He responds eagerly with a soft mewling noise that ripples down my throat.

His hands move, trembling, over my chest and to the waistband of my pants. We separate with a sudden pop and he continues to stare down at me, his chest heaving with visible effort.

He smiles impishly.

I snarl.

His smile then turns very nervous smile as two of his fingers skim tentatively across the sensitive skin between my bellybutton and the waistband of my pants. It almost tickles, but it is so much more than that and I jerk like some spastic idiot.

It is painful how much I want him to touch me, and terrifying how much I don't.

//But will he want you, my pet, when he discovers how truly damaged you are? How cursed?//

I swallow. I'm actually not prepared for this. How humiliating.

Naruto ducks his head and follows the movement of his hand as he traces the top of my waistband. His throat bobs nervously.

Now that I kissed him, apparently he thinks he can just do whatever he wants. He'll think I sanctioned this when I certainly did not.

Stupid hormones.

The announcer on T.V. is overly distressed over a loud splash of water as another aspiring ninja fails in their quest.

Naruto moves his other hand, still attached to mine, and his two meet above the button of my pants.

This cannot be going there.
Not to sound childish, but this is way too soon. In truth, I haven’t really made my decision yet.

But then, I think, it is no big deal. We have the same equipment and we've seen each other before. In an entirely different context, true, but still . . .

Naruto's hands are shaking so bad that he can barely make them touch the fabric of my pants. My abdominal muscles quiver anxiously beneath him. Then he glances up again and I can read his face as easily as if it were subtitled.

And that is it.

//And so the truth at last.//

Although I am saved from freaking out or freaking him out, I don't feel in any way relieved.

With no real effort, I push Naruto off and scoot to the other side of the couch, sitting up. It is actually amazingly easy to say "no" now.

It hurts, though.

//Stop that, it is unbecoming for a ninja.//

I didn't think that it would. Being rejected. It never really crossed my mind.

But the smile Naruto gave me was not a smile of anticipation or excitement, or even the nervousness of "I don't know quite what I'm doing". It was twisted and sour as if the very idea of taking things further made him physically ill.

//It probably did. This is nothing more than a game to him, a test to see how far he can take it. To make you look a fool. And now we know and it is all for the best.//

Perhaps it is just as well that I see it now.

He's forcing himself to do something he really doesn't want to do.

Naruto blinks, quickly tucking his hands on his bent knees. "What?" He asks, but the relief is evident both in his voice and in the way he releases a heavy breath of air.

Casually, I zip up the jacket.

//Do not fret, dear Sasuke-kun. Remember, there are other, more worthy ones to whom you can turn.//

"Wait, what's going on?" And now he sounds truly confused.

I sigh.

When I look at him, my face is neither red nor hot; I am too hurt to be humiliated. "Just forget it.”

"Forget what?"

"Everything." I pull my legs out from under him and stand up. I guess I have all my answers now.

It was a productive visit after all.

//Productive, yes, yes. And this time around, remember how he truly is.//
"Wait! Where are you going?" Naruto scrambles to his feet as I head for the door.

"Home."

Wherever that is.

//Ah, my pet, my pet. Things will be better.//

"No, no, stop." He anxiously tries to block my exit, but it's in vain. "Look, I'm sorry. I know you told me to wait and I should have listened. I really meant to, I mean I wanted to give you time, I guess. But then you came here and this is really hard for me. . ."

"It's fine," I answer tiredly, not even bothering to put up an offended front. "Stop trying to force yourself."

He crinkles his forehead worriedly. "Force myself?"

"You don't owe me anything," I shove him unceremoniously out of the way. "Don't try so hard."

"Wha . . ?" He looks honestly puzzled, screws up his face and finally understanding dawns. "Oh, no. Wait a second." Every part of his body is in motion as if he is unsure what to do with them. "Look, you don't understand." He wobbles a little. His eyes dart nervously around the room as he bites the inside of his lip. "See, I'm not really gay."

"Hn."

And there is nothing more to be said as I walk out the door, leaving Naruto spluttering like a moron in the apartment entryway.

I'm already in the street by the time Naruto dashes outside. "Let me explain! You don't understand!"

What's to explain?

I'd say that statement's pretty damn unambiguous.

//Indeed. But there are others with whom you fit better. This was just a wrong turn you took, my pet. And now that you have finally realized that, you can move forward.//

I keep on walking.

"What—what about your shirt?" Naruto's voice is high-pitched desperation as he tries to drum up a reason for me to stay.

"I'll get it later," I reply with no intention of doing so.

//Good, my dear, good. Things will all work out perfectly, you will see . . .//

Naruto continues to shout hysterically, but there is no reason to heed any of it. Then I hear the slap of his quick sandaled feet on the dirt and without looking back, I begin to run too.

Naruto is fast, but so am I and I'm expert at losing someone if I want to.

//Things will work out . . .//

And as silly as this action may appear, at this point running is the only possible way to hold onto
the last threads of my unraveling pride.

//You'll see, my pet. You'll see . . .//

It is the only thing I have left.

I storm through the village like a man on a mission, though unfortunately my only mission is the mundane task of getting the hell away from Naruto.

//An admirable one.//

'Get lost.'

//It is not my fault that things turned out the way they did. It is yours for ignoring my very sage advice.//

I pivot, balanced on the back of my heel and walk backwards a small distance, but Naruto's identifiable blonde hair is nowhere to be seen.

I feel like an utter fool.

A fool for running through town like a big scaredy-cat. A fool for letting things get so far out of hand.

A fool for blinding myself to the fact that Naruto does not, in actuality, want me.

//A fool now made wise can move forward.//

Isn't this just the story of my life. Circling and circling and always back to the same damn point. I should've known.

As soon as I finally get a taste of my father's approval, he dies.

The instant I finally achieve my long sought after revenge, Itachi flips the world on its head.

And of course, on the same day I realize the mortifying fact that I may actually want Naruto, I'm rejected.

It should be routine by now.

It shouldn't even hurt.

//Soon, there will be no pain, no worry.//

'Stop it.'

I drive my nails tight against my thigh.

But it does. It hurts so much that I feel paralyzed by it.

Each nasty glare and muttered insult hurled my way by random Konoha denizens makes the pain plunge deeper, as if they all know of my rejection and are anxious to finish the job.

//Yes, Sasuke, yes. That is how they are.//

By now, the ache and embarrassment has penetrated too deep into me, leaving nothing but a horrible, complacent numbness.
"Sasuke!" The soprano voice is extremely exasperated as a firm grip on my arm halts me in my tracks.

I am not in the mood.

I still carry that numbness within me, only now it's warped into a throbbing sort of numbness, which doesn't make much sense but I don't know how else to describe it.

"I've been calling you for blocks!" Sakura notifies me acidly. "Didn't you hear me?"

Honestly, no. But I think it's best I don't mention that.

Sakura slams her hands to her hips in that matronly way I've come to think of as the "Sakura disapproves" pose. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath as if preparing for a bout at the chuunin exam. Then she tilts her head to the side and smiles deviously. "Why don't you help me?"

I'm about to snap back "no", but before I do, she tosses a stack of boxes toward me and I catch them on instinct. She picks up the remainder herself, smiles brightly, more genuinely this time, and marches off.

Call me crazy, but with her superhuman strength and the fact that she still retains the boxes after claiming to "chase me for blocks", I don't think my help is really required.

But then she turns back around and commands me to "Come on". I can see the vein of anger pulsing in her temple and I've learned that nowadays, the wisest course of action is not to piss her off. Grudgingly, I follow.

//And she will not make a fool of you like the fox-boy did. Perhaps you should give her more of your attention.//

'Just go away, would you?'

We take our trek in silence and I notice vaguely that we are tracing our way to the hospital, Sakura’s home away from home.

With a disinterested roll of my shoulder, I follow her into the lobby and through one of the many mysterious closed doors and I'm not quite sure when exactly it was that I received clearance into the medical supply rooms, but here I am. Without acknowledging me, Sakura rips open the topmost of her leaning tower of boxes and starts rifling through it. She examines each item and sorts them under a system that makes it plain why medic-nins must study so extensively.

//So she is an intelligent, dedicated girl. Worthy traits.//

'I know what you're trying to do.'

//Only help, my pet, only help.//

"Hand me that one," Sakura orders with a twitch of her head. I scowl and she raises her eyebrow expectantly. Snorting, I relinquish the highest box into her care.

The rustle of plastic and paper permeates the room as Sakura tears into each package with reckless abandon as if it is her birthday morning.

"Here," she says abruptly and, not lifting her head, waves a bunch of hermetically sealed needles in
my face. "Put those up in the blue bin, will you?"

The little plastic tubes wave insistently in front of me. The crinkling sound they make is tremendously annoying, so I snatch them from her hand with an aggavated huff and she doesn't even try to hide her smile.

There are about ten blue bins of various shape and shade, but only one is nearly empty with what appears to be syringes so I dump my cache in that one. If it's wrong, Sakura should've known better than to force my assistance. I cross my arms, lean against a bare wall, and refuse to do any more of Sakura's allotted work. She glowers at me from under he long lashes and I glare defiantly back. She shakes her head and returns to her task.

//She is understanding, yes? Strong, smart, attractive, more stable than the fox-boy, and really a rather perfect match for you, wouldn't you say?//

'I don't think you know her all that well.'

//Or maybe it's you who is biased.//

It doesn't take too long for Sakura to finish, after which she pulls out an apple from who knows where, seats herself on the table amidst the cast-off packaging and regards me a crunch of her teeth into fruit.

I keep my eyes cold and disapproving as I watch her.

She gives me a smirk and I could almost be proud of it if it weren't directed at me. Annoyed that she dare try to mimic an expression of mine, I push off the wall and head to the door again, not bothering with goodbyes.

//Do not be so stubborn, my dear.//

"Sasuke," she shouts and when I turn, an apple flies toward my head. I catch it neatly.

"So," she says, the crisp crunch of her bite into fruit echoing oddly. "What is it?" She stares as if trying to use the intense greenness of her eyes to shuffle through my experience. "What's got you into such a state?"

"A state?" I repeat with bored disinterest.

The girl grumbles and then leans forward a little, searching through one of her leg pouches. She removes a small compact and tosses it to me.

I observe her skeptically.

But she just flourishes her hand irritably in my direction. "Well? Go ahead."

Resigned, I pop it open, feeling an even greater fool than I have thus far, and take a peek at my reflection. I look tired and red and unkempt, but I hardly call that a “state”. Those damning golden snake eyes, the scarred one slightly smaller than the other, gaze back at me and mock.

Sometimes I forget I have them.

//Ku-ku-ku.//

I throw the mirror back and comb my hand through my hair in a futile attempt to tidy it.
"Are you going to tell me or not?" Sakura asks impatiently. "I'm going to find out somehow anyway. You may as well save us some time." She scrutinizes me for a curious moment. "Is this about the rumor?"

"What rumor?"


I doubt I even want to know. "It's not about a rumor."

The half eaten apple sits strangely on her palm as she stares at me. I stare blandly back at her.

Deftly, she takes another bite of apple and wipes away the dribbling juice with an unladylike swipe of her palm. Disgustedly, I turn away.

"Not gonna eat that?" She asks, brandishing her partial apple at my whole one.

I don't answer.

"Hmmm." The only sounds in the room for a while is Sakura's slurp-crunching.

//Cease with your undue criticism. She is certainly neater than the boy. Besides, there is nothing wrong with a healthy appetite. It gives her the proper shape for childbearing.//

'I don't want to hear this.'

//You never did like hearing the truth.//

With a grace she hadn't yet displayed today, Sakura disposes of the core into a nearby wastebasket with a nimble flick of her wrist. Then she inclines her head and her pink hair shines almost white in the fluorescent light.

"I'll take a guess," she says breathlessly, "that this has something to do with Naruto."

My head tips slightly. "Why would you say that?"

She shrugs. "Because it always does."

I glare, but she gives me a challenging lift of her chin and with a snort I turn away.

Always, always, everyone.

//Perhaps you should consider the fact that the guilt for that lies with you.//

She hums under her breath and then releases a sigh. "What did the idiot do now?" She pauses momentarily to allow a bit of teasing creep into her voice. "Or was it you?"

I don't have to dignify that with a response. It's none of her business, despite what she seems to think.

Of course, though, it was him.

"Must have been you, then," the kunoichi confirms matter-of-factly with a decisive nod of her head.

My anger wells up in indignation and I grip the apple hard, letting the sticky juice from the punctures caused by my nails to trickle over my fingers. Of course it could never be Naruto, the
good and innocent golden boy.

//No, no. Do not allow useless anger get the better of you, not now. She is only trying to help.//

I’m the scourge, unwanted in the peaceful Eden of Konohagakure.

//Hmm.//

I sneak a sidelong glance at Sakura and she raises her eyebrows, grinning encouragingly.

//Do you see? She is only being kind. And not pushing, like some others I could name.//

That enough is true.

I let out a long breath of air and look at her, mulling over my predicament.

"How did you see your future?" I inquire quietly.

Sakura is caught slightly off guard by my question, but quickly recovers. "What do you mean?"

Uncomfortably, I push myself into the small corner between door and wall and look her over carefully.

//She is reasonable, is she not, my pet? Now go on. Go on.//

"I mean," I start, searching for the right phrasing, "did you think you would be married, have kids, things like that?"

I’m well aware that I sound like an idiot.

Sakura widens her eyes in surprise, but she soon regains her composure, leans back on her hands and crosses her legs. She scrunches up her face and looks up and to the side as if trying to remember something.

"I guess if I think about it, I've always pictured myself with children. Husband, home, the whole deal," she finally tells me. Then she angles her head almost coquettishly. "It used to be with you."

I shift uneasily. "And now?"

"Now," she shrugs, "it's not."

She gives me a weak little smile, tries to hold my gaze, but loses the battle and looks away as if her failure to do so shames her.

//Do you not see? Something of what she once felt still remains. How much better a match she is for you!//

'Stop being absurd.'

The room goes deathly silent.

Cautiously, quietly, I go to where Sakura sits and haul myself onto the table beside her.

//Make the offer. She would not be so cruel as to reject you outright. And now even you can't say you have anything to lose. But everything to gain.//

"What if it could be?" My voice is unrecognizable, I'm not sure if it's me who's spoken.
Sakura whips her head around to face me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

She gives me a tight, disbelieving purse to her lips, her eyes narrowed so much that the green takes up almost the entirety of them.

For a few seconds, she appears to be weighing the truth. Then she smiles ruefully and shakes her head, looking away. "Don't joke around." She says. "Everyone knows you want to be with Naruto."

And that statement irritates me to the very core, igniting further the flame that makes us Uchiha what we are.

//Gah! You have dug your own grave with your imprudent and misplaced obsessions! You must fix this; make her believe.//

"I keep hearing that!" The spitefulness of my voice breaks the spell of the hospital, threatening to shatter needles I have only just put away.

//Ah, much better.//

I'm sick of it. With everyone constantly saying that, pushing me in that direction so how could I know the decision I make is mine?

Sakura turns to me and looks honestly shocked, the most by far in the series of shocks she's shown since she stumbled upon me.

But how can I care, when truth or not, everyone, and clearly everyone, is trying to make the decision for me.

//Of course they do, such is how Konoha functions.//

"The whole village," minus the elder perhaps, though I don't mention them, "has decided that I am simply supposed to be with Naruto. Why? Because he claims that's what he wants? No one has bothered to ask me!" I slam my left hand violently into the cold metal of the table and it doesn't even hurt.

And now Sakura gapes, her bottom lip quivering, her mouth opening and closing as she tries to capture words from the air. Her eyes are now so wide that they are completely surrounded by the whites.

I simply look back, letting the harsh heaviness of my breathing speak for me.

After a minute or so, Sakura closes her mouth and swallows audibly before lowering her gaze and shaking her head.

//She is trying too hard. There is still hope yet.//

"That can't be," she whispers.

"And why not?" I try to keep my voice level.

"Because you can't," she insists.

"No one has bothered to ask me," I reassert.
She raises her head with her face as set and determined as her next words. "Everything, if not about your brother, was about Naruto. The rest of us were invisible to you."

//That is indeed the impression you gave. You must always make things a challenge. Let us work hard to repair the damage before it is too late.//

I pull my mouth to a straight line and stare. I don’t argue because I know that it’s essentially true. "It has to be," Sakura says, more to herself. "Or else, why did I . . ."

But she doesn’t finish and as I have nothing left in me to say, I slip off the table and make my way to the door and to escape.

//What a troublesome boy you are. I thought this is what you decided. Show a little fortitude. If you choose otherwise, you are a fool.//

At the last moment, I turn back and place the uneaten, but flawed red apple on the table beside her like the tempting reminder of forbidden fruit.

I feel Orochimaru's smile like a slice like a knife through my soul.
There is a whiff of moisture in the air, a coolness of breeze and then the water shadow appears and attacks me. It’s a diversion but that doesn't render it harmless.

I dispatch the first shadow quickly, but it is a hydra and two more instantly appear to take its place. As I get rid of those as well, I scan the area as swiftly as possible in search of their creator.

Kakashi is nowhere to be seen.

My sharingan has been pushed to the edge of its normal limits and is now at the point of strain where my vision wobbles and blurs. It works better than this, sees faster, clears further; I know it does. I have used it beyond its supposed limitations before, at least once. But now it’s resisting me at every juncture, making me struggle again to reclaim what I’ve already obtained and this time worse than before.

It’s like relearning how to walk. I know I can do it; I just need to find the strength and remember how.

My sight is hazy, yet it should still be enough to shatter an illusion if there is one. Nothing changes. It's possible Kakashi has gone underground, I might not be able to detect him there, but I doubt it.

More likely, he's used the opportunity the water shadows provided to conceal himself in the trees.

The false Kakashis are more annoying than the original, so I hastily form the seals of a katon goukakyuu no jutsu and evaporate them into the air. The atmosphere is now saturated with the dissipated jutsu, making my limbs heavy as I rotate in a circle to perform another inspection.

My eyes shift wildly, the strange, fish-eye quality, giving everything an even stranger appearance.

I stop suddenly halfway around.

I wonder if that's it.

The sharingan probably doesn't like the snake-eye aspect that Orochimaru forces into my eyes any more than I do. No other Uchiha in history, at least to my knowledge, has had one set of eyes with two distinct and opposing attributes. But there has to be a way to enable them to work together.
There must be a thread in common between them.

With ingrained dexterity, I evade the kunai aimed at my back within a hair's breadth. Kakashi twists his body, brings his leg around one side and his arm the other in a surprisingly serpentine manner, like some sort of slippery eel. Perhaps that is why my parasite dislikes him so much.

//Do not decide my mind for me.//

"Sloppy, Sasuke, sloppy," Kakashi admonishes with the weapon held firmly at my throat.

But I'm too busy trying to formulate a plan.

Kakashi sighs midway to a grumble and releases me. In the back of my ears I hear the sound of a kunai sliding expertly back into place.

"You've got to do something about your concentration issues," he complains. "I know you're trying not to act rashly, but there is such a thing as over-thinking."

If he only knew.

//Ku-ku-ku.//

Now, back to important things. The sharingan opens up the eyesight further, collecting more information than the eye usually would and at a faster rate. It sees things a normal eye can't like an opponent's likely trajectory or the edges of an illusion. On the other hand, Orochimaru's snake-eye is not very special.

//I do not appreciate that.//

It only sees what's there, just in a different way. It takes in a wider range of vision, but the outer rim is distorted and out of focus. Only the circle at the center is perfectly clear. Maybe that's what's upsetting the sharingan.

It doesn't make a lot of sense, but then neither does having reptile eyes nor having an annoying, hissing snake muddling around in my head.

//I do not muddle.//

Then a snake slithering, whatever; it's not like the phrasing matters.

"Are you listening to me?" Kakashi interrupts from another planet.

This gives me two options. One: I completely push Orochimaru out, lock him up and throw away the key. If I do that, any influence he has on my eyes should, in theory, disappear. My normal black eyes would return, thus allowing the sharingan to function properly.

//Yes, my pet. Good luck with that. There is no way you are getting rid of me. You need me.//

"This is what I'm talking about!" Old one-eye shouts in exasperation. "I could easily kill you right now and you wouldn't be able to defend. You probably wouldn't even see it coming."

Unfortunately, as appealing as option one is, I've already tried it without success.

The other option is to devise a way for the two elements work in concert. I suppose if that useless, ever-present fish eye is only truly focused at the center, maybe if I concentrate the sharingan solely on that area . . .
//That might work.//

'It might.'

//Might even be an improvement.//

'Don't flatter yourself.'

Still though, it's worth a shot.

"Sasuke!"

Slowly, I direct my attention to Kakashi, keeping my stance rigid. I let my lip curl into a snarl.

"I want to try again."

My teacher studies me for a while, then forms his trademark little grin beneath the mask. "All right." Then his face goes grave. "But I won't hold back."

My mouth draws up sharper.

Of course.

I settle my senses and concentrate. Focusing all my vision on the two center spots, I block out all else like I am looking through binoculars. It is a weird sensation, but I have no choice but to work with it.

//Indeed, my pet.//

'Just get lost.'

//I cannot do that. I am intrigued to see what happens as well.//

Kakashi vanishes amidst a rustle of leaves and a swirl of wind.

There isn't much time. It's hard to guess what technique he'll use; there are too many he likes.

I remain in the center of the trees, blatantly exposed and remaining perfectly still. This is best for my experiment. I close my eyes.

And I begin to hear, absurdly but unmistakably, the sound of birds.

I guess he really isn't holding back.

No matter. If this works I may discover something immensely profitable. If it doesn't, well, it won't make much difference.

With my eyes still shut, I activate the sharingan and meticulously feel my way around it. I've never attempted this before: to sense the chakra affecting my eyes without using my sight, and now is a bit of a dodgy time to experiment, but I'd rather just put everything on the line in one dramatic sweep.

The sound outside is reaching the piercing, squealing pitch that I recognize well and I know only a scant few seconds remain for me to figure this out.

I feel the chakra hovering like liquid over my eyeball, powerful and whirling fast like a hurricane,
which means it too has a sort of eye, a calm center amid the chaos. I begin to push the vibrating outer edge to the center as quickly and efficiently as I can, concentrating all its power on that central space.

Then I detect that final sort of pop of Kakashi’s chakra when the last of it to be collected now sits in the palm of his hand.

My new sharingan is still half-formed, but there's no time for second guesses.

This is it.

Sink or swim.

I open my eyes and am almost floored by the oppressive swell of chakra and power that pierces the surface of my cornea. It burns like the fire within me only hotter, white and searing like the sun.

The outer edge of my vision is blurred and distorted like always, but it has also gone dark. It is like looking through a tunnel, or rather two tunnels that meet somewhere down the line.

But the center . . . the center is clearer than it has ever been before, perfect clear, future clear, so much so that it hurts. It wobbles still, as if there is too much there to be contained and at any moment the precious hold will burst, shattering my vision into a thousand pieces. It has not yet established proper stability, but I can see everything.

Everything.

The sound of chirping grows louder and I turn towards it, almost casually.

Kakashi is barreling at me, the light of his hand eclipsed by the glow of my clarity.

He is phenomenally fast.

Yet I can see him coming. Not much more than that. But it is something.

It is potential.

That sparking, chirping, lethal fist aims straight for me.

But I can see it.

I manage one step back.

In an instant, the chidori disappears into the pale blue sky as if it were nothing more than a trick of the light. Kakashi dispelled his jutsu a split second before contact to avoid harming me.

In that instant I realize that Kakashi's chakra control is far more impressive – and formidable – than I had ever imagined.

He would have hit me, there is no doubt about that, and for good measure he let the ridge of his knuckles tap against my ribs. Nonetheless, he had to reach a little bit further. Not much, a few centimeters is all, but when considering that the chidori is designed as an unavoidable attack, the significance of this cannot be overstated.

Kakashi gapes at me, honestly surprised.

He intended to hit me, to come close to ending my life in order to reinforce the lesson of "paying
attention”, but perhaps he is the one who has learned something.

He wasn’t expecting that at all.

//Neither were you.//

'Maybe, but I knew something would happen.'

//And a delightful surprise it is, my pet.//

And I must say, the look of utter astonishment on Kakashi’s face was well worth the risk.

-----

My nights seem lonelier than they once did, though if anything is different it is that there are more people intruding in my life, not less.

There is a hissing in my ear when I sleep, full of words I can't quite make out.

And when I wake, my mind is filled with black hands and white, of people once familiar to me but never friends.

Of an itching in my mind that something is not right, but when I fully wake and go about my mundane day, all thought if it vanishes.

And by the time I go back to sleep, I can no longer call to mind what it is that bothered me.

-----

I spend the next few days in solitude, only allowing for such forced fraternization as training.

//Are you still sulking? You were rejected, toyed with. Accept it. Good that you know now and can seek a worthier companion.//

‘You are so annoying.’

//As are you.//

It’s all just as well, I suppose. As I suspected, Naruto took the decision right out of my hands. I just didn’t know it would hurt so much.

That it would hurt still.

I thought all my pain had already been used up on my family.

//There is always more to be had. You should know this by now.//

And it’s all Naruto’s fault. He gave me every indication that he wanted it, that he wanted me. I had no idea what I felt until he pushed me to examine it. Up until now, I had relegated any such inclinations deep into the cells of my subconscious where they wouldn’t bother me.

I was perfectly happy with the arrangement.

//Happy?//

Well, accepting. And I would have remained so, fine with denying myself, until the end of my days. I wouldn't have had to consider what I could miss.
How I hate him.

"I'm not gay."

And how does that make any sense whatsoever? If it was so simple to decide what you are, then I wouldn’t have had a problem to begin with.

// Why do you insist on dredging up the distant, fruitless past? //

'It was two days ago.'

// Distant enough. It is time to move on to better things. Like your relationship with the girl. //

'Sakura?'

// With the pink hair, yes. //

'Why? It's a lost cause, anyhow.'

// I would not be so sure. And would it not be worth it? //

'I don’t really want to use her that way.' It’s a strange thing to admit. ‘She's one of the few people who actually stood by me.’

// Precisely. Her loyalty to you is exactly what makes her perfectly suited. Do you want to live or do you want to die? //

'I want to be true to myself.'

// Tch! What nonsense. One ridiculous little misstep and you're ready to sacrifice everything, and for what? This is nothing more than your perpetual cowardice rearing its ugly head yet again. What do you care what an insignificant, infantile boy does? What do you care for the peace of mind of Konoha? They only hate you for circumstances beyond your control from ages ago. They have no reason to want to be rid of you now besides their own meager insecurities. //

'Oh yes, and you wouldn't be enough of a reason?'

// They are unaware of my existence. //

'I meant my defection.'

Idiot.

// I can hear you, dear Sasuke. Even when you do not speak to me. //

'And?'

// Without my helping hand, you are doomed. //

'And so are you. Don't think I don't know you always act out of self-interest. With my compliance or not, you'll do what you deem necessary to ensure your survival. You always have.'

// And what is so wrong about that? Self-preservation is only natural. Besides, you act as if the idea of the girl is a fate worse than death. I assure you, it is not. I know. //

'You should, but unfortunately you're not technically dead.'
And then the parasite goes silent. I don't know whether he's plotting further or simply run out of things to say. The former, I'd guess, since I'm not sure the latter is possible.

I swallow thickly and search my mind for that omnipresent leech, but he has chosen to ignore me.

Rather unfair how easily he can do that too, when I cannot.

At any rate, moping over this like some lovesick teenager – the moniker doesn’t suit me – is a total waste of time.

//Hmph.//

I have another concern anyway, not the least of which is my new team leader.

Anko is clearly still wary of me, analyzing my every move from the corner of her skinny eyes, just waiting for me to trip up. I steer as far away from her as humanly possible, whenever possible. I'm not sure what she suspects, but whatever it is, I have no intention of handing over any ammunition.

Most often I hole up in the empty apartment to spend as much of my time alone as I am able. The few unfortunate times that I've crossed paths with Kakashi, I quickly cut him off before he can delve into uncomfortable subjects. I ‘m seriously researching the condition of temporary insanity because I'm sure that’s what I was suffering from when I confided in him.

It has made things oddly strained between us, which is fine, but it has also made it difficult to live under the same roof, which is not.

I neither want to face Naruto after my humiliation, nor know how to handle Sakura after my ill-timed and false offer.

My preference is avoidance as I wait for time to pass by.

//What a simple, insolent child you are.//

My flesh and blood roommate is absent right now and when I hear the knock on the door, I am sorely tempted to ignore it.

The knocking grows insistent, downright annoying and I know it must be Naruto and there's no way I'm answering it now. Suddenly, I hear Sakura's voice.

//Answer that. This is no time for hesitation.//

'And now you're interested?'

//Aren't you?//

Not really.

//You must let her in, she has only ever been faithful to your well-being, even when the boy would hurt you. You need her to preserve your life.//

'Don't be ridiculous.'

But I get up anyway and when I go to open the door, the pounding on it is so fervent that it makes my hand shake. I'm surprised she doesn't simply break it down.

As I am about to open it, my parasite pulls an about face and rears back.
//On second thought, don't open it.//

'Why?'

//You won't want to see what's there. Not any more than I do.//

Orochimaru saying that is a surefire way to get me to do the opposite. So I do. Sakura is smiling nervously or sickly, they look strangely the same, but it's the person in front of her that immediately draws my attention.

Naruto.

Then I was right. But I feel like I am part of one big, all-encompassing prank and regret letting useless inquisitiveness get the better of me. I shoot a nasty glance to Sakura, swiftly followed by a questioning one. She rolls her eyes away, incapable of looking directly at me, and shakes her head. For no good reason, I take that to mean that she hasn't recounted our conversation to Naruto.

"Hey!" Naruto yells way too brightly with that dopey smile on his face. His eyes have apparently not gotten the message, as they are dim and shadowed around the edges. "Look who I ran into!"

He makes it sound as if meeting up with Sakura is a once a year event worth celebrating. To my satisfaction, Sakura gives the back of Naruto's head a look of incredulous disgust. At long last, she faces me.

"Hello, Sasuke."

I return her look for a long moment and then focus back on Naruto. "What do you want?"

He laughs without mirth, his hands fidgety and twitchy as if this is his first day with them and he's taking a test drive.

"So," he says. "I was thinking." He pauses, probably expecting my usual interrupting jibe about his "thinking abilities", but when I stay silent he hesitates, apparently at a loss. By the time he continues, his confidence has waned. "It's been a long time since the three of us have done anything together, so I thought . . . you're not busy, are you?"

I snarl quietly and stare hard at him, not “yes” but not exactly “no” either.

I can pretend nothing happened just as well as he can.

He smiles again, close to an apology and I hate when he does that; it makes it harder to stay mad at him.

//Do not lose your direction now. Remember how he hurt you and used you. He deserves no forgiveness.//

"Well, we haven't had a good, old-fashioned training session, you know, the three of us like we used to. Remember how fun that used to be?" He volleys his head rapidly from one of us to the other.

Sakura looks at him as if he has just sprouted antennae from his head and announced that he is here from the planet Mars and can we take him to our leader, please? "Fun?" She snaps incredulously.

"No," I reply, nixing the idea neatly. Fighting with Naruto would involve touching Naruto and I don't want to be that near him, even if it's to injure.
'Shut up.'

"Then I guess we could get some ramen," he suggests, putting his hand to his chin, the deep thought causing his neck to bend under the pressure. "We used to do that sometimes, too."

Sakura cuffs him so hard on the back of the head that his eyes almost fly clear out of their sockets to smash against the door. "Ramen? Is that the only thing you can think of?"

Naruto begins his usual protest, proclaiming the many and varied virtues of ramen, but I can hardly be made to care. Ramen, training, whatever, I can't believe he thinks we can just go back to what we were as if nothing has changed. I am about to tell them both to get lost when Sakura slams her foot down, literally. I hear the crack in the floor.

"I am not going to eat ramen again!" She shrieks and I'm sure people are craning out their windows to determine what all the fuss is about. "Can't you think with anything besides your stomach?"

"Then you come up with something if it's so easy!" Naruto crosses his arms over his chest defiantly, apparently believing it impossible for her to complete such an elementary task.

They are arguing quite vehemently and exclusively with each other. I am just the parsley garnish on the plate, which is perfectly fine as it allows me the opportunity to bow out completely. I begin to back into the apartment, closing the door discreetly after me, but Naruto catches the movement and quickly stops it with his hand on the door. He leans in. I can feel the edges of his breath on my face and the dizziness it causes in me makes me scowl.

//Keep your resolve, Sasuke-kun. Now is not the time to falter. Do not forget: he has used you, just like all the others. He will lie to you, abuse you and abandon you.//

He's got a lot of nerve getting into my personal space after he was so clearly revolted by it the other day. My face glows crimson with anger.

"Oh no, you don't," he declares with a dark, abnormal gleam in his eye. "You're not getting out of this that easily." But I can see his arm is strained too far. There's shortness to his breath that wasn't there before.

I keep my expression as neutral as a pane of glass, but quickly glance to Sakura, narrowing my gaze.

"Well?" Naruto asks.

The one side of my body is heated from the pressure of that stare.

//Kick him out! End this foolishness once and for all!//

Sakura has either been too distracted or angry to notice our interchange, or she's excellent at pretending either way because her features haven't shifted. Then, for no particular reason, she swiftly searches through her pockets, finally whipping out a small box as if prepared for just this moment.

"We should do this," she declares, lifting her chin.

I peek at the item.
"What's that?" Naruto takes the box into his hand, careful not to let go of the door.

Discreetly, I look sideways over his shoulder.

Not that I care.

He thumbs out the first of the cards and deftly flips it over, revealing a queen of hearts that smiles at me slyly.

Both Naruto and I look up at Sakura as she stands with her hands resting resolutely on her hips.

"A deck of cards?" Naruto asks skeptically.

Without saying so, I agree.

"And why not?" Sakura challenges. "At least it doesn't center on fighting or eating, which will be a new venue for the both of you. What," she taunts, "don't you know how to play?"

The sinister smile that gradually spreads across Naruto's lips does not fill me with confidence. Especially when he turns to me and I think of the small, enclosed space we'll be trapped in, too close together and with too many opportunities for things to go ill.

//Yes, that cannot bode well. However, it will give you a chance to get closer to the girl. If you play your cards right. Ku-ku-ku.//

'That was awful.'

Then there is a soft, warm hand on my shoulder as Sakura flashes a suspiciously innocent smile.

I can't say I much care for the glint in her eye either.

-----

"Come on," Naruto whines after inviting himself into my home. "You can't have anything against cards."

And I discover that the word "fine" has escaped my lips without asking for my permission. I say it with weary irritation, not wanting to agree but caught in one of those situations where it would be worse not to.

Not looking at him, I follow him into my apartment.

"What, don't you want to?" He then asks in the disbelieving tone of a person who cannot understand why everyone doesn't hold the same interests or desires as they do.

But it's too late to take anything back now and his attempt only exacerbates the wound.

"It's fine." The sentence feels like sandpaper ground over my tongue, filing off the ends of my teeth as it makes its way free.

All is moot anyhow. Yes or no, they would never have relinquished the fragile hold they have my time and acquiescence.

//And how disappointing. But you must at east use your time wisely to distance yourself from the
boy and move closer to the girl.//

'Just leave me alone.'

//I only have your best interests at heart, my dear.//

'Somehow I doubt that.'

"Hey!" Naruto bursts into the living room like a sudden storm, overexcited by trivial things. "That's the perfect table."

I plant myself at the farthest corner wall and sense before I see when Sakura passes me by.

Naruto is busy rearranging my furniture to meet proper card-playing feng shui guidelines. The table is light and easily moved, but I can still see the strain of the muscles in his hands and neck, can imagine their workings beneath his oversized jacket and my eyes go glassy. Not long ago, those muscles and sinew moved for me, over me, with me.

//No, no, no. You are thinking of things you shouldn't.//

In my mind's eye, I can form pieces of experience into a whole that lets me fill in the space of a future I will never have with a thousand intimate memories.

//Give it up, my pet. He has certainly made it clear how he truly feels.//

I blink and shake my head free of the thoughts as water from a colander and return to impassively monitoring the two invaders.

Sakura is overseeing Naruto and while it is the natural order of things, there is something contrived about the way she pitches her voice and the way he gripes a little too much. It's overdone, like a play they've put on many times before. This isn't the first time I've noticed the peculiar tension between them.

But then Naruto is complaining again. "I don't care if you say I can only think with my stomach, I'm hungry." His face comes into focus and I am struck by the painfully recognizable twelve-year-old pout. "There's got to be some good food here. Right, Sasuke?"

_of course, idiot_, the incline of my head states.

"No reason to be mean!"

I snort.

"All right, all right!" Sakura shouts with exasperation. "We'll get something to eat. Come with me, Sasuke."

//Ah, very good. Promising.//

'Don't be an idiot.'

Sakura beckons imperiously for me to accompany her. Eager to be out of Naruto's immediate vicinity, I follow. That and I don't like people rifling through my things without my supervision.

"Snacks!" Naruto insists. "Snacks!"

With a disgusted roll of my head, I enter the kitchen on Sakura's tail. It takes her about thirty
seconds flat to discover the contents of every cabinet, crack, cranny, and corner. As her hand clutches the handle of cabinet number seven, I place mine over hers, stopping it. I don't like it when people casually search through my stuff.

She blushes in anger, struggles with finding the proper expression to wear and yanks her hand away.

//See, see? Such an encouraging reaction.//

'What did I just tell you?'

But the feel of her hand imprints itself into my mind.

They are my mother's hands.

//And your mother was a good woman, was she not? And you wouldn't want to be a failure or disappointment to her, would you?//

"There are some chips over here," I indicate, trying to draw attention away from . . . whatever.

Sakura nods but isn't paying attention as she begins to appropriate Naruto's demanded snacks.

Soon I am standing at the kitchen counter, holding a large tub of greasy chips that I, for one, would not term "good food" while Sakura busies herself beside me.

I want nothing of this suffocating socialization.

//Time to institute the plan . . . //

Sakura patiently pours three drinks into three dissimilar glasses as if to represent our respective personalities. The one with the flower motif I assume to be hers, the faceted one to be Naruto's, and the plain, boring one distinguishable only by the crack in its side is mine.

As she performs her menial task, I study her. I've never really looked at her before so I have no way to describe her.

Now, screwing up my face as though to will the illusive words forth, I try to find them.

Her hair is short.

//How eloquent.//

Her face is round, moon-shaped, and her eyes seem unnaturally large though her mouth is small. Except of course when she's yelling, in which case it encompasses the whole of her face, threatening to spill out into the empty space around her.

She has narrow shoulders, but the rest of her is ample, forming an "s" shape from the side and a figure eight from the front. She promises to resemble her teacher when she's older.

It had never occurred to me before exactly how much that doesn't appeal to me.

//Wipe that sneer off your lip. And you have decided things before sampling them. Do not be so quick to judge.//

I'm not so sure it's "quick". Every girl I've ever met held not the least bit of interest for me beyond their worth as a fighter. At least I don't have to be annoyed anymore by their unsolicited attentions.
//Don't be an imbecile. That is precisely what you need now. Now, truly, truly consider the girl. She is attractive. Yes?//

I guess, if I really think about it, it has always been Naruto. From way back, from before such concerns ever entered my mind with any conscious thought.

//Forget him. He doesn't want you, remember? Don't pine over him like some silly girl.//

I hardly knew him before I began to feel something that couldn't be easily defined. It has taken me this long to realize it.

//You cannot excel at everything. I suppose self-awareness is not your forte, but what does it matter? You repulse him.//

'I know.'

//He looked like he was on the brink of retching.//

'I know.'

//Isn't that enough to make you change your mind?//

Resignation is a bitter pill I have come to know well. All it takes is a little water to get it down.

//Very good, my dear. Now look to the girl.//

I consider Sakura again.

//She is lovely, is she not? A big forehead, perhaps, but that is hardly a tragedy. And most importantly, she is likely the only girl in all of Konohagakure who may be willing to provide you with an heir. Well, there may be a few others floating around, but with your less than stellar social skills, we do not have the time to tarry with them.//

That would be more insulting if it weren't so patently true.

//Precisely, my pet.//

And so, I have but one option left.

Sakura.

It is ironic that now that I might want Naruto, the only way to keep him is to be with Sakura. And even then, the best I can hope for is just to be where he is. Eventually, maybe we could become friends again. That would be enough and about as much as I could expect.

//What is this sentimental drivel? You think there is a way to befriend him again? Why would you even want to? After what he did?//

'I've done worse.'

//Does that excuse it?//

'Maybe.'

//It does not. Besides, all that matters is surviving. Though I suppose that even if it is for such ridiculousness as you spout, it still comes down to surviving. So do something. The clock is
ticking.//

I look over to Sakura. Poor, ever-present, sidelined Sakura.

I don't hate her, that is true enough. One might even say I like her, as much as I like anybody.

It wouldn't be all bad, would it?

//No, no, my dear. She wouldn't hurt and betray you as others have. She would be good for you. Loyal.//

'Yes, like a dog, apparently.'

//Don't be crude.//

'Besides, you keep saying that, but why would Sakura be any different?'

There is a lengthy pause.

//Ah, I concede your point. But if you are to be abandoned regardless, you may as well pick the route that will preserve your life.//

I consider it.

"You know," the subject of our discussion says unexpectedly, raising her eyes to me, "Naruto told me what happened."

He did, did he? I show only aggravation.

"I understand that new things can be frightening," she turns to the counter. "But that's no reason to run away."

What's this story he's telling?

"That's not what happened," I inform her acerbically. "He . . ."

// There is nothing to be gained in telling her the truth. You must spin it to your side, convince her it was you who were disgusted and not he. She could be swayed to your side if you play this intelligently. Besides, this only goes to show how little the fox can be trusted. Once again, after humiliating you, he gossips to the first person he meets.//


Sakura places the drinks carefully on a small tray. They fizzle and pop as she stares at them, an ice cube in one altering its position with a crystalline clink. "Then what was all of it for? You and me and Naruto?" She shakes her head with finality.

//Ah, but her reaction betrays hope. Or at the very least, introspection.//

'Don't look too much into things.'

//My, but you are infantile. Affection remains. Fidelity. And most of all, salvation.//

Sakura glances to me, the furrows in her brow showing confusion shaded with worry and deep thought. She has not been wholly convinced one way or the other, despite what she says.
Of course, neither have I.

But there are no good options.

The short table has been pulled to the center of the living room, with the cards already dealt when we reenter. Naruto is bouncing in his seat with too much enthusiasm, an attitude that Sakura quickly quells with a "No, put those cards back in the deck and reshuffle."

Her thin finger wiggles at the end of her hand like bait on a hook.

"Why," Naruto demands in indignation.

Unaffected, Sakura hands him his drink – the faceted one as I had guessed – and rolls her eyes. "Because I don't trust you. You could have looked at those cards at any time."

Taking the glass, Naruto looks down inside it and sticks his lip out in a pout. "Always thinking the worst of me," he grumbles like a kid, but drags the cards back into a single pile anyway.

I try not to think it's cute.

//Try harder.//

I cross my legs beneath me when I sit and I assume Sakura does the same since she makes no mention of the way Naruto's legs stretch out the length of the table, practically reaching me on the far end.

The new hand is dealt and we begin.

I don't want to play this stupid game.

//Patience, my pet. You need to spend more time on the girl. We must work with what opportunities are given us.//

About fifteen minutes later, Naruto yells a hearty "Gin!" which earns him nothing but a smack courtesy of Sakura's hand and an informative "We're playing poker, idiot!"

This causes him to spurt his drink by route of his nose and almost into my hair but I duck in time. He's wiping the unattractive dribble from his face with the hem of his sleeve while shouting gibberish about how no one told him and what's the difference anyway. In general, making a spectacle of himself.

And this is what I've decided I want?

I must surely be insane.

//Yes, that does seem to be the only logical explanation.//

He grouses down at his cards and slams them on the table, their deserved punishment for being "gin" instead of "four of a kind". As he tosses his cards into the middle for a new deal, he raises his head and suddenly smiles, apprehensively, for no apparent reason. His gaze fixes on me as if nothing else exists in his world.

Oh right. Now I remember.

//You cannot seem to remember that it is all a lie.//
For a minute, I forget to breathe.

"So, four for Naruto," Sakura says, relinquishing the cards with a disapproving huff through her nose. "Sasuke?"

"Two," I reply, not skipping a beat. I place the discards into the center at the same moment Naruto decides to reach for his new ones. The barest tip of his finger meets mine and a moment of breathless electricity careens through my body almost knocking me over.

//This is not good.//

No. It's not.

I take up my cards and sort them into my hand, not too slow, not too fast, and behave as if nothing unusual has occurred.

Naruto holds his hand in the same position in the center of the table, staring at me for a while and biting his lip, before using his finger to gently brush the cards to his side. He fans them in front of his face and soon his eyes are glued to their possibilities as he sorts through the various combinations of cards like an adding machine.

All I have is that horrible queen of hearts.

//Hmph.//

"Three for me," Sakura states and deposits her useless cards into the graveyard and replaces them with those at the top of the pile.

"All right, so . . ." Sakura gently places her hand down on the table and sorts through her yen. "I'll bet three."

High rollers, that's what we are.

Naruto calls and I do the same, there's no possibility of me not doing so; it's a matter of pride.

Sakura wins easily with three of a kind, and even I beat Naruto, who had absolutely nothing. I'm not sure he actually knows how to play.

Things go on like this for a while and though hardly exciting, it is relatively benign. We all start to relax and I take several glances over to Sakura. I'm still debating. Plus, I wouldn't know how to make it all work with Sakura anyway.

//Sadly, that is true enough.//

When Sakura deals out the next set, I make a point to put my hand over hers in some hopeless attempt to stir up the same flash of emotion I got with Naruto. Nothing happens aside from a nervous jolt of her hand and the casual removal of her fingers. She refuses to look at me.

I can't really look at her either.

//Do not be so ridiculous. Just like the cards, this is a game. You must persevere and wait for the right hand.//

'I don't know what you mean.'

//Of course you don't, my boy. You are so terribly clueless.//
And the game continues on, boring as ever, but uneventful is better than disaster.

Then I feel an uninvited appendage stretch over to my side of the table. I examine both my opponents, but neither gives any clear sign of being the culprit. But I could make a pretty good guess.

The foot eases over mine and up along my clothed leg. When I search Naruto's face for a sign, all he does is yell "call!" and antes up his bet.

His movements seem a little more constrained than normal.

I fold my hand and push away from the table inelegantly at the same time that I lay down my cards. Naruto shifts faintly and his foot traces my movement. With an uncontrollable spasm, I lever against the table edge and hoist myself to my feet. Sakura looks up at me curiously, while Naruto adamantly *pretends* not to notice. I seize my half empty glass.

//Awkward, my pet. Do not lose before you have played.//

"I'm getting something to drink," I excuse myself hastily and rush out of the room and into the comparative safety of the kitchen.

I collapse into the sink, the glass making a horrible crashing, sloshing noise when it hits the metal.

//Get control of yourself, you foolish boy. Do not make a big deal of trifling things. It is just a game to him, as simple as this game of cards. Remember what he has done.//

My body has become over-sensitized with Naruto's nonsense. There is no other explanation. With the faucet running cold, I splash some water over my face to cool down. The clear liquid cycles down into the silver center drain.

I have got to control the situation better.

"You all right?"

Too absorbed in my thoughts, I completely missed Naruto's entrance. I whirl around, my wet hair sending droplets of water spraying over his face.

He tilts his head to me - the water drips down his cheek and how does that not bother him - waiting for a response. I don’t know where he gets off acting normal after . . .

"Don't even," I warn without bothering to finish the sentence.

His eyebrows pinch together in the middle of his forehead and his lower lip pushes against his upper.

It's endearing, in its way.

No, wait . . .

//Useless.//

"But," he whimpers. "You haven't let me explain anything. Look . . ."

"There's nothing to explain," I state, not wanting to hear any lame, made-up excuses.

"You don't understand." He’s speaking very quietly, especially for him.
"I understand perfectly well," I snarl, trying to keep my rising voice in check. "People in neighboring lands understood that."

"That's not true!" He squeaks.

I grip my fists tight, talking a step back from him and glare straight into those deep blue lying eyes. "Just stop." My blood is glowing hot again. "I don't want to hear any more lies."

"But I'm not lying! If you would just listen to me . . ."

//But he has nothing to say that you would want to hear.//

"I don't want to hear it." My tone is startingly calm while my gaze is as still as ice. "You've had your little fun and now it's over."

"Fun? But . . ." Naruto is faltering, unsure what to say.

"It won't happen again." I decree with finality.

His puzzled but sheepish countenance only serves to irritate me more and I shoulder past him gruffly. A least he doesn't have the nerve to try and protest.

//And what could he explain? Nothing. Because it was the truth he revealed in that moment and now his joke has been unmasked.//

When I trudge back into the living room, Sakura is silently shuffling and reshuffling the cards as if hypnotized by their movement, doing her best to block out everything she's overheard. Her face is shadowed by what seems to me to be a modified sort of regret.

//Now, dear pet, before you lose your chance, your life, everything I have worked so hard for . . . //

I sit down, my hurt and anger and determination making me blind.

"Sakura," I say, and wait for her to focus on me. With intense concentration, I hold her gaze and bite back my trepidation to help me say the next words. "He is not what I want."

Her lips pull into a white stripe, doggedly refusing to believe it. Her head convulses to the left but nothing else changes.

With a slow blink of dismissal, she rotates her head away, glances across the room and that's when I at last achieve a bitter success.

Sakura's mouth drops, just a little, as if her jaw hinge has slipped, and she takes in a quick gulp of air.

"Oh, I, uh, forgot."

His voice is soft, damp, like the melting of ice the moment before it cracks.

"I've got a new mission early in the morning. I'd . . . better go."

I'm shocked into utter numbness, too stunned to even be certain what I should feel.

I feel like my world has returned to black.

//Triumphant, my pet. Vindicated. This is as it should be.//
Sakura appears as stricken as if she has just seen her teammate fall in the line of duty.

It is a strange, long, excruciating moment, confined in the vacuum of my false confession.

Then, Naruto leaves.

And Sakura and I are alone, with not a thing in the world to say.
"Hey, Sasuke?"

"Hn."

"Do you think we'll ever make it?"

"Where?"

"Home. Are we ever gonna make it home?"

"What home?"

"The village. Konoha. You know, home."

"That's not my home."

"What-what do you mean?"

"I mean that's not my home."

"But it is. How can you say that? We've been looking for you for a long time just to bring you back."

"So?"

"So? So? So we're trying to take you home, that's what!"

"I didn't ask you to."

"Hmph. That's not the point."

"Don't be an idiot."

"Stop calling me an idiot!"
"Stop being one."

A moment of silence passes.

"So do you think we will?"

"What?"

"Get home. Geez, what do you think we've been talking about? And they call me the idiot . . ."

"Idiot."

"Sasuke!"

A pause.

"I'm sure you'll make it."

"Not you?"

"That's not my home, I told you."

"But it is! That's where you were born, that's where your family . . ."

"There's nothing for me there now."

"What?"

"I'm sick of repeating myself."

"But there are people there, friends putting their lives on the line for your sake. What about them?"

"Friends?"

"Sakura, Kakashi . . ."

"Hn."

"And me. What about me, Sasuke?"

"What about you?"

"Well. I want you to come home. I want my best friend back. Isn't that enough?"

"Aren't I enough?"

A long, quiet, oppressive silence.

"No, Naruto. You're not enough."

-----

As it turns out, Naruto really did have a mission. One outside Konohagakure; it seems he’s been having a lot of those lately.

This should’ve helped; if I didn't have to see him, I wouldn't have to think about him. And then "Sasuke's new survival plan” could be implemented.
It didn't exactly pan out.

Now that he's gone, his absence haunts me like all my other ghosts. He's everywhere in a way I can't escape; his memory boring into me like the drill to a deep, full oil well. And my feelings are just the same: thick and black and sludgy.

How quickly and completely I screwed things up.

No, not me.

'You.'

//Do not blame me when there was nothing to ruin. You don't even know what you feel and with no reciprocation, why worry?//

'I'm sure you've ruined something.'

//I am only trying to preserve your life.//

'My life? Ha! You're trying to save your own worthless, nonexistent hide.'

I don't understand how in the world I got into this mess. And over Naruto? Naruto, of all people! I can barely stand him, best friend or not and now this. . . what?

My stomach twists and tumbles and I become nauseous.

There's no turning back now, even I can see that.

I feel foolish and immature, not being ready to make a decision. It makes me feel like a kid.

Naruto.

Itachi.

Too many choices have led to too many disasters and will continue to do so. I make my own decisions but sometimes I wonder if they are the right ones. But I can't back down. And there are no easy choices.

It is too much.

It is all too much.

Naruto doesn't even know.

No, I've got to stop this.

Don't think about him.

It's not exactly working.

Every time I close my eyes, he appears in both good and bad, ending always on that last repulsed, revolted, sickened look on his face. I can't erase it. Even so, he's the reason I came back and forfeited my life.

If I now lost him as a friend . . .

Why did I bother coming back, letting them trap me, torture me, if that's how it ends?
But I did succeed in what I set out to do. Naruto is alive and that's all I had intended and that is enough. My life is forfeit; I knew that long ago. Nothing changes.

Besides, I have most assuredly mangled things as deftly as if I single-handedly orchestrated the line of events that brought us to this.

But if I lost him as a friend . . .

I would lose all reason to survive.

Oh.

That's an unwelcome, unpleasant and wholly unforeseen thought. I don't care to think that again and try to banish it.

But it lurks there in the muck of my darkest fears like a monster in the shadows. Its eyes are red and glittering.

Oddly enough, like his.

//You are still such a child. Your sole purpose is to survive. To be an Uchiha and make more little Uchihas to come after you.//

'And why?'

//To make your mother happy. To fulfill your destiny.//

'Destiny?'

What a bunch of nonsense.

I have already fulfilled whatever destiny I may have had.

Now there is no going back. And nowhere to go forward.

"What's wrong with me?"

"Oh, so many things, Sasuke."

My eyes open a fraction wider.

Kakashi is sitting on the arm of the sofa, his feet propped up on the cushion in front of him and his face bears that exasperating half-smile that I truly detest. I neither noticed his entrance nor realized I spoke aloud, and that can mean no good.

"Now, don't give me that look," he admonishes. "What's the problem this time?"

He's far too amused by this.

His eye is doing that curvy thing again. One day, I'll straighten that loathsome curve into a perfectly expressionless line. Permanently.

The left side of my face twitches with barely suppressed rage. "I'm not talking to you." I made that mistake once; I have no intention of repeating it.

"Gee and it sounds an awful lot like you are."
Forget straightening his eye. I'm going to pull it out by the bloody, dangling root and let him stumble around blind.

"You've been moping," he singsongs as he sits down on the couch properly. "More than usual." He pats his lap encouragingly as if he expects me to sit on it. "Tell me all about it."

He's being way creepier than normal and blatantly condescending. I think I'll rip off that mask too and cut off his lips and yank out his tongue so he's left with nothing but a big gaping hole that makes no sound, not even "ouch" when he bumps into things, seeing as he has no eyes.

*Seeing as he has no eyes.*

Heh-heh.

I smirk.

"What are you thinking about?" Kakashi asks.

"Pleasant things."

Old One-eye doesn't change his expression, but tilts his head as if he finds that prospect interesting, if not altogether believable.

"I heard you and Naruto had a bit of a falling out."

"Hn." I state, sick to death of everyone's intrusiveness. "Why would you think that?"

"I have my ways," he says mysteriously.

I grunt and turn away, placing my chin in my hand. "Iruka probably told you."

"Well, that is one of my ways, yes," he says, completely unbothered by the mundanity of his information gathering network.

He stares at me a little while and I let my eyelids droop in apathy and boredom.

"Let me see your hand," he says suddenly.

I raise an eyebrow.

"Don't be difficult," he chastises. "I'm your teacher and your guardian and I can make you do what I say if I have to."

Yeah, right.

But it's not like I care.

//No, of course not.//

'I already have one antagonist to contend with right now, how about you stay out of this?'

//I think not.//

I hold my hand out, palm up. I expect him to temporarily release the seals like he does for training—he's the key holder, after all— but instead he cups my hand in his like water in a saucer. I instinctively flinch before regaining control, all of which Kakashi soundly ignores.
He concentrates hard on the imprinted concentric circles a moment before sliding his finger over my bare skin.

This time I do pull away.

"Don't be a baby," he chides and takes my hand roughly to continue inspecting my seal. I allow this only because I am *not* a baby.

Kakashi proceeds to press his thumbs into my palm, pulling and stretching and squishing the marks of my seal.

My eyes go cloudy as my mind travels back to a very different time with a somewhat similar action. It was nothing like this, all analytical and harsh. When Naruto did this, it was warm, soothing, and lulled me into a pleasantly sleepy state.

//Stop that.//

"You like that, do you?" *Naruto had asked, his voice low.*

I did.

//Enough.//

Kakashi brings his one normal eye down close to my palm and peers into it as though through the lens of a microscope.

I don't like this.

"So?" I spit out vehemently. "We done?"

Kakashi sighs the age-old sigh of the downtrodden and finally, after eons have passed, he lets go. He leans back as I wipe my hand on my pant leg.

"It's as I suspected," he says in a pathetic attempt to peak my interest. It's not at all peaked, but I'm no mood for games, either.

//Are you ever?//

"What?" I snap.

//In the mood for games.//

'I'm not talking to you.'

//Ku-ku-ku.//

"What exactly did you do, during training?" Kakashi asks, glancing over at me as if I've been harboring some deep, dark secret.

//Haven't you?//

'Oh, shut up.'

I shift my head. "Just concentrated," I reply, which is basically true. So what if it also had to do with a snake and a lot of supposition?
"Concentrated?" Kakashi is more irritated than interested.

Good.

I take a long, slow blink and a deep, cleansing breath. "I just made the sharingan work for these eyes."

Kakashi lifts his eyebrows but nods his head thoughtfully. Then he crouches down in front of me and takes my hand again, holding on like a vice so that when I try to jerk free, I can't. He pries my fingers open to take another look at the bull's eye mark on my palm, appropriately similar to the one on my future.

"It's cracking," he says, staring deep into the code of my hand. "The seal."

My hand is released, so I place it in my lap, once again wiping it on my clothes and these pants are probably now contaminated beyond reclamation.

"Is that good or bad?" I inquire uncertainly. It’s hard to tell these days.

//Oh, it is very good indeed.//

And that response makes me think: bad. My parasite has too much reign as it is.

//You wound me.//

'You have no idea how much I wish I could.'

//Actually, I do. But it is of no consequence, seeing as you are helpless.//

'Enough.'

It’s a long while before Kakashi continues and when he does, it is with an unsettling and not reassuring, "I don't know."

I snarl at his utter uselessness.

"But there is one way to find out." That smile is back, along with that stupid rainbow shaped eye.

He wags his finger at me. All I can think about is how much I want to tear the grin from his face. Again.

-----

"All right, now try to stop it!"

Stop it? I clamp my mouth shut to hold in the phoenix fire flower jutsu that really, truly, no kidding, wants to come out. It's not so much "hot" as it is weighty, pressing against the back of my teeth and filling my mouth like ashy overdue vomit.

My eyes begin to water.

Unable to contain it any longer, I belch forth a large cloud of sooty, smoky jutsu that trails a few fiery tendrils. I begin to hack, trying to catch my breath and rid myself of the charcoal taste that has lodged within my throat. My eyes flow freely from the effort and I would really like to stop now, but my throat has other plans.
"Now let me see your hand," Kakashi orders, completely unconcerned with the fact that I am about to expel one or both of my lungs onto the ground. He steps towards me and reaches out, but I violently slap him away.

"Get the hell away from me," I try to say, but it comes out sounding more like "heh-hee-ack!"

And still he doesn’t care, stepping forward and forcefully grabbing my hand. I’m too busy trying to not die to put up any meaningful resistance.

Kakashi takes my hand harshly and jerks it up to his face, practically jamming the fingers up his nose. It is so unfair that he looks bright-eyed and bushy-tailed after our bout whereas I feel two steps away from death. Of course, that was the whole point. I had to keep the seal while using jutsu after jutsu to expel the bulk of my chakra. To my great annoyance, that didn't take too long as apparently the seal works a bit like a faucet and Kakashi had it set to "useless trickle".

I’m almost too exhausted to truly be annoyed.

//It only means you must practice more. So much potential, so little brought to fruition.//

'Oh, shut up!'

Kakashi frowns.

"What?" I rasp out with a final painful intake of air. It seems like my lungs have finally cleared, but the strain still makes my eyes water.

"It's as I thought." Kakashi scowls.

//Oh, this is good. This is very, very good. Best you have all your ability available to you, I think.//

'You're just deciding things on your own. And whatever it is you're scheming, just stop right now. I'm not doing anything for you.'

//We shall see about that.//

Then I feel the familiar tingle of the seal reactivating fully, followed by the black emptiness left behind by the absence of my chakra.

My knees buckle under the weight of my body and I fall to the ground. Huffing shortly, I look up to the old man, realizing just how heavy my eyelids are getting. Like a runaway freight train, my weariness is hitting me head-on.

//More training, my pet. You need more training.//

I don't even have the energy to fight the parasite.

"I need to go speak with the Hokage," Kakashi says seriously. He considers me with an almost devilish smile on his face. "But first perhaps we ought to take care of our little sleeping beauty."

What did I say about these stupid nicknames? But I feel the burden of my tiredness fall on me - my head, my neck, my eyes – and then I fall, but I never hit the ground.

Someone catches me first.

-----
Every crack of twig, every rustle of leaves, and every whistle of wind jolts my harried mind.

I can't remember the last time I worried about anything. It is a nervous, jittery feeling, like bugs are running up my spine and into my ear and I don't like it one bit.

But after Kyuubi's little romp that destroyed a good part of Konoha, I think I'm allowed.

I keep myself well hidden behind the edge of the tree trunk and peer with my sharingan eyes into the forbidding forest beyond. They're not much help in a situation like this. I can only see the enemy if they move to attack.

As assured as I can be that no enemies are skulking about, I recede back into the depths of the makeshift shelter. The tree is giant, reminiscent of the forest of our genin test, and with a little extra cover, I've made a viable hiding place.

The fire is still burning brightly but well concealed from the outside world. I take a seat next to my patient and watch the uneven rise and fall of his chest. Gently, I place the back of my hand on his forehead and am nearly scalded by the heat. His fever has only gotten worse.

The damned idiot.

I rifle through the dwindling supply bag with my one good hand for the last of the water bottles. When I finally find it, I bring it to Naruto's lips and tilt his head up.

"Swallow," I command wearily.

He takes only a sip before abruptly closing his mouth and shaking his head.

"Naruto . . ." He's getting on my nerves.

He needs more water, but every time I give him some he gets violent, knocking the bottle away and splattering the precious commodity all over the dirt floor. Sighing, too exhausted to even yell at him, I try to get to my feet so that I can get more supplies.

Naruto grips my hand and it is surprisingly strong, all things considered. At least it's my good hand so it doesn't hurt too badly. His head shakes crazily from side to side and I can't be sure of the reason.

"Naruto," I repeat tiredly. "We need more water."

He continues to shake his head and I don't care if it's not his fault, it's getting annoying.

"I have to go now, while I'm sure the coast is clear," I say with far less patience than just a moment ago.

But he's having none of it, even while asleep. At least he damn well better be asleep or I'll kill him and solve my little problem. He uses both hands to pull my arm and yank me clumsily down beside him. I fall hard on two of my ribs, ones that I'm pretty certain were cracked and now are likely broken. They probably punctured a lung too.

"Oof!" I exclaim elegantly and close my eyes as I slowly let the searing pain recede and let the more manageable throbbing ache enter. "Idiot!" I snap, but then groan, finding that the only one paying for that comment is me and my bruised ribs.

Naruto rolls in toward me making his hot, rancid breath pulse along my shoulder, bringing to mind
rot and the slow deterioration of internal organs.

It smells like death.

But his face looks more peaceful now, even flushed and disturbingly hot to the touch.

I suppose I can let it be for now. We should be safe for a while yet.

I adjust my weight a little more comfortably and settle in for an extended nap. I didn't sense any threatening presences nearby and the two scouts I dispatched earlier haven't yet returned.

I'm hoping this bodes well.

Naruto mumbles unintelligibly in his sleep and it sounds like pain.

So I let it be, for now, when he scoots a little closer.

-----

"Are you still asleep?" Kakashi asks, tapping me on the forehead with his knuckles.

I open my eyes, snarl at him and cough up a small puff of smoke that had been loitering in my stomach since earlier in the day.

I was not asleep. How could I sleep when little fiery bits of jutsu keep bouncing around my insides? It's very unpleasant.

//It is terrible down there.//

'Wait. How do you know? Aren't you only trapped in my mind?'

He shrugs. Orochimaru shrugged. That is so creepy. I hate when he does things like that.

"Get up," Kakashi commands.

I scowl at him but comply, bracing my hands on the couch back and arm. The dissolving jutsu in my stomach sloshes like rocks of lava in an acid lake.

Glaring upward at him from the couch, I'm glad for the mask or otherwise I'd be looking up his nose.

He looks unhappy. His eye, not his nose. And the crossed arms.

//Angry little scarecrow shouldn't play with fire . . . //

'What the hell is wrong with you?'

"Show me the chidori." His voice holds the grimness usually reserved for enemies.

//Oh-ho-ho.//

"No," I say.

"Why not?"

"Why should I?" I snap with far more emotion than I intended.
"Because I'm telling you to."

"And is that supposed to mean something?"

"Sasuke," Kakashi says with irritable exhaustion. "Don't make me go through this again. You’re under my care and I don't think things will go well for you if I have to tell the council you aren't cooperating."

My eyes thin as I look at him; I’m so sick of that threat.

//But it is true. Those wrinkled old bags have been in power for too long. They have no sense of vision and the power has gone to their heads. But they will learn one day . . . //

I tilt my head and train my unwavering gaze on Kakashi as I stand. Reflexively, my left hand clenches at my side. Kakashi stands stolidly at the front entrance of the room, arms crossed. He makes no indication that he will move any time soon.

"Shouldn't we at least go outside?" I suggest.

"No," he answers coolly. "I don't think that will be necessary."

//Oh, well my goodness. This ought to be informative.//

'Don't sound so pleased. This could get you in trouble too.'

//Do not underestimate me, my pet. I have been here a long time and no one has noticed. I do not fear this meager display of yours. It will reveal nothing.//

'No one?'

//Hmm. . . . //

"Well?" Kakashi asks, more sharply than I've heard him speak in a long time. "What are you waiting for?"

I don't know, a miracle? People are constantly coming by and bothering me, yet all of a sudden they're listening when I tell them to leave me alone at the exact moment I could use the diversion.

Typical.

I nervously stretch the fingers of my left hand. "I can't do anything with these seals."

Old One-eye shoots me a nasty glance as if it's my fault that he's forgotten. Impatiently, he waves his hand at me to offer up my own like a bleak sacrifice. He’s very rough compared to usual, and I'm not sure which behavior is worse; they are both disturbing in their own way. He does his little "unseal" jutsu and the power tumbles back into me in a rush. My foot slips backward. It's never been like this before.

//Careful, my pet, careful. No use advertising to everyone how weak you have become.//

'I'm not weak, just startled.'

//If you would rid yourself of your worthless soft sentimentality, you would gain the strength you should already own./

'I'm not sentimental.'
"I'm not waiting all day, Sasuke."

I spare one short glance for Kakashi then inhale a deep gulp of the stale apartment air. I haven't attempted this particular jutsu in quite a while, but I should be able to do it. I wiggle my fingers to test their strength and mobility. The chakra coils like lengths of thread around the fingertips. Slowly, I wrap the fingers of my right hand around my left wrist. Then I let the power come.

There are a few sparks of static electricity and a whiff of ozone, burnt and ionic, released into the air. I feel the slow pull on my hair as the current causes it to stand on end. I turn my head in toward my arm, partially to monitor my progress and partially to shield my face from prying eyes.

It hurts like hell.

Each stream of electric chakra rips through my muscles, like it’s shredding them to a ragged, bloody mess. Then the burn begins, hot and acid as if my skin is melting away. My lips pull over my bared teeth and I only now realize I've squeezed my eyes shut. I can smell the smoldering of flesh and dust as the chidori starts to form. But it’s wrong. Most of the chakra is lodging just below my elbow, bulging my bicep with the excess of unusable energy. The crackling light encircling my hand is minor and hardly intimidating. The sound of it is as if the birds that create it are being strangled and struggle for every last breath of air.

"That's enough."

But I'll make this work. I will make it work.

"Sasuke, that's enough!"

Kakashi sounds oddly frightened but I can't be distracted by that.

I can do this. I have to. I need to still be able to this, otherwise that would mean that I . . .

"Sasuke! Stop!" I feel the hard break of the wall before I feel the grip of his two unforgiving hands on my arms. In that instant, my concentration wavers, sending all that pooled chakra ricocheting back into me with the force of a million fatal stab wounds. I let out an involuntary pained gasp.

My vision has gone blurry from the agonizing impact catapulting through me in all directions until Kakashi is nothing more than a few indistinguishable shapes. My breath comes hard and my lungs protest each inhalation I have the audacity to survive. They would rather give up the fight already and I am inclined to let them have their way.

How easy and uncomplicated that would be.

I'm having a hard time sensing my arm at all aside from the heavy weight and the tortuous burn at the shoulder joint.

It seems it too has betrayed me, just like everything else.

-----

When I wake up, I feel the unfortunate effects of sleeping on a rock floor. My eyes are gummy and thick like someone has poured rubber cement in them and it hasn’t quite set.

I finally pry them open, but the only thing I see is darkness. The fire has gone out.
Night has fallen.

With a great groan and a severe protest of my many injuries, I manage to sit up. And after one quick look around, I slip right into that tricky emotional hole that stretches between annoyance and alarm.

Naruto is gone.

Scrambling to my feet much too fast, and ignoring the attempted rebellion of my body and the sudden tilting of the world, I make my way to the shelter entrance.

My initial instinct is to head toward Konoha, and I do, but I make it only a short way before I realize there are no signs of passage. Naruto's far too weak and disoriented to have covered his tracks so well or taken to the trees. With a strange, unsettling feeling, I turn around and start in the other direction.

I find him not too far off, stumbling lamely over bracken and bramble and making very little headway.

"Hey, dobe," I chide irritably.

"Gotta . . . no . . . away . . . away," he mumbles. Or something like that. He's still feverish so he's not making much sense. I limp to his side to grab his shoulder when it becomes clear words won't suffice. He whirls on me, throwing a punch that doesn't even come close and ends up twisting his legs like a pretzel until he falls back on his ass.

"Idiot," I snap quietly, hoping to attract as little attention as possible and undo any damage that Naruto may have already done.

I drop to my better knee and reach out to help him up, but he slaps me away and immediately thrashes around on the ground as if he's possessed. His mouth opens and closes, but the only noise he makes is a sort of choking sound.

It sounds bubbly, like it's filled with blood.

There is really no choice now; he's making too much noise. If this keeps up, we're going to be in big trouble. I straddle his body, sitting back on his legs and using my weight to hold him down. Then I make a desperate bid for his flailing arms and finally capturing them and pin them to the ground. They are spread out above his head, which continues to thrash from side to side as he spews that line of half-word gibberish. A small line of blood, dark, almost black, dribbles out the side of his mouth.

He howls like a sacrifice.

"Naruto," I whisper. I shake his wrists to get his attention. "Naruto. You've got to calm down."

He shakes his head vehemently a few more times then warbles through his throat as though drowning.

I lean down close to him and whisper his name, soft, soothing, so only he can hear it.

His neck arches backward, the tendons pulling on muscle, the veins popping to the surface and he bares teeth stained pink with his blood. He shouldn't be this bad. Even I can tell that. Normally he's a quick healer, but it looks like, if anything, he's getting worse.
Something’s wrong.

//Kill him.//

I won't, if for no other reason than to piss that stupid little voice off. But the truth is I'm not in good shape at the moment either. Everything aches and I am more a purple bruise than my normal skin color. There are broken bones and angry cuts, including a large gash over my chest, barely held together with hasty stitching. And there’s an uncomfortable tingling in my left arm.

So I may as well take care of Naruto while I'm taking care of myself. I’m not going anywhere.

Naruto's breathing has slowed and he's finally stopped fighting me. His chest rises and falls with each shaky breath, making a wheezy, whistling noise as it escapes his mouth.

"Hey," I nudge nervously, taking another quick look around. But if anyone were going to attack, they'd have done so by now.

At long last, Naruto opens his eyes. He looks at me pleadingly, yet scarcely cognizant if at all. His eyes are the deepest of blue, like the murky depths of the ocean. They flicker to violet, blue, violet, and for a brief instant, red. He squeezes them shut and I watch as his newly sharpened claws dig into the palms of his hands.

Slowly, carefully, I ease my hands beneath his cutting fingers and free the claws from his palms with a small spray of blood. Gripping on tight, my fingers laced between his, I let him cut the backs of my hands instead.

I cringe.

After about a full minute, Naruto passes out. I let out a long breath of air and pry my hands free. He looks oddly innocent like this. His lungs are still rattling and he's managed to tear open some of the bad stitching on his wounds, but at least he looks calm. Almost like he’s dead.

And I’ve often wanted him dead and gone. I’ve been a step away from killing him myself too many times to count.

But I sling his arm over my shoulder and drag him back anyway.

He's really got to lose some weight.
We both stop in the street facing each other as if by some prearranged signal. She looks the same as always, just standing there, waiting.

It is a long, short, unwieldy moment. I feel a strange sort of pull towards her, deep within my gut, and promptly ignore it.

Then Sakura turns on her heel and high-tails it in the other direction.

//Well, that is certainly an auspicious start.//

'Shut up.'

I watch her retreating figure for a moment and then continue on my way.

-----

Sitting with my legs folded and my hands in my lap, I regulate my breathing to be slow and even and try to empty my mind of thought. But that's a daunting –near impossible – proposition when there's a psychotic parasite bumbling around up there.

"That's it, Sasuke. Better." I can feel Kakashi slowly circle around me. "Now that's it. Clear your mind."

I feel stupid.

//Ku-ku-ku.//

'Can you go away?'

//Ku-ku-no.//

I purse my lips and screw up my will and try again to empty my mind.

"That's not 'relaxed', Sasuke."

I snort derisively.
"Is this what the Hokage told you to do?" I ask.

"Yes. No." Kakashi sighs with disgust. "Well, basically."

"So is this actually supposed to help?"

"Yes, if you would actually clear your mind and be quiet like I told you." Old One-eye sounds annoyed, but he’s probably trying to cover up the fact that he doesn't really have an answer.

"So the Hokage didn't tell you to do this, did she?" I feel like being a bit difficult right now.

"That's not exactly true."

I crack an eye open to look at him skeptically. "Not exactly?"

If it were possible for someone like Old One-eye to look embarrassed, that's how he'd look right now. "She was busy. And she thought I could handle you on my own."

"Busy?" I ask incredulously.

"A Hokage's life is very complicated. She's preoccupied at present with . . . I don't have to explain myself to you." I almost smile at how flustered and defensive Kakashi sounds. He narrows his one visible eye at me. "It's not your concern. Now shut up and concentrate."

I smirk. "Hn." But I also close my eyes and do as he says. Orochimaru cackles maniacally, but softly, in the back of my mind.

After a while of this, Kakashi starts moving again, resuming his circle route around me. I hum a low noise and return to my "meditating". I don't feel any different, just stupid, the same as I did before.

"What exactly is this supposed to do?"

"Quiet." Kakashi continues to walk in that spiral, over and over until he must be dizzy. "You need to concentrate. I want you to find your chakra channels."

I shake myself in preparation then try to do as Kakashi says. It’s a boring, frustrating process and for a long time, I don't sense anything.

"That's it." Kakashi's voice is distant and soothing. "Go deeper, hear your heartbeat, listen to your breathing, and try to find the pattern of your chakra. That's it."

I calm myself as much as I can, seeking out these strange inner sounds like a deep-sea diver, and after a dull, silent eternity, I find them. My chakra crackles like fire and electricity and when I focus on the blue and red of it, I can follow each thin line from its start at the center to its end. The trails in my left arm lessen to a trickle once I reach my fingertips, not an encouraging sign.

"Very good." Old One-eye praises. "Did you notice a difference?"

I feel like telling him "no", but I'll bet he knows the answer already, so there's no point. "Yes."

"Good, good," he states. "Now try to even it out."

I'm not quite sure how to do that, but I try, with essentially no success. He must realize because he soon cuts me off.
"All right. That's enough. Now I want you to ease out of it. Don't break out of the state suddenly." Kakashi waits as I do this. I let out a long breath of air and look up at him, oddly exhausted.

Kakashi looks down at me and seems to both approve and disapprove at once.

"What?" I snap.

Then he kneels down in front of me, grabs my hand and, lightning-fast, intensifies my seal. I feel a fire burn through the chakra channels I just found and then suddenly, as a candle in the wind, go out.

"Hey!" I yank my hand back and study it, rubbing the palm with my other thumb. "What did you do?"

Old One-eye smiles at me with the curvy eye thing again. "Almost all of your chakra is now sealed."

"What?"

"Until we figure out what's going on and how to fix it, it's safer not to give you any more access than is absolutely necessary." His grin is almost too big for his face.

"What?"

He waggles his eyebrows at me disturbingly and stands, still with that stupid curvy one-eye. "Let's go home."

I snort, cross my arms and refuse to move.

"Have it your way," he singsongs.

But if I had it my way, I'd never be here to start with.

-----

It's been a terrible night and the coming day promises to be no better.

My hasty covering of our tracks was exactly that: hasty. If anyone really took the time to look, and I'm sure they will, the traces of our path will be rather obvious.

But there was no time. It's not like I can trust the damned usuratonkachi to look after himself.

I've gotten precious little sleep.

All my nerves are pouring to the surface so that I can barely think straight. I thought I was past this. This fear, this concern, this thought of anyone else's welfare. I haven't felt this way since I was a kid.

Not since I last fought on a team alongside Naruto and Sakura.

I look up to the sky, clear of clouds and rain and it's no friend of mine.

My heart hurtles to the front of my chest the moment I hear a whimper. I'm way too on edge. After taking a last cursory look around and sensing no enemies, I quickly crawl back to him.

I've hidden Naruto carefully behind the curve of the trunk and he's mostly undetectable from the
inside. Out of necessity, I have a small fire burning, but it's mostly unnoticeable.

Naruto is whining again, a high, choking sort of noise and the blood has returned to the corner of his mouth. Quickly, I check his bandages for rips or excessive bleeding, but they don't seem any worse. But he's drenched in sweat, practically making a lake of it where he lay. Beads of it trail down his forehead and down his neck. I almost burn myself when I put my hand to his forehead. The fever simply won't break. Using the pad of my thumb, I gently raise one of his eyelids. The iris is milky and I have no idea why. Eerily, it stares at nothing, then for a mere instant, flashes red, rendered pink beneath the film on his eye. Naruto grits his teeth and groans. I release the eyelid angrily and feel like pummeling him.

Of all the stupid, ill-advised, rash, goddamned things to do!

He's suppressing the Kyuubi.

No wonder he doesn't seem to be healing. He's not. Not only isn't he letting the fox work its magic, he's using his precious little energy to fight it. I get why he'd do it, but now is not the time.

"Naruto," I say, my voice stern and irritated.

He doesn't answer.

I smack him lightly on the cheek. "Naruto." He swallows back the blood bubbling in his throat and rolls away.

I'm in no mood for his obstinacy. Here I am, risking my life for him, and would someone please explain that, and he's just lying there, ignoring me. Dying.

There's a sudden sharp pain, somewhere between my throat and sternum that somehow feels hollow at the same time. My injuries are bad too, some apparently worse than I realized.

That unappreciative little dobe.

I am not standing for this. Roughly, I grab his shoulders and shake, harder than I should, but not hard enough to satiate my anger.

"Hey moron! Just what do you think you're doing? Let Kyuubi heal you!"

But he just purses his lips and shakes his head and lets me bang it against the cold hardness of the forest floor. I dig my fingers into the fleshy part of his shoulder and don't even care when I draw blood.

Well, if he's not going to listen to me, then I'll have to try going straight to the source. I've only done this once before and I'm not at my best, but I'm too infuriated to consider the situation rationally.

I let my consciousness fade out and float right into Naruto's mind. It's a little too easy; he's worse off than I thought. I find myself in much the same place I did the first time I did this, in a large empty cavern, only this time there's a small cell door at one end, bolted with about ten different types of locks. Naruto is slumped in front of it, looking about as bad as he does in the real world. In the small barred window of the cell door I can see an indistinct, undulating form. There's red mist leaking from the window and every pore and crevice it can find in the locked door and surrounding Naruto in a bloody cloud.

A deep growl rumbles from behind the door and reverberates in the soles of my feet.
I am taking a step forward when something pops up in my peripheral vision. There’s another door there, about the same size as the Kyuubi cell, but with only one simple lock and no window. It’s white and black with a red circle in the center and black teardrops that look oddly familiar. There are cracks throughout it, mapping out the veins of the tree it may once have been. It looks like it will burst open in a shower of splinters at any time.

For a moment, I tip in its direction as if pulled by some sort of gravitational force, but then bring myself back to the matter at hand. I pull my foot firmly back into place.

I walk up to the cell door, dismissing Naruto who even within his mind is too tired to even notice me.

"Kyuubi," I say shortly.

The rustling inside the cell stops abruptly and in a flash, a single large fox eye is glaring at me through the window.

There is a deep throaty growl.

"Uchiha boy. To what do I owe this pleasure?" His sarcasm rolls like distant thunder through the empty room.

"I need your help." I speak evenly.

Kyuubi’s chuckle is the dry crackling of dying embers.

"And what would you ask of me?"

I ignore his condescending tone and answer. "It's not for me, it's for Naruto."

"Hmmm." It sounds like predatory purring, this thinking. He stares at me with that one giant pupil and then sticks his nose in the slot and sniffs. I'm not sure whether he's smelling something or making a wordless comment.

"And why should I waste my energy to heal the little kit? He doesn’t want it." The eye makes a second appearance in the window.

"Because if he dies, you die."

He purrs again. "I wonder if that’s so. Do you want to chance it? I’m game as I’m always game to be rid of this flesh and blood prison. But you seemed awfully desperate to dispose of me not three days ago."

"That was different." I say adamantly, though my mind is not nearly as certain as my mouth.

All remnants of the fox face disappear from the window completely. I hear the percussive thud of mammoth weight moving behind the door. The blood mist squeezes through the cracks like a nearly empty toothpaste tube and winds around Naruto, a million trails of smoke that eventually merge into a single mass. Naruto begins to choke violently. His back arches towards the door, his head banging against the solidity of it. His hands go to his throat to pull off a rope that isn't there while his legs scrabble frantically for purchase on the floor.

He’s being strangled.

There are no sounds but the sliding, slapping of his feet and the malicious growl of the fox demon.
Naruto is dying.

"Stop." I say.

But I hear is the thud, thud, scrape of Naruto's struggle.

"Stop it!" I say louder.

I hear the rumbling cackle of Kyuubi's malevolent wit.

I take my first steps toward Naruto and calmly lay my hand on the extension of the fox. It feels like a fuzzy waterbed.

"Stop." I say and the word feels cold in a belly that is usually hot with the Uchiha fire.

The cloud bursts into liquid bubbles, floating around like bits of sentient blood. Naruto collapses to the ground and loses consciousness, if such a thing is possible in one's own unconscious. The bubbles shoot toward the window all at once, entering the blackness and disappearing from sight. There is a crash of metal and bone when Kyuubi clamps his jaws shut, filling the little window with his giant razor white grin.

I feel tired, worn out, and my head begins to throb.

"You don't have the same eyes you did before," the fox says, his teeth flashing white in the darkness.

His breath smells of ashes and decay.

This is no good.

It's all no good.

I return to my waking self on the roll of Kyuubi's arrogant laughter and am utterly spent. It's a testimony to the seriousness of my wounds and exhaustion that I immediately crumple to the ground.

Naruto lies close to me, his face gray and thin.

His chest rises excruciatingly slowly as he resumes breathing, and yet he looks minutely better, as if Kyuubi actually did listen to me.

And as I lose consciousness, I wonder what was behind that other door.

-----

"You're concentrating too hard."

"How can I be concentrating too hard?" Ouka gripes as she glances up at me. I'm holding her small, bony shoulders in the palms of my hands while her one foot is planted firmly on the ground and the other not so firmly on the trunk of a tree.

"Very easily. You're doing it now."

"Aww," she whines and crosses her arms to pout resentfully at the tree.

Her pigtails swing when she turns up to glare at Tetsuo as he stands securely perpendicular to his
chosen trunk and carelessly transforms leaves into metal and back again, letting them fall harmlessly to the ground.

"How come he can do it," Ouka accuses, "And I can't?"

"Because he never concentrates too hard," I say for the umpteenth time today with an impressive degree of tolerance, if I do say so myself.

//Why must you tarry with this child? This is not even proper training.//

'Your former pupil says it is.'

I glance over at Tetsuo as he tosses himself effortlessly onto a nearby branch and immediately drops off to sleep.

Anko has left us to our own devices after a basic overview of what to do, which essentially means I've become the interim leader. Tree climbing is a skill I mastered years ago and it didn't take me long to reclaim it.

So, after what had to be hours of Ouka's whining, I was obliged to relent and assist her.

//What a disappointment you continue to be.//

The girl struggles with it as much as she struggles with everything. Of course, once she does master it, she'll probably leave everyone else in the dust. That's the funny thing about her.

I shake her shoulders with my hands. "Try again," I tell her.

She looks up with those big, trusting eyes and gives me the overwhelming impression of a puppy. She could pass for Kohana's twin.

She pulls down the corners of her mouth and uncrosses her arms so that they dangle like dead fish at her sides. "All right," she consents dubiously. The girl begins to concentrate - too hard again - and the swirl of chakra blows leaves into little spirals around her feet. "I'll bet you could do this on the first try," she mumbles accusingly.

"Try again," I repeat and don't mention how long it actually took me to learn this particular skill.

"Yeah, yeah," she grumbles. I release my hold on her and she promptly falls to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Kohana barks and wags her tail.

Ouka protests with a string of child obscenities, rubs her back and scowls up at me.

"Just imagine if you'd fallen from higher up," I advise her coldly.

"If I'd fallen from higher up," the girl complains, "I could have braced myself and fallen properly."

"Better not to fall at all." I shrug and walk away.

"Sasuke-san!" She cries out after me, half indignant, half plaintive.

But I pay no heed.

She just needs to practice and she doesn't need me for that.
I stroll to the other side of the field, close my eyes, block out the world, and concentrate.

//What are we up to now?//

Unfortunately, I haven't yet succeeded in blocking out my inner world, the one thing I would most like to do.

And even though I’m avoiding Kakashi, I’m still trying out his methods. I seek that stream of electricity that flows silently through my blood, but it is as elusive as an S-class criminal. My seal is activated so I can’t actually feel it, but I can imagine.. I picture pulling the current like a string and winding it into a single ball in my left hand. But even in my head, it doesn't work properly and my hand jerks as if it has been burned. All the power jams at that point just below the elbow as though a dam has been constructed. My hand feels sort of numb with the tingly sensation of muscles fallen asleep. I can't feel any of the channels that ought to be there and I should be able to manage that, even with the seal.

I redirect my focus to my right hand and seek out all the channels, flexing each finger as I find its corresponding flow.

They are different, my two hands.

"Whatcha doing?"

"Why aren't you practicing?" I return without cracking an eye to the girl.

"I'm done," she states decisively.

"Did you walk up the tree?" I roll my fingers into my palm one by one and send the chakra racing back up my arm, redistributing it back throughout my body.

"No." She sounds pouty and petulant.

"Then you're not done."

I take a cleansing breath in through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to retain my semi-meditative state and ease my arm back into correct working order.

//Admirable but pointless.//

'Thanks for the vote of confidence.'

//You forget that I was in a similar, unfortunate position myself. Just have Tsunade fix it. Why squander your precious time with this "meditation" garbage?//

'I don't need her help.'

//Tch-tch. Pride is all well and good until it threatens my existence.//

'Isn't that so sad?'

//As long as I am stuck here, then I'd prefer all things to be in perfect order, at least for a while.//

Yet again, I don't care for the sound of that.

"What are you doing?"
The strange and wholly unexpected interjection from our third and normally indifferent member comes as a surprise. I guess he wasn't asleep after all. Slowly, I relax my fingers out flat and let the feeling return in a tingling swell of sensation.

I open my eyes.

"Tetsuo."

I level a droopy, disinterested gaze at him identical to the one he’s giving me.

Orochimaru’s up to something and I need to figure it out before it’s too late.

Tetsuo lets his head loll to one side as if the string holding it up has snapped. As I regard him, his eyes narrow shrewdly in uncharacteristic pensiveness. I tilt my head almost imperceptibly in question.

"Why are you a ninja?" He asks warily.

"Why are you?" I retort.

He shrugs indifferently. "It's what I'm supposed to be."

I snort. "It's all I have."

We stand and regard each other silently for a short while and I think we may have come to some sort of understanding of one another, though I'm not quite sure what it is.

"What is wrong with you guys!" Ouka's high voice interrupts our contemplation of each other. "Those aren't reasons to be a ninja!"

Tetsuo and I turn to our tiny companion as one. She is frowning at us with her arms crossed and her legs spread wide in some cheery super-hero stance.

"'Supposed to' and 'nothing else'!" She scoffs

"Then why are you a ninja?" Tetsuo challenges.

"Because it is in my blood," she states unflinchingly.

Lazybones raises his eyebrows high over droopy lids, a show of incredulity for him.

But I understand it, I think. It’s in my blood too. The twisted, cursed Uchiha blood.

"Big deal," Tetsuo slurs and takes a step away.

"You don't listen," Ouka says to him while looking at me. "It's not about family or obligation, it's about me. I need to be a ninja, to move and fight and do something. I want to be able to protect the people important to me in a real way. I want to make a difference, even if no one ever knows it. I’ll know it. Even if my family wasn't ninja, even if it wasn't expected, even if I'm no good at it, I think I would still do it. I mean, I can't imagine being anything else." She shrugs helplessly.

"You're very self-aware for a ten-year-old," I compliment dryly.

"Ten and a half," she says with a grin.

Kohana yips and bounds over to me so she can rub her head affectionately against my ankle. Ouka
smiles.

Tetsuo gives a raspberry and drags himself off from the group.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ouka shouts. Kohana barks her puppy encouragement.

"How do you know you'd want to be a ninja anyway?" The boy waves his hands lamely in front of his hunched shoulders. "You're an Inuzuka. You weren't given a choice."

Ouka glowers angrily at him but offers up no answers. They begin a staring contest that provides me a few moments of blessed peace.

Ouka opens her mouth to say something, but I don't feel like listening to anymore of this futile argument right now.

"She's right," I say, to put an end to this. "It's in the blood."

//How true. Ninja's blood flows differently than others'. Hotter, faster, almost bubbling . . . I can feel it now, coursing through your body.//

'Stop being creepy.'

I suppose Tsunade, the interfering hag, was right in her way, when she told me the same thing.

However, Tetsuo grunts derisively. "Blood." He shakes his head and gestures a hand disgusted toward us. "What about choice?"

And with that, he leaps up and returns to the trees, disappearing among the leaves.

Ouka and I both watch him, she with perplexity and I with interest. That was the most I've ever heard him say about himself.

I think it might've been important.

-----

On the fifth day of Naruto's absence, I see Sakura again, staring at me across a crowded market street. I glower back because I don't like people staring at me and she's probably thinking unflattering thoughts besides.

//Oh yes. That's so very helpful.//

'Enough, you.'

//Just go over there, the clock is ticking down.//

I'm not going.

//Tick, tick, tick.//

The street begins to fill past capacity with the bustle of everyday life.

//I do not know why you are so resistant. This is merely a mission. A goal. Go to her.//

For an instant, I consider it, my stomach tugging towards her at the thought, enough to make my foot slide forward. It's the only thing that would give me any clear-cut direction right now. But
when I look again, Sakura has disappeared amongst the mob of people, just another nameless face in the crowd, unnoticed and unremarkable.

-----

As I sit up watching over a dying Naruto, the two scouts I dispatched ages ago finally return, wrapping around my ankle and arm in a familiar caress. They hiss contentedly at me as I absently stroke my fingers along the tops of their smooth heads.

I call them "Green" and "Black" because one of them is green and the other black. They haven’t told me their names, if indeed they have any since they have taken no objection to my naming them. On occasion, I call them "Greenie" or "Blackie", but that is rare and they usually just go about their business, bringing me information when necessary before slithering off again and I am content to let them do so.

For the first time in longer than I care to recount, there is good news.

"We have found a trail to the tree village you seek," hisses Green.

"Free of the stink of humans," finishes Black.

"Good," I say. "Very good." I push myself to my feet and Black slithers his way up my leg and over my body to my unclaimed arm. I walk to the back of the shelter.

Groaning in pain as I am forced to kneel, I shake Naruto’s shoulder gently to rouse him. I clutch my side, trying to ease the pressure on my ribs.

"Naruto, wake up."

Green and Black flick their little tongues at me in a strangely friendly manner.

"I don’t have any time for this," I grumble and jostle Naruto hard enough to rattle loose the useless brain inside his skull.

"Nyah-nurgh," he says.

Close enough.

"I’m taking you to Konoha."

"No!" He yells, suddenly coherent.

I clap my hands over his mouth to prevent any further outbursts. Surprised and slightly unnerved, Green and Black slip free from my wrists to land on the forest floor where they writhe anxiously on either side of Naruto’s head. Their tails flip back and forth as their thin tongues taste the diseased air.

"Be quiet," I whisper angrily to the blonde and receive a shooting pain in my side for the effort. But it looks like Naruto’s having a difficult time breathing, so I let go and lean close until our faces almost touch. "Be quiet, dobe. Do you want to let everyone know we’re here?"

They could be friend or foe – there’s no way to know – and I can’t chance it. I can’t rely on Green and Black to accurately tell me who’s out there. Their descriptions are usually limited to “human, possibly male”. Sometimes they’ll give me an extra little tidbit like “light hair”, but that could be Kakashi or Kabuto and I don’t fancy meeting either to be perfectly honest.
I don't want to go to Konoha, that land of betrayal and hatred and utter selfishness.

They are the cause of everything: Itachi, Naruto, me.

I don't want to go back there.

I hate Konohagakure and every last one of its inhabitants.

But Naruto is dying.

I don't need to be a medic-nin to see that.

//Let him die.//

Black, skittish with all the activity, glides back to me and curls his sleek body around my neck, weaving his head into the ends of my hair. The more bold Green flicks his tongue at Naruto's face.

"No, no," the patient mumbles breathily. "Konoha... no... Sasuke... no, no... other... hurt... can't... Sasuke..."

I haven't the faintest idea what he's attempting to tell me, but it doesn't matter.

I could always just drop him off there and flee. Hopefully, under the cover of darkness, no one will even know I was there until after it's too late.

"We're going."

"No! Kyuubi... hurt... Konoha... Sasuke..." It's taking way too much energy for him to spew this nonsense. Energy he doesn't have to spare.

Green leans forward and let his tongue tap Naruto's cheek.

"This one tastes of the swamp," he says, which means he thinks Naruto is beyond hope.

But I have to believe that isn't true. I have to believe that there are enough of Naruto's friends in Konoha to protect him. I have to trust them to know what to do, to spare him and heal him, and to protect him from the village.

So now I have to do the one thing I never wanted to do.

Go back.
Chapter 28

The streets of the village are as familiar as they always have been and "good" section or "bad" section makes no difference, they are equally unfriendly. In Konoha nothing ever really changes.

And I’m having a hard time reconciling myself to anything. The time of reconciliation has passed.

//Cease this foolishness.//

All I want now is to rid myself of this nagging parasite.

I'm not sure anymore where of us one ends and the other begins because I'm not sure that there is a "one" and an" other" anymore.

//This is all irrelevant. We must find the girl. Do your duty for once. I do not believe for a second that you would truly let yourself die for pride. You are too much the coward for such misplaced nobility. And it is all just as well. In death you achieve nothing, but in life . . //

'What do you care, when you're trapped in my mind? Besides, you're so old, all the people you knew are probably dead. Who's left for you to get revenge on?'

//Hardly, my pet. Those horrible impediments to your future were the same ones that stood in the way of mine. So we, in fact, have an enemy in common. Does that not count for something?/

'Not really.'

//What nonsense. Do you not want to destroy them utterly? Exact the revenge on that old useless council that has been long overdue since before even my day?//

I stop to think, snarling at an unfriendly man muttering in the corner and spitting in my general direction. The crazy part is, he probably doesn't even know why he hates me. It just starts randomly somewhere and spread like an epidemic from one weak mind to the next.

//Stop waxing philosophical. What is wrong with you! Spend your energy with survival and then revenge and then power, yes power always lies at the end.//

'You are so insane even I'm having a hard time believing it'
He’s awfully fixated on the whole “survival equals Sakura equals children” thing and that it is enough to make me avoid it. Not that I don’t have reason enough anyway.

Konoha hates me and I them and I don’t think there’s anything that makes it worth staying anymore.

The hitae-ate around my upper arm chafes. It’s been long since I wore that and it feels alien, especially when not tied around my head. But my forehead had been bare these past few years and it can no longer withstand the weight of that metal. It stays no better on my arm. I can’t help but wonder if this is some sort of omen.

//Since when do you believe in such whimsical trash?//

'Since now, maybe. And what do you care?'

The stalls of food, weapons, clothing, and everyday needs all around me like a labyrinth, filled with things I can’t afford to buy.

A somewhat familiar face ducks behind one of the seller stall curtains when I walk by. I gaze indifferently at the half-moon face exposed on the one side of the curtain. She blinks her white eyes in a rapid succession of nervous ticks, but doesn’t look away.

Someone bumps into me as I stand parked in the center of the dusty road. He throws invectives and paltry insults at me as if his inability to look where he’s going is somehow my fault.

The Hyuuga girl's little ivory hand wraps around the fabric that conceals her and almost takes on color with the force of her grip. She shuffles her feet subconsciously, anxiously kicking one of the numerous bags that collect around her. My eyes flick down for only a moment before I blink back up to her face. Her fingers curl in, pulling back the curtain slightly. Her eyelids droop halfway in an oddly kind gesture as the corner of her mouth tilts up.

The whole scene strikes me as utterly surreal.

//It would appear that she will impose on you when there is no one to see and report the unpleasant objectionable company she keeps. Now that someone may see, may talk, or may tell, she wants nothing to do with you. What typical Konohagakure behavior. It is just as well. She is, after all, useless. She will bear you no heirs.//

I feel a small sharp pain in the pit of my stomach as if I have eaten some bad fish.

The parasite is constantly complaining about something, as if I care how things upset him. Everything upsets him.

The clock of the world begins ticking again, cycling its invisible hands indelibly around its uncaring face.

I turn and walk away.

But I hear clearly when the girl gathers up her bags and steps outside her comfort zone.

Then I hear a thump and a cascade of crumpling paper as a man bumps into her and curses – probably the same one that did so to me earlier. He’s likely unaware that she’s a member of the eminent Hyuuga clan. If you don't look at the color of her eyes, you'd never know she was a
member of that honored and feared family. She doesn’t have the bearing.

The sounds of stumbling and mumbling and packing now reach me and I know that she has too many packages to adequately handle herself, especially with those fretful, quaking hands.

//Leave her. It is too late now. She already bears an heir.//

//Leave her.//

I incline my head back over my shoulder and witness her futile struggle. Then I begin to head in her direction.

//Such soft sentimentality.//

A favor given is a favor returned.

//As I said.//

The fact that it irritates the parasite is of course more than half the point.

Crouching down beside her, I quietly begin helping her redeposit her various items within her bags. The Hyuuga girl flinches and stills, the tips of her tiny, slim fingers drawing small unintentional lines in the dirt. In the corner of my vision, I can see her too-white eyes looking at me. Once the packing is done, I stand and slap my hands against my pants to clear them of dirt. As if in slow motion, Hinata unbends her knees, a handle bag in each hand following her up like long, heavy sleeves.

I’ve lost track of time; the days tend to run together when there is so very little to distinguish one from the other.

But there’s a noticeable bulge to her belly, pushing against the seams of her fluffy coat and stretching them to their limit.

We stand like two simpletons in the street, blocking the main thoroughfare.

"Hey, take your little girlfriend somewhere else, buddy!" Someone yells.

Hinata blushes.

I stare at her.

Then she glances down at the large overstuffed paper bag that rests by her leg, the same one I refilled only seconds ago. She waits the duration of a butterfly’s wing beat before bending for it. But I beat her to it, grabbing the parcel ungraciously and hating the crinkling, crushing sound it makes. The Hyuuga girl looks up at me and gives me that shy erratic twist of a smile. I don’t smile back.

Without request, without demand, she pivots in the direction of her home and I walk quietly beside her.

//How many times must I say it? This girl is entirely worthless. What are you going to do? Try to pass it off as your own?//

I estimate the expanse of her waistline. She’s not too far along and in all likelihood, she got pregnant sometime after I arrived, making it outwardly possible.
I wonder if such a thing would actually work . . .

//Oh yes, of course. And what will you do to explain away the fact that it doesn't look like you?//

'You can hardly tell by babies. Besides, the Hyuugas and Uchihas are related. The difference would be negligible.'

//And when the child grows and shows no sign of the sharingan? That is what they are after. Do you think they will simply forget about that after a baby unrelated to you pops out of the girl? Those old councilors would be even more unforgiving when they discover you have deceived them.//

'Pops out?'

//Best of all, have you not forgotten that the old hag warned you against the Hyuuga girl? I suspect they already know about the child and the father. No, you would be convincing no one.//

Unfortunately, I suspect he is right about that last part, but old Oro sounds a little desperate and that makes me smirk.

//Do not mock, my boy. So enlighten me, will you begin thinking straight or will you be writing your eulogy? Because the marriage with this girl would be pitifully short. "Til death do us part" would come very quick indeed. Are you prepared for that?//

I scowl. I thought I was. No, I am. Only now I'm not so sure.

//I rather thought not.//

He sounds oddly . . . relieved.

The Hyuuga girl, having caught me eying her and more specifically her belly, tips her head and gives me a quizzical look.

I glower and snap my head away.

She seems unbothered by my attention and though plainly curious, she doesn’t ask.

I’ve never been inside the Hyuuga compound before. It seems like a miniature forbidden city, and I somehow doubt I’ll be given the red carpet treatment. Instead, I pause outside the main gates.

The girl peers back at me, her eyelids fluttering nervously, as her gaze travels everywhere but actually at me.

"Y-you can c-come in," she offers weakly.

I blink slowly at her.

"Th-they-re all . . .," she releases a little awkward laugh through her nose. "No one else is here."

"No one?"

She shrugs and it looks like she's trying to burrow her head in the tall collar of her coat. "No one that would c-care."

Giving her a curt nod, I shift the bag in my arms and enter the hallowed halls of Hyuuga.
They remind me very much of the Uchiha sector, only grander and more contained. This is not especially surprising. Both Hyuuga and Uchiha were considered amongst the elite clans once upon a time.

Once upon a time.

//It could be so again; it should be.//

That is long past and long lost. I don’t believe there’s any chance of restoring their honor now.

//Weakness. Defeatist.//

Without ceremony, I deposit my bag next to hers on an unremarkable table in what looks to be fancy dining room. My task completed, I give her another nod, slightly more polite than the last, brush my errant hair from my eyes and head to the door.

Her stuttering voice stops me.

"S-sasuke-sa-," she stops briefly, purses her lips and lifts her chin a fraction. "Sasuke-kun."

I grace her with as suitably a congenial expression as I can form at the moment.

She worries her lower lip between her teeth and takes a moment to nod to herself before speaking.

"W-would," she clears her throat as though it has suddenly gone dry. "Would you like me to take c-care of that?"

My eyebrows pull together. "Take care of what?"

She waves her hand limply at me to indicate . . . something, but I have no idea what "limp wrist" translates to. She clarifies. "Your hair."

I blink several times in rapid sequence and if on cue my hand reaches up and pushes the hair from my eyes.

"You do . . . do that a lot," she says, indicating again vaguely the way I push my hair from my face.

I do? I wasn't aware of anything like that.

//You do. All the time.//

'Then why didn't you mention it, you useless parasite?'

//It makes no difference to me what nervous habits you adopt. Besides, I rather like long hair.//

'You're pathetic.'

Hinata, having exited the room, now returns and displays a hand mirror in front of my face. What is it with girls and mirrors anyway? Do they have to carry them everywhere?

Dutifully, I look in the mirror and what I see is him. Itachi. The traitor, the murderer, my savior, my brother. There is, of course, the family resemblance, but we also used to have distinction from one another. Now, when I look at my reflection, I can unmistakably see him.

It's the hair.
With an inadvertent guiding of my fingers, I had brushed it into a single unit and tied it together with a spare length of fabric I found lying on the apartment floor. It is such a small thing, but it really makes a difference. I haven’t had the time to worry over it and I don’t much fancy a stranger approaching my head and throat with what amounts to a very sharp weapon.

But I also haven’t cared.

My appearance after my Konohagakure captivity has been of little to no importance to me. Funny that everyone thought me to be narcissistic about my looks, but I really wasn’t. Though now that I’ve looked in the mirror, I should probably to change it.

I should find a pair of scissors.

//I rather like it long, my dear. It is very becoming, more . . mature.//

'Yeah, right. And, I'm sorry, but unlike some people, I don't care to parade around what amounts to an old, moldy mop sitting atop my head.'

Irritably, I reach out and press on the mirror rim, forcing both it and the girl's hand down without much resistance.

The white in white eyes that look back at me are mirrors themselves, showing me exactly how I appear in other people's eyes.

"Cut it."

And the Hyuuga girl gives me a smile that for once lacks the normal nervousness.

The scissors snip methodically over and over, a quiet metallic sound accompanying the languid clank of the deer chaser knocking hollowly against stone.

Hinata continually pulls a comb through my too-long hair and I discover that it has a similar effect regardless of who does the brushing.

This isn’t encouraging.

My eyelids feel heavy, my vision foggy and there is a pleasant stirring in the depths of my belly. It is a soothing sensation, as if I am satiated and sleepy, and it makes me want to close my eyes, lean back, and just let the brush go through my hair until I drift off entirely.

I suppose that means my scalp is one of my sensitive spots.

The fact that it makes me feel at ease despite the situation also discomfits me. I scarcely know the girl and yet here I am, letting her get physically close to me with lethal instruments.

I wish it were Naruto, his hands on my scalp, large and warm, pulling through my hair like he'd sometimes do. I'd wake up and he'd be watching me, twisting the ends of my bangs in his fingers.

I can see him now. Smell him, taste him, feel him . . .

This is not helping. I need to stop doing this.

//That is the first thing of any sense you have uttered all day.//

I did need the cut, though.
"I - ," the girl starts, then stops abruptly. She combs back another section of hair and clips it neatly between her fingers.

"What?" I make my voice as flat as I can.

Her hand slides free from my head and lands curiously on my shoulder where she brushes off several stray hairs. "I-I'm surprised you let me do this."

"Hn."

"I can't seem to do anything about the back." Her small hand presses down the hair at the top of my head to illustrate her predicament.

"It's fine." I try not to shift uncomfortably in my chair. "It's always been like that, since I was a kid."

//What is with this conversation? All this wasted time that you do not have . . .!/\n
"R-really?" She releases the hair and seems to consider it. She brushes out another length and I hear the concise snip-snip of her work. "I guess I sort of remember that. I wasn't paying too much . . . attention, I think."

I take a long time to enjoy the gentle pull when she combs back from my temple. I let pass a slow, relaxing moment before continuing. "I remember you."

Her hand stops and all I hear for a while is the dull rhythm of the deer chaser.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

She resumes her task without comment.

"I watched everyone," I say. "To some extent. If I was to be the best, I had to know the competition."

//Why is it you are always most talkative when it is of least use?!!

"Oh?" She inquires with a curious lilt.

"I’m an Uchiha." That says it all.

She circles around to the front to attempt tackling my bangs. My eyes blink too often in the quick, silver flash of the shears. Her eyes keep flicking up to my hair and back down to my chest to avoid looking at me.

"I-I can understand that," she offers sympathetically.

"Hn."

Her mouth pulls up into a small smile.

"I could . . . could n-never live up to my father's expectations." She snips a hair near my forehead and
shrugs. "But I still try."

"Hn."

She floats the end of her fingers through the top of my bangs. My eye contracts and she drops her hands so that they hang straight at her sides. Her head lowers so all she sees is the ground at my feet and all I see is the top of her head.

"I think Naruto is the same."

I blink slowly, reopening my eyes only halfway. "Ah."

"Only, he has to prove him . . . himself to everyone." I can see how her hands twitch, itching to come together. "I admired that."

Her lips turn up to a small, sad, almost wistful curve.

"I had a . . ." she hums tonelessly when she pauses, "crush on him."

"I know," I say more bitterly than I intended.

She simply brings her fingers together, maneuvering the scissors between them like a compass point to heaven. "When he and Sakura fell apart, the idea that I could lose my ch-chance was part of the reason I found . . . the courage to approach him."

Her head swivels away to a distant corner of the yard. The stutter that is so much an integrated part of who she is has all but disappeared.

//What do you care? I have told you, she is worthless. This is nothing more than an exercise in futility Time is running out../

'As long as it bothers you.'

//Tick, tick, tick, Sasuke my dear. Tick, tick, tick.//

"It di-didn't work." She laughs lightly. "He didn't even know I had liked him all those years!"

"He's dense," I snort softly and turn my head to the side.

"I know." There’s a charged pause before she lifts her head and I'm forced to face her as she clips the last of my too-long hair.

"That's why," she whispers, her voice dropping lower with each word so that I have to strain to make her out at the end. "He'll never know unless you tell him."

"Tell him what?"

Her fingers linger a moment near my brow, then she quickly pulls them down, squeezing several hairs of my bangs over and over to shape them into points.

Quickly, she moves around me, mumbling something that sounds suspiciously like "he's not the only one who's dense", though I can't be sure. The girl sighs and places the weapon down on the wooden floor with a clink. With a whoosh and a flourish, she removes the towel around my neck as though performing a magic trick. She snaps it suddenly so it makes a reverberating popping sound, ridding it of my shorn hair.
Once again, she is holding that mirror up to show me my reflection.

It’s better than I expected.

//You look the same as you did when you resided in Sound.//

Actually, it’s a little shorter than it was then and the bangs are thinner.

"I c-couldn't do anything with the b-back," she repeats apologetically.

"It's fine," I tell reiterate. "It's been that way since I was a kid."
"Sasuke-san!" Ouka-chan yells ecstatically as the little bundle of energy hurtles toward me. I duck out of the way and she lands with a clunk like a stone into the dirt behind me. Kohana is luckier, or more talented in her aim, and lands squarely on my shoulder, latching on with tiny puppy claws. She yips at me and I get an unfortunate whiff of her nasty puppy breath.

I rotate very slowly, the dog still sticking to me like glue, and face Ouka. She’s laying in a tumble at the foot of a large tree, smiling at me like her crash was exactly as she intended.

I give her an exceptionally dry look. "What," I ask carefully, "is this?"

Kohana barks at me and wags her tail; I can feel it thumping against my arm.

"Look, look!" The little girl yells cheerfully, tilts back onto her hands, and launches herself feet first at the nearest trunk. Kohana leaps free from me at last, bares her claws and lodges herself to the tree right beside her partner. With a display of self-congratulation worthy of Naruto, Ouka marches up the side of the tree and then upside down onto an outstretched branch. She waves me at me down on the ground, grinning like mad. I keep my arms crossed.

"See?" She calls down at me and lifts one of her legs to the side in a clumsy ballet-like move. The puppy jumps from branch to tree over and over, not even needing to concentrate to do so. Ouka twirls her leg – showing off – and then in pure vintage Naruto fashion, slips off the branch and comes careening towards the earth.

She flaps her arms a few times in a futile attempt to take flight before tucking into a ball, rolling two times and landing in a perfect crouch at my feet.

Kohana yips and leaps and wags her tail, completely unconcerned by her partner's near death experience.

Ouka straightens up and throws her hands back. Her grin nearly splits her face in two.

I raise an eyebrow critically. "You fell."

She pouts for a second then lifts a finger importantly at me, and smiles. "But with grace."

I have nothing to say to that.
Tetsuo, who has snuck silently up behind me, snorts.

"Oh! But that's not the best part!" Ouka cries, implying that there was something about her performance to be excited about.

The puppy, forgotten far above us, jumps with joy and races down the tree.

"Hn." I am not particularly interested.

"Oh, no." Anko warns us after appearing from nowhere. "I'll have no one acting lackadaisical about this." She grins widely in that way that always makes me think she's up to something. "We," she says importantly, "have a C-ranked mission."

I can't hide the slight widening of my eyes. "A traveling mission?"

The left side of Anko's mouth twists cruelly. "Oh, yeah. Get ready my little ninjas. Thanks to the impressive powers of persuasion of yours truly, we have landed ourselves an honest-to-goodness C-ranked mission." She plants her hands to her hips and sticks out her chest and I suppose we are meant to bask in her greatness.

Tetsuo snorts again.

I quite agree.

Ouka giggles nervously.

Anko's "powers of persuasion" notwithstanding, this seems a little too easy. I don't trust it. "Me too?" I ask.

"Oh, yes, Uchiha-boy. You, too." Her beady eyes bore into me, still waiting for accolades she won't receive.

I don't trust her any of this.

The council would never cave so quickly without reason. Even so, I'll take it. I'm sick to death of Konoha and its menial tasks. No matter the ulterior motive, it'll be nice to finally be able to stretch my skills after months of relative inactivity.

I give Anko a twisted little smirk of my own and she nods as if in approval.

-----

On the seventh day of Naruto’s absence, Sakura almost talks to me. I could tell she wanted to, the words like buzzing bees trapped inside her mouth. When I see her, there is a pull, gentle but insistent, tugging at the back of my spine.

She stops and stares, her lower lip twitching and her eyes near to watering from the pain of holding back.

I almost say something.

There’s this new niggling burn at the back of my brain, like guilt or longing, wanting me to go to her.

Instead, I simply stand and wait, watching her struggle, knowing I could save her, but choosing to watch her drown.
But what is there for us to say to each other anyway?

Then she blinks and tightens her lips and with a few partings of her mouth, awkwardly turns around, stilted in her steps as if on the edge of deciding, and leaves.

After a moment I leave too, in the exact opposite direction.

-----

"Are you going to die?" Green asks me in a disconcerting mix of irascibility and glee.

"Ngh," I reply, repositioning the Naruto-shaped burden on my back. For someone who looks so thin, he has a lot of heft to him. My legs keep slipping beneath me.

"If you die," Green adds, "We will bring our kin back to consume your corpse."

"How nice," I answer feebly and quicken my lagging pace.

"It is a great honor," Black is swift to assure me. "We would not eat just any human." He says it as though 'human' is synonymous with "sewer sludge". Perhaps to a snake it is.

"Let's just keep moving, shall we?"

I have to adjust Naruto's leg again; it keeps sneaking lazily below my arm. His body is scorching against my spine, as the fever presses itself through my clothes and straight to my skin. The side of his temple rests lightly on the nape of my neck, warm and clammy and brimming with infection.

We've been traveling for hours nonstop, taking a circuitous route to Konohagakure suitable only for snakes and fugitives on the lam, but I suppose snakes are leading me and we are fugitives, so it is to be expected.

"Is he your kin?" Queries Green, the over curious, gregarious one of the two serpents.

"No," I rasp steadily.

"Then why do you not leave him? The bugs would be grateful for the offering of his flesh."

"Hn," I say, my mind flooding with distasteful images. "There are people who'd miss him," I add by way of explanation. My sight has gone shadowy.

"But not you?"

"No."

Green hisses through his thought process as I trudge along in near silence; the only sounds are my feet's clumsy advancement.

"Then why?"

That's a good question. A very good question. "I don't know."

"Look here, the leaf nest comes into sight," Black interjects almost cheerily.

I blink several times until I see it. The wall of the village, the many repetitive rooftops, and up above that, watching over it all like gods on high are the rock chiseled faces of the former leaders.
"What about us?" Green asks out of nowhere.

"Huh?"

Black stops and curls in on himself, turning his head and his large yellow eyes on me. He samples the air inquisitively. "Would you mind us? Would you carry us home?"

"Yes," I answer without a moment's hesitation, because I would.

There's a long pause as the reptile pair loop their heads to and fro in a melodic manner.

"You seem heavy," Green comments strangely, pulling back on his momentum.

"Hn." My legs are cement connected to a useless column of flesh that keeps tipping over under the pressure of its own weight. My eyelids droop and I have to keep blinking them back open, forcing them wide in my endeavor to say awake.

"Here is a pleasant cut of tree," Black says conversationally. "May you want a pause?"

Oh, that sounds very nice.

And without preamble, I fall to the ground like a sandbag whose rope tethers have been suddenly cut loose.

-----

Kakashi's library is surprisingly diverse, containing far more within it than just the Icha Icha series. I've actually taken to reading more these days than I ever did before.

I don't sleep well.

//Aren't there more crucial things to attend to than reading?//

Hmph. 'I don't much feel like doing them.'

There's a restrained knock on the door, which makes me wonder who could possibly be calling. No one I know is restrained in any way, shape, or form. Excepting perhaps the Hyuuga girl, but she is so beyond restrained that I somehow doubt she would venture over for a friendly visit.

I don't know why any of them would bother visiting.

//It is almost cute how socially inept you are. Except that it is putting a major hitch in my plans.//

'Your plans?'

//Yes, they are no secret. Nor do I think they are so revolutionary.//

'Hmm.'

It's not the Hyuuga girl at the door.

It's Iruka.

And he's smiling at me.

"May I come in?" He asks politely.
I stare at him for a minute but when his expression doesn't alter, I step back from the open doorway. He offers up a congenial smile with a nod and enters the dragon's den. When I shut the door, it makes a small sound that rouses my former teacher from his thoughts and causes him to turn to me.

He hands over a dark colored bundle. "I'm returning your shirt."

I’d forgotten about that. I take it and nod.

The smile has apparently been tattooed into place because it sticks determinedly to his face. "Can we talk?"

Oh no.

I let my eyes narrow as I consider this latest request then solemnly nod again in reluctant agreement.

//You know that this is yet another waste of time to add to your long list.//

'Of course. I am not an idiot.'

//Then I really rather wonder why must you put us through this torture.//

I doubt I'll be able to simply say "no" and have that be an end to it. That’s hardly worked so far.

Orochimaru groans, halfway a whine.

'There's also the bonus that it annoys you. Any opportunity I have to do that I feel compelled to take. You ought to know that by now.'

I casually place my returned shirt on a sideboard and follow Iruka into the living room where he has made himself at home. He paces a few lengths and then motions with his hand as if this is his home rather than mine.

But then I suppose it is as much his as mine. Because it certainly isn't mine.

"Have a seat," he says. He’s even more confident and smiley than before.

The edges of my eyes pinch, making little rays of darkness spread out from the corners.

"Please," he implores and it sounds so close to actual pleading that I sit.

He takes a seat opposite me and continues with that infuriating and inexplicable grin.

"So I hear you've been having some interesting training lessons lately," he says at last.

"I guess," I reply flatly.

//What is this nonsense?//

'I have no earthly idea. Now shut up.'

"And your team - the rumor is you've been getting along with them well," he pitches up the last word to alter the statement into a question.

“Hn.” I guess this is some sort of official teacher visit.
"Well, yes," answers Iruka cheerily, "straight from the leader's mouth."

As if I could trust anything she says.

"And you and Sakura and . . . Naruto," he pauses at each name for emphasis. "All getting along?"

"Hn."

There’s got to be something more interesting in Konoha to talk about than my life.

//You brought this upon yourself. I told you.//

Iruka's smile softens and he takes a moment to glance out the window. His eyes rove the sky outside as we sit together, quiet and stupid.

"This must be so difficult for you," he muses, more to himself than to me. I raise one eyebrow in inquiry. "Everyone keeps prodding and poking about you and Naruto, I know," he explains. "And what you probably need is some time and space. Unfortunately, those are two things you just won't get. It's unfair, I know, but that's how it is."

"Why?" I sound a bit more anxious than I intended, wondering if he knows something I don't.

"No, no, no," he rushes to amend, moving his hands emphatically in front of him. "I didn't mean to sound so dramatic, it's just . . . let me tell you something about Naruto." He takes a breath and slowly lets it out again. "He's stubborn."

"Oh?" As if that's some big mystery.

//Oh, hardly. Why are you wasting time discussing the boy yet again when you ought to be pursuing the girl?//

Iruka smiles again and shakes his head. "Maybe I should tell you about the time before he found you." My old teacher looks up at me hopefully, but all I do I lift my eyebrows minutely and blink. He takes that as a "continue."

//Perhaps if you actually spoke a little more often, then people wouldn't take your every little gesture as something of great and elaborate meaning.//

'Why do you even care?'

//Because your attitude keeps getting us trapped in these pointless conversations and pulling us away from important objectives.//

"I'm assuming you know he and Sakura dated for a while?" Iruka speaks so bluntly that for a moment I’m taken aback, though I show none of this on the outside and silently agree.

"He had a crush on her for such a long time," Iruka says and chuckles with a distant look in his eyes. Hidden within my lap, I clench my hands tightly together. "Though towards the end even I thought it was more habit than anything else. It just didn't have that . . . passion? . . . it used to. I'm not sure how to explain it. But he had liked her for so long and she seemed to finally reciprocate, so I for one was happy for him."

My hand is beginning to hurt and my chest too while I try to regulate my breathing to something resembling normal. "And why should I care?"

Iruka forges on, as if I never spoke.
"They seemed happy for a while, but then something changed. Or maybe something became clear. I don't know what exactly happened. I had to read through the lines of what Naruto told me." He smiles again affectionately, and looks over my shoulder for a second before returning to my face. "He said he broke it off because Sakura had some crazy notions about him. I suspect Sakura’s the one who broke it off. Once Naruto gets something into his head, he’s too stubborn to let go. But they at least try to remain friends," he adds this caveat after hearing my doubting snort. "I didn't actually find out what Sakura told him until after Hinata."

My skull is pinching in on my brain and pushing the contents slowly through my pores and hair follicles. My jaw is beginning to ache too. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Hold on, I'm getting there." He sighs. "Poor Hinata," he shakes his head sympathetically. "She harbored that crush on Naruto so quietly for so long, I think it almost crushed her. And Naruto was clueless. When she finally approached Naruto, I think everyone was shocked. But again I was happy. They could've been good together. And if nothing else, it seemed like she might shed a little of that debilitating shyness. And I think she has."

"She's pregnant," I almost blurt out, for no reason.

My gut twists and lurches and tugs.

//While this is true, it is irrelevant. As is this conversation. And speaking of which, isn't there a girl you should be visiting?//

"I know," Iruka concedes quietly. He then immediately picks up the dropped thread of conversation. "I don't know what happened between them, but I think they're both better for it. Hinata gained a little confidence and Naruto gained a little insight. Though not without a great deal of resistance."

"Insight," I ask despite my better judgment, "about what?"

"Himself." The smile fades from Iruka's lips as he gives me a serious look, clasping his hands over the edge of his knees. He gives me a penetrating look and purses his lips in thought. "Sakura had told him that it could never work between them because he was in love with someone else. And had been for a long time."

I resist shifting uncomfortably in my seat and Iruka nods knowingly.

"You."

I’m giving him what is supposed to be either an uninterested or disgusted expression, but I think I may have ended up looking sick because Iruka raises his brows and chuckles at me.

"Don't think he just immediately came out and confessed. I mostly had to figure it out based on what little I knew.” He grins tightly. “No, Naruto didn’t like the idea one bit.”

There's no reason why I ought to be offended by this, but I am. It makes it sound as if I am the worst possible choice for anything.

//Hardly the case, my dear. You are the perfect choice for many things . . .//

Ugh. 'Just be quiet. Be quiet!'

"Is there a point to all this?" I ask.
But Iruka laughs again and shakes his head and I'm beginning to wonder if this is some nervous habit of his to which I am only now becoming privy.

"Just hold on. I'm getting there." He sighs. "I realized, after hearing Sakura’s claim, that she was absolutely right. For the past three years, a large part of Naruto’s life was about you. You were always somewhere in the back of his head. And I think it had been like that for a long time."

I adjust my position.

"Now, I'm not saying he had nothing else or loves no one else or has no one else. Far from it," the man continues valiantly, disregarding my discomfiture. "I think he assumed his feelings meant friendship or brotherhood. And I believe that's exactly what it was at first. But it slowly grew, so slowly that he didn't notice the change. I don’t think he could feel this way for anyone else, male or female. No one else can be what you already are to him."

There are a few moments of tense silence until I can take it no longer.

"And why are you telling me this?"

"I’m telling you this because you need to understand." Iruka says, unperturbed. He pauses as if to let this sink in, but I have no idea what he wants to sink in, so I simply stare at him blankly.

"Such a simple child."

'Shut. Up.'

Iruka looks at me a long time, as he did when I was a student and he was doing his best not to yell at us to "sit down and shut up".

"Naruto likes girls," the man then states matter-of-factly. "Always has, probably always will I suspect. You," he points at me, "are the exception. And that's a pretty big exception to make. He’s having a hard time coming to terms with it." Iruka shrugs noncommittally. "It’s not easy for someone who wants to be straight, who always thought he as straight, to suddenly realize he’s attracted to another man. Frankly, no one was especially surprised at the revelation of his deep . . . affection for you. But he kept going from person to person in the hopes that someone would refute it.

"No one would."

He pauses for dramatic effect.

"He was basically forced to accept it. But once he did, he embraced the idea fully. You know how Naruto is, and once he sets his mind to something, he won't stop until he has it. Even so, he’s still not entirely comfortable with it.

"Do you understand?" He considers me a little too seriously.

I purse my lips. "Should I?"

Iruka lets out a long breath of air and clenches his hand until I see the knuckles go white. "But I’m guessing he’s rushing in headlong before wither of you is ready."

He gives me a meaningful look as though this is supposed to have some special significance.

"What did he tell you?" I say these words through painfully clenched teeth.
"Not much. Just enough to guess."

This isn’t helping and it burns as it enters my lungs; I’m so furious that these issues are deemed worthy of anyone’s concern but my own. Iruka continues to stare.

"What?" I bark shortly, at my patience’s end.

"Oh," he says cryptically. "I see."

I huff noisily through my nose. Iruka hums, the way everyone does around me and folds his hands into a neat pile. "He's going to make mistakes. This is as hard for him as it is for you. Maybe more so." He peers through the side window, crusted with dirt and old forgotten drops of rain from old, forgotten rainstorms. "Give it time and be understanding. I think you'll find it worth it in the end."

My lower lip pushes put past my upper as I saw my teeth together and there’s nothing I want to say to him.

//How about you tell him to get out. Why do they all propose to “care” and insist on sticking their noses in where they don’t belong? Aren’t you fed up with all this helpful interfering?//

'It's none of your business.'

//I beg to differ, my pet./

I look up at Iruka and offer him my best scowl. "This is none of your business."

"Naruto is my business," he replies a bit harshly without missing a beat. "And so are you. So are all my students, present and past. I want you both to be happy," he says. "You can be as nasty to me as you like, but it changes nothing. I can still remember the child you were."

My nails are snapping beneath the skin of my palms. "And what makes you think I'd be happy with some idiot like Naruto?" I ask peevishly. No one knows better than me what’s best for me.

But Iruka just wobbles his head and whispers," Oh Sasuke, don’t be naïve."

//This man needs to go away. Now./

For once, I agree. I have had enough. More than enough. I have more than enough before he ever showed up today. Before I am forced to throw him out, Iruka claps his hands together in a gesture of closure and stands up. I quickly follow.

"Well, that’s all I had to say." He smiles a little sadly at me as he heads to the door. When he swings it open, I automatically take hold of its edge.

The bubbling boil of my rage is so fierce that it blisters my skin from the inside.

"I just thought you should know," he says in parting.

"Thanks for the shirt," I reply curtly.

Iruka opens his mouth as if he will say something more, but then thinks better of it, closing it into a strained smile instead.

I shut the door firmly when he leaves and feel the calm of great relief wash over me.
The hospital is packed to almost overflowing when I sneak in sometime near dusk.

Green and Black remain outside as I stumble through the doorway with my burden. I told them to just go home, but the two little snakes refused to leave, waiting instead for my "journey back". They probably think I'll get lost.

I don’t intend to stay any longer than it takes to drop Naruto off.

Surprisingly, no one pays any particular attention as the bedraggled form of two MIA ninja tramp in, one carrying the other on his back like a tumor. We hardly look like ourselves and I doubt anyone is expecting us to just waltz into Konoha main hospital of our own accord, so perhaps it’s not so surprising.

With a plop, I deposit Naruto in an empty seat. He looks terrible. Wan and pasty, wet with fever sweat and already a bit too thin.

But he’s no longer my responsibility. He’s from Konoha and Konoha must take him in.

Carefully, I brush a lock of hair from his forehead, rubbing a clean spot into his skin with my thumb. And then I stare at him; I suppose it’s to bid my last friend goodbye.

My last friend?

"Sas . ." he starts and I clamp my hand tight over his mouth to prevent the rest from escaping.

I feel the warmth of his breath on my palm as he settles back into fever sleep.

I take a quick look around. There are less people here now. I’ve lingered too long. Without another glance back or even another wasted thought, I rise to my feet and swiftly exit the building.

I feel dizzy and my stride is unsteady.

Night has come and the darkness is a welcome cover for me. I take a quick scan of the area, but there is no sign of either Green or Black. I’m weary and tired and overwrought and my chakra has torqued sideways the last few weeks, so it’s possible that my senses are dull, but something doesn’t feel right.

It could be they wandered off, too unnerved by all the people to want to stay, despite any promises. They are after all wild creatures, generally solitary by nature and not fond of humans.

At any rate, I have to leave with or without them. I sneak into the shadows, ready to make my escape and grant my final farewell to Konoha when I see them.

I stop in my tracks, too shocked to move.

Why would anyone do such a thing?

I fall to my knees with a loud thud, un-ninja-like. Very un-Sasuke-like.

They were harmless little creatures, not bothering anyone.
Why would someone do this?

I gingerly pick up the scattered pieces of their broken bodies within my hands.

They are so small.

I . . . don't know what to do.

My hands begin to tremble.

I . . . why do I feel this way?

I made them a promise. I need to bring them back to where they came from. Back to their families, if they have any, back at least to the place where they started.

I coil them neatly into a ball in my palms, easily portable.

Why would anyone do this?

The green and black of their smooth scaled skin curl together in a design like marble.

I barely knew them.

And yet what is this ache that crawls up from my heart?

"Hey! What are you doing there?"

Then someone is yelling. I don't recognize the voice and how can I care anyway when I carry death in my hands?

These horrible hands. They can do nothing but bring death. They cannot even protect two little snakes. Worthless, hateful, spoiled beyond redemption, they have probably killed Naruto too.

"Boy! Are you listening?"

A rough hand grabs my arm and shakes me hard as if he is something strong, as if he is something special. Slowly, I roll my head towards him and glare.

He is a doughy-faced man, replete with hitae-ate, but I doubt he's even a chuunin. He's probably the lowest level you can be and still be allowed the headband.

He looks hard into my face for a while before flicking his gaze to the side, uneasily. His clay features pull into an expression of revulsion that makes him look even more like a troll.

"Ugh, what do you have that for?"

And before I can hide them away, the man hits sharp and quick and unexpected at my hands, sending the last remnants of my almost friends flying through the air as though they are no more than refuse to be tossed.

I watch the strange silhouettes meld into the dark edge of the night and disappear.

Gone, as if they never were.

I whirl on that monster with remembered speed and force my pupils to spin with chakra past what I sustain. Once again it fails me, my old eternal enemy, my self, with a burst of star-sharp lights
behind my eyes. I can feel myself falling into unconsciousness. There a moment and then gone.

Gone into the darkness, just like Green and Black.

-----

I never did go back.

I was trapped in the hospital, too weak and deluded and mixed up with Naruto that I forgot them.

I wanted to forget them.

My promise had been turned to bitterness just like everything else I touch.

I hadn’t meant to lie that time. I had honestly intended what I said. But then time and circumstance spiraled out of my control and it is far too late now.

But it remains that they are still there, somewhere, waiting for me.

Waiting for a rest that will never come.
I have dreams sometimes, of Naruto and me and things that can never be. It’s all new to me and would probably be humiliating if not for the pain.

I bury my head into my pillow, worn smooth and soft with years of use, and now smelling of clean laundry. Sometimes I want to go to sleep and never wake up.

//Stop dawdling and get to work.//

'What work are you talking about?'

//Anything besides your useless worrying.//

I groan and roll to my side and right off the bed.

'Get a life, would you?'

//Oh, I intend to, my dear. I intend to.//

I yawn widely and go to wash up.

A knock sounds on the front door; I hear it muffled through the closed door of my bedroom.

I stop what I’m doing and perk up my ears to listen. It’s been ten days since Naruto left and not a word. Not from Kiba or Shino either. I would’ve thought with Hinata out of commission that Neji would have replaced her, but he refused.

No one even thought of asking me.

The voices outside my door are hushed and indistinct. It is soft and distant, but it sounds like Sakura. Then there is the soft padding of feet coming closer. She must be agitated. Under normal circumstances, she shouldn't be so easy to hear.

The knock this time is on my door.

I consider answering it.

//Answer it, you fool!!//
Then I change my mind.

Yet there is this strange sensation, like my hand is being guided to the door of its own accord. Then there is a much more forceful knock that breaks that unseen thread.

"I know you're in there, Sasuke," Kakashi says with the aura of the parent he is not. "Now get out here. You have a guest."

"No, Kakashi-sensei," Sakura flutters in a way so unlike her usual brashness. "If he doesn't want to see me . . ."

"Nonsense." The bang on the door is like a percussive demand.

Quickly, I glance up to the window, tempting me with its ease of escape. But some invisible force holds me back that is almost painful.

//You do not want to do that.//

'And I asked for your opinion when?'

//You need it.//

I growl low and irritably under my breath.

//Come now, what is so terribly bad about the girl? You cannot possibly be still pining over stupid, silly ninja boys, can you? I thought you had finally seen reason, that this could be your new mission.//

Quietly, I place my bare feet to the floor and slip off the bed.

//See now, not so hard.//

I’m answering the door because I don’t want to be seen as someone who runs away from everything.

//You already have that label.//

'Shit up.'

//Do not fret, my dear. I wholly support your decision. And about time, too.//

'Well, gee. Now that I have your approval, I can call my life complete.'

Disregarding the ravings of a lunatic, I open the door as though I answered it on the first knock.

Sakura is there of course, standing uncomfortably in the exact center of the doorway. Kakashi is there too, leaning one arm on the doorjamb and looking disturbingly like a man on the make. It's an odd position, especially with Sakura in the picture and I can't help but sneer at him in disgust. He looks at me with his typical bored eye.

"It's been ten days," Sakura says awkwardly. She doesn't exactly sound nervous, but she doesn't exactly not sound nervous either.

I turn to her, slowly, and for an instant, our gazes lock. There is a weird unspoken understanding that seems to pass between us, a sympathy that only we two can share.
"I know," I say. I didn’t need to be told.

//Which is a problem. You ought to be focusing on staying alive.//

'Shit up.'

Sakura gives me an almost smile, as if she’d like to but the situation doesn’t call for it. Then she nods, purses her lips and asks, "Can we talk?"

"We are, aren't we?"

With that one statement, I dissolve any understanding we might have had.

//Which is yet another problem.//

'I said shut up.'

//Stop acting like a child.//

And so we all just stand there as part of some strained tableau like a bunch of idiots.

"All right you two," Kakashi says firmly out of nowhere. "In the living room. Now." He gives us both pointed looks in turn and heads in that direction without waiting for us.

I look at Sakura and she looks at me and by unspoken, tacit agreement, we both follow our former team leader's orders. Habit, I guess.

//Habit, not habit, what difference does it make? At least this is progress.//

Kakashi is already waiting for us, seated on the couch as if he’s a counselor waiting for his next appointment. From the corner of my eye, I glance at Sakura and see that she’s staring straight at me.

Misery loves company, or so they say, but I think they're full of shit.

"Sit," Kakashi commands in the same tone he'd use for an unruly ninja dog.

But for the next few seconds, neither of us does anything. Then slowly, finally, Sakura sits down, rather primly, on one side of the couch. So I circle around back and seat myself on the far end.

Kakashi tilts his head as he glances from one of us to the other, raises his eyebrow, closes his eye and shakes his head.

I look out the window.

"So then," Kakashi leans back comfortably into the chair. "Let's talk."

Sakura squirms a little, probably imperceptible to anyone who doesn't know her, but even without looking I can feel it.

"What happened? Hmm?" Old One-eye asks in his teacher/authoritative voice. He switches his head from one of us to the other as if he actually expects us to say something.

We don't.

Kakashi groans gruffly under his breath. "Then I suppose I’ll have to do all the talking." His eyelid
droops seriously. "I don't know what exactly is going on between you two and Naruto and I don't think I really want to. You kids' drama is a bit too much for me. But I will say this," he clasps his hands in a very "father knows best" manner. "Deal with it. I’m tired of all this nervous pussyfooting around each other. Your concentration, and by result your work, is suffering. Both of you." He gives us each a meaningful look. "I've had enough of it. Now, Sakura has wisely decided to come over today and work through it. Sasuke, I want no complaints or refusals from you. You two are going to sit here and work it out if I have to create a barrier around the apartment. No doubt this has something to do with our blond-haired friend and it may be just as well that he’s not here to interfere. He’s a distraction, particularly for you, Sasuke."

I scowl especially hard at him.

"So," Kakashi continues unfazed. "I've said what I wanted to say. You are friends, you are family, and that is too important for whatever trouble exists between you to get in the way."

He pushes his palms to his knees and stands up. "I'm going to leave you two alone for a while and when I return I expect to find two fully intact, happy ninjas . . " Kakashi goes to the front door. "Well, one happy ninja and one back to normal sour one," he amends.

I snort.

Then Kakashi quietly leaves and the soft click of the door ends his speech with a sedate punctuation mark.

Sakura and I sit there, motionless and mute.

We haven't been alone since that day in the hospital supply room when I started this whole snowball rolling down that slippery slope.

//It's not rolling fast enough.//

'Yeah, yeah, I know. I did tell her I would choose her.'

//That's not exactly what you said.//

'Yes I did. That's exactly what I said.'

//I think perhaps we ought to review the connection between your brain and your mouth, I am not certain it is in proper working order.//

'Go away.'

I scowl into the air and set my chin in my hand, digging the fingers into my cheek.

"Something wrong?"

My eye twitches with irritation; I had pretty much forgotten Sakura was here.

There’s a pause and then a whoosh of air as Sakura exhales loudly.

"Things can't go on like this."

//How very right she is.//

I make an irascible noise in the back of my throat.
The gentle shift of fabric and the minute squeak of the couch are the only things I hear for a long time.

Finally, Sakura speaks. "Sasuke," she says neutrally. "Look at me."

I turn to her and school my face into its bland, uninterested mask.

She smiles sickly at me for a second then looks away, atypically nervous and demure. She’s not usually at a loss for words.

She twists back, curls her lips curiously and asks, "Did you mean what you said?"

That question could refer to so many things that I decide not to answer.

//Don't be obtuse. Say "yes". Everything you have told her are things you want her to believe are true.//

'I hardly think you can make that sweeping statement.'

My eyes shift to the corner, disgusted with my over opinionated parasite. Thinking it’s a reaction to her, Sakura purses her lips irritably and clarifies," You said that Naruto isn't what you want. That things could be different." She pauses for dramatic effect and when I still make no response, she repeats, "Is that true?"

I bite back the words that bubble up my throat and almost choke on them.

//Just answer her, my little poppet.//

'Poppet? How many times must I say I don't like nicknames?'

//Do not be so difficult. Answer.//

"Yes." Speaking that one syllable was much more difficult than I would have thought and I don't like to think about that.

Sakura gives me an astonished widening of her eyes. "Why?"

It’s such a simple question that ought to have a simple answer, but I don't have one. All simple answers waved me a fond farewell ages ago. "Because it is," I tell her.

//How very clever.//

"That isn't an answer," She retorts acerbically.

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth."

"I have. You just don't like it."

"But," her pink head makes a little circle as her eyes come to my face. She blinks a few times, pulls her lips tightly at the corners and gazes at a spot somewhere above my left shoulder. After a while, she seems to rouse herself, blinks, and lowers her eyes. A sorrowful little smile tugs at her lips. Slowly, she edges closer to me until she can reach out her hand and slide it coolly over mine.

"You miss him," she informs me and I’m startled for a moment. I look down at our hands to see
that mine has curled into a fist beneath hers.

It is a graceless moment, stark and forefront in my senses in a way entirely different from Naruto. He would have my senses buzzing on the brink, caught between nervousness and anticipation.

This is just odd.

But then there is something, I don't know what, that eases the tension inside me, severs the tautness and it’s not so bad.

"Don't you?" Sakura crooks her lip with just a hint of sadness.

//Answer the girl. The chance is finally upon you and you waver? Must I force-feed you everything? Very well then.//

'Chance at what?'

//Life of course, you silly boy. My silly little boy.//

"How would you know?" I snap back instead, surprised by the force required to get the rejoinder out.

But Sakura doesn't take the bait and smiles indulgently, skimming her fingers near my face in some vague indication. "It's obvious."

It can’t be “obvious”. I’ve worked too hard to remain impassive.

//You give the girl a little credit and not yourself too much.//

I just frown at her. "So," I concede, "what if I do? Does that mean I want to fuck him?"

Sakura flinches and yanks her hands back like the word was a missile. I intended it that way, but it won't get me any closer to my goal.

//This is not helping.//

Recovering from her shock, Sakura turns to me disapprovingly and opens her mouth to say something sharp, then seems to change her mind.

//At least she thinks before she speaks, unlike some people.//

'You've got to be kidding me. I hardly speak at all.'

//And yet no thinking goes on beforehand.//

'What do you know?'

//Ku-ku-ku-ku.//

Her big green eyes squint at me a moment, before opening wide once more, in a sort of forgiving way. The shy, crooked, half smile has returned.

"I miss him too," she says supportively and moves closer. Her hand goes back to covering mine and it’s no less awkward than it was before.

//Oh, this is promising. Very, very promising.//
"We should have heard something by now," she tells me as if I might not have known. It hurts when I think that that is a real possibility. "It's not normal." Unwittingly, she curls her hand tighter around mine. "No one will tell me anything." She turns her head swiftly away.

I feel like my knuckles might shatter under her iron grip.

"I'm afraid," she whispers, so soft I can barely hear her. "I'm afraid something might have happened to him, to all of them. And then yesterday," she flicks her eyes in my direction. "I overheard an order to send in a team to 'clean up the mess'. They were going where Naruto went."

I force an unimpressed smirk. "That could mean anything," I say. The idea that something bad could have happened now rises back to the surface, the cork in the water of my mind. "Naruto makes a mess of everything."

But Sakura is not swayed. Her eyes go a bit wide and she leans into me earnestly. "What're you gonna do if he's hurt or . . " she trails off, her gaze darting around my face. I try not to listen to the words she doesn't say. They have been in my mind too, little monsters hiding in the dark.

Her small, shaky hand lifts to my face and smoothes over my cheek. It is warm and a little clammy and while not comforting, it isn't horrible either.

//Yes, yes, this is good. Do you see? This is not so very terrible.//

"What are you going to do if he doesn't come back?" Sakura's lower lip pulses with the holding back of tears.

My hands clenches under hers.

If that were to happen, what would I do? Would I have any reason, whatsoever, to remain or continue?

//Cease the melodrama, my pet.//

If he were not here, I may as well burn Konoha to the ground.

//A worthy prospect, but not yet my pet, not yet.//

Everything I went through, everything I sacrificed would be for nothing.

//Not necessarily, my pet. Think of your family, of your duty. Of your future.//

I blink back to myself and realize that Sakura is much closer than she was a minute ago. I can smell the warmth of her breath on my face. A small knot inside me pulls tighter. She’s looking at me curiously as if she doesn't quite know how she got here. Her eyes are watery, filled with tears not yet fallen and deep in color like freshly mown grass.

She’s beautiful in her way. But wrong.

I can't help but think that.

Yet the moment I think it, that knot pulls on a string, the tail reaching towards her. It is just shy of painful, almost forced.
It is strange and unexpected and born of the absolute absence of Naruto.

It doesn't feel right and yet there it is.

"What are you gonna do if Naruto . . ."

And she can't seem to finish the sentence. She closes her eyes briefly, the pressure of her eyelids pushing out the excess water into two thin lines down her cheeks.

It seems more and more a possibility that he won't return the longer this goes on. I've seen that future first hand, deep in the forests of Fire. If it happened again, if he lost control, it's all the excuse the council would need to be rid of him.

They couldn't.

They couldn't.

If they did, I may as well lie down and die with him, which is overly dramatic but true. He's the only one that truly . . .

That strange knot in my stomach pulses, reasserting itself and pulling towards Sakura.

Something isn’t right.

My nails make a horrible scraping sound in the thick fabric of the couch. My other hand rises and clutches Sakura's arm, moving on its own and gripping tight to make her skin turn pink and white. Her hand bites into the side of my face until I can feel the individual half moon impressions of her finely filed nails.

The pain is sharp and real and essential.

Sakura is letting loose little choking sobs like hiccoughs.

We are both caught in the same grim imagery.

I want it to go away: the ache, the pain, the worry. But Sakura is pulling them all to the surface like drowning people I wish would just die already.

//Yes, yes, go along now little one.//

Orochimaru's voice is a murmur in my head, a hum in my ears, there so long I half forget it.

"What are we going to do?" Sakura's eyes open, marred with unspoken emotions that spill over into me.

I feel another tug to her.

//There, there now, little one. There, there.//

I'm sick of this pain, the swelling in my chest and the thickness in my throat.

Make it go away.

I don't want to feel anymore.

That whatever-it-is that draws me to her is growing in strength, painful at the edges and I don't
know where it came from. It feels foreign. It feels wrong.

Sakura is so near that I can barely distinguish her anymore. She smells of lavender and powder, the way I suppose girls ought to smell, but it is too sweet and artificial. Naruto's smell is raw and sour and all his own and I really shouldn't think about Naruto because that brings back the acute bitterness of his absence.

//Carefully my pet. Slowly. Easy . . //

The sensation in my gut tumbles and rolls, feeling unnatural.

"What are you going to do?"

Her question is a whisper against my lips, a cloud that in my mind dissipates into every corner like a bad deed hardly forgotten.

My heart constricts with conflicted, unwelcome, alien feelings and gives a quick agonizing lurch until the back of my teeth hurt.

Make it stop.

Sakura's knee has touched mine and her hands have moved so that one grips my wrist and the other flattens to my face, the thumb rubbing the scar over my eye.

Sakura looks at me a long moment, her eyes overflowed with worry and sadness, switching erratically from one of my eyes to the other. With the pads of her fingers, she pulls down both of my eyelids so that she doesn’t have to look at my eyes.

//That's the way, my dear, that's the way, just a little push . . //

The feeling in me lowers, twists into the inkling of pain but not, guiding me wordlessly to her.

Somehow our lips press together, awkward and tasteless, but somehow better than having to think about Naruto.

Naruto . . .

Her lips are soft and full and so not right, but I have discovered in these long days that my mind is malleable. So I make her him and fill my thoughts with the smell and feel and taste of Naruto.

I don't remember getting up or going to my bedroom door. I don't remember bringing Sakura with me. In some sense, I feel like a marionette with someone else pulling the strings.

At the same time, I don’t want to think about what may have happened to Naruto. I just need something, anything, to fill up the empty space.

Sakura is convenient.

And I am no more thinking of her than she is thinking of me. It is crude and crass and necessary. We are both thinking of Naruto rather than each other.

We tumble through the door anyway.

Naruto . . .

I don't want to think about him yet he is what I see my hands move to her. Beneath my hands, her
hair is short and coarse. Her build becomes heavier with just a little imagination, the grass green of her eyes rise above into deep blue beautiful sky. The flower sweet smell of her sours and I know that I am suddenly losing my mind.

But I don’t care. This may be my only chance to have him and I’m taking it.

She is soft. But I pretend that she is not.

She has a sweet flavor, like honey and mint, but even as I kiss her, on the back of my tongue, in the depth of my throat, I still taste the earthiness of him.

I slide my hand down her side to the delicate curve of her hip, my thumb caressing over the bone.

I know this is Sakura, but for now I can use her. Just as she is using me.

I lean my weight forward and she willingly falls into the mattress. She is muscled, thin and defined, but still soft and smooth the way I suppose girls are supposed to be. But there are too many curves where there should be edges.

But I can pretend. I can.

And this is the only path left for me, stretching straight out into the horizon. If Naruto returns, when he does, then this is the way I can be by him. It’s for the best.

I’ll never have him anyway.

And I can make myself believe that I love her.

It has always been painfully easy to lie to myself.

It feels wrong, twisted, and forced but never mind that.

And never mind that when she calls out, I’m hearing another voice.

-----

It has been an eternity since I fought like this, but I can flow right back into it like pulling on an old, worn out pair of shoes.

Naruto lands on all fours like a cat, crouching menacingly into the farthest crook of the branch. He looks to me briefly, and in that instant I know what he is planning.

It has been a long time, but I can still read him; he tells me all I need to know in one quick glance.

I unsheathe my katana and send the bulk of my chakra coursing down its blade to the tip. It curls like tiny bolts of lightning, charging the metal with electricity.

Diversion, deflection, sleight of hand, it is an elaborate ploy to conceal the true intention. Naruto and I used to be good at this I think, this working in concert and knowing instinctively what the situation demanded.

Even against each other, our fight was a dance of following the other's lead and anticipating the next move.

We knew, even through all the surprises, we knew.
That string was always strung, thin perhaps, but still there.

I . . . missed this.

That’s an odd thought.

Naruto lunges like a wild beast at his enemy and the red cloud that envelopes him starts to solidify into fox form. The film of air around him bubbles and boils but holds shape while Naruto starts to lose his. The line between demon and man is dissolving, less concrete than it was and though with this comes power, so too does the loss of humanity.

For some reason, that doesn’t sit well with me.

It isn’t about the strength he gets from it; I have a strength of my own at least equal to it.

No, it’s the lessening impression of "Naruto-ness" in the air. He is slipping away from me and I can only sense him as though from a great distance though he’s only a few meters away. That shouldn't bother me - a powerful partner is a powerful partner - but it does.

The pulse of malevolence is heavy, pressing in with each beat and echoing into the beat of my own heart.

I don’t like this.

My sword is suddenly ripped from my hand and sails through the air, flipping with baton grace before seeding itself firmly in the ground below. I dodge the immediate attack and flip over myself twice, sending forth a quick fire jutsu as another distraction so I can land expertly on the hilt on my fallen sword. I pull the chakra back into myself before jumping free.

My enemy comes at me again, but he is nothing compared to me, sluggish and unimaginative. It is as nothing. He is a fly caught in a web.

Let him think he has the upper hand, let him think that I’m overwhelmed and ensnared. He’ll discover soon enough his folly.

We too have our dance, inelegant but effective and though he thinks he has me cornered, enclosed within some unbreakable bombshell, I am about to prove him wrong. I slip free from the trap like water and it explodes high in the air, sending shrapnel shards of chakra raining down. But the touch is like the scratch of a kitten, quickly forgotten. He is re-gathering a second attack but I’m faster and initiate the sharingan to make him think I’m somewhere other than where I really am. I pool my chakra again and charge in for the killing blow when suddenly his eyes flick to the real me. I feel an instantaneous thrill of surprise and act fast, altering my trajectory in hopes of avoiding his oncoming attack. It’s not enough. He still sees me but what I feel then is not fear but anger. Anger and frustration at the unfairness of it all, that I have endured so much and still fall short.

But it will be enough. I will make it so. I’ve had my fill of this useless fight so I quickly formulate a new plan. He’s about to launch his explosives, but I’m ready.

Just then, the air goes horribly still. It sucks suddenly into a vacuum and for a moment nothing moves, nothing breathes and time simply stops. Then there is a concussive burst, not of sound exactly, but of an impact I feel down in the marrow of my bones. It’s like I’ve expanded from the inside until everything pops, a giant release of pressure all at once.

The shock is such that I don't see anything for a while, just hear the horrific sound of bones
shattering and muscles ripping.

I'm hit. I land on the ground so hard the breath is knocked out of me and for one disorienting second, my vision is gone. When I regain the full faculty of my senses, I see Naruto staring down on me, the weight of his body kneeling over mine heavier than it should be.

But no, not Naruto.

Kyuubi.

The outline is complete, encasing Naruto like a second skin, outward from his, with ears and tails and teeth ready to kill. He grows down and it vibrates inside my empty chest. His eyes are full red now, all fox with no inkling of the boy I knew. This thing, this demon over Naruto's body and inside him, presses down on me and I fight the wince when his claws cut through my skin. They embed all the way to the bone.

What a rash idiot.

His warm, fetid, animal breath fogs over my chest and puffs back up into my nose. Wild crimson eyes regard me with an unreadable emotion. Coldness is there too, like a predator sizing up its prey.

I hear the high whistle of the wind through the leaves and the piercing staccato of a bird seeking its mate. There's a buzz and chirp of insects and the baritone of Naruto-Kyuubi's deep breathing aching in my ears. All of nature simply goes on, the deadly battle barely more than a blip on its radar screen. I sense nothing else. At least nothing else human. The others are dead.

All dead.

I'm about to be joining them.

Except I won't let that happen.

The atmosphere crackles with predatory hunger, the need to burn and destroy and to feed.

I can understand that.

Looking straight into the beast's eyes - not Naruto - I wonder why he still just kneels there. In this position, he could easily tear me to shreds, but he does not.

His chest begins heaving deeper, the rumbling breath pushing through lips stretched wide over glowing white teeth. His claws press harder into my arms as though he wants to cut right through the bone. Reflexively, my head arches back, exposing the strain in my throat. Naruto-Kyuubi's upper lip quivers on one side and he stares at my neck with violet eyes. I flick my gaze to the side and catch sight of my katana just barely out of my reach. Carefully, I walk my fingers in its direction. The violet gaze shoots back to my face and he snarls, sensing my movement. He squeezes my hips between his knees and I hear the crack a moment before the pain. I release a reflexive gasp.

Kyuubi bares his teeth at me in what I can only guess is his version of a smile, and flattens his tongue up against one of his razor canines.

The smell of blood and death wafts over to us in a particularly strong breeze. Naruto-Kyuubi arches his belly hard into me, closes his eyes, and throws his head back to sniff the air. I can feel his low growl vibrate right down my spine.
I make a mad grab for my sword.

The red gaze returns to me, intense in a way I don't comprehend. He sneers a moment, his mouth pulling tight over his teeth again then lunges down and drives those sharp canines into the juncture of my shoulder and neck.

I cry out a short bark before regaining control. I grit my teeth against the pain as the force of Kyuubi's bite causes my back to bow up into him.

Our bodies meet in the middle as he continues to press down. His breathing is quick and causes him to move rhythmically over me. He hums into the wound on my throat and I can feel it tingle down to the ends of my every nerve.

My hand scrabbles in the dirt, desperately seeking my katana. Finally, I feel the familiar comfort of the hilt in my palm and quickly pull it up, hitting it into the side of Naruto's head. He doesn't move, so I keep ramming him with the hilt, over and over, harder each time, his body grinding against mine, pressing me deeper into the ground, until he's finally knocked out.

He collapses onto me in a boneless heap of sweat and bloodlust. He presses the full length of his body to me until I am completely driven into the dirt. The scent of him is pungent in my nostrils and the red outline of the Kyuubi fur is warm along my skin. I roll his body roughly off of me.

I lay there a moment willing my heart calmer as the blood slowly oozes out the bite marks in my shoulder and stains the ground red.
I am not weak.

I’m not.

But I’m not strong either.

I know this now, though I’d never admit it aloud to anyone. But I know in the way I am here with Sakura, safe and comfortable, but meaningless. If I were strong, it would be Naruto beside me, not safe, not comfortable, and frightening. I know this too.

But I am not strong.

So here I am, with this pink haired girl whose long ago crush has crumbled away, just like the person she loved who never really existed. And yet, she is here with me too.

Because she is not strong either.

When I awake, I am half dangling off the side of the bed. Sakura has curled into a little ball, hugging the wall. It’s as if we wanted to pull ourselves as far away from each other as possible.

With a groan I sit up, quickly covering my nakedness with the spare corner of sheet allotted to me. It is distressing and nauseating and I am too upset to even be sick.

I feel emptier than I did before, like the traitor I have been called. It’s like some outside force was guiding me and it makes me feel hung over like I was drunk.

If there was way to erase the last twenty-four hours . . . but there isn’t.

There is no going back and when I leave the room, I don’t even bother with a backward glance.

When I enter the bathroom, I turn from the mirror, not wanting to see myself. I already know my reflection.

Pale and sickly and disfigured, why would anyone even want me?

Damaged goods.
Sakura certainly thought so, flinching back every time she touched one of my scars.

And yet . . .

Naruto's fingers have known each mark with analytical intimacy, unafraid and accepting of all my outer flaws. The inner ones are the problem anyway.

I throw myself under a spray of hot water, hoping it can burn away my skin along with my memory.

I kneel on the floor and lean my forehead against the smooth tile, letting the steaming water boil a trail of retribution down the back of my neck. I scrub at my body to slough off the scent of her and my betrayal like a snake shedding its skin.

It’s no good.

I’m far past saving.

I shut the water off.

My head begins to throb, more than a simple headache as though my brain is swelling far enough to crack my skull.

My skin has gone pimply chill from the shock of cold after so much scalding water.

I get dressed and get out of the room.

None of the furniture is where it ought to be. None of the pictures or books or memorabilia is mine. The walls are the wrong color and even the thermostat is set too high.

This could never be my home.

But if Naruto returns, I can make it the place I live. The council wants me to have a family? They want to try again to control the Uchiha line? Fine, then. History has shown that the Uchiha blood can neither be contained nor controlled. They will get what they deserve in the end.

Much as I hate it, Snakey has a point.

An unwanted family and delayed vengeance are better than the alternative.

I expect old Oro to burst into my mind crowing with self-congratulatory exclamations, but there is only silence. And pain, constant, throbbing pain.

If Naruto returns, I will have to stay and there is only this one way.

I will have to make it work. I can make it work. I just need to fool myself, but I’m expert at that.

After all, when I was with Sakura, I made it work by filling my mind with images of blonde hair and blue eyes and golden tan skin . . . and his voice . . . saying my name . . .

All right. It's official.

It's gone.

I have lost my mind.
Shit.

With a groan, I bury my pained head in my hands. The sun slowly filters in through the window, warming the tips of my fingers.

//Yes, yes, soon now, soon.//

I scrunch up my forehead, barely able to hear the parasite; he is so deeply entrenched in my mind.

'What?'

But Orochimaru doesn't answer.

I shake it off, upsetting my aching brain, and drop my hands to the tabletop. I'm not properly dressed so I go back to my room for a complete set of clothes.

Sakura hasn't moved; she's still curled up like an animal to the corner of the bed.

//Maybe even already. Hm . . . //

In the middle of buttoning my pants, I stop in realization. The parasite is mumbling to himself, agitated and near exultant and utterly unaware it would seem, that I can hear him.

//Hmm-hm. Maybe already, yes. He'll be worth something after all.//

'Huh?'

//Yessss . . . //

This is extraordinarily creepy and disconcerting.

//Soon I can be free again. Patience is its own reward.//

His voice is hypnotic, pounding in my head and making me dizzy.

I stumble clumsily out of the bedroom, away from Sakura, and practically fall out the door, making one hell of a racket. Sakura stirs. My knees buckle and I just barely stop myself from collapsing flat on my face by grabbing hold of the doorjamb. The headache is steadily getting worse.

//Patience, my silly little boy. A virtue you never learned.//

The parasite has gone completely off the deep end.

"Sasuke?" A sleepy sounding Sakura calls from the bed.

I can't get my throat to work, not that there’s anything to say to her. Fumbling, I somehow manage to make purchase on the doorknob and clumsily shut it with a reverberating bang.

//Still so innocent, so deliciously innocent. Trusting.//

//Naïve.//

My hand slips from the door and lands with a smack to the uncarpeted floor.

On the outskirts of my senses, I hear movement from the room at the end of the hall. Kakashi is awake.
//So easy to sculpt. Like fresh clay squeezed between the fingers.//

There is movement all over the apartment now and the sounds strike like thunder in my cavernous mind. I have to get away. Everything is too loud. On shaking hands and knees, I crawl far from them, from all that noise.

//Everything is going perfectly.//

I grope my way blindly back to the kitchen, squeezing my eyes shut against the too harsh light.

//All falling into place.//

The sound of my hands slapping against the side of the cupboard as I try to haul myself to my feet is offensive. With sheer effort of will, I stumble to the sink and grab a glass, filling it with water without bothering to rinse it first.

//Chances. There will be chances. Must make him hurry it along now. Before it is too late.//

The center of my brain is pushing outward, hot and spherical like a star about to die. It’s Orochimaru causing it, I know it is. He is restless, eager, and nearly aroused.

I put the glass to my lips and it tastes like ashes.

//Maybe already. Maybe.//

And then something shifts inside me, this pulsing, oppressive ache that tunnels downward until it's deep down and constricts with actual physical pain. I recognize this sensation, though this is slightly different. There is no sweetness to it, no longing, just need, sharp and pointed and undeniable.

//Again, again, again.//

The pain, the push, grows and intensifies and I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Then it contracts into one tiny solid point, deep within me and swells.

I grit my teeth and press my hand down, capturing the glass between it and the cool metal of the sink, pushing until the glass shatters in my palm.

It makes a good contrast to the pain inside and gives me something else to focus on.

Somewhere, in some world where pain does not exist, a pair of doors open. I hear voices only on the very peripheral of my consciousness.

"Sakura!"

"Kakashi-sensei! It's not – it's not what you think!"

My senses are peaked up higher than normal and my ears catch the soft sound of seams popping.

"Oh, I think it's exactly what I think. I leave you two alone for a short while – to talk – and this is what happens?"

"It's not what you think!"

"I can't believe you would do this, Sakura. I expected better from you. I thought you had matured, but I guess I was mistaken. And where the hell's –"
"Sasuke!"

Sakura quickly comes to my side. I can feel the gentle vibrations of her footfalls in the floor and taste her scent in the air, of lavender and sex.

She’s wearing one of my shirts, a little too short to be decent and now stretched out at the bottom.

The pain inside me pitches, increasing twofold and becomes warm liquid, spreading out to my fingers and toes.

The very tips of Sakura's fingers graze my arm and the feeling spikes and turns magnetic, urging me to reach out to her like the cure to my long-suffering affliction.

My eyes fly open and I push her, hard. "Get away from me!"

Her lower back hits the table edge with enough force for me to see the instant of pain in her face as she collapses to the floor.

She looks at me and all I see in her eyes is worry.

"Sasuke!" The reprimand is sharp and commanding and masculine.

I flick my eyes in Kakashi's direction, and immediately wish I hadn't. My vision alters quickly – sharingan to fish eye to perfectly clear – faster and faster like a pinwheel in the wind.

"Oh . . ." Kakashi breathes out and regards me with a strange mix of confusion and understanding and not just a little bit of horror.

And before I know it, I've emptied my stomach on the kitchen floor.

The pain has not lessened, it may even be greater, and the pull towards Sakura defines so that it nearly overwhelms me and it takes all my presence of mind not to give into it.

I know that if I touched her, it would make this go away. I know that, but there’s something wrong in it.

Belatedly, I realize there is a strong hold on my arm, gripping so tight to my shoulder that I'm beginning to lose feeling altogether.

//Come now, come now. Don't be so stubborn. Make it disappear. I know you know how. Just go to her.//

My breath is harsh in my throat, burning out the edges like fires. I feel like I might be sick again.

//That's right, my pet. Sweet, naïve pet. You know how to fix this.//

The voice in my head is manipulative yet soothing, trying to ease me into his snare. And yet I don't think he knows I can hear him.

"Sasu –" Sakura's tentative question rips through me as she carefully crawls in my direction, climbing delicately around the sick on the floor. She reaches a hand to me.

I feel so weak, useless, like a kid who needs his parents to save him.

I hate that child; always have.
And I have no parents.

Violently, I slap Sakura's hand away before she can touch me.

"Sasuke." Kakashi tries another rebuke, but before he can fully get his words out, I use the forward momentum of my slap to pull free of his outstretched grasp. Not expecting any strength from me, he is caught off guard and practically lets go of his own accord. I scramble away, slip in my vomit, fall flat on my knees, and race to the window.

"Sakura!" Kakashi cries. The rush of air behind me is palpable as they both move in some predetermined flanking maneuver.

I waste no time and crash sideways through the window, breaking the glass rather than opening the latch. I land rolling, the shards of broken glass little pinpoints of lights spinning around me. There is no time to spare. I quickly get to my feet and race off, hopping from branch to branch by means of chakra and intuition. I close my eyes. The ANBU are chasing me but my path is too erratic for them to keep up. I’m slipping on nearly every other tree, but I barely notice, instinctively grabbing with my hands when I start to fall.

The persistent cackling in my head spurs me on.

//Foolish child. There is no escape. You are in too far.//

There is only one place I can go and I can't let the ANBU slow me down.

The farther I get from Sakura at least, the clearer my head becomes.

//And soon I will be free of this prison! I will have all that I have fought for . . //

I stretch out with my senses, honing in on the old lady like a bright beacon in my personal night.

//Freedom, power, even greater than before. Immortality for generation upon generation . . //

The pain prickles and surges, and I release a choke of surprise. My foot completely misses the branch ahead of it and I can't quite find my focus and I hit the ground with a thud.

The wind is knocked out of me, but the sudden impact has awoken something else and when I open my eyes, I discover that the shuffling my vision was doing earlier has slowed. Breathing roughly, I concentrate and snap what little remains of my usable chaotic chakra to my eyes. I force them into a sharingan, my sharingan, not perfect, but wholly mine, and take a breath.

The ANBU are nearly upon me.

I push myself to my feet and keep going.

//I will have what is mine.//

The pain twists and burrows lower.

' Shut up.'

//What is owed me.//

All my mixed emotions combine, augment, and nearly cripple me.

' Shut up.'
The need to be rid of this is great that I scarcely make it to the door, pushing my way through guards and masses of useless people, toppling them over like bowling pins.

"Shut up!"

I don't bother knocking. I just barrel my way through the bevy of humanity and burst through the door.

"You can't go in there!" Some woman calls after me and waves her hand uselessly.

"What is this?" Tsunade jumps to her feet in irritation, letting her stacks of paper fly out into even untidier piles. "What happened to security? Izumo! Kotetsu!"

There is a double pop of chakra behind me.

"Yes, Hokage-sama," two voices say in unison.

"What? What! No. What are you saying? Stop it!"

"Get him out of here!"

"Yes, Hokage-sama." The two voices approach me.

My hold on the sharingan begins to slip and my vision goes blue and red and yellow and black, separating into the different colors of the rainbow.

"No," I gasp out. "You have to stop it . . ."

'Wait. Stop.' Shizune suddenly materializes and edges closer to me, waving her hands calmly on either side to brush the two men away. "Uchiha-kun?"

Her voice is gentle and questioning like she isn't quite sure how I will answer.

My eyes flick from Tsunade to Shizune, not entirely with my permission.

'Any moment now. Any would suffice.'

'No. What? What are you saying? Get out of my head, you bastard!'

"You have to stop it." I can no longer tell when I'm speaking aloud.

The pain spikes again and my hands start to tremble. A cold sweat breaks out over my forehead and slips down my face.

'I will have them all and soon I will have so many vessels to choose from, I can pick them off one
No. Wait, no. He can't, he can't.

"You have to stop him!" I squeeze my eyes shut and clamp my hands into my hair, raking my fingers into my scalp.

Tsunade makes a short, slicing motion with her hands and the two presences beside me recede.

"Uchiha!" She snaps.

"Tsunade-sama," Shizune pleads.

Generation after generation for eternity.

The pain focuses to a point and directs my sense toward Sakura, however far away she is. It wavers a bit near Shizune for a brief moment then stabilizes.

And then and then . . .

It's him trying to control me.

"Stop," I say loudly, brokenly.

My vision is blue and green behind my eyes and makes my stomach flip over. He already succeeded once.

The children will be mine.

"Listen to me!" Tsunade shouts at me, but she can't compete with the parasite.

'No, you sick bastard.'

He will soon be completely under my control.

"Tsunade-sama, look," Shizune says.

'I am not under your control.'

A hand grabs my arm, but I roughly shake it off.

"Kotetsu, Izumo, go get . . ."

The child and the child's child . . .

'Stop.'

My head aches something awful and I dig my short nails into my skull as I open my eyes to look straight at Tsunade.

"Stop it."

"Stop what?" The woman motions sideways to Shizune and the younger kunoichi rushes to the desk.

"He . . ." I choke.
"Here." Shizune's voice.

'Shit up.' "Make it stop."

Tsunade's voice has that strained falseness when trying to act calm over the panic. "You have to tell me what."

"Make him stop."

//There will be so many. So many, the simpleton. And he will willing provide each and every one.//

"Shut up."

"Hokage-sama, his . ."

"I know."

There is too much noise vibrating within the colors against my eyelids. I cover my ears, but it blocks out nothing.

//Soon, I will not need him. I will have his progeny.//

Stop it.

//And babies are so easy to possess.//

'Shit up.'

//Manipulate the mind until they trust me, then snatch them up. And the boy will willingly take care of me until I am old enough to escape.//

"Shut up."

//He will never even know. So simple.//

"Sasuke, you need to calm down," Tsunade urges.

//What beautiful irony.//

"No."

//He will provide me with everything I need.//

"Shut. Up."

"Hokage-sama."

"I know."

//It is all so simple. And then, someday, when he has outlived his usefulness, I can break his little neck.//

Yellow and red spiral against each other in the darkness of my brain.
A pair of small hands grabs me from behind, around the waist, and I kick and struggle to get free.

"Hold him still."

"Just punch him, knock him out!" Shizune is much more agitated now.

"Not good enough. We have to make sure that . . ."

"Break the fox's neck, like the twig of a tree. Yes, that first and the pet can watch."

"Shut up!" I yell, my voice ragged from overuse both within and outside my head. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!"

There is a crash as the door swings wide, banging loudly as it hits hard against the wall.

The pain in me spikes and twists and boils over.

"The children, Konoha, everything will be mine."

My throat is too raw for breathing now, let alone speaking.

Then Kakashi and Sakura are there, babbling and yelling and just two more people to make too much goddamn noise and I wish they'd all just shut up!

I hit the floor hard and it makes the pain in my gut shift uncomfortably, unable to focus its center anymore. I can dimly sense at least five hands holding me down as I thrash wildly to get free.

"Hokage-sama, he's . . ."

"Kakashi, you never said it was this bad!"

"It wasn't!"

"What's happening?"

"Sasuke, calm down!"

"I mean, I didn't know. It only just . . ."

"Where is all this strength . . ."

"Ku-ku-ku-ku."

"Kotetsu!"

"What's going on?"

"Hokage-sama, look."

"Ku-ku-ku-ku."

"Why is the curse seal activating?"

"Just hold him down! Discuss later. Kotetsu, a hand!"
My head is jerked back violently, pulling tighter the already taut tendons. There is a tiny pinch in my neck followed by warmth, thick like peanut butter.

And the red and yellow, blue and green blend out and together until there is only black.

Sweet, empty black, until there is nothing.
"You're awake."

The voice is a sweetness in the air, the remembrance of someone I could never forget.

Languidly, I open my eyes. The sun is high in the sky, warming the air pleasantly even in the shade of the porch. The grass enclosure is deep green with the round faces of full-bloom flowers trailing happily over the fence. The musical pulse of cicadas completes the impression of a warm summer place.

I roll onto my back, fully rested in a way I haven't felt in years. It is a feeling of relaxation and ease and a rare sense of peace, like coming home after a long hard journey.

This feels like home.

I look up into the darkness of the overhang, giving my eyes time to adjust to the difference in lighting. The figure above me finally dips into view and I smile.

My mother smiles back.

Her long, thin fingers lovingly brush the hair from my face, the tips of them cool against my skin.

"You've been asleep a very long time," she says. "How are you feeling?"

I carefully stretch out my back like a cat and revel in the pull on my muscles. "Pretty good, actually."

"That's good." Her eyes go soft when she looks at me. "But you still have a while to go yet. Rest more."

And I do feel inclined to rest, to stay in that pleasant place just before sleep where my mind becomes hazy and my body grows still. I roll back to my side and resettle my head on my mother's folded knees. Slow, as though moving under water, she cards her fingers through the back of my hair.

I stare out into the garden, with the fuzzy white overlay of heat making everything look ethereal. My body feels light, incorporeal, more spirit than flesh.
"A while to go for what," I ask belatedly.

"Until you come home."

"But," I contest bewilderedly, "I am home."

Mother lets out a breath filled with affection and patience. "No, not yet." The warmth of her fingers grazes my temple as she pulls all the hair from my eyes. "You are still in the dark place. On the edges, so close to the light. But in the shadows still."

I look around, but I see no shadows. It is too bright in the heat of the day for the dark patches beneath the plants to be anything but thoughts.

There is no darkness here.

But I don't argue.

I am content.

"I love you," my mother says, an abrupt declaration.

"I know." I flush red because even though she is my mother and there's no one to hear and I already know she loves me, it's still embarrassing. Also, I'm pleased.

A small smile crosses my lips.

Here, I don't feel the weight of my life on my shoulders and my mind is blissfully calm.

I wonder for a moment if I have died.

It is very quiet.

It is not so bad.

Yet there is a hole where something should be, though I can't seem to remember what.

Then, like a rocket, the sun shoots to the top of the sky and blinds the world with intolerable brilliance. I lever up onto my one arm and shade my eyes, squinting out into the brightness and see nothing but endless white. My mother's hand slips from my head to land gently, protectively, on my shoulder. My eyes were not made for this light and the more I look at it, the more they burn.

I close them tight but they still tingle.

My mother's hand is solid and reassuring on my shoulder.

With a strange, lofty, echoing sound, I hear the laughter of a small child. The fingers on me tighten, not painfully, but as though she is trying to rouse my attention.

I reopen my eyes and after a few blinks, I see a couple of people in the distance, blurry and indistinct.

My mother's hold shifts again and I adjust my position so that I'm sitting upright next to her. The hand that was on my shoulder falls away and moves between us to lay over mine. I can feel her watching me.

But I'm watching the two people, a woman and child, barely distinguishable in the cloud of white.
The laughing child starts crying and the woman kneels down to his level.

"Do you remember this?"

I turn to my mother's question. She's smiling at me.

"Remember what?"

She graces me with another moment of her smile then tilts her head slightly and flicks her eyes to the corner in wordless indication.

I look back to the couple and squint my eyes in hopes of seeing them more clearly. The boy's fists rub his eyes in child fashion, making little sobbing noises as the woman tries to console him.

I blink again and see that they are we, my mother and I. But I'm just a little whelp, three maybe four years old and there's no way I could remember that.

Looking back to my mother, I give her a mystified expression.

"No?" She asks and her smile turns indulgent. "How about this?" Again she flicks her eyes, this time in the other corner.

This time when I look the image is much clearer.

My child self is older but still a kid, and my mother is standing behind him as he hides in the crook of the door. His face is flushed pink.

"What is it, Sasuke?" Memory mother asks.

The little version of me gulps and swings away from the open doorway in embarrassment. His head shakes fervently back and forth. "Nothing," He mumbles in a child's squeaky soprano.

"Oh?" She walks to the entrance and gazes out, quickly scanning the street. "You were staring awfully hard at nothing."

The boy toes the floor then races back into the depths of the house.

"Sasuke!" Mother shuts the door and follows after without another word on the subject. She finds my young self in the living room sitting in the middle of the floor. She squats down in front of him and chuffs his chin affectionately with the knuckle of her index finger.

The child version of me pouts and crosses his arms.

My mother's head inclines in thought. A moment later, she stands and enters the kitchen. The small me watches her from the corner of his eye.

In the kitchen, the woman bustles around with pots and pans for a bit before calling out.

"Sasuke, dear. Will you come and help me?"

My child self grumbles, but pushes himself to his feet and walks into the other room, thick with the smells of spices and oil. He stands quietly in the center of it, waiting and not offering until a bowl of carrots is presented to him.

"Would you wash these for me?" Mother smiles sweetly.
The child frowns up at her but obediently takes them and rinses them clean. Wordlessly, he lifts the bowl over his head and into my mother's face.

She gives a thorough show of inspecting them before nodding in approval. "Good," she says then gestures to the table where a knife and board are waiting. "Now, how about you cut them?"

The boy continues to pout at her, but does as he's told and heads to the table. He's helped her before so he already knows how she wants them. She doesn't need to watch him closely because he's a ninja and knows how to handle sharp utensils.

They go about their work silently for a while and the boy's anger slowly ebbs away.

"What's wrong?" Mother asks when she knows her son is no longer pouting. She's very good at that.

He continues to chop.

"Something's bothering you," she informs him. "And you're going to sulk until you tell me. So, what is it?"

The carrot slices up bright orange onto the cool tan of the cutting board. In little kid style, the boy bites his lip. The carrot cutting slows until it stops altogether.

"Mama?"

"Yes?" She replies encouragingly.

"What if I didn't want to . . ."

But then the memory fades like a movie reel burning out. Again it is just my present day self and the ghost of my mother.

"No?" She repeats, and sighs. "Not ready?"

I turn to her and she smiles at me, that soft, sweet mom smile she always saved especially for me. I can't return it.

"Well," she pulls me down and cradles my head in the crook of her shoulder. "No matter. It will come. Right now, we have guests."

I pull away abruptly to blink at her, but she only grins and gives a tinkling laugh. Her hand lifts to gently cup my jaw.

Then she rotates to face the opposite direction and looks up as though something is there. I crane my head back, but see only blank space. So I turn all the way until I am sitting the same direction as my mother and everything changes. The empty whiteness melts away into a kitchen – not ours, it's far too grand for that – and we kneel at a table overflowing with food. Across from us sit our guests who are hungrily, and might I add rudely, gobbling down their dinner. The truly bizarre part is that they are Naruto and Itachi. Both are acting childish, almost primal, something I expect from Naruto, but that looks alien on my brother. Their chopsticks click like weapons to snatch up every last morsel of food.

My mother and I don't have any plates or chopsticks. I look to her, but she's too wrapped up in the eating competition to take any notice. Her smile is still firmly in place, making her look fairly vapid.
"Hey, that's mine! Give it to me!"

I'd recognize that voice anywhere. I glance back to Naruto as he yells at Itachi. They're pulling curiously and furiously on the same object with their chopsticks. But what they're fighting over doesn't look like food at all, but some nondescript shadow.

"It was mine first!" Itachi shouts.

If I were in a chair, I would have fallen out of it. Since when did Itachi start lowering himself to act as infantile as the dobe? My head whips to my mother as she giggles foolishly.

"I found it!"

"I made it!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"You spoiled it! It's mine now!"

"Mine first, always mine!"

The absurd argument continues on in this way, growing more ludicrous with each passing second. Then my mother begins to laugh hysterically, loud and high, and I wonder if she's lost her mind. I jump to my feet to intervene and gain some order in this bizarre situation, but the instant I rise, the ground evaporates from beneath me and I fall down into a bottomless abyss. A great long time passes before I land, hard enough to knock the breath out of me in one great whoosh.

Everything has gone black, darker than pitch, and the only light seems to come from me because I can see my body glowing with soft incandescent light and nothing else. This place is as dark as the last was bright.

I sit up and look around.

"Hello," I call out but only the echo of my voice answers.

So I try to stand, only I can't. When I pull on my leg, it's held fast, shackled to the invisible ground. Suddenly two small eyes appear in the darkness beside it. Then like the flicking of a switch, a thousand tiny eyes spark into being all around me, creating a sinister yellow-starred night sky.

My hands seek ground behind me, but they only slip precariously on the piles of writhing snakes beneath my fingers. Serpents are my allies, my servants and masters and sometimes friends, but right now they are ready to devour me. Then the laughter begins. That odd, forced, familiar laughter and Orochimaru materializes from the darkness, a ghastly specter in pale white as his unearthly glow fills the otherwise emptiness.

"Shh now," he soothes, but the depraved grin on his face doesn't match his words nor does it do anything to allay my fears.
He glides up fluidly, floating in the darkness rather than walking through it, until he is kneeling over my prone body.

He cups the side of my face, tilts his head and smiles in a rapacious imitation of my mother. I try to jerk my head away, but the snakes hold tight.

"It is too late," he says and slides his hands up so that they clamp around the sides of my head. Then he sinks his fingers in, steadily, brutally, through bone and flesh and blood.

I scream and wake up.

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As I attempt to unglue my eyelids, a too bright light assaults me and instantly gives me a headache that prickles at the seams of my skull. I quickly close my eyes again.

After a moment, I venture another attempt and though I need to blink and over-adjust to the unaccustomed brightness of the room, I’m finally able to focus.

"Well now," Tsunade drones acerbically. "I see you’ve decided to rejoin the land of the living."

"What happened?" I rasp. My voice sounds funny, like it does when I'm sick. I try to cough it clear and end up making a repulsive sound.

"Let me see." The woman's words are long and drawn out and as cold as ice. "You’ve been keeping secrets that threaten the village, you haven't been following the rules, you've been interfering with my kids, and you caused a scene in which it took four ninjas to hold you down. There's probably more, but I can’t think of it right now." She crosses her arms and leans back to cross her legs as well, apparently to make a point. "You've been out for two days."

I blink as my dulled mind slowly processes. Two days.

Two days since Sakura.

Two days since ten days, now twelve.

My initial instinct is to ask if Naruto has returned, but I'm not entirely sure she’d tell me the truth. Then I remember I have bigger, more pressing things to worry about. I twitch my eyes at Tsunade instead.

She only glares back, growls a little under her breath and leans forward. "You," she pokes my shoulder harshly for emphasis. "Are more trouble than you're worth. If it weren't for a certain blond-haired," she stops short, catching herself at the last moment. She purses her lips and pokes me again with a dismissive air. "I wouldn't bother."

I tilt my head slightly to the side and return her glare for a few seconds before turning away.

Tsunade settles back once more, sitting stiffly in the uncomfortable chair, and tries to appear important.

"You're going to answer a few questions for me," she instructs sternly. "And you’re going to tell me the truth. I've spent two days digging through that garbage heap of a brain, as well as your chakra, so I'll know when you're lying."
"Then why ask at all?" I argue smoothly like oil slicked over water.

Her eyes thin to lines so I can see the shadow of the true crow's feet at the corners. "Oh," she muses in warning, "I will hit you." Subtly, behind her folded arms, she cracks her knuckles.

I glare at her particularly hard, but say nothing. The whole reason I came to her was to get the answers to those questions.

She gives an almost imperceptible sideways nod of her head and says, "Tell me again how you killed Orochimaru."

For a moment, I'm confused. We've been through this already and I would have thought she had recordings of it. "He used the body transfer jutsu," I explain succinctly. "I expelled him out by pushing his consciousness into an injured ninja nearby. Naru-" I stop, the name sticking in my throat for a second. "Naruto killed him with a modified rasengan."

Tsunade squints her eyes thoughtfully at me and clasps her hands carefully in her lap. "In more detail please."

And so I tell her. It's an almost identical, word for word recount as I had given Mouse boy all those ages ago in the interrogation room.

The woman observes me intently through the entire recitation as if each word is crucial. At one point, her eyebrows shoot to her hairline, a silent affirmation that she believes she's found what she's been missing.

After I finish, we just sit a while, staring at each other like morons. Then she bends forward and clenches her hands violently until the fingertips turn red.

"After you expelled Orochimaru, you said he looked at you?" She asks.

"Yes," I respond cautiously, wondering if she's mentally slow. I'm sure I explained that when I retold my story.

"Now, you're absolutely positive it was Orochimaru that looked at you, not the injured ninja or . . someone else?"

"Yes," I reply, a little irritated now.

The bones of her hand are standing out starkly against her skin.

"Did you hear Orochimaru then? In your head," she clarifies, to be certain there's no mistake.

"No. Not then."

"When was the first time you heard him?"

I shrug and press my eyebrows together. "I don't know. A few weeks later, maybe?"

She nods sagely and finally releases her hands, stretching the fingers free of strain. Her eyes bore deeply into mine. "And what about your eyes?"

"What about them?"

She's on the precipice of becoming enraged but then it trickles away. "When did they change?"
I mull it over a while but the truth is, "I don't know."

Her gaze roams over me, looking at something I can't possibly see. But she nods again and I take that to mean she believes me. "When did you first know they changed?" I don't answer, so she adds, "When did you see them?"

"When I woke up," I tell her. "Naru-" and I stop, not wanting to say his name again. "I saw a reflection."

"And you've been hearing Orochimaru for a while now, haven't you?" Her mood is turning sour now that she seems to have what she wants.

I nod, because seriously, there's no point in lying now. That cat's out of the bag. That cat shredded the bag and ate it for dinner.

"He's been getting louder and more talkative, hasn't he?" She purses her lips after saying this, no doubt already assuming the answer.

"Yes and no," I say honestly.

She blinks and sits up, startled only briefly before patching on the token, professional expression. "How do you mean?"

I shrug slightly. "When he talks, he tends to talk a lot. But sometimes he's absent completely."

She takes that information in. "And he's been trying to tell you what to do, hasn't he?"

I warily offer another nod.

"Have you been listening to him?" The "listening" part is hissed like a snake, disapproving and accusatory. "Have you?"

'It's a trap,' my mind yells at me. 'A trap!' In pure defensive mode, I automatically answer, "No."

She hits me – hard – in the arm. "Don't lie to me!"

She doesn't wait to hear any explanation, instead launching ahead with the interrogation. "Can you hear him now?"

I stop and pull inward, but my mind is abnormally quiet. With my internal sense, I probe around for his presence. And there he is, just like always, heavy and oppressive. But he seems to be, odd as it sounds, out cold. It's almost as if he lost consciousness when I did, but for some reason he hasn't yet regained consciousness.

"No," I tell her, both curiously and cautiously. "But I don't always."

She leans back in her chair, exceptionally smug. "He's still asleep."

At this declaration, I enter back into my mind and feel out his awareness and this time I sense the unnaturalness of it. "What did you do?" I ask, almost hopefully, though I keep my emotions in check. But maybe she can do it again.

"Oh, I just put a little chakra bind on him," Tsunade proclaims haughtily, but is quick to dash my hopes. "Don't get too excited. It's not permanent and I can't keep reinforcing it. First, because I don't have the time," she arches her eyebrow challengingly. "And second . . ."
But she doesn't get to the "second" because a whirlwind bursts through the hospital room door, demanding our attention.

"I knew it!" Anko shouts, my so persuasive, illustrious, and may I add illusive, team leader, pointing at me.

I find there is no need for me to get out of bed.

Tsunade is on her feet before there's any chance to speak, whipping on the intruder menacingly. "You knew what?" She shrieks.

Anko takes a small step back. She remains irate, even while trying to explain her way out of the hole she's dug for herself. "Well, I didn't know in the sense of knowing, but I knew," she peers around the Hokage to jab that accusing finger at me. "You were giving me the creeps." For a brief moment, she blinks her gaze to Tsunade before returning it to me. "It wasn't just those snakey eyes, either. I knew there was something!"

I scoff and look away to my lovely wall view. It is exceedingly white. "You were never there."

"Oh not so, my little Uchiha!" I turn to face her and she sort of flashes her teeth on one side. "I was spying so I could see how you acted."

"And that worked out so well, didn't it?" Tsunade cuts in sardonically.

"It would have," Anko asserts defensively, "if I'd had a little more time."

"Time's up! Don't you have some place to be?" And with that, Tsunade begins manhandling Anko out the door until only my leader's persistent head and hand stick through. She waves that free hand incessantly.

"We're going to have a talk before we leave!" Anko yells.

Then with one final push, the older woman gets the young one out the door and slams it soundly. She's huffing with suppressed rage when she turns to me. I watch curiously as she grabs the chair and lodges it firmly against the door.

She turns back to me and it's obvious how much she wants to scream, stomp, or throw something. Maybe all three.

I sniff loudly.

Her little display of barring the main entrance was purely psychological. It wouldn't stop many in this town from getting in if they wanted to, especially with the window readily available.

"You children," the woman says through clenched teeth, "are enough to drive a person mad."

I'm about to make a smart remark but stop myself.

There's not much I could say since some would assert that I'm already mad, what with the voices in my head and all.

"Now," the Hokage says, in a fairly convincing semblance of calm. "Where were we?"

"I'm still going on the mission?" I ask instead.

Tsunade levels a very heavy gaze at me. "Actually, yes," she says, not skipping a beat. "The
assignment's already accepted." She says this without any credibility as she strolls to the center of
the room. "And you might have to be useful, so you'd better get that guest of yours under control."

I jerk my head in surprise. "Why am I going?" That wasn't the answer I expected. I'm not allowed
to leave Konohagakure, let alone with an S-class criminal on board, so I'm a bit dubious.

"Because the assignment's been accepted. Konoha never goes back on its word." The Hokage's
words are clipped and I know that she's hiding something.

Besides, I'm sure another team would be more than willing to take on the job. "Why?"

"How about we get back on topic?" There's no space for diversion in her tone. She sits down
heavily on the edge of the bed as if we are old friends rather than tenuous comrades. "Now, where
were we?" I'd like to argue, but I can see that it's futile. She'll just direct the conversation back.

I growl. "You were telling me why you can't get rid of my parasite."

The side of the hag's lip curls with amusement for the slightest moment. In the next, it is gone and
she looks very stern. "So, you want to get rid of your 'parasite', do you?"

"Of course." Isn't that obvious?

"Well, you can't."

Kohana could be fully grown in the time that I glare at Tsunade. "Why?"

"He's now a part of you," she states plainly, her gaze unwavering. "Try to take away a piece and it
might shatter the whole."

"What -" That can't be true. I thought the one advantage of letting the secret out would be that I
could finally be rid of him. " - Is that supposed to mean?"

"It means exactly what I said," she snaps, exasperated. "He's too much a part of what you've
become to be removed now."

That absolutely, positively cannot be true. I don't need him; we're not in some mutually beneficial
symbiotic relationship. "I want him out."

"No."

I snarl at her and try very hard not to throw the bed at her. I want to smash something, hit
something, kick, break, destroy. But I am stuck in this bed with the leader of the village sitting on
it and she'd be thrilled for the excuse to throw me out the window. I can't do much of anything.

And then this thought, evil and unwanted, begins to creep up from the darkness. I don't like it and I
can scarcely get it out of my mouth without injury.

"If I had come here sooner," I grind out, "could you have gotten rid of him?"

The expression that crosses her face is pure wickedness. It is evil at the basest level, such that a
devil himself would be envious. The side of her mouth curls up and she answers, "No."

I blink stupidly. "What?"

She snorts. "Even if I had been there at the exact moment you separated yourself from Orochimaru,
I doubt I could have done anything. It took me the better part of two days to figure out precisely
what had happened." She says this rather bitterly, as though upset with the result. Maybe she is.

But actually, in a way, this is good news to me.

Then Tsunade looks at me seriously, her eyes like two thin lines slashing through her face. "I suppose you did the best you could, all things considered, but if you hadn't caused the situation to start with, you wouldn't be here now. You won't be getting any sympathy from me."

My eye twitches spasmodically. It's not as if I was walking around begging for sympathy. I don't want any damn sympathy.

"So," the woman says then with mock solemnity and a malicious glint to her eye. It's almost as if she's enjoying this but doesn't want to own up to it. "Would you like to know what I discovered?"

I wonder what would happen if I actually said "no". But since I want to know the answer, I say, "Yes."

She adjusts her position on the bed carefully, trying to replicate as closely as possibly the position of authority she would take at her desk in Hokage Tower. I sneer as she doesn't quite succeed. "When you split yourself from Orochimaru, you didn't do it properly."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I snap.

She hits me again, this time on the other arm so that I will now have a matching bruised set. "Don't be such a brat!"

Any speck of respect she might have retained disappears at that moment.

I wait impatiently for my answer.

Tsunade frowns and continues. "I suppose," she hedges begrudgingly, "I really can't blame you. Obviously, you had no idea what you were doing. And you did what was logical." She's making this as insulting as she possibly can without actually insulting me. "But you didn't properly identify what was his and what was yours. When you tried to push Orochimaru out of your consciousness, you did an incomplete job. Instead of getting rid of all of him, you only did a part. It was the greater part of him, or else I'd probably be talking to an old teammate right now rather than a new problem." She grimaces, but I give no reaction. "That's why he smiled at you with that other ninja's face, but could also speak to you later."

My eyes glaze over as I roll my thoughts inward.

How ridiculously stupid.

I should have picked up on that ages ago, but I didn't.

"And?" I ask the Hokage. "Is that all?" I like to appear as if I taking this all in stride.

She deliberates for a moment before settling back. "You have to keep him." As she's letting that sink in, her lips curve up, giving the unmistakable impression of a Cheshire cat up to no good.

"No," I say.

"No?"

"No."
"Well," she shrugs nonchalantly. "That's too bad. You don't get a choice." I'm going to protest when she gives me a sharp, warning finger, held upright to her face. "Because what you also managed to do was split yourself. Until I saw it myself, I didn't think it was possible, at least not as a permanent condition. But of course, it isn't really."

I blink at her quizzically and point at myself, stating silently: "hello, here I am". Unless she means that I'm going to die soon. This thought probably would frighten me, but it doesn't. Instead, my lip curls in satisfaction. That there is what they call poetic justice. The elders have been holding an execution over my head that would essentially become moot.

I wish I'd known that before.

But Tsunade is talking again.

". . accidentally split off part of your darker half, the newer and less natural part of yourself."

'Huh?'

"Nonetheless, it's part of who you are and you need it. But it's completely gone; Naruto killed it when he killed Orochimaru's greater half."

I'm trying hard to follow along, but it's a bit like following a fly's path on a hot summer day, constantly weaving in and out of view.

"But," Tsunade goes on, "you do have the dark element of Orochimaru in there to replace it."

"What?" I bark before thinking, leaning forward.

"You'll have to absorb him, for lack of a better term."

"What?" I repeat. It's a very important question.

"It's already started," she forges on as if I haven't spoken. "The line between your two thought patterns has begun to blur. You must have noticed it," she says in some disbelief.

But I'm still dealing with the idea of "absorb". Becoming one with that snake was not one of the things I want to do before I die. All right, so it had been very close to that, but it wasn't quite the same thing.

It wasn't.

"No," I state quietly.

"You really don't have much say in the matter."

"No."

"Listen kid, you're out of options and it can't be stopped anyway."

"No!"

She slams her hand on the bed, but with not enough force to do much but bounce the mattress. "Yes!"

My nostrils flare with the rapid intake of air and my knuckles hurt from gripping the hem of the sheets. I don't want him to be a part of me; I don't want to have to listen to him forever, moaning
and complaining and conniving, and to be influenced by him without even realizing it . . . without being able to stop it . . .

"That's what happened." That's why I felt like I wasn't completely in control of my body that night; I wasn't. It explains why I’ve been so susceptible to his influence. I know how far he’d take it. My head is spinning. "Can't' or 'won't'"?

The woman looks at me with just the hint of puzzlement. "Can't or won't what?"

"You can't stop it," I emphasize, "or you won't?"

Her face tenses with thought. "I don't think it's possible."

'Patience, Sasuke, patience.'

"But if it was," my teeth scrape against each other and I really hate when they do that. "What would happen? Are you saying I'd die?"

"No," she answers carefully and my poetic justice bids me farewell. "But you would probably go completely insane instead of just the halfway you are now."

I let the barb slide off my back.

"If you refuse to absorb him, the two of you will separate entirely. In that scenario, you might have alternate control, like a split personality, and I think you can understand why that's not allowed as a possibility. More likely though, it would be just plain old straitjacket wearing, lock you up and throw away the key crazy."

"No," I say, still thinking about Orochimaru becoming a permanent part of me. "I can't have him. He's insane. He's trying to . . ."

But I cut off there. "He talks too much."

"Yes, that would be annoying," Tsunade concedes. "But you'll have to be stronger." This last part comes out as a very clear threat. She considers me a moment, using her old eyes to delve into my psyche and hits a brick wall. "What’s he trying to do?"

I look at her flatly. "You're going to tell the council, aren't you?"

Her gaze is unwavering, bored even. "You'd be surprised how much I don't tell the council."

The left side of my mouth tics up and I almost want to smile, but no, not really.

I turn to look at the white wall.

"Is it possible for him to take a child?"

The pitch of anger in Tsunade's chakra charges the room with electricity.

"So that's what he wants." She sounds both disgusted and furious, but unsurprised.

I wait for her chakra to calm before asking again; I need a rational answer, not an emotional one. "Is it?"

I hear her release a heavy breath and her aura shrinks but remains angry, just more controlled. "Under normal circumstances," she measures, "it would be easy. There would be basically no
resistance. But these circumstances," her hair swishes softly as she shakes her head. "There has never been a situation like this before. I suppose he could find a way to detach himself from you, enter a child's mind and join it while still in the formative stage. In that case, he could sculpt the mind effortlessly and essentially be in full control." She adds a belated afterthought. "In that case, you'd go insane."

I nod. But now that my initial . . . panic has subsided, logic begins to set in. "What about the three year rule?"

Tsunade slumps forward and steeles her hands in front of her face. "Well now, that's a good question." She sticks her lower lip to the side. "Obviously Orochimaru doesn't think it's an issue. And since he's had little else to occupy his time, I'm guessing he's already figured out what's going on. Perhaps he thinks that in his current state he could last longer in a new body, maybe as long as necessary." She narrows her gaze. "This is just conjecture, but he might be right. Since he is not a full consciousness, he need not, and likely can't, completely replace the original consciousness. He could simply lurk, sort of the devil on the shoulder of his victim and gain his trust, until the child was trained to his satisfaction, then he could essentially take over. The original consciousness would become nothing more than a crutch, there and necessary, but without ability to act on its own. By then, he could use the body to produce a child and start the cycle all over again." She drums her fingers ominously on her arm. "It's quite ingenious actually."

The flame of rage in my belly rises up my throat.

"But the truth is, I don't truly know." Her voice is somehow soft and harsh at once. "It's also possible he can't do anything at all. You're the dominant one in the relationship. There's no way to know for sure what'll happen until he actually tries."

I nod again, the white of the wall never shifting, never changing, always so very, very uncomplicated.

"At least this puts things in perspective," she muses with a note of sarcasm. "You're a selfish brat, no changing that. I don't like you. But if Orochimaru replaced the worst of you, the part that was most unnatural and most created by you, the real Sasuke might be an improvement. Time will tell."

I turn to her and blink slowly and extremely stupidly.

Her gaze is not altogether unkind.

There is a knock at the door.

Shizune looks down curiously at the chair blocking her entrance as she stands in the doorway but shakes it off quickly, saying, "Hokage-sama?"

"What!" Tsunade looks over at her assistant and the futility of the chair and growls. I snort.

Obviously accustomed to such needless outbursts, Shizune simply says, "You're needed at the Tower."

Tsunade's face becomes alert. "Is it . . . ?" She asks without elaboration.

"No, Hokage-sama. Just the council."

For a moment, I thought Naruto might have returned. I think Tsunade was hoping the same thing. But she only looks at me seriously for a second and turns away.
She nods mutely to her assistant before looking back at me and warns, "You'd better do what I say. I don't want any more trouble. If you even think about disobeying, I will beat you senseless." She looks at me pointedly. "And I will enjoy it." She heads to the door but at the last moment, she turns around again and glares, with not even a speck of good humor. "And stop messing around with my students."

So she knows about Sakura. I stare back, giving no indication of being insulted or even knowing what she's talking about. She opens the door and scans the hall for an instant before waving her hand at someone I can't see. "Hey, you! Over here. I want you to watch him."

"What? Me? But I . . . awww...."

There is a long, annoyed groan as Shikamaru replaces Tsunade in the doorway. The door closes without another word, leaving he and I alone in the cold hospital room.

Shikamaru makes an exaggerated roll of his eyes that starts at his left shoulder and travels to his head before completing at his right shoulder.

"What a drag."

Shikamaru and I look at each other. If ever two people had less to say to each other, well we wouldn't be on the top of the list, but we sure as hell wouldn't be at the bottom either.

Shikamaru makes a useless little circle, pulls out a cigarette pack from his vest pocket and distractedly fingers the contents. I glare at the box.

"You'd better not light that," I warn.

Shikamaru rolls the cigarette deftly between his fingers. "I wasn't going to," he says, slightly irritated. "This is a hospital, you know."

I grunt.

He replaces the stick to the pack and stuffs the whole back into his pocket. His fingers flex abstractedly once with nothing to hold onto.

He gives me an exasperated look, rocks his head and groans. Then he walks to the farthest side of the room and leans on the windowsill. I watch him for only a moment before turning back to the empty wall.

1. There's no way I could ever chance letting that monster go free and know that I know his plan, I know how to stop him. We will be each other's prison and end it all together.

There's actually something poetic in this justice after all.

But I still have to deal with Sakura. And Naruto. It was all just a mistake.

A big, life-altering mistake.

"Did you figure it out yet?" Shikamaru asks out of the blue.

Slowly I face him and raise an inquisitive eyebrow.

He grumbles then makes himself more comfortable at the window. "The king," he groans, as if this
is dialogue we've rehearsed many times and I should know my line by now.

I tilt my head and lift my brows to tell him a silent, unconcerned "no".

Shikamaru gives me a typical droopy-eyed look in return.

"Yeah, that's what I figured," he grumbles.

"What's that supposed to mean?" My words are level as I remain cool, calm, and collected. I feel the slight stirrings of the snake coming to consciousness, but I push him back down.

A little credit would be nice.

"Just that you're selfish." Shikamaru looks at me plainly, without recrimination as though he is simply stating a fact. And so he is. "You never think about anyone but yourself."

I turn my head to him. "Everyone's selfish."

"I don't know about that." He anchors his palms on the sill and cranes his neck, trying to look out the window.

I scoff. "Of course it is." I stare at him and though he affects nonchalance, I can see the way my serpentine eyes make him uncomfortable. They make everyone nervous except maybe Naruto. And the Hyuuga girl, strangely. "To different degrees and over different things, but everyone's selfish."

The lazy boy frowns at me with weariness but says nothing. The obvious manner in which he'd like to leave is evidence enough to prove my assertion. "Look at you," I point out.

His frown deepens. "What about me?"

I lift my chin smugly. "You don't want to be here. You're just itching to run out that door and be with your friends."

"Yeah, who wouldn't? But I'm still here, aren't I?" he replies, relaxing.

"But it's the intent I'm talking about." I smirk. I don't know why I'm having this inane conversation. Except that I'm right and he's wrong. "You'd rather be someplace else. In fact, that's all you're really thinking about."

"That's just human nature." His fingers stop. "Besides, I came to see Chouji, not you. He was injured recently and I'm worried."

"Exactly," I say, justified "It's human nature to be focused on oneself, even when thinking of others. I'm worried. How would it make me feel? It's just the nature of the beast."

"You have a dim view of humanity." But he doesn't refute me.

I shrug. "Maybe."

"Not everyone is like that." He's most likely arguing because he's upset at being trapped in this room with me.

"Name one," I challenge, just to see what he comes up with.

He looks at me, disgusted. "Naruto."
I snort and almost choke on the laughter I bite back. "How so?"

"He's put up with a lot from Konoha, yet he still protects it. And he spent nearly three years far from everything he knows and loves to train and search for your worthless ass. Often at his own expense," The lazy boy expounds, thinking this proves something.

"That was possibly the worst answer you could have given. That," I say flatly, "was for *his* benefit. Not mine."

Shikamaru's mouth barely straightens, he's too firmly into lazy mode for anything greater, and asks, "And do you regret it?"

There are long minutes of silent staring. My parasite shifts and presses against the bubble of my perception and tries to break through. But he's weak still and Tsunade's makeshift barrier holds and I drive him back into the recesses. I shift my gaze to the window Shikamaru is so preoccupied with. Outside it is bright and hazy with the rays of the midday sun. The familiar sight of Konoha seems fuzzy as though nothing more than a half-remembered dream.

The sides of my lips draw down into a frown.

"That's not the point," I respond, not wholly certain about any regrets.

And to this, Shikamaru says nothing.
They release me from the hospital later that day since my condition is no longer a medical one, and there's little they can do. I leave the confining white walls gratefully.

At the apartment, I find two notes waiting for me, like mail held after a trip. One is from Anko, terse and to the point.

*Meet us tomorrow at Training Ground #4 at 10 am sharp.*

The second one is from Kakashi, my ever-errant roommate.

*Sleeping Beauty –*

What the hell?

*I’ll return tonight and we’ll talk then. The Hokage assures me that you are no present danger of another attack. For now, that will do.*

*Remember the ANBU, as ever, will be watching.*

*In the meantime, clean up the mess.*

At the bottom is his stupid smiley face signature.

I huff heavily and look around. The place is indeed in shambles, broken window and all. I wonder if he's been sleeping here in this squalor since I left, but it doesn't matter. There’s work to do and since I live here as may as well do it.

The brevity of Kakashi's note tells me he’s still angry. If he had a doghouse, I'd be in it.

But despite all the provocations, I don't feel as angry as I should.

And that feels weird, unnatural. I think I might be getting the cusp of what Tsunade said when she told me I was missing a piece.

And with that disturbing thought, I get to work.

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It is especially dark outside, the new moon has risen it is seems as if the world is being swallowed up by a black hole. Without the interference of Orochimaru, my mind is open and clear. I lean on the rail and stare off into the blackness, barely able to make out the silhouette of trees in the great expanse of sky.

I have a lot to think about.

Everything is flipped on its head; I have a valid reason not to have children now. It is an excuse, using Orochimaru's threat, but it is a good one.

My father would be disappointed, but then he always was. And my mother; what would she think? She always wanted grandchildren, wanted to keep our line alive. Now I am the last Uchiha and there will be no more. I never meant to disappoint her.

Yet I fear I have.

But it’s necessary that I end this; it may be the last and one good thing I do.

And then there is Naruto.

Without Orochimaru to bother me, he is present in a new and clearer way.

My attachment to him is inexplicable but powerful.

Even when I was with Sakura, I was with him. I was afraid of losing him and she was a convenient stand-in. There's nothing to be done about it now.

But it was Naruto. Sakura was right; it has always been Naruto. With him, I belong.

He makes me feel like I can be home, because that’s what he is.

He’s what Itachi used to be, was meant to be, but could never be.

He makes me feel like I am something other than what I am.

"And what are you thinking about?" Kakashi's voice is friendly yet mocking, an unusual combination in light of what’s happened. I don't answer. "That was quite a show you put on earlier."

"Hn."

"We might have been able to prevent what happened if you'd told me." I put my chin in my hand and look away. "It was reckless, not telling anyone about your little houseguest," he chides. "I could have better understood what was going on with you."

I say nothing.

"I take it he had a part in the episode with Sakura?" He is giving me a way out. I ought to take it.

“Not entirely,” I say, being truthful.

Old One-eye pauses pensively.

"I'll have to tailor your training to deal with this new issue. You can look forward to more meditation.”
"Hn."

"You know, I'm not going to gossip about whatever you might tell me." I can tell he's now smiling under that mask.

The edges of the trees are quite fascinating.

My roommate turns around, leans his back against the railing, and crosses his arms very importantly. "Ninjas have a tendency to die young and unexpectedly."

"What a cheery fact." We all know this already.

Kakashi chuckles. "Yes, well, the point I'm trying to make is: we don't have the time to debate happiness, we should just grab it when we see it."

"Hn."

He turns around and rests his arms on the rail beside me, mimicking my own pose. "I know you better than you think." I sigh heavily, but he doesn't get the hint. "I trained you. I knew you as a kid, Sasuke, and as much as you've changed, you really haven't. You may like to style yourself an expert at hiding your emotions and for someone who doesn't know you, that's true. But I know you. And I know you're both confused and conflicted."

I snort. Way to state the obvious.

"And I restate: it helps to talk."

The leaves remain infuriatingly still. "And why would I talk to you?" I snarl. "You'll just lecture me and run off to the Hokage again, right?"

Kakashi shifts a little and stands up straight. "Unless it's a matter of Konoha security, whatever you say stays between us."

I glare at him suspiciously from the corner of my eye.

"I'm only looking out for your well-being, no matter what you think." He grins foolishly beneath his mask. "Even now, I consider you one of my precious comrades."

Fighting unwelcome emotions, I look away. That brings to mind a time better than what followed though I didn't appreciate it then.

"Hmm." He stares out into the distance. "Perhaps if you tell me, you can stop making moon eyes all the time."

"I do not make "moon eyes"!" I exclaim and now probably everyone in the complex is awake. What the hell are "moon eyes" anyway?

Kakashi grins victoriously "Well, you look at Naruto differently from everyone else," he states with conviction. "That's nothing to be ashamed of. You two would make a cute couple."

"Don't be crude."

"I'm not. I'm being factual."

I snort again. For a few glorious minutes Kakashi says nothing and the silence washes over us. I take a glance at him then away into the darkness and back again.
"It's not so simple," I say without really wanting to open that door.

"Oh?" Kakashi pitches his tone to sound interested, but not too interested. "In what way?"

I let out a grumbled sigh; this is ridiculous.

"Tell me." He urges.

"How many times are you going to annoy me with this nonsense?"

"As many times as it takes for you to get it." He's still grinning. "Go on"

I scowl at Kakashi, try not to blush and look away before I lose my courage. It's like he's performed a secret conversation jutsu on me when I wasn't looking. "I just feel drawn to him," I say reluctantly. "I don't know why."

I stare out into the darkness, forget where I am and words I didn't know I had come tumbling out. or known come tumbling out. "Sometimes it feels like it's not enough. Like I want to crawl into his skin, breathe the same air, see what he sees, feel what he feels, know what he knows." I look at my hands clutching the rail, feeling lost. "I don’t think that has a name exactly and it doesn’t make any sense and I . . . I don't know what I'm saying."

I grind my chin into my crossed arms, utterly mortified.

There’s a long uncomfortable silence.

Kakashi hums thoughtfully. "So you have been thinking about it. I think I'm a little jealous."

I slide my feet away.

He chuckles. "No, don't get the wrong idea. I think, well, who wouldn't want someone to feel that for them? It's rare, to say the least."

I snarl at him. He’s teasing me. I don't need him to tell me I sound like an idiot. I am well aware of it.

Old One-eye pats me on the shoulder. "I'm being serious," he says. "What you describe is a once in a lifetime experience and sometimes not even that. A lot of people would throw everything else away to have it."

I breathe deeply into the cross of my arms. "Don't be melodramatic."

"Don't be dense."

But I feel like my body is becoming tighter, closing in on itself.

“'You’re afraid,” Kakashi states matter-of-factly.

He moves much closer than he was only a moment ago and looks down. "I thought you weren't afraid of anything."

"I'm not," I assert firmly.

"Oh?" He sounds skeptical. "Then why not act on it? Frankly, Sasuke, I think it's ridiculous you don't. If you've realized this much, you've come far. Yet you insist on letting yourself get waylaid by rules and others' expectations. You're only making it worse for everyone involved."
I tense my shoulders to close in on myself, a useless protective shield to the world outside. I feel so out of place, my mind foggy and uncontained. "I've spent most of my life protecting myself from attachments. Now you expect me to just let it go?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

His response is so frank that for a moment I am struck silent. And for once, Kakashi doesn't initiate another long lecture. Instead, he rubs my shoulder one time then walks inside, leaving me alone with my too many thoughts.

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The following day when I arrive at the team's meeting place, an irate Anko greets me. She stands with her legs apart, her hands on her hips and a fire blazing in her eyes.

I say nothing and wait for instructions; I'd rather get this over with.

Anko's expression sharpens.

On the other side of the field, Ouka trades anxious and worried glances between the two of us quickly, as if her head is posted on a spring. Even Kohana, normally full of things to say, sits silent and still, instinctively knowing something is amiss.

Tetsuo yawns.

Anko's lips twist a moment before she speaks. "Let's see it."

"See what?" Is it me or did that make no sense?

"Get over here," the woman commands, pointing her finger to the ground in front of her as if I am dog to be disciplined.

The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can leave. So I drop my traveling bag and walk up to the designated spot.

I don't want to be gone if and when Naruto returns. I think if I see him, things might become clear. And I can't help thinking it's highly suspicious I should be sent away right when everyone's waiting for Naruto.

//Such a . . . silly boy.//

Orochimaru yawns mid-sentence.

How very fortunate.

He's awake.

"I want to talk to him," my leader suddenly demands.

//Oh-ho.//

"What?" I ask intelligently.

Anko grabs the sides of my head, yanks me towards her and shouts, essentially at my forehead. "Hey! You in there! Come out and face me!"
Irritably, I extricate myself from her grasp and jerk my head back because not only was that stupid and pointless, but it was loud. I think she might have busted my eardrum.

"Uh," Ouka queries. "What's going on?"

Kohana whines, tilts her head and opens her mouth so her tongue can loll out in apparent curiosity.

In the background, Tetsuo mumbles something under his breath that sounds a bit like "stuck with all the crazy ones".

//Isn't this entertaining?//

Of all the people who shouldn't be in a good mood . . .

"Hey, Orochimaru, why don't you come on out and talk to an old student?"

//Well, well, now. Maybe I should.//

'I think maybe you shouldn't.'

"I don't think he can do that," I reply wryly.

Anko reaches for me again, but I dance out of her range and angle my head back. I'd rather keep my distance from insane people.

"Oh, I'll just bet he can't," the woman says mysteriously and what is she trying to get at? "Just you listen up." She wags her finger importantly at me. "You may be up to things, but now that I know, I'll be keeping my eye on you." She then puts her fingers to her eyes and back to me to reinforce that claim.

//What is all this about?//

"What's that about?" I ask at almost the same time as Orochimaru. I wince.

"Now that I know, I'll know," she informs me.

"Uh . . ." Ouka, unnaturally quiet, stands at the sidelines.

"So? What?" I taunt. "What can you possibly do about it?"

"For one thing," she tells me angrily, "I was his student too, remember? I can help you deal with him."

"Hardly the same thing."

//I'd like to see you try.//

"Uh . . ." Ouka repeats.

Anko lets out a disgusted sigh and crosses her arms, unhooking one finger to point at me. "Look you. I know all of his little games. Once you understand him, he's pretty easy to resist. Despite the fact that he's in your head instead of outside, the same basic principles apply."

//Look who suddenly knows so much.//

'Shit it, you.'
"See now, right then." Anko throws her arms up in indignation and turns around. "He was talking to you just then, wasn't he?"

//That means nothing.//

"How'd you know?"

She whips back around to face me, and shrugs. "Since I already know where he is, I can sense when he's active." Then she pulls her mouth to the side sheepishly. "Plus you get this distant look on your face."

I look at her with slit eyes. "How come you never mentioned this before?"

Ouka inclines her tiny head quizzically to her leader.

Tetsuo has vanished from the landscape entirely.

"That's not the real problem," the angry kunoichi says, glossing over my question.

//Cease speaking of me as if I'm a pest to be gotten rid of.//

'You are a pest. A parasite, a leech, a . . .'

Anko smacks me hard across the face.

"Mitarashi-sensei!" Ouka yells in my defense.

But I don't say anything. The slap startled me more than truly hurt. I just give her my patented glare.

"You," she states with a measure of restraint she's never shown before, "were doing it again."

I deepen my scowl but remain silent. I can't argue what is basically true.

Anko drops her hand. "You listen too much."

//Tch! Hardly. You never listen at all. How many times have I told you that the boy is bad for you? How many times have I told you: you need the girl? You have one option for survival. And yet you are again considering him, practically decided. You may as well just fall on your sword now.//

"Who cares what he has to say? He's insane and vengeful and self-centered and how come you don't know that? And the whole reason he's trapped in there is because you listened to him in the first place." Anko pokes me in the chest for emphasis. "I have the sneaky suspicion that you've always listened too much." She keeps her finger poised firmly on my chest. "You said he was a parasite . . ." she begins.

"How long were you listening at the hospital?" I interject fiercely.

The corner of her mouth curls up in a way I don't like one bit. "You said he was a parasite, so treat him like bug."

//Bug? Bug! I am no such thing.//

"His talking is the buzzing of a fly. It's annoying, especially in the beginning, and for a while you can't seem to hear anything else. But then after it continues to buzz and more important things take your attention, eventually you'll almost forget the fly is there altogether. Like background." She
bares her teeth at me and presses her nail into my sternum.

I twist my mouth. "So you say."

She smiles more easily and leans back on one foot. "And so do." Then she pats me so roughly on the shoulder that I'm not sure if it's meant to comfort or punish. "Don't worry. I'll help you out. That's what I'm here for after all. To guide and aid my helpless little followers."

"I'm not a follower," I grind out. Nor am I little or helpless.

"Me either!" Tetsuo's lazy drawl emerges bodiless from the surrounding trees.

But Anko simply laughs, throwing her head back for one highly alarming moment. She pounds her hand on me again. She's taking far too much pleasure from this. "Don't be so stubborn." She focuses her eerily red eyes straight on me. "Whenever I sense you talking to old Orochimaru, I'll give you a handy reminder." She waves her hand helpfully in my face, grinning idiotically. "A hand. Get it?"

I stare at her blandly and purse my lips just a little. Her idea of help is based less on actual help and more on her personal enjoyment. Slowly, I cross my arms and stare at her, silently challenging her to our little established battles of wills.

Anko smiles mockingly.

"Uh," Ouka says again and takes a small step forward, raising her hand. "Who's Orochimaru?"

-----

I hate to say that Ouka looks cute, all pouts and determination as she marches alongside me, but she kind of does. After hearing the story, she’s taken it upon herself to make sure that I do as I'm told and ignore the parasite. The little girl's arms are swaying far past normal, working up the momentum to strike me the instant Anko gives the go-ahead. Kohana trots happily on my other side as a canine honor guard and our leader walks behind us so I can feel the chill down my spine from her sadistic stare. Tetsuo lazily drags up the rear.

//What pointless, boring drudgery.//

I ignore him.

//It is however, the perfect opportunity to make an escape. We are outside the main boundaries of Konohagakure. We could find a little wench to settle down with, produce a large brood of children, then return to lay claim to what is rightfully ours.//

The inside of my cheek bleeds from the pressure of my teeth.

//No one is watching now. There's no reason to follow the rules if we're free. Survival is imperative. Forget the elders and move ahead. No reason not to. They'll never catch us.//

'I'm not going to . . .'

"Inuzuka!" Anko barks.

"Right!"

"Oof!"
I furtively rub the spot Ouka struck. For such a tiny thing, she packs a hell of a punch. I haven't checked, but after only a couple of hours I'm pretty certain I'm black and blue all over, thanks to the concerted efforts of my leader and her new ally.

It's felt like much longer.

This, I suspect, is more what a C-ranked mission should be like rather than the much more exciting and perilous one I was involved in as part of Team Seven. The missive Anko has stashed in her front pocket is important, but not crucial or particularly interesting and therefore not likely to attract any dangerous attention.

The main problem we're likely to encounter would come in the form of bandits roaming the immediate area, too stupid to realize that ninjas, even ones as small as Ouka, are not people to trifle with.

"Someone's out there." Tetsuo's soft voice reaches us up in the front as if carried by the wind. One thing I'll say for him: his complete disinterest in all things makes his tone stay level. Anyone listening would likely only catch the timbre of the words and not the content. And the timbre sounds a lot like: "look, a tree".

We continue on our way as though nothing of import has happened. Secretly, I activate my sharingan and scan for traps in the path ahead. Kohana sniffs the air as her partner takes a sly look to the side.

"So, Uchiha-kun, whatcha see?" Anko asks conversationally.

As carefully and secretly as I can, I search the full expanse ahead of us. The air is too still, the wood too quiet. Almost as if . .

"Sound." I say.

"I thought as much." Behind us, I sense Anko ushering Tetsuo forward to more closely align with the main group. "This stinks of them." Anko's voice is barely whispered over my shoulder.

"They've put up some sort of stasis," I say, more for Ouka and Tetsuo's sakes since Anko should be well acquainted with Sound's Modus Operandi. "So that their sound based attacks will have more punch."

Kohana growls lowly under her breath. She's too much a ninja herself to bark out needlessly. Ouka's nose twitches as she seeks the enemy's scent.

"Three," she says, but when the puppy's voice rumbles, she amends, "No, four."

Tetsuo grumbles, but bends to pluck some blades of grass, which he then begins to straighten into thin little lines on his palm.

"What do they want?" He asks with a marked disinclination to act.

"The scroll?" Ouka inquires nervously.

"Nah, I doubt it. Keep moving." Anko picks up her pace slightly and urges us forward. "More likely they're just wandering around and hoping we've got something they want."

"Then why'd they be tracking us?" The little kunoichi looks up at me with her big brown eyes. "We ninja don't have anything. Besides, we have Mitarashi-san and Sasuke-san."
I almost blush with misplaced pride.

//So now the praise of a child is worth something is it?//

"Yeah, but you and Tetsuo are kids," our leader says knowingly. "They'll think we're only training, weaker than we are."

"They think Konoha is soft," I add quietly. "It's been a mark for attack quite a bit lately, so it's stretched thin. They also think Konoha's rich and expect us to have a lot of money."

Ouka wrinkles her nose. "They're stupid."

I shrug neutrally. "I wouldn't say that. Misinformed based on their own hard lives," I take another quick scan, but while the disenfranchised Sound ninja might be deluded, they're not typically rash. "The point is, they're probably desperate by now and think we'll have pocketfuls of cash ripe for the picking."

Ouka giggles. "Ripe for the picking . . ."


Through all this, Tetsuo has remained extremely indifferent. "I wish they'd just attack already," he states through a wide yawn.

Anko slaps the back of his head. "Don't wish for stupid things." But then an eager curl comes to her lips, which clearly belies her wariness. "But I could use with a spot of violence."

"Sasuke-san," Ouka says quietly.

Kohana's growl grows louder then she yips once, a high, barely audible alert. All sound escapes until the only thing we can hear is the rhythm of our own breathing.

"They're coming," Tetsuo states uselessly, his voice an unwelcome noise.

I feel a tiny hand lace through mine as I take a set of shuriken in my other. Kohana backs up so that the tip of her tail just brushes my calf. Warm little fingers squeeze my hand. She's a good girl and a surprisingly good ninja, but she's still just a girl. Her fear is understandable.

Remember," I whisper and squeeze her hand back. Then I let go and ready myself.

And the silence shatters with the shriek of an ear-splitting whistle.

The sound goes straight to my brain, turns my stomach over and spirals pain through my body like a fiery tornado. I cover my ears and close my eyes for a few brief seconds, just enough to settle my stomach and get my bearings. In that time, no one attacks. The moment I release my ears, the shriek assaults my senses once again. As swiftly as possible, I unwrap one of the lengths of cloth around my leg and wind it instead around my ears. The whistle becomes muffled and though it still drills at my brain and stomach, it's manageable.

//Ah, the sweet sound of home.//

Orochimaru's voice is plain in the absence of noises outside.

//How well I recall these children of mine. Basically useless, but look, still active!//

He has a twisted sort of paternal pride.
I take a quick check of the rest of my team. Ouka and Kohana stand side by side on my left. The girl has had the same idea as I, but she's also tucked her hair beneath her hitae-ate as an added buffer. The tips of Kohana's ears stick straight up from the binding wrapped around her head.

Tetsuo's out; it must have happened immediately. He's lying like a dead fish on the forest floor. I don't think he's actually dead, though I can't be sure. Anko, oddly unaffected it would seem, is slowly making her way toward him.

There's movement in the trees to my right. I'm about to warn the rest of my team, but there's no time.

The enemy is upon us.

The strike, fast as a gale force wind, would have hit me if not for the sharingan. I dodge out of the way as a ball of concentrated air hurtles right toward where I was standing. It crashes into the earth behind me with the impact of a bomb, raining down dirt and bits of grass from the blast like an April shower. Beside me tumble the bodies of Ouka and Kohana, too light to hold their places against the onslaught from their side. They barely miss the bomb and somersault to a precarious stop just in front of me. As they face the opposite side, the girl gives me a frightened, wide-eyed glance, but otherwise appears all right. Kohana arches her back and bares her little puppy teeth.

//No time, my precious pet. No time. My other children have come to play and they do not like when the game is delayed.//

Disregarding the particularly maniacal turn Orochimaru's voice has taken, I turn back just in time to spot another attack approaching. I dive to the side, throwing a series of shuriken and shadow shuriken at the direction the blast originated from. They slam soundlessly into the trunk of the tree.

Quickly, I peek to one side and see Ouka and Kohana rapidly preparing a jutsu. The girl's hands are shaking, but luckily Kohana seems perfectly calm. When I look in the other direction, I see that both Anko and Tetsuo have disappeared.

Out of the trees ahead of me emerges a girl. Tall and lithe, her fiery orange hair is pulled up high into a ponytail. In her hand she holds a reed pipe, a deceptively simple yet deadly weapon. They were fairly common tools among the warrior's arsenal of Sound. I don't recognize her, but there's no reason I should. She stops and scrutinizes me and I take the opportunity to covertly begin the preparation of a jutsu. The girl says something I obviously can't hear. But with the sharingan activated, I am able to replay the images back in my head and read her lips, a skill I acquired in Sound.

"Don't I know you?"

Of course, I don't answer.

Off to the right, hidden among the far trees, I spy a shaking of leaves and tree branches that indicates a fight.

Gradually, I rise to my full height to square off silently with my chosen opponent. I ready my hands into proper position as the flame haired girl sneers down at me. Apparently, she's decided she no longer cares much who I am beyond "enemy". We form hand symbols at the same time. When the Goukakyu no Jutsu meets her roiling sphere of sound, the explosion is massive, blocking out sun and sky and casting the world into heated, smoky darkness. A moment later, the stasis breaks and there's a sudden influx of sound. I quickly remove my makeshift earplug. The shrieking whistle has died. Someone has fallen. Probably by Anko's hands. To my side, Ouka and Kohana are in their
beast forms and the combination of little girl and puppy dog is odd, but sort of familiar.

The aura of the flame haired enemy alters and I know the jutsu she's about to perform is a new one. I redirect my attention to the matter at hand; Ouka will have to fend for herself. The Sound kunoichi leaps into the air and slashes down with the pipe, creating a strange trilling of notes. The air from the flute hits the ground and rips forward in four straight lines, throwing up rocks and large chunks of dirt in the wake of the canyons it creates. I can easily enough dodge them; my sharingan predicts the course of each channel with near pinpoint accuracy. That's why I notice that one of them is heading straight for Ouka. She's too immersed in her own battle to realize her peril. There are but a few scant seconds to get to her, but I'm quick. I lunge wildly to the side just in time to grab her up and roll us both out of the path of destruction. Almost instantly, probably in reaction to the shock, Ouka's jutsu breaks and I am left with a tiny shaking girl in my arms.

I pivot onto my knees and set Ouka to her feet in one continuous motion. She has the decency to look ashamed. But remembering my first C-ranked mission, I'm probably not one to judge.

//Oh, it's always proper to judge.//

She'll get braver with experience. She’s still only a child.

"Sasuke!"

For a second I am struck dumb. I know that voice and scowl in recognition.

The entire nature of the battle changes into an impromptu village reunion.

Ouka blinks at me with her uncomprehending child's eyes and an inappropriate lack of readiness. Kohana has joined us and bravely stands vanguard, ready to protect us from whatever comes next.

But there's no protecting from what comes next.

The fire-haired kunoichi moves nearer, preparing another attack.

"Yohko!"

With a lashing motion of her arm, the evident leader of the marauding gang of bandit kunoichi puts a stop to anything the fiery haired girl might have intended.

Slowly, I rise until I'm standing straight, but outwardly relaxed, and face this girl from my past.

"Karin."

She has the impudence to grin shyly and blush.

Yohko walks up to stand beside Karin, looking both worried and irritated as she assesses the two of us.

Ouka’s doing a pretty good impression of the same.

"I was wondering what happened to you," Karin suddenly professes as though we agreed to meet here. "I was afraid you might be dead."

"I'm not."

The bespectacled girl approaches me in a rush and I combat the urge to back up. She wants to throw herself at me like she used to when we were in Sound; I can see that familiar gleam in her
"Everything fell apart after you disappeared and Orochimaru-sama died," she tells me as if I couldn't figure as much out.

//--I didn't die! I'm right here. Now, come and serve me again, my pretty little subordinate.//--

"'Pretty little subordinate'?"

Ouka punches me in the thigh. It seems as if she's becoming able to detect when I talk with my parasite without the help of Anko and that's not good.

"Won't you come home?" Karin implores futilely.

"No." I have no home and even if I did, it certainly wouldn't be Sound.

"But Sasuke," she whines and steps even closer, still flushed pink. "It could be like it was before. It's all a mess now. Sound is basically destroyed. Over." True or not, I don't care. I never had any real connection with Sound. Karin waves feebly around her to indicate the sad state of affairs.

"Look at us now. Running around aimlessly, chasing down random victims like dogs. It's disgraceful. Without a leader, the labs rioted and Sound shattered, everyone scattering before they got caught in the backlash. Its lands are being fought over by the neighboring countries and now there's nothing left. Maybe if someone could bring us back together . . ."

//--Karin, what a loyal child. And still enamored of you, it appears. The perfect choice for starting a new master race. Her chakra sense and healing abilities combined with your sharingan and fire abilities, what mighty children you would make!//--

'I think I'd rather not.'

Ouka hits me again, more brutally this time.

"Stop it," I order her, shifting my gaze down.

"You stop it," comes her decisive rejoinder.

"And what about Orochimaru's lapdog?" I say instead, addressing Karin. "Isn't he the new leader?"

Karin rolls her eyes. "Kabuto is insane. He's tried to combine himself with the leftover parts of Orochimaru and has fallen completely off the deep end."

//--Indeed? Well, isn't that interesting?//--

"Who cares?" The fiery Yohko spits. "What's that got to do with anything?" She looks me up and down disapprovingly. "Let's just kill him. He's nothing special. And he's a traitor."

A traitor twice over, even.

Karin shoots Yohko a look that effectively shuts her up.

"What's going on here?" Anko enters the conversational fray with Tetsuo dragging his feet dejectedly behind her.

After a cursory examination of our adversaries, Anko grins that grin that can only be described as serpentine.
"Karin," she muses and settles back on one foot. "The last time I saw you, you were nothing but a little brat." She runs her tongue over her teeth. "Looks like nothing much has changed."

Karin's stance goes rigid and she firmly pushes on the edge of her glasses, the better to look down on us. "Hey old woman! I wasn't talking to you!"

The vein in Anko's forehead nearly ruptures. "Old woman?"

And now we're having an insult rally.

How quickly things deteriorate. I feel like I'm back on Team Seven with Naruto.

Karin ignores Anko's indignation and returns her attention on me. "Sasuke . . ." She coos, almost batting her eyelashes.

Ouka takes my hand.

"You were one of us, remember? Be one of us again."

The little hand in mine squeezes as though she thinks she can hold me here. Anko is practically foaming at the mouth with rage, still dwelling on the "old woman" comment.

I close my eyes in resignation.

I guess it's up to me.

How did that happen?

"Karin," I intone calmly.

She perks up with that oddly possessive, overly hopeful glint in her eye.

"Just go."

Her face is static for a moment before she blinks in bewilderment, underlined by anger.

"You can't mean that," she asserts incredulously. Underneath her tone, like rats burrowing underground, is that ugly rage.

"Can I kill them now?" Yohko the firebrand grasps her pipe firmly.

"I'll let you walk away from this for . . ." I search for the proper words and settle on the inane, "old time's sake."

Karin again pushes her glasses up though they can go no further but through her face, and bites her lip.

I stare blandly at her.

"You don't really want to try me, do you?" I find it difficult to keep the sarcasm from my voice. "I don't have the patience for it."

//Well enough and true, but do you have the chakra? That is the question.//

'They don't need to know whether I do or not.'

Tiny nails dig into my hand, branding half-moon impressions in my palm.
Karin's lips twist tighter, yet she looks more dejected than angry.

"Ayaka! Ami!" The red-haired kunoichi of my past shouts. Two girls emerge from the woods behind us and obediently join their compatriots.

"We're going," Karin announces.

"No way! I can take these guys. I can take all these guys!"

"Yohko!" Karin's fury is quick and fierce, with the swing of emotions I remember well. The immediate calm afterward is a bit unexpected, however, and a little disconcerting. It seems she too has changed. "We're going."

The two new arrivals, younger and more compliant – one of them looks the worse for wear - nod in acceptance and disappear as if this was nothing more than a detour on the way to something better. Yohko on the other hand gives us, and me in particular, an exceptionally dour expression before reluctantly following her companions. Karin turns too, but takes a last, melancholic look over her shoulder.

"For old time's sake," she says and is gone, leaving me with the uncertainty of whom spared whom and why.

//Ah, such missed opportunities.//

She always was a bit soft in that regard.

//And here I thought we'd get a little excitement.//

"And here I thought we'd get a little excitement," Anko moans and stretches her hands high over her head.

I glance at her, unsure whether to laugh or be sick.

"Well, at least it's taken care of. I doubt they'll be coming back," she adds a moment later.

"Aw, man," Tetsuo whines sullenly as he kicks dirt.

"Don't worry," Anko comforts him unsympathetically and slaps him on the back. "I'm sure you'll be conscious they next time we're attacked."

Ouka giggles.

My hand begins swinging and I look down to see Ouka virtually beaming at me. She’s got a halo of light and everything, though that might be a trick of the sun. Kohana sidles up and begins rubbing her head against my calf.

I look impassively into the distance and groan. "Don't we have a mission to complete?"

The slap this time is on my back as Anko cheers, "Right so."

She strides forward and points importantly at the horizon. "On we go, my little ninjas! All right, Team Four!"

She's quite jubilant over winning a glorified spat but Ouka swiftly puts a stop to it with a practical observation.
"Uh, isn't that west?" She asks innocently.

Our illustrious leader remains almost motionless, apart from a self-conscious tick, before clearing her throat and adjusting her aim.

"Onward!" She cries and starts marching, this time in the correct direction.

-----

The rest of the mission is horribly uneventful. We make it to the northern lord's land, drop off the parchment, and are sent on our way without a word of thanks. That lord was rude. He treated us like lowly servants and if Ouka weren't still gripping my hand, I'd have pummeled him.

At least it's over.

At last, it’s time to go back.

To Konoha.

I pick up my pace and without a word, the rest of the team follows suit.

-----

Something's wrong.

I can feel it down in my bones the instant we enter the gates of Konohagakure, a couple days ahead of schedule. I pay no attention to the "goodbyes" of my teammates as I make my way to the apartment. Anxiety mounts in my tendons with each ensuing step.

All my irrational fears are made rational when I find a highly agitated Hyuuga Hinata waiting at my front door.

"Sasuke-kun!" She yells, loud for her, and walks briskly up to me.

Something is terribly wrong. I tighten my grip on my pack for stability. "What is it?"

Her lavender tinted eyes are strangely ominous. "I-it's Naruto," she says cryptically. "He's back."

There's an instant flood of relief and . . anticipation?- but then there's Hyuuga Hinata. "And?"

She bites the inside of her lip. "They've p-put him in c-custody."

My heart stops. "Meaning?"

"He's in p-prison."

There's a muffled thump when my bag hits the floor. I control my emotions and keep my expression impassive. "What?"

She steps up to me, close enough to take my hand, her small fingers warm where mine have gone cold.


I school my face with stoic determination and nod. And we're off, racing through the streets as if fire itself were chasing us.
It's not until much later that I realize I left my pack sitting outside the door, free for anyone to take.
We travel down the endless spiraling staircases at light speed. I have since reclaimed control of my hand, but at the moment it's about the only thing I have any control over.

Naruto is locked in the deepest depths of the prison, reserved especially for the most dangerous of criminals.

The ones who don’t have much longer left.

I quicken my gait to match the beat of my heart.

Just as we’re about to enter the inner sanctum, Hinata stops, turns, and pulls me into a dark alcove. She then takes something out of her pocket and puts it over my head.

"What the . . " I protest.

"Shh!" She tosses a pair of dark glasses over my eyes and wraps a dopey looking scarf around the bottom half of my face several times. I feel like Aburame. I debate whether or not I want to find a mirror to see how stupid I look, but ultimately decide it's probably best that I can't.

//Yes, rather wise. You look a perfect fool.//

"Th-there are jutsus inhibiting b-barriers here. So no transfor . . mations," The Hyuuga girl explains. "And the Hokage said you're n-not allowed. Now, don't speak," she commands in an uncommonly authoritative voice.

Hinata is already advancing on the guard, who smiles pleasantly. I walk up to stand beside her.

"Hyuuga Hinata here to see Uzumaki Naruto," she states in a crisp, clear voice.

Luckily, I have enough self-control not to shoot a glance at her and give the game away. Her stutter has utterly disappeared.

"Yes," the guard says, checking her name on the list. "Sign here."

Dutifully, the girl signs where indicated.

"And who's this?" The guard asks as he takes the ledger back as he eyes me, still congenial.
But no one told me I was playing, so I don't have an answer!

//Tch-tch-tch.//

"Kuno Masato," Hinata informs him without taking a breath. "Also here to see Uzumaki Naruto."

"Ah, let's see, let's see." The man runs his pen down the side of the list looking for this name that isn't mine. I take the chance to peek at Hinata and notice she's still not breathing.

I hope she doesn't turn blue or faint because that would be bad.

"Yes, here we are," the guard announces cheerily.

Hinata draws in air.

I take the pen and copy the fake name in the proper place.

The guard reclaims the ledger. "You can go in now," he says.

"Thank you," Hinata replies with a nod and forcefully guides me through the open gate doors. After we walk for a bit, her grip on me relaxes.

"Th-that was easier than I th-thought." She gives me a weak smile.

I look at her. "He was awfully friendly," I remark.

"Yes," she answers.

"You seem to have been prepared."

"Yes." Nervously, she looks away. "I have b-been down here already, so he kn-knows me. It makes me wonder." Then she directs the full brunt of those unnerving violet eyes on me. "W-well?" She asks, trying to sound impatient but too anxious to pull it off effectively. "Wh-what are you waiting for? He's in the second cell on the right."

//Exactly where he should be.//

I spare her another curious glance, then go to see the person I've been waiting a lifetime for.

It is only a few meters, only a couple steps, but the trek to the cell seems interminable. I swear my hands are sweating. Sweating! All to see someone I've known almost all my life.

The long line of cells is ominous and empty and I can't sense any other prisoners skulking in the shadows. I take a deep breath and stop in front of Naruto's cell. He's sitting gloomily on the stone bench, staring at his hands. He's just sitting there and I've been waiting for him these past two weeks and what am I supposed to say now?

"Dobe."

In slow motion, he faces me. The face he presents is dark and haunted; his cheeks are thinner and there are purple circles below his eyes. He glowers at me with a strangely cynical expression. I quickly remove my makeshift disguise so that I look more myself.

The cynicism disappears, but the glare remains.

It's as if he is growing older by stages with each period of our separation. He seems to have lost the
baby fat around his face, but it’s happened too fast. That roundness looked better on him; it made his cheeks puff out when he smiled or frowned or ate. He looks empty without it.

His eyes are dark, like a rain cloud has passed over the sun.

I don't like these changes. They make him no longer my Naruto.

But if he ever was mine, I lost him long before now.

//Sometimes you make lucky mistakes, unfortunately followed by bad decisions.//

We haven't spoken beyond my curt greeting. We've only stared at one another in a silence filled with all that we were, are, and could ever be. It speaks volumes.

But maybe that's how it's always been.

"What happened?" My voice sounds unfamiliar.

Naruto contracts his eyelids and looks away without answering.

"It was Kyuubi, wasn't it?"

I don't need to see the twitch of his eye to know the answer.

"Naruto." I want to scold him because I’m disappointed. I’d warned him about this before.

//Then he is useless, unable to learn even the simplest of lessons.//

The knuckles of his hand stand out severely against the tan of his skin. He wants to lash out at me; I can taste his tension in the air like lemons. But he won't because he knows I'm right.

In his profile, I see his eyebrows crush together, sculpting permanent wrinkles in the space between them.

"I hear you're dating Sakura," he says suddenly, his voice a dry, cracked desert of resentment.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Did you sleep with her?" His eyes turn back to me then, deep and lustrous, a rich, intoxicating indigo.

"Did you?" I retort sharply.

//Ku-ku-ku! How amusing. Perhaps this will not be so terrible after all.//

His lips pull tightly into a thin line, but he doesn't say anything, so I guess that's my answer. I don't suppose I have any right to be angry or hurt, but that doesn't prevent it.

"Well," he muses sarcastically, a warped little smile on his face. "I hope you'll be very happy together."

"Don't be an idiot."

"Idiot?" He flies to his feet, fists clenched fiercely at his sides. And this is better. "How dare you! This is your fault, you know!"

"My fault?"
"Yeah, yours. If you hadn't, then I wouldn't have . . ." But with his inability to make a cohesive argument, he pinches his lips together and says nothing more.

//And now he blames you. It couldn't be more perfect if I tried! What a child he is, not even taking responsibilities for his actions.//

'You did try. This is because of you.'

//I wouldn't complain over that. Look at what I saved you from.//

I sigh. "Naruto," I say, trying to take the high road here for once. "What happened?"

His rage blends out over his face until it dissolves. His eyes change color again; now gray like deep periwinkle and that is beautiful too. I guess that stupid saying really is true, his eyes are the windows to his soul.

He looks at me until his eyebrows dip to meet in an inverted "v". Then he blushes, smiles that infuriating, sheepish not-smile, and shrugs. "Things didn't go as planned."

"That doesn't much explain why you're here," I observe dryly. I want to keep him talking long enough to haul out the true Naruto beneath this false one. "It was Kyuubi, wasn't it? He got out."

He refuses to face me.

"What are you doing here?" He asks instead.

"You didn't want to see me?" I'm very proud that my voice doesn't crack, humiliated that it almost did.

He picks at invisible lint on his trousers and flicks it away. "I didn't think you'd come."

I don't know what I'd have done if said "no".

"I just got back," I say and for some reason I want him to know just how recently that was. "I think I left my bag outside the front door; I never made it inside."

Naruto scrutinizes me with his deep blue eyes like evening sky then looks away quickly. "That's stupid."

The nape of his neck is flushed red, so all I say is, "I suppose."

He's pleased.

The short soft hairs at the back of his head aren't so short anymore. The pink of his skin blends under the golden tinge of hair like fire. I remember the feel of his skin, his hair, beneath my fingers. I wonder if they feel the same or if they too have changed, like his face, into a Naruto other than mine.

"Now what?" I blurt out.

Naruto doesn't seem to notice the non sequitur. "'Now what' what?"

"What are they going to do, now that you're here?" I won't say words like "elders", "prison", and "Kyuubi". I don't even think about the worse ones.

His whole body shifts, sags like clay weighted down. He lets himself meld into the stone bench
again and leans his head back to the wall, closing his eyes. His cheeks retain a faint flush, giving the illusion of a slight roundness and that is better.

"They're going to put me on trial."

"They're going to put you on trial?"

"Yup." His voice is too light, nearly blasé. "That's what they said." He snorts derisively. "I think they're looking forward to it."

"And then what?" It's a struggle to keep my tone free of contempt.

"Well," he says with disinterest. "They'll pass their judgment, right? Isn't that usually how things go? Then they'll probably kill me." He laughs like a bark. "No, sorry, "execute"."

All the air goes out of the room, regardless of what I already knew. "What?"

"Probably some ninja way, with a sword or something. I don't know."

"And you're just going to let them?" My tongue feels thick in my mouth.

He opens his eyes and gazes at me. They are that deep, intense blue, Naruto blue, my blue. "What would you have me do?"

This attitude isn't him, all this dispassion and acceptance.

"Something!" I shock myself with the volume of my own voice and slam my palm against one of the obtrusive bars. "Anything! Better than just sitting there and letting them do what they want without even putting up a fight."

He narrows his eyes at me and a spark of the old fire is back, the anger at the way of the world and his place in it. It's that spark I want, that flame, that fire. All that boundless energy and moral outrage that makes Naruto who he is.

"Why should I?"

Better still if he'll aim it at me. Just me. *Only me.*

I glower at him. "What about all your friends? What about all you goals?" I sneer. "What about all the excuses you gave to *me*? Or do they mean nothing to you? I thought you were going to become Hokage, change the world and all that. What ever happened to that?"

"What about it?" He drawls.

It's a challenge.

I'm always up for a challenge.

"Come here." But Naruto doesn't move immediately. If anything, his face becomes sharper, honed hard like the edge of a knife.

So I raise my hand and crook my finger a few times.

For a mere instant, Naruto's expression changes as he blinks back his disbelief. He examines my finger, then my face, tilting his head almost like a cat and stands up. Cautiously he approaches, unsure what I'm going to do. But he is anxiously anticipating it as well, as though he's fabricated
all sorts of possibilities in his overactive imagination.

I smirk and watch him as he watches me, his eyes glued to the curve of my lips.

And that is better too.

Then I pull my arm back and shoot it forward with all the weight of my body behind it, through the break in the bars and with the force of all my pent up frustrations. Naruto soars backward and hits the wall then sprawls all over the floor.

"What was that for?" He screeches, as he rubs his cheek. His eyes flash.

And there it is, the flame to the spark I both need and crave.

I fold my arms over my chest and give him my best condescending glare.

His jaw juts out past his nose, baring his bottom teeth. He stumbles to his feet, clumsy with rage. It builds and builds as his shoulders rise increasingly higher with the intake of each subsequent breath.

I wait for it.

His fists open and close, deliberately, but he is still debating. His eyes glow deep, a blue like violet, almost no longer blue, but still a Naruto color.

And still I wait. I know it will come.

The spiky hairs on his head nearly stand on end, the tips glowing faintly red. His jaw shifts back. His fists stay clenched.

I allow my sneer to deepen.

He’s upon me almost faster than I can avoid, but then I don't want to avoid it. His knuckles connect sharply with my jaw and as I fall back, he makes a mad scramble for my shirt. He seizes it, jerks forward and smashes our foreheads together. I get a sharp whiff of his breath, sour and old from too many mission rations. I slam my hands to his shoulders and shove violently until he lets go and stumbles back. Then I plunge my leg through the small opening in the bars, and thrust it into his stomach, slamming into him with as much force as I can marshal under the circumstances. He doesn't fall back. Instead he grabs my ankle and pulls it deeper within the cell, adjusting the angle. The abrupt motion causes me to drop, my other leg ramming bent to one of the bars.

My breath catches with a pain that fires all the way up my spine.

Naruto looms above me, breathing harder than he should, his every muscle tensed. I wrench my ankle free from his grasp and lock my foot around his calf, twisting and pulling it quickly so that he falls hard. I lever myself properly back on my hands.

Naruto props himself up on his elbows, his knees bent up and spread, and glares at me. His chest is heaving with the expenditure of effort and fury, and sweat is slowly staining his shirt. I can smell it in the air. It's raw and pungent and my lip curls in satisfaction. He views that as some sort of contest and begins crawling over to me, straddling my outstretched leg and stopping a little less than half a meter away. I slide my leg free as he sets back on his haunches like some sort of wild creature.

His left eye flinches in uncertainty.
His shirt is quickly soaking with sweat clinging to his torso so I can nearly see the demarcation of his muscles.

I lean forward, thread my hand through the gap, grasp his collar and tug him forward. Now our faces are only separated by the width of the bars.

His eyes, full of hate and rage, are the purple-black of deep indigo. His whisker marks pull taut over his cheeks as he gnashes his teeth, his warm animal breath wafting into my face. A vein in his neck visibly pulses, fast and harsh and shining with sweat beside strained muscles.

I want to slam him against the wall and kiss him until he's breathless.

"So you're just giving up, are you?" I say.

Naruto's chest spasms towards me as he refocuses his eyes.

And the hate is still there. The hate and the anger and the strange acceptance, but there's something else there now too. His hands grapple for the bars on either side of us. He slowly screws his grip inward with a squeak and the action makes his biceps bulge.

I get another whiff of the sharp and earthy smell of him.

"What," he grinds through his teeth, "do you want me to do?"

The impulse to tackle him straight through the bars is nearly overwhelming, but I won't have him, not like this, when he is no longer mine. Roughly I release him, but his grip on the bars holds him upright, merely stretching out his arms stiffly. I uncoil smoothly to my feet.

"I'll come back when I can talk to Naruto." Because, of course, this isn't my Naruto.

With that, I exit to the hall, feeling wary yet confident. Let him think about me, as he should, while he's cooped up in there.

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When I find Hinata, she greets me with wide eyes and a furious blush.

I simply lift an eyebrow.

The girl clears her throat with a high-pitched cough and blinks. "Wh-where's your d-disguise?" She asks me once she's found her voice.

I try not to let my irritation show as I deftly spin on my heel. I'd hate to have Naruto see me backtracking after my dramatic departure.

//Yes, how very terrible that would be. A tragedy of epic proportions.//

For once, luck is on my side.

Naruto is in the same position as I left him, only now his head is tilted slightly forward, his eyes pinched closed and his lips parted as he takes short breaths of air. His grip on the bars is so tight it seems he might snap them any second. His skin is flushed like burnished copper, red and tan, I quickly collect my things before slipping back out.

The Hyuuga girl is still blushing when I return and quickly throw on the disguise.
The way out is as easy as the way in.

Soon after the girl and I part ways, my elation crumbles like ashes and reality crashes down on me.

I come to a slow stop a couple of blocks from the prison.

If he really did what I think, if the Kyuubi got out, if he caused mass havoc . . .

Naruto could die.

He could really die.

He’s no more a favorite of the elders than I am.

The thought that he could be gone forever, that I would never again see his face, hear his laugh, confront his anger, or feel his touch in hunger or violence, sucks all the breath from my body. Until now, the possibility still felt remote, like an irrational fear that would never see the light of day.

But now it could.

It really could.

My heart expands, too big to fit anymore and squeezes like jelly through the cracks in my ribcage. It’s but an inkling of what I would experience if Naruto actually died.

It’s a pain I cannot hope to bear.

I close my eyes against it.

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\+\ In the murky cavern of my mind my mother appears with that special smile on her face. She stands in the darkness with her hands clasped expectantly in front of her. She is waiting.

"Are you ready now?"

Her expression is so sincere that I nod, though I don't know what I'm agreeing to.

But she takes my hand and gazes upon me with those soft onyx eyes. The same color as mine yet not. "Then come." She reaches out a hand to pull back the edge of the darkness as though it is a curtain and the brightness of my previous dream returns, blinding and hurting my eyes.

"What if I didn't want to be a ninja?"

We are back to before and I blink rapidly at my little replica, striving again to recall this as the scene slowly plays out before me.

In my memory vision, my mother looks to the young me quizzically, her knife frozen in the air. "You don't want to be a ninja?"

My child self knits his brow and gradually resumes chopping. "No, I do. I was just wondering what if I didn't. What if I didn't want to be all the things you want me to be? Would you hate me?"

There’s a treble in his voice. Pathetic.

The knife clanks to the countertop as my mother turns. "What brought this on?"
The boy shrugs diffidently.  

Mother searches his face then carefully removes knife and carrot from his hands, setting them on the table. She takes his shoulder. "Sasuke . . ."

Little me sighs wearily as he’s forced to face her. "I saw a kid in the street with his father. Older than me. They were working in a shop. And his father was a ninja, but the kid wasn't." He bites his lip, staring resolutely at the floor. "But they were smiling, happy, and it didn't make any difference that he wasn't a ninja even though his father was and I just thought . . ." He shrugs again.

My mother’s eyes are tender with worry for an instant, but then the sweetest smile that I hadn't remembered appears on her face. She tucks her index finger under my child self’s chin and tilts it up so that he looks her in the eye.

"Why do you think such things?" Her gaze is so warm it’s almost blinding. "I could never hate you. You’re my son and I love you, no matter what. And you should never do things just because other people want you to, whether it be Itachi or your father or even me." She shakes her head to support this contention. "Always do what makes you happy. If you want to be a teacher or a cook or a ninja, it makes no difference. If you’re happy, I’m happy. The two are inseparable and that’s how it will always be. It’s all I have ever really wanted. Your happiness." She cups his cheeks in her two hands, small and soft and warm. "Understand?"

The child face flushes up splotchy, unsure whether to be pink or white, but he nods, conceding her words.

Her grin widens. "Good." Then she kisses the top of his forehead and returns to her previous task. "Now get back to work."

"Yes, mother." My young self turns to the carrots and chopping board, slicing them again with a tiny, shy smile on his face. \+

The memory fades like moonlight when I open my eyes.

If I were the sort to laugh at myself, I might be tempted to do so now. But I’m not that sort, so I stay quiet.

My mother would never have judged or disowned me as I had feared. I know that. How often did he tell me those words of reassurance? She had her own ideas of what she wanted for me and maybe she would’ve been a little disappointed, but she would’ve wanted me to be happy. Only my own anxieties made me question what should have been obvious.

My mother would love me in whatever path I took.

All those stupid people were right: Kakashi, Sakura, Tsunade, Hinata . . .

I hate that.

But when faced with the idea that I could seriously lose him forever, my path becomes painfully clear. It has always been Naruto. Damn the council, damn Konoha, damn rules and regulations and family responsibility

Damn all of it.

If I’m to break because of this, then so be it.
And I will have him; my Naruto that I lost and will find again.

It may not last, it may bring my death, and it may have Naruto hating me afterward. A choice between a long miserable life and a short happy one is still a choice. And for once, it will be my own.

Too much time has been wasted already.

Naruto will be mine, just as he should be.

But first, I have to help save his life.
Chapter 35

I can be patient.

People think I'm impetuous, but that's not altogether true. I can weigh my decisions, I can wait for the right moment, even let an opportunity pass in order for the perfect one to come. People might disagree with my choices, but that doesn't mean I don't consider them first. And I can be patient; I have learned to be so.

But there are times when patience is not a virtue.

I remind myself this as I walk back to the Hokage tower. Or race back. Or whatever.

I walk straight up to Shizune at her desk and demand to see Tsunade.

"I'm sorry, but she's unavailable right now," the woman tells me. "You can make an appointment."

And that would be helpful if I were seeing the dentist. I glare at Shizune and then at the door beyond.

//Break it down.//

Locked and barred, I don't care; I stride right on up to it.

"Uchiha-san!" Shizune springs up and catches my arm.

I disregard her and pound on the door. I can be polite. I pound again, hearing the snap of splintering wood and Shizune pulls on my arm, trying to stop me, but I yank free.

//No time for pleasantries. Break it down.//

The answer I get from behind the door is in no way polite.

"Get lost! I'm not accepting visitors!"

One side of my mouth curls up in a smirk. I hit the doors with one round kick and they fly open easily.

//Ah, finally. Broken.//
Shizune is running past me, Ton Ton oinking alongside, as the woman yells some sort of apology.

"What is it with security?" Tsunade screeches. "Izumo! Kotetsu!"

But they're already there, pinioning my arms and preventing me from entering any further. I stare blankly ahead at the Hokage as she paces behind her desk with the short stack of papers. If I had full access to my chakra, I could handle these guys easily, one shot and done. But my chakra is bound and my options limited. So I have to satisfy myself with the knowledge of "if only", and I wait as patiently as I can.

But patience is not always a virtue.

"Oh," the Hokage says dully when she bothers to face me. "It's you."

She screws up her face, revealing the lines of her normally concealed wrinkles, and pauses a few moments. Then she huffs like Ton Ton would, through her nose, and dismisses her two main guards and her assistant away with a single magisterial wave of her hand.

The two men reluctantly release me.

//Manipulation is a valuable tool. As is intimidation.//

I smirk as the shinobi disappear from the room, leaving the old woman and me alone.

"So," Tsunade says lazily, seating herself at her desk and pretending to resume work. "What is it you wanted?"

"If I absorb Orochimaru, will he shut up? Will he still be able to perform his body transfer jutsu?"

"If I absorb Orochimaru, will he shut up? Will he still be able to perform his body transfer jutsu?"

Those are the words that escape my mouth.

"No, and I have no idea."

"Will I feel better?"

//Ku-ku-ku-ku.//

She raises and eyebrow in interest and sneers. "If you mean, will you go back to being your old nasty self, probably."

I nod absently. That's mildly reassuring.

The woman steeples her hands neatly on the desk in front of her. "But that's not what you came to ask me."

//Ah, but than what did we come here for? To display your utter uselessness?//

I hold her gaze steadily, make my breath slow and even. "What's going to happen to Naruto?"

"You'll find that there's very little that goes on in Konoha that I don't know." She pounds a sheaf of papers on the desk short side and sets them aside. "With all the conspiracies going on under my
nose, I've made a point to develop an even more extensive spy network than the elders." She rests her chin on her folded hands. "You really didn't recognize him, did you?"

I don't know whom she means. Her smile spreads like a contented cat. I've got to keep control of myself, regardless of the provocations. Standing there silent, I let my mind flutter back.

//Disappointment after disappointment. So unobservant.//

The congenial smile, the straw-colored hair, the voice slightly higher than I'm used to, but still. "Kuma." How very irritating.

Tsunade smiles on one side of her mouth as she stands, leaving the tips of her fingers balanced delicately on the edge of the desk. "Is that what you call him?" Her fingertips slide off to hang at her sides, displaying how much she doesn't consider me a threat. "He'll be holding that position while Naruto's there, if you care to visit again, Kuno-san."

I allow her jeer to slide off my back. "So," I continue, keeping my voice flat. "Naruto?"

"I'm not going to let the council do what they want." There is fierce determination in her voice. "Does he even care?" I grumble this to myself, but in such confined spaces, she's sure to hear. "More than you think." She sighs and leans back on the windowsill. "And I'm not about to let any misplaced guilt make him give up." She eyes me critically. "But that's not your concern. Why are you here?"

//Again, such a good question.//

I settle back on one foot and lift my chin slightly. "What can I do?"

"And just what do you think you can do?" She questions rather plainly. "A traitor and a murderer, a de facto criminal with no good name, no power, and a complete lack of trustworthiness. Tell me, Uchiha Sasuke, what exactly do you think you can do?"

//She put it quite succinctly there, didn't she? How needless are you?//

My breathing quickens with anger. There has to be something I can do.

I cannot just stand here.

I am not, and have never been, helpless. At least not since I was a worthless child.

//Oh, are we forgetting a few things?//

Then, suddenly, the woman's face softens. Her previously narrowed eyes return to normal, the light brown gentle when she speaks again. "Go home. That's the best thing you can do for him. Or visit him. I'm sure he'd like that. I'm sorry," she says and actually sounds like she means it! "But it's better if you don't get involved."

I glare at her furiously and drag my ragged nails along my palms, concentrating on the tingle of pain they cause so that I won't rush forward and snap her neck.

//That at least would be satisfying. Release some of this pent-up frustration. And so much more like whom you ought to be.//

We two regard each other for a while, both knowing full well the truth of her statement.
Then I leave.

-----

Sitting at the apartment doing nothing is not what I want to do.

So I stand.

Occasionally I pace.

It's a new activity for me, so I thought I'd test it out.

It does nothing to help me think or make me feel better.

For the first hour, Kakashi sat on the sofa watching me, but after a few useless suggestions on his part and a few death threats on mine, he gave up. For the hour after that, he just sat and reread one of his favorite volumes of Icha Icha Paradise.

And all I can do is stand and wait and occasionally pace.

There has to be something more constructive I can do.

//There is nothing. There is no use in railing about it.//

There has to be something. Because I am not useless. Work, brain, work!

There's a gentle knock on our door.

I push off the wall and look at the offending slab of wood. Then I look to Kakashi, but he only flips a page in his book and says, "It's for you."

True or not, he's clearly not getting off his lazy ass to do anything.

I rip the door open, nearly rending it from its hinges.

Hinata is there, a small smile on her face and a large wrapped box with a big red bow in her hands. I have to admit to being at least slightly surprised. This is about the last thing I expected to see when I opened the door.

I stare at her impassively and don't invite her in.

Her forehead wrinkles a little bit but then she gathers her courage and holds out the box. "Th-this is for you."

"What for?"

She blinks rapidly and opens and closes her mouth once. Then she tilts her head. "It's your . . . birthday," she says. Then she adds nervously, "I-isn't it?"

I glance back over my shoulder to my unhelpful roommate. "What day is it?"

"July 23," he answers rather quickly.

Oh, so I guess it is. My birthday. Seventeen I am now. Seventeen. Whatever that means.

I turn to Hinata and take the box from her hands, nodding. It's the only thanks she'll get; it's not like I asked for anything; I don't even celebrate my birthday.
The girl stares at me for a bit and doesn't go away. Why isn't she going away?

Hinata's violet-tinted eyes flick down to the package, up to my face and back down again. "A-aren't you g-going to open it?"

So that's what this is about.

She wants to see me open it and show my undying appreciation. Fine, fine.

Without inviting her in, I take the box and set it on the kitchen table. The girl pauses in the doorway for a moment, thinks about something, looks back and forth and finally enters. Once inside, she quickly comes to my side and stands beside me. I pull up the ribbon and it unravels loop by loop like a loose yarn in a sweater. I lift the lid from the box. Inside is a formal suit, black and well tailored and much too nice for anything I would need. Gently, I remove it from its confines and the fabric rustles softly as it unfolds and slips free. It's of fine material that picks up a hue of midnight blue when the light hits it just right. There is a shirt too, of brushed cotton in off white, and a tie in deep Prussian blue. The suit even has a pocket square with an embroidered symbol of the Uchiha fan tucked neatly into the breast pocket.

I blink lazily as I take this all in.

It is far too fine. She shouldn't be giving me something of such rich quality. It's inappropriate and besides, I have no occasion to wear it.

Behind us, Kakashi whistles lowly and it's the first I am reminded he is there.

I turn to the girl critically.

Hinata flutters her eyes nervously then smiles her patented shy smile. "It's," she starts hesitantly. "It's a bit of a bribe."

I lift one eyebrow and stare at her. Then I carefully fold the suit back into the box, replace the lid, and hand it back to her.

"I cannot accept this."

She nips her lips together and gently pushes it back. "You can't return it," she says somewhat adamantly. "It's a g-gift. Besides," she finds her stability and pulls a paper from her pocket, thrusting it at me like a weapon. "I'd like you to wear it at my wedding."

//There is always a motive. Nothing in this world is free. Kindness always comes with a price. You should have learned that by now//

I take the paper, unfold it and quickly read the contents.

I fold the paper up again, place it on the box and look back at the girl. 'Seriously?' is what I want to say, but in lieu of that I say nothing.

"You're coming," she tells me in that rare but forceful voice.
My mouth forms the word "no" because I have no desire to go to a wedding. There will be people there. People I don’t like and who don’t like me.

I can’t think about such frivolous things right now anyway. Not with Naruto locked up.

"You're coming," she repeats even more obstinately but smiles sweetly.

I narrow my eyes, but don’t put up a fight. She’s one of the few people who don’t look upon me with disdain. If for some bizarre, inexplicable reason she wants me there, I suppose I could go.

//And leave as soon as possible.//

She nods approvingly.

"Don't I get an invitation?" Kakashi whines from the connected room like a spoiled little boy.

Hinata's pale eyes bug out briefly. Then, without a word, she turns and walks over the one-eyed pouting man. "Of course," she says, all tangled up with nerves again. She hands him an invitation and he beams up at her with his big crescent eye.

"I'll get you a good present." He claims, oddly noble. "How about an Icha Icha How-To book? That sounds good." He suggests this without a single muscle altering his expression.

"K-kakashi-shi-san!" Hinata is so mortified that she blushes impressively and manages to stutter over the entire name.

I can't help thinking that she must already be acquainted with some of the things in that book; or else how is she pregnant?

As if running from the scene of a horrific crime, Hinata turns and dashes to the front door, pulling it wide. She takes a moment to cast one last glance at me. "Happy b-birthday, Sasuke-kun," she says with unwarranted sobriety. She quirks up her mouth briefly before finally escaping through the door.

"Bye!" Kakashi calls after her, cheery and oblivious.

I stare at the closed door for a moment and then at my box.

Seventeen. I am seventeen today.

I don't feel any different. No one has made any fuss over it aside from this one gift, not that I expected it.

Or wanted it.

//No, of course not. It must serve as a reminder of so many unpleasant things.//

When I was small, there was always a little bit of fuss. My mother would cook me something special and give me a day free from chores. Father thought it was all a lot of nonsense. But Itachi would always set aside time for me. That was the best part about my birthdays. It was the one day of the year that when I asked him if he would train with me, I knew the answer would be yes. And he'd pat my head and smile and . . .

"You don't want a cake, do you?" Kakashi asks me. And I don't respond because that statement makes it clear that I’m not getting one.
But I was never one for sweets anyway.

I turn from him and look again to the innocent looking white box filled with the quality blue-black fabric for a long time.

Then I turn and walk out the door.

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"Hello, Kuno-san," the "guard" says merrily. His straw colored hair sticking up straight in a dead giveaway; I should have noticed it before.

I twist my mouth. Putting up this ridiculous charade is a probably necessary to save face if the time to defend my actions should come.

"I'm here to see Uzumaki Naruto," I answer crisply.

The man smiles and I take the time to examine him. It's a face I don't recognize, not that I expected to, but then this is probably a disguise too. He’s younger than I pictured him. And older. He has light brown eyes and perfect teeth. His face is shaved smooth and he doesn't look like a professional killer at all. But then I suppose none of us do.

"What do you have there?" He asks me.

Instead of replying, I place the box on the table for him to inspect. He does so and all I can think about is how hot, sweaty and uncomfortable this scarf around my face is.

"Nothing tricky in this is there?" Guard nee Kuma asks, poking around the box and casting some sort of x-ray jutsu on the contents.

Actually, I just made that last part up. I’ve never actually heard of an x-ray jutsu.

"All right. Everything looks O.K. here." He’s still smiling as he hands the box back to me. I scowl behind the scarf and dark glasses. "Sign here please."

I do as he says with an angry flourish. He grins stupidly.

I grumble under my breath as I stroll down the prison hall.

Naruto is sitting on his little stone bench with his head tilted back and his mouth slightly open. His eyes are closed but he's not asleep. His breathing doesn't have the right rhythm.

I walk up to the cell door and wait for a bit, observing him through the bars. He looks so much older.

But then, I’m seventeen today so I’m older too. But sometimes I forget that years have passed. Sometimes I still expect to find the same round-faced kid in the orange tracksuit spouting his certainty about the world and his place in it. But he’s not the same.

And neither am I.

But that’s not the point. I think the point is that this might be the first time I've noticed how different he is. This may be the last time I see him.

"What're you staring at?"
I look at his face and see the unforgiving stormy blue of his eyes watching me acutely. I stare right back at him and I see with curiosity when his eyebrows pull together as if he doesn’t recognize me.

"Sasuke?"

"Who'd you think it was?" I ask sarcastically.

But he analyzes me a little longer, searchingly, shakes his head, and doesn’t answer the question.

"What are you doing here?" He asks sourly instead.

He's not being friendly by any stretch, but he’s not shutting me out. He's just being belligerent.

I cross my feet without uttering a word and sit down on the cold floor with folded knees. I place the box I front of me. Naruto watches with mistrustful eyes but at least he’s watching. There’s a little bit of restrained interest there too, though he tries to hide it. That is good; his spirits are up.

I lift the lid of the carton, carefully pick up a slice of cake, set it on a napkin, and offer it up to Naruto.

He looks at me as if flowers have sprouted spontaneously from my head.

I don’t move a muscle and say, "It's not poisoned."

His lips clamp together and he tilts his head in disgust. "Well that would just be overkill, wouldn't it?"

I ignore that and continue to look at him, waiting. I’m almost desperate for him to take this cake, not only because I don't particularly want it, but also because it would mean something.

Naruto glares, his brow crunching up with anger and confusion. Is the decision really that difficult?

His gaze is so intense it makes me uneasy. Then he looks to the slice hungrily and asks, "Do you want me to have it?"

I swallow and feel my Adam's apple bob in my throat like a stone. "That’s up to you." My hand is shaking ever so slightly, and I’m hoping he doesn’t notice. I’m feigning disinterest but he couldn't really deny me this one simple thing, could he?

Air comes short and dry into my lungs and for a moment I think I might hyperventilate.

Naruto stares hard as though his eyes double as drills in their free time. They delve into my eyes and my brain, hammering at the bone of my skull. Then he gets up, walks slowly over to me and sits down on the other side of the bars until we’re at eyelevel. He's in defensive mode, wary and attentive. He never takes his gaze off me, nor I him, as he reaches his hand over and delicately slips the piece of cake from my fingers. His eyes flicker down to consider the cake but he doesn’t hurl it across the room and I feel like I can breathe again.

I take a piece for myself, just for something to do. I pinch off a small bite with my fingers and slip it into my mouth, cleaning the tip of my finger with my tongue before pulling it free. I roll the cake over my tongue and to the roof off my mouth before biting down and releasing its full flavor.

It’s not a flavor I care for.

Sugar packed together with flour and butter and I swallow reluctantly. But if I don't eat it I'll have to spit it out and look stupid, so I force another bite in. I flash my eyes to Naruto and see that he’s
studying his cake, his eyes hooded by his long pale lashes. Half of his piece is already gone, but he is not eating as fast as he normally would, only breaking off small bits with his fingers and shoving them into his mouth.

He really has changed. He is not a Naruto I can claim to know anymore; he's not the annoying kid I left for dead. He is not my Naruto. He is calmer, smarter, more thoughtful, and better looking.

Much better looking.

I’m sure he hasn’t noticed.

Naruto swallows the last piece and his throat works over it, his muscles tensing and relaxing and I wonder what they would feel like under my lips.

‘Stop, Sasuke. Pay attention.’

He’s staring at the almost complete cake, missing only the two pieces we’ve taken. He’s probably still hungry. They aren’t feeding him well, that much is obvious.

With my thumb, I separate another slice from the whole and wordlessly offer to him. Naruto cups the napkin in his hand, ready for his second piece and avoids looking at me as if I am a waiter at the prison restaurant. I have to cradle my palm under his to keep steady as I set slice number two on the napkin.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

His hand is cool next to mine, work-rough and this simple touch sends electricity bolting through my body.

This is silly. I have touched him plenty of times before.

I place the cake in the napkin and say nothing.

I try to slide my hand slowly from underneath his, lingering too long, but he yanks away fiercely, scowling at me and obviously angry. His eyes are cobalt and intelligent and begin to turn marginally to violet with the influence of Kyuubi.

He's really pissed.

He stares at me a long time without doing or saying anything. I don't know what he wants from me. Once, I would have known, but that has all slipped through my fingers. He breaks off a substantial piece of the cake slice, practically half, and shovels the whole into his mouth, slipping his tongue out to lick a bit of frosting that was stuck to his lips. He swallows back the cake irritably and I try not to get sidetracked.

Orochimaru my special visitor is mostly, disturbingly, quiet.

I'm finding it very difficult to focus.

"So," Naruto says, wary and subdued, a bit of cake squishing between his fingers, "Why am I eating your birthday cake?"

Quickly, I look down so that he won't see the blush that's heating up my face. What am I, some twelve-year-old kid? But Naruto remembered, even before I did, without me having to say anything.
Stupid.

"I thought you liked sweets." I comment sarcastically. "Isn't that where you got that belly from?"

I can’t help it, old habits are hard to break. But he puts the last piece of cake into his mouth, entirely unbothered. He’s behaving as if I’m not even there. And this aggravates me to no end. Then he does something truly bizarre, even for him. He takes hold of the hem of his shirt and lifts it to inspect the stomach I have just insulted. Again, as if I am not even here.

It’s not round in any way but not exactly rock hard either.

He rubs his hand along the plane of his belly and I stare. Then with a sigh, he drops his shirt and his torso collapses in.

"What are you doing here?"

He's not looking at me and without his hitae-ate, his hair flops forward and hides his face. His voice is accusatory and irritated.

I look to the cake.

"Fattening you up," I answer snidely.

"Why don't you go eat it with Sakura?" It’s clear it’s a question not intended for an answer.

"I don't want to eat it with Sakura," I snap petulantly.

"Sasuke," he says and I can hear the patience in it as if he’s speaking to an unruly child.

But I am not a child to be disciplined, so I don’t answer.

"Sasuke," he repeats, harsher this time, a demand for me to reply.

I scowl angrily at him.

"Why are you here?" He repeats this, annunciating each word with animosity, as if I am a foreigner with only a tenuous grasp of the language and he simply doesn't have the time for me.

"Are you still giving up?" I shoot back instead.

"Do you have to answer every question with a question?"

"Do you?"

He glares at me and I do the same. This is a battle of wills that will never be decided.

"So are you?"

He sighs and wipes his hands on his pants to rid them of crumbs.

"I gave you a napkin, you know," I remind him.

He glowers at me and continues to wipe his hands with extra vigor. Once clean, he sets them back behind him on the dirty prison floor.

"I never said I was giving up," he informs me flatly, treating me like an ignorant fool.
"Yes, you did."

"No," he says very carefully, explaining as though to a slow person. "What I did was ask you to give me a reason."

"Same difference."

"Hardly."

I scowl at him and think back. "But you just sat there and told me how they were going to kill you." I finish the "and you just accepted it" in my head, but he knows it's there.

His face is hard and he lifts his eyebrows briefly. "It's true, isn't it? That's what the elders want. It's what they've always wanted; I've known it all my life. After everything I've done, they still see me as nothing more than a monster."

That enough is true, but the elders are not the only power.

"You're not a monster," I whisper without meaning to and look down at the remaining cake, staring at me from the box and carefully close the lid. My piece sits half eaten on the floor beside it.

"So, what do you want me to do?" His voice is soft but threatening, ready for an argument, deciding there will be one before I even have the chance to respond.

"What exactly do you want me to say?"

"The truth. For once, if you even know what that is." He is angry, spoiling for battle. "So what about it, Sasuke? Do you want me here? Won't it complicate your tidy plan for your little life? Do you even give a damn?"

That is unfair. "Why would I want you to die?"

"It would make your life so much easier, now wouldn't it? And you've wanted it before."

"This is different."

"Is it?" He leans forward, perching his hands on his knees and curves his back like a predator ready to pounce. "Do you care at all or do you want me to just sit back and let them kill me? Tell me, Sasuke, I'm curious to know."

"Is that what you think?" I counter acerbically.

"I don't know what to think," he snaps. "You never tell me anything! Why can't you just say what you mean? Everything with you has to be some big mystery!"

I clench my fists at my sides.

Naruto leans back again and waves his hand dismissively in my direction. "Why don't you just go back to Sakura. Then when I'm gone everything will be perfect."

I jump to my feet, utterly incensed. This isn’t what I came here for.

He’s ruining my birthday.

//--Yes, yes. Always starting a fight, isn’t he?//
"Do you want me to tell you that I want you to give up? To just roll over and die?" My face is bright red, so hot that if I touched it, my fingers would burn. But it's not embarrassment now, it's anger. "I won't say that. Because I don't want it."

"Why not?"

//A very good question.//

He is quiet and his head jerks once; his eyes are now periwinkle and guarded.

"What?" My tone is subdued because what kind of a question is that. I pout and narrow my eyes. "I thought we were supposed to be friends."

//Friends? Friends are not supposed to go out of their way to hurt each other.//

Naruto snorts derisively. "Yeah, right. Some friend you are." He looks down at the box where my birthday cake hides and whispers bitterly, "I don't want to be friends."

And whose fault is that?

I'm sick of being blamed for everything. He's not an innocent bystander.

//It will never amount to anything. Give it up. Enough with the boy. He does not want you, don't you get that? Perhaps there is still a chance to salvage things with the girl, to gain your life.//

I gaze at the white pastry box and out of spite, because that is an old standby, easy and self-satisfying, I stomp on it. Frosting spews out from the sides of the box obscenely, spilling on the floor like slashed innards.

Naruto eyes the wreckage for a second, slowly puzzling out that it once was cake and perhaps my final attempt at mending a friendship far past saving.

//Perhaps?//

"What the hell d'you do that for?" The idiot shoots an accusation back at me, instantly pulls back, catching himself with one hand on the floor. His expression turns dark and I can see the shadow of his tongue behind his cheek, running along his incisor.

"Fuck. You." I say the words very slowly so as to leave no mistake.

Naruto's hair practically stands on end. "You bastard." His voice is quiet and barely contained. "I was trying to be civil! Where the hell do you get off being mad after what you've done?"

//As if he did not hurt you first, of course? Right, my precious pet?//

I grab my things and storm out of there, leaving the squashed remains of our friendship in dessert form clear for him to see.

"Hey! I'm not done with you!" I can hear him calling after me, letting this knowledge register on the very edge of my senses. Even through his rage, at the end, right when I'm about to exit, a little bit of desperation seeps in, despite himself. "Yeah, that's right! Go ahead! Run away! You're good at that!"

But I ignore him and the clank of the outside door is like the closing of our tenuous friendship.
The knock on my bedroom door is firm but not demanding.

It is the first I've heard from my roommate since I stormed in and slammed the door behind me. It isn't much, but this little room with the nondescript bed and dresser and lamp is the only place I can truly call my own.

But it’s not a sanctuary.

I lie down and curl towards the wall my bed is pushed up against.

The knocking continues, but I easily ignore it.

//Very good, my pet. Very good.//

I scowl. If he were really becoming a part of me like he should, he wouldn't be using those annoying endearments anymore. Still, it's creepy either way.

//Tch-tch-tch. Don't be such a child. Are you an Uchiha or not?//

After what I estimate to be fifteen minutes, Kakashi gives up and sulks away.

//Much better. Your brother would be proud of your resolve.//

'Don't be vulgar.'

I curl up smaller on the bed. Itachi. Why bring him up now? After all I have done to move on, I thought his ghost was behind me.

//But you haven't moved on. You can't.//

I don't have time for this. I don't need anyone and I don't care.

//Such a silly boy.//

Itachi got what he deserved.

//So true, so true. Best you remind yourself of that.//
But angry as I am, Naruto, of all the people in this godforsaken world, doesn't deserve any of it.

In truth, I'm not even sure of Itachi anymore.

I sit up on the bed, bending one knee and wrapping my arms around it. I shouldn't be worrying about my brother anymore. He's dead and buried or gone at any rate and I can't do anything more about it.

But Naruto . . .

I rest my chin on my knee and look over at my closed closet door.

If he hadn't been such a jerk, I wouldn’t feel so useless.

I reach behind me, grab my pillow and pitch it at the door. It makes contact with a supremely unsatisfying "poof".

He chased after me for three years, but I guess that means nothing. Just as I chase after Itachi for nearly eight and that meant nothing too.

It's unfair that after vengeance is achieved, all that is left is emptiness.

But I don’t want to think about my brother anymore.

I flop back down on the bed, weary and overwrought and facing the black wall.

Then, because I am human and I must, I fall asleep.

And then the dreams come, as they too must.

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\+\ At first I am alone, walking through a forest, dark and unfamiliar. It is completely, eerily, quiet, free even of the tiniest sound. When I look up, small patches of light break through the trees and when I look down, I can see their reflections shining crookedly over the forest floor. But I am completely in the darkness. Even when I place my foot directly under a shaft of light, it remains dark as if I myself negate the sunlight.

As I continue on, the forest becomes more tangled, with vines reaching up and down, connecting branches to ground and tree trunk until it forms an intricate spider web design. All except for the path I tread, which remains oddly unobstructed.

I sense a presence behind me, but when I look, no one is there. Only the spider web closing in, leaving no escape but forward.

And I know it is he, my omnipresent guest, now trailing me into my dreams.

I continue on until I come to a clearing. It's unremarkable, but bright and clear and when I step into its sunlight, sound returns. I can hear the birds high up in the trees, swooping and singing in the clear blue sky.

There is a figure sitting on a rock, waiting as though he is a wise man offering counsel to wayward travelers.

Itachi turns to me with a smile I have seen only twice before. Once when I was very young he smiled at me like that. I can't remember the circumstances or the reason why. But the smile I
remember.

The only other time I saw it was when he died.

He greets me. "Hello otouto."

I have nothing to say.

There is blood in his smile, trickling over his chin and seeping from the gaping hole in his chest. He’s smiling and he’s bleeding and he wants to remind me of what I have done.

"I had to, you know," he tells me.

Only I know nothing of the kind.

"Yes you do," he says.

Am I just supposed to believe him just because he says so?

"Of course."

Because you would never lie to me, would you big brother?

He tilts his head and his grin turns lenient. "I lied all the time," he says. "Every time I called you weak or unimportant. Every time I told you I didn’t care. I lied all the time."

Then how am I to believe anything?

"You’ve seen the shrine. You know what they could do, what they did do. You’ve met the elders. You remember father. Is it so hard to believe?"

But not mother. Mother would have never condoned such a thing.

"But she did. She knew. She had to have known."

A bird swoops down in front of me nearly taking out my eye.

"Don’t be obtuse, dear little brother."

I look at him.

"They captured it, they released it; they are practically related to it. Just like me. And you. So I had to. I’m loyal. What choice did I have?"

His smile never falters and becomes not so much affection, but disturbing the longer it stays in place.

"What about you, my dear brother? Have you been loyal?"

I blink and don’t answer.

"You kill me for him and yet you are not by his side?"

That’s not true.

"It is. It was for him. I saw it in your eyes, always so easy to understand. It was not revenge or mother or father. It was for him."
It wasn’t.

"Will you ever accept it?"

I don’t need to accept what isn’t true.

Then there’s a great gust of wind and the scene before me is swept away like sand in a storm. And I know it is he; that damned snake sannin trying to take control. For now I let him.

I am done here.

The scene reassembles itself completely into the mouth of a cave looking out over the Land of Fire.

A man enters, dressed in purple and black, his long hair pulled high up on his head.

"How many?" I say. Or rather, the man whose body I inhabit says. His voice is familiar, but altered. Through him, I can hear and see and smell, but that is all.

"Fourteen, my lord," the other man says with a slight bow.

The man I’m in nods. "And are they ready?"

"They’re eager, that’s true enough." The man reports hesitantly. "But unfortunately not yet fully trained." He eyes us warily and adds, "They’re very young. Only a couple of the older soldiers returned."

"Any especially gifted among them?"

"Not that we have seen, sir."

We stand and venture to the entrance of the cave. Looking down, we see pockets of ninja training in the breaks of the woods. There is seriousness in the air, a pitch of anticipation.

This is not some random grouping or an established country.

This is Sound. I recognize the rhythm and cadence of the movements. This is an army training for battle.

"When do we move out, sir?" The man in purple and black turns to us.

"Soon," we say as one. "I only wish it could be now, while the Kyuubi is still in chains." We look back to the man in purple and black again and nod. "That is all."

The nameless ninja takes a quick bow and leaves with a, "Yes, Kabuto-sama."

We retreat back into the silent solitude of the cave.

"Just wait, Orochimaru-sama," Kabuto says into the nothingness. All alone, his voice echoes strange and gravelly in the hollowness of the cave. "I’ll do as you wish. I’ll carry out your revenge and raze Konoha to the ground. They’ve grown fat in their complacency, snobbish in their exclusions. They think they are untouchable!" He laughs and it sounds so much like Orochimaru. "But they are very much touchable. They are nothing." His voice is pitching higher, speaking faster, the depth of the insanity Karin spoke of beginning to manifest itself. He looks down at his hands, one human and one gnarled and clawed like a monster’s. Just like Orochimaru once. "I will seek out my own purpose, my lord. I will punish the scum of Konoha and rebuild Sound mightier than it was before!" He slams his hands to the wall of the cave, breathing quick and heavy. "We’ll
take all of the lands, you and I, Orochimaru-sama, and show them true power. We will be God!"

He begins to laugh. Slow at first, a quiet cackle, but quickly growing in momentum. It is high and screeching, the laugh of madness.

This is no dream.

And Konoha is really in danger.

There is a press against my mind. Orochimaru is attempting to speak, to make contact with his maniacal minion. But I bind him back. I will not allow it. I am in charge here.

But it is not easy.

The old snake knew to come here. He knew how to do it and take control, if temporarily, of my unconscious mind.

"Orochimaru-sama," Kabuto pleads to the air. "Why won't you speak? It has been long since I heard from you."

Our fingers scrape along the stone and start to bleed red and black. This stink of decay enters my nose. Kabuto's mind is a whirling stew of emotions, fear and anger and loneliness and loss.

"Do not abandon me now!"

With a forceful jerk, I pull myself out of there.\+

I awake in my bed, staring up at the ceiling. My left arm has become prickly and numb and I have to shake it a few times to get feeling back.

How long has Orochimaru been making contact with Kabuto this way? Mad as Kabuto was, that enough was clear.

I scowl up at the bare textured whiteness. Itachi, Orochimaru, Kabuto . . it's always something.

I spend the remainder of the night restless, unable to sleep with the anger over the knowledge that once again I'm being exploited for someone else's means.

This time around Kakashi just raps a couple times and opens the door uninvited. He peeks his head inside.

I should have locked that thing.

I sit up and scowl angrily at the closet door. Stupid door.

"So," Kakashi says, letting in the light from the hall and entering without permission. "How are you this fine morning?"

I rest my cheek on my knee so that I face the window, away from him.

Kakashi strides forward and yanks open the curtains to momentarily blind me.

"Tsunade-Hokage-sama would never let them execute Naruto." He says as though I asked.

"What can she do?" I grumble, my voice half swallowed by my shoulder.
"You'd be surprised. Besides, a lot of people have petitioned the council on his behalf. Didn't know that, did you," he says with a smile in his voice. "Naruto has a lot of friends."

As I have not. Kakashi means to be reassuring, but I feel a twinge of resentment and jealousy. Who was there when I needed them?

So few. So very few. Sometimes, when I was a child, none at all.

//Always left alone. That is why we can only rely on ourselves.//

"So?" I snap. "The council wants him dead."

"Perhaps," Kakashi acknowledges, unconvinced. "But most who have spoken up are shinobi. And like it or not, the council knows that without the support of the shinobi, Konoha is doomed. They're not so blind as you think. They'll come around. Not because they want to, but because they'll have to."

There's some validity to this. But the council's bitterness runs deep and they're not exactly know for their intelligence.

"I take it your impromptu meeting with Naruto didn't go as you planned?"

The sky outside is annoyingly blue.

"He doesn't want to be friends," I say simply as if it is no concern of mine.

"And you expected him to simply forgive you?" Old One-eye sighs heavily behind me. "You hurt him, Sasuke. You have no right to expect him to simply forgive you. And you just stormed out, didn't you?" He doesn't wait for a response. "You just let your anger get the better of you, deciding on your own what his words meant and left. You didn't even give him a chance to explain."

"What's to explain?"

"All right then." Kakashi begins, oddly putting up no argument. "Say he does want nothing to do with you. Say he does want to cut you out of his life, chop, done." I glower at my reflection in the glass and it glowers right back. "Don't you think he has a right to that?" I scowl until it hurts, trying to break the glass. "But the real question is, are you going to accept that?"

I study my image in the window, with the yellow snake irises, the scars like tick marks counting off the years in my arms and that cut over my eye that makes it look lazy and sinister.

How much have I "accepted" already?

//More than your fair share, certainly. Too much.//

Kakashi walks closer and sets his hand on my shoulder in a fatherly manner. We look at each other in the reflection of the window, the blue sky far beyond.

"The real issue here is," he starts and grips my shoulder a little. His hand is warm through my shirt. "What are you going to do about it?"

-----

I can be patient.

Really I can.
But I have none to spare for the infuriating council whose anteroom I’m currently standing in.

The door and several elite guards bar my way, but I know those elders are in there, alone and biding their time, making me sweat and hoping I’ll give up.

Well, I’m not going to.

Instead, I take this time to assess the fighting capabilities of the guards stationed around the room. Two stand on either side of the council door and the other two press solidly into the corners of the wall behind me. They’re of course among the elite and practically spoiling for a fight. Their nerves curl into knots, coils ready to spring out at a moment's notice. Still, I think I could take them. One good chidori nagashi and they’d be taken down a peg or two. They might have some special abilities I don’t know about, but I’m not worried. I’m better than most ninja in the whole of Konohagakure, let alone these four.

//Yes dear, of course. And wouldn't it be fun to teach these arrogant upstarts just whom they are dealing with. But you forget your seals.//

I clench my hands so that my short nails dig into the centers of the bull's eye marks.

'I forget nothing.'

There are always the seals to consider.

I wonder if I could activate the curse seal instead. That might give them pause. If it worked. I haven’t tried since Itachi.

//Oh, yes, let's! And after that we can take down the council!!//

Despite the insanity of Orochimaru's reaction, I’m thinking about it. I try to feel out the seams of the curse seal. It creeps and crawls, sort of like snakes under my skin, which is unpleasant. But it makes it relatively easy to find.

//Fun, fun, fun!!//

Just as I’m about to test it, the wrinkly old hag steps out from behind the door. Her eyes are hidden beneath the many folds of gray skin, but I can see the grimace. She looks like nothing more than an unpleasant troll, the kind that lurks under bridges and demands unwarranted tolls.

"So," she says tartly. "You're still here."

Her lips, if possible, pull thinner. "We have heard quite enough about Uzumaki already. You’ve wasted your time."

Now she’s simply irritating me. She thinks she’s so high and mighty.

"You're not going to kill him," I inform her placidly.

Her hands pull to the front and she grasps them together threateningly. "You are treading on dangerous ground, Uchiha."

"Maybe it's you who are," I say boldly because, seriously, what more can they threaten me with? There comes a point when no greater threats can be made. We’ve hit an impasse. "Naruto has a lot of friends. Mostly ninja. What do you think will happen if you execute him?"

The guards all straighten to high alert as if their backs were not boards already.
"Are you threatening me, boy?"

//No, not yet.//

"Just making an observation."

"You had best think longer before making any more 'observations'. Good day."

She begins to back away to her inner sanctum, shutting me out forever. But I can’t allow that. I have to do something. I have to be the one to save him.

//Useless old witch. Just wait. One day I will have my revenge.//

'Oh, just be quiet. Let me think. '

Her craggy gray fingers close on the handle. She’s pushing the door open.

//I have followers still. Stupid woman. They will come. They will show you what happens when you deny me.//

And then, of course, obvious as it is, it hits me.

"I can help you." I offer cryptically

She turns slowly and raises a skeptical eyebrow. "You? What can you do?"

I'd like to shoot back that I can do a whole lot more than an annoying hag on death's door but as that won’t help, I bite the retort back. "Sound hasn’t yet been defeated." I say this casually as though it’s insignificant. "They’re rebuilding."

Her gluey eyes narrow in suspicion. "None of our spies have reported news of any such thing." Funny that she would simply reveal that to me. The old wrinkled lips purse. "The only way you would know would be if you were still in contact with them."

That's scarcely the only way. "I’ve had visions."

"Visions," she scoffs. "And now you are claiming to be a psychic?"

"No," I measure my next words very carefully so as not to lie but not exactly tell the truth either. I don’t want to offer any ammunition she doesn’t already possess. "There were certain jutsus in Sound. They allow me to tap into Kabuto’s mind."

She reels on me then, as much as someone of her extremely advanced age can without falling over and accuses, "You are in collusion with them!"

What an idiot. "It wasn't by my choice."

Her expression turns doubtful, but also attentive. "What kind of jutsus are these?"

I have to think fast. "Communication style," I lie smoothly. "For keeping in contact over long distances." It sounds reasonable enough.

She lifts her chin haughtily. "I have not heard of these."

"New techniques are being created all the time." Stupid to point this out; she should be well aware of this fact. "Sound country specialized in sound based jutsus."
She’s slowly beginning to appreciate my information. "Say all this is true," she concedes reluctantly. "How does this help us?"

"Kabuto isn’t aware I can see into his head." But I must correct myself. "Actually, it’s more like I’m in him and can see and hear what he does."

"Then you will tell us." She folds her arms, tucking her hands in her sleeves like she is some breed of royalty.

I shake my head. "Why should I just hand over this information?"

"You are not in a position to withhold anything, Uchiha." She thins her already thin eyes. "We can force this information from you if necessary."

//Konoha. No better than the rest, worst than most.//

I shrug complacently. "I have experienced your methods of ‘extracting information’ before, if you will recall." I look her right in the eye. "I imagine it would be less effective this time." It wasn’t as effective last time, either. I never did reveal Naruto's choice and I never will. That is one promise I intend to keep.

"We shall see about that." She snaps her fingers and two of the ANBU encroach on me like well-trained dogs.

"I’ll make you a deal." I show no sign of fear or concern. The ANBU stop and the prehistoric woman says nothing, so I continue. "I’ll give you the information I have and try to discover anything further, if you will release Naruto."

The woman laughs the rippling cackle of a witch. "Why would I agree to such a thing? The Uzumaki boy is a danger to this village and needs to be put down. And we will take the information from you with your cooperation or not."

//Snap her neck. Break it clean off.//

I ought to snap her fat neck for that. Break her head clean off and set it on a spike at the town gates for everyone to see. That’s an extreme thought, straight form the parasite, but I can’t say I disagree.

But my voice is level when I say, "You have a choice: take the life of a ninja beloved by many, who has saved this village numerous times and lose the support of the shinobi or set him free and get information to help battle an enemy that is practically on your doorstep."

I sound calmer than I actually feel.

Her face turns especially harsh and I know this is it. This is the moment that I will find out whether my gamble will pay off or not.

-----

My cell stinks of urine.

She called me on my threat, but she’ll find out soon enough it was no bluff. We shall wait and see how long it takes her to smarten up.

I honestly can’t be sure if I was assigned to this particular cell out of cruelty or kindness, but it
strikes me as being both. It’s catty corner from Naruto's and if I peer out the bars, I can get a perfectly framed view of him, if he allows it.

Right now, he’s crouching like an animal at the edge of the bars and glaring at me.

I sit with my arms and legs crossed, my back ramrod straight, and stare back.

"What are you doing here?" He growls as if it’s a personal affront to him that I'm here, like I’ve done so just to annoy him.

"Sitting," I answer snidely. "You?"

"I mean," I can practically see the hackles rising on the back of his neck, "How did you get yourself thrown in jail?"

I blink once, slowly and keep my own counsel.

"Well?" He asks. But when I still don't answer, he looks away and grumbles, "Fine, be that way."

I watch him for a little bit. This is getting me nowhere. "I tried to make a deal with the elders."

His interest is peaked though he tries to conceal it. "For what?"

My humiliation pretty much reached its summit the instant I was manhandled in here, so the truth can’t do any more damage. "Your life."

Naruto's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "You tried to make . . a bargain . . for my life . . and ended up here?" He huffs curiously. Then, inexplicably, his mouth begins to widen in a grin. Not a happy one, it's too malicious for that. Instead, he sits sneering at me for a while before bursting into laughter. It's more like a snicker at first, hissing and harsh and offensive, but it eventually turns into his usual, full-bellied laugh.

I scowl at him.

It's not funny.

//Your imprisonment is a joke, I suppose.//

"It's not funny," I scold him when he won't stop.

Although all things considered, I guess that isn’t so bad.

His laughing finally ceases. "Sure it is." Then he stands up and walks deeper into the cell and out of my sight.

I don't see him again until a couple hours later when they finally decide to serve us dinner. It is some sort of fake stew. I say "fake" because I normally think of stew as having something other than broth and a few pathetic bobbing bits of meat. No wonder Naruto savored that cake like he did.

I look over to the other cell and see Naruto plunk his bowl down with disdain. He's probably thinking about ramen and how far this is from it.

//You have no idea what he's thinking.//

That’s true enough.
I look from him to my bowl and back again and listen to the uncomfortable silence. "I'm still waiting," I say. He won't start the conversation so in a one-time show of humility, I will.

"Why should I talk to you," he snarls.

I'm not sure what that inflection in his voice means. "Do you have something better to do?"

"I'm sure there's something." He looks longingly up to the ceiling as though he hopes it will crash down on him for just a little change.

//A boy like this is no help to us at all.//

"So, are you going to tell me what happened or not?" I ask acidly.

"No. I already did." He scrunches his nose at the ceiling in disgust. "What's it to you anyway?"

"Tell me."

//What is it to us but nothing?//

He scowls and sighs heavily but says, "Kyuubi got out, destroyed a big part of a village. Got caught. Now I'm here. The end."

He's playing hostilley, but he is playing. "Did any villagers get hurt?"

"Nope. Not by me. Not really. Some minor stuff I guess."

"Then what are you so upset about?" I am past frustration now. Any fool could see there's more to this. And I'm no fool.

His eyebrows meet in the middle. "Kiba and Shino evacuated most of them before I attacked," he says as if I never spoke.

"Kyuubi attacked."

//Splitting hairs.//

"Whatever."

So now he's going to play that card again, the lackadaisical, what-do-I-care-if-I-die and Kyuubi-and-I-are-the-same card. It's a complicated card. And bullshit. "What stopped you?" I ask.

There's a hidden reminder there of the last time this happened and how even in his ferocious blood rage he recognized me and calmed back to his normal self.

He gives no sign of recognition as he says, "They had to send Yamato."

So that is meant to be another example of how unnecessary I am to him.

//Perhaps accepting that fact would be best.//

"And you blame me." I try to make it a flat statement, but the bitterness can't help but seep through.

He suddenly comes back to himself, remembers he doesn't want to speak to me, and shoots a resentful expression in my direction before getting up and heading back into the cells' shadows.
I am left to my own thoughts until sometime in the middle of the night. We should be asleep but hoe anyone could sleep here is a mystery to me, so I remain awake. I don’t even use the dirty slab they have the audacity to call a bed. Instead I lie on the floor and stare at the blank black cell wall with the crack crammed up near the seam of the ceiling. There is nothing to look at and nothing to do but stare at the wall and listen to my unwelcome companion.

//So. You think this is an improvement to your situation? Threatening the elders? While the sentiment has merit, first let us point out that being thrown into jail improves no one’s situation.//

I roll onto my back and look at the blackness, this time in the form of the ceiling, unsurprisingly the same.

//Secondly, you betrayed everyone you were sworn to. Hardly makes for a trustworthy informant.//

'Speaking of informants, you’re the one that got me in this predicament to begin with. If not for your meddling, they would have no reason to throw me in here.'

//They need a reason now, do they?//

I roll back to my side to check if the view has changed, but of course it hasn’t.

Orochimaru is blissfully unconcerned.

//And most of all, what makes you think I would collaborate with you to bring down my most loyal of followers? They will come, my pet. To free me and exact my revenge. Oh, they will come and you can’t stop it.//

'We’re doomed to become one, remember. I'll be able to enter Kabuto's body whenever I want, just as you could, and gather whatever information I can.'

//So much confidence for a failed experiment.//

Mentally I shrug.

//Hah! You are too weak. Always too weak. Try it, my dear. I welcome the entertainment of your attempt to subjugate me.//

'You’re nothing but a web of memories. I think I can handle it.'

//And yet you haven't thus far.//

I scowl at the black wall.

//And for what purpose, anyway? To be their loyal dog? For what possible reason?//

The wall accuses me silently.

//Oh, that's right. The fox. But oh! The fox has rejected you now. He has chosen the dark dampness of a cell over you. Think about that. The girl has not come to see you either. No one has. So tell me, my pet, what purpose would you serve?//

I place my hands under my head and curl up tighter. I do not easily admit defeat. If that were the case, I would have given up long ago. The loss of what I once had: family, friends, Itachi, Sakura, Naruto, seeps into my cold heart at times like this. It would consume me if I let it. But I won’t.

"I don't blame you."
Naruto's voice is quiet and distant, echoing softly off the walls until it finally reaches my ears. It doesn't sound real and for a moment I wonder if I've fallen asleep.

"I was confused, after you said . . . I was all twisted up. Like everything got turned on its head and what I thought was real wasn't. But I guess, I guess I was just being an usuratonkachi again, right?" He snorts sourly and I realize he's talking to himself. He has no idea that I'm awake so I keep my mouth shut. This may be the only time he'll say such things. "Yeah. Right. Sakura. It was always supposed to be Sakura, I guess. She had that crush on you and I thought you didn't care, but maybe I was wrong. No. I was wrong. Sakura."

He heaves a breath after which there's a long silence. There are no night sounds here, no birds or crickets, no frogs or the faint footfall of people hurrying through the darkness. We're too deep into the earth for anything but silence.

"It wasn't supposed to be anything dangerous. Just a lord without much skill trying to take control of a town. All we had to do was prevent it. Simple, right?" He pauses and I'm careful not to make a sound. He's finally telling me what I wanted to know and I won't risk that changing.

//None of this is of any possible importance. It is all so very senseless.//

"But he was there, with his soldiers, in the middle of the Town Square, torturing, killing innocent people, kids even, as a warning to the rest. People that I guess got missed in the roundup. If we'd just checked again . . ." The anguish is rising in his voice, slow like a softly rolling boil. "And it made me so mad. No one should get hurt because of my mistake. I was still upset about you, and Sakura, and how nothing ever seems to go just my way, and it wasn't your fault, but I couldn't think straight. Everything just tumbled. And I lost it.

"See, I lied when I said I didn't hurt anyone. I was responsible for those people. And I killed that lord and his men. Destroyed half the village at least, before Yamato found me." He pauses meaningfully. "But those men deserved it, right?"

He laughs dryly.

"Yeah, sure, that's right. Their lives didn't matter," he says with bitterness directed at himself. He shifts his position, stands up I think, and walks to the far end of the cell, muffling his voice.

"See, it's not your fault. But it also kind of is."

He grumbles and I hear the shuffle of feet, a dull thud of a foot hitting a wall.

"Stupid," he derides himself. "He doesn't deserve it."

I don't know what it is I don't deserve. Blame? Or forgiveness?

Because I know, that's what I have to ask for.

But I can never ask for it.

I don't suppose I do deserve it.

//What nonsense. Whether the fox forgives you or not, who cares?//

I look up to the tiny crack by the ceiling, so small and insignificant.
'I do.'

And I realize with a shock just how much I do.

//Hmph. Utter nonsense.//

I listen carefully, but there are no further sounds from the cell down the corridor. Only the soft quiet of even breathing. He has fallen asleep, just like that.

I wonder how he’ll be in the morning.

-----

I’m awake before he is, but then I have always been an earlier riser, even when we were on Team 7. At least that much hasn’t changed.

I rise and stretch out my muscles, which are exceptionally stiff from sleeping on a stone floor.

There are only a few moments for me to decide what I should do. I know now that as angry as he is, Naruto does not entirely hate me.

It’s not much, but it’s more than I knew yesterday.

It’s everything.

//Everything to what? What exactly do you think changes now?//

A worker enters though a hidden door, holding a tray with two bowls and choruses "Breakfast!"

I'm sure it will be as delicious as dinner was. Naruto stirs and mumbles sleepily. This is followed by a loud thump and a groan, which I assume is Naruto rolling off his bed and landing on the floor.

Something is tossed to me that looks like gruel and tastes like paste. I push myself up to the very limit of the bars and crane my head for a glimpse of Naruto, but he pulls his bowl back and keeps himself where I can’t see.

//Such a shame. Needless little foxes should not be worried over. After the stunt you pulled, you'll be lucky if the elders ever let you free.//

We pass our breakfast in silence with only the noises of silver spoons against stone bowls. These bowls must have been here for decades. I wonder how many people have used them.

And how well they are cleaned.

I drop my spoon back in and decide I’m no longer hungry.

The nameless man returns not much later to retrieve our dishes.

My eyes flick again to Naruto’s cell and now I can see the tip of his foot pressing against the bars, his toes peeking up under the sandal strap.

//Fascinating. Actually, a bit pathetic.//

"I’m not with Sakura," I call out over the hallway.

There’s a long delay before Naruto replies flatly, "That's nice."
Honestly, I am surprised he even answered. I consider it a success, so I go on.

"I don't want her," I say.

//Is this supposed to help anything?//

"Oh. Well," Naruto muses snidely. "You don't want her, you don't want me. I guess you just don't want anybody." He huffs derisively. "Well, congratulations. You got your wish."

My lips twist even tighter. "It was a mistake," I snarl. "Sakura. It just sort of happened."

"Some mistake," Naruto snorts. "Things like that don't 'just sort of happen'."

"It did," I growl, trying not to yell. "It's only because you were gone so long and we thought . . ." I stop. He'll never understand what I can't explain. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't want anything from you."

//See now? Simple enough.//

"You don't understand," I sigh.

"What's to understand?" He grunts. "I tell you I love you and you sleep with Sakura. Seems pretty simple to me."

"Yeah. Right." Apparently nothing I say will make the least bit of difference. And he's trying to make it sound as if all the blame falls on me. He wouldn't have if I hadn't? Well, I wouldn't have if he hadn't . . . "As if I'm supposed to believe you."

"What're you talking about?" He asks crossly, but blatantly confused.

"That day, remember? When the very idea of me made you sick." I remind him pointedly. "That afternoon with the shirt, when you were all weepy about the lady and the girl?" Yes, I am being mean.

//That is the point.//

His face comes into view, flushed up pink with indignation, but he passes over my snide comment. "And I told you about that." He makes a somewhat sour face. "It’s not normal. It’s not me."

"Then you have no damn business being upset with me," I grind out.

"I sure as hell do!"

"Says who?" I shoot back. "You claim to 'love me'," I complain, the words tripping awkwardly off my tongue, "But you made it perfectly clear you don't want me."

//Never did.//

"I didn't say that," he snaps. "It's not like I expected any of this." He looks from side to side nervously as if suspecting someone will leap out and attack him. "What," he quips, disbelieving, "It doesn't bother you?"

"No," I answer honestly. "It doesn't bother me one way or the other."

He blinks at me wide-eyed then scoffs. "Uh-huh. Like you were so sure that day."
"What's that supposed to mean?"

He blinks, unsure whether to be angry or confused. "You still have no idea, do you?" He stares at me incredulously for a moment then glares. "But I guess I shouldn’t have worried. You already look and act like a girl. Sasuke-chan."

And I am on my feet, slamming the palms of my hands against the bars. "Say that again and they won't need a trial!"

Naruto chuckles, completely devoid of mirth. "Yeah? What're you going to do about it?" He tilts his head back and looks around. Slowly, he rolls his head back toward me and levels a strange blank stare. "It doesn't matter anyway," he continues. "It’s over."

I grip the bars and don't know what to say. If I could right now, I’d beat Naruto to a bloody pulp. As it is, I have to settle for gripping the metal until my bones hurt.

"Talk about simple," I manage to spit out. "One mistake and everything changes."

"That's right!" Naruto yells across the expanse of the stone floor. "And stop making it sound like you forgot to pick up milk on the way home! You slept with Sakura, after I told you, after I thought..." he trails off, unable to find the words. When his eyes lift to meet mine they are a color I have never seen before, iridescent and dark, like the ripple of water under moonlight. "You made me believe you wanted me too."

And it is hypnotizing, that look of hate and loss and desperation and it makes my mouth go dry.

//Enough of this.//

I grasp the bars tighter and clench my teeth. "You don't even know what's going on."

"Oh, I think I do."

But of course he doesn't. He doesn't at all. There are too many things he doesn't know, too many things I won’t tell him.

//What is the point in trying?//

Naruto is glowering at me with all his spite and disappointment from his undeserved high horse and it’s intoxicating. He sits on the floor, his fists clenching, his chest heaving with deep breaths, pretending he doesn’t want to rip out my throat.

Tauntingly, I curl my lip and bare my throat.

Naruto's gaze sharpens and his fingers dig into the floor like claws. His irises begin to waver, indigo to azure to violet. His anger is truly surfacing now. But the Kyuubi is contained and Naruto remains himself.

"You want to, don't you," I tease.

Naruto just shows his teeth and growls.

I tilt my head back a little farther, exposing more of my neck. "Go ahead. Rip out my throat."

He leaps up and is in the nearest corner of the cell before I can blink. "Don't tempt me," he snarls.

And I let my smirk grow. "Go ahead, let's see it, dobe."
With one hand gripping a bar, he stretches the other toward me as if he could really reach that far. After a moment or two, when he comes to the conclusion that his arm is not in fact made of rubber and cannot reach me, he gives up and instead yanks on the bars with both hands and actually manages to rattle them.

"C'mon! You want to fight? Any day, pretty boy!" He jerks the bars again and it makes a hard, echoing metallic clatter.

“Let’s see you try.” Anything. As long as he’s paying attention to me.

//Oh, yes. This is good. Good, good, good. Cut, snap, slice, rip.//

"Please! What do you think you can do? I've beaten you before, I'll beat you again!" He's given up the futility of shaking the bars and resorts to just yelling. "You've never been able to see sense unless it's beaten into you."

As we are exchanging essentially empty threats, Kuma calmly strolls down the corridor. Both Naruto and I peter off our threats pathetically as we watch his progression. Kuma finally stops in front of my cell with a big ring of keys dangling enticingly from his finger.

He grins at me.

"Uchiha Sasuke, you have been released and are free to go."

My eyes go wide a millisecond before returning to normal. Out of the corner of my eye I see Naruto blink stupidly.

I've only spent a day here.

Kuma leans down and unlocks my door.

"What about Naruto?" I ask.

Suddenly everything shifts. Seconds ago we were ready to pummel each other into the dirt and now my heart lurches with worry.

But Naruto scowls. "What do you care?"

Kuma swings my door open. "It’s not yet decided."

For a minute I stand inside the cell, freedom beckoning me as I stare at Naruto on the other side, his hands gripping the bars and looking almost stricken. His face goes hard again when he catches me looking, as if he’s just recalled he’s angry with me.

It takes him a little while to collect the willpower but he does, and he uses it to turn away from me and lean his back on the bars. It is a clear dismissal.

Kuma quietly takes my arm and guides me away, past Naruto. I surreptitiously look back over my shoulder and see that he’s watching me from the corner of his eye in just the same way.

And I know that he doesn’t know how to feel any more than I do.

Because in that moment I realize that while he said he didn't want me anymore, he didn't say he didn't love me.
On the basis of nothing, I had expected to be led to the front entrance of the prison and then simply
allowed to go free.

//I don't know why.//

I'm never so lucky.

Instead, the moment I step from the darkness, the Hokage's not so ever-present guards accost me. They
each roughly grab one of my arms and yank with a bit more force than I deem truly necessary.

//This is to be trouble.//

Izumo leans down and whispers harshly into my ear, "The Hokage wishes to see you."

Fiercely, I tug my arm free from his hold. Slowly, I let a sly smile steal over my face. "If that was the
case, all she had to was ask."

//Yes, good. Do not cower in front of such lowly men. You are better than they.//

Izumo pulls up stoically, retakes my arm –apparently not believing me – and the two men drag me away.

I feel a little betrayed, truth be told. I don't know why, but I thought Kuma would have come to my
defense. Or at least have given me some forewarning. Instead, he callously abandoned me to my fate.

And now I’m standing in another whitewashed room with not only the Hokage staring down at me,
but the elders as well.

It seems I have been the topic of some much-heated conversation. The stress in the air goes many
ways, weaving an intricate pattern that is not solely directed at me.

//Do not quail beneath their pitiful gazes.//

And so I shall not.
Finally, The Hokage drops her hands to the long table in front of her and speaks. "It appears you’ve still been keeping secrets." Her gaze sharpens to a razor point. "I thought we had been through this before, Uchiha. You cannot gain the trust of Konoha if you don’t give it."

It’s an unfair judgment. "I haven’t been keeping secrets."

//At least not lately.//

"You told us just the other day that you have been able to read Yakushi Kabuto's mind," the old hag spews at me. "What is that but keeping secrets, pray tell?"

//That’s rather a great jump in logic, isn’t it?//

I snort. "I never said I could read his mind," I correct the woman. "And I told you as soon as I knew," I remind her haughtily. "I only realized it was a vision for the first time the night before."

Her frog face pulls in as if she has just sucked a lemon. "And you immediately tried to use it as blackmail."

//You would have done the same.//

I restrain myself from shrugging.

As soon as she believes she has made her point, she adds, "You led us to believe it was a situation long in your notice."

//Hardly our fault that you yet again leap to unwarranted conclusions. Stupid old bat.//

I keep my face blank. "I never said any such thing."

The old woman looks like she’d like to catapult herself over the table and throttle me. I’d just like to see her try; she’d probably break a hip. But before anything of the sort happens, Tsunade speaks up.

"So you’re telling me this is a new occurrence?” I can feel the weight of her scrutiny as a physical thing. She’ll know if I lie.

//Not lying, is it? We’ll see how well that works out.//

"No," I finally admit.

She raises a critical eyebrow and the old man has evidently woken up with a sudden snore and a jolt.

"I knew it," the old hag shrieks. "I knew it!"

//Sounds like a spoiled child.//

Tsunade shoots a disagreeable sidelong glance, but says nothing against her. "How long have these visions gone on then?"

//Oh, do not tell her that. It is a trap. A very obvious one at that.//

Yes, because I really ought to pay heed to the cause of all my troubles.

//That is unmerited.//
"The visions have only just started," I amend. I’m still unsure the extent of the elders' knowledge of my present circumstances. I’m guessing they know nothing of Orochimaru or I wouldn't be standing here in relative safety with all my parts in tact. "But the connection," I stress that last word as I give the Hokage a meaningful look. "Has been active for some time."

Will she even understand such a subtle hint?

//Perhaps you give her too much credit.//

She stares at me, trying to figure out my meaning. I blink once and she sits up straight.

"I see," she states brusquely.

So she is not so oblivious after all.

"See? See what?" The bag of bones has redirected her attention onto the Hokage, giving me a brief respite. "What on earth are you talking about?"

Tsunade lays her hands flat on the table and turns to the woman. "I will handle this."

The ancient lady sputters incoherently, making her look even more ugly than before, hard as that is to believe.

//Didn't know that was possible.//

The man, on the other hand, stares intently at me with lazy eyes. He is quiet and seemingly unconcerned.

//He is the one to watch out for.//

Or the one to turn to my side.

"There are tricks afoot," he says.

I look to him but say nothing.

"There is more to this little horse than meets the eye." His hands are folded neatly over his chest and he leans back in his chair.

"What is this now?" The old woman asks, her unfortunate attention once again in my direction. "Are there more secrets yet to be revealed?"

I keep my expression impassive, it's not as if I have any intention of telling her anything.

//Our secrets are our own.//

"Perhaps we ought to skip ahead to the real interrogation," the hag motions to the invisible ANBU lingering in the dark corners of the room. "I'm certain Ibiki-san can be ready in a moment."

"Hmm," says the old man.

//Go ahead. See how far you get.//

It’s no wonder this country’s such a mess, if these are the people leading it.

But the Hokage is quickly on her feet, drawing all attention back onto her with the abrupt
movement.

"I will handle this," she repeats and I'm surprised she could fit any words through those clenched teeth.

"Tsunade . . " the older woman begins.

But the Hokage stops any further objections with an impressive pound of her hand on the table, sending a crack rocketing through its center. "I am the leader of this village."

"Only in . . ."

"And I'm the leader of its ninja. They follow me." Her sharp brown eyes turn on the elders with willful fire. "I have had enough of your interfering."

The other woman glares with her little toady eyes, but the man simply tilts back his head and stares at the ceiling.

"If Uchiha has information about an encroaching enemy, then it is my jurisdiction." The Hokage seems to stand a little taller. "I'll get the information we need from my ninja in whatever way I see fit." The blonde woman lifts her chin and stares down at the two ancient impediments as though her command is absolute. "You have interfered into areas of my affairs for far too long. You're overstepping your bounds."

The prehistoric bat gets to her feet and glares at the Hokage. "You would do well, girl, to remember your place. You may be the leader of the ninjas, but we are the council of the village. Our word is law."

I speculate abstractedly if the Hokage enjoyed being referred to as a "girl".

//Bet she did.//

Tsunade's gaze narrows sharply and flicks from one corner to the next, taking note and perhaps sending covert messages to the shinobi stationed around the room.

"The ninjas are my charge. It's about time you let the future take care of itself." The formidable blonde woman circles the table to the front and approaches me. Her look is stern as she states, "You will hand the matter of Uchiha and Sound to me." She quirks up one side of her mouth. "I'll get the information I need."

The ancient councilwoman folds her hands into her sleeves in that would-be royal way of hers. She attempts to stand up straighter and waits a full two minutes before responding. "Very well," she says, as if she is granting a request rather than being forced to bow to a demand.

"And," Tsunade muses almost whimsically. "You will release Uzumaki Naruto."

At this, the old woman bristles. The man drops his head once again.

"He's a danger to this village, an abomination," The elder woman attests. "We will do no such thing." I can practically feel her foul spit from where I stand halfway to the door.

My body goes rigid, my hands clenched tight and I feel the surge of chakra to my left hand striving to form a chidori, not entirely of my free will.

Tsunade puts up a quick, subtle hand, a gesture meant to calm me.
"What is the use of calming? A little rage can be good. A lot of rage even better."

"He is a valuable asset. He’s protected the village many times, despite the way you, and it, have often treated him. You cannot simply throw such loyalty away." Though she addresses the elders, her eyes never leave mine. Her mouth lifts in a small, devious smile. "Besides, you know the opinion of the ninja community. Do you really think it wise to risk their loyalty?"

"If the fate of one little ninja is enough to sway their loyalty to an entire village, then we do not need them." The old woman sounds very certain of this.

"Pompous, more like."

"Oh, they would still protect the village," the Hokage concedes. "They are shinobi after all and they take an oath to do so. But the ties will be frayed. How can any of them expect fair treatment when you imprison a faithful ninja for doing precisely what he was sent out to do?"

"He practically destroyed an entire village!" The old woman insists.

"Villages can be rebuilt." Tsunade pulls her arm in tighter when she sees my foot move. "Nearly all the villagers were saved. The lord was defeated, the threat eliminated. Naruto did his job and yet you wish to punish him. All ninja look at this and see that it could be them in the same position."

Tsunade still has not faced the old pair, instead keeping careful watch over me. In return, I am keeping careful watch over the elders.

"Odd that this is no longer about us."

Clever.

The prehistoric hag holds her hands securely in her fat sleeves and throws her shoulders back in defiance.

"She has some serious delusions of grandeur."

Then the man creaks to his feet and leisurely exits the room. It takes quite some time for the old crone to notice the departure of her one ally, but when she does, the woman jerks her chin high in the air and strolls out after him. Tsunade, the ANBU, and I are now alone. I switch my eyes to Tsunade and she lifts one eyebrow interestingly.

"Did you win?" I ask blandly.

But she grabs my arm with enough of her supernatural force to cause the blood to stop flowing to my fingertips and swings me around.

"Come with me," she commands and with no other viable option, I do.

She closes the door so quickly after I enter her office that I almost lose my other arm.

"So," the Hokage begins as she passes me. "Tell me about how long your little guest has been speaking with Kabuto."

"I don't know," I answer tersely. "Are they going to release Naruto now?"

"And why exactly ought we to care?"

"Well, try to think back. How do you know that night wasn't the first time?" She sits behind her
disorganized desk and gives me a smile more appropriate for dark alleys than offices. "They'll have to let him go soon. Even if she won't see it, he knows I'm right."

//On the other hand . . .//

"The Kyuubi is dangerous and Naruto will have to remember to learn more control. He had almost full control already when this . . ." she waves her hand. "But that doesn't change the fact that most ninja are up-in-arms whether they like Naruto or not.” She shakes her head. "The elders have put themselves in a very untenable position. It’s hard for shinobi to do their job when any move could cause a backlash." She gives me a pointed look as if to make sure I understand. I do have a brain, thank you.

//Unlike some old women we could mention.//

"They can't let it stand that way and they know it."

"How soon will he be let go?"

//Wretched little whelp. You are showing your weakness. You should never show your weakness.//

Tsunade smirks at me. "Soon." The woman gestures to a small chair on my left. "I think these ‘visions’ of your take precedence. Sit."

So it did work. About time.

//Perhaps not so useless after all.//

And I can wreak a little revenge against my uninvited guest.

//Wait a minute . . . //

And Naruto will see what I did for him.

//Predictable.//

"Now tell me," the Hokage says. "How do you know they've been communicating?"

I lower my lids half-mast. "Kabuto basically said as much." I purse my mouth and take a breath, remembering the near pride he had in his insanity. "And Orochimaru clearly knew how to take control and maneuver to him."

She raises one thin eyebrow. "But you've never noticed this before?" I don't answer and she takes a different tack. "Do you normally recall your dreams?"

"I try not to." I push myself closer to the back of the chair and sit up straighter. "Usually they're nightmares."

Her hands fold into each other neatly on top of the desk. "I see." She considers her fingers for a long while. "And there's been no other incidents that you can recall?"

"No," I tell her.

But she eyes me skeptically. "Are you absolutely certain about that? Think again. Anything strange. Anything at all." She uses a voice one would use with a wild animal, slow, soft and encouraging.
It's getting on my nerves. But I do as she says. Naturally there would be a lot of memories with Orochimaru or Kabuto. Nothing sticks out in my mind.

//An utter waste of time.//

Except . .

//There is nothing to see because there is nothing to find.//

The back of a forgotten memory tickles at the edges of my consciousness.

//This is useless. Stop it. There is no need. There ought to be better things to do.//

There was that one time.

//No times. There is nothing.//

There was that one time; so long ago that I put it from my mind. But . . .

//Because it means nothing.//

I slowly open my eyes. "That day . . " The images are still hazy.

"What day?" The Hokage urges.

//No days.//

"In the classroom . . "

"Yes?"

//Classroom? No, nothing happened there. You are remembering things that did not happen.//

I look straight at the woman and into her penetrating eyes. "It was like two images overlapped." I pause, thinking about it. "But that was a memory; Orochimaru escaping after you refused to heal him."

//Ha! I should kill her for what she did to me!//

Tsunade sneers as she relives fond memories. "Describe it to me."

And so I do, to the best of my ability. That first jarring sensation, the kids and the cave, feeling out of breath and desperate. The Hokage absorbs every little bit of information like water into a sponge. Once I'm finished, she leans her head to the side and stares a long time. Orochimaru growls like a beast trapped in a cage.

Then, all of a sudden, the woman pushes back from the desk and rises. Clasping her hands demurely behind her back, she takes a few moments to gaze out the large picture window at the village and the trees and sky far beyond.

"I don't believe that was a memory," she informs me. "I believe that was first contact. The connection with Kabuto had likely just been made so that it was tenuous and unwieldy." She turns
to me and levels me with her harsh honey brown eyes. "But I think that Orochimaru recognized its potential. From that moment on, he both used the connection and hid it from you."

My eyebrows pull together as the full weight of that settles onto my shoulders.

'I will kill you, you understand that, you slimy little snake?’

//Try it, my pet. You need me. Besides, you are still too weak, as you have always been. Such a disappointment.//

If what she says is true, that means it’s been, "Almost six months?"

That's six months of lying, six months of being manipulated. Six months of Sound regrouping. All by using me.

My chakra begins to crackle at the seams, seeking out my seals so it can smash them to bits and grant me my freedom.

'Damn this "combining" shit. I'll just expel you out like the waste you are.'

//Ku-ku-ku-ku.//

My chakra finds the curse seal first, the most receptive, the seal that lures it in, cajoling it to snap and break. The tri-comma mark begins its quick seduction, the tendrils of power reaching out its tiny feelers, caressing the underneath of my skin and whispering to me promises of power, strength, revenge and all I could ever want.

Tsunade's grip on my shoulder is barely in time, but it sends the strands zipping back, reforming their deconstructed circle and leaving them cowering in the darkness.

"Stop that."

Her voice is somehow firm and soothing at the same time. I blink several times, fighting to make the agonizing, absolutely seductive power-haze slip from my vision.

She finally releases me and that sudden absence of pain is like its own physical presence.

"Looks like you're going to have to do some serious training," the woman remarks almost lazily as she returns to her seat. "That display there shows me that. And if your new connection is to be of any use to us, you'll have to learn to manipulate it as well as Orochimaru."

//Never. You are too simpleminded. I've been trapped here in the banality of your brain long enough to know that.//

"He'll fight me," I declare unequivocally.

"Yes," she muses. "I expect he will." She curves her lips up in that not reassuring way. "Now then. Shall we begin?"

-----

I am sent to an empty, imposing interrogation room to wait.

And wait and wait.
I don't know how much later it is when someone finally comes to check on me, but it's far past what decency dictates. The door opens and Izumo is there with someone behind him, but the man's body blocks them, so I can't see who it is.

"Uchiha Sasuke," the man says levelly. "Your trainer has arrived." He turns and nods to the other person. "I leave him to you." He slips out between the bare space allotted by the doorframe and then I am alone and face to face with Yamanaka Ino.

She glowers at me from the doorway and remains perfectly still.

//What is the hell is she doing here?//

This promises to be an unpleasant, if not disastrous, experience.

I nod and greet the girl neutrally. "Yamanaka."

Her expression tightens briefly. Then she enters the room, closes the door behind her and silently walks up to me. She gives me a long searching look then sits in the chair opposite mine. Meticulously, Ino places her hands onto the table and interlocks her fingers like the teeth to a zipper.

"Look," she says, her eyes blank and her tone only briefly reflecting her desire to be anywhere else. "I'm not here for you. I'm only here because as I understand it, you're our best chance at avoiding further destruction to Konoha." She pauses, but it's not a silence that needs interruption. "We will be professionals about this and, hopefully, we'll be done quickly." As I would very much like the same result, I again make no comment.

"All right," she says. "I'm going to enter your mind but still allow you free access so that you can start to feel how this works. I want you to pay close attention to the details. Notice how your body, your mind and your chakra feel different. Because you're going to have to do this by feel and with secrecy." Her face remains static and stern as she explains as though to a first year academy student and I have to fight not to betray my irritation.

//And why? She is no friend of yours and of no use.//

'You can just stay out of this.'

//The ultimate irony, my pet, is that without me, you wouldn't be doing this at all.//

I wince with annoyance, which makes Ino lift an eyebrow.

"What is it?" She asks.

"How much do you know?"

"Obviously, I know everything," she informs me in that eerie monotone. "Otherwise I couldn't help you."

//Not so good at keeping secrets, are we?//

I swallow with a clench of my jaw. "Orochimaru is talking."

Ino's eyes seize in for an instant before she responds. "We'll just have to wait and see how that affects things." She’s back into her self-appointed mask in a moment. "You'll ultimately need to replicate his chakra signature for this to work anyway, so it might be just as well. There are no
jutsus for this sort of thing and none you could use anyhow. Only the," she pauses for a second and I see her throat tense up. "Yamanaka clan can perform that type of jutsu. When you do this for real," her face turns darkly serious, "You're on your own. It's do or die on your first try. If you fail, there won't be any second chances and we'll be blind. So we want to get this as close to perfect as possible." She breaks, either for dramatic effect or to ensure that I fully comprehend what's at stake.

"Are you ready?"

I have to be. "Yes."

Both of us are grim and composed, "professional" as she said, as we regard each other.

"Good." She quickly makes the necessarily hand seals and the next thing I know, the two of us are in the blank space of my mind, crowding into an already overcrowded space. Orochimaru's constant malevolent sludge undulates creepily in a corner.

"Pay attention," Ino's voice warbles oddly. "Do you feel how the links between body, mind, and chakra feel disjointed, almost fragmented?"

"Yes." It's both oddly familiar and unnerving, maybe because it's familiar.

"Memorize the connection between them first. It's the center of what makes a person who she is, so it's both the most important and the easiest to pinpoint."

I nod.

But I have no idea how to memorize an intangible sensation. Ino must realize this because she says, "You won't get it on your first attempt." She waits a few minutes more and I do my best, but this is new and different from anything I’ve done before.

"Wouldn't want you knowing how to do this, now would I?"

In my mind, Ino scowls and suddenly we are back into our proper bodies. My head jerks to the side with the violence of return. My vision becomes sort of tunnel-like for a second before it clears. Ino is biting the inside of her lip, deep in thought.

I clear my throat and ask as politely as I can manage, "What's the problem?"

Her eyes lazily lift to my face and she lets her swollen lip go. "I'm trying to decide whether it's harder or easier to have him interfering."

"He'll be there either way," I inform her.

"Yes. I realize that." Her pale blue eyes are expressionless. "Well, as long as you can ignore him while we're working," she pitches it like a question, so I nod. There really isn’t any choice. "Then it ought to be all right." Her hands shift slightly, though still in proper seal position. "We'll keep doing this so you can fully memorize the pattern. Then I'll slowly ease off and while I'm doing that, you'll need to replicate what's left. I'll tell you whether or not you're doing it right."

"You can do that?"

"Of course," she says as if it's obvious. "It's essentially what I have to do when I perform the jutsu anyway." She shrugs minutely. "Then we'll repeat the process for body, mind, and chakra until you know them all."
"That'll take a while," I remark.

"Not if we work fast." She states firmly. "Ready to try again?"

I take a deep breath and rest my hands flat on the table. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

She nods once sharply with the barest sardonic upturn of her lips.

And we begin.
I'd much rather just smash Naruto's door to smithereens and waltz in, but I'm trying to be polite. After two days of Naruto “refusing visitors”, I had to find out from an unfamiliar guard that he was released.

//Not so important, are we?//

Naruto opens the door and immediately tries to close it again, but I stick my foot in the way.

"What do you want?" He asks rudely.

"Let's talk."

He tries to hold his emotions in check, he's never been good at that. "What could we possibly have to talk about?"

"Naruto," I growl with a bit of impatience.

He lifts an eyebrow challengingly and I fully expect him to chase me off but instead he says, "Fine. Talk."

I eye him warily. "May I come in?"

"No."

Pursing my lips I glare at Naruto in hopes that he’ll relent.

"We're supposed to be friends."

"Funny that, coming from you."

"You're the one who said it."

He sighs and looks up to the corner of the wall behind the door hinge. "You said it first. Maybe I was just delusional . . . ."

"How many times did I save your life?" I add, remembering the times before and after my defection that this was true. "How many times did I risk my own? You're telling me now that
"Hey," Naruto protests, his gaze dropping back to me. "I saved your life."

//Always trying to get credit, never allowing it to someone else.//

Not the point.

"Exactly," I say and my concession to Naruto's claim momentarily shocks him.

Naruto huffs angrily. "And so, what? You think everything can just be patched up? After what you did?"

"What I did?"

"Yeah, you. You slept with Sakura."

"So did you."

He blushes slightly, but defends himself by saying, "That was long before I said anything to you. Before I even knew."

"And because you 'said something' you think that gives you some kind of claim?" I snarl. "Life doesn't work that way."

"That's not all," he says and his blue eyes are intensely cobalt as they look into mine. "You know there was a lot more than that."

Maybe so.

//Still taking liberties.//

"There was no agreement between us," I point out. "We weren't together, Naruto."

He looks down guiltily to his feet. "Sure felt like we were."

"How so?" I snap back. He looks up at me with an accusatory grimace and I grit my teeth. "Fine," I grant. "There was more. But we were not together. How could we be when you made it quite clear you aren't gay. Your exact damned words! In case you've forgotten" – and he damn well better not make any more snide comments – "I'm a guy."

"Don't you dare try to –" He sputters, trying to act innocent, like he's the only injured party, but I don't allow it.

"Did you think I should just wait around to see if you ever miraculously got over that?" I accuse. "Well, I don't have the time."

Instantly, I realize it was a mistake.

Because instead of listening to the important part, he latches onto the last words like they mean something.

"What do you mean you don't have the time?" He asks, his hostility now laced with apprehension.

But it's easy to gloss over that. "Life is short. Ninja often die young," I tell him, employing the oft-quoted axiom to a practical use. "Am I supposed to waste it just waiting?"
And this gets me right back to where we started, with Naruto scowling unapologetically at me. "Well, you didn't wait at all. What was it? Two days?" He contemplates two of his fingers as if that will make his statement anywhere near the truth. "I was willing to wait for you."

"Like hell. You rejected me. And it was two weeks," I remind him. "Two weeks of you being gone and having said a whole lot of things you couldn't back up. You rejected me first and I didn't know if I'd ever see you again and even if I did . . ."

This is pathetic.

//The words right out of my mouth.//

I grip my fists at my sides and lift my chin with the last gathered dregs of my pride. Then I turn on my heel and return the way I came, just like always.

Naruto doesn’t follow.

I don't know, I kind of thought maybe he would.

-----

I shouldn’t be chasing after Naruto like a lovesick puppy, nor should I be biding my time, trying to do something so horribly common as "woo" him. I have better things to do. I have a life outside of Naruto.

Iruka answers my knock on the door and as soon as he looks on me, his face grows sympathetic. He smiles this sick little smile and I know what the answer is before he opens his mouth.

With a fierce glower, I say, "Fine. But he can't avoid me forever."

"I'm sure you're right," Iruka says encouragingly. "I really am sorry, Sasuke. I'll do what I can to get him to talk to you, but this is something you two need to work out between yourselves."

I nod gruffly. At least it's something.

//Seems more like a sign to give up.//

Not now.

I don't believe in giving up so easily. But for today, this is enough. So I go to join my team for further training, to be followed by Kakashi and Yamanaka. What joy. I think maybe the elders are going through with an execution by working me to death.

So be it.

-----

And I’m back again.

This time Naruto opens the door.

He doesn’t look the least bit happy. He crosses his arms and leans on the doorjamb, keeping the door close to him so it will be that much quicker to shut it.

Honestly, I had not expected him to open the door at all, so I am woefully unprepared.
I stare at Naruto for only a moment before asking, "Are you going to Hinata and Neji's wedding?"

He looks at me like my brain just fell out. I kind of feel like it did. His expression narrows, debating perhaps whether or not I am laying some unforeseen trap. I can almost see it when his mind finally clicks. "You're going."

"I was invited," I say judiciously, but then correct myself. "I'm being coerced."

Naruto snorts, inclines his head and sets his jaw. "All right then."

He moves to shut the door and I slap my open palm on it. His blue eyes scowl at my hand as if it is a giant, flesh-eating bug.

"What is this?" I snap.

Slowly, Naruto turns to face the question. It takes a few minutes of him staring at me for his anger to mutate to resignation.

"This is it," he says cryptically.

"What?" I say, refusing to move from the spot. "You don't want to see me anymore?" It has to be a lie.

"I can't," he says with a strange finality.

"Can't?"

"I can't be friends with you. I told you. I can't watch . . ." He stops suddenly and shakes his head irritably.

"You mean you won't," I accuse.

"Whatever." His voice is distracted and he's looking off into the distance at something only he can see. Then he refocuses on my face. "Just leave me alone, all right?". The door begins to close in on me again and I've had it. With more force than technically necessary, I slam the door open until it hits the sidewall with a notable crash.

I take a quick, big step forward until I am nearly looming over Naruto and he scowls even fiercer at my sudden proximity.

"So this is how it is now?" I growl. "I make one damn mistake and . . ." I close my eyes briefly as I clench my teeth, struggling for control. Then I look harshly into Naruto's eyes, so offensively blue as he remains silent. "I hate this place. I only came back for you," I point out furiously. "I stayed for you and nearly died for you and now you won't even talk to me?" My whole body is trembling and I have to grit my jaw to keep my rage from exploding out.

Naruto still stands there stupidly, staring, saying nothing and that's it, I have to leave.

I have to leave before I do something irreparable like snap his neck in half.

In one final statement, I smash the door again and hear a gratifying crack when one of the hinges ruptures.

I turn and leap onto the railing and then down to street level two stories below. I make my way
down the street leisurely because he has no right, no right at all, to see me running away.

-----

On my way back to the apartment after an especially brutal session with Yamanaka, I spot Sakura standing by herself at the bridge from our Team Seven days. I watch her unmoving form for a while.

Then steeling myself against what's to come, I walk over and stand beside her.

//And now what?//

We remain side by side for a while, the wind whisking around us, the only noise or movement on the bridge. I’m here but I really don’t want to be.

So we stand there and look out past the trees and the edge of Konoha until Sakura stands up straight and sighs.

"Naruto won't talk to me," she states unhappily, pulling back on the rail with both hands.

I pause for a second, deliberating. "He won't talk to me either," I finally say.

"Oh," she muses, turning her head in my direction. "I'm sure that's not true."

I grunt.

"He might be fighting with you, but I'll bet he's spoken with you all the same."

I look at her seriously and inform her, "Not for two days now. All I get is Iruka."

"Still," she says, looking back over the rail, "More than me. I don't think he'll ever forgive me."

Her face winces in pain and I can understand that feeling well. I am . . afraid . . of the same thing.

//Fear is a worthless emotion.//

"It was a mistake you know." I can offer no reassurances about Naruto. If I had any assurances to give, I'd hoard them for myself. "Us."

She releases a vibrating sigh. "I know." She looks up to the heavens, but the clouds remain obstinately still, refusing to part and give her the answers she needs. "None of it was supposed to happen. She presses her lips together. “It can’t be taken back. I just wish we could move forward."

I nod and look out again to the edges of Konoha. If only I'd never returned.

//You had a choice.//

No, I really don't think I did.

"I just want him to talk to me," I admit embarrassingly and pause into a long silence even Sakura won't fill. "But he refuses to be my friend."

Sakura makes a snort, like a laugh, and I look at her irritably. "Of course he would," she says with wry amusement. "None of us can turn back now. Especially Naruto. You do realize this, don't you? You do understand why?" She scrutinizes me with a tinge of shock in her expression as if the answer "no" is an impossibility.
I neither answer her question nor press for an explanation.

//This is growing sickening.//

“I didn’t mean to get you involved,” I manage to say because Sakura in her way is important to me too.

She blinks wide-eyed at me for a moment, then smiles. "And how hard was it for you to say that?" I scowl at her and she hums affably. "I was already involved. And I was as much to blame as you. I just lost myself there for a moment because . . ." she lets the sentence dangle in front of me.

"Because you're in love with Naruto," I finish for her.

She tilts her head curiously and raises one eyebrow in question. "Why do you say that?"

I turn away from her, staring off into the far line of trees. "You said his name."

From the corner of my eye, I see her instantly blanch in mortification. But then her lips twist into a crooked little smile and she starts to giggle. The sound grows and swells until she finally bursts into loud, boisterous laughter.

I look back to her and frown because it's not funny and she just won't stop laughing, the tears streaming from her eyes as soon as she wipes them away.

And it’s not funny; the two of us trapped in the same ridiculous fantasy because we had no one and we had no one else and it was the best we could hope for.

And it's not funny.

The tears still come, with a smile on her lips, and her laughter dies down reluctantly to that sighing, until she’s barely catching her breath.

I snort, curling my lip, and turn away.

It's not funny.

Except that it has to be funny, otherwise it would just be terribly, horribly sad.

Finally, when Sakura is finished, she lets out a heavy breath, and stares with me out into the distance.

"We're quite the pair, aren't we?"

I snort.

"But you're wrong," she declares. "I am in love with Naruto, but no less so than I am with you." I glare out over to the trees. "Maybe it’s not fair, but it’s true. And I know it can’t be me. It’s never me. I know that. But why?" She sniffs, holding back a different version of tears and laments, "Will it ever be me?"

"I'm sure it will." It’s not a comfort, simply the truth.

//How very saccharine.//

Sakura turns her emerald eyes to me in surprise, but then they crinkle up in pleasure. "So. Maybe the third time's the charm? All right, then. I won't give up." She stands up straight and stretches her
arms far up behind her, reaching until she rises to her toes. When she looks back at me, she appears lighter, almost prettier than she was only moments before. "You don't give up either."

I have no intention of doing so.

The pink-haired girl seems to be nearly floating when she starts off the end of the bridge. At the very edge, where the wood merges with the dirt road, she turns back to me and says, "I'll see you later." Only she delivers it like a question.

So I nod.

And she grins and gives me a little goodbye bow with her hands behind her back before she leaves.

-----

Another four days has passed and every day Iruka has politely turned me away. But I don’t intend to give up.

I struggle through each day with only one goal in mind: Naruto. Every day the same as the last four. I am dog-tired and weary of it all, and if Kakashi’s treatment of me is any indication, it shows.

I’ve been strangely isolated these days, even when I’m with someone. It’s mostly self-imposed, but still . . .

I’d forgotten how lonely it is when I am alone. I used to have the fight for revenge to fill the empty spaces, but now the only thing I want to fight for is Naruto and that just makes his absence that much more keen.

I fill my time with whatever I can, just so I don't have to think.

//Yes, supply shopping is so very exciting and productive.//

I carry my two bagfuls of groceries in my one hand and peruse my list in the other while standing just outside the main door of the store. There is a better selection and higher quality of meat and vegetables here, and thanks to some persuasion by Hinata on the owner, I’m allowed entrance, if not friendly service.

I have to hit another store and beg for them to sell me that special laundry detergent Kakashi insists on. Sensitive skin my eye!

I shove the list back into my pocket and growl, turning in the direction of the next store.

But then something flickers through my peripheral vision and I search the opposite side of the street until I find it.

And there is Naruto standing in the great throng of people, stock-still and staring. At me.

I stare back.

His look is not inviting or reproachful, or anything at all. It’s just a stare, as blank as can be, but it doesn’t waver. A bevy of humanity crosses back in forth in between us, but neither of our eyes leave the other. I am frozen, with this incredible draw to go to him growing in my belly, and yet I can’t make my feet move. If I move, the spell will be broken.

Then someone bumps me from behind as they exit the store, grunts and gives me a nasty look and
for one dreadful moment, my eyes flick to the unknown man.

And when I look back across the street, Naruto is gone.

-----

When I go to meet my team on the following day, I find Anko pacing like a madwoman, excited and actually rubbing her hands together like some sort of evil genius.

Both Ouka and Tetsuo are sitting on the grass watching her like obedient students. I, however, do not sit. I stand and tower over the munchkins and cross my arms, half worried that I may have to defend myself when Anko snaps.

//She has it in her upbringing.//

But when she sees me, she just stops and folds her restless hands together. "Good. Uchiha. You're here." She eyes each one of us importantly as if something momentous is about to occur. Then she grins and the image of evil genius is complete. "We did well on our C-ranked mission." Tetsuo grumbles and looks off to the side. "We need to take more of those and earn ourselves a name. A reputation." She's just on some crazy roll now. "A shot at the chuunin exams."

//Chuunin? Not a bad idea, if it were possible.//

"Chuunin?" Ouka repeats nervously and I peek at her from the corner of my eye. She appears to have gone completely green.

Anko resumes her pacing, pointing repeatedly at nothing with one finger as though counting the advantages off. "Just imagine it! The youngest chuunin in years."

"Me?" Ouka squeaks. Of course it's her.

"A return of the great Kanamori family."

Tetsuo grunts unintelligibly. Both Ouka and I look at him. I had no idea of family "greatness" and even less of a "return".

"And the redemption of the last of the feared Uchiha clan."

I huff. Now she's just delirious. There's no way they'll ever allow that.

But she's still on that roll and picking up speed as she goes downhill.

"See now, this is how it's going to be." She stops and faces us, folding her arms over her chest with unjustified conviction. "We are going to train harder than ever. We are going to take any mission that comes our way. I don't care how insignificant it is, but the tougher, the better. And we are going to excel at each and every one of them." She jabs her finger at us. "We will become a well-oiled machine. And then, we are going to the chuunin exams." She smiles expansively at us. "Who's with me?"

Raucous silence greets her.

"Well," she says, unruffled. "You will be."

Dubious silence greets her.

"All right then! Let's get to work!"
There's a distinct lack of enthusiasm as the two little ones rise. Kohana is the only one who seems genuinely eager at the prospect. But her spirits are rarely ever low, so she's hardly one to go by.

"Sasuke-san?" Ouka asks in her little voice.

"Hn?"

"What are the exams like?"

//Simple little child.//

I look down to see she is still an impressive shade of green. I hope she doesn't sick up all over the training grounds.

"There was a written," I inform her plainly. "A team mission, and elimination battles. At least that's how it was when I took them."

She hums and her little face crinkles in concentration. When she looks up at me, her child eyes are wide with interest. "How come you didn't become a chuunin then?"

I scowl in remembrance. "Only one did that year. There were . . . interruptions."

//Interruptions indeed. And Naruto.//

'And you.'

"Oh." The girl lowers her eyes to her feet as we walk and Kohana yips impatiently for us to follow. Unusually subdued, Ouka fiddles with her fingers distractedly. Suddenly, she looks up at me and grins wide. "Kiba-nii-san is a chuunin."

I look away. "Hn."

"Can you imagine?" She asks with newfound zeal. "If we went to the exams and I passed, that means I'd be a chuunin like Kiba-nii-san. And way before him." She giggles devilishly. "Bet he'd hate that!"

I smirk out to where Anko waves eagerly for us to join her.

"Hurry up you two!" Anko calls after us. "If you take all day, we'll have to work into the night!"

Ouka looks up again and grins exuberantly at me. "Let's show them, huh, Sasuke-san?" Then she and her canine companion dash off to meet up with our resident lazybones, who has miraculously beaten us to the grounds.

I shrug mentally and join them.

-----

Ouka squints an eye in pain, but refuses to make a sound. Carefully, I bind off the end of the bandage so that it is secured around her elbow. She has another on her wrist, her hand, both her knees, and a big patch on her jaw. A little bit more and she'd look like a mummy.

I roll up the scant remainder of the bandages and stow them back in my pack.

The little girl sighs and looks at her hands. Kohana barks, wags her tail and pants her puppy breath into Ouka's face. She too has a bandage, but only one, around her front left leg.
I stand up to my full height over the tiny child. She sighs again, even deeper than before.

I growl with irritation. "What?"

She’s totally unaffected by my disinterest in her petty problems. "I'm never gonna get to be a chuunin!" She complains.

I groan and look out to the horizon. Anko and Tetsuo left long ago. "It's been one day."

She rips a tuft of grass from the ground and tosses it angrily away. In defiance, it floats gently back down to earth. "I know," she whines. "But look. I couldn't even keep up."

I gaze down at the girl as she holds out her arms in front of her and examines them dejectedly.

"It was a team exercise," I remind her. "It's about learning to balance our abilities to one another and work in unison." She drops her hands to her lap. "It will take a while to get the right rhythm."

Especially because I don’t want to.

Ouka looks up to me then, her lower lip sticking out in a fat pout and it’s difficult even for me to stay mad at her.

//Wonder why. Doesn't seem to fit. It is a useless emotion.//

She looks pitiable, all wrapped up in so many bandages.

"Don't push yourself so hard," I advise her.

"But Mitarashi-sensei said . . ."

"Forget whatever craziness Mitarashi said." I sigh with exasperation. "There's time."

She gazes up at me with those big trusting eyes and I don't like it. Then she smiles quite wide and hops to her feet. Her face puckers in as she winces in renewed pain. I quickly steady her by grabbing tight under her armpit. "What did I just say?" I scold.

She turns sheepishly up at me.

Once she's entirely regained her equilibrium, I let go and Kohana comes to her side, sitting obediently by her feet.

"I'm going," I tell her unequivocally.

I take only a couple steps before she is beside me again, lacing her tiny fingers into my palm. I lower my lids halfway, inhale deeply and give her a peeved expression.

She smiles cheekily and grips tighter.

We walk towards the main exit of the training grounds hand-in-hand like a couple of fools, but sometimes it’s easier just to humor her.

//If you say so.//

Then the world stops on its axis abruptly as two unexpected people cross our path. That stupid unnatural bastard who is supposed to look like me, and Naruto.
"Ah, hello Sasuk-"

I scowl brilliantly and turn away before he can finish.

"Oh, I see," that useless waste of space reflects.

But I’m looking at Naruto and for the second time in recent memory he is looking at me. And he looks a long time, slightly confounded as his eyes flick up and down. Then, slowly, he nods a detached greeting.

I blink a few times to assure myself I’m not hallucinating. Cautiously, I nod back.

We stay for one strained moment more, then I jerk on Ouka's hand and begin dragging her behind me.

"Oh! Wait, I . . ." she protests, but we are out of the training grounds and the pair's sight before the girl can fully regain her stability and cease flailing her arm.

When we slow to a normal pace in the main Konoha corridor, Ouka sets her child eyes on me with resumed intensity. She wants to say something.

Not being a patient child, it doesn't take her long.

"I didn't know you knew Naruto-nii-chan," she observes inquisitively, meaning to ask a question.

"How do you know him?" I ask instead, ignoring her evident interest.

"Oh, he's by the house all the time," she replies joyfully as if this should be obvious. "He's Kiba-nii-san's best friend."

Oh, he is, is he?

//Betraying, lying bastard.//

No wonder he no longer wants to be friends. I’ve been replaced.

//Lying, cheating little . . .//

"Ow!"

I look down and quickly let go of the tiny hand I’m crushing. Ouka shakes it out and flexes the fingers experimentally.

I need to get better control over myself.

The girl begins picking at the bandage delicately with her short pink fingers.

"Don't do that," I reprove her.

She drops her hands to the side. Then she turns up to me again and returns to her question. "How do you know Naruto-nii-chan?"

And just like that, in her innocent way, she has already forgiven me.

A heavy cloud settles over my head. I brush it away.

"We were on the same team," I tell her.
"Oh?" She says curiously and scrunches her nose in deep thought. A few moments later, her eyebrows disappear beneath her bangs and her eyes bug out. "Oooh. So you're . . ." But she doesn't finish the statement and just leaves her mouth hanging open.

"I'm what?" I prod irritably.

But she cocks her head to the side and stares at me intently. Then she smiles a little cupid bow smile. "I see. Yeah."

"See what." Now it's just downright aggravating.

Ouka simply grins. "I'd better get home." She takes a couple quick steps and still moving, calls back. "I'll see you tomorrow, Sasuke-san! C'mon, Kohana!"

The puppy barks me a cheerful farewell and bounds after the girl, the two of them quickly disappearing into the crowd.

I watch their fleeing forms and grumble under my breath.

-----

I'd assumed that after our past couple meetings that Naruto would see me, but he's being pigheaded.

But the next day, I see Naruto again, this time in the Ichiraku ramen shop eating lunch with Kiba. I grit my teeth and glare at Dogboy's back, hoping to ignite him with my thoughts alone, but seeing as my chakra is still bound up in seals, it fails miserably.

//Well, one can only hope.//

I’m standing with the curtain lifted over my head when the owner notices me and smiles. He’s one of the few people that always treated me with decency so I feel the obligated to do so. Plus, Naruto is here. I let the curtain fall back down and scan the counter seat availability. There are three vacant stools extending on Naruto's left side and I take the middle one, which is not too far and not too close.

I make my order and at my side, I see Naruto come to a sudden stop, chopsticks halfway to his mouth. I wasn’t aware of any conversation going on before I arrived, but I am painfully aware of the silence that follows.

Brazenly, I turn my head to the two's direction and while Naruto resumes eating and diligently examining his meal, Kiba is leaning far over the counter and sneering wide at me.

Best friend, huh?

//Why should we care?//

"Hello, Sasuke," he chimes mockingly.

I shoot him a cross look as Naruto turns to him and punches him hard in the arm. Kiba ignores both of us and snickers like a dog, wheezy and snide.

"How's the training going?" He asks, as if I’m not shooting him a death glare.

He’s doing this to bother me-
"Kiba!" Naruto whispers harshly.

-and possibly Naruto.

Fortuitously, my order is set down before me and I’m grateful for the distraction. With the perfect excuse to look away, I stare deep into my bowl and begin to eat. It's the cheapest thing on the menu, the only thing I can afford, but on par with the rest as far as I can tell. Too bad I'm not a connoisseur of ramen like Naruto.

"Ouka says you're training for the chuunin exams," Kiba comments, ignoring the fact that I don’t want to talk to him.

Whipping my head in his direction to make a nasty retort, I halt midway when Naruto looks to me and asks, "Really?"

It's the first time he's spoken anything to me in almost a week and it's not even angry.

I swallow thickly. "Yeah."

The left side of Naruto's mouth tilts up lightly with an unreadable, but not negative expression. Then without warning he dives back into his ramen, shoveling it down his throat like it's some sort of race. Kiba peeks up over the crouched blonde head and flashes his dogteeth at me.

I narrow my eyes and return to my lunch, picking at it slowly.

Perhaps a minute, maybe less, passes before Dogboy finds the need to once again open his big fat mouth. "Think you'll manage to make it against a bunch of little kids this time?"

The chopsticks in my hand snap in half. "Can you pack up the rest of this for me?" I ask the proprietor.

"Yes, of course." The man takes up the bowl and to my surprise, sends a deeply disapproving look in Kiba's direction.

"Kiba!" Naruto growls. "Stop."

"Aw, c'mon," Dogboy teases.

"Here you are," the owner says, handing me a bag with my remaining ramen in record time.

"Thank you." I take the bag and head back out the stall, minutes after I entered.

"You can't say that wasn't fun," Dogboy protests as I leave.

"Just stop," Naruto demands irately.

"You know I don't like the guy, but . . ."

I don't hear the rest as I walk back to the apartment, wishing I hadn't bothered stopping.

//Yes, it was a fruitless, wasn't it?//

But then again, Naruto did talk to me.

Perhaps it wasn't a total waste of time after all.
I have a little hope in trying again. When Iruka answers the door this time, his response is slightly altered.

He ducks his head behind the door, then leans down to whisper to me. "Perhaps check a little later?" He suggests. "Give him a little time. He needs to think things out and maybe it would help if you didn't come by so often?"

It's the best news I've had in days.

//Really, and why is that?//

So I leave and give Naruto his "time" as Iruka suggests. And during this time, I work and I wait and I am ready to beat the crap out of Naruto because I can be patient, but I don't like it.

It was yet another long day ending in an unfriendly session for Yamanaka and I today. We have already passed my memorization phase of the "link" as she termed it, and are into the "easing off" segment, but I don't think it's going well. After the third try, both of us were completely worn out so that was the end for the day.

I don't feel like I accomplished much of anything and Ino wouldn't tell me one way or the other.

Something is happening because my head is pounding, though I can't say whether that's good or bad.

//That has been true for quite some time.//

These extra thoughts aren't helping.

The pain shifts from above my eyes to the base of my neck at odd intervals, making it impossible to even try to get rid of it. And I'm too tired from lack of sleep and I haven't eaten much in the past three days and all this overwork is starting to make me nauseous. I feel like I'll die pretty soon from this, whether that was the intention or not.

At any rate, I must look like I've lost my mind, sitting at the side of the road with my head between my knees and my hands at my temple, making a poor attempt to massage the headache away.

'Headache" is a term I use loosely. This is way beyond that.

A stabbing pain tries to bore its way out the front of my cranium.

Stop thinking, must stop thinking; it's only making things worse.

//Fine by me. Gives me room to move.//

Bad idea, bad idea.

I groan as the throbbing increases until I just want to find a nice dark room in which to curl up and die.

"Ah . . ."

My eyes fly open at the sound and I lift my head, making little black spots dance in front of my eyes. I almost black out from dizziness. But Naruto is standing there in the street by himself, looking down at me confused and, I think, concerned. It's hard to tell.
"Are you O.K.?” He asks doubtfully.

I drop my head back to my knees; it hurts too much to talk right now. I fully expect him to leave and after a few moments of nothing, I assume that he has done just that.

But then there are fingers at my temple, ones I know well, pressing familiar little circles into my skull. It's better, when someone else does this, somehow more effective than when I try to do it myself. Plus there's that whole thing of Naruto being nice to me. Somehow, that helps too.

And it does feel nice. It doesn't entirely rid me of the all-consuming headache, but it’s an improvement. I don't know how long he does it, but I let him continue for as long as he's willing. There is a wonderful silence and warmth that grows in my belly for the duration that he deigns to be kind.

But then he has to ruin it.

"Don't you have someone to do this for you?” He asks quietly. "Sakura, maybe?"

I groan. This nonsense again.

//Not so much nonsense, really.//

'Don't even think of it. We're far past you manipulating anything anymore. You're just wasting your energy.

'On second thought, go ahead. Whine and wheedle.'

I lift my head to look Naruto straight in the face, so very close to mine that it makes me dizzy in a whole different way. His fingers stop, and try to pull away, but immediately I grab his wrists and hold them close. I can no longer feel his skin, but I can feel the heat.

"How many times must I tell you I don't want her?" I repeat crossly. "That I never . . ." But the pain comes back with the anger and I can't finish. I flinch my eyes shut and grip Naruto's wrists tight.

"Yeah, right. Whatever." He says softly, petulantly. "If you say so."

I wince back as the pain in my head returns with a vengeance. "There's only one person I've ever wanted." I say with exasperation.

My hold on him lessens; it's once again becoming hard to think.

"Yeah?" He replies, vaguely sarcastic. "Who?"

I raise my tired eyes to his and gaze at him for a long time. I exhale, deep and slow. "Don't be an idiot."

Naruto's expression changes. But he doesn’t move. He opens his mouth and takes one long breath. Then he easily wrestles his wrists free from my grasp; I lost all my strength when the headache returned. He stands and without a glance in my direction, leaves me where I began, alone on the side of the street with my head between my knees and one of the worst headaches I have endured in my life.

-----

This time, I’m not turned away. Iruka answers the door as always, but just at the moment he is about to apologize again, I hear a soft reluctant voice in the background call out, "Let him in."
A bit fluttery, the man backs out of the doorway to usher me in quickly as if he thinks Naruto will change his mind if I take too long.

Naruto is standing at the corner of the hallway, gluing himself to wall in order to keep a safe distance from me.

He eyes me uncertainly and while I have wanted to be here and wanted to talk to him, I have absolutely nothing to say. I keep myself safe at the doorway, still open to provide an escape.

This nervous intimidation I feel is unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

//Reason enough to be done with it.//

"How are you?" Naruto asks me quietly.

"All right," I answer noncommittally.

"No more headaches?"

I shrug without meaning. If I were to tell him that I get them every day, sometimes worse than when he saw me, what would he say? It is a pain, physical and basic and easy to deal with, all things considered.

Naruto only nods and I'm not sure he's actually listening to me.

"And you?" I ask. "They treating you O.K.?"

//This conversation is stupid.//

"I've gotten better at keeping the fox in check," he says flatly. "It's a lot of work, but if I concentrate, it's generally fine." He inclines his head. "It's better. I can use the healing ability whenever I need to now."

"That's good." I try to sound encouraging, but I don't actually know how to do that. "And the elders?" I add. "Leaving you alone?"

"They don't seem to have much time for me anymore." He says with an edge of suspicion.

"That's good." For a second, I almost want to smile. "Good." It means that the Hokage's ploy worked. The council's attention is now focused on me.

//They should be paying attention to us anyway.//

"Did you . . ?" Naruto's gaze increases in suspicion. Perhaps he is not so clueless as I would have thought.

//Why should he not know how the attention was deflected off of him?//

"Hmm?" I reply uninterestedly instead.

"No, forget it." Naruto looks away from me then, down the hallway and to freedom. "I should . . ."

"Maybe we can . . ." I stop, unsure how to finish until I remember Sakura's parting words to me. "I'll see you later?"

He pauses, looks to his feet. "Yeah. Maybe. We'll see."
In a way, it is more than I could have hoped for.

"I want you to try solidifying the aura of Orochimaru in your head," Kakashi orders. He waits a moment while I attempt this, but all I create is the big ball of evil sludge I have come to think of as "Orochimaru". "Have you done it?" Kakashi asks.

I purse my lips. "It doesn't look like him," I reply flatly.

"That's not important." Old One-eye seems to wave my concern off. "Have you differentiated his presence from yours?"

A roiling, bubbling black pustule sits in the corner of my mind. Orochimaru identified? Check. I nod.

"Very good. You're getting it much faster now." I suppose I should be pleased by his praise, but I'm not. "Now, this is the tricky part," he goes on. "It's different from what we've done before. I want you to sift through that form for any parts that feel familiar. Traits that you had before Orochimaru, that are now being supplied by him. These are the parts you are going to reintegrate into yourself. O.K.?

Uh, no, not so much. "I can't do that."

"Oh?" the silver-haired jounin asks with lazy interest. "And why is that?"

"He's all sludgy."

There's a short pause and then I swear I hear Kakashi chuckle. "Maybe you should try solidifying him into something a bit easier to sort through then."

I can't think of anything else with which to associate with Orochimaru except snakes or bugs and with their constant movement, that wouldn't be an improvement.

"Let's see," Old One-eye begins musing to himself. "Something easy to sort but can remind you of Orochimaru." He hums in thought and it's kind of annoying how lackadaisical he's behaving. "Hey, how about you turn him into a representation of the curse seal?"

"That's three dots," I point out acidly.

"No, when it's been activated. What is that, curse level one?" He queries, completely casual. "The one with all the speckles."

"Yeah," I groan. "I know what you mean."

"Try that."

"Won't it activate the seal?"

"No," he chortles deprecatingly. "Stop thinking of everything that's going on in your head so literally. Now try it."

I scowl but do as he instructs. It's his funeral if this turns out poorly. The black pile of Orochimaru bubbles a little, but then settles back down, oozing into a gooey puddle.

"Don't give up. Keep trying," Kakashi encourages.
"I could without the cheerleading," I snap.

"All right, all right," the man concedes. "I'll be good."

I ignore his condescending tone and try once more. The pile bubbles again, the surface popping with a horrible oily sound and tries to ease back down but this time I don't allow it. I keep pushing at the image, forcing it to separate into its many components. Some of the bubbles burst and splatter themselves over the walls of my mind, forming into the craggy spots of the curse seal. I continue on in this way and more bubbles pop and the pile begins boiling and rocking and suddenly the whole thing explodes until there is no more pile, just marks surrounding me on all sides.

"Now, start picking out the pieces that are most like yours." Kakashi instructs.

I don't even have to tell him I've finished. Sometimes, I really hate him.

But I just exhale a long, weary breath. "How will I know which ones are mine?"

"Don't worry," Kakashi informs me with uncommon certainty. "You'll know."

And so I visualize myself back in my mind, in the creepy cavern with the curse seal wallpaper and matching carpeting. I walk up to one wall and stare at it for a long time.

Nothing happens.

I concentrate on the marks, willing them to do something, but they just sit there mocking me.

It's not working.

Then I reach my fingers toward them and one of the marks begins to pulse oddly. It shimmers a blue color and when the tips of my fingers near it, it hops of the wall onto the back of my hand, scampers up my arm and burrows beneath my skin.

You've got to be kidding me.

I roll my shoulder uncomfortably. I can still feel it.

I look around. There are literally thousands of the jeering little spots.

And each one will have to crawl under my skin and worm its way into my system.

I cannot put into words how much I loathe that damned snake. Truly, truly loathe him.

-----

"All right, Sasuke. That's enough for today."

With a great exhalation of relief, I open my eyes. I can still see all those spots, black and pulsating blue.

The day is already darkening and I've barely scratched the surface.

Kakashi drops down to a crouch in front of me. "You did well," he says. "It will become easier with time, don't worry." Did I look worried?

//We shall see about that.//
"After you've absorbed the necessary elements, we'll then work on reforming the Orochimaru ones."

"Is that really necessary?"

"You'll need it in order to spy on Kabuto."

I groan.

//I'm not sure I care for this.//

"After all that's done, can I get rid of him?" I ask petulantly.

Kakashi's eye droops in pity.

I'm ripping that eye out one of these days, I swear.

"I don't need your pity," I spit.

"Sorry."

I sneer at him.

I grind my teeth but get to my feet. My legs are wobbly and Kakashi moves to help me but I slap him away. I am not some damn charity case!

"You haven't been eating well." It's an observation of fact.

"I barely have the time to sleep," I bark. "Between you and Anko and Yamanaka, when do you expect I'm supposed to eat?"

A slow, disturbing smile spreads over Kakashi's face.

"All right then!" He shouts cheerily. "I'm treating my favorite student to dinner!"

"I'm your only student," I grumpily remind him.

"Your point?" He grins his crescent moon eye at me. "Don't be so stubborn, Sasuke. A meal will do you good, flesh you out. You're all skin and bones!"

//He's right about that. You're of no use if you collapse from starvation.//

I don't think that Kakashi has any business being so joyful, but dinner sounds really good right now, even with the unwelcome company.
I feel completely stupid and look completely stupid and this is completely stupid, but it was Hinata's idea and being a girl and engaged and pregnant, she might know better than me.

Naruto should be getting out of his training any moment.

So I stand up and begin searching of the best place from which to suddenly appear without looking like a complete moron.

//--Too late for that.//

"What are you doing?"

Well isn't life just perfect?

I turn to face Naruto who's looking at me somewhat bemused and somewhat perturbed.

"Are you hungry?" I ask. What am I doing?

He takes a step back, afraid that the crazy person might be dangerous.

"Is there something wrong with you?"

Yes. "No."

Naruto's expression is highly skeptical and he slides to the side, charting out his easiest escape route.

"Look," I say with vexation, "Are you hungry or not?" I lift up my nondescript bag; view exhibit A. "I have food."

"Did you come here to give me that?"

Yes. "No."

He’s warily edging towards the road and I can see he still doesn’t trust me. As if I'd poison him! "I don't want anything from you," he states defiantly.
I was stupid to listen. Hinata knows nothing. "Forget it."

But I don't take more than three steps before Naruto calls after me, "Is it ramen?"

Of course. Always ramen, always the same.

//He never changes.//

He'll never change toward me either. This is nothing more than an agonizing exercise in futility.

My nails dig into my palm around the plastic handle. I don't turn around. "It's yakisoba."

"Yakisoba?" He repeats judgmentally. "Where d'you get it?"

"I made it." I wait a second to see if that makes any difference, but of course it doesn't.

//A glutton for punishment.//

'If I am, it's because you made me that way.'

I continue my exit and am so entrenched in my frustration and rage that I almost miss his "All right."

I stop, unsure if I heard right. "Did you say something?"

//Better had you imagined it.//

"I said," Naruto says a little irritably, "I'll try it."

"You don't have to force yourself."

"Stop that." He snaps. "I said I'd try it. Don't be difficult."

Difficult? He's the one being difficult. *I'm* trying to be nice. Every muscle in me tenses, wanting to snap back.

Only I don't want to start a fight today.

//Can't see why not.//

So I exhale steadily, count to three, and return to Naruto. I hold the bag out for him to take and smirk wryly at his shocked expression.

Hesitantly, he cups the bag in his hands. I let go and his lunch falls heavily into his grasp. He considers me critically, but I smooth out my face to be entirely placid and he can find nothing to criticize. Then he moves to the shade of a nearby tree, sits down, and unwraps the package. The aroma of vegetables and spices instantly fills the air and I know that it is good.

//A noble attribute for a ninja to possess.//

It is. Shut up.

I sit down beside Naruto and he doesn't protest but he doesn't acknowledge it either. Carefully, he takes a mouthful of yakisoba and wolfs it down. I should scold him for treating my painstakingly prepared food with such thoughtlessness, but the surprised look on his face is enough. I smirk at him, but he doesn't look my way. He takes another bite and swallows with more care, actually
appreciating it this time. His chopsticks mix around the noodles for a while and he comments thoughtfully, "It's good."

I snort. Of course it's good.

I reach over and Naruto flinches away from me stupidly. I shake my head and take the other container from the bag; it's not like I would have made lunch only for him.

We sit in silence for a long time, which is strange but not as strained as it has been lately.

"I didn't know you could cook," Naruto observes.

"Can't you?"

"Not really." He pauses to take another bite of yakisoba. I hear his throat work as he swallows it down.

"This doesn't change anything," he says resolutely.

I poke distractedly at my noodles. Then I nod and put another couple of them into my mouth. I continue my lunch, so concentrated on my task that it takes me a while to notice that at some point, Naruto stopped eating. My hand stalls poised over my bowl.

There's a weird tingling on the back of my neck and when I raise my head, Naruto eyes are on me, glassy and indistinct.

All at once, with no lead-in, with no reason, something is about to change.

I lick my lips free of salt and notice a little bit of sauce on the side of Naruto's mouth, thinking I'd prefer to lick that.

And now, I'm O.K. with that.

I hear rapid breathing in the air around us and it takes a moment for me to realize it's not me that I'm hearing. Naruto's chopsticks drop and splatter sauce and vegetables in a small arc over his belly.

He places both hands flat on the ground as he tips slowly toward me. I keep my eyes locked onto his, but I cannot read him. I don't know why or when things changed so suddenly. His right hand levers onto my left knee then gradually rides up my thigh as he moves a little closer. His lids fall halfway so that his eyes fill with deep blue, blocking out the white. I don't move. He pauses, takes in a long rattling breath, and holds it. Time stops for half a minute as my hands tremble with the terrible yearning to reach out and crash us together.

I can practically taste him.

But then he blinks and suddenly rears back, hits his bowl of yakisoba making a mess of it, and swears loudly. He glowers furiously at me as he tries to clean up as if it's my fault.

'Doesn't want me anymore'?

Yeah, right.

He's only fooling himself with that now.

I just hope he's not as good at fooling himself as I am.
I’m perched on his windowsill when I see him next.
I’m not a stalker.

//Oh, certainly not.//

He looks tired.

His face is drawn thin, white and haggard. I watch him for no particular reason as he walks in and out of his room, tossing things haphazardly and making the place an even bigger mess than it already was, a feat I would have thought impossible a moment ago. I’m there a long time trying to figure out what to do and how to go about it when he notices me.

The window opens and he looks at me blank-faced and I haven't yet decided if this is better or worse than anger when he says, "What exactly are you doing here?"

I focus on him and in this light, he doesn’t looked quite as worn out as I feared. I mean thought. To be honest, I don’t have an answer. My feet just carried me here, no reason.

"Do you want to spar?" It's the first thing that comes to mind.

//Genius as ever.//

And the look that I receive is genuinely amused. There is even a trace of that old twinkle in his eye. I hold myself firm and let my eyes fall half-lidded as though I’m bored.

"Why?" He asks and the logical answer, of course, is that we are ninja. "We might end up killing each other," he warns me.

"You wish," I mutter back, surprising myself that it’s only halfhearted.

Orochimaru groans unpleasantly.

"So," Naruto hums, not really listening to me. "Is that what we're supposed to do?" The amusement has vanished from his face, erasing any trace of the old Naruto as he inclines his head. I turn my head to the side and shrug without conviction. There’s a long moment in which Naruto contemplates something. Then he says, "Fine," flat and unemotional and disappears from the window.

"I'll meet you there," I grumble and jump to the nearby trees. I don't tell him exactly where, but I'm not worried. He'll find me.

Once I reach the training ground, I wonder not for the first time what it is I'm doing.

//Everyone wonders that.//

Training is both safe and unsafe when done with Naruto. Familiar but after everything, different. Awkward.

New.

What exactly was I thinking, sitting in his window?
I should have had a plan, but now I've set myself on an uneven footing.

I start to stretch my muscles. It's been a while since I've trained with anyone worthwhile and my tendons have seized up with stiffness and neglect. It feels good to stretch them out.

I have the feeling Naruto won't be holding back.

The soft sound of footfalls signals quietly behind me, an odd nod to fairness.

That has to be a good sign.

I face him and he is just standing there, arms crossed, looking at me and not moving.

I look back.

There's a suspicion that hangs in the air, an edge to our interaction that didn’t exist before. It can’t be changed back.

Yet, I don't regret it. I make it a policy never to regret anything.

I wanted to see him and now I do. I stayed in Konoha for him and now here we are.

"So?" He asks, perturbed, more than he should be, considering he agreed to come. "Are we gonna fight or what?"

I almost smile at him. "It's what we do."

Naruto betrays a small emotion in the twitch of his right eye. His upper hand folds neatly into a fist, large and strong and perfect. "Rules?"

"Between the two of us, we already have plenty, don't we?"

'Not going to happen.'

Naruto nods in understanding, but doesn't make a move. Well, one of us is going to have to start this. Secretly, I slip a large folded shuriken between my fingers and duck it behind my back.

We gauge each other forever as if this is our first meeting and we have all the time in the world.

Naruto shifts his right foot. So it has to be me. I whip out my throwing star, fan out the weapon and send it soaring in his direction. It weaves in and out of the air currents in an intricate course. Naruto doesn't move until the very last second. The shuriken misses him by a long shot when he disappears into the trees, as I knew it would.

I would have been disappointed otherwise.

//Can't let that happen.//
It was only meant as a sort of commencement bell.

I crane my head upward, activate my sharingan and seek out any discrepancies. I catch the movement as Naruto attacks from the upper left, flying towards me with his leg outstretched. I immediately cross my arms to block the brunt of it. The sudden power of the assault makes me slide back a little but that is nothing; it’s to be expected. As soon as Naruto lands, I rebalance and swing my leg in an arc, hitting him directly in the side of the ribs and he disappears in a puff of smoke.

//One trick pony.//

He could make thousands of clones if he wanted and this fight would essentially be over. I don't have access to that kind of power right now, which makes this an unfair, unbalanced contest. Which is fine. Besides, I doubt Naruto would go that route.

Four more Narutos emerge from the trees at once, from four different directions in four different stances. Well, it's not original, but he's fast and this will keep me on my toes, though only because I'm limited. The four clones, yes I am certain they are all clones, assail me at the same time, shouting "U-zu-ma-ki" like a battle cry. There is a split second separating each hit, which I am able to isolate with my sharingan. In quick succession, I dodge all four and just as quickly ascertain the precise spot in which to hit each clone and dispatch them in the next second.

I should get to cover. The trees and their branches should suffice. Immediately, I race up the side of a tree and hop onto one of its branches and it's as if they were waiting for me. Ten Narutos surround the spot I've just leapt onto, ready for a fight.

I rapidly do the calculations. Could I counter ten attacks in one second? Maybe. If I were in my normal shape and not so restricted with training, it would be simple. But I've only had two brats and a lazy One-Eye to train with lately so it's probably best not to chance it. Fast and easy is the way to go. The ten leap from their branches toward me as I form the hand signs for the Katon Hōsenka no Jutsu.

But it fails.

It fails spectacularly.

The fire in my belly sticks in my throat before plummeting back down and burning away at my stomach lining. It rends and tears and sears at the tender insides of my organs the way only a creature of fire can. I am ripped apart from the inside out, blazing and in that moment my vision goes black.

I forgot about the damn seals!

It is only for a second and may in fact be what saved me from a ten Naruto attack. When my vision vanished, so did my balance and I slip off the side of the branch. I am cognizant in the very next second, but my hold is lost and I fall almost too fast to move. I hit the ground on one foot and lightning-quick project myself to a nearby tree so that when the clones attack, my form instantly transforms into the branch I'd replaced myself with.

Unfortunately, my back hits the tree too hard and I literally manage to knock my breath from my body.

And then Naruto is there, the real Naruto. I can sense him, smell him, and he’s alone. He’s just looking at me like he's worried or something and I don’t want his pity.
"Sasuke?"

I look at him and try to use my sharingan to form a genjutsu, but it won't work right.

He's not even in defensive position!

//Presumptuous little brat.//

"Don't underestimate me!" I drop my hands to the ground and swivel around, kicking my leg up high behind me. He blocks with his hands and I complete the circle, taking a step back as I right myself. My skin begins to burn, blistering red as Naruto just stands and regards me as if none of this makes any difference.

I swing my arm but he catches the wrist and twists it aside. So with my other hand I grab the back of his head and pull it down as I raise my knee and knock him hard in the chin. He then wrenches his hand free through my arms, yanks on the one holding his neck by squeezing the forearm down with his elbow and smashes our foreheads together. I forcefully let go and push him away.

There's a little more life to him now. His breathing has quickened and his eyes are small and defined.

My arm hurts and, damn it, I'm breathing harder than he is, yet it feels good. The exercise, the expenditure of energy, and Naruto have all had their affect on me. I feel more alive than I have in a long time. My heart is pumping and my blood is flowing hot, but it doesn't hurt. Naruto quirks his mouth so that his sharp, white-shining teeth show in a sneer.

I can feel it, that roiling, boiling, coiling deep in my gut. Right now. For some strange reason, right now. This is it; this is what makes him so different, what makes him worth it. It feels as if it will rip right out through my skin if I don't touch him.

I'd forgotten it. Because I wanted to or needed to or whatever.

But it has to be Naruto.

I launch forward with my fist, grazing along his shoulder as he ducks out of the way and it is not enough.

He seizes my arm and sweeps my legs out from under me, but as my head falls forward to the ground, I drop my hand and flip one-handed out of his hold.

And then we are at it again. All thoughts of genjutsu or ninjutsu have been utterly forgotten. All sense of style or grace or winning is gone. We are back, in this brief moment, to where we once were, before Kyuubi and Sakura, even before Orochimaru. A brief glancing hit here or a kick there, a rough hold on an arm or ankle and each contact, each hit just fuels it, feeds that fire like gasoline.

He probably doesn't feel it; he's not damaged like me.

And oh, how I don't care.

For once, I'm not worried about it or the future or anything but this here now. I just let the feeling build, coil in tighter and tighter until it has to break.

And then he’s caught me. Because I want him to; because I need it. His body, warm from exertion, presses close against my back and a strong arm wraps across my stomach. His other hand holds a
kunai to the top of my throat. He thinks he’s won and maybe he has.

I wonder if he realizes how his whisper against my ear sends a shiver down my spine. "Give up?" He murmurs.

I guess I have.

"Haven't we been in this position before?" I quip. But it wasn't exactly the same. He pulls me closer, menacingly, and now I can clearly feel the tension in every one of his muscles from shoulder to knee and I smirk. With new motivation, I grip my fingers firmly around his wrist as he clutches the kunai, and tilt my head back slightly. We are both breathing hard and the glint of sun off his sweat-slicked skin temporarily blinds eye. I can feel his chest move against my back as he breathes harshly into the crook of my neck. This is how I want it. His energy is angry and intense and focused entirely on me. There is nothing else in this world for him at this moment but me.

It makes my skin itch.

There are no doubts now, no elders, and no restrictions.

For a moment, I close my eyes and draw his scent into my lungs, musky and sour and earthy and everything Naruto. When I open my eyes again, the blue of the sky is like a long welcome home.

As horrible and ridiculous as it is, how could it ever be anyone but Naruto?

'It's like it was Sakura and I set up from the beginning?'

'No,' I think as I slide my hand down to his hip and grip my fingers in, 'I think it was us.'

There's no response when I drag my nails down his leg, pushing them deep into his skin and muscle beneath the fabric. I curl my hand around the line of his hip, keeping him close. His hand holding the kunai pushes up higher, nicking my throat near the jaw, and starts to tremble. The heat of our bodies, the smell, intermingles in the air around us and I can feel the need in him as much as in me.

I hiss with satisfaction.

He can pretend all he wants. But I can feel him hard against me. His mind may be unresolved, but his body has no such qualms. I bend slowly toward him and my breath catches.

And finally, he responds.

He releases a long, low growl and thrusts sharply forward.

His breath ghosts fast and heavy over my ear and I slip my hand within his pants at the hip and dig my fingers into his skin. The kunai slips lifelessly from his hand and lands point down in the dirt between my feet. Then Naruto flattens his palm over my throat and the small cut he's made there slowly oozes blood down through his fingers, warm and damp. He yanks my head back by the grip of his thumb and forefinger near my ears until my head practically rests on his shoulder. The panting staccato of his breath heats wetly on the juncture of my neck when he buries his head down into me.

My throat seizes up in desire and there's more than a little pain.

And it's all good.
It feels right when my mind turns to syrup as his fingers slowly ride up my ribcage. I let go of his hip to cover his hand and guide it deftly beneath my shirt, the fabric hugging our hands tight as they move higher. His body spasms, but his fingers press into my skin experimentally, all the way up to my collarbone. I can feel the increasing beat of his heart pounding along my spine. He traces back down, dipping into the indentation left by Itachi. His breath hits me in a long-short rhythm like Morse code, while I'm not quite sure I'm breathing at all.

He moves his hand down again, tickling over my ribs and for a slow moment, he reaches his arm farther around, locking me tighter into the perfect outline of his body. Then, within his heated breath on my neck, I sense the slightest hint of hard smoothness.

His teeth.

Then the barest tip of his tongue.

I can't get enough air into my lungs.

Still holding his hand, I steer it farther down, until the edges of his fingers brush the waistband of my pants and just barely further still.

Because he needs to understand that I am not a girl.

And he stills; we both do. His breathing changes, a sort of dot-dot-dash coded against my skin. Then he does the wholly unexpected. He dips his thumb within my waistband, slowly pulling them down to a point and pushing his thumb inside. The anticipation is so sharp and sweet it is almost painful. Then he touches me and I feel myself suddenly go weak, but he holds me up tight. His thumb is ragged and rough against my sensitive skin.

My teeth squeeze hard against each other until it hurts.

His breathing is calmer now though not normal.

Then the hand at my throat moves. I grip the wrist tight as can, desperate for balance as he slides two of his fingers along the cut in my throat and sends a warm tingling sensation rippling all the way to my stomach. He tilts my head toward him and issues a command. "Look at me."

And I do.

There's no way I can't.

But my sight is as cloudy as my mind and I can't make out his expression. He forces my head back by the chin and languidly strokes his tongue over the cut he just healed. My eyes fall shut again. My bones have turned to jelly and I can feel myself bending, bowing, and falling forward.

There is a forever moment in which I desperately hold onto consciousness.

He sighs languidly along my throat. "I shouldn't forgive you." As he says this, he drags his thumb along the tip of my erection and though my eyes are closed, I swear my vision goes full white. My knees buckle fully and the only reason I'm standing at all is because Naruto's still holding onto me.

His hand spreads flat on my stomach then and I don't know how it got there. With one arm around my waist, he stretches the other across my shoulder and pulls me in tight once, his chest vibrating against my back.

Then he is abruptly, brutally, gone.
Instantly, I collapse to my hands and knees. It takes more than a few minutes and a few rattling breaths to reluctantly claw myself back to awareness.

When I finally manage to open my eyes, the handle of a fallen kunai looks me in the face.

And I grin.

I almost laugh.

Naruto may have won the physical battle, but I have won the more important one.

He's already mine.

And I think he knows it.
The morning shines brighter than it has in a long time. The birds are singing, the flowers are blooming; it's like a brand new day.

All right, it's nothing at all like that. It's like every other damn day in this godforsaken town.

It's just another ordinary, too damn hot day in Konoha, but it does somehow feel different. I rise quickly from bed, clean up, and get dressed.

//How repulsive.//

I can't remember the last time I felt this way—unburdened and not entirely reluctant for day to begin. The last time I would have felt like this would have been over ten years ago, when I was that child I can scarcely remember being.

So, it's not the day, it’s me. In a weird sort of way, I feel like I’ve recaptured a part of myself that was lost.

It's because of Naruto.

Of course it is.

//How lovely and poetic, I'm sure.//

Just a little bit more and I'll break that stupid barrier of his. I know it's crumbling; I know he wants me. I know I will have him and right now, all else pales in comparison. Yet there are others too, that wheedled their way in when I wasn’t looking.

I've never actually felt this way before.

But it doesn't feel *bad* exactly, or wrong. I am almost giddy. Only "almost" though; Uchihas by nature and nurture do not feel "giddy".

I haven't glanced in a mirror because all this "almost giddiness" probably makes me look like a complete idiot.

//You are giddy. Everything in here is thrumming. It's making me nauseous.//
And isn't that just perfect?

But it will pass

I'll get used to it.

Mostly because it will pass.

I go into the kitchen and pour myself some cereal as there is no Kakashi-chef for me this morning. This is just as well. I'd like to avoid him at least until I get this whatever it is under control.

But of course I'm never so lucky.

//No, of course not.//

"Ah, sleepyhead!" The old jounin chirps, mimicking the imaginary cartoon birds twittering outside. "You're up early."

I'm facing away from him, but for good measure I duck my head down near my bowl. Kakashi walks around me, takes the same cereal box and pours himself his daily breakfast portion. Then after replacing the milk to the fridge, he leans against the counter and eats standing up, staring at me.

Thankfully, Hinata didn’t cut my hair too short so I can use the long bangs to partially block my profile. I also employ a strategic placement of my arm.

"You seem happy," Old One-Eye observes as he crunches around his cornflakes.

Damn.

//Never did learn, did we, little one?//

"I'm not." Very good. My voice is completely level.

"Hm." Kakashi stops eating for a moment and I suppose he's analyzing me, but there's no way I'm going to chance looking. It's unimportant.

I shovel some more cereal into my mouth and chomp loudly.

"All right, if you say so," he says, walks behind me and drops his bowl and spoon into the sink with an extremely obnoxious clatter. "Well, I'm off! I'll see you this afternoon."

And then he just heads to the door without glancing back. A light bulb goes off over his head and he gives an especially creepy smile as he closes the door behind him. Once again he's sticking me with his chores!

"Hey!" I shout and there's no need to fake any irritation. "You aren't just going to leave your dishes are you?"

But he’s long gone.

I still have that nauseating butterfly feeling in my belly. I make quick work of the dishes and stow them away. I double-check all my packs to assure that they are fully secure and head out to what promises to be another fun-filled and exciting day for Team Four.

//Yes, that's a beneficial use of your time.//
I step outside. And there's Naruto, leaning on the rail and pouting at me. To be honest, I'm not quite sure what to do, so I turn back around and lock the front door- always an absurd action in a village filled with lock-picking and jutsu-wielding ninja, and try to reestablish my self-control. I am Uchiha Sasuke, I do not behave like some flighty girl and I will certainly not do something so asinine now.

//Well that's something at least.//

I face Naruto.

He doesn’t look happy, though I can’t say for certain what he looks like. He just waits, patiently, quietly, for however long I don't know, while I collect myself. I say nothing.

He deepens his pout and shifts uncomfortably. But he came to me, so he’ll have to be the one to start this. I wait as he gathers his thoughts.

I watch mesmerized as he swallows. His mouth drops open and he lets out a low sigh. "It doesn't change anything."

//Now, now. Perhaps we ought to wait and see how this plays out.//

I smirk. This is so predictable that I can hardly be upset by it. As I stroll up to him, his crossed arms fall away so his hands can rest on the railing at his sides, the fingers spaced out and pressing deep into the wood. "Nothing?" I ask, close enough that I feel the nervous heat emanate off his body. I place my hands near to his, but don’t touch him. I tip my head down close and whisper, "You can't honestly believe that."

The air between us is wound tight. I want to shatter it to pieces.

His eyes close for a moment, as though he’s in pain. "It fixes nothing." His eyelids lift, but his gaze remains downcast. "It doesn't make things better." He looks to the side, still at the floor. "It makes things worse."

"Worse?" My forehead crinkles up because that makes no sense.

Naruto closes his eyes and takes another long, drawn out breath. "So I've decided." He raises his head and then torturously slow, he lifts his eyes. Their glowing gaze is intent upon my face. "I'm going to forgive you."

//What?//

The side of my mouth twitches as this weird exhilaration fills me, but I don't know what to do about it so I just flash my teeth.

"You don't deserve it," Naruto states quite firmly. "But I need it." He looks away. "I can't be angry at you anymore. I don't like it." His head rolls back to me, his expression growing confused, conflicted and still with that lingering of pain. "And maybe I should have been clearer. Maybe what you did makes sense to you, even if it doesn't to me. Maybe you didn't understand, just like me..." He purses his lips together and swallows, his throat bobbing greedily. "But it doesn't matter. It changes nothing."

There is a long pause and I wait. I wait because I have to, because I can’t understand. Everything is different now.

And yet, there's something off about the way he's speaking.
He's making me uncomfortable.

//Says a lot for how far you have fallen.//

My skin squirms over my muscles like it doesn't fit. And I wait. The silence between us is a snarling, yowling beast, nipping at us for our attention.

"So," Naruto says and pauses to grit his jaw. "I don't want you coming to see me anymore. I've tried. And it just doesn't work."

//Hm.//

I huff with amusement and disbelief. "What do you mean it doesn't work?"

Naruto takes a long breath through his nose and clenches his teeth; I can see the tensing muscles in his jaw. "Just what I said. It won't work."

I lean a little closer and fan my breath warmly over his lips. His eyes flutter shut. What a liar. "You can't deny this."

His eyebrows crush down as his eyes open. "You don't listen."

I raise a hand to his face but he pulls away. "What's the problem? You said you forgave me."

His eyes turn to ice, cold and exquisite. "One thing's got nothing to do with the other."

Yeah, that makes sense. "Don't be difficult." I cradle my fingers, smoothing them down the air around his face.

The ice in his eyes drops to absolute zero. His body pulls into itself, making it smaller and farther away from me. "You're so arrogant." He growls uselessly. "Let me make this perfectly clear so there's no confusion." The line of his jaw is hard and uncompromising. "I forgave you for my benefit, not yours. And I didn't do it so we could have some twisted relationship. I can see now that it's crazy. It can't work."

My brows pull together and I blink.

What?

I shake my head. I clench my hand into a fist at the side of his face. "You're not making sense."

Naruto releases a short, deep sigh from deep within him. He swallows hard. "Look. You don't get it. So we, as friends or whatever else we could have been, are done."

There is finality to it that I didn’t expect.

"No," I refuse automatically and grab him by the arms. He’s not making any sense. He can’t end before we even start.

Irritably, Naruto says, "Yes."

This is not the way the story was supposed to play out.

I know he wants me; he said he loved me. So why then? I tighten my grasp and shake him, but he remains devoutly unaffected. "Explain it."
Naruto steels his eyes and hardens his jaw. "I did. It’s done."

My breath sears my throat. My eyes twitch and I dig my fingers into his biceps until I can nearly feel the skin purple. "You can't mean that."

"It’s done." He makes it sound indisputable.

But he can't just decide these things on his own.

"Stop being so stubborn," I growl and pull him to me. I press our lips together hard, and I expect to feel that fire from before, that loss of self, that desire that consumes us.

There's nothing. Nothing because he won’t let there be.

He just lets the cruel nothingness insinuate between us.

Something isn't right. Bewildered, I pull away, struggling for each worthless shaky breath. My heart pounds heavily in my ears.

It was empty.

Naruto’s eye twitches and the muscle in his jaw tenses again.

All the air is suddenly sucked from my lungs, slowly yet in a single powerful punch. It takes a few moments for the inconceivable to register.

_We're done._

My eyelids convulse once and my head jolts gracelessly on my neck. "What?"

He says nothing, his unfeeling lips pulling into that bloodless line, and stares at me, huffing once through his nose.

He means it.

He really means it.

"I don't want you staying in Konoha just for me," he says as though nothing has happened, his voice somehow calm. "I don't want you getting hurt or doing things you don't want because of me. I don't want that responsibility. I don't want you to . . ." Naruto stops, the venom of his words slowly working their way into my system. "If you hate Konoha so much, then just leave."

The air hasn’t returned to my lungs yet. "You can't mean that," I say adamantly, feeling the give of his flesh beneath my nails and the tightening within my own chest.

I can't breathe.

He ignores me. "In fact, you should. It would be easier."

I really can't breathe. And the absence of air pulls in and claws out and my chest is going to collapse any moment now in a big bloody heap.

Naruto stares at me a long time, then his eyes flick to one side and back to the other before retuning to me. The conflict is still there, the nervousness and hint of pain.

And I have to blink repeatedly because my eyes burn and I don't understand. After all this time, all
he’s done, he’s just going to end it.

I - I don't understand. I thought he understood. He said he forgave me. I know we feel the same thing. This must be some hallucination caused by overwork and lack of sleep. Because Naruto, my Naruto, would never just end things between us. He’s too stubborn.

But the muscles under my hands are very solid; the texture of fabric rough and real against my palm.

Naruto's eyes flicker up to me, weirdly sky blue, and away again. "Aren't you going to say something?" He whispers.

But the words are in a foreign language, their strange, unfamiliar sounds bouncing off my eardrums and back out again without entering the processing portion of my brain.

The world has evaporated all around me. I can't accept that; I won't. It can't be true.

It can't.

Slowly, I try to curl my fingers into fists, but there is skin and flesh and bone blocking my way. But Naruto can't really be here, saying these things to me. I tilt my head but I don't see anything. The shapes are there, square and circle and line, and the colors, tan and orange and blue, but they don't come together in any logical pattern. The edges blur and mesh and I'm looking but I'm not really seeing anything at all.

It can't be real. That finality, that surety I've not heard in his voice before; I can't believe . . .

This isn't real.


I feel lost and I know I need to do something now, but I don't know what it is. "I," I begin, my voice confused and so far distant that it's not my own, "have to go."

I stand up straight, my hands slipping away weakly, but I feel nothing. This is some other Sasuke with some other Naruto.

Because this. Doesn't. Make. Sense.

My eyes can't see, my ears can't hear, my hands can't even feel anymore. I move my head around in jerky little motions, but no matter how many times I blink, my vision won't clear. It's hazy and fogged over. I gaze out, a little to my right and repeat, stilted, "I have to go."

Yes, that's right.

My team is waiting. I will get there and once we begin, my routine will start up again and everything will fall into place.

I take slow, heavy, clomping steps down the stairs, each tread jarring with hollow insistence up my leg.

I will start my day, just like every other one for months and when I do, everything will fall into place and back into reality.

Because this, here, doesn't make sense.
"My team is waiting.

-----

"Uchiha! Where is your head?" Anko's voice is severe and screeching, yet seems to come to me from a great distance.

My back hits the tree with a crash and as I slide down, I press into it so the ragged bark bites into me. I need to feel it rip and cut and slice my skin to know that it’s real.

My sharingan has been active since long before I got here but it is of absolutely no help. I keep blinking my eyes, but regardless of how many times I do so, but it’s all still a haze. Everything in front of me is a distorted blur; my team's faces stretched and squashed like the reflections of a funhouse mirror. The sharingan doesn’t work. I can't see the shades of the future, the afterimage of what hasn't yet been. All I can see is the watery, insubstantial, unfathomable now.

"Sasuke-san!" Ouka's voice, high-pitched and worried voice cuts into my world as if it is real. There's a tiny shape in my field of vision, wavy with dark pigtails.

"No, Inuzuka." Anko now. "Leave him. He's of no use to us. He'll only end up getting someone hurt."

"But," the little girl objects pathetically.

"No. Now come on. You and Kanamori can do some training without him. Uchiha will only get in the way. Uchiha," She repeats the name contemptuously, "Can join us if he ever finds the strength."

The larger shape moves farther off, dissipates into the murky beyond until it is no longer distinguishable from the rest. The smaller shape remains unmoving in the center of my sight until Anko calls out a brisk, "Inuzuka!"

There is a tiny whine and as Ouka leaves, another shape defines from the shadows and chases after her.

But Anko is right.

I'm no use to anyone when I'm blind.

-----

There's no way to determine how long I sat there, as time carries no more meaning for me. At some point I pulled my knees up and wrapped my arms around them. I need nothing more than rest and that’s all. I'm tired. I lay my forehead down and keep my eyes open, staring at the darkness of my pants. Eventually, the detail filtered out and all that remained was blank.

The sounds of the world grow shrouded; my ears are plugged up and refusing to pop. There's no reason for me to move. I have nowhere to go.

I'm so tired.

A solid empty ache has planted itself in my chest, pushing outward and sharpening at the center with an almost pulsating pain.

I still can't breathe.
I'm there a long time before I hear the muffled sound of grass crinkling with the impression of tiny footsteps. Six. There are six footsteps. I can still count to six.

There is a pathetic little whine and the next thing I know a warm furry chin rests on my arm by my thigh. Kohana is the name of this thing and she whines again and licks my ear and I don't bother to clean it. She presses her cold wet nose to one side of my face and breathes her puppy breath on me. After a moment I smell it, meaty and acrid, raw like the nerves under my skin.

Then two little child feet come closer, stop at my other side and pause a moment. Kohana lifts her chin and whimpers.

And I sense more than feel when Ouka sits down beside me. She leans her head on my shoulder and says nothing. The quietness is all consuming, heavy yet not oppressive. It warms like an old heirloom blanket. Ouka's pigtailed hair is scratchy against the exposed back of my neck, but it's not bothersome and in the next moment, I no longer feel it.

Just like everything.

The small weight of a puppy head reasserts itself and Kohana licks my ear again in canine comfort. It is moist sticky sandpaper and unpleasant, but I don't wipe it away. The two little teammates remain perfectly still for a long time, doing, saying, judging nothing.

After a while, the air circles around us, offering up to me the soft scent of Ouka.

It is a scent fresh like springtime, warm like kid sweat, and sweet, like the first taste of honey.
I wander aimlessly through streets long embedded into my memory that I now barely recall. There are houses all around me: houses, carts, people and activity.

They are the road signs to someone else's life.

I can't feel anything but that gaping hole, expanding every moment throughout my chest, swelling past the limits of what I can withstand.

As I walk, I bump into person after person, faceless heads on fingerless bodies that say something, yell something, and hit me back. But I can't help it.

My sharingan swirls in a blood red tempest over my eyes.

But I cannot see.

-----

"Forget this!"

Yamanaka shrieks and storms to the closed door. At the brink, she whips her head around and glowers at me in a blonde, white and black swirl. I can hardly make out any details. "Your mind is somewhere else entirely. I don't know how you expect to work this way!"

I say nothing and glare at the opposite wall as if there is a window there to peer through. The girl didn't even try, just groused at me for fifteen minutes then started screaming. There’s no point. I’ve never cared about Konoha.

"The next time you come here, you'd better be ready to work," she warns. Her voice is higher than I remember. "Otherwise, you're just wasting my time."

She slams the door spectacularly behind her, the sound echoing abrasively a thousand times within the chasm inside me.

There won't be any more times.

There is nothing left of me to function.
It is just barrenness like desert, and when a wind blows through it, it strikes me inside like ice.

-----

Dark is good.

The quiet, concealed, solitary darkness of my room is a welcome match to the darkness inside me. There's a bed beneath me, but I can't feel it. I know it's there simply because if I wanted to I could touch the sill of the window with my fingertips, something I couldn't do from the floor. But I don't want to do that.

My body is made of a substance heavier than lead and will not be uprooted from this spot.

I don't know how long I've been here, curled up on my side like a bloody fetus expelled too early from the womb. The clock is on my other side, in a world where time matters. It's a meaningless distraction I doubt I could read with my blind eyes anyway. But that's only when they're open. When I close them, they fill with losses I can't bear and the pain is stabbing sharp and bottomless. So I keep my eyes diligently open and gaze at the featureless wall for minutes, hours, days, months, forever.

There is still that constant empty ache, but it doesn’t hurt. Not now.


The surfaces of my eyes burn like dry sand melting to glass, but I can't blink either.

It takes too much damn effort to move.

I can feel nothing.

And yet there is so much of it to feel.

The room, in all its darkness, grows darker and the air goes cool, still, and stagnant like me. And the time passes.

Or it doesn’t.

I can't say and I don't care.

I just wait. Though there is nothing to wait for.

I'm done with it all. None of what I put myself through serves any purpose.

The silence is good. Not because it is calming or gentle, but because it simply asks nothing of me. In the hermetic seal of my room, I can't even hear the birds outside, assuming there are any. Perhaps they've all died.

_Foolish little brother._

Itachi sits in a chair facing me as he has now for quite some time. I don't know where he got that chair; it isn't mine and he hasn't told me where he found it.

_Is this what you are to become now?_

_A useless waste of all my time and energy?_
I blink for the first time and it blisters my pupils like acid.

Do you see what happens?

I told you to hate.

Hate is protection.

Itachi shifts, leans back, and crosses his arms.

You never did listen.

I swallow and the large jagged stone that has replaced my Adam's apple bobs, scrapes, and bleeds, trying to fill the cavern in my chest but there is no more room. The emptiness takes up too much space.

Itachi is talking nonsense that has no bearing on my current life. I'm tired and overworked and nothing more. He needs to just shut up and give me a little space.

My sacrifice means nothing, does it?

The trade means nothing?

He waits, with his disdain hovering over me like the storm clouds of my life. He can do what he likes; I don't care.

What will you do now?

He's not coming.

Itachi doesn't sound unkind, he's merely reminding me of the facts.

He has left you.

The pang returns, the many faceted star bursting outward, slicing through my heart and pulling back, stabbing through it again and again and tenderizing it like cheap meat.

He has excised you like a boil, a wart, a diseased abscess better to be rid of quickly.

The heaviness rises to my throat, presses up until the backs of my teeth hurt, but nothing comes out because there is nothing there to begin with.

Abandoned.

Somewhere, in a land not my own, a door slams. And another opens.

"Sasuke."

Kakashi sounds disapproving of the fact that my bloody entrails have leaked all over the bedroom floor. So be it.

"What are you doing here? We have training."

He approaches, his feet squishing messily in the remnants of my self that have spilled across his path, though only I can hear it.

"Why are you here?"
Why indeed?

I don't answer. I should be allowed one damn day off without having to give explanations.

"Answer the question, Sasuke."

Little brother, someone is speaking to you. Don't you know it's impolite not to answer?

Like I've ever cared about politeness. Besides, the synapses in my brain seem to have given up. After so many failed attempts, they don't even bother anymore.

"Sasuke, would you look at me."

Kakashi looks mad.

Itachi smiles at me from his chair, smug and all-knowing.

Then there are fingers at my throat pressing in, choking me with their unnatural presence. "Well, you're not dead."

I wouldn't be so sure about that. It's a highly debatable point. You've cheated death too many times already, haven't you little brother?

The fingers are now gone, but the impression remains. Just like every knife, needle, and burn, they all leave their mark.

"So this is it now? You're just going to lay there and do nothing?"

I can do nothing because there is nothing. I stare at the wall. I want to be left alone, that is what I want.

You always were so melodramatic, little Sasuke.

"Look at me."

Your commanding officer is giving you an order.

It doesn't matter if God were issuing the orders; movement is impossible. I have become like moss growing on the side of a log, only I'm stuck to this bed, still and intractable and unnecessary.

Plus, I just don't care.

A strong hand grabs my shoulder and tries to force me onto my back, but I'm firm in my position, too heavy to move. Kakashi grumbles and lets go and my body rolls resentfully back to its original position.

You are nothing but a disappointment to all.

And what do I owe them anyway?

"So you're just going to lay there. Had enough of wasting everybody's time?"

I suppose I'm meant to feel guilty. But I don't. There's nothing left in me to feel guilt. Besides, I've spent too long in the service of those who would manipulate me to their own advantage. I can't really care.
"This is what you're going to do now? All the effort and time and pain put into bringing you here and helping you out and this is your repayment?"

*Does seem rather self-indulgent, doesn't it?*

Everyone is selfish; I have never claimed to be different.

"I'd thought you'd changed."

*But you are incapable of it."

"And you did."

*You have lost. Tell me, little brother, how does it feel to honestly, truly, irrevocably lose? It's a new experience for you, is it not?*

"Before, you were someone. Now you're nobody."

There is disappointment in the air, along with disgust, hate, and anger, making it thick and heavy. And I do not feel it. I know it's there, but it never touches me. I am separate from it, from him, from everyone, just like it's always been.

A heavy breath, like an expulsion of the last of the faith he had in me, and Kakashi leaves in a gigantic, childish huff. He doesn't close the door completely, so the light from the hallway slices offensively through the room like a knife, exposing the emptiness like my spilt entrails. I stare blankly at the light reflecting off the plain meaningless wall.

-----

My bones and mind are weary. I need a little peace and quiet, but Itachi won't cease.

*You have truly become nothing."

He will not stop.

*Nothing of worth, anyway."

My eyes burn.

*Thought you knew what it was like, did you?*

I try to blink, but my eyelids are carved from implacable stone.

*Thought you knew yourself."

They burn.

*But there are always lower depths to fall to. The truth is you are nothing without him to balance you."

The pain in my chest stabs outward, angry that it is neglected. But I can't do anything about it. My body is too heavy to move.

*And he's gone.*

It fills with cement and ice, abrading my bloody insides.
Now the world knows what you are really worth.

My mouth falls open, dry with cotton.

Nothing.

I still cannot breathe.

At some point I fall asleep.

-----

When I open my eyes, the sight is the same as it has ever been: a white wall turned gray by darkness almost black now. Night has fallen down around me.

I close my eyes again and sleep some more, though I get no rest.

There are too many dramas within me for rest: Naruto and Itachi and mother, Orochimaru and Kabuto, and sometimes my father.

Always, I try to steer my mind back to Naruto, back to the make-believe world where things are right and times are happy, but it never quite works.

It never quite works.

"All right. That's enough. Get up."

With difficulty, my eyes open.

The room is a gray lightness now, so it must be day. Not that that's of any significance either.

"Get. Up."

A bunching of fingers prods my back a couple times so that I rock a little. I don’t reply.

There's an exaggerated huff and then a thin white hand reaches for the cords of my blinds.

I move instantly.

I clamp my hand over the other and grip tight. I don't want light. Darkness is good. Darkness has long been my companion. Another hand enters the picture and easily pries the first free but since neither of them returns to the blinds, I let them be.

"Not so helpless after all," the girl muses. "Good. Here. Eat."

A bowl is dropped unceremoniously onto the bedspread. It’s piled high with apple slices and cheese and their noxious fumes invade the stagnant air of my asylum. Some of the apple spills out onto the bed. I glance at them a moment and turn away.

The food is dirty dark gray in this low light, unpleasant and unappetizing. My stomach flips down closed, refusing them outright.

I do not want them.

I turn back to the window and stare at the sliver of light that pushes through the space between blinds and window frame, bright and offensive. I pick at the edge of the blinds to try blocking it
out, but it just appears on the far side instead. I drop my hand. It's not worth the effort.

The bowl jangles behind me, the apples and cheese banging like bamboo wind chimes. The girl picks up the fallen bits and deposits them back in the bowl as if nothing has happened. Now the dish is thrust into my face, the sweetness of fruit and the milky scent of cheese mixing unappealingly. My stomach protests forcefully by twisting itself up and wringing itself out.

I turn away.

The bowl rattles unrelentingly.

"You'll eat this one way or another," the voice threatens. "Even if I have to shove it down your throat myself."

Thin unwelcome fingers grab for my chin but I pull away snarling. She snarls back.

The girl is not backing down and somehow I know that she never will; that she's not a person to be taken lightly. I dip my fingers into the bowl and lift out a slice of apple. It hurts my teeth when I bite into it, too cold, crisp, and sweet against my tongue, all alien sensations over the last . . how many days has it been?

The first bite settles like granite in my stomach.

"Good," the girl says, inordinately pleased with herself. She rattles the bowl in my face. "All of it."

I scowl at the bowl, then at the dark air and the amorphous shape that speaks. The edges and curves of her face are barely distinguishable, but I know her.

Sakura.

Yes, that is her name. Sakura.

I don't want her here.

But my stomach whines pathetically because it doesn’t care what I want. I take another slice and force it down. The two pieces in my stomach meld into a heavy boulder, blocking my throat.

Sakura shakes the bowl, but when I make no move to continue, she drops it to the bed, and shoves a pieces of fruit into my face as if I am an invalid.

Lazily, I take it from her and laboriously swallow it down, bite by horrible bite.

Then she forces a piece of cheese onto me. It lands especially heavy in my gut and my stomach mounts a terrific protest.

Sakura doesn't care.

And it is apple, cheese, apple, cheese until it is all gone except for the giant lump plugging up my belly. I want to throw it back up.

"Now," she triumphs, placing the empty bowl on the nearby bed stand. "Was that so hard?"

'Yes', I think, as the acid in my stomach sloshes ominously. 'I might die now."

"So then," she muses, rather cheerily. "Are you going to stop feeling sorry for yourself?"
"I am not feeling sorry for myself." My voice is hoarse and scratchy from lack of use, an unwelcome sound that has no place here.

Sakura straightens and through the crack in the window a glint of light reflects off her smiling teeth. "Yes you are."

I focus back on the wall that asks nothing.

"What kind of behavior is this for a shinobi," she states, still somewhat amiable, but not as cheerful as before. "What kind of behavior is this for you, Uchiha Sasuke?" Her voice has grown in volume.

*She's right.*

"What?" She asks tartly. "Do you think you're the only one who's had pain? You think that makes you special? Well," she snipes, sarcastic and angry. "Welcome to the world."

I shift my eyes in her direction, until they practically roll to the back of my head, and narrow them to slits.

"This is part of life. There is always bad with good. There's not some simple black and white answer to everything." Her words are hard, yet the hand she places on my shoulder is gentle. I listlessly try to shrug away.

*But you cannot understand the grays, can you little brother?*

"I am not feeling sorry for myself," I reiterate sharply. "Am I not allowed to take a fucking break?"

"Sure you are," Sakura replies, completely calm. "But that's not what you're doing. And you're not going to accomplish anything by lying here like a lump." I whirl my head in her direction. "Like a lump," she repeats pointedly.

I pull away from her and my muscles groan painfully form their long hibernation.

"You're absolutely no use to anyone like this," she condemns. "Is that what you want to leave behind? That after everything you did, you really did nothing?"

"Nothing?" I snarl back. But it is. "Nothing."

She sighs with exasperation and throws her hands up in the air once before dropping them back to her lap with a loud slap. "This is not Uchiha Sasuke." She growls. "I don't know who this is, but he's just wasting my time."

"Then go," I snap.

"Oh," she says, straightening up in the chair. "That would make it easy for you, now wouldn't it? Then you can go back to sulking at your little pity party. Yes, that's very helpful."

I clench my jaw until it hurts. "You know nothing." My voice is still gravelly, only gradually returning to normal.

There's a long pregnant pause.

"You're right," she concedes quietly. "I don't know anything. And whose fault is that, do you
think?" She crosses her arms over her chest and remains unbending. "No one understands because you won't let them." Her voice softens until it is almost a whisper. "You're not the only one who's ever had their heart broken."

I blink at her and a film washes over my eyes like fog. They are burning dry yet blurry. My heart is not broken. It is iron, has long been iron, and is not so tender a thing.

And yet I say, "I can't," without really meaning to.

Sakura tilts her head like a curious cat. "Can't what?"

I put my hand to my chest and drive my fingers into it, because the ache is as fresh as when it started, and still as shocking. I take a breath and it is like swallowing liquid nitrogen.

I can't.

I still can't.

Sakura looks down at my hand for a long time before raising her face back to mine. I search for the shapes that make her but I don't know what they are. To my surprise, she places her hand, soft and warm, over my ice-cold fist.

"And you do no one any good by staying here." She squeezes my hand once before guiding them both down. I don't have the energy to fight her; my body is lead. "We need your help. Konoha is in danger; you know that better than any of us." Her fingers dig into the back of my hand. "Doesn't that count for something?"

She doesn't understand.

*Konoha means little without a reason.*

I look away. "I don't care about Konoha."

"And what about the people who live here?" Her tone is no longer kind. "Don't we count for something?" She pulls her hand free, making mine cold again. "Don't *I* count for something?"

*Does she, little brother?*

Swiftly, Sakura leaps to her feet, pacing the inadequate width of the room several times before speaking again. "Then know this," her fists start to shake furiously at her sides. "Naruto loves Konoha. You don't have to understand why, just that he does. And if you care about him as much as you pretend, you'd want to protect it too." She stands there for a moment, trembling with rage. Then she adds, forcing it between her teeth, "You're a fool. But even so, I'll stand by you. If you ask me, I will stay." She waits, her stance rigid like a tin soldier and I turn my head only faintly in her direction.

It's still dark, and though my eyes have adjusted, I can't see her face clearly.

"Do you want me to stay?" She repeats, her voice far too controlled.

I don't move; don't actually look at her. Itachi still sits in his chair, observing me like I'm a lab rat. Then he smiles grimly like all the knowledge in the world is his.

Sakura huffs disgustedly, throws her hands up and stalks towards the door. She pulls it open, the light cascading through the doorway to a different world and I see the edge of her hair and the
curve of her shoulder, pink and peach in the half-light.

*So this is to be your answer?*

"Yes."

I know it's me who spoke, but was it to Sakura or Itachi? I myself don't know the answer and maybe it was both. Or neither. And the fact that I don't know - what does that make of me?

Sakura pauses and angles her head down. She waits there for the count of two whole minutes, 120 seconds. Then she softly closes the door.

She turns, straightens up suddenly taller, and walks back to me. She pulls up the chair Itachi was in- the chair I don’t remember owning – and drops herself down noisily.

And she smiles. Even if I couldn't see the shadow of her upturned lips, I would know.

"Took you long enough," she says and puts her fingers to the curtain cord.
"Uchiha! So kind of you to join us!"

Anko’s sardonic comment reaches me long before I enter the training ground. She must have super sight or something, or else she’s been yelling that every fifteen minutes in the hopes that one of those times it would be true. I wouldn’t put it past her.

It’s only a moment after I appear that Ouka races to me. She halts suddenly, almost topples over, looks up, and grins. Kohana trots leisurely to my side and rubs her little puppy head against my leg. The little girl looks like she’s hankering to follow suit, but thankfully for everyone involved, she refrains.

"Well, I guess we can get down to real work now," Anko observes dryly as she struts up to us. I look to her, and in the background far past her shoulder, Tetsuo stands and does nothing. Mitarashi grins wickedly. "All right guys; let's get cracking. We're way behind!"

I take a step forward, but Ouka swiftly bars my way, still gazing stupidly at me. Her mouth splits wide into a cheeky grin.

"Wait 'til I show you what I can do!" She proclaims. But then her face drops a little as she adds, "I thought maybe we wouldn't see you again. And then what would we do? Only me and Kohana and stupid Tetsuo!"

"Don't say that," I admonish her automatically. It's like a switch gets flipped whenever she’s around.

"Well, it's true," the little girl pouts. "He never wants to do anything." She looks back over her shoulder at the boy. "I think he was hoping you wouldn't come back so he wouldn't have to do anything." Her eyes return to me. "But Mitarashi-sensei said we'd wait a few more days, and if you didn't show up after that, we'd just have to recruit someone else."

I am a thing so easily replaced, in every venue of my life.

And yet . . . I wasn't. They were still here, waiting for me. And Anko greeted me like normal, offering neither rebuke nor condolence as if this is any other day.

Then Ouka flushes pink, looks at her feet, and kicks the dirt with the toe of her sandal. Kohana
whines deep in her throat and rubs her head along my calf.

"It wouldn't have been the same," she complains.

"Hey, you two! We've lost almost a week already!" Anko shouts irascibly to us, her hands firmly on her hips. "Get over here!"

Ouka looks up at me demurely from under her lashes, apparently oblivious to our team leader's impatience. A tiny hand grabs the edge of my wrist and tugs it like a bell pull. After I don’t answer the summons, she commands, "Come here," and yanks exceptionally hard. "I got something to tell you," she says overloud.

"Now!" Anko shouts and I can feel her irritation all the way on the other side of the field.

Ouka jerks on my arm again, so I bend down to her short level. She gives me a serious look before leaning in close and, cupping her hand over her mouth, whispers into my ear, "I missed you."

She straightens up not much taller than before, gives me that same serious expression and nods her head decisively, her face pink with innocence. Kohana barks loud and sudden, but no one seems surprised.

"If you don't get over here right now, I’ll make sure that you regret it." Anko warns us menacingly, but none of us take her threats too seriously.

Ouka turns and heads in that direction without letting go of my hand. I wrestle free and she doesn’t complain. I watch Kohana's little tail wag happily as she bounds past the girl to join her, the boy, and the crazy woman.

What a lot of nonsense this is.

But it is my team.

Mine.

I find myself trying more earnestly to better match abilities to my teammates'.

I do this not for myself; I have no hopes to be anything but what I am. And in service to Konoha, I’m not sure I’d want anything else.

Ouka is so pleased it nearly makes me sick. In fact, in the five days of my absence she has improved a great deal, not the least of which is in confidence. Even lazybones has improved, though he seems no more excited about the prospect of chuunin exams and ninjahood than he ever did. As the day proceeds, I discover that if I don’t think too much and simply let our movements flow together, we’re not a bad team. Of course, it’s just a genin one, so that’s not saying much.

But in a strange way, I want them to succeed. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say I think they should succeed and I won't allow them to fail because of me. I'm not a failure nor will I be anyone's burden to bear.

Our daily training comes to a conclusion and, right on schedule, little Ouka waltzes up to me and waits. I don't know why she waits or what she's waiting for, but she has always done this and after five days nothing has changed.

The girl stands patiently, staring at me as I collect the last of the weapons – some are mine and others belong to the other, reckless members of the team. I really ought to have a discussion with
them about this sort of inappropriate ninja behavior.

Kohana, far too excited as usual, - I'm beginning to wonder if someone has been sneaking loads of caffeine into her food - races around us, yipping and working off the hyperactivity that accompanies a day of training.

Ouka watches intently as I stow the last of the kunai with a click and stand up straight. I hand a set of throwing stars –hers – back to the child and without a hint of embarrassment, she packs them away.

I look at her for only an instant, then head in the direction of the apartment. Immediately, dog and child flank me and that well-known, oddly soft little hand laces into mine. This time I don't try to pull away.

"Let's get ice cream!"

The joyful shout comes from absolutely nowhere. I risk a sidelong glance in her direction and Ouka beams at me as if she has just won the lottery.

"I don't like ice cream," I state, looking back over the street.

The tiny hand squeezes mine. "But I do."

I pause momentarily in my progress.

That is a thought.

She does.

I do not, but she does.

I resume walking. After a couple seconds I ask, "Where is it?"

Her hand squeezes so tight that I scowl at her, but she, undeterred, shines at me nearly as bright as the sun. Kohana barks and yips and wags her tail and runs around in a circle like a puppy on speed.

Well, she can act as happy as she likes. She's not getting any.

Ouka yanks hard on my arm and I allow her to drag me to this ice cream place.

Once we are there I am summarily corrected and informed that it is in fact called an "ice cream parlor".

Whatever.

Ouka orders a banana split, easily the most expensive item on the menu short of gallon containers. It essentially empties out my wallet.

I order one scoop of green tea. It is subtle, just a hint of flavor and a touch of sweetness. If I am forced to eat ice cream, that sticky, creamy, overly sweet confection, this is really my only option. Still, one scoop is more than enough.

The little girl sits contentedly across from me in an elaborately cutesy chair, swings her legs, and grins at me with an ice cream smeared smile. There is an awful lot of the sweet in the bowl for one small person. But then again, she is already halfway through and showing no signs of stopping.
She breaks off a piece of banana and hands it down to Kohana.

Stupid dog. I thought I said I wasn't going to get anything for her.

Ouka smiles chocolatey up at me as I finish the last of my green tea ice cream.


The nothingness in my chest reasserts itself, expands and punches outward. For a second there, I almost forgot about it.

I take Ouka's chin in my hand and gently wipe away the melted cream with my napkin.

Happier? "No." Not happier.

Ouka tries to say something that comes out a mumbled mess since she can't quite speak clearly while I clean her face.

The emptiness within me pulls in, presses out, beating like a heart and yet nothing like one, serving no purpose but to be painful and remind me of what I have lost.

Definitely not happier.

Ouka protests grumingly and puts her sticky ice cream hands on my wrists. I leave her cheeks and go to work cleaning her hands instead. The girl releases a relieved sigh, but otherwise says nothing.

I pull the napkin over one short, plump finger.

Not happier, but resolved maybe?

Naruto may be done with me, but that doesn’t mean I have to be done with him.

Finally finished, I let Ouka go and lean back in my chair.

The penetrating pain is there even now, though somehow not as bad as it has been.

I still cannot breathe.

Ouka looks at me, opens her mouth, but then closes it in an uncharacteristic display of self-control. Instead, she smiles meekly and goes back to her half finished dessert.

The next moment, I groan with deep disgust.

In one fell swoop all of my hard work is undone with an overflowing spoon of melting ice cream.

-----

These days I sleep more than I used to, and while they are no less troubled than they were before, they are of a different color.

I dream of Naruto often. I remember all the things unique to him and the solace of his presence better than any drug. I dream of undefined days and the hazy ordinariness of everyday life.

It sounds odd, but there is something deliciously painful about such dreams.
We cannot remain apart forever. We are two halves of the same coin, Naruto and I, incomplete without the other. I think he knows it too.

Sometimes, I dream of Itachi. I recall the times long ago when he was simply my brother, perfect in my inexperienced child's eyes and incapable of flaw. I dream of the kind Itachi who found compassion for me when he had little to offer and of the Itachi who defended me when no one else cared.

And then I dream of the Itachi at the end, the full circle Itachi who was my brother again.

But he is still a mystery to me and when I wake, I recall that it’s my fault.

And then there are the dreams of my mother, fleeting like a dream within another. She is but a ghost who lingers in my mind with so much to say that cannot be spoken. She floats and sways and disappears and appears and when I awake I know that she somehow lingers still.

Even in my waking hours I can see her eyes filled with sympathy, the kind only a mother can offer and the kind that can only be accepted from a mother, trailing my steps like shadows.

She is still waiting, I think, for me to be her child.

-----

"That went . . . well," Yamanaka says with a bit too much surprise in her voice.

I look blankly away and say nothing. Two "sections" of memorization are complete and we are well into the third. I don’t want to waste time worrying over this. It’s all a matter of will, control, and concentration. I am Uchiha Sasuke. I can do this.

And I will.

Although I have felt distinctly out of sorts since Naruto . . .

Enough.

I cannot think of him or else that pain returns with insistence, demanding attention that I don't have to spare. I close my eyes, inhale deeply, and concentrate only on what I must do.

"So," Ino says oblivious, or more than likely uncaring, of my inner struggle, "If we keep on this pace, it won't take long until we’re finished." I hear her tap her fingers on the hollow wood of the table. "You've improved." She states this rather grudgingly, stands, turns halfway, and heads to the door.

I mumble a nearly inaudible, "Yamanaka."

She stops in her tracks almost instantly. Then slowly, as a toy winding down, she turns. I wait for a moment, weighing my decision, and then I nod. It's barely perceptible, but I know she's seen and understood. Her gaze goes a little wide, mistrustful, but I glimpse it only from the corner of my eyes. It’s an acknowledgement for her sacrifice, not a thanks for her compliment. I’m sure she knows that.

The blonde girl crosses her arms defensively. "I'm not doing this for you," she reminds me flatly.

"I know." It's a phrase more astringent on my tongue than I expected.

She pauses a moment then nods warily, droops her eyes, and leaves.
But in a way, I'm doing this for her.

It's not for me.

Because I hate Konoha.

-----

I think that I am at best one third of the way through my trial. The spots speckling the inside of my mind remain daunting and continue to wink at me maliciously like the evil leeches they are. It's exhausting work and when I reenter the real world, I collapse heavily onto my heels.

"Sasuke, look at me."

I'm not up for an argument, so I comply.

He tapers his one eye at me as his mask crinkles in what I'm guessing is disapproval.

"Has anyone said anything to you about your appearance?"

I regard him with distinct annoyance. "My appearance"? Most people don't even look me in the eye, let alone talk to me. "No."

He hums thoughtfully and drops to a crouch. His hands reach to my face but I bat him away angrily. He doesn't need to be that close and certainly doesn't need to touch me to see me. With a deep frown that creases his mask distinctively, he drops his forearm to his bent knee and stares. "Not even Naruto?" He ventures.

Naruto hasn’t spoken to me since that day. I heave an exhausted, disgruntled sigh. "No."

Old One-Eye hums again and taps his finger against his leg, keeping time to music only he can hear. The one eye shifts away for a moment as he mumbles to himself. Then, almost instantaneously, his attention is back on me and he says, "We're done for today. I want you to go home and get some rest." And in a swirl of leaves and dust he is gone.

I fall back on my hands and crane my head to the deep blue sky and feel that sharp emptiness again. I’m used to it. I let my arms bend beneath me and drop my body to the ground.

Rest sounds nice. Darkness and unconsciousness are appealing to me right now.

I close my eyes and the blue vanishes.

And once again, I sleep, but this time I do not dream.

-----

This is a new and unexciting experience. I've never been to this section of town before and I'm as foreign to it as it is to me.

No one here seems to know about me or what I've done, or at the least they seem not to care. It makes for a somewhat refreshing change, which says a lot for the banality of my life.

//Indeed.//

Except I need a little advice and there’s no one I can ask. I don’t exactly fit in. Everything here is fancy. Frilly. Girly.
It seems that way anyway.

I need a list. I should get something appropriate for bride and groom, but I don’t know either very well.

I guess I don’t really care.

//As you should not.//

I replace the delicate fluted glass to the shelf and move on.

I don't like having to resort to a gift. I ought to be giving them the customary cash, as is right and proper, but I don't have access to even the minimal 3,000 yen. As little money as I can spare would look better as a gift, assuming that I can find the right one. It’s more than they have a right to expect after making my attendance mandatory.

//Why should it matter to you either way?//

I'm half dreading this stupid wedding. I'd be all dreading it except that Naruto will be there. Angry with me or not, he's not the sort to let such things get in the way; he will put his friends and promises first.

//What useless notions.//

I haven't seen him in such a long time. And I need to.

I really need to.

I inhale, but no oxygen reaches my lungs. The empty ache has twisted to form a solid wall that blocks my airways.

I pick up a porcelain vase, simply decorated and about three times what I can reasonably afford. I carefully set it down again and continue forward. I have no clue what to get for that strange girl.

And she is a strange girl. She's given me this. A day free of recrimination. A day doing something I don't want to do, but the freedom with which to do it.

//Such a disappointment.//

She's given me the opportunity to be anonymous in a town that has long adored and deplored the Uchiha name and me along with it.

She is a strange girl indeed.

At times it seems like only minutes have passed, at others it feels like years and that I must be an old man patiently waiting for the end of his days with no one waiting for him on the other side.

Yet I doubt it's been a month.

Hinata's wedding was scheduled only two months after she gave me the invitation and it wasn't long after that that Naruto . . .

//That is quite enough.//

So it has not been very long.
It has been a lifetime.

And it's an odd sort of life, full of things I don’t want to do but allow.

It’s no more than a pit stop to my true destination.

-----

I dangle my toes toward the still surface of the lake and with a little more effort I could probably touch it. I can remember sitting on this pier before, though back then my feet barely reflected in the water let alone have been able to reach the water. The pain was there then too, but different, sort of dulled whereas this is piercing.

//Oh, this is productive.//

I close my eyes as it passes.

This is the one place where I feel I can rest, even if it brings no peace. I can see no better, nor hear, nor feel.

And I still cannot breath.

//What useless drivel.//

The pain here is lessened, as the ache rises to surround rather than consume me.

It's manageable.

I gaze out over the empty water. The gentle lapping against the wooden supports is there but muffled. It is a rhythmic and easy cadence, soothing like a lullaby and I listen as if my ears work properly. I stay in this quiet place a long time, son long that I forget myself. It takes another’s voice to rouse me.

"So I got the green light."

//How utterly perfect.//

"'Green light', what the heck's that supposed to mean?"

I open my eyes and force my ears to work, to absorb sound, to make my muddy brain understand.

"You know, no more restriction type stuff," Naruto explains.

Kiba snorts skeptically, as I would have.

Naruto is here.

He is here.

//No reason to get so excited.//

"Well, for the fox anyway," Naruto grumbles in that way of his. "He's all touchy and irritable, but I'm in charge now. I just gave him a good kicking and now he sits back while I keep control."

The edge of my mouth turns up.

"Oh?" There's a pause. "Oh! Well hey. That means you're gonna go on some missions now?"
"Uh," Naruto hedges guiltily. "Not yet. But soon. They still don't trust me after last time, but I'm good to go, I swear! It's only a matter of . . ."

He stops abruptly.

"Huh? Wha? Whaissit?"

There is another pause, broken at last by Kiba's revelatory "Oh." This is immediately followed by an extended conversation made in such hushed chattering that I can't decipher it. It doesn't matter much, just so long as I can listen to the welcome sound of his voice.

//Ugh. Pa-the-tic.//

But then Naruto whispers something sharp and final. Kiba groans irritably and the voices move farther off. There is a quiet shuffle, padding, and I know they're leaving.

//Finally. That is more than enough of that.//

But this is the first time I have heard his voice in more than a week and I cannot allow him to go.

"Naruto!"

Everything freezes.

I hadn't meant to say anything, didn't realize I had until I play the voice back in my head and recognize it as my own.

We all pause, the tension strung tautly between us through the heated air. They're waiting, I realize, for me. I'm supposed to do something now. I had no plan when I called his name; I just wanted him not to leave.

I just didn't want him to leave. Pathetic, yes. But no one other than me actually needs to know that. My exterior, as ever, remains composed.

I rest my hand flat to the deck. "Sit with me?"

There is a brief silence and then shuffling again.

He's leaving.

He's still trying to hold steadfastly to his stupid decision. And there's little I can do about it when he's like this. That's all right. For now.

I choke a little as my lungs seize up. Still no breath, still no air.

"Hey, c'mon." It's Kiba this time, that best friend of his, whiny and annoyed. "You're no fun anymore."

"No fun?" Naruto snaps.

I sharpen my hearing as best I can because isn't this interesting?

"Yeah, you've . . ." But then Kiba's speech lowers and I don't know what he's saying. All I can hear are the tones like music, low and rumbling with the roll of timpani and the mellow crescendo of horns.
Then there is quiet. It doesn't last for long, yet it's heavy, a lead weight slowly being lowered centimeter by centimeter onto an already tense situation.

I remain still as a statue. I won't repeat my request; I won't beg or plead or turn my head. I have my pride still. Yes, I do: I am still Sasuke. Yet every nerve in my body is thrumming, awaiting his answer.

It seems like forever.

And it seems like an illusion when the subtle vibrations reach me from down along the planks of wood. When he is close enough, I look at Naruto's feet. I don't look at his face because any little thing might make him change his mind. Instead, I look out over the water as he quietly sits down beside me. He says nothing, so I do the same.

But gradually, yet somehow instantly, I feel lighter but grounded. My body is no longer simply a carcass to house my self, but me altogether. The lapping of the water intensifies, and is joined by the normal sounds of summer; the whine of cicadas and the distant whistle of birds. The image before me clarifies and I see the individual leaves on the trees and each undulating ripple of water. I sit straighter and fill my lungs with the sweet stale air, letting it back out reluctantly. I can breathe again.

I can breathe.

I glance sideways to Naruto. He sits stiff and stern, his lips pulled into a thin white line as he stares at the line of trees on the far end of the lake. His hand is near mine, close enough to touch though I don't. I can already feel his presence. His scent and warmth and breath are in the air all around me, enveloping my every sense.

And I feel better.

I can breathe.

But it's not enough, not nearly enough. For now, just that he is here at the same time as me will do. I know he'll allow no more than that. He's stubborn. But so am I, probably more than him. So I'll play this stupid waiting game, because I have my pride and my sense of self and I will succeed in the end.

And he is sitting here with me, even if begrudgingly. He hasn't looked at me or acknowledged my presence in any way.

But he is here.

Boldly, I turn to look at him directly and reintroduce myself to the contours of his face; I haven't seen him so closely in quite some time. So I look at him, stare at him, study him, and realize that the image in my head didn’t do him justice.

I can see him grow edgy as one does when they sense someone's eyes on them. Finally, he turns to me with his mouth half open, ready to spew some sarcastic remark, no doubt. But when he sees me he stops. His eyes go large and his mouth gapes foolishly.

I allow my lips to form the gentle curve to a smile. It's barely a smile because I don't recall how to do it, but it's close enough for him to understand. I wait a moment more, peering at his stunned expression with satisfaction then gracefully get to my feet. His head tilts clumsily back to follow my movement and I keep my eyes locked onto his. Just a moment more, just a moment, and then I will leave him alone. For today.
I blink slowly and pull my lips a hair further. It’s very quiet, with only the soft lapping of water and the song of insects, but I have no need to fill the silence. I simply look at Naruto and he should know.

Confusion almost instantly takes over his face followed by something that looks like fear, but since there’s no reason for it, I’m sure I’m mistaken.

I turn my smile into a smirk and hum once in amusement. All this will change someday.

It has to.

Two halves cannot be divided forever.

Then I turn and head down the wooden walkway back to the life that has been given to me.

I haven’t given up on him. And I don’t, won’t, believe he’s truly given up on me regardless what he says. He’s trying too hard. But all that really matters right now, at this moment, is that he is here.

In this stupid village I despise.

And so are Sakura and Kakashi and Iruka and weird Hinata, mysterious Kuma, and silly little Ouka with her dog. Even crazy Anko and lazy Tetsuo and manipulative Tsunade are here. They are all, in their way, mine. And I protect what is mine, regardless the cost. Even if it means protecting what I hate.

And so this is Konohagakure.

This is my life, my future, and my reality.

I am ready.

END

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