108 Earthly Temptations

by Vixen_Tail

Summary

A character study into why the older generations of shinobi are harsher and less inclined to compromise.

SI/OC Pre-Konoha, Warring States Period, Post-Founding. Currently up to the middle-end of the Second Great Shinobi World War.

Part One, the beginnings of Sekanji Terazawa. Poison Mistress, occasional kunoichi Lady, and the aunt of Orochimaru. Part Two, the establishment of Konoha and the character of the village Founders. Part Three, the end. Now on Part Four, the dead rise.

Notes

I should be working on RR, yet for some reason I can't. So I give this instead, with the added caveat that I am alive and well and still hammering my head against that particular bout of writer's block.

No, I loathe social media and therefore don't have much you all can contact me through. I also abhor phone calls and sometimes even warily eye text messages… so yeah.

This is… more or less a character study, of how and what made the initial/first generation of shinobi in the hidden villages so… hard. Or maybe ruthless. Uncompromising. Being said, this is also the growing years of the character I've selected to give that impression for your enjoyment. It's not truly difficult for her yet, as Tera's mostly underestimated and
working around the expectations most of this age have for quietly demure women. I've also been told it's fairly confusing, and I apologize as the parts that will make that clear were pushed back for the next third of the story.

This is also a writing exercise, I'm trying to do this in three parts of 50,000 words only. I'm already two hundred words in debt to the next part.
Seikanji Terazawa (…my name is Erin Woods) only vaguely realized something being a small measure off at first.

First of all, her name wasn't Terazawa… or it hadn't been, until all those around her used that name with the occasional variation with cutesy little –chan tacked on to the end.

Then there was the whole being looked down upon issue. She was fully grown, thank you. 

…or had been, the last time she took stock of herself.

The people (family? They all looked alike… sort of) she was with right now were an isolated clannish-people, mainly. Being tasked to follow one into 'town' just removed her from the compound they occupied before the sun even rose.

There was a startling lack of mirrors or reflective chrome around which also contributed to that nagging sensation of nothing being real. The glimpses caught in dark lacquered paint or the occasional puddle of mysterious liquids on the worn track road they eventually reached revealed (not) familiar features of impressive murky-ness.

Aside the strange-familiar name, the apparent giants, her very clothing that she was dressed in every day by another of those giants that insisted on chopping up her apparent name every time she used it, the fact murder or training to commit homicide was either a pastime or a way of life… 

…oh, wait. No, that was what was off.

But if it was a dream, then what did it really matter?

Terazawa (temple noise? really?) blinked bemusedly and suddenly slid to the side in a not-possible manner to evade the sharp edge of something that glinted just within her field of view, striking out in return with the bladed edges of her small hand fans to remove the hand of the man attacking her. It was more instinct than deliberate, something her mind/body followed along because she had spent years (never?) being drilled in the movements.

The coppery, musty, stinking blood that splattered across her face was startling in how burning hot it was.

Her fan wasn't long enough to entirely remove the hand, all she scored was a deep wound on the gnarled wrist nearly thrust in her face. In spite of the injury her attacker wrenched his blade downward to at least strike her face, through pure muscle or desperation from the ugly sneer she was given, but she used her smaller stature to dive underneath the man's blade and snapped her fan (weapon, was that why it had red silk?) closed in order to drive it blade first into the back of his thigh.

Ripping open the femoral artery and dousing herself in even more stinking hot blood, forcing the man to pitch forward from both the blood loss and the severed muscles while trying to keep up with her movements.

This time the blood splattered onto the back of her neck, but she refrained from pulling a face at the feel of the viscous liquid seeping down the back of her odd robe. Two seconds later and the scruffy man bled out too much to be of any further threat, but she still pulled a blade (what?) from the sheath buckled to her bicep to drive into his heart as she had (not!) been drilled to do.
While she had been so distracted, the woman she had been accompanying had strangled one much more fit attacker and effortlessly lopped the head off another slightly older desperate-looking type with heavier versions of the weaponized fans than she had. Sinuously, as if the rigid bones of the human body didn't mean anything in the face of her goals.

"Tera-chan," murmured the (cool water scented breezes, why she thought of that in reference to her was... not... why?) woman with very interesting eye makeup simply, gazing at her levelly from those oddly copper colored eyes set in black, "what a mess you made. Perhaps lessons on evading the consequences of your actions is required?"

If anything, the giant-woman sounded amused as she gathered up the spilled shopping from the dirt lane they were attacked traveling down. A few dark earthenware jars had fallen to the ground, cushioned by a basked she (didn't) sort-of recalled making for the woman in remembrance for something (a death? No... a birth of death?). As if the reeking blood the other was now drenched in was nothing more than easily cleaned ink splatters, and that murder on the outer reaches of this little hovel of a village was nothing to be concerned over.

Terazawa blinked slowly back at the woman, fruitlessly trying to recall why her thoughts seemed a bit off as well as whatever this dream-thing was.

There was something disquiet building up in her stomach, a knot of unease, as her mind tried to work through the fog of whatever was wrong with her yet found nothing erroneous to correct so the sensation wasn't able to take root and become more than a absent concern. She knew (did know, should know?) the other, and yet didn't. Murdering another should prove alarming (yet was not somehow).

Not everything was adding up, the offset distance between a fully grown woman and herself (who should be) proved only one such stumbling block to finally making a conclusion.

Whatever it was, it was not yet alarming enough to make Terazawa unwilling to go along with whatever was going on. She might not understand at the moment, but she would.

Perhaps she'd wake up, back in a cramped apartment with her best friend, and wonder over the purpose of this mad dream with Becky over a pitifully tiny tub of ice cream. Even if that really wasn't an indulgence they could afford for something as vaguely terrifying as a nightmare. It would be unfortunate to not see where this demented creation of her mind was leading to, surely it had an ending, but all dreams came to an end eventually via the waking world.

...right?

(ooo000ooo)

It didn't stop there.

Step by step, the longer things stretched on, the less 'dream-hazy' things got. Trotting along at the heel of the same-other, the one that called her by a (not) familiar name and dressed her (when?) up in soft brown silks with a band of black to cinch things closed, gave her time to... process.

Lucidity was... interesting. She hadn't realized she was capable of lucid dreaming.

It was neat, kind of.

She could almost feel the heat beat down on her dark (wait... I was ginger) head, a tickle-itch of sweat irritating the blood-stiff silks that stuck to her neck (...when was I supposed to wake up? Maybe I'm sleeping in...), and (when was the last time I was in the countryside?) a rather
refreshing breeze scented with dry earth and warm loam stirring up the papery blades of grass the other was wading through. There was a nice raspy sound to the wind to go with the occasional flap of cloth as it tugged clothing and hair playfully, as its fingers stirred up and let lie the blades of grass in patterns no human could hide within, punctuated through with bird calls and the odd critter forging their own paths around them.

This wasn't the way they came, in the early hours of the false dawn. Which was obvious, really… why allow someone to ambush them if they had been watched since stepping into town?

Stealthily, a small short blade was drawn out of the sheath on her upper arms (was this a dress? I hate dresses) and her fingertip was pricked with the sharp point.

"Tera-chan?"

"…just checking." The sharp scent of fresh blood, even when she had the reek of long-dried on her clothing, was slight. Unnoticeable. She could barely pick it up on the wind buffeting her, and it hadn't yet drifted to the taller woman even accounting for the breeze's slight strength.

Yet somehow the other knew she harmed herself anyways.

Sensor whispered part of her mind, with another impression of cool pools on a mid-summer day cut through with a stiff breeze that the other woman felt like to her own senses. Impossible insisted another half, the more uncertain half of herself when disproven with that sixth sense she (somehow) knew.

The disharmony commanded a large part of her attention, even as another half kept a sharp eye out for yet more impossible things. Tracking the descent of the sun, listening to the pattern of the grass humming against itself, attributing the bird calls to their actions (wood grouse warning of a fox, sparrows calling territory, a faint woodpecker hammering in the distance near home) and the back of her 'guide'.

There was definitely something wrong. Terazawa's (wooden shoes? Why was she wearing… geta?) steps became less sure, the gap between her and the other widened enough that the woman paused and turned around, as the inconstancies finally started registering.

Genjutsu half of her screamed, with the feeling of this-is-not-right sharply snapping in place like a rubber band around her heart and mind.

Even through the budding panic, the twisting terror of nothing being right, half her attention remained on the world around her and yet the more she searched herself for what was obviously (not) wrong. Something (long lessons on why by a majestic willow tree) insisted that she keep aware, keep an eye open and warily watch for an ambush the illusionary sensation was for.

The other half of herself, which recalled the assignments she had procrastinated from finishing (English Literature was boring) and knew she would be late for her shift (waitress at IHOP, the best she could get right now), just simply recoiled from everything. Herself, not-right as it was, her mind, the ingrained suspicions she didn't recall ever having, the blood she was soaked in.

A palm slapped against her bare forehead, a truly nauseating spike of that liquid-breezy burning coolness spiking through her mind then trickling down her spine, and thin but strong arms wrapped around her as the world spun dizzily.

Terazawa's world refused to settle, rebelled against any sense of balance and muddying her sense of up from down. Which nicely matched the gut-wrenching panic of WHAT-THE-FUCK-IS-GOING-
ON in her head.

The panic was stupid, training *(that she never got yet, had memories of)* had her breathing under control before any alarm could twist her features. Her aching head was ignored, attention rooting in on the dry grasslands they both were leaving behind in an alarming amount of haste from over *(mother's?)* the other woman's shoulder.

Fruitlessly, childishly *(but... she was a-)*, insanely, ignoring the lack of a chest which would mean-

She hiccupped, near-silently, as that which once was her *(former-past)* life seemed to start drifting from her grasp again. *(Again would mean she forgot once before- no. No. She'd wake up in a few moments, laugh a little at the weird nightmare with her roommate, then go to school to be chewed out for not doing her homework.)*

*(ooo000ooo)*

Terazawa wasn't waking up. More specifically, she wasn't waking up from the dream-nightmare of being a midget murderer far from what she had once known.

In the courtyard of the *(their, the Sekanji clan's)* home was a truly impressive willow tree half bent over a rock-edged shallow pool of water. Which wasn't natural, Seikanji Katsutarō had made the water feature and planted the tree to accommodate Shimako's shinobi family while they visited for allowing her to marry into another through manipulating *earth and then water chakra* to demonstrate his competency.

Which… no. Nope. Not doing this.

Shimako *(not-mother/giant-woman-other)* was a severe beauty with razor sharp wire coiled in both kimono sleeves, sharp copper eyes set in a lightly tanned and angular face. Long, inky black hair *(a whisper of 'you can grow out your own once you've proven you can overcome that obstacle' floating through her mind)* that fell to the small of her back slicked down with an oily *(weak, contact-based, made from a tincture of snakeroot)* poison grown in the garden their incredibly backwater compound was built around.

Her *(not)* memories insisted the woman was originally from the Land of Rivers. As such, the dry plains of Grass where the Sekanji Clan resided, *Kusa no Kuni*, irritated her sensibilities with how parched it could be in summer. Vaguely, foggily, she could sort of *(not)* recall being told her visiting family had been worse in that respect.

Luckily, with where the group of wooden huts with sliding rice-paper clad walls was built, they had a natural source of underground water nearby. As they were in the north corner of Grass right next to Earth and Waterfall Country, they had a tiny touch of mountains against one edge of their land with a diverted stream nearby coming from somewhere that merely drained into the rivers that fed the lush Land of Fire to their southeast. There was still the razor-blade grass everywhere, stretching as far as the eye could see if you set your gaze south and west, and the odd tree here or there wasn't too odd as long as they were old enough or strands of wild bamboo.

She didn't have to draw the water from the well set smack dab in the middle of the compound *(for a bath?)* this time, her guide *(not-mother)* had another of the pale-skinned Sekanji slightly older than her do it as the concern of what genjutsu she was under meant she was contained under *(her supposed father's)* Katsutarō's eye instead.

Crusty, blood-splattered yukata and all.
"She became suspicious of it half-way back," offered Shimako demurely to her husband, sounding proud of her for some bewildering reason, as they sat side by side inspecting the (WHY?) girl's blood splattered appearance, "we were attacked, as you had suspected."

The half-suspected, half-remembered detail of eye makeup had proven right in time. The woman had caked some kind of matte black gloss around her eyes, only to remove it upon reaching this semi-decent hovel in a feudal Asian village using some kind of pre-treated cloth tucked away in her sleeves. Mark-free, she rang less of a bell in Terazawa's mind… at least the part not still wondering what the ever loving, fresh hell was going on.

"...Uchihas then. Could be a supply raid in the wings." Concluded the paper-pale man solidly, only to cock an eyebrow at the split-second hesitation of his wife's. "No?"

"I didn't see any of their eyes around." Admitted the woman slowly. "In town or otherwise."

"Think the rumors are true, then?"

"Which would leave who, husband? The Kuramas?"

There was a beat of oddly tense silence, before the (supposedly?) strong in battle woman lowered her striking gaze and inclined her head to the man obediently. "My apologies."

…what?

"Genjutsu of a level required to confuse her, young as she is, would not be uncommon." Dismissed the soberly dressed man shortly, turning back to his (apparent) daughter and looking extremely annoyed from how his light blue eyes highlighted with mauve-purple lines narrowed. "At least she caught it."

Terazawa stared back at him absently, half-waiting for this to end in an abrupt waking where she wasn't a flat-chested and murderous midget, before a twinge of wary unease in her (dream) half had her turning to Shimiko.

"Still remember nothing, Tera-chan?"

"A few scattered fragments." Even her voice was different, a delicate wisp of a sound pitched too childishly high for comfort. "Most of it is… hazy still."

"Yamanaka." Concluded Katsutarō sourly, a brief flicker of intense hate passing over his features almost faster than she could see.

Some unknown instinct had her tensing again, this time in concert with the other woman.

An uneasy conclusion was being drawn, if only because of historical precedents where women and girls or just anything female were less desirable (therefore scorned/killed/married off quickly) in less developed parts of the world matched with half-recalled (forgotten?) instinct.

Panic was held at bay through sheer reflex, and instead she focused on the woman who could murder two men in the space of a few seconds yet was so submissive to her husband. Who would then be, if not earning that reaction through fear, more skilled in the art of death than she was.

It was horrible to think of about two people she did not (really) know beyond this one meeting, but Terazawa would err on the side of caution before risking something she only half understood.

Instead of doing anything half-feared yet half-expected, Katsutarō smoothly yet abruptly rose from
his kneeling position to storm out of the room. Banging the delicate wood and rice-paper wall/door that opened into the courtyard against the frame it was set in and nearly causing the almost-fragile seeming wood to slide shut again. There was a sliver of darkening sky visible through the new gap, meaning it was now more than six hours since she had consciously started keeping track.

...either again or for the first time, depending on how she viewed it. Terribly confusing when she couldn't even trust her own thoughts without other feelings twisting the meaning, so working out a way to ignore the twinges of unease and still survive here was her current aim.

In her (prior) experience, dreams lasted moments whereas nightmares only seemed as if they lasted hours. Having killed someone at the beginning of whatever this was supposed to be, she would gladly classify this as a nightmare.

Lucid dreaming/nightmares were new, she'd give it another day before really starting to become concerned.

(By the time she had finally been able to scrub down her skin to remove the last flaky scales of blood, and scrub the dark brown and now spotted yukata clean of the same, she had half a suspicion she wouldn't be waking up. Once her not-mother laid out their sleeping mats, after the communal dining in the courtyard as what was stewed up was served to all over a bed of rice, she had the theory that waking up would return her to her real world. Which one she really wanted warred with her sense of disbelief and the brutal logic she woke with.)
A week and two days passed before Terazawa (Erin, damn it all) would admit to herself this fake-dream-thing-issue wasn't ending.

Five days of swallowing down panic when she woke up to the slide of lacquered wood against equally sealed wood or the ghost-quiet whisper of a footfall, six of early morning calligraphy lessons, two afternoon herbology lectures, nine days of dance lessons disguising instructions on how to fight with small blades hidden in fans and silk done before the evening meal, and two late-night and apparently risky chakra training sessions done on the sly.

Nothing changed in respects to her foggy confusion. Aside the feeling of dread that started building up in the back of her mind the longer a few coincidental things kept reappearing.

Shimiko kept a wary eye on her own daughter but, as the hours stretched into days and the only problem became Tera's sudden confusion when encountering some of the chores she (hadn't) always done or the people that once knew her, the woman merely accepted the (supposed) fact some rogue Yamanaka had removed her memories.

Nearly all of them, meaning that whatever it had (not) been was experimental and therefore likely not worth it to pick a fight over the compromised mind of a girl-child.

Katsutarō didn't bother, acting as if she had just taken a gigantic step backwards in development and was instead brain-dead rather than a murderously small person with compromised memories. Eventually, when it became apparent to others that shared their village-compound-thing, he stopped.

Once his brother had a quiet word with him about exactly how few men there were left in the Sekanji family and reminding him the women had been picking up the slack until they could gather (breed) more.

That was something else aside her rapidly dimming concerns between what had been and what was to occupy herself with. She had her still-frequent panic attacks, the night terrors where she dreamed of waking only to wake in this reality instead far from what had once been normal to her. However… they were exhausting to keep up with and everything else Terazawa had to do in a day. Eventually, she just had to shove it aside as she worked to regain an even footing to do said panicking in.

Oh… she knew. It was hard to pretend ignorance after the one raid that crashed against the bulwark of their walls and was turned away using all the water in the pond to drown six men in the middle of a prairie. They were still trying to refill the pool before the willow tree died.

Chakra, rumors of the Uchihas warring against the Senju Clan, rogue Yamanakas screwing over random people for whichever reason, elemental manipulation, concealed weapons, poisons, taijutsu. If she wasn't sure entirely, the news filtering to an out of the way collection of hovels in the Land of Grass of a four-tailed bijū crashing against one of the towns in Earth would do it.

The Naruto anime. Possibly the worst one possible to somehow fall into outside of the vaulted Village Hidden in the Leaves or another of the Five Great Shinobi Nations. Even more, to fall far outside any recognizable timeline as there was no such thing as a Hidden Ninja Village. There was no handy step-by-step guide for living in the Warring States Era, it was all just a revolving morass of murder at this point.
Frankly, it was entirely possible her whole family-unit thing would be murdered off shortly so she or anything she knew wouldn't matter then.

Even so when *Naruto*'s canon began… she'd be an old woman if not long since dead.

Life-expectancies in this day and age was about forty. Maybe more in ninja, samurai, and the noble class and less for regular people, but not really all that far apart. Worst still getting married off as a broodmare after puberty was the social *norm*. Having at least one child by fourteen, and by twenty years four or five brats was 'respectable'.

Tera absently scrubbed harder at the stain in the cotton cloth, trying to leech the blood out of the yukata before a stain set in. It was one of Katsutarō's favorite, but he ended up wearing it into battle when one of the guards reported suspicious movement a touch north of them high up in the mountains. Leaving it to soak momentarily, the stain was probably not coming out but dying it in a new pattern or color was possible, she wandered with a purpose for that dye.

Also, to do a bit of snooping. Shinobi family compound or not, there was no other way to learn of things a girl-child would not be told if she asked.

There were about thirty males in the Sekanji family. There was two elderly males that didn't do anything constructive with their time but probably deserved being lazy, one of which barely moved much less realized he was present regardless of what happened, and six boy-children. The rest were peppered between teenagers and middle-aged men, either learning to fight or going out to earn the money the clan existed upon.

In contrast, there were fifty women. Fourteen girl-children, of which Tera was one. Six pregnant ladies and two newborn girls. Shimiko had announced a pregnancy, around the moment when Tera could sense a tiny bit of rock-grit in her usual feel, which *might* end up a girl again since apparently of all the children she and Katsutarō had… only one had been a boy-child but he ended up stillborn.

From the whispers she had gathered just doing chores around the compound as she was expected to, Tera had nearly had three elder siblings. The first boy-child, who was dead on arrival, two sisters, of whose fate *no one* talked about as it either was not interesting or relevant, and then herself.

Small wonder, really. The human body wasn't entirely *ready* to bear a child by fourteen years of age. It was *possible*, entirely so, but a baby was a highly resource intensive thing to crank out. If you were a bit malnourished to start with, which was the norm given the risky and unstable supply lines for those that didn't make their own food like her family, then being pregnant came with even more risky complications than normal.

Tera (*Erin*) had less than solid interest in childbearing, the fact she knew that actually made her slightly more knowledgeable than the *fucking family healer*. Who prescribed a *diet* light on greens and heavy on meat to Shimiko for the duration of her pregnancy.

At this moment, she was entirely unsurprised with the fact she was an only child for being her (*not*) mother's fourth pregnancy.

In the life she wasn't trying to forget but was becoming hazy through sheer time and emotional distance, she recalled having siblings. Did remember her (*former*) father's catering to her mother's whims, which included late-night trips to a twenty-four hour convenience store or gas station, and taking care of her siblings as well as being taken care of until she and her siblings split off to live their lives.
Being the eldest was new.

Pushing away the nearly crippling stab of homesickness, there was nothing to be done about it and
wallowing was terribly difficult to afford the time for here, Tera slinked away from the thin walls
of the wooden and paper construct that past as a home in order to pretend she wasn't
eavesdropping.

That depended on the next baby surviving the stupidity of this era, preferably without killing the
woman that was practically Tera's only guide here.

Digging the dye she had placed under the rock that edged the pool, in the thick and uneven glass jar
that had been part of what Shimiko had gone into town to fetch for the family clan, Terazawa
returned to the laundry efforts and spoke with the grey-haired woman overseeing it all.

Her (never) father's yukata and a few other pieces that were too stained to be left were gathered, a
small drop of so-dark-it-was-black green dye was dropped into a rusty kettle. After stirring it
slowly for what felt like hours, the newly forest green garments were fished out and set out to dry.

(Shes very nearly got slapped for the 'failure'. She-who-once-was-Erin stared flatly back at the man
posing as a father when he expressed his 'displeasure' the formerly soft grey cotton was now deep
green. She-who-was-Tera was deeply terrified the defiance would hurt. The man wasn't a bully, in
any measure of the term, just entitled with a false sense of superiority being male in a male
dominated society gave him. He had expectations for what was 'proper', which jarred against the
still developing sense of self that made up his supposed daughter. 'Brain-damaged' little Terazawa
that resulted ended up being the odd duck out, not proper in the least as a girl should be yet
conforming to expectations when it suited the situation. They were a hard kind of ninja, the type
that survived only with others of their blood working in concert, they'd use that anyways.)
They had names, she was sure, but Terzawa didn't want to know.

It wasn't cold, or even cruel, of her. She frequently had to remind another what her name was. 'Girl' was the title she was used to more than even the (faintly) familiar name. Appearance was the descriptor of choice, not personal names. Especially not in a world where the guy you saw standing guard or the woman that knew the secrets to herbal scented laundry would be gone as soon as you blinked.

Between the grief and homesickness, which never lightened up in any way but was acknowledged all the same, and the conclusion that they were all doomed anyways… she couldn't muster the interest to get attached.

Besides, no one really stood out to her as 'important'. As fogged as her other memories were becoming, with less and less interest paid to Erin's stress inducing life and leisure hobbies in the very real danger of the here and now, she knew or suspected what she was part of and it wouldn't matter in the end.

Polishing weapons was a task shared by all Sekanji family. The thick purple crests starting from a sharp point on the bridge of her nose that spanned most of her eyelid and ending in a thinner point almost to her temple, even if her eyes were a copper color and skin was a touch too tanned to do the coloring justice, was easily glimpsed at through a freshly sharpened knife's edge. There were kunai of a type, heavy knives without a hilt pommel or the ring handle and simply shaped as a trowel might be with scraps of fabric wrapped around the hilt, but her family preferred short swords if at all.

Orochimaru had canonically been an orphan, so it wasn't impossible that after her mother gave birth she might just end up dead with everyone else.

The eyelid coloring which was shared in the family, as well as various shades of pasty pale white skin, was all over the place color-wise. Greens were common, as well as blues, and there were reds here or there. Only her father's line had purple, it's why they ruled the family as head because purple was royal, and only the woman from River Country had the metallic eyes to go with it. Ergo, Terazawa was closely related to the future Snake Sannin and head of the Village Hidden in Sound.

That wasn't enough time, to find a way to survive whatever would kill them all off and just leave an orphaned child in another country.

In a way, it was relieving.

Not being the only one that knew what a shit-storm was coming, the only one perfectly placed to do anything about it. She could try to be one of those McGuffins, a plot point, through what she left behind if she had any idea how to. Terazawa was too far from Konoha, too early, and not part of the recognizable cast list.

The war between the Uchiha and Senju were still on-going, meaning most of the establishing eternally-at-odds thing between the two clan heirs or heads was already over with. Or maybe it was long over, the rumors only exaggerated due to fear of what a 'shinobi village' would mean for the rest of the world so no one was passing on the word it was established, but still too late for her to do anything.
Tera could just… past time until she died. Probably take a hard look at a map or three, because Orochimaru ended up in the middle of Fire in a shinobi village somehow and the rest of her family was… unconcerned with anything beyond the Land of Grass.

It would probably hurt, dying. She didn't really recall if she had died as Erin or what had happened that ended up with her consciousness displaced in a child's body. More than that, whatever it was that messed with her sense of self so badly she had only fragmented ideas of what happened those few days.

Therefore, even if there was a day or three of straight sprinting with a newborn baby in hand looming in her future, Terazawa didn't really mind.

She'd do her part, ensure the canon of this world started as it would. Then… either she'd readjust as a simple farm-girl or hermit-herbalist or die.

It didn't really sound all that bad to her right now.

(ooo000ooo)

Shimiko barely survived giving birth.

Thus rendered bedridden, Terazawa had been tasked as her hands while she cared for the newborn. 'Aka-chan' for now as a name still had to be thought up, the baby girl (what?) fussed weakly the first few days until a more balanced diet was given to the exhausted mother and settled them both out from the pseudo-starvation.

It was entirely possible to starve to death even if you still ate. Scurvy was the disease for those that didn't get enough fruit or greens, she knew that much at least.

Tera subtly sabotaged the (so-called) 'healer', dumping a lot of the exotic and possibly poisonous teas prescribed out in the grass surrounding the simple two-room home in exchange for an alternate willow bark tincture the older woman taught her while she had been pregnant and needed the headache reliever. Shimiko barely had the energy to wonder why it all tasted the same, belatedly covered with some berries and fruit juices scavenged from the kitchen pit before she could, and drunk it obediently.

A week passed, the newborn being dubbed 'Momomi' (written with the kanji for 'professor' and 'work' which combined made 'lesson'), before Katsutarō returned to the little house. As the woman had gotten absolutely no stronger even as her second daughter developed into a less fragile creature, the man eyed her sourly then sniffed at the second girl-child presented to him before abruptly leaving again.

Terazawa would've figured that was that, had her mother not said something.

"Tera-chan," whisper-soft, her voice was still sure and placid even as those coppery eyes narrowed at her, "what are you up to?"

Even with the excuse of 'sabotage' to hide behind, Shimiko had never assumed her daughter understood less of what was going on. If anything, she seemed to expect more after that hazy summer day when things snapped together and she realized what was going on. Several months of watching her learn to conceal herself, even with most of it taken up by her pregnancy, had not changed that sharp regard that implied the (not)-girl's cover was blown a long time ago.

"I do not know how to take care of a child." Tera offered equally as placidly, concealing the truth behind what was still true. There was no way to outright lie to a sensor of the type she and her
mother was, so that route of dismissing blame was ignored. "You raised me, therefore ensuring my senior is kept alive to do so is only natural."

Burning copper bored into tempered copper, earning neither so much as a blink for an eternity's worth of moments.

Eventually, when Momomi decided to weigh in on her sister's side by starting to fuss with discomfort, their mother hummed in non-answer as her attention was redirected.

"You will be a good big sister, Tera-chan." Shimiko observed in an oddly deadly soft voice before the younger girl could retreat for some lukewarm water drawn from the well that morning. "Ensure Momo-chan has nothing to fear, won't you?"

The weight behind that implication, when she had spent the whole week avoiding the very thought, crashed into Tera's chest with the force of a falling boulder. Only managing a tight nod in the mother's direction, the girl fled to bury her mind with numbing chores a newborn caused.

If Tera and Momo were the only ones to have the coppery eyes and purple eye-markings… pale skin was common of the rest of the family. She might not be Orochimaru's sister or aunt but mother.

Erin had not been in a committed relationship to ever think of maybe having children, and Terazawa was way too young to be comfortable with that thought as well. Even still, social norms of this era was marriage by fourteen with at least one brat on the way by then.

Orochimaru was kind of an asshole, right? Would it be much of a loss if there wasn't a Snake Sannin? (Yes.)

If he was relying on Tera to give birth to him, he had a long wait ahead of himself.

But… she had sort of looked forward to the brat's appearance. As a sort of sign that she was no longer needed, that her involvement was over and done with.

(Shimiko never recovered from the difficult birth, and two years later they buried her with the rest of the recovered bodies of the Sekanji family near the base of the mountain that framed their home. Two years of whispered instruction in arts not normally taught to Sekanji girls, not even their few shinobi, around and behind her husband's back to prepare for her eventual and inevitable death. So Terazawa could instruct Momomi once the older woman was gone. Katsutarō took another wife not days after the River native's death, one with green eye markings to go with her flat black eyes and white skin only half a decade older than his eight-year-old eldest. That girl religiously avoided her husband's daughters from another woman, put off by the creepy blank metallic eyes that practically dared her to try interfering with how Terazawa raised Momomi. A few months after that their grandmother, the woman that had directed Tera around in her chores after Shimiko became unable, died and left her double-room home to her granddaughters. Katsutarō then gladly forgot he ever had girl-children for several years.)
Entering the Rōmon

There were benefits to being one's own, as well as drawbacks.

Of course, they weren't truly alone in a compound-village made up of family members. Terazawa directed the still developing and growing Momomi with pitching in when they required something, laundry day was shared by the entire family and everyone ate from a communal pot as the family was semi-notorious for poison use and the odd sudden death wasn't all that unusual even here.

Teaching the girl the fan and blade-dances their mother taught her was painfully nostalgic, even if Tera hadn't actually become that attached to the doomed Shimiko. Repeating the same lectures and lessons under the willow tree on the banks of the pond dredged the memories of her receiving the same, from another that shared their eye coloring and usually had something wet and often juicy at hand for the few passive hours.

Sensory training was practically nonexistent as it either was and could be developed or wasn't and nothing could be done, so until Momo questioned the sixth sense she did little about it. Herbology was something shared by all, Terazawa made a point to learn all the tinctures the so-called 'healer' knew then develop them into the poisons they originated from.

Apparently in some silent fit of blame-slinging, as nothing seemed to happen from that.

Chakra control was male-only, yet with the death of nearly ten men since she last counted it was now allowed if not encouraged for the women to develop it. Training, as in physical fighting with one another, was also gender-limited. What little she knew of both was her mother's work, taught and done in the dead of night because while she wasn't aware what consequences doing it would earn her she was aware it had been kept silent for a reason.

Furthermore, if Tera wanted something more for Momo... she had to earn it.

Which meant either more chores, to be worth an extra indulgence, or go out and get it herself.

With how little she even knew the people around her even if they called her family, which their mother's non-native standing might've had something to do with the absent-more-than-intended snubbing in the compound even if they had the purple markings to denote a close relation to the family head, Tera opted to go out and get things for the sisters. Little things like ribbons for Momo's hair or a doll she desperately wanted for her third birthday after their mother's death, a set of bladed fans forged for mid-sized girl hands instead of the child set she gifted to her little sister to learn with as she couldn't yet wield the adult weapons with her short size, or just additives to their meals so neither were hurting for essential vitamins or minerals.

Keeping things in good repair was the hard part, as well as entertaining a child when all Tera wanted to do was crawl into bed after a long day of chores or work. Their roof sprung a leak shortly after the two of them moved in and their so-called father happily forgot their very existence, and investigating that when walking on walls was not a trick taught to girl-children was vexing as well as slightly dangerous. Repairing it when she had no blessed clue how carpentry was done required asking questions of a highly wary craftsman in the nearby non-ninja village and the risks traveling incurred her.

Tera held no illusions about her level of skill. She could defend herself from those that never trained to hold a weapon easily enough, from young ninja sprinkled around the countryside if she had a bit of luck and the time to prepare, yet when it came to shinobi trained and honed in battle...
she was less than an obstacle.

Her chakra control was decent, but she had bred true to their mother's natures. Wind and water, whereas her little sister dropped the wind for their father's earth. Wind was phenomenally tricky, double-edged and dangerous to try wielding as a weapon without a pre-structured jutsu to guide it that wasn't taught to girl-children, and while water was everywhere it wasn't in the concentrations needed to wield against another in a snap instant. Not in the oft-dry prairie she lived in.

Leaving her with her sensor skills and poisons. Poisons were a clan-wide fascination, easy to obtain and with the right acting easy to employ.

If it came down to it, Tera held enough poison in her sleeves to down an entire army as well as the blades she kept on her for immediate self-defense. Her mother kept wire in them, and that had been her choice. Patterning her clothing and sense of dress off the former River native was… less in remembrance and more practicality.

Besides, her mother wasn't using her kimonos anymore. Which left the yukatas and few kimono Tera earned as the niece of the clan head to her baby sister's use when no one else would bother themselves over how the girl was dressed.

The only way to improve her few kunoichi skills, which were pathetic in this day and age as to be nearly common for anyone with the interest of living past the hour, would be to go out and find a ninja from someone else's clan to match wits and blades against. As a girl she wasn't invited to the few shinobi training sessions available for the few men in the clan, so she was stuck between training without a teacher or picking fights with someone that might prove to be important down the line later on.

That all being the case, she did not want to match her steel to an Inuzuka combo's claws.

Where the shinobi and dog came from was beyond Tera, as far as she knew their local area only held the Sekanji, Yamanaka, Kurama, and maybe a few Uchiha if they were in need of something. The Inuzuka Clan were a nomadic clan of shinobi, wandering with the game animals instead of pitching tents to turn a section of land into a home. They could be anywhere or nowhere, depending.

In what was recognizably her sour luck, Tera and the Inuzuka pair ended up hunting the same boar for dinner. As she looked like a Sekanji poison user on sight, even with the eyes being metallic and flat black paste smeared in broad streaks around the eye covering the markings of their family, and they were notorious for their poison skills… the Inuzuka decided that she had 'stolen' his and his dog’s kill and worse yet made it inedible because she and the rest of her kind probably ate poisoned things.

She didn't bother apologizing, for one it would be wasted as the other wouldn't trust her enough to take her word, and if she refused the suggestion that her clan ate poison it might backfire later on in an Inuzuka raid on their food stores. The male was spoiling for a fight anyways, wasting time on dead ends to delay the inevitable didn't seem like it was worth it.

Instead, she dipped into the unfortunately few poison bombs she had on her.

Known for their dogs, their feral looks, and a literally killer sense of smell, it was entirely unsurprising the male dodged the dense plume of poison spewing out easily. It did pull him away from the so-contested boar, and the poison was one that could be cooked off by heat so contaminating the meat was an non-issue, so Tera darted back into the great grasslands that made up her home country.
Instead, as the male probably thought correctly that her main weapon was the poisons her family was known for, she gripped the fans that lay within the bandages wrapped from elbow to wrist. The mid-sized, made for a teenager's broader hand, fans with the still spotless blue silk she was about to irreparably stain.

Falling into the stance drilled into her since long before she could clearly recall in this life, Tera held out one to deceive before her and held the other half open to attack with behind. Her opponent barreled on without seemingly noticing, racing neck and neck with the dog hot on his heels, only for both to suddenly split around her.

As the dog held less chakra, truly felt like an animal, and didn't have a cruel human mind to back it up, Tera deemed it a lesser secondary concern and kept her senses trained for that feral burning that signified the Inuzuka.

With a sudden jump, she spun herself up and around the male's attempt to claw open her back and slashed out with her fans to score three shallow nicks into his left arm. The one overextended to claw her.

He kicked backwards once he had the space, nailing her dead center of her stomach and about flinging her tiny form yards away from himself. Barely touching ground, the girl dropped a fan to grab a handful of the strong grass and bodily pulled herself forward and away from the dog's lunge for her neck. She flung the loose sleeve of her yukata into the canine's maw instead, and it bit into her poison store.

Most were designed to kill humans, not animals. There was still a lot of poison, and worse ingested or breathed in before it tried not to, in the tiny packs of lethal substances stored in the pocket sewn into her sleeves.

Thankfully no contact poisons, she wasn't yet confident enough to use such things. It spilling onto her skin would just mean she needed to scrub down with a chalky powder kept in the hollow of her geta afterwards to prevent irritation. Some water would not be amiss, but again that was for later.

The dog was dead, both she and the Inuzuka knew that. Gagging, the canine tried to deny it, but it staggered only a few steps as it's muzzle foamed while lethal substances interacted with both it's biology and each other.

A wordless howl of pure rage made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, snatching the discarded fan back up Tera dove to the side out of sheer blind prudence before trying to orientate herself in order to see her attacker.

He stopped hard at the dog's side, helplessly taking in the weakly twitching animal's condition and a few sniffs of the spilled powders, before whirling on her with a truly ugly look in his eye.

"If you had not picked a fight, it would have lived." Tera observed calmly, long-ingrained habit learned from ducking her so-called father's irritable eyes and wrath making her seem more composed than she was. "Control your rage, Inuzuka. Before it controls you."

Her icy words nicely disguised the hard knot of terror in her chest, sliding down her spine to lodge itself somewhere where her guts resided. However, with his sense of smell… or could he only scent the poison right now?

Barred yellow, and a few missing, teeth were snapped in her direction in response. Flexing his claws a few times, the male reached into his tattered trousers to pull out spiked knuckles. "I would've been just fine maybe clawing your face up, bitch. Now? I'm going to gut you and leave
you to die. Maybe choking on your own poisons too."

Wonderful. Hopefully their so-far-absent uncle would consent to take in Momomi once her death was confirmed. Terazawa literally had nothing else to live for, and honestly…

...she didn't really want to die.

Not this way, when it could be used to hurt her little sister. Her sweet little sister would bawl, and likely piss off one of their relatives by doing so. Becoming too attached was a large faux-pas in this world, death was all too common for attachments to do anything but hurt in the end and if you had them you had to accept that risk. Even close family wasn't spared, there just weren't enough feelings to go around once people started dying off.

'Bitch' was pretty tame of a slur, really. She might not yet be fully ten years of age, but being aware that a balanced diet would help more than just meat to grow with made for a slightly taller than average girl. As far as a provocation was concerned, it was really weak and a sign for just how upset she had made her opponent.

Good, rage made sloppy work. Widening the small sliver of possibility that she might yet survive this.

Both fans were flicked open this time, resettling herself into a resting-stance Tera impassively tracked the Inuzuka with both eyes and her other senses. Inuzukas weren't known for their genjutsu skills, though that just meant they were likely due for a specialist to take everyone else off guard.

His feet moved with his burning-rage tainted chakra, the sounds coincided as well in the pattern she had been listening to since birth, and she could see exactly how much he shifted in her view.

The chakra built for a moment, causing the Sekenji girl's eyes to widen in alarm before she bolted.

It was the dead of summer, what the hell was that idiot thinking?

Fire gouted from the man's crooked finger held up before his face, but Tera was no longer in the fight. Abandoning any pretense of combat readiness, any desire for the boar to supplement her and her sister's bland meals, and any remote interest in seeing how her skills stacked up to someone more trained than her, the girl flat out ran to where she knew a river meandered through the plains.

With any luck it wouldn't have dried up yet under the scorching heat, even a trickle would be useful.

The fire chakra messed with her senses something awful, but even still she could pick out the greater burning force tainted with near-irrational fury as it barreled after her. Through his own flames, which served the moron right for starting a wildfire when the grasses were truly parched.

Holding both fans closed, wind chakra would do nothing to help right now even if she wished to risk tattering her own hands and arms when coated in her own poisons, and wielding them as the daggers they could be she fended off the first heavily slung weapon aimed at her back through sheer luck of a perfectly timed backwards glance.

Tera whirled again with the motions of her fans, flicking one open to confuse the eye with the bold colors as she attempted to ram the points of the other into the Inuzuka's spine. He twisted at the last second, not as sinuously as she could but still with an edge of inhuman grace, so she only scored a glancing hit off his leather clad side as he dug his claws into her hip.

Snapping closed the open fan, Tera shoved it through his neck when he thrust his head forward to
bite into her own.

Claws dug into her flesh reflexively, his off-hand occupied with clawing open the back of her left while his right tried to do enough damage in her hip to incapacitate her. Wrenching the fan in his throat out earned her another spraying shower of nauseating blood.

Or possibly… the nausea was from the poison seeping into her hip as that was the same side as the sleeve of poison the dog bit through.

The corpse hit the ground with a meaty thud, cushioned as it was by the dry grasses underfoot. Tera ignored him, already occupied with wrenching off one of her geta to get at the neutralizers kept on hand for just this sort of situation. A few moments spent stripping off her ruined rags, and she dumped half of the chalky powder into the deep slashes on her hip and the rest was used to scrub the light oily sensation her few liquid poisons left behind from her skin.

The wildfire would conceal her scent, maybe. Depending on when someone was sent for the… boy's...

Tera blinked down at her former opponent as her fingers stilled in feeling out how soiled her yukata was. The boy was older than her for sure, and his dog had been fully grown, but he wasn't exactly that much older. No facial hair, and from the dirt he was coated in that she mistook for stubble or a deep tan he had been pretty far out from wherever the Inuzuka Clan was right now.

Swallowing uneasily as she realized how lucky she had been he hadn't been older and more skilled, the budding poison mistress dropped the soiled clothing to the ground next to him.

The powders and liquids that had burst open when the dog attacked her would seriously mess with anyone trying to pick up her scent, and the wildfire was moving with startling quickness so she had to move before it caught up and burned the bodies and her top layer to ash.

It was just… pure luck alone she survive when he didn't. He even had a second, a partner, and she really only won because she shoved enough poisonous materials down the damn animal's gullet to cripple it into death instead of actually fight it which enraged the boy past the point of calculating his own survival over everything.

Entirely over nothing. The inuzuka could've had the boar with her well-wishes, she would've hunted the sows probably in the area instead had he not wanted to beat her up. Nothing she had on her would've be more than enough to survive a 'spar' with a semi-hostile shinobi, the poisons alone were all the 'ingest or breath in' child-safe variants her family allowed her.

Rubbing more of the powdery neutralizer into her hip until the blood made it stick together into a sort of paste to cover it, which was likely to become infected if she didn't wash it out sometime soon, Tera uncomfortably adjusted the thin 'under clothes' she was left in. Her yukata had protected her stomach and upper chest from the saw-bladed grasses, the baggy leggings that were now torn and bleeding would just allow the blades to irritate her injury as she returned home.

Running would aggravate her wounds and allow whatever bits of poison that seeped into it to spread, but taking her time would just allow the possibility of someone hunting her down and being caught injured and alone.

She still had to outrun the wildfire the stupid boy had started, so there was nothing for it. 

(Terazawa ended up with a fever, five deep and infected puncture wounds decorating a hip, and lost a few pounds of weight she really couldn't afford to lose in the end... but she survived. Her
successful if delirious return alerted her family that the Inuzuka Clan would be passing through shortly, enabling them to mount an effective resistance to the raids the nomadic shinobi clan conducted to live. Momomi ended up hosted by the sisters' uncle while her elder recovered ungracefully under the aging eye of the family's healer, cementing her dislike of living anywhere or with anyone other than her elder sister. The service Tera performed mostly unwillingly for the Sekanji clan earned the two of them some measure of goodwill, that finally outweighed the suspicion the 'Yamanaka sabotage' had earned the elder years ago.)
Passing the Komainu Guards

Momomi set her chin on Terazawa's unscarred hip, as her elder sister did the same to her, and the girls lay curled up together on the thin mattress that passed as a sleeping mat. Fall winds were rattling their slightly shabby home, knocking the framed sheets of rice paper against each other as they were denied a way into their small two-room home.

It wasn't cold enough yet to require a blanket on top of the wool winter-weight clothing, the musty and possibly mouldering thing required airing out sometime soon and was left in the cupboards of the heavy armoire left to them after their grandmother's passing.

Momo sunk her tiny child fingers into the heavy sweep of black hair her sister had let down to pull over herself for the warmth. It was free of the contact poison the elder informed the younger their mother had once worn in her hair, and therefore safe to play with for once so Tera didn't snap at the girl and scramble to dig out something to counteract the toxins.

The slight change in how she was treated was almost startling for the older sister. Ever since she nearly killed herself trying to provide for the younger girl, because the clan really didn't see what use two more girls would do for them and so did the bare minimum as if they survived all well and good but if not oh well, but now…

...now she was being given help and the contrast was ugly.

One of the clansmen had actually checked over their hovel of a home for winter-readiness this year, instead of leaving it up to her to do when she noticed it happening. The small repairs were ignored, probably for her or spring to do, and the roof was slated to be re-thatched with the others that needed it as it would be easier to gather the grasses all at once instead of one by one. The fact this was their third fall, soon to be fourth winter, on their own meant something.

Not a whole lot of good, really.

Being ignored was the status quo, and something Tera could deal with easily enough. Being ignored also meant the family wouldn't demand anything from her in return for doing more than just chores for their basic living needs.

Re-thatching the home she and Momo live in was not something she could do alone, and it terrified her what would be asked in return.

Tera wasn't at the age where she felt safe in childbirth, wouldn't be for a decade more, therefore she wanted nothing to do with getting a husband. Even if their family barely had more than two handfuls of men left, she didn't want to be part of how they were going to rebuild their numbers. Even for the 'safety' of more numbers, because she survived and if a tiny increment of care had been given to her development the last few years she might've done better than that.

A few more years, when she was 'of age' for that nonsense, of tiny things… of fixing their decaying home or small comforts given and she might end up in a situation where pressure was applied to marry her off. Thing she couldn't do or fix on her lonesome, like replacing the likely mold infested framed paper walls or being given some of the old cooking implements for her poison making or even just being fed more than the bare minimum, would add up until she had quite the 'familiar debt' to discharge.

Worse of all, it wasn't even maliciously intended. There was no hostile reasonings behind the
manipulations, it was *probably* done 'for her own good' according to the adults around her. As she wasn't a 'risk' any longer, *when was she deemed so*, and had the prospects as the eldest niece of their clan's head she was probably expected to marry well.

As in likely her 'future husband' would be twenty or so years older than her, and not looking for a kunoichi wife but a broodmare for sons. Any besides the first two or three boys would likely be sent back to her family to bolster their numbers, unless a child-accident or three happened.

It wasn't even all that unexpected, either. Three of the girls half a decade older than her had already married out to various others, some the regular people that lived just over the plains a bit in that village near them and one to a minor Waterfall merchant in exchange for a few pricey things the family needed to replace. They all had been perfectly happy to be married off as chattel, leaving the harsh living a shinobi compound demanded of the residents. Her nauseatingly young stepmother had two brats, and from the look of things was happily working on baby number three.

Terazawa could tell herself it was normal, *expected* of a girl of her breeding and even that it might not actually be that bad, all she wanted. Did so until even the usually sweet and placid Momo became unnerved by her distracted irritation.

It didn't help.

Erin had been more than schooled on how the human body worked, what and why things were either unhealthy or bad for any standard of living. Tera couldn't entirely recall *why*, but knew the basis.

One of the things she knew, from an interest in historical dramas that likely only had a passing acquaintance with what really happened in some other lifetime, was that nobles ate rich or fatty foods with little exercise to burn the unneeded calories off and that was why they were mostly fat or riddle with health complications. Which, as they had a higher standard of living, did nothing for their life-expectancy.

...which also meant that if she could find the correct poison, to exaggerate or worsen any symptom of consumption to the point of death, she might not have to suffer through a marriage of convenience.

Tera shifted slightly, flicking the coppery eyes down to consider her little sister thoughtfully.

In all honesty, all her 'kills' so far were done without thought or intent. Mainly, she killed to save herself.

Premeditated murder was honestly not all that far removed, if she was pressed to be honest. Contemplating it did disturb her slightly, if only because right up until now she could be described as probably the *least* bloodiest kunoichi in Grass.

Likely because 'kunoichi' were a rarity. Inuzukas had kunoichi, were the *only* women she ever saw fighting because they could in the scuffles earlier that summer, but mainly women didn't fight for more than self-defense or to get away from an attacker so she could rush to her husband or his guards.

Claiming the title for herself was part of her 'childhood rebellion'. Apparently allowed because the Sekanji family hadn't wanted to risk the 'damage' she had trying to refuse when her own father couldn't care less. Now that she apparently could work through, or around, the 'compromised' part of her the family would take up interest in her movements again. Limitedly, but as long as she was proving useful...
Terazawa wouldn't make it easy for them, but the fact remained there were things a nine-year-old girl couldn't honestly do on her lonesome. Some of the things a five-year-old girl like her little sister required.

Tera might not be interested in a husband, and would delay Momo's marriage as late as she could get away with, but social norms might mean more to the younger girl than the elder.

Having little to no connections to anyone in their family, apparently half from their self-defense and half through her own indifference, meant she was perfectly alright with being labeled either 'damaged goods' or 'spinster'. However other women would dislike the labels, it would provide her with a bit of security to hide herself from the 'goodwill' of her family.

Her scars didn't yet earn her that safety, the puncture wounds that grew infected and cost her nearly two months in bed were tiny scars in reality. They'd lighten the older she got, and she wasn't yet done growing so the possibility they would smooth out was still there.

Being able to hunt her own dinner might, as that was definitely not 'woman's work' in this day and age.

Tera had to learn to fight, better than to just 'survive' against being attacked. She also needed stronger poisons than were taught and allowed to be carried by women in the clan, as poison resistance one earned through handling the substances and ingesting tiny increments would impact her oh-so important ability to bear children.

Risky, stupid things that wouldn't really help her in keeping herself in one piece to keep raising her little sister as her mother had demanded of her with that deadly soft tone.

It was that or abandon the girl eventually anyways when the Sekanji family decided her worth was more in who she could marry and the sons she might bear than her poison making skills.

Stuck between a rock and a hard place, and a pointy slow death by a thousand cuts. Tera sighed heavily, closing the eyes that once belonged to their mother she now only shared with her little sister.

(Eventually, Terazawa focused on poisons as the easiest and more reliable method by which to secure her freedom. The clan had a wide variety of local and rare plants they cultivated to make their poisons, none of which they would allow a girl access to, that Tera had to expand upon and explore herself. She started by expressing an interest in medicine, already known as she had made up a few of her own personal poisons from former remedies. It would take the rest of the winter, when most the muscle work in producing the clan's more complicated poisons was done, before she had three personally developed variants to try testing. A large number of the surrounding game animals suddenly came down with mysterious illnesses and sudden deaths attributed to sabotage by another poison using clan, meaning hunters had to range even farther to find something safe to bring back. Which fit Tera's needs nicely anyways, even if that required her to leave Momomi behind for longer and longer intervals.)
Utterly lucking out on the second non-Sekanji shinobi she ever saw, the Nara had barely bothered to disturb himself when the two caught sight of each other while they both were gathering herbs, the third proved…

...interesting in the end.

Ranging in the opposite direction that time, because if a lone Nara was *that* near the border of Grass and Fire then nothing in the Land of Fire would be all that interesting to her yet, Terazawa trekked into the rocky foothills of Earth.

There were cork trees in Earth, a few but there, which meant tree-walking without leaving easily recognizable marks on the only tree within miles of her home. Some of the dry mountainous herbs might prove interesting to try developing poisons from too.

With a collection of cuttings for her personal stores, sketches and rubbings to identify them later marked down with the *hellishly expensive* writing paper and charcoal kept in waxed cloth to prevent smearing, she spent a full morning carefully exploring how one would go about walking up the side of a tree.

Carefully, because she had no desire to pluck splinters out of her legs and because this was open land where anyone might be hunting something a little more intelligent than game animals.

While investigating the needles with an eye to see if gathering a supply for leaf-sticking exercises for her little sister would be possible, the budding poison mistress' chakra sense picked up on a watcher. She almost wouldn't have noticed, had the individual remained outside her range instead of trying to creep closer.

Tera stared without seeing the fragile and dry needle rolling between two fingers, concentrating on that blip of *not-natural* earthen feel she could only just pick up. Too far out to be identified as anything more than a chakra using animal, which in itself was a concern to begin with, and there was little that could provide enough cover to sneak up on a semi-aware person around.

What occupied the Land of Earth?

She never did really hear much about the shinobi clans that occupied the foothills of Earth, it was part of the known Inuzuka hunting grounds and therefore the nearly feral clan of shinobi had driven off most everything but the hardiest of people. The Land of Fire shinobi were more of a nuisance honestly, they ended up talked about more.

In a way, that wasn't good. For that meant whatever was lurking in these rocky, wind-swept hills was a lot more stealthy or had a habit of ensuring they weren't talked about through any or all means possible.

She didn't want to tangle with that, whoever it may be.

Plucking up the basket of herbs, and damming the traditional black eye markings that were required before any member of the Sekanji family was allowed outside of their tiny plot of a home village that made her recognizable as a poison user, she nixed the idea of gathering up cork needles for future lessons and instead made her unhurried way back into the Land of Grass.

She had a split-second to pick up the tiny rock that had some insane speed barreling towards her
head, as in a pebble imbued with intent-laced chakra skipping through the air effortlessly even if wind-resistance was a thing, what the hell?

Bolting, which gave away she was aware of the watcher and the attack, the Sekanji kunoichi picked up a zigzag pattern to her steps. Basically making thirty degree to sixty degree turns every couple steps, which from vague possibly-unreliable knowledge she knew would throw off a sniper's aim.

Because that was what she was up against, a chakra user that found a way to kill from meters away using a tiny projectile. Something she knew full well, using tiny chemical particles to hopefully kill off anyone unwise enough to get in reach of her.

Three more pebbles impacted the gritty dirt underfoot around her, honing in even with the randomness to her steps. Before she could risk a near-hit, and find out if a pebble-ballistic could do the same as the guns in Erin's lifetime, Tera dropped her basket and dove to the opposite side than she would be expected to turn given her zigzag running and submerged herself into the river that had carved this passage into Earth over a millenia.

Water was honestly the element Tera knew best, it was less wild than wind and didn't harm her unnecessarily. Making a tiny breathing tube connecting her lips to the surface was something her mother had taught her in the weekly baths she had been allowed while Shimiko was alive.

It did nothing to help her senses, as being enveloped in water she was manipulating just made everything fuzzy the further out she tried to pick something up. Water would break the velocity any pebble was chucked through, and indeed a few crashed into the surface only to lose the bone-breaking force for a slow sink.

One cut off her tube of air, which was quickly reestablished before she spluttered on the water.

Half of the packets of poison she had on her had been wrapped in the fragile variation of rice paper, meaning this river was now slightly tainted. At least for a little while, and good thing the clan boiled what it drank to evade any rival poison clan's attempts to sabotage them. Her makeup concealing what degree she was related to the Sekanji clan head from casual view was based in grease, meaning it wouldn't wash away in unfortunate rainstorms or dips in various bodies of water.

What she had left, to spring the trap her basket left on the shore was bait for, were her waterlogged fans and a handful of blades. Or the two utterly clunky stone vials full of a murky green plant ooze, which were more lethal than the 'standard' poisons she lost due to soggy paper.

They were also untested.

Well… not with human testing. Even knowing she needed to develop her craft more in order to evade novice mistakes another poison user could hunt her down though, she didn't feel right poisoning off a whole village just to see what various dosages would do to a living being.

She did know it would kill any decent sized animal such as the old nag that a farmer that lived three days travel outside her usual hunting grounds once owned, which was the extent her rookie experimental poisoning attempts went. Made from the dried and ground leaves and flowers of wild corn cockle, one of the few poisonous plants she knew of that commonly grew in Grass country, it was more an ingested poison than a combat one.

She was hoping it would work if she coated something sharp with it just as well.

Staring through a few feet of water was irritating, and not just because of the flexing and rippling
surface as the river flowed along. The cold was also uncomfortable, but preferable to being in the open with someone chucking rocks at her head. Tera watched closely for anything, any movement or more rocks that might proceed someone prodding an unknown basket abandoned without apparent cause.

Manipulating water outside of it's usual currents was hard, but not impossible, for her to accomplish. It just took more effort than she found necessary, but in a pinch…

Whipping a thin ribbon of water out and lashing around a foot over where her head would stand netted her contact with something, the band of chakra laced water wrapping over the obstacle and dragging it into the depths of the river with her. A utterly nondescript man ended up upside down in front of her face, the young girl narrowing her copper eyes at him as the air that had formerly been in his lungs bubbled out of his nose.

Thrashing, eerily stronger than his physique suggested but unable to connect to the rock and mud that made up the bed of the river as she burned through her chakra keeping him level where he was to make use of that, Tera was utterly discomfited when her apparent victim finished drowning and turned into a few stacked rocks.

Electing to not wait and see the fallout of her attempted murder, another thin strand snatched her basket off the river's banks and the remains of her chakra was used to keep the expensive heavy writing paper within dry as she allowed the current to carry her off and back into the Land of Grass.

The cuttings and plant life would probably benefit from a wash, anyways.

Eventually the formerly deep fast currents trickled into a shallow but even faster rapids, forcing the young girl to crawl out of her safe haven or risk bashing herself and her various sharp implements against rock.

Panting as she fought through the drain, she had used more of her ill-trained chakra today than she ever had but had to in order to not drown, she wearily dragged her sodden self into the brush starting the expansive plains she lived upon.

That tactic probably wouldn't work in Earth again, or she was deeming it so in order to never tip off her surviving victim she nearly killed him via drowning. Knowing her already abysmal luck and how it worked, it would just figure that the few times she would be able to use it safely would eventually lull her into a false sense of security.

As she failed to kill the ninja-sniper, she would never be sure it would work again.

Tera had… forgotten clones were a thing. Elemental clones even, not illusionary copies that was the hallmark of precise genjutsu use. Most chakra use was primitive from what she had expected, and either a rare jutsu with a few hand-signs passed down through family lines or learned through repeated exposure being the target.

It was more normal to just shape chakra, skipping the internal manipulation as flubbing something when doing so was nasty and healing in this era was equally as primitive. Experimenting with chakra based jutsus was… lethal when done wrong.

The water ribbons were her mother's trick, done on the sly while she had been bedridden but unable to not help Tera get toddler Momo into an ever dreaded bath.

Blinking the coppery eyes inherited from the woman slowly, the tired girl assumed she became
more maulden when drained beyond safe limits. The small breather had at least given her an idea for how to safely gain the experience she was lacking, and some of the chill had evaporated under the harsh sunlight.

Unfortunately, it was only mid-way into spring and therefore being wet as she was would just mean getting more chilled unless she risked herself to dry out the kimono.

Either way, she should doctor her arms with the neutralizer scrub to avoid irritation from her poisons dissolving into the river water. That was, if the powdered chalk survived the dunking in the compartment of her geta.

She picked herself and her basket of a few mountain-scrub cuttings up to start the long walk back to familiar territory, pondering if shadow clones transferred memories back to the original then did water clones do the same?

If it did, she could finally have a sparring partner. Herself wasn't a great one, especially as then she would only become used to fighting another of her own size and skill set, but she wasn't the only ninja-type she knew. Besides which, she could poison her own clones more easily than poisoning another human just to see what it did.

If she really had little scruples with murder, either through familiarity or the brain chemistry of this body or desentizing through exposure, then she didn't want to see where that rabbit hole would eventually lead.

Orochimaru had been an asshole. It might've just ran through the family from the look of things.

Drowning was not a particularly nice or quick way to go.

(Terazawa experimented for weeks on end to reverse engineer a water clone technique through hearsay and half-forgotten rumor. Her first partial success was a limp copy of her own hand that lasted a second, including the shiny burn patch she had earned through experimenting with poisons. The sheer number of times the water exploded on her during her testing led Momomi to assume their roof had sprung another leak, as the wooden floor was nearly never dry. She eventually had to stop for nearly three months as Kusa entered the dry summer period and water became heavily rationed out to weather the scorching heat. In the fall of her tenth year, her semi-missing uncle and clan head of the Sekanji clan started mentioning marriage around her which made her hide out in the far distances of their homeland and experiment with the various rivers or bodies of water that weren't common for their terrain. Eventually, in the grand total of six months and nearly most of a seventh, she succeeded in making a clone of water chakra that was unsuited to sparring but entirely susceptible to poison experiments.)
Beholding the Pagoda

Momomi's first trip outside their family home was a week-long one, the longest Terazawa could get away with dragging her heels on. A simple trip out to the near-city that seemingly sprung up out of nowhere after the early days of Tera's childhood, in hopes of finding a peddler that might have some of the Land of Wind's almost infamous glass for sale.

Not to buy, just to see about it. Even selling her painstakingly manufactured tinctures and tonics for healing to various merchants, she wouldn't have enough money to purchase glass.

What limited glasswork there was available far outside of Wind's borders appeared bulky and warped, novice-made rather than skilled wares crafted by masters. A few jars here or there was apparently an embarrassment of riches, even if the Sekanji family had a fair few storing the really strong poisons they had in stock yet had to hunt for their dinner on most nights.

Windowpanes Tera vaguely recalled, pushing past the mentally choking haze of grief and homesickness to Erin's lifetime. She would murder for a solid wall fitted with windowpanes so she wasn't shut in a dark and dreary paper house every night.

She was always half-scared their walls would just tear apart when the rainy season came. Wet paper was not a good insulator either, and the damp probably killed more than a few of the elderly or very young every time the seasons changed.

That was a pipe dream, really. At the moment the only ones that could afford that kind of wealthy indulgence would be nobles, and she had lucked out in not meeting any so far in this lifetime and aimed to keep that going.

Sometimes, Tera became fruitlessly frustrated with this world. It was often backwards, entirely and senselessly brutal, and so... so bloody. Not really somewhere she wanted her baby sister to grow up.

The sweet and quiet girl that faithfully copied her stances and learned to manipulate water at her sister's knee on shadowy nights was slowly losing that innocent side of herself. Not by any obvious method, just wear and tear from an existence watching a few handful more of their family leave their compound and never return and feeling a sort of backlash from the indifferent cautiousness they all had for those distantly related.

The press of uncertainty and unease caused by the trickle of fighters they did have dwindling down to less than what they needed to maintain their numbers or any sense of security didn't help.

She didn't have a choice in that honestly, and their mother had seen no issue with bringing them into the world and it had been less dire when she had been barely five so passing judgement on that was something she was unwilling to do.

"Sister," a tiny brush of the hand against Tera's hakama earned the younger girl a backwards glance, especially for the way she was going to evade identifying either of them closer than just Sekanji but still give her respect as her elder, "are we expecting... anything?"

"I was not, my first visit." Murmured the older girl softly, curling her hands within the wide sleeves of her outfit so she could grab either her poisons or the bladed fans that were slowly becoming fit for her hands. "Much to my own detriment."

The literal city that had sprung up, situated squarely on a main trade road that wound into Earth
and connected to Fire's less rocky highways to just about everywhere, was... not really all that impressive.

Not to someone that recalled what a 'modern' city would look like.

Tamachi, as the former collection of huts had been named sometime when she had been looking for anything else to occupy her mind with, had grown to the point it now had basic walls. Bamboo walls, from the few forests of them that broke up the grassy plains of Grass, but walls.

Which would mean what was contained within was pricy or worth it to steal, thus why they had the fragile security.

Sometimes, Tera despaired over her own self more than normal.

The older she got, the more skilled and the less time and effort she had to put into the basics she and her sister needed, the more time she had to think. Which wasn't entirely a good thing, barely mastered water clone issue and poison experimentations aside.

As she had more time to herself, the more she drifted back across long-since abandoned thoughts to how she once was. The panic attacks had died off as well as the exhausting uncertainty and disorientation, she didn't miss those in the least.

The thoughts, ideals, and problems a so-called 'modern' mind had caused her when she had been too young and in too deep to deal with were another thing.

Knowing of modern luxuries and being forced to make due without them was a torture in itself. Food preservations, the exotic cooking and spices even the middle-class could taste, near-sinful comforts that were day to day realities merely teased her memory these days. The bitter realization that Erin once had the greatest library of information at her fingertips but never put that to use learning something useful stung, and the medical advancements alone...

There was really little for it, as Tera had to survive in a world Erin had been too soft to survive in long.

The regrets still oozed a kind of bitter loathing within her mind, the bits of life Erin had been free to pursue but hadn't due to trivial concerns. The utter lack of such opportunities here highlighted them all in retrospective painful ways sometimes.

Like now, thinking back along the scientifically classified herbs and plants laboriously worked over again and again to refine pharmaceuticals from. The guesswork and sheer folk remedies of the now help her little when developing an untraceable poison she might use, as the underpinning reasons why they did this or that thing to the human body was all simply conjecture.

Sometimes well-studied conjecture, but the point remained there was very little solid fact to work from aside 'too much of this causes death'.

...and wasn't she a ever so pampered little princess?

Hard work never killed anyone, and if she pulled rare and entirely unknown complex poisons out of thin air she would earn herself more scrutiny than she could safely labor under. It was insultingly easy to keep the Sekanji clan out of her personal research, a false-journal made on scraps of the rice (really mulberry but who recalled that?) paper that also made up the walls of her home and a true one that looked more like the field journal she kept track of her herbology finds within.

Hidden in the sheets of paper drawings and sketches of various plant-life were the odd legend and
rumor, written in a very awkward and bastardized haiku-style. Certain words and actions corresponded with her experiments in learning her trade, the longer poems that occasionally had their own pages with supposedly mythological creatures documented the few successes so far.

Contemplating her pitiful progress so far, which really wasn't all that terrible for a almost preteen young girl if one discounted the advanced understanding another lifetime impressed on her, did not distract Tera from the understanding a few more shinobi than normal were present in Tamachi.

Momo, who didn't quite have her older sister's sensory range but had leaps and bounds to grow within, stuck as close as a burr to her elder as they wandered with the flow of traffic.

Again damming the stupid 'traditional' black eye markings that made it obvious what clan the girls hailed from, she hesitated only momentarily before pulling her hair sticks out. Dark, lanky, but more importantly poisoned hair fell in sheets around her, giving her something to hide her eyes with for the time being. Momo had less issue following suit, even if loose hair in this day and age meant loose women. The tiny sips of the antidote, really a strong antihistamine to prevent any angry skin rashes from forming, stored in a metal pendant disguised in one end of the brass stick she removed was shared between them while they had the freedom of movement.

They were young enough their hair would be overlooked as a slight complication on the road.

Obviously, no ninja worth their chakra was fooled.

Tera gripped her fans compulsively as the sisters were cornered by a sudden dead end that had either naturally occurred or was produced via genjutsu, depressingly she was sure it was really a wall and that her unfamiliarity of the town's development had cornered them instead. She didn't even need to turn around to tell there were now five individuals blocking them in behind them, and instead she sighed heavily.

The hand that reached out and seized a fist-full of her lanky hair was entirely expected, as was the blade held up to her throat.

"Did you have an issue to present? Or are you just assaulting two girls for the joy of it?" Tera asked wonderingly to the sky she was forced to look at, privately suspecting they weren't going to get off as lightly as that incident way back when she was with their mother. Literally her very first truly recallable memory in this world that wasn't just impressions or murky thoughts. "I must say, I am utterly unimpressed it took five of you to corner the two of us."

It was more than overkill, especially taking into account their ages. Obviously, from the height and solid form behind her, at least one was a fully grown and likely well trained shinobi hardened by several years of conflict.

A harsh tug on her hair was entirely unneeded. "Why don't you shut that shew mouth of yours?"

This whole 'nearly being killed and wondering who would take care of Momo' thing was starting to get tiring. Tera blankly gazed up at the sky as both she and her sister were intently inspected closely, only when the shortest of the group hissed out a sudden swear word that made her little sister startle and turn wide metallic eyes on him reprovingly.

The elder blinked, slightly derailed by the sight. That was... actually kind of adorable of her baby sister.

"Ken, drop the bitch. She's Sekanji, poison users." Being suddenly released was appreciated, the shove forward was also unnecessary. "You're probably already poisoned."
"He is, in fact." Confirmed the elder of the sisters blandly, turning to actually take in their opponents.

'Ken', if he hadn't switched positions with someone before she could turn which she doubted he could do fast enough to fool her senses, was a tall and impressively well-muscled man that likely didn't originate in Grass. Shorty that correctly identified the girls' originating family was a native of Grass or from Earth given his broad and flat features.

There was no others in sight, but still present in senses. Tera stared hard at one such blip, until a darkly scowling grizzled veteran type popped into existence between one blink and the next.

Odd, she didn't really blink all that often. It was unnerving to not blink, so she learned to get away with it as rarely as humanly possible.

Momo had occupied herself with staring at another such discrepancy while she coaxed the first one out, but apparently her little sister didn't have the intimidation factor the elder possessed. No others magically appeared out of nowhere.

Blinking at the demanding hand held up in front of her nose, shoved there by the 'Ken' character, Tera reaffixed her gaze on him. "Antidote, now."

Blinking again earned her a truly ugly look of rage from more than just her assaulter.

"I see no reason to comply." Tera informed them in a pleasant yet passive tone, considering the situation and what she might be able to twist out of it. The poison on her hair was truly mild compared to what it could've been, her hands were free to toss even more on top of what had already contaminated the one so far, yet she still had her sister to worry about. "If I do, you could still kill us. If I do not, then at least I will have the satisfaction of taking you with me for it."

"You are not who we're looking for." A new voice informed her as if that had anything to do with the situation now, a girl slinking out of the shadows near the entrance of this blind alleyway. She wasn't old enough to be a veteran-type like the guy who probably trained this group up and was facing the possibility of losing one to his own stupidity. "From one kunoichi to another, would you not consider it? They may be morons but they're my morons."

Female solidarity? Please… as if any such thing existed before Tera had Momo pressed into her arms. "There is an antidote, I do have it. I am unwilling to supply it to someone that will likely kill both me and my sister once he is assured of his continued survival."

"Kill her and take it off her corpse." Demanded the old shinobi harshly.

Tera held up two paper wrapped packages and one of the small stone pots she kept a paste-like substance that required water to mix into. "Which one? Not all I carry are poison, not all are antidotes."

Frankly, some antidotes were nearly as bad as some of the poisons if used incorrectly.

The kunoichi tossed him a sour look, turning back to her and moderating her body language into something entreating and vulnerable. As if the sisters' chakra senses didn't give away the lie. "Please."

"No. I'm more inclined to poison the lot of you. We are immune, you are not." Tera dismissed silkily, tilting her head to peer at the group from under her overly long fringe of hair. "However… that leaves the possibility you have more of your number lying in wait…."
They didn't, the seven of them were the only shinobi in nearly a kilometer of distance.

Her words were another lie anyways. Momo was not immune to her elder sister's poisons, and likely would never be unless she expressed desire to learn a poisoner's craft. Calculating a way out of this without giving the group before her reason to hunt them down right away or getting conned out of something she didn't want to lose would be difficult.

Her family's reputation would be the hinging factor. How afraid were they of poisons?

How much could she manipulate that?

"I think… this is what we will do. My sister and I will head to the northern exit of the town, I will set down the antidote and set off a poison bomb. If your young 'Ken' takes the antidote within the hour he will be perfectly fine… aside a possible rash since immediate treatment is out of the question." Tera weighted the appearance of each of her visible opponents intently, wondering how much they knew of her craft. "I will be keeping a haze of poison around both my sister and I once we leave, any attackers will be forced into range and will die even if we do as well."

The older vet didn't believe her. Unfortunate.

Then again, they also didn't believe the girls could pick out exactly how many attackers they had. That fifth and final one had yet to reveal himself, even after both Tera and Momo picked out the closer two.

The preteen poison mistress was entirely alright with that. She had an airborne poison to test anyways.

Taking possession of her little sister's hand, Tera strode down the lane as calmly as she could. Even steps, never looking back even if she could feel her attackers melt somewhat in her senses and still follow along.

She had found wolfsbane on her ill-fated stint in Earth, one of the highly virulent poisons her family kept on hand and expressly gathered in the wild instead of cultivate to grow near home. Picking it, when it was so highly poisonous she recalled the information well into another life and got repeated warnings to never bother the purple flower if she ever saw it in this one, had required a fair bit of creativity.

The reward was a natural fast-acting poison that was already contact-based. More than what she could pass up at this time.

Tera hadn't packed it into a smoke bomb, wolfsbane was too strong to risk it blowing back at her. Of course, a powder was equally as risky to employ.

Her long neglected wind affinity would be getting a workout, and if she harmed herself that would just be her due for never honing the double-edged ability.

She'd take that over harming her own sister by accident.

The antidote to the snakeroot oil that weighed down Tera's hair was in the brass hair stick of her mother's and the topical treatment in her geta, yet she reached for a tiny stone pot of powdered and concentrated mountain laurel extract. It was one of the more pleasant poisons the Sekanji family produced, but took a significant amount to actually kill with. Fishing one of the also Sekanji family secret smoke bombs out of her other sleeve, Tera glanced backwards at their armed and rather hostile escort.
Already, a raised rash was becoming apparent on Ken's fingers and palm, a strip also showing up on his wrist. It wasn't to the point of cripplingly painful, would never get that bad, but he should already be feeling sickly as the poison seeped into his blood and attacked his heart.

"Take this with a mouthful of water." Murmured the elder sister softly, peering around her long fringe again to take in their various stone-faces and the slight hints of body language that spoke so much more when any of the refocused on each other. "Wash the affected area with water… preferably with milk, but if you are unable to secure a supply then ground chalk will also help. There is poison in the smoke bomb, but it should disperse within half an hour."

Frankly, what she was handing over would only exaggerate the symptoms the male was suffering. On top of the snakeroot sap oil, it would hasten his death so it wasn't long and agonizing.

It was really the only mercy she felt up to giving, they did assault the sisters for no reason as they weren't the target anyways.

Besides, with the concentrated wolfsbane powder she was about to throw… it was very nearly overkill if any evaded that.

Tera didn't have to fight when her enemies would poison themselves. They probably correctly believed she was of no match for any of them, and with the added complication of her little sister she wouldn't be able to move fast enough to prevent any backstabbing.

"Little sister, up on my back please." Momo used the little chakra boost she needed to get the height to grab onto Tera's shoulders, planting her geta shod feet on the older girl's barely noticeable hips for the stability. Her hair was a complication that was already accounted for, but the sisters would stop to treat any rash that appeared the moment they crossed one of the creeks near home.

"This will cure him, right?" The kunoichi asked blandly, but still with enough of a specific intent behind it that she sounded a touch desperate anyways.

"I hold you all no ill will." Explained the budding poison mistress calmly, as it was true enough. She just was a bit of a icy bitch when her little sister was dragged into things… as well as a bit proactive when it came to future threats. "The delay is only so I may ensure the safety of my own while you do so as well. Do not expect an immediate cure, it will take a few hours."

Gathering the wind chakra to make use of, it was so fickle and hard to direct but all she really needed was a breeze not a weapon, did at least get the elder of the ninja opposing her to reconsider his apparent assumption she couldn't do as she said she would.

It was entirely too late.

The packet of wolfsbane in her hands was already spilling out of her sleeves and drifting on the air currents, thankfully away from the sisters and into the faces of the five loosely grouped ninja. Tera had to invest in leather gloves sometime soon, because trying to hold even heavy waxed paper in a way that protected her skin from the fast-acting poison was entirely tricky.

Kneeling to place the pot on the ground, and rising back to her feet, while her sister was balancing on her back was just to buy time. Once she was fully upright again, her opponents were already experiencing the slight nervous disorder that appeared as a tingling sensation that categorized wolfsbane poisoning.

Disguised by readying themselves for the next few seconds and whatever nerves they had facing off with someone who had already poisoned one of their number, which had their hearts pumping
and pushing the toxins further into their bodies as the wind whipped around their forms.

Learning how to concentrate a poison was probably the best help her family could've given her, even if it was done grudgingly and mainly only so she could learn how to condense healing herbs for improved effectiveness and better storage.

Tera thumbed the smoke bomb idly as she waited, inspecting each thoughtfully as she waited to see the results of her work. The breeze she had guided twisted and pulled in her grip, which for now wasn't a sign of an ill-experienced wind user but a kunoichi playing with it to give her the benefit of the doubt about when she would move.

The kunoichi hit the ground first, closely followed by the still hidden one, as they had less body mass to be worked through. Paralysis and the beginnings of a heart-attack slowed the veteran and the two younger but still fit men, Ken worse of the three of them, but all the other two could do was stagger weakly towards her.

"Really now," observed Tera thoughtfully as she watched them succumb to her handiwork, tucking the bomb away, "why ever did you think you could operate here without us knowing?"

A throw of something sharp and pointy went way too wide to ever have the hope of connecting, she might go after it later for good steel wasn't something she could easily pass up. On the other hand, it was probably toxic right now and a few rainstorms would risk rust but not her own body's integrity.

Stripping them of shinobi tools to repurpose would take a few days to accomplish, hopefully a last rainstorm would pop up so the greater concentration of poison would wash away without killing anyone else.

Returning her gaze to the only one even conscious enough to prove interesting, the eleven-year-old girl thoughtfully considered the amount of concentrated wolfsbane and his greatly more solid body mass. It was a ridiculously powerful poison for any small amount, if she wanted a more quickly working toxin then maybe an even more concentrated variation was needed.

It also increased the risk of poisoning herself through unlucky or unwary usage, but... death wasn't a stranger to her and wasn't truly feared. Her only regret would be Momo's fate.

Tera would spend the effort to find a shatter-water proofed container first, the waxed paper had worked and would be used for future slower variations... but working safer would never be a silly concern. Perhaps she should work it into a cream or oil instead, and use it with protective wax to protect herself from it's deadly touch.

Speaking of, Momo slid off her back and to the ground but remained at her side for however poisonous her sister may be the opposite side of the road was downright toxic. Turning to doctor her brushing contact with her poisoned hair took all of a few moments, the compartment in her geta was half empty by the time she was satisfied she had protected her little sister from the truly painful rash that would've resulted otherwise. "Do not touch your yukata, I will find you something new in town to wear."

Her little sister turned solemn eyes to her elder, speaking a world of concerns in a glance through the eye coloring they shared.

Tera smiled back at her wryly, never really sure if she was padding her baby sister's intelligence with her own assumptions or if they really could communicate complex thoughts with the bare minimum of words. "Our lord uncle will be most irate to learn of our little adventure, little sister."
Especially as we were here to investigate what supplies we may have purchased come fall."

Tamachi had walls, which meant they had guards. Guardsmen that likely witnessed the assault, and more that beheld what even a slip of a Sekanji poison user could do in revenge once removed from highly trafficked urban areas. The consideration of not poisoning a section of their town may earn her family something, as well as the reminder the local shinobi presence for hire was *not* random foreigners.

Either way the subtle manipulation in her words, pitched to carry no matter how softly spoken, might just earn them a slight discount on finding Momo something untainted to wear for the day. The rest was on her family to follow up on.

*(The head of the Sekanji family started mentioning marriage even more often to Terazawa once they returned with the news, earning him both sisters' ire and the pointed avoidance of the elder. Mainly to replace the wolfsbane supplies she made her best poison from that took down the unwary far beyond her skill level to otherwise fight off. Their stepmother tried only once to sound the budding poison mistress about what kind of marriage she was aiming for, only to stumble away from them suffering a heavy rash and becoming mildly ill in the following days. Tera accepted the punishment for poisoning a fellow Sekanji gracefully, terribly proud of Momomi's revenge for the perceived threat of trying to separate the sisters.)*
To Pray at a Ruined Temple

Long hours in enclosed spaces doing the same action over and over again was an unfortunate complication of poison or medicine production, but Terazawa broke it up with tending to Momomi and herb gathering or selling treks. It allowed the tiny amounts of poison that spilled onto her fingers and hands the time to work out of her system without building up to toxic levels, ensured she never started becoming sloppy with how she handled her work, earned her money to save for smoothing the harder parts of life, and generally got her out of the family compound before she poisoned all of them to leave her alone or die off already.

What little ninja training she had was only accomplished on such wanders, far from the now oppressive watch from the Sekanji family.

Tera knew perfectly well she brought it on herself, showing 'family solidarity' in that incident with the foreign shinobi was all she could do to prevent someone from suspecting she wasn't Sekanji but making use of their reputation anyways. It was still possible, but not after her uncle did follow up with whoever snubbed them so.

She could wish it brought less complications with it, but such was life.

Momo seemed to deal better, but then again she was younger and less 'willful' than her elder sister. The girl also was easily pleased still, with a kind word spared even as stingingly as the Sekanji were wont or a small treat when she poured more effort into learning the woman's work the family allowed.

Tera suspected a 'putting a foot down' incident was looming ever closer, when her so-called father would be pulled into things or her uncle attempted it on his lonesome. When she would be forcibly betrothed to some unknown for the 'good' of the family, and sent off to be someone else's headache.

Would killing him before or after the marriage ceremony earn her more consideration?

Before would probably nicely infuriate her family, and avoid the necessity of taking on whomever's responsibilities once he was safely dead.

She wondered if they'd risk trying it a second time as well.

Pulling her gaze downwards, Tera's coppery eyes latched onto the shinobi lingering on the far side of the gorge-spanning Tenshi Bridge. Coming to a slow stop, she wondered if she should try risking another venture into the Land of Fire or investigate the brush-plants that might grow in the crevice.

...she knew that one. The Nara one, they had spent a few hours warily pacing each other around a clearing but never did try risking whatever specialty the other had during so.

Stopping at the foot of the bridge on the Grass side, the Sekanji poison user warily eyed the man suspiciously.

A long measure of time passed, wherein the few merchants and travelers hurried on or decided to find another way around the gorge, before the Nara's shoulders slumped and a sigh was heaved.

Amused, because there were probably aspersions cast against her very nature in that sigh as well, she considerately took the same measured steps to him that the Nara took towards her. They
stopped, a quarter across the bridge each, and Tera readied both her wind chakra and another airborne toxin.

She was willing to follow along as long as nothing aggressive was put forth, not stupid. They were in the middle of the bridge, so the shadows the railing cast at high noon were at the thinnest possible but still far enough she could react when he lashed out at her. As well as poison the very air so he would never bother her again.

Yet another sigh was heaved from the flex of well-developed shoulders, then the Nara actually raised his voice to be heard over the distance that spanned between them as it seemed she was unwilling to get closer. "I've a question."

Tera blinked at him blankly, because… obviously or why else in the world would he try to speak to her in what approached as utterly neutral ground around here?

"Ferns are poisonous, right?"

Oh. Reconsidering the distance she was maintaining, because what she remembered might be suspect this far from when she really knew the clan's reputation but the rumors alone painted them all as unwilling to actually engage in fights without backup or a solid plan to evade all complications, Tera started walking forward so she wouldn't have to shout. "They are."

Black hair, black eyes, heavily tanned, and entirely one of the forest dwellers the Land of Fire was known for producing in excess, the Nara scrubbed a scarred and beaten looking hand through scruffy facial hair. He didn't have the genetics for an actual furry face, so the straggly strands made him seem more like a crazy wild man than a shinobi. "And so are new grown fern shoots?"

"To a lesser degree." Corrected the Sekanji poison user calmly even as her nerves tightened with the closer distance between them. This was a risk… but her family's reputation was starting to tatter with the pitiful few men they still had left to maintain it. Building it up, if even for just the knowledge base, could only help her in the long run. "Fiddlehead ferns, the tightly curled up new fronds, hold less of the toxin the fully unfurled and grown variations carry."

She was eyed exasperatedly. "Are they safe to eat?"

"...in moderation. A small amount, only once every other week, will not kill a fully grown human." Tera offered bemusedly. "The toxin in question displaces some of what the body requires for healthy living, it's a slow one that will take months if not years to finally become lethally poisonous, but it will naturally work out of the system eventually on it's own."

"Tch, figures."

"All things, in enough concentration, can be toxic." She informed the man pointedly, then readjusted her grip on her herb basket. "May I pose an inquiry of my own?"

Her impertinent request earned her a cocked eyebrow, as the 'implied' trade in this exchange was allowance for her presence in his country rather than an exchange of information.

"Would there happen to be any nightshade in the local area?"

She earned an eye roll that time. "Yes."

...now, how to get out of this confrontation without it ending with either of them dead?

"I'm surprised you talked." Offered the shadow disguised as a man, taking a measured step to the
side of the bridge.

"You are the first to actually request my expertise instead of immediately assault me." Tera commented neutrally as she matched him step for step until she ended up on the opposite side of the bridge's rails. "I was curious."

"Did they live through it?"

"I am standing here, am I not?"

The admission earned her a wary once-over, as well as a narrow look. She smiled as friendly as she was capable in return, which apparently put no suspicions to rest.

"I'm not going to drop dead in a few moments, am I?"

"No, but I reserve the right to correct that if you attack."

"No wonder you lot aren't very popular."

Tera could only smirk wryly at that, which ironically set the older Nara more at ease with her presence and really felt more natural to her. She figured she did 'friendly' badly, which wasn't really much of a bad thing in this world and age. "I suppose the whole 'if I go down you are coming with me' thing is a bit hard to get past, we tend to be very vindictive like that."

"The 'poisoning your allies' risks might have something else to do with it." He pointed out lightly, taking a backwards step she mirrored until they both were standing on the railings.

"I tend my allies when they come in contact with my poisons." Frowning now, she inspected his appearance and what he was trying to convey to her. "Have you heard the others don't?"

"I meant that generally of your kind, not your clan specifically." He corrected after a moment of consideration, giving her unsought confirmation their reputation that had reached Fire hadn't degraded all that much just yet. If he was calling her family a 'clan' and not 'tattered remains of one' it really was right now. "Don't get mad at me for that."

Forgiving it and letting the minor insult pass would prevent this from becoming hostile, which... he probably wouldn't underestimate her poison skills through her young age. As if age or experience had anything to do with lethality.

Tipping her head in a nod, or an extremely shallow bow, Tera remained silent.

"Right. I'm going to drop off here. Don't throw poison after me."

She pulled her hands out of the voluminous sleeves, holding them up in the air so he could assure himself she had nothing gripped to do so with and he'd have the time to bolt before she could pull something out.

Of course, that did reveal the bandaged forearms and the fans tucked away within the wraps. Revealing the possibility of her wind natured chakra, as they were the normal tool used for such, and the equal possibility she could throw that after him if need be.

The Nara tisked at her again, looking slightly aggravated indeed. He did do as he claimed, taking another step backwards into empty air.

Tera bolted the moment he was in free-fall, just in case he left anything behind as she wasn't
entirely certain what chakra could do in the hands of someone much smarter and better trained than her. She had no desire to stick around anyways, she had a limited time on her own before the Sekanji family would come after her from past experience.

She wanted that nightshade.

That was… probably the most polite and straightforward interaction she ever had with a foreign shinobi. If the Nara was a shinobi and not just a chakra trained whatever.

She could hope for more such interactions, maybe in the possibility of time. It wasn't likely, but that they were possible spoke volumes.

Tera wondered how far away Konoha was from being founded, or if he was a recruiter of a type out to find more clans to bring in.

That held terrible implications over her looming betrothal issue, as she sort of recalled that either her son or nephew Orochimaru would be part of one of the first shinobi academy teams.

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Correction, the Village Hidden in the Leaves wasn't even remotely established or recruiting yet.

One Nara might be aware of and accepting of her gathering herbs in the Land of Fire, but that didn't mean any of the other shinobi the land was apparently teeming with was so understanding.

Terazawa found the truth of the matter out while rushing to escape yet another hostile ninja attempting to hunt her down.

...mainly in hunt herself for a stream with enough water she could make a water clone with, and then somehow reverse the situation so she could distract or kill the genjutsu specialist that took umbrage that her chakra sensing kept her from falling for his illusions.

Finding a decently deep one winding through a loamy stretch beneath leafy boughs, it was the work of a second to form up a weak water copy of herself to send off in the obvious direction while she hid herself in hopes of getting behind the male. Slinking into the water after taking a split second to divest herself of her papery poison packets in a crevice made by thankfully dry stones and leaves, Tera tried to bury herself into the mud at the bottom of the river to conceal her form.

From the blur that didn't even pause in jumping over the watery obstacle not a handful of seconds later, she succeeded. Muddled as her senses were from the chakra protecting her method of breathing and kept the liquid out of her various stone pots of poisoned oils and creams, she could tell that much.

There was probably such a thing as fire clones, but the dispelling of such might honestly be terrifying enough one wouldn't do it in the middle of a forest during a parched autumn day.

Chakra control over water allowed her to shed most of it as she rose again, taking the papery packets in hand and immediately following after her clone and her attacker. Hopefully it would remove a lot of the earth as well as the poisoned oil in her hair before it seeped through her clothing, but she held little hope for that.

Interestingly, the forest eventually cleared up for a wide open space two other shinobi clans were currently having it out with each other in. Tera faltered on the edges when she realized which two, for while the Uchihas were arrogant shinobi that liked to decorate everything and everyone they owned with that fishing bobble-looking icon… the Senju took a few more moments to identify.
The man chasing her water clone got derailed when the white haired and red eyed man in blue armor, in the process of retreating from some kind of lunge, sourly questioned his intelligence for barging into a battle in chase of a fake.

Her water clone came to a sudden stop, turning to regard the Senju closest to it for a moment as the deception was ruined, before dispelling on it's own.

The water left behind was then subsequently used in hopes of impaling the Uchiha that had been opposing him before the interruption.

Tera silently turned around and wandered off, masked by the sounds and distraction of a miniature war starting up again, hoping to fetch her herb basket before the guy realized he could trap that if she wanted it back.

That was utterly out of her league, and something she wasn't touching with a ten-foot-stick. Even if she was still angry at the asshole that liked to attack girls picking flowers.

However toxic they were.

(Terazawa never saw, and her water clone was unable to inform her however it tried, of the flash of yellow light the white-haired Senju used to travel that her abrupt appearance on a battlefield had derailed. Which likely saved the Uchiha's life from being skewered on a sword he wasn't able to see or predict. Her non-involvement was ruined long before she would feel safe taking one step back into the Land of Fire again. Her willing help to the Nara did at least bear some fruit, as she refrained from trespassing into their lands again but occasionally a flower or two of nightshade would appear close to the Tenchi Bridge when she passed nearby. A whole stalk was planted there and tended to on the Grass side once it became apparent she wasn't returning and the toxic fern poisoning likely had worked it's way out of whomever's behalf the Nara man had asked for.)
Leaving the Shrine

Terazawa didn't protest getting sold to some minor Land of Earth nobleman, much to everyone else's cautious confusion. It would take another year or so to happen, so she'd be the ever so developed age of twelve on the cusp of thirteen. Likely to be married the very day of officially becoming a 'woman'.

Momomi helped her pack up various things to travel with once it was known to the sisters, and to hide the rest of it so when she came back things could be restored to how they were without tipping anyone off to the plans to do away with the unwanted husband.

The perk for not obviously fighting the family's will in this instant was a wardrobe actually made for her she could still grow into, not clumsily hemmed kimonos and robes she had from her long dead mother. Irritatively, they tried to confiscate her poisons and weapons while doling her up so. Leaving it to her little sister, and hiding the more sensitive information and concoctions with the adult-sized non-usual weapons and most of their mother's jewelry, neatly evaded that.

Officially and obviously handing over the teenaged-sized fans for Momo's use, while picking up their mother's full adult sized versions, apparently put some of that concern to rest too.

Apparently, her small rebellion over 'her' things was more expected than her dismissive shrug when she was used as a bartering chip in negotiations with one of the two local nobility families in range to be painful to the Sekanji family's existence. It was also dismissed as being anything of importance as well, as they likely thought her more conforming little sister would hand the parts they wanted over the moment the elder was safely out of the way.

Now knowing exactly where she was in respect to everything about to happen in the Land of Fire, contemplating how to return to save her little sister took up most of Tera's mental energy these days.

Well… that and getting her ears pierced. She had a plan for that, being perfectly aware of how badly poisoning a nobleman would backfire on her personally and the Sekanji vaguely.

Wasn't there a poison for causing impotence?

...one couldn't have enough backups.

Pushing those thoughts aside, she'd need Momo's help to source those herbs for her before she left the compound for the supposedly last time, Tera refocused on the one glimpse she got of the Senju-Uchiha war.

She was pretty sure the First Fire Shadow was the brunette Senju that occupied the center of that mess, who had appeared fully grown and utterly unconcerned with whatever had distracted some of his men in favor of trying to talk to the long shaggy-haired Uchiha and growing trees to his will. Which would make the white-haired guy with red eyes, who was probably an albino on hindsight, the Second. As the Uchiha helped with the establishment of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, that the war was still on meant it wasn't established yet.

There wasn't a shinobi academy to graduate from, or a village to be an orphan within, so the fact she wasn't willing to let some likely elderly and fat nobleman from Earth paw at her likely wouldn't be an issue.

Aside the one killing her prospective husband will bring down on her head.
All total, there were only fourteen men left in the Sekanji family. Two of such a young age they were still being trained and therefore not allowed outside of the compound. One of which was an elderly man who was the family healer, they lost the only two other elders they had to time and just general complications of poison using. Her father and uncle made up another two that wouldn't leave if the other was off handling something, and that left ten shinobi poison masters.

Forty women, a few had died or were married off and yet more were being born. The odd lack of sons being born was interesting in a sort of absent kind of way.

Tera was now banned from leaving the collection of hovels they called home, so she turned her attention on the long neglected remedies she rarely studied and more often made poisons from. Her 'dowry' was being built up, the bride price already paid and being sort of used to pretty her up.

Frankly, she was certain they were hoping for a lost cause.

Momo ended up with their mother's softer looks and their father's whiter skin to offset her unusual coloring, Tera's was too flat and angular with a purposely cultivated unsightly tan to be remotely mistaken for 'pretty'. 'Pinched' was more apt, which might be from the near foot she grew in the last few months without adding on any weight. The eyes and the colored crests were really the only parts of herself she was fond of so far, but if she'd get to a also unsightly height she'd be pleased as punch.

If she bound the beginnings of her chest and padded out her waist a little, she could comfortably pass as male.

Which said not very good things about her betrothed if boyish girls were to his taste.

It wasn't likely, if the man had ever clapped eyes on her before they'd meet for whatever wedding was being planned she'd choke down one of her more unpleasant yet survivable poisons. More likely, very flattering reports were passed instead that painted her as daintier and less lethal.

Aside which, it was even more likely her marriage was just an excuse to enter some kind of arrangement with the man and his household rather than on her own merits.

She might actually have to suffer through some few months of being 'married', depressingly. If the man was robust enough in body, sabotaging that so she could get away with both mind and body intact might take a while. Hence why she really did have to ask Momo to find either the cuttings of saw palmetto the family had or for a distraction so she could run across the entirety of Grass and the Land of Rain to find some strands of the borderline desert plant in Wind herself.

Said little sister dug her pointy chin into her elder's slightly scarred hip, staring insistently into the slightly more jaded copper that matched her own coloring. Tera rolled her eyes, lowering her head back on the silk clad hip in her own grip.

With the clan's distraction fitting the elder sister with her own voluminous sets of clothing, their mother's was re-hemmed back to a child's fit so Momo had more than enough clothing to wear. She in fact had more than enough to double her layers when things turned cool and chilly. "Sister, what?"

"...kind of ironic, honesty." Tera murmured to her, ensuring her soft tones wouldn't carry beyond their single-roomed home. "I found something to buy time with in the medical lessons I have been getting."

"Maybe he won't be that bad." Momo suggested equally as quietly, smoothing fingers down the
bare arms of her sibling's. "He will be rich."

"The best measure of a man is how he treats his vassals and those who can do nothing for him, not those he wants to curry favor with or impress." Quoted the elder sourly. Which wasn't really fair of her, in this world any such show of concern and good faith would be taken advantage of and perverted by more than just shinobi. "I never heard of a Nakagawa before."

"Could be new." Pointed out the girl, arguing as the devil's advocate. "He might've come from a different Land, maybe even River."

Tera eyed her little sister skeptically. A romantic the elder was not, but the younger was.

As their mother was from River, and her elder sister had nothing bad to say of the deceased woman, Momo rather liked to dream of running away and finding their mother's shinobi clan and the better life they would both have there. Given the utterly sardonic look Tera had given her for that wistful daydream when it had been presented, she didn't speak of it often again.

Much to her elder's painful chagrin when she realized the younger girl had been serious in that.

"If he is new then he would need an Earth bride. Not a Grass one." Tera corrected the girl tiredly, draping her silk wrapped and poisoned hair a bit more away from the two of them. "It is more probable his previous wife has died and he wants a new one he can mold into a perfect ornament for his arm or court."

The next bath she got it would no longer be laced with snakeroot sap and that would be it for her poisons. The very thought made her feel raw and terribly exposed, which tended to harshen the edge of her tongue.

Of her self-made poisons she could sneak by the family, she wouldn't risk carrying any until right before she left. More security that way, and she was getting a few utterly useless containers of cosmetics she could empty and repurpose.

"Why would he then ask for a 'moldable' bride from a ninja family?" Momo queried just as skeptical as her older sister could be if caught on a good day. "We are not well known for being biddable."

"A snub, a goad, a risk, a threat, possibly even because he likes them young." Tera informed her bitterly. "Likely, it is not a conscious decision for any of that. Just a bonus for whatever else the family bargained my life away for."

"Sister, perhaps you should at least investigate before you set yourself against this man." Thumping her head down on Tera's hip, the younger girl gave the elder a sweet smile. "Not just to plan how to escape, but gather an understanding of what kind of situation it is. Whenever else would you get an expressed invitation to infiltrate a court risk free?"

Pursing her lips, because the moments when Momo's cunning outwitted her were moments Tera was stupidly and overly proud of, the elder sister heaved a sigh. "I suppose that is not too great a task. I could even take a look around with an eye to see if I could liberate something you would like…"

"I have an embarrassment of wealth now, sister. I would like to retain it, more than add to it."

A bitterly wry smirk stretching thin lips, Tera closed tired eyes for the night. "You are too good for me, Momo-chan…"
"Then we are even, for you are more than I deserve."

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The fact there were barely ten men of age to do anything and nearly thrice that of women in the family had some… disturbing consequences.

It was easy to track parentage when certain couples had very specific eyelid markings shaded in various hues, especially when you knew perfectly well one couple were both green-crested yet they produced a baby with solidly red ones.

Terazawa didn't greatly keep track of things going on within the family, she really just blandly watched when she had nothing better to do. Right now, she had literally nothing better to do even if some of the women were about pulling their hair out about her 'commoner manners'.

Her mother gave her the decorum lectures, which had been memorized so she could repeat them for Momomi. She knew them, but the choice to use them was hers.

Right now, there was a surprising upswing in children with green or blue crests cutting across their eyelids. Reds had nearly all died out, the last one she recalled was a girl married off to the merchant family in Waterfall.

Then there was the baby, with the nearly extinct red crests. When the last one that had red and had been a male was one of the guards that single-handedly took on some bandits in order to ensure the supply run to the village made it back whole. He didn't survive, and that had been months ago. The mother was a woman who had married a male with green that matched her own, who also hadn't died all that long ago.

'Keeping it in the family' was all well and good, but using one or two members to ensure the next generation was on the way was a… interesting solution.

Tera hoped someone was keeping track of the genealogy, it was about to start twisting in wild ways.

No, one occurrence did not a pattern make. However, that same slight… mix up had repeated again.

Her semi-absent understudy of the family's elderly healer resulted in her tending patients as his hands on occasion now she was being kept close to the compound, long years of equally hard or dirty chores helping her maintain a mask of indifference while forced into closer contact with her family.

The mother had blue crests, the 'father' was another green. The baby had the purple that normally only showed up in the branch of the family only the clan head and her father occupied.

Last time she checked, she wasn't male and neither of her half-brothers of age to start fooling around with a married woman. The crests also didn't tend to mix like this, otherwise there'd be those with black or brown crests by now.

Her uncle wasn't married, oddly. Hadn't been since before she could remember. Then again, she was mostly sure he preferred men and she had no issue with that or felt like shaming him for a slightly different orientation. Frankly, Tera would love to be considered asexual even if she knew perfectly well she liked men from how her eyes caught on well-muscled figures and masculine forms. She sympathized with him, mainly.
Gently washing down her likely other half-sibling with lukewarm water and some strips of undyed and torn silk, Tera wondered what exactly made her and Momo different than the rest of the family.

She really had no issues with her half-siblings. They were young, still learning, and just around as far as she was concerned. She had less neutral thoughts about her father, who likely returned them with a vengeance if he even thought of her these days.

Given the one time she approached the sisters, her step-mother could've taken Momo in and likely would've tried raising the baby even if she hadn't exactly been all that much older than the eldest of her husband's issue. What would've come of that was only now speculation.

Tera… really shouldn't have taken in a girl only four-five years younger than her even if she was probably mature enough. It wasn't even the issue of 'I know better', some elements contributed true enough... but not entirely, as it should've been an issue of 'provision'. A eight-nine year old girl was not a mother, should never be a mother, yet she did it.

Was it because of that one incident with Shimiko?

When her mother turned that tone of soft danger on her, stating what Tera would be to the newly born Momo with no mercy in her voice?

Swaddling the newborn baby boy up in the rest of the silk that wasn't ripped up into strips, Tera brought the baby to the slightly disorientated mother.

Addled as she might be from stress or the painkilling herbs, there was still nothing wrong with the woman's mind or comprehension speeds. She glanced up, into a very different face that sported the same stripes as her newborn son.

Defiantly. For a split second meeting the coppery eyes boring back into her own, then her soft brown eyes got even weaker and lowered back to her lap.

Thin lips pulled even more taught, but the preteen poison mistress lowered the baby to her arms.

It wouldn't be fair to judge anyone. A shinobi clan was rather like an over-extended and overly controlling family one. What the head of such family demanded, like 'help increase our numbers in any way possible', would be obeyed because that is what these women knew. Obedience.

Tera spent a moment to be thankful for Erin's influence, however debilitating it had started out.

(The upswing of births didn't really fix anything. In a few of the months Terazawa had left in the family compound, three more purple crested babies were born and several more with different mixes of crest colors joined them. By then the strain of supporting so many dependents when they had a limited number of ways to earn income took it's price out of the males left, cutting the number solidly in half in a unnervingly short time frame. The remaining few started teaching all the children, regardless of gender, out of hope another like Tera would be found and could start helping out. Momomi was terribly amused to be immediately slotted into the same role her elder sister had come into by ignorance and exclusion, and yet she earned more respect for it.)
Terazawa's soon-to-be husband sent a few people to 'help' prepare his future bride.

Both sisters utterly despised them upon meeting the group.

With the added scrutiny on her person and behaviors, Tera planned to lose them all by either taking over the bulk of poison making or grinding herbs into remedies for hours. It kept her indoors, which had already slowly lightened the tan she once had and proudly wore until she approached something almost like 'pale'.

It was also, at least the healing herbs part of it, declared as suitably 'feminine'.

The two guardsmen, the older servant male, and the personal handmaiden all gave the 'lady's tutor' looks for that. The sisters' uncle politely pretended ignorance to the slight and focused his flat black eyes on the horizon visible over the walls of the compound.

Eventually, the fact that the Sekanji family sold *both* poisons and herbal remedies to those that would buy them made by men as well as women permeated the utterly ridiculous and heavily waxed hair piece the older woman wore on her head. Two dots of red high on her cheeks, not disguised by her caked on makeup to hide the wrinkles, burned momentarily.

Tera and Momomi exchanged a set of utterly bland looks.

The elder sister slid one of the almost too long to be wielded fans out of her wide sleeves, snapping the heavy wood-clad steel frame open to use the red, green, and white silk that fanned out to hide the lower half of her expression. Then she smirked wickedly at the group, while safely hidden. "Tea, perhaps?"

Seizing almost desperately onto the offer, the older woman sniffed haughtily and gave the sisters a short nod. "Please. Hopefully your tea ceremony will not require too much correction."

"Not many like to indulge me, unfortunately." Tera informed the woman as the group gathered together to skirt around the drooping willow tree half hanging over the pond in the middle of the compound. "Not to mention my little sister refuses to correct her elder."

Fanning the fan a few time to hopefully remove the nauseating scent of overly perfumed yet unwashed flesh from in front of her face, they likely had been on the road for some time, the poison mistress allowed her little sister to run ahead and find the china set they inherited from their mother.

The fact it was still intact was something of a marvel for Tera. Momo had a liking for getting into everything as a baby then toddler girl, the additional fact the tea set was rarely used and usually only for the younger sister's birthday probably helped.

A curious facet to being a master of poisons, poisoning yourself tended to be a fairly common fascination shared by all of them.

Especially to build up resistances to your own poisons.

There were a few Tera would never dose herself with, but a few were consumed in tiny partial bits. The snakroot oil was a topical toxin, and thus wouldn't be something one built up resistance to
unless it was through repeated exposure. Mountain laurel was entirely too toxic to be of any beneficial use. Wolfsbane was another matter, as while concentrated or even slightly diluted it could still be poisonous… tiny amounts diffused over a large amount of water could be used to calm hysteria or lower high blood pressure.

What helped was that the correct poison in the right amounts were actually beneficial as long as conflicting or compounding herbs weren't being used at the same time.

As long as one was careful and crafty about it, you could end up immune to a toxin and drink it with minimal or no issue alongside your assassination target.

Not that Tera had solid intentions of getting that close to someone she wanted to kill enough to assassinate them, that was how one got scars and while she may not want a husband right now… that didn't mean she refused all male attention.

Just… a few more years would have to pass before she'd consider it.

The point of the mental wander was that Tera had been teaching Momo about how to poison a tea ceremony using the set they had and refreshing their decorum lessons at the same time, which likely meant the set was still a tiny bit toxic. Enough to discomfort but not truly poisonous to suggest more than just upset stomachs or irritable bowels to those without any built up resistance to the childhood-safe Sekanji family poisons.

The sisters, the 'tutor', and the older gentleman male all sat around a tiny table neither sister recognized but made no mention of in the double-roomed house they had made their home within. The handmaiden seated herself on the edge of the wooden walkway that spanned the house, politely far enough to not be involved in an interaction of those with a higher 'class' but at hand if called upon.

"I implore you to forgive the lack of a view, this place wasn't chosen for the aesthetics." Tera started with while Momo fetched out their implements from the box they had been kept in, setting a slightly beaten copper kettle to boil on the embers of their banked fire pit. It kept them decently warm in the winter if they curled up close enough, and rarely saw use aside boiling water or reducing poisons into concentrated forms. "We also do not cook here, the family shares that duty and we eat communally… because otherwise we would have the unfortunate impulse to poison one another more often than we already do."

The smile she gave her guests was maybe too blandly accepting of such things, given the gentleman paled a few shades and from what skin could be seen around that facial mask the 'tutor' whitened almost to Momo's nearly unnaturally pale skin color.

Building up a tolerance for the toxins they used was a Sekanji family fascination, and a fair warning should probably be issued.

From the sound of it, and the jump of their pitiful chakra stores, the guards standing right outside the sliding door weren't happy to hear that either.

This would likely end up to be some painfully awkward few months, and worse yet she had to leave with these people to go see who she had been sold off to without so much as a 'by your leave'.

Tera eyed the heavily made up woman thoughtfully as their deceased mother's tea set was arranged on the table.
Perhaps… a slight preview and test run of her plans would not be amiss.

Could she get the woman to die from stress or fright without even inducing a slight fever?

The sister exchanged another look as the tea ceremony set was criticized for the few chips Momo accidentally inflicted on it before she could control the utensils fully.

It might amuse her little sister as well… it was likely to become a temptation they would both want to do themselves.

Tera fanned the heavy weapon in front of her face again, earning herself a slightly narrow coppery gaze under purple crests from Momo as the breeze whipped by the elder and not the younger.

Taking pity on the awkward silence going on over on the other side of the table, the elder sister smiled blandly as she turned back to her guests. "It was our mother's, one of the few things we have left of her. I will be leaving it for Momo-chan, mind you."

The male's only reaction was a tightening of his features, suspicious eyes peered at the girls from the woman.

So high strung, that one. If she felt embarrassed over her criticisms of a long deceased mother's things, then perhaps she shouldn't open her mouth to give them. This was no pampered princess' household but a shinobi one. As far as Tera knew, there were differences between noble run homes and samurai ones… so expecting differences when visiting a ninja one should've gone without stating.

Maybe she should play the 'composed' one, Momo the 'hellion'. The reversal would be interesting to see, both now with the Sekanji family's reaction and the eventual household of her husband's reaction.

Snapping the fan closed, Tera smiled blandly at the pair as she slid the wind user's weapon away again in favor for less obviously lethal utensils.

(ooo000ooo)

"I am going to kill her." Momomi informed her elder sister viciously, helping with the decanting of the syrup made of boiling wolfsbane flowers and leaves to a tray to dry out. "I am sorry if you wished for the privilege, but you will have more in time. I want that one."

Eventually, when the last of the liquid evaporated, the whitish-tan powder would be carefully scraped up and packaged into easily utilized waxed paper packets. That was in a few days, right now the deadly liquid just had to sit.

"So vicious, little sister." Terazawa murmured with audible amusement, gracing the irritated little sister with a small smirk as she temporarily set aside her tools so they could be boiled and scrubbed with chalk while whoever was unlucky to get 'dish duties' wore heavy leather gloves and a full face mask.

The remains were usually poured into a pit at the far end of the compound, and a day or two later whatever was in the hole would be torched with the single male they had with a fire affinity.

"I am not jesting, sister."

"I did not think you were."
Momo puffed out her cheeks in irritation behind the cloth masking her nose and mouth, much to her elder sister's delight.

It was rare that the girl behaved childishly, now she was almost seven. As if *that* was a mark of maturity.

Tera reconsidered the thought, as she had not been much older when she took her little sister and they went off to live by themselves. It was entirely possible, with this betrothal mess and the fact Momo had replaced Tera as one of the family's herb and animal hunters, that her younger sister *did* consider seven or eight to be the age when one had to pick up their own responsibilities and pull their weight.

That was… unfortunately true in this life, the earlier you could start giving back the better things became.

"As long as you wait just long enough so I can play with her for the next month, you may have her."

"So generous, big sister." Momo snarked back with a cutesy tone, helping with transferring the tools they had used to the basin sitting on the ground waiting to be purified from the toxins they were used to create.

The thin and nearly cracked leather encasing their hands were also pulled off, and Tera wondered if they'd survive another scrub down as she planted her slightly sweaty hands on her hips. "I can afford to be so, that handmaiden girl is equally grating in a less obvious way."

"What was it this time? Your marks *are* natural? That your hair *is* real?"

"...something like that."

Tera had actually been accused of having tattoos, and by association all the children and babies being born were tattooed within days of being born. Not a stain of color applied to the lid of her eyes, and the rest of the family as well, just that they all had tattoos. It wasn't a straight out accusation, but the implication could've been caught by a deaf person.

Aside the utterly impossibility of tattooing a solid colored swath stretching from the bridge of the nose and over the eyelid to the temple, especially on squirmy babies that would not sit still for such a thing, the fact an accusation was tossed her way at all was rather… vexing.

The handmaiden had been equally disbelieving that the heavy and lanky hair she had was unaltered. Other than the fact *all* of it had to be washed every time Tera had a bath and any artificial extensions would've fallen out then… the semi-casual mention of the preteen cutting the bulk off to make it more manageable had nearly induced a stroke in both 'borrowed' women alone.

She wouldn't really cut it, it was a badge she *earned* to wear long. However, they didn't need to know that.

Next, the girl will likely suggest the coppery eye coloring was some kind of ninja illusion trick and not really naturally metallic.

Aside the two women, who were not entirely accepting they were now tending to a utterly indifferent kunoichi type that could care less about their sensibilities, only the elderly man showed any censure at anything the sisters did.

He was stealthier about it. Not enough to get two girls, who while not really *abused* were certainly
neglected enough to have put real and constant effort into reading body language and were trained at least half-heartedly to identify threats to their persons by the family, to overlook it. It earned him an equal amount of indifference as the women did.

The guardsmen, on the other hand, Tera rather liked them.

As much as she could when it came to people she had no intention of dealing with for long.

She still didn't know their names. They didn't interfere with her duties either, or just be snippy little shrews over the harsh lifestyle that made the sisters into what they were.

Tera looked down at Momo's softer features, getting slightly derailed by contemplating her sudden height over her little sister when for years the norm had been the both of them being nearly or close to the same height.

She was no longer surrounded by giants, in fact she was one of those giants to Momo now. It was barely two feet of height, but it was so disorientating when barely a few month ago it hadn't been that drastic of a difference.

"Well..." trailing off a little uncertainly, the fact that in as little as five years her little sister might just be married to whoever fathered Orochimaru hitting her hard when her dearest wish was to prevent it and possibly lose the Snake Sannin making her suddenly doubt her plans, "are you sure you want me to come back?"

Ironically, or not considering the contents of this room were toxic enough to cause sudden death of all residents of any mid-sized village, this was the most secured part of their compound. With the attendants and guards watching her movements at all hours and being nearby at night, really the only place the sisters could have a conversation that wouldn't be overheard.

A warm body impacted Tera's abdomen, thin arms wrapping around her waist in a strong hug. "Please. I can do a few months on my own, sister. As long as it will end. I do not wish to lose you yet."

Wind users ended up with rather toned forearms, just simply from the strain of trying to conduct gusts to one's will which was normally done by arms or hand movements. Fan users as well, although that was due to the wind resistance against the cloth. That required more force to circumvent than in most weapons.

Water users, which they both shared an affinity for, tended to have rather strong core muscles as they pulled water up from the ground into their hands which put strain on the stomach and back. Swimming, a decent excuse to hide water manipulation lessons within, also built up the back muscles.

Earth users had rather strong legs, oddly.

Tera wasn't entirely sure how Momo could manipulate the earth all that well, just as how the girl tended to have a mystified look on her face when she used the wind. Still no actual jutsu, even the water clone was without hand signs, all they had was the innate manipulation anyone with an affinity could do with enough experience and risk.

"You might just be better off." She continued her thought, because as much as she could fake it she really was a cowardly woman at heart. "You could find you like your arranged husband and not want to follow along with your big sister's silly worry over being forced to marry too young."

Orochimaru was... an orphan. By a young age. That was basically all the personal early life
information she ever had on her possible son/nephew. Tera might not survive her trip into the courts of the Land of Earth, just as Momo might not survive the separation, and they both might die with whatever awaited them beyond that.

"I believe you more than any of the males in this family." Momo insisted strongly, slightly muffled by the plain cotton yukata that they had swapped their clothing for so if a spill happened nothing important would be lost. Pulling her head away from Tera's stomach, the girl gave her elder sister a hard look. "Second thoughts?"

"...I will likely be killing my supposed husband in short order." Dismissed the taller sister shortly, as that wasn't a question since it wasn't likely the man would accept a four or five year pause before 'consummating' the marriage. "If I come back, are you sure you will not resent me? You have just as much right to live as you would like as I do."

"And who here would allow that, beyond you?"

Likely not their so-called father, nor their uncle.

Then again, with how few men there were left... it was likely she'd come back to an entirely or almost female dominated Sekanji family.

That might just end up highly interesting. Would leadership fall to their step-mother... or to Momo, until Tera could come back?

Tera pulled in a long, deep breath. Letting it go, and wishing it would take that squirming sensation in her belly as the air left her lungs, she huffed wryly. "Right then... less than a month now, then I am to go off and live in a life of luxury."

"...is it bad I wish the family fails to pay your dowry?"

"I kind of wish the same sometimes. Then both those sour little bitches could be given an ultimatum to leave already." She smirked at the insulted huff her use of profanity earned her. "That old man too."

(Terazawa would almost change her mind about allowing Momomi some of her 'toys' she was being sent, nearly three separate occasions in the remaining month she had left as an 'young girl'. The second group, which held more guards and another handmaiden on top of a runner for the elderly man, were nearly poisoned in their entirety when they showed up without prior warning. Tera was slightly disappointed the entire gaggle of 'normal' people weren't drowned via pond water by the sisters' father, however little she thought of the man. At the very least, the second handmaiden found herself the favorite of the pair much to the first's ire. Tera would never recall either's name until well after she left the Senkanji compound, and never learned the 'tutor's'.)
The Virtue in Greed

Her 'husband' was a dead man walking.

Nakagawa Norimoto was either seventy or something around there, was bulkier than muscle would've accounted for. The loose jowls alone showed some kind of consumption issue in his life, the clothing already slightly stained with sweat even if there was enough of a wind to ensure anyone sensibly dressed would be comfortable if slightly chilled.

Not athletic, more inclined to send people and then yet more people to solve his issues, had more money than sense if he wanted a kunoichi bride from the looks of things.

Terazawa was twelve, not even halfway to thirteen, and the man was eyeing her with interest.

Not anything she recognized from this lifetime, but certainly something she recalled from Erin's. Interest in the carnal sort, even if she was underdeveloped and with the body of a preteen child still.

Heart attack she decided firmly as her 'lady's tutor' introduced the two of them. She had also better start early with the saw palmetto extract however limited her supply, because with a nobleman taking a 'no' or even respecting the whole 'not until married' thing might not be in his character.

She should have at least six or so months, to 'learn the ropes as a noblewoman' before she became his lady wife. She rather intended to use them to learn the lay of the land and find natural poisons to augment her few Sekanji toxins she smuggled from home.

Momo deserved something shiny and utterly priceless for being such a good little sister.

Also to learn how to evade what security Lord Nakagawa's samurai could put forth.

Tera had known in a sort of absent way there were samurai. If they corresponded with the 'samurai' she recalled from another world and lifetime entirely was a question still, but they were armored figures placed all around the courtyard she was led into and utterly unhappy with her very presence from the scowls and feel both.

With her 'lady's tutor' properly infuriated by absentmindedness to help along Momo's little 'gift' pumping through the horse-faced woman's blood, Tera turned back to the man who thought himself more than a match for a kunoichi bride. Her left hand fan snapped open in her hand, hiding the nasty smirk that creeped across her face as the warriors startled and the elderly 'husband-to-be' blinked in confusion.

"Nakagawa-sama… a pleasure." To kill you she finished in her head, which made her statement utterly true. Having a chakra sense just enabled the sisters to have figured out how to lie without actually lying.

With chakra being in existence, it was entirely possible a variation was used by these samurai. Best to be careful before she fatally fumbled something important.

The utterly sickening greasy smile that crossed the elderly man's face nearly took her aback, wondering if he thought her that thick or if no one ever told him doing that made him appear like some kind of baby-eating pedophile.

Oh, wait. He was at least half of that.
Tera fanned herself with the disguised weapon thoughtfully as he lavished praise on the very tired seeming woman that 'taught' her, considering what an easily led man like him could be twisted to.

She had a few months, she promised Momo so. This was also an engraved invitation to gather up a few of the possible Earth-only herbs that wouldn't grow anywhere else in the Elemental Countries, with the added possibility of meeting actual shinobi clans from this part of the world.

Passing that up just because she couldn't stand the lord and master of this part of the country would be just… silly.

Confusingly, she felt rather… underdressed without the black grease concealing the marked skin around her eyes. It was a ponder to occupy her mind with while more flowery speeches that welcomed her arrival and more old men praised her 'delicate beauty', with a few thrown in congratulating her intended husband.

…'delicate beauty' was probably the nobles' way of calling her slightly better than plain, or something just a touch less masculine than expected.

She had a month or so to get used to the exposed feeling, and maybe a few days should be spent to be sure that she loathed her 'husband' before she offed him.

Tera's blade-capped war fan twitched as a thick-finger hand latched onto her bare forearm to draw her closer to her 'intended', but she really wasn't all that surprised as she had kept a good chunk of her senses open and searching for anything with more chakra than the samurai she could see. Tracking Nakagawa's movements before he touched her was really child's play.

Literally child's play, she helped Momo developed her slightly less sensitive chakra senses while she was blindfolded and Tera held a stick to smack against her shoulders.

"Terazawa-sama?" Handmaiden number two quietly asked, actually meeting the copper eyes that flicked her way head on. "Are you not tired? We traveled far today."

Hardly. Nakagawa sent a coach for her, and the women had rode in that while the various men marched along in it's wake. Sitting long periods did not bother Tera all that much, patience was very much a shinobi virtue she honed making poisons or raising her own little sister. Staring enough to unnerve the two she rather disliked had kept her entertained for the trip, and probably would have done so even if the trip took even longer.

"I am fine, for now." Allowed the younger girl just as softly, returning her gaze to the people now boasting of what fabulous wedding gift they would present the 'couple'. "If that is a request to get inside so you may sit…?"

"I-I, wouldn't dream of asking such a thing!" Squeakily, amusingly enough, the poor girl got even more red in the face when her outburst attracted a lot of attention her way.

"Nakagawa-sama, I simply must inquire if we could retreat inside?" Tera inserted into the silence before anyone could say something about her favored little plaything reacting as she wanted, lazily wafting the fan a few more times before snapping it shut and tucking it quickly up a sleeve. "Preferably, somewhere where we may avail ourselves to tea or other cooler liquids?"

On closer inspection, he did have the ruddy complexion alcoholism could impart. She was utterly unsurprised when her suggestion earned a lot of favor from the men, and then her eyes caught on the women standing demurely silent in the background.

The 'noblewomen' of Earth, or rather this tiny slice of it still near Grass enough there was some
vegetation but also starting to show the rocky spikes that likely categorized the landscape farther north.

The Sekanji poison mistress had spent a few hours here or there watching the plant life dying off the further into the country they traveled. Possibly, in her one and only interaction with an Earth shinobi, *that* had been the bone of contention she had been attacked over.

The Land of Earth probably had limited greenery, so what there was here was likely jealously guarded. Even if it was poisonous.

Contemplating the plant life here seemed to be more important to her than gauging her 'peers', apparently.

(ooo000ooo)

Her to-be husband had very loyal retainers.

Not two seconds into her 'personal refreshing' time, after that utterly nauseating display of overt wealth and henpecking broke up as other nobles left to return to their little plots of land before forcing an invitation for dinner out of Nakagawa, she had been faced off with two wives of his people.

Apparently the old grouchy male had been perfectly aware the elder of the Sekanji sisters was entirely willing to murder off his lord and master, hence why he seriously disapproved of her very existence. His wife seemed to share his sentiments entirely.

The other woman was the wife of one of his highly trusted samurai, who probably knew perfectly well shinobi and samurai tended to be eternally at odds but decided to try to get to know her anyways.

Tera fanned herself with the right fan this time, contemplating the intrusion to 'her' rooms and if she felt anything that would derail her plans.

"I promised my little sister to genuinely give this a try." She informed both older women as handmaiden number two fussed about with transferring her apparently pitiful collection of kimonos and yukatas into the wardrobe from the traveling chest that was also a gift from her husband. "Of course… this was before that 'lady's tutor' was sent and insulted my deceased mother's things."

Samurai wife winced, stone-face's wife breathed in deeply.

"As I do not like to lie, especially to her, I will at least try for a month." Tera half-closed the fan, giving the illusion that she was confessing something to the other women. "I might actually spend closer to three trying to see if this marriage would work, this is the farthest into the Land of Earth I have ever been. I will admit to some curiosity how things are done this far from my native lands."

It was an interesting thought to nibble at, her mother did it herself when she married her worthless father.

Even if it was a case of 'better this evil than the unknown', and appearance aside, if Nakagawa could inspire loyalty to the point unarmed wives of his very concerned retainers would confront a kunoichi bride… he might not be *entirely* worthless.

She was still going to start him on the saw palmetto extract the moment she could.

Snapping the fan fully open again, and considering the two of them over it, Tera tried to figure out
which would be the 'weak link'. The one that expressed interest in getting to know her, which could be a feint of it's own, or the disproving one?

It was probably a weakness of her own to rely on chakra senses while interacting with others, but it was a good judge of who lied to her face and if something was going to come to blows. Moreso, for catching who was guiltily nervous around her and who just loathed her presence.

The friendly one was entirely guilty, that could have any number of reasons why behind it. From her samurai husband specifically telling her not to confront the poison mistress, to expressing interest when there was none, or just for feeling uneasy in the face of a preteen girl.

Stone-face was more at ease in Tera's company, disproving for sure but not in a hostile manner as her husband was.

Well, anyway it fell into place… she had a month to get the patterns down and engineer the poison she wanted to feed her husband before he could try to bed her.

Even while doing all that, she could still learn a few new tricks.

(ooo000ooo)

Nakagawa had a greenhouse garden built for her.

Terazawa actually faltered at that, the utterly extravagant walls of paned glass and the sheets that plated the sloping simple 'v' roof that stood in the rear yard of his manor house. It was removed from the harsh Earth ground by flagstone and hard bricks, raised a full half foot up in consequence. Inside was a steamy-feeling wonderland of colorful flowers and bristling green brush, water channels threading between boxes of dark earth, and a head gardener.

Gazing around blankly at the ‘gift' in the strong early morning light, the Sekanji kunoichi seriously wondered if she could steal the entire building. Momomi probably wouldn't mind helping her all that much, even if she couldn't move the greenhouse successfully via her earth affinity.

They could just take the plants, and some seeds… maybe a cutting or two to replant elsewhere.

Ironically, she couldn't even identify half of the plants. The few she could that she had never before seen in life were from sketches and documentation written in scrolls by long since dead Sekanji poison masters. What she could see were all exotic, likely imports from either the smaller countries around Earth or specifically hunted for him through specialized merchants.

...now if only she could be assured her little poisoning people habit, people like her to-be husband, wouldn't put off the servants and retainers here it might even be perfect.

Likely, the nobleman only ordered 'pretty flowers'. Unaware most of the more colorful plants were also toxic in their own special ways.

"Pretty, aren't they?" Boomed out Norimoto cheerfully, that still nasty smile on his tanned features as he confirmed her thoughts on his motives.

"...pretty indeed, Nakagawa-sama." Tera started fanning herself again, fingertips itching for her tools.

The carefully thinned beeswax she used to protect her fingertips from the wolfsbane when she went to pick more, the leather gloves used to protect the hands when concentrating the toxins her family use in their craft, perhaps even her paper and charcoal to sketch and write her observation of each
plant before taking cuttings to experiment with.

She just needed a poison lab, or just even old cooking pots and a room to store the more volatile concoctions within as they dried, and she could be then described as something approaching content.

A beefy hand wrapped around her thin shoulders, causing another inadvertent twitch of that disguised war fan. "Know the use of any of these?"

"Several." Confirmed the poison mistress dryly, keeping herself from shuddering or shrugging him off through sheer force of will. "Anthurium, the waxy bright flower with the one wide red petal in the front row, two boxes over. The sap is used to make an irritant to blind the eyes, enough could cause permanent blindness."

Gratifying, the overly stifling hand was removed from her person.

"The purplish flowered bush plant three rows away in the same column is called autumn crocus, which nearly matches cyanide poisoning in effect when administered in certain amounts… however, used limitedly it can also be used to treat gout and some chest pains." Tera eyed the wealth of plant life contained with the glass walls, slightly put out this wouldn't be available to her in her aims of painlessly ridding herself of the man. "My family is ironically very good at healing with plants as much as we are capable of killing with them, Nakagawa-sama."

A boisterous laugh about rattled the panes of glass out of their settings and nearly had her cringing as it echoed in the enclosed space. "I will remember that, little Terazawa."

Her fingers twitched on the wooden grip of her mother's fan, irked more he was referring to her so familiarly when they really had yet to know one another for an entire day.

"Come now, it's time for breakfast. You can play with the flowers as much as you'd like once we're married, my dear."

...bribery?

Interesting.

What kept her from killing him the moment the vows were taken?

Tera wasn't shallow enough to be tempted in the least. She'd likely take some hours each night carefully extracting what she would need to replant the exotic flowers and bushes elsewhere, as well as taking down some descriptions and sketches to fold the seeds into.

Perhaps the work of a few months, if he was going to try to 'control' her access to the plants in the daylight.

She had yet to see if she could walk on glass as well as she taught herself to stand on bark, wood, or water.

(Robbing the greenhouse of its seeds was the work of several weeks, as most were flowering out of confusion for the tropical climate in thin mountain air, but it didn't take as long as Terazawa had assumed it would. Norimoto did try to limit her access, but the utter failure to set limits on his kunoichi bride in respects to his gift seemed to please him more than displease. The sketches she defied him for, as well as the descriptions of each plant as they flowered, were all inspected by various suspicious samurai at least three times before she got them to her rooms. Tera always smirked at them while they all but shook out the papers in hopes of catching whatever poison she...
might've snuck away with. The plants that made up part of her wedding gift weren't the ones they should've been wary of.)
A month passed surprisingly quietly, Lord Nawagaka became emboldened enough from not dropping dead to irritate the hell out of Terazawa with his proprietary behavior to her person and slightly controlling ways.

The fact she was more than sure she was giving him enough saw palmetto extract to remove any sketchy motivations for a male of his body weight and age did give her pause, but then the gossipy hens that disguised themselves as Land of Earth noblewomen tipped her off as to why.

Nawagaka had no sons, and even still no daughters. Four wives, of which she'd be number five if things got that far, but no children at all. He was old enough that if he had any they would be grown and with households of their own, not to mention their own responsibilities, so she hadn't questioned the lack of step-sons or daughters to be introduced to.

...Tera didn't know how to cure that issue.

It did greatly explain why he went for a foreign bride, if the women in his home country weren't up to bearing him one. Especially if he wasn't going to go along with the custom of adopting a fully grown man as a heir to pass his lands on to instead.

The hen she mentally labeled guppy-face got an expression one normally got when biting into a fruit only to realize too late it was a lemon plastered onto her overly made up face when she mentioned her thoughts.

Wafting a breeze she maybe stole from outside using her wind affinity between her and the rest of the overly perfumed gossips sitting in a ground floor tearoom just simply so her eyes wouldn't water up and she didn't start sneezing, Tera examined her 'opponents' from over the top of her gently waving fan.

Again. Norimoto might not be the greatest power in this lowlands area of Earth, but he was central enough to be the middle ground. Netting him the dubious honor of being the one expected to host meetings in order to prevent excess travelling time making this part of the court too tired to conduct business.

The age range was utterly all over the place, interestingly enough. Too old men matched with too young women, a few old wives who had surprisingly young husbands, and only two couples that seemed anywhere near the same range of age.

Both of whom utterly hated their respective partners.

To the point Tera sincerely wondered if she offered her poison skills… would they assist her ridding herself of her unwanted husband?

Yes, still unwanted. However hard he tried to charm and buy his way into her good graces, the best attempt so far was still the wives of his retainers who still tried to integrate her somehow into the household, she couldn't look at him as a serious romantic partner. He was… well, himself.

Especially not in as little as four or so more months.

Tera pulled another gust when one of the older women married to a young man leaned over her cup of tea to give an illusion of privacy even if she raised her tone into something that would easily carry. "Yes, your predecessor's fate was rather tragic. They were rather well matched as a pair, until
Asashi-sama came down with a nasty case of stone fever."

"Is that why he went for the closest thing to a healer possible this time?" Inquired the younger girl idly, refreshing the cup of tea she had with the pot she had to herself.

The lack of trust... seriously now. Killing 'her' guests when she still had a would-be husband to knock off would make it harder to get away with it. Besides which, if she wanted to risk doing the same to herself she could take all their heads off with a sharp blade of wind.

Still smart of them. Removing the temptation of spilling a bit of powdered mountain laurel into the tea of her more irritating acquaintances.

She still couldn't quite believe the second handmaiden actually believed her when she said it was a packet of herbal compounds to treat 'feminine ailments'. While in a way it was true, it just... was a bit pitiful of the girl.

The lie of being a healer was easily proven, she knew a lot of plants and how to use them. More on how to kill with them, and she really should start breaking into mushrooms and venoms but she didn't have a easily reached source for either, but she had started out on perverting remedies into the poisons they sprang from.

Tera was starting to get bored even with all the new things to learn around her. Nobles gossiped, had retainers who loved even sketchy ones, samurai were boring fuddy-duddies hung up on honor, and that was really the best she could get in a month.

Another two or three months, about when she could start expecting love letters from her 'lover' to 'prepare herself' with, and she might just kill herself instead.

Hen number six started up a new conversation when it became apparent Tera wasn't biting for any intrigue that was long since done with, about those 'nasty merchants' and how horrible they were. Especially when they charged a decent price for hauling their luxuries to far corners of the Land of Earth in order for such-and-such and so-and-so to live in moderate comfort.

Yes... such a hardship.

The fan moved a bit faster as things continued in that vein. While Tera kept a log of the gossip and knew perfectly well what their names were and who they were married to right on up to what they preferred to eat and drink she really could not care much about their 'toils'. Giving them all new names and even forcing them to be reintroduced to her was a minor amusement, more so when the rumors that nearly no one could make much of an impression on Tera enough for names to stick started being bandied around.

Did they really think she wouldn't know?

The deception suited her rather whimsical boredom for now, so she didn't correct them. There was also the part where her ignorance of their names was a bit of a pride competition now, which earned her more gossip and tidbits she could probably never use. Better than her behavior coming off as a slight against them all, but they probably thought she was exotic and strange rather than just rude still.

One of her idly labeled 'hens' brought up the lady's tutor again, and her ever so unfortunate illness that claimed her life, as an aside to her neighbor. Slightly too loud, suspiciously watching Tera for a reaction she didn't give. Even if she was rather proud over Momomi's first kill-
Someone was moving around behind her.

Odd, no one normally paced the manor's encircling walls during the time Tera was forced into entertaining the court ladies. Either because they didn't wish to be a topic of discussion or to prevent guards from spoiling the ladies' view of the… utterly bland tan wall that protected them from the peasant rabble.

Snapping her fan shut almost violently had the women in the room shutting up as the Sekanji kunoichi focused her attention elsewhere.

...right behind her. Curious.

Wood creaked nearly silently, the utterly weak chakra flared with ugly intent, and Tera whirled around to her knees in order to finally use her fan as it was intended before he let loosed his drawn weapon of choice. The arrow had no chance, the nearly \textit{blunt} winds hammered it to the ground before it could embed itself into any of the ladies.

The backswing of her fan neatly took care of the blandly dressed archer as well, weak though the wind would be after crashing against the very earth. He ducked in time but the bow that was taller than even he was not so lucky and ended cleaved in two, the string breaking lashed a painful bleeding welt against his face.

Amusingly, once things were settled one of Nawagaka's samurai ran over in full armor to flatten the would-be assassin even more before taking him in custody.

Tera sunk back into her cushioned seat with another spin of green silk, leaving the men to clean up after her. Still amused copper eyes glanced from a white face to a red face to a blank space because the owner had fainted and so on until she reached the merely wide eyed middle aged noblewoman that was brave enough to take the seat on her right. "More tea, Kaneshi-sama?"

"You \textit{do} know our names." That woman observed critically, more shocked by the sudden violence than actually terrified at the very visible reminder they were dealing with a kunoichi.

"I even know you are allergic to nuts. Be assured I will be having word with the kitchen staff after this to ensure the mistake is never repeated." Confirmed the younger girl serenely, tapping the folded weapon of war against the plate of fried noodles in peanut sauce that sat mostly untouched in front of the woman.

Tera had been curious, sue her.

It \textit{was} very good food, slightly richer than she was used to, just… slightly toxic for one of her guests.

...curious.

(ooo000000)

One of the samurai committed seppuku over the mistake of not catching the incompetent assassin.

Terazawa was present when Nawagaka demanded the act for the ridiculous 'shame' of being bested by someone that likely studied the court's movements to do expressly that. She was also still present when the young man decided right there and then was appropriate, just simply asking for a ink and paper beforehand.

In the main receiving room, with it's painted silk scroll decorated stone walls and tatami-matted
floors, which will likely need replacement shortly.

His requested paper and ink was supplied, too.

...really, it wasn't all that major of an issue.

The attacker was in custody, a motive and target could be found, no one was harmed. Other than the attacker, that was.

Yes, she was forced to defend herself and her guests... but wasn't that expected?

Wait, nobles. Well... perhaps it would've been better if she died?

Then at least that poor boy's death would've meant something.

Tera didn't say anything as things were put in place for the ritualized suicide, more out of respect for the samurai's life choices than anyone else. She might find it stupid and wasteful, but it was a culture thing to him and therefore likely more important than her opinion.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time for the boy to die, probably because he nicked something major that spewed blood in almost a sheet across his opened slightly threadbare kimono.

...it was a bit odd, watching a death she had no hand in.

While things were then promptly cleaned up, in a practiced manner which meant this wasn't as rare of an occurrence as one might like, Norimoto turned to consider her before returning to what the incident had pulled him from. "I wasn't aware those pretty fans of yours were weapons, Terazawa."

"Anything that shapes the wind is a weapon to me, Nawagaka-sama." Allowed the poison mistress after a moment of thought and considering the caps that had prevented their real purpose from being obvious. "The fans were my mother's, mainly I have them in remembrance of her. I certainly never expected being required to use them here."

Water could also be lethal in her hands, but she was suspicious this incident might start a campaign of separating her of anything that could kill. Best not to give them headaches as they tried to figure out how, revealing that later on when they have all but run themselves ragged with every other weapon she could touch already would assuage some of her ire in that eventuality.

Besides which, she was already trained to use fans in battle. She might as well continue with that, as she would be more practiced with them than any other weapon.

The grin he got this time was a touch less greasy feeling and more dark, which she honestly respected more than his attempts to 'get her used to him'. Still disgusting, but respectable.

Tera thought about it more as she waited, wondering...

"Terazawa-sama, is there something else wrong?"

"How well are the court ladies known to the staff here?"

The elderly appearing samurai she was talking to, who she was almost semi-sure was possibly not the husband of peppy-samurai-wife that kept nagging her to give things a chance, blinked at the sudden question. "Fairly so."

"So... say Kaneshi-sama's nut allergy would be already known?" Asked the Sekanji poison mistress pointedly, because that kind of opening was phenomenally tailored for sabotage.
Something that wouldn't kill bystanders, but would murder a target in a really painful manner?

Easily accidental, especially if there was a new kitchen worker who didn't know in residence and a lady who was supposedly unused to her peers overseeing the tea party.

"Then why oh why did they serve a, very tasty mind you, nut-based dish to tea?" Tera gazed back calmly as the old samurai stared hard at her. "I believe you may have rats. Would you like some rat poison?"

"I think," the elderly man observed strongly, "we will be perfectly fine hunting on our own."

"Pity."

It really was, too. She could've then made use of the greenhouse, which was probably why he refused.

Well… that and avoiding his lord and master demanding his death for involving his to-be wife in the issue even more than she was now.

(ooo0000oo)

The Land of Earth was very… earthy.

It was the best Terazawa could come up with.

That didn't mean it wasn't beautiful in its own way, a more severe grace than the wild plains of Grass and with more hidden charm than the riot of life that was Fire.

The rocks often changed depending on the sky, turning from dull tan and grey to ochre red or even an ugly bruised purple and sometimes all of that in one day. Plateaus where things could be grown were cramped and limited, but were welcome surprises all the same. Water was rare, and sometimes came out of the very rocks, leaving long stretches of bare earth dotted with the hardier plants that liked near-wastelands.

"Do not touch that." Tera called over a shoulder before her handmaiden number two could grip a weedy brush plant to help her along. "That is blister bush, it should be self-explanatory."

Alarmed, the girl slid away from the innocent seeming green plant with the near sphere of yellow frond-like flowers topping it off. Actually slid, the sloping incline was apparently not that good on the handmaiden's knees and balance.

A good find of the girl's, but not really what she was looking for.

Being polite and asking for an escort to take a bit of a 'nature walk' earned her an attendant and a full escort of samurai, even if she and her so-called guards were perfectly aware she could defend herself perfectly well. They didn't make snide remarks over her shinobi nature, she didn't make their jobs difficult and possibly get a few or all of them killed.

Diplomacy at its finest.

Now then… where oh where would a good candidate be to cause a very fatal heart attack in her to-be-husband?

She just wanted to find it, then come back under the cover of night to gather enough to purchase her freedom.
Likely, half the reason she had so many guards was to prevent her from gathering plants per her poison making skills. Or the inept assassin.

That was a concern as well.

The possible killer wasn't really the tipping point for her, she had been put off the entire arranged marriage due to her very age and the age of Nawagaka himself. Aside which, her little sister might really appreciate a more senior poison user to help her along if the last of the Sekanji men had died off by now.

Her issue with the noblewoman's lifestyle was the utter *uselessness* of it, and in protest to the very painfully obvious manipulations her intended was doing in trying to trap her here.

Tera had actually little compulsions against allowing the death of someone she didn't like all that much happening by someone else's hands as well. Her husband was just her *target* and if she was going to take the blame anyways it might as well be for a damn good reason.

The incompetency her saboteur was trying to paint on her was a bit much to suffer through silently.

An inept, overwhelmed preteen that had no idea how a noble household was run probably wouldn't have caught it. A green kunoichi might've been still trying to work out her responsibilities and who knew what to have realized what was going on.

Tera was never allowed to be green, added with her herbology skills and she knew the look of tetterwort doping and could track back the yellowish stains the plant left behind in unwary or unknowing users.

Between her saw palmetto extract and tetterwort's sedative qualities, Norimoto might just end up passing on in his sleep. Painlessly, which would do him none of the harm he was trying to inflict on her.

It could either be luck or by intent the herbs being used were complementary, a small blessing she was going to ruthlessly question to the ground anyways. The coincidental mistakes and snags in the formerly well-run household that suddenly occurred not a month into her stay would've driven a lesser woman to distraction, especially a young girl that would've expected the staff to be perfectly suited to handling their business since they had done so long before her under a more experienced lady.

The archer assassin sent after her might've been intended to shake her up, to make her cautious and focus on a method of death that wouldn't be used in the end, but it had the opposite effect and caught the Sekanji poison mistress' attention.

First of all, who with any sense used a bow that big in a courtyard that wasn't even half a mile across?

Had it been shorter, required less effort to draw, and her opponent aware of her chakra sensing, whoever they were aiming for would be dead. Her money was on one of the other noblewomen, so to be shocked over the death as well as force her intended to be distracted placating the corresponding widower… while her own ninja background was put into question.

In conclusion there was an unneeded medication being applied to her intended husband, an inept assassin that just might be a disgruntled individual manipulated to increase the tension between the samurai and the kunoichi, sabotage to the overall household's operation to distract, and one foreign Grass kunoichi wife with a convenient background in poisons and ninja things.
She certainly hadn't expected this level of intrigue when she came out here.

Finding her would-be saboteur and pinning the sudden heart attack on him or her would just be icing on the cake.

"Aa… here we go." Hemlock, a fairly invasive species which was perfectly poisonous in its native form. A goodly clump of the tall plant with clusters of white flowering stems, growing in the crook of the road and one of the rice paddies that somehow actually existed when the rest of the land looked as if it had been salted not too long ago. "Interesting specimen, I have never seen this in Grass."

With that much volume, the possibility some of the leaves could be pruned and perhaps an entire stalk harvested for her own use was high. Tera couldn't quite recall if it was the leaves, roots, flowers, or stem that had the greater concentration of toxins... but as she was fully aware it was lethal in small doses it likely wouldn't matter all that much.

Handmaiden number two obediently handed over the pricey and even crisp scroll she was keeping her Land of Earth herbology notes within, bound with a rather charming green silk backing and possessing a handsome brass handle. "If you don't mind the question, Terazawa-sama… how long do your walks tend to go?"

"At least most of a week, recently." Tera informed her pleasantly, pulling the loose end of the scroll to find where she had left off after transferring all her greenhouse plant notes.

She'd cut off that length once she was gone, greenhouses were cheating and this would be detailing only Earth-native plant life in the end. Leaving enough of a border to enable that action, she started sketching out the plant as it stood fully grown.

"T-terazawa-sama, we cannot be gone that long…"

"I am aware. A few more hours, girl. I would like at least another specimen I have not studied yet before we return." It would take a while to finish sketching anyways, more than enough time for the girl and the four samurai to recover their breath for the next half of the trip.

Returning will be fun, as she didn't intend to stop again after the next plant sketching pause. A lovely day to stroll straight back to the nobleman's manor without so much as a halt, unless her lovely squeaky handmaiden requested one.

Would the heavily armored samurai collapse from heat exhaustion before or after that?

(Upon their return Terazawa loudly professed her ignorance when it came to the samurai’s limits blandly, pointing out that her handmaiden knew full well that she wasn't in Tera's league and actually spoke up when her lady went at something for too long for her to keep up. The fact the men didn't have the same sense a court attendant did was wondered over in perfect bemusement, especially as all four of her 'guards' ended up bedridden for a few days after her stroll around the local area. They wore armor, heavy things that didn't breathe and poured more weight down on their laboring lungs and muscles. It earned her no good-will from the samurai, but did gift her with some leeway when it came to her own personal defense. While maliciously intended on behalf of certain manipulated parties that made up her would-be lord's retinue, it actually fit into the kunoichi's plans nicely and she hunted down her would-be saboteur quickly enough to make use of him.)
"That is poisoned." Terazawa calmly informed their honored and really important guest before the man could take a bite of the stir-fry containing a riot of vegetables and the terribly expensive imported shellfish in a savory sauce. "I would not eat that unless you have a resistance to larkspur toxins."

She knew it perfectly well, the garnishments were personally supplied by her. On the sly in the dead of night, while a water clone occupied her bed and she had the range to replace the edible petals set away to make this meal. Larkspur petals were a very pretty purple, or at least these were, which offset well with the dark green broccoli and complemented the orange carrot and red pepper slices.

The pinkish white shrimp flesh looked rather fetching against the darker petals too.

"Slightly odd… they only grow in wooded areas of high elevation and I haven't seen trees around here to allow cultivating that. And I suppose the greenhouse as well, but I have yet to cut anything from there as I have no place to store or experiment with them." Tera continued calmly, nibbling delicately on the equally colorful rice dish that was just as spicy.

Kuzuyama Takaari was a slightly more powerful nobleman than her would-be husband, and frankly had her marriage been arranged to him she might've not decided to give him a heart attack the moment she saw him. Well-fit, almost more samurai than noble, and without that greasy greedy grin Nawagaka had, he controlled a far greater portion of Earth within which most of the native food was cultivated within.

It would've been fun to match wits with him. She might have actually lost.

Norimoto had the merchant routes to his lands, which he built his wealth from and yet wasn't very happy with it even so. 'Dirty work', at least as close to it as a nobleman would lower himself to do. Hence why her intended wasn't as powerful as the man they were hosting, and likely why he'd let a few less 'noble' things slide like the habits of a kunoichi wife.

As long as she was more than strong enough to bear him the children he desperately needed to secure his dynasty to his bloodline.

This was… some kind of business meeting, done without the rest of the hens that made up the lower Earth daimyōs' courts.

There wouldn't be a better occasion to have the would-be saboteur known of before her to-be husband's very terrible and 'surprise' death. Especially not if she wanted to act sometime soon.

Being samurai trained, Kuzuyama was distrustful of her entirely.

However, poison advice from a mistress of the art of making and using them was nothing to sneeze at.

One of Nawagaka's manservants was sacrificed in the name of truth, willingly taking a few bites of the dish in question for them, and while the rest of them continued to eat the non-poisoned parts of dinner he very nervously sweated in place in the middle of the room as they all eyed him with varying amounts of interest.

Then he had a very painful looking stroke. Not a heart-attack, which was easier and more painful to
cause via poisons, a stroke.

...well. Tera blinked at the slumped body in bemusement. Larkspur wouldn't have caused that, not through the minor amounts that would have leached into a freshly cooked dish garnished with toxic leaves and petals.

Stomach pangs for sure, maybe a few internal blisters, and yes in large enough doses even death.

She seemed to have caught an accomplice, not an innocent. The larkspur likely interacted with the tiny amounts of an unknown toxin to encourage a stroke in a fit and a little on the young side of a middle aged man, it was a mostly water-soluble poison that could boost another if induced closely enough.

Rising to her feet while her intended and his guest were still too startled to do anything, Tera checked over his fingers and hands. Tetterwort stains were hard to rid oneself of, yet the man's hands were clean.

...a sedative also wouldn't have caused a stroke when mixed with larkspur. How delightful.

An unknowing accomplice then.

Oh no, wait. He was still alive.

Tera announced such pleasantly just in time for Norimoto to basically lose his temper, in a very silent nobleman way.

Did the poor man stroke out from stress?

Or some other toxin she didn't know?

"Nawagaka-sama, I require whoever you are seeing for the tetterwort. The sedative will keep this one alive just long enough for me to save." In a manner of speaking, a stroke would cripple some part of him permanently before she could calm his body enough to help him past it.

"The… what?"

"You did not know?" Tera pretended surprise, not bothering to try keeping her chakra system level through the lie. "You were on it long before I arrived, I had assumed you were getting it for treatment of some ill or another."

The situation was 'shocking' enough to account for any flux, and she had made it a point to keep her reactions as 'truthful' as could be up until now. Might not do her any good aside the practice with how unlikely another chakra sensitive would be in a nobleman's household, but worth it all the same.

If her calculations were correct, not knowing how far the insurrection within his household went would bring 'shame' on the elderly nobleman she was intended to wed. Especially since the reveal was done in front of a honored guest, more importantly a more powerful one he was trying to cultivate better relations with, during an 'intimate' private dinner with the man.

Catching the poison before it could harm said guest, offering to nurse the affected through the illness, her prior catching of an assassin, and how agreeable she was when it came to following the 'duties' of a noblewoman would protect her somewhat. Perhaps she was a bit willful, when it came to plants, but she was both a poison mistress and healer.
Having one's tools ready for use before they were required were the marks of a professional. She had been denied that, and now she had nothing to help with.

Belatedly catching on that this probably wasn't something he wanted his guest to witness and judge his worth by, Nawagaka called out sharply for his head samurai to assist his intended and her medical duties.

Tera was then rather excluded from the rest of the fallout, but she had someone to nurse through getting caught up in the machinations of two ninja fighting over the rights to kill the same target.

Rokkaku Yoshiharu, said elderly samurai man she vaguely recalled talking to before this, watched her solemnly as she fussed with making her victim comfortable.

Unless someone else could find that tetterwort supplier, there was little else she could do for him right now.

"Will he live?"

"At the moment, it is too soon to tell." Stress or chemically induced strokes were easier on the body than those caused by blood clots or internal bleeding of the brain, so long as they didn't go on for long, but there was also whatever amount and number of other toxins to take into account as well. "Be assured, if someone can bring me that tetterwort supplier his period of unconsciousness would be less likely to be permanent."

Tera knew perfectly well who it was, but it was entirely possible they either wouldn't think their cover was blown due to the entirely different poison used during dinner or that they could weather the incident safely somehow. Keeping watch for the, entirely true, rumors that she arranged this night's disaster herself would be a thing to also occupy herself with while she waited.

"Until then, a darkened room and perhaps a bath would aid him more than I can do without any herbal remedies at hand."

Rokkaku narrowed dark blue eyes at her. "Will he be able to work for Norimoto-sama?"

"...unlikely. Strokes do tend to paralyze some part of the body or mind, once he wakens we will be able to judge to what effect this has had on him." Depression would be a big thing to watch for, as with any disabling incident. Speech problems, inability to control his own muscles, uniquely new skills with his less dominant side suddenly appearing, perhaps even partial to full body paralysis.

Depending on which part of his brain stroked out, the complications possible were nearly uncountable.

The old samurai kept watching her closely, but Tera's part was over with and she had nothing to hide.

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Terazawa was allowed to make up whatever treatment she deemed necessary for the retainer that ate poison willingly to spare his lord and master and his intended bride, not to mention their honored guest, the same fate.

She did so, pointedly. Wolfsbane, she loved wolfsbane.

The fact it worked to help Ikeda recover his mobility, because if used carefully it worked to reduce fever and the pain he might've otherwise cause himself overdoing physical therapy under her eye,
was just a bonus.

Tera also informed the poor man that in a large dose, as in the entirety of what she made up for his treatment, would cause muscle weakness and a tingling sensation before death. Within Rokkaku's hearing.

It was a way out, even if the extent of the damage he suffered from was a partial paralysis of his left arm and a heavy speech impediment. However, as the old samurai had expressed some stiff concern that the manservant might not want to just simply deal with the physical infirmary or mental complications and the setback it might cause him, she provided the option anyways.

Her victim at first looked sorely tempted, in the early days when he could barely rise up out of bed even with Tera and the samurai helping. By the third time, first to the elderly man as he didn't catch the prior two other incidents, Ikeda seemed to contemplate escaping the entire situation in a very final way the Sekanjii poison mistress was politely asked to leave the room so Rokkaku could impart some very pointed words.

Very pointed, Tera didn't really leave them to it but occupied herself and a maid down the hall slightly… and if the breeze carried more than just fresh air she wouldn't admit it and the girl had been too embarrassed about overhearing to tattle.

She did then learn the two of them were childhood friends.

"What use is a manservant with only one working hand?" Nawagaka asked of her in the second week of treatment, not cruelly so but more asked out of practicality and what he likely saw as 'reasonableness'.

If Ikeda didn't return to his former duties, then the nobleman would have to find something else for him or release him from service.

With a likely pitiful pension, newly homeless, and without any prospects to better himself through.

"...I could use a scribe. A one handed one is no real trouble." Tera allowed thoughtfully, as the man likely would never really recover completely from the stroke and the inevitable complications that would arise in time. Keeping him close to someone that could treat that was just sense, but it also had her considering what she would be taking with her when she left.

Perhaps handmaiden number two wouldn't mind coming with her, as well?

More hands made for a lighter load, and leaving all these quality silk kimonos tailored to her size would be a bit of a crime.

"He doesn't know how to read or write." Rokkaku informed her later the same day, apparently after rumor already made the rounds within the manor well before he visited his old friend.

"Teaching him will be good for his dexterity and to keep his mind occupied." She reassured the samurai calmly as they passed one another. "It also will not be something he had a 'before' to judge his progress now against."

Even with healing duties to distract her, Tera kept an eye on her saboteur.

Ninjas either learned patience or died quickly, or became utter monsters on the battlefield, so the servant that was still drugging Norimoto kept his head down and went about his duties as any quiet young boy overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of a noble's household would be.
Ikeda was the main servant in charge of ensuring everything the cooks needed for a meal was prepared before it was required, the manager of the kitchen staff. A one-handed man wouldn't be able to bring in and serve the heavy platters of food, or snacks or tea trays that really were more dessert trays of equal weight, as custom and the traditional presentation required. If he required an assistant for that then it would be emenity more practical to just hire a new kitchen overseer. Hence why Nawagaka had him take a bite of the poisoned dish that night instead of some random footman, and who was possibly exposed to whatever toxin was or had been prepared to ensure she was 'shamed' enough someone would have had her killed or forced her to do it herself.

Utterly delightful.

Tera had done her preparation, if her opponent was caught off-guard and red-handed with the oh-so coincidental murder 'weapon' she would have no obvious or possible way of acquiring then…

She'd much rather use her own but, up until she realized he was also a poison user or simply had some and therefore a valid way of acquiring more that wouldn't be known to a Sekanji poison mistress, that had been her only option.

Removed some of the prep-time required as well, which was good as she was starting to seriously wonder what Momomi was up to now.

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Terazawa was obviously tending to Ikeda when her intended husband suffered his obviously poison induced heart-attack the still-unprepared kitchen worker saboteur had obviously served him. Thus ended the Nawagaka daimyō dynasty.

In a spectacular fashion too, she heard the upset even cloistered away in a small room with a infirm man and her personal handmaiden to guard her virtue. The dining room had to be closed off until the maids could scrub down the utterly blood splattered ceiling and floors, the blood of the ill-reacting when surprised saboteur decorated the ceiling where at least four samurai had lunged to cut the assassin trying to run down then turned their blades on themselves to follow their lord and master into death.

She was sorry she missed it, in the aftermath.

Tera gathered the utterly shell-shocked and slightly terrified remainders of the deceased lord's retinue together in the biggest place that would hold them, mainly the tea room with the really important staff in front of her and the lesser workers out in the courtyard behind.

"Rokkaku-sama, I request you keep the peace. At least until a runner can alert whoever was more senior to Nawagaka-sama about his death and convey a request for either legitimacy or a new lord." Asked the Sekanji poison mistress sedately. "I intend to figure out how my intended husband was murdered, and therefore who demanded it, until such is no longer welcomed."

The white-lipped and white-faced samurai merely stared back at her for a long moment. "Why not take control yourself, Terazawa-sama?"

"I am kunoichi. Even you yourself do not trust me, and I believe you are the one samurai here that knows me best as of this moment." Her fan, neglected while she had doctoring to do, lazily drifted to ensure the open wall pulled a higher breeze than normal to spare her sensitive nose of the mostly unwashed bodies gathered together and the fear that was almost stifling in its oppressiveness. "I am also an outsider here still, however well my introduction to Earth's courtly ranks might have been I
am still a native of Grass."

Her measured and completely toneless words didn't entirely cause a ripple of unease through the ranks before her, they were well-trained and very much a nobleman's supporting servant ranks, but she didn't need the chakra senses to feel the almost physical cringe behind her.

"My use now is my family's mastery of poisons, if you do not mind I will supply my expertise for your use and then return to my father's home as my marriage will not be happening."

True, even though she hoped that man would be dead by now too.

The older man nodded to her sharply. "Then I await your findings, Sekanji-sensei."

With a sly smirk he probably couldn't see, Tera left him to corralling the people wishing to impersonate headless chickens and went to finally go play with the poisons she just acquired.

(What killed her intended husband was the residue made from carefully peeled and boiled seeds of a yew bush, that she stole from her would-be and now dead saboteur's things while leaving just enough and the mutilated seeds to implicate him even more when and if an investigation was launched into his presence. She required less than a moment's worth of thought to connect that with the southeastern part of the Land of Waterfall or simply the southern reaches of Rice... or the very northern edge of Fire. The rest of the week was spent carefully transferring the seeds she had taken from the greenhouse and hidden away for from her rooms into specifically marked packets to match them with a description of a plant in her notes, making cuttings and extracts from the remainder of the greenhouse plants, and foraging for the few Earth native plants she had found by then. Her shiny new chest of poisons, the chest of kimonos and accessories, and a smaller chest containing her dowry were then gathered up as Terazawa prepared to leave the noble courts of Earth.)
"No."

"Terazawa-sama-"

"I am not a noblewoman, I am kunoichi." She pointed out softly to the group of people that had confronted her before her departure, the tips of her bladed war fan glinting in the light now she had finally removed the caps that disguised it as a bladed weapon and not just a tool of chakra manipulation. "I will be returning to a very hard life, one of which would not require retainers."

Handmaiden number two and her new scribe both looked alarmed.

Rolling her eyes, Terazawa flicked the fan so a gust smacked into their faces in reprimand before returning it to shield her face. "Yura-chan and Ikeda-san are the only ones I am prepared to make exceptions for."

If her family protested… then they could go away. She had afforded the meat, grains, and vegetables to feed herself and her baby sister on her lonesome once before. Going back to that would likely be easier now she was a 'woman'.

Laughable, as she wasn't even thirteen, but this society was horribly backwards sometimes.

Going alone, with her two tagalongs, would be possibly harder until she found them a base of operations they would be safe within.

With their utterly normal self-defense skills… and no or little intent on either's behalf to improve that…

...even back in the Sekanji compound, they were hurting for just hands to help.

Forcing down the grimace, Tera turned back to the group and narrowly inspected each of them standing before her and if they could meet her 'ninja-scary' eyes.

...they would pixs themselves if they ever came face-to-face with an Uchiha, a Hyūga, a Yamanaka, or just about anyone else that could go 'crazy-eyed'. Thankfully, those were mostly Land of Fire shinobi clans and therefore some time away if they survived that long.

"If you wish to marry well, you will need a staff." Insisted handmaiden number one, who was not coming with even if Tera had to murder her to ensure it. "All noblewomen-"

"I don't intend to ever get married." Announced the kunoichi as if that wasn't the opposite of what good, decent women did in this day and age. "I am a Sekanji poison mistress. I kill people for a living, I study poisons that might just cripple my ability to bear children, I fight. A husband might just object to all that, and I have a different duty to fulfil to my family now my marriage has fallen apart."

It would likely be what she was returning to, as they had finally done away with gender segregation due to poor numbers.

"If any of you are hoping I am your way into a proper position in another court, please leave." Tera glared at handmaiden number one until she very rapidly walked away. "As for the rest of you…"
...who hadn't walked off on her yet. There remained eight other stubborn individuals still standing there asking her to take them with her. To a shinobi lifestyle, to hardships and murder and even more unspeakable terrors for well-bred manor dwellers.

Fanning the weapon a few times as she thought, glancing from face to face, Tera pondered the implications.

Rather younger faces, even if her now safely deceased husband had been around the upper edge of sixty and possibly older than that. Second or third generation servants, possibly fourth, who didn't know of another way to live because this manor was all they knew.

Rokkaku had gotten a return runner a few days ago, a new noble family would be moving in and the nobleman would be taking over as the new Lord of Nawagaka. Who already had a staff of people he would be bringing with him, as did his wife and each of their three sons.

The samurai might stay to guard him and his people, move on and become ronin, or take their lives to follow their master into death. It really depended on the relationship Norimoto had with them and what their expectations were for life after his demise.

It couldn't have been that unexpected, aside the whole murder bit. The man had been nearly a geriatric, a surprisingly robust one going to seed but elderly enough to count anyways. There likely were a lot of plans his people had for life after his death being carried out right now.

Tera would like to leave before the new Lord Nawagaka moved in and pondered marrying her off to one of his sons to firm up his hold on his new lands. She might not be a native, but there was what her marriage was to cement to take into account and the fact her very existence meant at least one kind of ninja would be interested in helping out with a bit of covert action on 'her' behalf.

Killing a single nobleman who was already ancient and came with convenient blame-target already embedded in his retinue was one thing, especially as she had several months of cushion time to plan in, the son of a nobleman who would be very unamused as well as more cautious of sabotage was another.

Especially as her thirteenth birthday was approaching rapidly. She hadn't known she was born in the waning days of summer, August fourth to be specific, until her birthday actually became relevant.

It had taken Tera nearly three months to plot out this one death in a safe manner. Especially to the point she wasn't being run out in disgrace or attacked. Even if it was her fault he died when he did.

"A ninja's life is not a particularly kind one, nor forgiving." She informed the group blandly, taking the steps needed to leave the manor home of a Earth noble for the last time. "I will not accept more than I must, that kind of burden will be deadly to me. However..."

A pause, and she gave each of the eight she hadn't intended to ever see again a once-over.

"...I will not restrict where you may roam."

If they followed her home, they could learn a few new trades and shore up the tattered remains of her family.

Tera took the last three steps out of the ornate and overly indulgent manor home, however cushioned and decadent it was it was still a prison to her, stopped dead in the grand and main marble entrance as she stared at what waited for her there with the carriage that would be taking three heavy chests of her things back to Grass with her.
Rokkaku was given an entirely deadpan staredown of his own.

"You are doing this to annoy me, correct?"

The elderly samurai gave her a smile that wasn't particularly nice looking. "They are unmarried, the only or last sons alive of old brothers in arms, nowhere else for them to go as the new lord will be bringing his own to replace us. You are the last living remnant we have of Norimoto-sama, his wish was to marry and continue his line through you. Part of that-"

"You will be waiting very, very long time for me to ever consider it."

"Then we will be with you a very, very long time, Terazawa-sama."

A delicately plucked eyebrow, which she was never suffering through again, rose up and likely pulled oddly at the freshly made grease-based paint that coated the skin around her coppery eyes and hid the purple crests that were the mark of her family line. "...'we', Rokkaku-sama?"

(ooo000ooo)

"They followed me home." Terazawa announced as flatly as humanly possible, ignoring the purpling rage on her father's dirt streaked and still black grease marked face in favor of focusing more on the utterly bemused one on her uncle's. "I am keeping them."

Momomi bit her lower lip to hide her expression, whipping out her preteen-sized war fans to hide the expression until she could recover her mental balance and keep a straight face.

Rokkaku looked fairly bemused himself at the miniature of his new 'Terazawa-sama'. The rest of them behind him were either trying to be as straight-faced as their 'lady', failing utterly and a few cracking sheepish or not smiles, or just panting as they recovered from the slog out of the Land of Earth into Grass.

"The former Nawagaka-sama suffered a fatal heart-attack, the cause was the toxin extracted from the seeds of a yew bush more commonly found in the Land of Waterfall or Rice, or possibly the very northern parts of Fire, the assassin was killed in revenge by a few of his now deceased samurai." Tera reported, still with that utterly flat tone as if she was talking about the weather and not murder she had a large hand in.

She had spoken to the nearly twenty-strong entourage about some of the inner workings of shinobi families, how tone and expression was flattened out to prevent unsightly connections or easily accomplished sabotage, so they wouldn't become alarmed or overly defensive about how the 'whys' and 'hows' came about in a conversation between two or more ninja.

Also because she really did kill Norimoto but telling any of her new samurai that probably wouldn't end well.

Momo probably would be the only one to know that for the rest of her life. At least until her samurai finally died off, or wandered to a new master.

They had to get bored of being the exception to the rule of utter dislike between shinobi and samurai sometime, right?

"Is that how you came into this…" Her uncle trailed off, examining the people gathered at her back standing in the yard of the Sekanji family compound. "...pack of people?"

He probably had a word that was more insulting in mind, but currently his eyes was on the score of
samurai that likely would try to cheerfully gut him for any slights against her 'honor'.

Tera might actually grow to like her new retinue.

Eventually.

It really depended on how willing they were to let her go off on her own.

...or if they wouldn't mind being the sisters' punching bag to develop actual battle-worthy skills on.

"As I said, lord uncle, they followed me home." Fanning the wind user's weapon in front of her face a few times just to see if her father's head really would explode if she gave it enough time, her coppery eyes touched on the only identical set she knew of briefly before returning to bore into flat black. "They are aware we all pull our weight here, and that for the time being they will not be trusted with much. Aside that, I brought back some Earth-native poisons and my refunded dowry."

Her uncle spent a moment contemplating things. "...I suppose we could use some guards. The west side of the compound is yours then, be sure to start pulling your weight again so they will be fed."

Likely, he was wondering who else he could marry her off to now. Even one dead husband to her name was one too many for most that would toy with the idea of taking a kunoichi wife.

About twenty-some more mouths to feed was no small thing, especially as from the look of things the state of the family had fallen even farther in the months she had been gone as the strain of so few working shinobi took it's price from them. However, those behind her were adult hands to help balance out the riot of children and to take on the guarding and poison making that would otherwise eat into the man hours of their few shinobi.

A few more women apparently had given birth while she was away, and a suspicious number of them had purple crests.

Tera smile blandly, snapping her fan closed and leading her new people to where they could settle in.

'So they will be' meant there wasn't enough food for them all right now.

"Care to go hunting with me, Momo-chan?" Inquired the elder of the sisters thoughtfully as they watched people pour into formerly abandoned single or double room huts. "I think... we might actually need a deer or something."

"Or several boars. Maybe even a full horse." Agreed her brat of a little sister pleasantly, ignoring the spectacle of former manor dwellers taking in their reduced living situation as optimistically as they could. "Do you suppose your manly samurai can hunt their own dinner, or should we gather enough for them as well?"

"That will not be necessary, Terazawa-sama." Rokkaku muttered tiredly as he leaned his heavily armored form up against the compound wall three steps away from her side. "We can hunt for ourselves."

Most of her 'staff' had been scandalized when she opted to pace the carriage instead of ride within in, but by the second day on the road that scandalized emotion turned into something resembling desperate gratefulness. It was either pile their worldly possessions, earned in a manor house that never required moving vast distances, on their own shoulders... or stack it in the carriage.

The elderly samurai she inherited had caught up on day three of the trek, puffing under his armor
and the beginning summer sun. He claimed all he wanted to take with him was his armor and
sword, but she was suspicious he had cut down his belongings to the very little he could travel so
far with and simply made due with it.

Had she said something of intending to not ride in the carriage as well, he might have more
keepsakes and she did slightly regret the unintentional sacrifice she had caused him.

That he followed her anyways, without anything else to his name, was actually slightly… touching.

"Just for today, Rokkaku-sama." Refuted the poison mistress gently, honor might be a strange beast
to her but if it made him happy she could learn to deal with it. "So you and your men can ensure
the rest of our people are protected and guarded from possibly surprised shinobi returning home
while I am gone."

Before he could muster enough mental energy to formulate an effective protest, Tera snapped open
her fan and smile slyly from behind it at him.

"Besides which, one of you needs to return my dowry to my lord uncle… and there is the
inspecting the compound's wall and perimeter for organizing patrols and guard positions, taking
down any urgent request my retainers require in the coming days, getting to know the ladies of the
family left by sight, impressing that being samurai is not a weakness to the shinobi trainees, and
other general fussy things I will likely have no idea is required but you do."

Rokkaku eyed her sourly, or as close as he was able to do both exhausted and still struggling with
some remains of grief he had yet to deal with pitted against the 'respect' and 'honor' he had for her.
"That, Terazawa-sama, is a low blow."

"Kunoichi," dismissed the preteen delightedly, turning on a heel and not needing to look to know
that her sister followed while he remained where he was, "thank you kindly for taking care of all
that for me, samurai-sama. I really do not deserve your presence or service."

Tera glanced to the side at her little sister when she giggled for the teasing.

"How ever did you end up with samurai-sama and the rest, big sister?" Momo asked
mischievously, a wicked smirk on her painfully missed features turned up so they could clearly see
one another.

"That, naughty little sister, is a long story."

"I do not believe I am the one that has been naughty…"

"...perhaps."

(The infusion of unskilled but able hands were what really saved the Sekanji clan in the end. The
lighter workload needed to maintain and guard the compound as well as the offset of the crush of
newborn children to take care of enabled more of the few shinobi they had left to take better and
longer jobs that paid better, the mothers even eventually had the time to return to poison making
they were being taught to do as that art would be kept in the Sekanji clan by order of the family's
head. With samurai guards posted on the walls and both sisters returning to hunting or selling the
herbs and toxins, not to mention Terazawa's returned dowry which was repurposed into buying
food stores, the clan's strained position slid just under the notice of rogue shinobi trying to hunt
down those that killed their clans or roaming Ronin who held a grudge against any ninja that
might've done the same to their former lords. Poison users, an entire family of them, in dire straits
would've been a ripe target for either group.)
"-there's a shinobi village being built in the Land of Fire-

Terazawa about spluttered out her mouthful of rice and fish, which Rokkaku would give her that utterly disappointed look for doing so she painfully swallowed the sticky and savory mouthful instead.

It had been the even more elderly samurai's suggestion to put a certain breed of fish in the pond, after staring at her oddly for the story behind why they had such a thing, which the younger children tended to and fed the insects that were abundant in this part of the world. The eventual steady supply of fish to eat very nearly earned the man headship of a shinobi family, after that first really lean winter and even more emergency food sources were seriously thought about.

That first winter had been hard in other ways as well, the inherited samurai had outnumbered the pitifully few Sekanji shinobi left and that had bred a conflict and a half alone.

Even two years later, there was still a bit of friction between the two parts of the clan.

They qualified for 'clan' again, a fair number of the widowed women had taken advantage of the fresh blood available and married both samurai and former noble servants. Under the condition that the men would take the Sekanji name and supply more children for the clan to turn into shinobi, and in some cases only a child before the rest would belong to the samurai side of the family.

Tera had been keeping an eye on her growing number of people so her likely philandering father wouldn't upset the development in any way, but even when it came to the Sekanji-samurai relationships things were going surprisingly good.

Part of the issue between Tera's people and the rest that stuck closer to her uncle and father was the shinobi-samurai gulf, their lifestyles were entirely different and while her men were still learning and teaching her a new way that could be middle ground... it was still hard on them. Trying to speak to a ninja about the bushido way made for several interesting incidents, the fact that the sisters tried made it so they seemed to hold them in higher regard than their clan head or his brother who led them.

That the girls were also being given lessons normally only samurai wives and daughters would get was another bone of contention.

The samurai did use a kind of chakra along with martial sword skills and basic martial arts of their own, just a very primitive type that made up part of what shinobi saw as chakra. As a ninja daughter, Tera had been taught and then passed to Momo the various ways to boost what they could do naturally with the human form and their elemental affinities. According to Rokkaku's lectures on the topic, reinforcing oneself like that and the nature manipulations was considered mostly dishonorable for samurai to do against any opponent.

Unless both sides had the same or similar skills sets, and more importantly both sides agreed to it, they wouldn't use those skills they did know even if it killed them.

Honor was still a very strange beast she was trying to study the ways of. True understanding would likely never be possible, she was very much the murderous creature created by shinobi life, but she could then account for it in her people when she knew enough.

Blinking coppery eyes so they wouldn't water after nearly breathing in her dinner, Tera refocused
on the thinly veiled gossip her father was also listening to from the elderly healer she was slightly surprised to realize was still alive.

"-Aburame, Akimichi, Hyūga, and Uchiha clans."

Her worthless father scoffed. "And you believe that? The Senju and Uchiha hate one another, there was a war that took a head from both and uncounted more shinobi. Such wars breed enduring hate, not peace."

"The Shimura Clan does, they left to join."

...Shimura?

Tera thought about it, trying to recall who they were when her thoughts were currently samurai-fuzzy and not on ninja things.

She returned to eating as she put one and one together. Ninjutsu specialists, not entirely nomadic but entirely willing to pull up stakes and wander if the local area turned less than ideal. They moved in almost five years ago, racking up an impressive reputation even among the normally prideful people of Grass.

Especially for foreigners new to the area.

Tended to be what the Inuzuka Clan crashed against every other summer or so since they moved in, leaving the clan of poison masters breathing room even with the imbalance of shinobi to samurai they were suffering from.

The fact the Shimura Clan moved away was actually slightly a pity aside for the 'losing a powerful and more eye catching neighbor', they bought healing herbs in as much bulk the Sekanji could manufacture. Occasionally poisons, but mostly just for the herbal remedies.

"Terazawa-sama," Rokkaku murmured at her elbow, catching her attention while kneeling down in his 'proper' reporting position, "you have a visitor."

Blinking coppery eyes over at him questioningly, Tera took another bite of her dinner.

While Momomi wasn't exactly as tall as her, and only just starting to 'develop' so they couldn't do it outside of it, inside the compound the two of them could stand in for each other. It was the arrangement the younger sibling agreed to in exchange for borrowing some of the elder's slightly worn noblewoman-grade kimonos. Her little sister should be the one up for being bothered with any issues within the clan's comp-

Oh. This wasn't an internal 'visitor to her station' requesting permission to marry or something like that. This was an 'at the gate' thing he didn't want her father, standing in for her uncle off doing ninja poison user things, to be presented with.

Setting the chopsticks across the bowl, she pressed it onto the elderly samurai with a sharp smile. "Eat, Rokkaku-sama. I will get something else in a bit."

Slinking off before he could refuse however politely to eat her portion of dinner, because samurai lessons or not she was still a kunoichi, Tera darted to the compound's gates while pulling out the black grease to do up her eyes for meeting with non-clansmen.

Tera was somewhat surprised to be presented with an Akimichi, a Yamanaka, and a Nara.
"Terazawa-sama..." Harumune, one of the still rigid samurai that was about equally as much as an issue as the few remaining Sekanji shinobi could be about each other's presence, protested her improper arrival or very presence in front of unknowns only to trail off at her sharp look.

As she jumped the walls instead of bother the young boys pulling 'guard' on it with the samurai and her knees were bent to take the impact, Tera rose to her full height before the close gates and pulled a fan from her sleeves to flick open. "Good evening... valued customers?"

"Yeah... it's her." The Nara informed the others he was standing with blandly, too young to have been the same one she once gave some dietary advice to, getting the Akimichi to somewhat relax even if she had a bladed war fan held out in front of her face. "Hey, my cousin wanted to know if you'd-

"Shut it! There's no way you can be sure." Hissed the blond with the oddly blank looking green eyes with no pupil, driving an elbow into his gut to cut him off and drive out any air he might've used to continue with. "We're supposed to do this properly."

Tera watched the interaction with bemusement, wondering what it was like to have that kind of closeness with people they weren't related with. Was it like her and Rokkaku?

That was more respect for the other's duties, and a large measure of exasperation over each other's lifestyles. There was fondness, hard won through arguments and compromises and still building, but maybe not the match to these three just yet.

Perhaps more like what Momo had found with Yura over the last few years. Although the handmaiden was very much older she was still very naive, well matched with a slightly jaded kunoichi who might be several years over half a decade younger than her. They made a good pair, even if Momo could evade her friend by going off hunting outside the compound when things became tense between them due to the differences between their upbringings.

Either way Tera had first dibs on the handmaiden's hairdressing skills, as interesting as the girl found it to try working with poisonous hair.

The ruddy haired and armored Akimichi, who probably didn't think twice about why the Sekanji clan had armored swordsmen guards in full view even if they were supposedly shinobi... although she was pretty sure the Nara noticed and did more than enough wondering, cleared his throat roughly and tossed them both a glare over a shoulder.

Then, turning back to her, he bowed slightly. Not quite courtly but with a decent amount of respect anyways. "Sekanji-sensei, we've come on the advice of the Shimura Clan. Our orders are to gather up the herbs used for healing to start our own stockpile."

"That sounds fairly ominous." Tera pointed out blandly, after a beat of silence to digest that kind of word-of-mouth advertising. Earning herself a flushed redhead, a roll of the eyes from the brunette, and a panicked look from the blond. "I am going to assume you mean to purchase rather than 'acquire through force'."

"Yes! Please."

Smirking softly at the higher-pitched voice that broke embarrassingly on the confirmation, unidentifiable due to the sudden change and the fact she couldn't see the Akimichi or Yamanaka mouths moving through their slightly panicky expressions, she fanned herself with the weapon a few times as she contemplated that kind of order.
It would be a lot of money… or maybe…

"If you mean to acquire the plants to grow elsewhere, I can send a guide with you. If you mean to place an order for simply the dried and preserved herbs, I can give you an estimate of how much we will be able to accrue by a picked date. However… we had an arrangement with the Shimura clan about them purchasing in bulk the stockpiling friendly prepared salves and tinctures we can produce. If they truly sent you here, and I mean I intend to ensure it is them you were guided by, my clan will be willing to enter negotiations for something similar to that with their agreement. With the understanding what we might supply to them would then become more limited."

Now that things weren't about to go sour, this might actually be one of the very first missions the Village Hidden in the Leaves had ever issued and if so those poor shinobi must be under so much pressure to ensure it went right, the Akimichi seemed to recover his mental balance. "Right, we'd like the negotiations please. Erm… if you…"

He probably caught the 'clan' and not 'I' issue. With a childhood of selling her own concoctions behind her she did end up one of the main Sekanji negotiators, but if she tried to conduct this one she was just asking for her clan head to finally act on the threat she posed.

"My lord uncle is out at the moment, our expectations is that he will return in a week's time." Tera offered idly to help him out a little. "He will likely negotiate on the Sekanji Clan's behalf."

Hopefully, if things remained as they had been the last few months, her useless father would then be immediately sent out while her uncle had his breather.

"We'll send someone to negotiate on behalf of the Village Hidden in the Leaves, with a member of the Shimura Clan to mediate."

She blinked a few times at them in surprise. "So it is true?"

"You heard about it way out here?"

Tera tilted her fan enough the Nara would easily catch her smirk. "The Shimuras were our neighbors, everyone noticed their leave taking."

He dismissed that easily with a shrug, also easily ignoring the slightly confused and a little wary tugs his Yamanaka friend was doing to get him to be quite. "I mean the rest of it, I would've bet they wouldn't have revealed why they were going or where."

"As far as I know, your shinobi village has at least five clans of shinobi so far and are adding a sixth." Pausing significantly, the teenager flicked her fan closed in preparation for ending the talks. "Quite a few dismiss it as rumors claim the Senju and Uchiha clans founded the start, and we all still remember the war between them."

It was probably one of the more eye-catching explosions of two shinobi clans developing an extreme dislike for each other. Being ninja in the first place, massacres and just simply entire thriving clan complexes going silent and abandoned overnight was more common.

One could always trust Land of Fire shinobi to what others do silently in the most extreme and loudest way possible.

Made the rumors even more ridiculous in a way, the Aburame Clan wasn't known for being loud. Hyūgas also weren't all that energetic in that respect either, but that might have been how the quiet insect ninjas got involved.
Inuzukas, on the other hand, would probably be one of the very next clans to join in when they swung around again. They likely would crash into the village they were building, and try to raid it, only to incur the wrath of the legendary shinobi that were building said village.

The gates behind her finally creaked open, spilling Ikeda out into the plains that spread out from the slightly rockier grassy ground of the Sekanji compound and wove seamlessly into the tougher plant life of Grass. He had his writing case, a block of wood carved and hollowed out so he could handle his writing supplies and sheets of paper with the hand that wasn't half crippled.

"Terazawa-sama?"

"A request for negotiations, for pre-made herbal remedies that store well. Between the Sekanji Clan and the Village Hidden in the Leaves, the shinobi village of the Land of Fire." Dictated the kunoichi clearly, more for the benefit of whoever else was eavesdropping behind the walls than for her partially paralyzed scribe. "A representative from the Shimura Clan will be in attendance, a negotiator on behalf of the Leaf, and a negotiator on behalf of the Sekanji Clan. At… where are we holding this? Here, a neutral location, or there?"

Tera pointedly looked at the spokesman, who blanked for a moment before scrambling for a red bordered scroll out of his pockets. "Uh… here?"

"You are known associates to one of our clans, not possibly hostile." Mused the Yamanaka thoughtfully, shrugging after feeling up his chin in a 'thinking pose'.

"Twice over, actually." Chipped in the Nara, scratching a cheek.

How… generous.

"Right then, here."

"Do you have all that, Ikeda-san?"

"I have it, Terazawa-sama. One moment for a clean copy." The brush swept over paper again, the writing block propped between the slightly stiff left arm and his hip to give him something firm to write upon.

That copy was first passed to her, and she swept a hand over it a few times to get the breezes to dry the ink so it wouldn't smudge while she read over the formal invitation for forging a new contract between shinobi clans and now villages. Then she rolled it up and handed it to her very bristly samurai to hand over to the shinobi standing a wary distance from the gates of a poison using clan. "...Harumune-san."

"Of course, Terazawa-sama." Very stiffly, he took the paper from her and minced his way across the ground so it could be taken by their possible future customers.

The Nara took possession of the scroll, giving her a hard look to probably sear her image in his mind to report later, then the three of them gave certain farewells that correlated with how important they found the job of opening up contact with her clan of poison masters.

Then they all disappeared in the blink of an eye, allowing Tera to catch how they molded their chakra in order to instantly displace themselves so far down the mountain ridge that separated the Lands of Grass and Earth they likely followed to find them.

Hmm… "Does anyone know where Momo-chan got to?"
Chakra sensors cheated highly when it came to reverse engineering jutsus, but they could only show one another what they learned. Teaching someone else who couldn't pick up what they could was like trying to describe how to live to a rock.

(ooo000ooo)

They had a slight problem.

Make up enough of the eye crest masking grease paint to cover everyone down to the young children, or allow the Village Hidden in the Leaves to know about the deception surrounding it?

The samurai guards had little issue accepting the clan's rules when it came to face paint and being outside of clan grounds, as a matter of fact it was the first thing they had done when they reached the Sekanji compound. Anyone spying on the clan would only see all of the people going in and out had the same marks, and therefore associated the black and flattened ring around the eyes with the Sekanji Clan.

Terazawa was weighing in on making up enough paint, they could always make more and some of the children might just see it as a grand thing to be allowed the privilege to wear the sweeping black smears around their own eyes before earning the right to leave the grounds.

Momomi pointed out their clan law wasn't 'outsiders should never see' just 'while outside clan grounds' and therefore they shouldn't hide away from prospective business partners.

At first only to be the devil's advocate to her elder sister's point, then she really dug into her side of the argument.

The debate became a clan-wide thing, only solved when a test day was arranged to see if young children could wear the marks without smearing them onto everything and away from the crests.

In short, they couldn't and that decided them in the end.

As there wasn't an exact timing for the meeting to be held, the daily routine of the Sekanjis continued as normal. A few samurai and wife pairs were still circling out to the known locations of wild herbs to gather as much as they could without killing the patches, more was taken from the family's garden of poisonous plants, Tera and Momo traded off on hunting game animals and herbology gathering trips.

The elder of the sisters hoped the Leaf group got here before her father returned, if only because she really didn't trust the man to behave himself. Her uncle wasn't really a lot better, but he was greatly less objectionable personally and could be reasonable.

Tera actually didn't know what she felt about the impending meeting and all the implications within.

Orochimaru should be born and somewhat grown by the time the Third Fire Shadow came into power, but from rumors and what the team from the Leaf had to say there wasn't yet a First Fire Shadow.

Meaning her baby sister, as well as herself, had several years of time to find Orochimaru's father and see if either of them really wanted to get involved with that.

As Momo was only just eleven herself, a 'few' more years should be at least five or so more.

Even beyond that headache of unknown circumstances, there was the steadily growing…
something in the clan.

She could honestly say her people didn't start it, well they did but it hadn't been intentional.

Rokkaku showed the more obvious bits of it by not going to her father but her side to report the Leaf group. The impressionable kids went along with that, the creaky grandpa samurai guy with the sword that ran their conditioning drills and sometimes told them gory tales was a lot more familiar to them than some distant and overworked pair of shinobi brothers that really ran things. The rest of the samurai already only reported to her, as did a good half of the clan's non-combatant members.

Her remedies and concoctions tended to be more popular in the clan as it was, meaning that she had usurped the healer she still blamed for the death of her mother entirely by accident. Might have something with the whole 'eat a full balanced meal, just a portion on top of that' she ordered for all women that were pregnant rather than the 'high on meat, low on the rest' thing that likely help along Shimiko's death.

Tera had the popular support of the clan, had taken it over so stealthily she surprised even herself since she hadn't cared about popularity or even the Sekanjis as a whole for the longest time. The few shinobi left rarely contributed to the internal clan politics anymore, they were barely home long enough to do more than lay with their wives in hopes of more children and restock their poisons before getting new orders or jobs to do.

She could probably stage an insurrection at this point. There would be sabotage and attacks afterwards, but it was possible.

However it came about to end up with Orochimaru orphaned in the Village Hidden in the Leaves, it probably wouldn't happen this time around. Tera had, quietly because Momo would protest, imparted her orders from her mother to her samurai.

If anything happened to Tera, or something wiped out the clan, they were charged with protecting her instead. Not the poison library the Sekanji maintained, not the easily replaced lands or buildings or even rare plants they had, her baby sister.

Orochimaru wouldn't really need the help in being an utter beast of a shinobi, whatever kind of asshole he would be personally.

"HALLO!"

Blinking black painted eyelids over copper eyes as the brightly burning chakra signatures got even closer to her at a more rapid pace instead backing off or readying for combat, the poison mistress dropped the poisoned bomb back to her sleeve pocket and turned to see who was hailing her.

...that was unexpected. Tera waved back, mostly out of pure confusion and a little shock.

The white-haired, red eyed asshole that nearly got her killed and was possibly a Senju was back. The brunette and significantly more tanned man he was shoulder-to-shoulder with was the one cheerfully waving at her, from what she could make out at this distance he was probably smiling at her too. A member of the Shimura Clan was following along peacefully enough, the bare chested and gloved hands with bandages going from wrist to midway up his biceps was a recognizable contact she had dealt with before.

...or at least a good copy of the man, down to his very chakra nature and the natural feel of him.

The more shocking bit, other than getting a smile from a red-armored shinobi she wasn't familiar
with while being accompanied by a blue armored one she had less pleasant interactions with, was that they had three kids with them.

Really young children, probably half Momo's age if anything.

Tera let her right war fan fall into her hand, flicking it open and concealing the lower half of her face with the brightly colored fabric as she waited for the group to catch up to her.

That made the asshole that nearly got her killed tense up, but aside a narrowing of the already thinly opened red eyes he didn't say or do anything else. Even still, his darker companion seemed to pick up on it and slowed his rather bouncy stride.

"Sekanji-sensei?"

"I am, who is asking?" Being asked for medical advice from the really brave natives of Grass was rare, but it happened. She was pretty sure these people weren't natives.

"We're from the Village Hidden in the Leaves, here for negotiations?"

She waited a beat, turning her coppery eyes to the forest green bandana shaded ones that belonged to the possible Shimura Clan member. "Shimura Motoaki-san?"

"Good to see you again, sensei." The named shinobi greeted her pleasantly enough with a nod of the head, including the men he was with in a broad gesture of one hand. "Senju Hashirama and Tobirama, the head and heir of the Senju Clan. With them are brats one and two, and kunoichi wanna-be number three."

Letting the fan snap shut in a smooth moment, the poison mistress pondered how to handle this as the children expressed their very loud displeasure over the introduction. Likely they had not caught on that it was a mild deception to safeguard any importance beyond being known to the Senju brothers behind.

"...the asshole that nearly got me killed is the Senju Clan's heir?" Tera questioned in her politest tone, figuring since she couldn't decide they could do so for her, tapping the frame of her fan against a hip.

That made Motoaki falter mid-step, and the brunette in red armor whipped around to give his apparent albino brother in matching blue a horrified look. "TOBI!"

The gaggle of wide-eyed and shocked ninja trainees all almost ended up in a stack on the road when they failed to watch where they were going and knocked into one another.

Wide red eyes suddenly narrowed, the tattoos on his face shifting with even that minor facial movement. "You were the one to save Inzuna."

"...who?"

Hashirama made a sort of despairing noise in the back of his throat. "You mean it's true?"

"I didn't almost kill her, all I saw was a water clone. It dispelled itself."

"Yes, but you told my opponent it was a clone and he very nearly caught up to me before I could flee the Land of Fire." Tera continued in a ruthlessly bland tone, tucking her fan away. "I was rather young still then, and he was easily twice my age with more experience than I could ever have at the time."
Tobirama blinked slowly at her, something edged with chagrin flicking lightning-quick across his pale and unfortunately handsome features before stilling back into a bland expression.

Tisking, she turned and started walking again. "You may as well just follow me, honored guests, my lord uncle is home and awaiting your presence."

"...the clan head's niece, Tobi." Sighed the equally handsome Senju Clan's head with a small chuckle as he followed along. "You suck with women."

A quick and solid thwack sounded, but when Tera glanced to them from over a shoulder nothing seemed disturbed. She caught the action via her chakra senses anyways, but the appreciation for how quickly they could pull neutral or just mildly bored faces was interesting.

Especially smoothing that much hair out after being smacked upside the head.

"Aa… Sekanji-sensei… those guard dogs… are they still there?"

The poison mistress blandly smiled at the group before she faced forward yet again.

"...oh man."

"Guard dogs? What good are dogs against shinobi, Shimura-san?" The voice was high pitched and squeaky but not to the point a young girl's voice would be, so one of the boys.

"They're not really dogs, honestly." She could almost see the sheepish scratching of bandages going on behind her to match the movement in her senses, she had witnessed him do it often enough when she started asking why he wanted certain 'extra' medications for certain ailments added to a shipment out of the blue. "See… the strange thing about the Sekanji Clan is that… they have samurai and shinobi."

"...what?"

"How?"

The questions came at about the same time, from the Senju brothers both. Distinctly different tones each, however. One surprised and slightly reproving, another gleefully interested.

"Terazawa-sama!" Interrupted one such samurai before the expression of ignorance or one of the many false rumors could be issued, as the guardsman bolted to the group's side.

Unfortunately, Harumune had not improved his opinion on ninja any in the last few days and the man fairly bristled with offended dignity at the sight of her company.

"Terazawa-sama, did they do…?"

"Harumune-san, I will only tell you once more. Stop." Tera smacked him lightly on the shoulder with her right fan when he got in range to 'escort' her, pointing it at the highly surprised girl of the group in the next second. "Besides which, there was a female attendant present and therefore if you start going on about my virtue-"

"But-!"

She clocked him over the head with the heavy weapon of war for interrupting her and the implication. "Not even if hell froze over."

Hopefully, either the violence or Rokkaku would be able to get through to him.
The elderly samurai had in fact witnessed the entire scene, as he tended to wait by the compound gates if she was expected back or overdue to return. Recently, the sisters had taken to short trips around and left the longer searches for after this meeting happened.

Of course, that meant he caught her swearing.

Tera gave him a bland smile, because even so he wouldn't dare correct her in front of guests.

"That, kid, is what I meant about the guard dogs." Motoaki informed the Leaf group quietly. "They're going to hate Tobirama-sama, they all are a bit fanatical about Sekanji-sensei."

"And just why, shinobi-san, would we do that?" Rokkaku inquired sternly, narrowing dark blue eyes on the whole group. Likely in hopes of picking 'Tobirama-sama' out if he so much as flinched.

Which he didn't, alas.

The kids all shuffled in place slightly, but didn't fold under the admittedly formidable stare.

"...I'm passing the buck here." The Shimura Clan member evaded, shoving his heavily gloved and wrapped hands into his hakama's pockets.

"While this is all amusing and such," Tera interrupted boredly, flicking her fan open again to fan herself even if it earned her quick looks for having the weapon in hand, "could we get a move on?"

"Are we actually going in?" Motoaki inquired, startled.

"You are representing a collection of clans that have gathered to the same village, are you not?" She countered slowly, eyeing him to ensure that was still correct. "Then we will give you the same courtesy we do for the nobles when they wish to meet for specific things."

"Is that unusual?" Tobirama questioned suspiciously of the man.

"Nearly never happens, according to the people of Grass."

Tera and Rokkaku exchanged a look, earning an absolute stone-face from the elderly samurai and a sly smirk from her. "May we continue, or is our hospitality going to be questioned more?"

Hashirama put his brother in a quick headlock and gave her a broad smile. "Lead on, Terazawa-sama."

He was unceremoniously shoved off in a quick movement and the screech of painted metal on metal, accompanied by the three sighs the brats heaved at their behavior.

The two of them might have more chakra in their little pinkies than she had in her entire body, but they were even more childish than her handmaiden number two.

Upon entering the rarely opened gates the very first thing the Leaf envoys said, one of the young boys, was a very loud exclamation of "Why doesn't anyone else have black marks around their eyes?"

Tera ignored it, Rokkaku could conduct them to her uncle and she had things to do.

(ooo000ooo)

"What is your luck?" Momomi inquired silkily after being informed of just what happened in her sister's day, trying to hide her full out grin behind her bowl of rice and grilled eel. She failed,
pointedly. "Good or bad?"

"...I am contemplating if I can sue it for peace yet." Terazawa allowed wryly, plucking at the freshwater fish that was her little sister's contribution to the pot this day to shred more of it so it'd last longer. "Which kami do you think would listen better?"

How to top eel for the day's meat?

Enough eel to ensure everyone had a measure, as well as enough extra to smoke and store away for winter?

Her little sister must have spent hours combing through the few rivers nearby for enough of the long and thin fish. They weren't easy to catch, especially not in this volume.

Perhaps she should go and see if that farmer she once poisoned the nag of would like any help in exchange for a cow or something. See if her brat of a sister could top that.

"...why do they eat like this?"

Huh... the mouthy one was asking painfully obvious questions again.

"You're really nosy, aren't you?" Momo observed pointedly, giving the young kids accompanying the Senju brothers and the Shimura representative a condescending look each.

It just gave Tera the opportunity to smack her on her head with her left fan before she could notice the movement through her senses. "Manners, little sister. Even if outsiders questioning our methods and traditions are rude, that does not excuse your rude behavior back."

"You're becoming more and more like samurai-sama, big sister."

Shrugging, because that was entirely possible as he was teaching her things that might be changing some of what she was into something else, she kept eating. It wasn't like Sekanji pride had been drilled into her very bones to enable her resistance to such influences.

Right up until the visiting brunette girl child sat herself down across from the sisters, a mulish look on her childish face as she put her bowl of dinner on the table too. "You're kunoichi."

"...and?" Tera inquired silkily after a beat, Momo giving her a skeptical look to match.

The Senju brothers shared a glance over her colorful hair buns, the Shimura shinobi had been waylaid some distance behind with the Sekanji Clan's head, while her equally tiny teammates fluttered hesitantly behind the girl.

"There aren't a lot of kunoichi back in the Leaf." Clarified the girl after staring at the sisters hard to make her determination in her still unspoken aims clear. "And most are busy with their own things, their duties around the village or to their clans, to teach me anything. Hashirama-sensei and Tobirama-sensei are boys."

"Boys can be stupid." Momo agreed with her offered sentiment, still suspicious but now seemingly highly curious with where this was going. "But they're boys, somehow they're still right."

The Senju Clan's head made another of his wounded noises, his heir merely rolled his red eyes and dragged the man to a nearby but separate table. Far enough to suggest privacy, but more than close enough for ninja even a fifth of their worth to overhear the conversation even at normal tones.
"I can't do a lot of the things they can, but you're kunoichi." Determined brown eyes turned to glare into tempered copper. "Can you?"

"No." Tera cruelly dashed the girl's hopes bluntly, tapping her chopsticks against the side of her bowl. "Matching them in their battle experience is not something I can accomplish, nor is trumping them in a martial fight or even one of chakra use. That is not how I fight, not how I make my living as kunoichi. If you are looking for some way to deny your very nature in favor of acquiring the martial prowess men who lived and participated in full out war for most their life possess, leave now."

"I won't help you," Momo continued much to the girl's badly hidden dismay, "I never had to fight against a hostile shinobi. My lady sister took care of most that would hunt into our territory and the samurai the others. I don't go outside it when what we need can be found within."

The girl's stubborn look didn't fade, even with the spiky haired kid trying to tug her away from the Sekanji sisters and back over to their teachers. "What do you mean by 'very nature'?"

"Unless you are blind," here she shot a skeptical look to the kid wearing glasses of all things into the field as a shinobi, "it should quickly become apparent that men and women are just simply built differently. We excel at different disciplines, with some overlap and occasionally with the ability to exceed the natural inclinations for particular subjects."

Glasses glared back angrily, but if that was on behalf of his little friend's feelings or the skepticism she had for his vision correcting implements was debatable.

"So your point is what? I just have to work harder? Give up trying to be kunoichi and be nothing more than a dutiful little wife?"

"Good kami above girl, who have you been listening to?" Tera questioned in bewilderment, voicing the question that seemed to be on the minds of her teachers if how they focused sharply on the question was any judge. "Are you not kunoichi? Sitting here before others that might prove lethal to you and yours, miles away from home, seeking an accord with another clan for the betterment of your shinobi family in the end?"

Young brown eyes blinked in surprise, in triplicate.

"For women, it's a choice. A hard one, for kunoichi means giving up on spending time with family or 'marrying well' or even the pretty indulgences in life we would otherwise have. One you probably do not have a good grasp upon even still, and therefore what your elders are trying to warn you of." Considering the thoughtfully silent girls, one aside her and one across, the teenager sighed. "By all means, I do not intend to say it is easy for men to do the same. They also lose out on time with any family they may have, dealing with the hardships and toils being employed in any career causes the same, but it is what it is and it seemed to be more 'acceptable' for them to do so. But for women, who must also balance their body's development and the future damages against ever having children at all against combat preparedness and surviving the injuries you will inevitably obtain, it is a more treacherous one that is not often sought."

Clamping her mouth shut, Tera did not wax on lyrically about anything, she sat back and considered the tiny faces turned up to her.

"The base choice, girl, is will you cower uselessly in your pretty home ignoring all the ills of the world and hide behind your husband when danger comes to call or will you leave it to fight? To safeguard those you care for, or let them fall into ruin when your very presence might have otherwise salvaged things?"
Stabbing her chopsticks into her dinner, the taste of ash on her tongue making even the thought of finishing the food distasteful, Tera abruptly stood and walked off to return the half full bowl.

"My lady sister is a bit harsh," Momo informed the group of kids pointedly as her elder sister left them behind, "but she's normally right. She never had the choice if she'd fight or not, forced into it after I was born and we lost our mother, and worked herself hard so I could have all of it if I wanted."

Did she?

Momo seemed perfectly content following Tera's footsteps in being one of the main hunters and herbal foragers of the Sekanji clan, which might actually be a case of 'see another doing the same and considering it normal' instead of a personal one. Her very unfortunately deceased husband situation might've just exaggerated the issue by ridding herself of him and returning to muddle what could be.

Tera was becoming a bit of a craven coward, when it came to her sister. As long as it seemed to make her happy, she wouldn't question nor ask if something different would be more suited. If Momo wanted a husband and to not be forced to hunt dinner herself… her elder sister had no idea how to arrange a marriage or do any of the wifely things like care for a household or a man.

Possible to learn now, but she had other people that could do said teaching and she wouldn't be providing those lessons herself.

It seemed that Tera also failed terribly when it came to raising another, if she had done it this long and couldn't separate the desires she had for her own life from that which her little sister had for her own.

It was all she could do, all she could provide, so she'd hope it'd be enough until Momo found a different way that suited her more.

(ooo000ooo)

"So!" It was hard to be startled by the man, given how brightly he burned in her senses, but Senju Hashirama could be a very surprising shinobi in spite of that anyways. "Terazawa-sensei? Can I have a word?"

Rokkaku bristled offended dignity in his very respectfully elder samurai way, expressing disapproval for the answer through his very pores and about oozing it from both still sharp dark blue eyes. The Senju Clan's head kept up his brightly hopeful smile without so much as a flinch, which grew broader when the elderly man could not find a reason to verbalize in order to deny the request.

They were done with plotting how to repel any Inuzuka Clan raids, and what would need to be done to weather the coming late summer-early fall when the attacks might be made.

Tera rose to her feet gracefully, stepping down from her home's porch with a cautious nod.

Her elderly samurai had to go start organizing things, and as she had no other pressing duties she couldn't exactly gracefully decline a reasonable request from guest of Hashirama's standing.

They were almost radiating cheerfulness from his pores, the God of Shinobi offered the other man a wave and beckoned the teenager to follow him as they wandered the length of the compound's inner wall. "I kind of want to thank you for being rather gentle with Koharu-chan. I realize you were kind of put on the spot, and I apologize for any bad memories she brought up-"
"Hashirama-sama… is there a point to this?" Tera interrupted before she could mentally wander back down those painful memories again, not really able to resist gripping her fans but at least not pulling them out while supposedly talking with a newfound ally.

The seemingly eternally happy man paused and considered it, sheepishly rubbing the back of his dark head. "I had an entire plan, you know. I was going to thank you for giving her something anyways and apologize for Tobi nearly getting you killed, then maybe ask if you or any in your clan thought about joining a shinobi village if it went well. But you got that same tired look to you now as last night so I'm just going to state that and not stick my foot in my mouth."

"...you are welcome, he is still an asshole, and I have not thought about it nor know if anyone else is interested." Dismissed the kunoichi blandly all at once, leaving her fans where they were because she had been using them as a crutch when it came to talking to other people and that would not help her now in the face of this man. "I… also apologize for bringing up ancient history, that incident was long ago and I do have a terrible habit of holding on to grudges."

"I think I should be offended on Tobi's behalf… if that wasn't kind of actually true." Hashirama mused, mostly to himself, before refocusing on her and giving a smile that really didn't seem to hold any ill-will at all. "Perks of being an older sibling is poking fun at them, am I right?"

"My little sister is certainly a trial some days." Allowed the poison mistress, a smirk crawling across her face almost against her will. "Anything else, Hashirama-sama?"

Another considering look, and the man then smile wryly. "You brought 'ancient history' up so we would be on the defensive and wrong-footed when we got here for the talks, didn't you?"

The fan made it's appearance before Tera consciously reached for it, and therefore she just waved it gently as she studied the man back thoughtfully. "...I have no idea what you may be implying, Senju-sama."

She received a, completely baffling, proud smile for the rebuttal.

"I am honestly sorry you didn't chose to help Koharu-chan and teach her a few things," Hashirama informed her gleefully, almost as an aside as if it should be a secret which forced her to pay more attention out of confused reflex alone, "but then again… she might've turned the cunning you've got and might share on us."

"It does not seem as if it has caused you any trouble so far." Observed the wind user wryly, fluttering the war fan to pull a gust of a breeze and help cool herself off under the harshening morning sun.

The Senju Clan head frowned momentarily, possibly feeling the wind moving oddly or even the chakra use, then brightened in an odd way. "Ooh! Share!"

"Are you…" Brain damaged? "...sure about that, Hashirama-sama?"

"You won't kill me, your clan wants our money. Until we've paid, I'm safe enough." He pointed out, still cheerfully, as if taking that gamble wasn't possibly lethal to him. "And have you ever worn armor in the start or middle of summer? I'm sweltering here, Tera-sensei."

When, exactly, did they graduate to that kind of an acquaintance?

They met yesterday.

"...so that's it." Hashirama spoke thoughtfully, sharp black eyes taking in her likely incredulous
expression before she could rid herself of it. He smiled again, this time touched with a small edge of what could be sorrow. "You were never trained, were you? Just tossed in head first, to sink or swim, and therefore you don't trust anything that might possibly come back and hurt you later. You're good, Terazawa-sama, but occasionally the little things slip through…"

Tera stiffened up, thin lips pulling taut as she regarded the man seriously from over the top of her war fan. "You, Hashirama-sama, are a very dangerous man."

"You'd be surprised how many overlook that and think Tobi's the cunning one." He returned wryly with a laugh. "Faith, please. He sucks so badly with people he can't understand or doesn't know."

"...I will have to take your word for it."

"Don't do that." A shallow pout passed over his face, not quite eclipsing the slightly bitter smile. "We were doing so good, too. Agreeing with me like that just makes it seem as if you're pandering to my opinions."

"I am." She informed him bluntly, as he didn't say his younger brother held less cunning to be less dangerous nor that Tobirama couldn't make allies or acquaintances he understood therefore interacted with better.

Pointedly guiding another breeze so it wouldn't brush against the shinobi pacing around a small ninja family compound with her was just for her petty amusement.

"Ouch, so mean." With another of those lightning swift subject changes she had yet to adjust to, the God of Shinobi gave her a completely serious look void of anything that might soften his words. "You and the rest of the Sekanji Clan would be welcome in the Village Hidden in the Leaves, Terazawa-sensei. Not just because of the trade agreement, we'd be happy to have a clan of poison masters and herbalists join us just for yourselves."

"And the samurai?"

"And them. Will be a bit different, you understand… but that's all for the better!"

Flicking the fan back and forth as she thought quickly, Tera tilted her head to the side curiously. "Would that not be something to press on my lord uncle, Hashirama-sama?"

"I did. But," another switch in tone, but one she half-expected now, "he's not the one that controls most of this clan, is he?"

If it took him less than a day to figure it out, then either things were becoming tenser than she thought or he had a keen eye for the tension of that type.

"That is a fairly serious accusation, Senju-sama." Tera murmured quietly while narrowing her coppery eyes on dark brown, ignoring her hammering heart and the nerves that tightened even more. "I do hope I caught the implications wrong."

"Probably not, but not in the way you are thinking." Hashirama waved a hand, half to dismiss the insult or accusation and probably half to keep his stalkerish albino brother from storming over and inserting himself into the conversation. "I mean, the Sekanji Clan's in some dire straits, yeah? There's you, and your uncle, maybe your little sister… and then only the samurai, for all these ladies and the entire gaggle of kids. Most under the age of our kids. I certainly didn't expect this, Motoaki's confused as hell about the lack of shinobi around, you've done phenomenally well in keeping even a hint of rumor about it escaping to hostile ears. Yet you still let us in, when we wouldn't have known different otherwise, and didn't make us camp outside. Such trust, Terazawa-
sensei, even when you really don't trust anything…"

"It was not my choice, you should be thankful of that."

"I know words are probably just more weapons for you, are for most of us, but you can trust us. We certainly aren't going to stab you in the back."

"That remains to be seen." But… she did sort of know that, didn't she? They weren't enemies, there wasn't a war on with their allies or even across the world right now, they were allies of a type now, and he was trying to foster good relations with everyone in the hopes of peace. "If… as you say, we can… if my samurai bring you my little sister and some or all of the children… please do not allow her to return here, Hashirama-sama."

The sheer surprise on his face almost made the bitter request worth it for that alone, Tera snapped her fan closed to tuck away and bowed herself out of there.

"Excuse me, I must attend to my duties now." Sweeping away from him, fully aware he allowed her to escape the conversation even as abrupt as the end was, she didn't get very far before Tobirama spoke up behind her.

"Hashi-"

"I deserved that, Tobi."

"Why?"

"I… just poured a bucket full of lemon juice and rubbed a handful of salt on old but still open wounds, I think. Or something equally as painful to draw something like that out of her."

Tera grit her teeth as the Senju brothers' voices got further away, blinking rapidly as she tried to control herself. She was more than old enough to be over crying just because something was hard or she hurt somehow, and she had always been aware she might have to bend her stiff neck and beg for help from the Leaf eventually.

The understanding look the elder brother gave her for the request on behalf of her younger sibling's wellbeing had just been a bit hard to accept.

...the thoughtful nod was just… something else.

(ooo000ooo)

"Tera-sama!" Squeaky but one of the voices she knew better, her eldest half-brother, sprinted to her with rather unseemly haste for the company of honored guests they were about to send off home. "Old man Kaku says it's starting early! Two score, maybe more. Kiyotaka-san was checking the laurel bushes and spotted them!"

"What is starting-" Cutting herself off, Terazawa whirled on Momomi much to the younger girl's alarm. "Momo-chan, the spoorwood poisons. As much as we have in powder. Bring it to the walls."

Senju Hashirama eyed the Sekanji Clan's head, who didn't move with the same urgency but did move in the same direction. "What's happening?"

"Spoorwood is only used for Inuzuka raiders." Sekanji Katsutsune informed him blandly as he paced his eldest niece so they could jump up to the walls and see what was coming. "Apparently they have started early this year. I would not suggest you leave quite yet."
"Why only them?"

With as much of the toxin as they had on hand, and the distance it would hopefully be employed with, it really was only the equivalent of a poison user's smack on the nose for almost forty attackers. Half that could be dogs, or the dogs hadn't been involved in the quick count one of the samurai had managed.

"Because, Hashirama-sama, all spoorwood does in limited airborne application is cause discomfort. Watering eyes, running noses, incoordination, and paralysis. In extreme amounts convulsions and death. We do not wish to be an obstacle, nor incur the wrath of the Inuzuka Clan for murdering their shinobi and dogs, but avoided." Tera was utterly unsurprised she was still followed by the entirety of the Village Hidden in the Leaves' group, but mainly ignored them as she finished smearing on the black paint around her eyes.

Utatane squeaked in surprise when she then loosened her kimono and the obi belt that held it shut. "Terazawa-sama, what are you doing?!

"What?" Draping the brightly patterned silk over the belt and folding it up to drop on the inner side of the walls, Tera adjusted the sleeves of the light cotton under robe dyed in darker but complementary colors to the cloth picked to be worn over it today. "This will not stain with blood as easily if we missed some outrider scouts. I like that kimono."

"Oh." The poor girl blushed heavily, slinking backwards to half-hide behind Tobirama's leg. "Sorry."

More importantly, Tera wouldn't mind tattering these clothes with the very wind itself. It also didn't have a skirt to tangle in her legs, the almost shirt-like robe tucked into her slightly baggy pants held up by another silk belt also held everything closer to her form and kept the wind from tugging it and her off balance. Over top were belted the plates of leather her samurai had insisted she wear if she kept on doing kunoichi things, which made her too warm in the summer months sometimes.

The armor was nice to catch the impact of kicks and punches with instead of more fragile ribs, which was the only reason she still wore them if she intended to leave the clan's compound at all.

Both bladed war fans dropped into her hands, which was the last preparation she had to do until Momo got back with the poisons.

It would be interesting, this would be the greatest amount of targets they would be trying this maneuver against.

Tera narrowed coppery eyes as the first of the Inuzukas rounded the mountain range that bordered the Land of Earth and provided a mostly secured northern side to the Sekanji Clan's compound. It was far yet, would take more minutes than she had assumed if one of her samurai had reported the sighting, but they were rapidly closing in.

...from the look of things, Kiyotaka had only counted the people and not the dogs pacing their masters. The samurai guards below them were already moving to account for the greater than expected numbers across the plains, but they would likely oppose the shinobi anyways if Tera did not find something to ward the ninjas and dogs off. "Well… I do not believe we have enough of the usual poisons, lord uncle."

"How much of the wolfsbane is made and ready?"
"Perhaps... just enough if we allow them closer and group up somewhat."

Hashirama leaned forward to see her clearly as her uncle left to fetch it instead, unconcerned in the extreme about the possibility of arrows or thrown weapons that could possibly be aimed in his direction. "What does wolfsbane do? Another paralysis powder?"

"Death." Murmured the Sekanji poison mistress lowly, halted before she followed the man by the inquiry. "Wolfsbane is highly toxic in the form we have."

"I thought you did not want to invite reprisals?" Tobirama asked neutrally next even as his students exchanged highly wary bordering on scared looks around his and his brother's knees.

"I will not risk my people needlessly. This many Inuzukas, against a score of samurai and three shinobi?"

Unfortunately, extremely so if their shinobi clan opponent was somewhat desperate to throw this many of their people against a target they had never really bested... perhaps that was it?

A pride thing, even possibly a last hurrah, and still likely it was just sheer desperation.

They did just travel through Earth, and with the Leaf being built it was likely the ninja clans there were pulling together just as the clans of Fire had. From the limited interactions she had with Earth shinobi, they were not kind nor understanding of such trespasses. And given the Inuzuka Clan's general operating methods?

Tera glanced to the men she was with, down to the children however they might protest the label, and back to the ninja barreling on towards her home.

Then she spoke her thoughts, because... well, why not?

Shimura Motoaki made an agreeing sound on the other side of the Senju brothers when she finished. "I kind of agree with Terazawa-sensei. We've dealt with the Inuzuka Clan before, they're surprisingly smart for the type of ninja that will continually attack those stronger than them. Usually just beating them up works to run them off without getting into a protracted fight, but they don't normally send this many at once at any one target."

"So they might need help, but if so are going around for it in the wrong way?" Sarutobi Hiruzen asked of them all skeptically, mostly looking up to Hashirama's approving grin but also to Tobirama's blankly considering expression.

"They might not want assistance, when if they take enough it will fix their ills." Tera refuted thoughtfully.

Her uncle and Momo leapt up to her side, clutching the bottles and the wax paper to pour them out into so Tera could use her wind affinity to blow it across the steadily closing distance between them and the Inuzuka raiders.

"Wait."

"Brother, they might not-"

"No, wait. Just listen to me." Hashirama interrupted his brother with a slightly apologetic smile for the stiff man. "If Terazawa-sensei is right, this will probably kill off the Inuzuka Clan."

Katsutsune gave the other shinobi a supremely unimpressed look. "If so, I fail to see why we
should hesitate. This is not the first time they have come to try to murder their way into our stores of food and supplies, nor are we the only ones to suffer attacks from them."

Tera frowned slightly off into the distance as she tried to see what condition the attackers were in, wondering if the Inuzukas before her dying off would beggar the clan enough to either fall apart or head to Fire to ask to be accepted in a more stationary lifestyle. "That is speculation, Hashirama-sama. They could have split their numbers to hit two targets at once, there is a merchant village not too far from us that would be easier to oppose and raid."

"More likely, as they are shinobi." Tobirama agreed with her idly, which reflexively made her frown at the man.

That he ignored blandly.

"To cut their noses off to spite their faces." Momo tacked on facetiously as she worked to prepare the poison.

"What?"

"What Momo-chan means is that the Inuzuka Clan usually sells their furs and assorted animal products to merchants and merely raids those they have no use for." Tera put in before her little sister could shrug and say it was one of her sayings to assorted brat number two. Which, while somewhat true, wasn't the point right now. "If they are raiding the town, they will not really last beyond this year if they try to continue business as is pass this."

"This is all very fascinating, but hardly the point. We are running out of time." Pointed out the Sekanji Clan head a touch harshly, redirecting attention to the mere mile and a half between the wall they were standing on and the Inuzuka raiders. "Hashirama-sama, did you have something to say?"

"Can we have them?" Hashirama asked bluntly, seemingly entirely serious about the question. "You certainly don't want them, I'll ensure they don't bother you anymore, and they live. Everyone wins, right?"

Tera arched an eyebrow at the man, skeptical. "They will not agree to such 'having' easily, Hashirama-sama."

"But if I do it, you'll let this go?"

Tobirama heaved a tired sigh, head bowing forward as the shinobi pinched the bridge of his nose. "Brother, we do not need reckless and aggressive nomadic shinobi in the Leaf. Especially not nearly broken.-"

She caught the sentiment he was about to say anyways, even if he tried to shut up before he said the rest of his thought. This time the glare she gave the Senju heir actually had an impact given that the red eyes glance at her only once before he avoided hers with queer intensity.

"They are desperate, half of them are injured already." Pointed out the God of Shinobi quickly to distract from that, waving a hand at the ninja trying to bolt towards them all before the poison masters could turn the air and their very bodies against them to drive them off. "I think you and Terazawa-sensei are right, brother. They want or need the medical supplies desperately, and the Sekanji are now our allies… might as well help them out with this and get a new clan in the Leaf. Everyone wins."

Her uncle was too taken aback by either the possibility the shinobi was honestly serious and could
do as he said to really reply in the tiny increment of time they had left to act within. Momo was
done with arranging the powders and impatiently waiting for her superiors to stop talking already.

Tera made the executive decision. This wasn't a shinobi she ever wanted to think badly of her or
her clan, especially not as she was sort of semi-beholden to them due to the 'protect my little sister'
last resort she had begged for. "The battlefield is yours then, Hashirama-sama. Momo-chan, put the
poison away."

"Great! We'll be back in a few." Not even waiting for her uncle to protest her giving the implied
permission, or for Momo to do as she asked before the poison held in a wax paper protected hollow
in her hands could be used against him and the opposing shinobi, the head of the Senju Clan bolted
off with his brother hot on his heels.

Absently tucking her right fan away, now that she had no need for them it wasn't necessary but
being prepared for any sneak attacks would just make sense, she watched with her samurai and the
Senju brother's students as a near forest sprung up from the ground to basically force each of the
speeding Inuzukas to run into face first.

Not just thin saplings, full grown maple trees that the terrain would never support cultivating from
seeds.

...all forty-some of them. Instantly. At the same time.

The dogs were caught in vines and bramble that sprouted out of the grassy ground next, catching
them away from their masters' sides, adding to the confusion riot of greenery which really seemed
like an illusion some of the Land of Fire shinobi threw around more than others. Distracting a fair
few of the opposing ninja in trying to dispel the genjutsu instead of focusing on the two legendary
shinobi closing in on them.

The band of new trees didn't completely conceal the fight, and really just gave the brothers the
cover and leverage to pierce the middle and thickest group of Inuzukas and work outward. Gave
rather interesting frames to snapshots of what each brother could do, pitted against hilariously
overwhelmed canines and their equally as befuddled masters.

Hard to catch Hashirama, who was treating the whole thing almost like a game of tag and was
darting in and out of the maple forest he sprouted using his earthy-springs chakra while also
sprouting yet more forest trees to force his opponents to run smack into. Tobirama was more
serious about his own half of the pack and equally hard to catch sight of, but catching the shinobi
that could disappear and reappear in a flash of blinding watery-sense yellow light yards away from
where he started was more than his opponents could do.

They tried, and mainly failed.

The forest's creation, continued as it was here or there, and the flickering of the other brother's
chakra gave Tera a headache. It was an entirely fascinating and utterly terrifying headache, but one
still the same. None of the Inuzukas died, which was insanely lucky of them, but the wavering as
they went from conscious and infuriated to out cold was another headache in itself.

Contemplating if the brunette shinobi used his wood creation ability to impale his opponents and
not just trap them was also rather... nauseating. She honestly wondered if the Uchiha Clan were as
insane as rumor said or what. The herbalist in her was wondering what those plants looked like on
the inside, and if he could not just grow his own herbs when the Leaf needed medicine.

The Senju head wasn't just springing up trees and the occasional bramble bush or crawling ivy to
infuriate his attackers, by the time his brother finished knocking his half out Hashirama had all of his tangled up in painful looking vines or almost grown trees trapping parts of their bodies within highly resilient wood.

...less than ten minutes. For forty human attackers and a pack of dogs, to grow almost a half mile of forest in a semicircle. Some of the dogs were still conscious, limping and whimpering pitifully and nursing bloody and badly scratched muzzles near their respective Inuzuka.

Tera whipped her fan down, hammering a blunt gust of wind into the pair trying to sneak by the highly startled and distracted samurai suspiciously eying the new forest feature and the men within. Flattening the kunoichi and dog pair in the split second between Tobirama flicking from the edge of the forest to right behind the Inuzuka combo.

Sarutobi nearly fell off the wall, being the one nearest her caused him to get caught in the backwash of wind and not paying attention to anything but the spectacle his teachers made out of the raiders made him easily startled. Luckily for him, his teammates seized onto his clothing and yanked him back up before he fell on top one of the samurai pairs below.

"Well… *that* happened." Spoke the elder of the Sekanji sisters as blandly as she could, which she suspected wasn't quite at the level she really would've preferred given the smug looks the brats one through three had.

"Sister, why does he even need us?" Momo questioned suspiciously, compulsively gripping the entirety of what wolfsbane they had on hand concerningly tightly.

"The Mokuton apparently doesn't work well with herbs, I think." Motoaki offered a slightly bit warily. "I know he can grow them, better if they're from seeds, but… something about how they're a bit… different?"

"...I wonder… what the inside of those plants really look like." Tera murmured, now highly curious despite herself. "It that because he has not studied them to know what part is beneficial or lethal, or because the *how* he has made them twists their very nature?"

Tobirama gave her a narrow look for that, even if he had to look up and sort of yell to be heard. "And what would you do with that information, if you knew?"

Blinking down at the man she only now realized was still standing there, the Inuzuka combo unrestrained and her samurai too hesitant to get near the foreign shinobi to do it, the poison mistress slipped the war fan she still held back into her sleeve. "Do? Is there anything to be done? It is a curiosity, a musing, and nothing more. The question will not hurt nor help... unless answered. If he does not wish to know, then I will do nothing."

There wasn't really much of a point. Hashirama's Mokuton Release might be able to make all the seeds in the Sekanji poison library bloom in seconds, but if it would alter the plants in any way then it wasn't really all that useful to her. After the man was dead, the results would likely not be replicable and therefore studying it would only be useful in this lifetime.

A curiosity, an abnormality, and nothing else.

"Okay… that's cool and all…" Tera blinked blankly back at the squinty eyed look she got from midget shinobi trainee number one, the one she was somewhat sure was Sarutobi Hiruzen. 
"...you're a wind user."

"...you do not say." She responded dryly as if they weren't up on the walls to use said wind abilities
to poison an entire raiding group. "Whatever gave you that impression, I wonder?"

"Saru, you are a guest. Behave."

"But! Tobi-sensei, she a wind user."

Tera and Momo exchanged a fairly confused glance.

"I can use the wind, Saru. So too can my brother."

"Yeah, with jutsus! She can use the wind, without hand signs. Just some fancy fan and chakra winds happen."

Tobirama eyed the child sternly. "I am aware, fans as of the type Terazawa-sama possesses are more often the tools of those with a wind affinity."

"Blunt chakra winds, sensei." Hiruzen pointed out as if that mattered at all, also pointing to the still insensible Inuzuka pair nearest the walls. "They're not cut in half."

"Again, I am aware."

"What does it matter?" Tera interjected harshly before that could continue, already with a headache from tracking the Senju brothers’ fight that was steadily getting worse as Hashirama reversed whatever it was that grew fully formed trees in an instant and a childishly high pitched voice shouted near her ears.

"It is… more common for others to use sharper and thinner blades of wind." The shinobi on the ground informed her as if she should already know the information.

"That just invites the winds to bite back for controlling it. Blunt winds are less prone to causing such injury on the user, for all they take effort to pull on."

In hindsight, the raised eyebrow from the asshole that nearly got her killed was not a good omen. Nor was the subsequent argument on wind natured chakra, much as the various brats enjoyed it.

(That was not the last time Terazawa saw those specific shinobi of the Village Hidden in the Leaves.)
Sekanji Katsutarō and Katsutsune were arguing. There was a tiny lull in jobs, and they picked to argue in the rare time they had to see one another within without having to rush off to meet some other deadline or fulfill another contract.

It wasn't like it was impossible to overhear such acts in the Sekanji compound, although nearly half of it was still empty and abandoned more than enough people starting or continuing their own families had spread out so it seemed less of a ghost town these days. If you sought out a quiet place it was entirely possible to hold a clandestine meeting… yet it was also entirely possible one of the many children would overhear and carry tales.

More importantly, they'd carry tales to Terazawa, Momomi, or 'old man Kaku'.

Tera listened to the report of yet another of the seeming verbal spars between her worthless father and their clan head who was his brother and her uncle, thinking on the elderly samurai more than the report.

Bluntly put, she called Rokkaku old because she had thought he was when they met in her terribly unfortunately deceased intended husband's manor. Over the last few years, she had learned otherwise but it still annoyed the man when she referred to him as 'elderly' and thus was her revenge for him following her with twelve other samurai.

Prematurely greying hair, stress, the more difficult life of a samurai, and just general battle wear and tear made him seem a lot older than Ikeda. Her partially paralyzed scribe, who was his childhood friend and had less stress in his life, looked nearly a full decade younger than her elderly samurai when in fact they were born within two months of each other.

...if Ikeda hadn't married one of the Sekanji women that apparently saw the slight speech impediment they hadn't been able to work him around and his more-than-slightly unresponsive hand as a challenge for newly acquired healing skills, she would've suspected the two of them had an… 'understanding'.

Tera should see if Rokkaku wanted a wife or something.

Everyone else of age in the compound was either matched off or had 'understandings' of their own with others. A few handful of women didn't have lovers or husbands, her lovely squeaky handmaiden Yura among them. It might be a samurai thing for why he hadn't asked leave to take a wife or something else she was currently unaware of, or maybe just-

Oh dear.

...hmm, perhaps she should see to some male company of her own?

Something quick and temporary, and preferably with strings unattached. It wasn't like her 'virtue' or 'purity' was all that damn important in a kunoichi's life, even if samurai girls were expected to maintain such.

Without her hormones making such a mess of her thought processes, perhaps she could finally make a damn breakthrough with the moonflower poison she was developing. The results were entirely all over the board right now, getting reliable ones that would enchant a victim to willingly consume even more until dying from a highly toxic overdose was… tricky.
Also… she'd likely be greatly less distracted overall. Sixteen was a decent age to begin such nonsense, much better than thirteen ever would be.

"Mashi-kun, I do not mean to interrupt you needlessly. However… why are you telling me this?"

Her eldest half-brother wrinkled his nose, puzzling the question over himself.

The boy-child was three years and some younger than even Momo, resulting in an eight-year-old that flirted with maybe getting Rokkaku to teach him samurai things more than learning the shinobi things his harsh and oft-missing father or slightly better behaving uncle could do.

The only saving grace ninja had, in his ever so humble opinion, was that his eldest half-sister could do cool 'kunoichi' things.

Ironically, hilariously, he seemed to consider ninja-things to be girl-things half the time.

_Momo hadn't been that foolish at his age_, Tera mused to herself while nine-year-old cogs churned harshly to find her answer.

While the shinobi-samurai thing hadn't yet come to a terrible end as she had half-expected, there were likely more of Mashi's type wavering over which side of the clan to dedicate their lives to. The earlier it could be decided would probably merely help them survive that.

Tera had very specifically reminded everyone she could that the Sekanji were ninja first and foremost, but that the samurai were also to be respected as they hadn't had to follow her and help them.

That… had not likely aided anyone with their own issues all that much.

"Cause… you're… old." The utter brat settled upon after some more thought. "Not as old as mother, nor old man Kaku, but they listen to you."

Of course.

Flicking him on the nose for the first part, she was not thank you very much, she waved a hand to dismiss him. "If our father is arguing with uncle, it is their business. Unless it comes to blows, or they start to lash out on anyone, it is not my issue."

Mashi wrinkled his nose at her for the assault, which was not as adorable as her full sister's irritably puffed cheeks, but nodded and ran off as he was likely late for drills but could claim 'talking to my lady sister' as an excuse.

Rokkaku would want to know about what, but that was a consequence for much later.

Shinobi, definitely.

Unfortunate, given Tera sucked with a sword. Momo had it easier, the samurai did not expect as much from her as from the lady they all picked to follow, but was also unsuited to swords. Her elder sister did slightly better with a naginata, which was her only saving grace when it came to samurai training.

If it wasn't the only way she'd get combat training without risking her neck…

...Tera would probably still do it to ensure her samurai did not feel as if their service was being maligned or taken for granted. That at least a few of the clan would seek to understand them and
why they did what they did, and appreciate them for it.

Getting one of the 'main branch' Sekanji into the samurai side of the clan would help so much, but not to the point she'd sacrifice her eldest half-brother to that life when he was too shinobi trained to be happy in it.

Perhaps one of the 'mysterious' children with the purple crests.

That was another thing she had to keep an eye out to correct, the minute her worthless philandering father did just enough to require 'putting in his place'.

As in the argument of whatever that was going on between him and his brother.

Her step-mother was still very much a nonentity to her right now, but the woman didn't deserve to have that ignored or encouraged even when the evidence of her husband's unfaithful behavior stared her dead in the face.

Tera had no illusions, between herself and her worthless father her uncle was probably highly displeased with the rest of his immediate family. However, she had been entirely willing to heed to most if not all of his orders to date while her worthless father argued with him about a few of them.

She was the 'lesser threat', and thus the only reason why her giving Hashirama the permission to take the Inuzuka raiders on instead of killing all of them with poison had yet to earn her more than a sour glare.

Then again, she couldn't think of one person who would want the God of Shinobi annoyed with them.

Especially not one that could go toe to toe with the entire if somewhat decimated Inuzuka Clan and dominate their Alpha in battle, take on any more challengers right after one another, and evict the entirety of the shinobi clan out of Grass for several years until they 'learned some manners'. While his brother and the Shimura Clan representative might've aided him, there had also been three children with him that could've been held hostage or threatened when dealing with a hostile ninja clan.

She could probably fit in an overnight visit to Tamachi sometime soon, and check out the red light district for anyone that looked suitable for a bit of fun as well as any more rumor of what Hashirama was capable of.

If she was lucky, no one would think anything of it and she could dodge an escort since it was close.

Slightly difficult to seek out male company when she had a severely disproving samurai at her elbow trying to lead her away from such men, or baby sisters who would want to know when she could have such wicked fun.

...or she could ensure the sisters left together, split up at the town, returned at separate times, and pin the blame the crime of 'leaving your lady sister unguarded' on the younger girl. There were a few 'womanly' things she had yet to impart on her baby sister she might find use of in the coming years.

Plans for when the brat next annoyed her, the poison in her hair might make such things a tiny bit difficult.

Also, she should source some wild carrot as she had no intentions of getting pregnant from such
foolishness.

Terazawa warded off the bladed edge aimed at her chest with the bladed edge of her own weapon, whirling to smack her opponent with the butt of the heavily bladed spear to knock him off balance. "Honor is all well and good, Kaku-sama! But shinobi will see it as an insult to their honor if you do not come at us with your all!"

"We're not training as ninja now, Tera-sama!" Roared back the always surprisingly sprightly elderly samurai, springing forward while her back was turned to slash at her leather plates using a carefully blunted practice sword with powdered chalk edges.

If that was sabotaged with itching poisons again, she was going to have the man run all the damn brats into the ground for the next week.

Once was more than enough.

Although… whoever brought forth the stinging nettle patch to her attention would gain a touch of leniency.

Tera barely evaded the sword's chalky edge, twisting under it even if the light armor plates bit into her side for doing so. Not grabbing the winds to help her, or push back her attacker, was still something she struggled with.

As well as not giving herself more strength than her wiry muscles should account for.

Her moment of inattention almost cost her the match, failing to use her dodge and perform a follow up left her open to a downward slice from her opponent.

Tera dropped the practice naginata as she bent herself backwards, kicking the haft up and causing the powder edged mock weapon to impact Rokkaku's inner thigh.

A touch high.

The samurai gave her a highly unimpressed look for her 'win'.

It was technically within the rules, as he did have armor plates buckled to his thighs just as much as any other major part of the body. Not entirely, as the line of chalk dust was nicking the seat of the elderly man's pants.

Grinning wickedly, she waited a beat to see if he'd try to protest.

No, she didn't hold the weapon in her hands the entire time. She rarely did, finding more use if she could throw or otherwise use the instruments of war given to her. Her war fans had multiple uses, and if she was going to put effort into another weapon then they had best be as useful.

"You are distracted today, Terazawa-sama."

"Too much to do, too much to watch for." Tera informed him slightly sheepishly, as it was all too true. "I will do better, Rokkaku-sama."

More often, when she had moments of inattention in a fight like that, he dumped her on her ever so 'noble' rear end and proceeded to lecture her until she tried to shut him up by feeding him whichever length of blunted steel nearby. Then he'd not go easy on her enough she could learn and
just trump her again, giving another lecture about respect and how samurai started spars.

At least she was getting better. Achingly slowly.

He might not be the best one to compare herself to, as the man was a beast of a samurai, but he was the one teaching her.

"Anything you feel safe in sharing?"

The Sekanji poison mistress hummed softly, helping her elderly samurai pick up their practice ring so another pair could use it that day. "Bits I do not, a few I might, but more yet that must be simply observed without influence to be aware of the true cause. Does that answer your question, Rokkaku-sama?"

"Perhaps."

It had been three years, almost three and a half, since the samurai had joined a poison using shinobi clan. Rokkaku had probably picked up the most ninja habits of his number, if only because the Sekanji sisters had made it a point to ensure he was not handicapped when it came to dealing with the few shinobi they still had.

Apparently, he had taken softly worded truth she only once spoke after the death of his lord and master as a 'failing' and sought to correct it by following her in penance. He hadn't trusted her when she was intended to wed Norimoto, and the possibility that led somewhat to the man's demise haunted him sometimes.

Tera wasn't… sure what she could do about that.

The blame was no one's but hers.

"We no longer have the numbers to sustain ourselves. No," holding up a hand before he could react or protest with the obvious to her murmured observation, the slightly samurai-ish kunoichi gave him a small and twisted smile, "I know what you will say. It is easier to go from samurai to shinobi, Rokkaku-sama… the other way around does not work. No samurai nor noble would trust a shinobi born one without excessive proof of their honor, you know this full well."

The reaction to the Sekanji Clan obtaining a score of the honor-bound warriors had been… impressive.

A lot of scorn, from those that would otherwise never mind interacting with her men, poured down from the usual superiors samurai had. A lot of hesitation, from those that would otherwise scorn the warriors as like the Shimura Clan. More uneasiness, from those that once would never have glanced at them twice as the merchants and peasant classes.

'Backstabbers' had been the politest way it was referred as, only once in Tera's hearing when one of her men accompanied her and they saw the local Grass nobles or just their fellow samurai on the road.

Well… her men certainly weren't going to take that kind of slander, in front of her no less, lying down. The subsequent lectures afterwards on honor and why even if they were attached and married to a shinobi clan and honor-bound to her line eventually just proved their point much to Rokkaku's disgust, as he was the one trying to lecture them.

...but it also proved their detractors right, just implied that they were fully accepting of such and merely disliked such being spoken of in a lady's hearing.
There was no clean way out of that. Just as there was no clean way out of the troubles the Sekanji Clan had now.

"We have six shinobi, of which two are kunoichi, left." Tera reminded the man pointedly, still softly as this was a rather touchy morale thing even with the false sense of security the samurai gave the rest of the women and children. "One needs to survive, if only to teach the younger generation of Sekanji shinobi skills. I cannot, as I was never truly trained, therefore neither can my sister. Even now, if we started this very second, too much will be lost if nothing is done."

Two more, on the same job to provide the security they would not, of the Sekanji ninja were now declared dead. Her worthless father did the announcement, with the same irrelevant angry energy he did everything with these days.

Either way, there were four actually trained shinobi left.

If she had to save any one, it would be her uncle. She didn't know the other two, and her father was entirely too much of a headache to wish he'd pass on his skills. However much she'd regret the two new widows on top of the latest pair, and the children rendered fatherless before ever really coming to know the men that sired them, her uncle was the best one they had.

She knew, had beheld, and suspected there were more shinobi in the world that could treat him like a young child instead of a battle hardened veteran. That was… not confidence inspiring.

One of them needed to be retained now anyways, to train up the half or more of the slowly growing Sekanji children that wished for shinobi training. They could do conditioning, weapon handling, and even basic chakra lessons with just her people, but not more beyond that.

If anyone so much as heard a whisper of their situation, and assassinated that one shinobi, the clan would likely crumble apart.

"Would that be so bad?" Rokkaku interrupted her thoughts with his usual brand of pointed old man samurai wisdom. "What use were they to you, Terazawa-sama? And yet, as you continually remind me, you are kunoichi."

"It's not the mind-set, Rokkaku-sama, it's the lessons. Earned fairly through blood and battle over generations, of what to do and what not to do when it comes to certain situations. That part of the Sekanji Clan's knowledge, which we could learn from scratch but it will murder more than most of those we train up to rediscover."

Ninjas were not fans of common sense in this fading era of eternal war and unlimited bloodshed. It rarely applied in their work if not their entire lives, and more often than not their lives were fantastical rather than mundane.

Brutally so, more often speckled with gore and horror, but fantastical.

Doing what no one else thought to do in any tense situation was how they survived more often than not. Not the obvious reactions any ninja worth their salt could predict another would do.

Routine had it's place, hopefully on the other side of whichever conflict, and predictability was a death sentence. Tera and Momo randomly chose days to hunt instead of simply gather herbs within, visits to any merchant towns or local villages were rare and never the same time each year. No one lying in wait for them to show would likely find either at any major area suited for ambush, and those that went to predictable places like strands of mountain laurel bushes or the wolfsbane flower patch had
guards to keep them safe from assault.

With the lack of ninja, they had stopped doing most of the work that normally put them in conflict with other shinobi clans. It wasn't entirely good, the lack of income especially, but there was some sort of silver lining in that.

She could hope, that with the Senju Clan putting their differences aside with the Uchiha Clan and forming the Village Hidden in the Leaves, the days of senseless bloodshed was over… but she was fully aware they were now on a time limit to the start of the *First Great Shinobi War.*

The Sekanji Clan had four shinobi, two kunoichi, and thirteen samurai. Thirty women, nearly sixty children of which forty or so were of age to learn anything. To survive *five* great Shinobi Nations hammering which was more powerful and therefore more feared out in blood, steel, and lives lost.

The eldest of the Sekanji sisters tipped her head back to watch the cloudy autumn sky as she and the samurai walked back to the more lived in side of the ninja compound, of how the pewter silver stormclouds gathered together thickly and blocked out even a touch of sunlight.

...they had reached an unsustainable position, surrounded by the slowly growing shadows of powers more networked and stronger than them by factors of ten likely or more, and were smack dab in the middle of one of the next *two* theaters of War.

Perhaps... it was time to sound out her people about Hashirama's offer.

(*Terazawa got her day and a very relaxing night in the largest of the local towns, running both Momomi and Yura out of the inn's rented room by lecturing them both on womanly natures and 'scratching an itch' and how to do it without unsightly consequences. Utterly embarrassed that the other had been present to witness their scandalous and personalized 'tips', the younger two girls elected right then and there to go camp and ignore the world for a night. Tera returned to the Sekanji compound perfectly happy and almost 'whole', just missing a tiny thing her samurai would likely be as scandalized to know she was missing, and used the girls' continued embarrassment as a smokescreen to speak with more of the half the clan that looked to her than her usual wont. Momo and her handmaiden never knew why she was so 'understanding' about their burning cheeks and the crime of leaving her behind. The results of the poll she conducted on her part of the clan confused Tera, as most did not care as long as she was there to ensure they were safe. She never would perfect the moonflower poison while in Grass.*)
"I refuse."

"Then what would you have us do, brother?"

Terazawa idly fanned herself with her war fan, waiting with patience she did not feel to speak to her uncle the moment her worthless father stopped riling him up. Momomi was less composed, but then again she had less upsetting incidents in her lifetime to learn to pull up a mask to conceal her real thoughts behind.

"I've almost single-handedly repopulate this clan, and you're suggesting we throw away the reasoning behind why?"

Oh my, how scandalous. He admitted it.

"You and the other men. Which still would not have worked had it not been for-"

"Do not bring her up in this!"

Such venom. Whatever did she do, father dearest?

Not die off conveniently when you wanted?

...if that was what was required to purchase her father's love… kami-sama spare her.

Momo, the less hardened and jaded little sister shielded from such loathing because her elder sister loved her freely anyways and always, slunk over until she was about pressed up to Tera's side. More than close enough for armor plates and buckles beneath silk to bite into her flesh, but without a word spoken of such.

She hadn't done such since she had been five and scared of the thunder crackling overhead.

"We swore to return. No matter what." Darkly, with as much threat as could be pressed in one's tone, her worthless father's shadow slashed a hand down in some kind of gesture painted on the framed paper walls of her uncle's home. "Now, now those idiots in Fire and Earth both move to consolidate power to themselves you want us to run?"

...return where?

"To abandon what the clan has remained here to guard and prevent others from usurping? What we sacrificed so much for, when poison users would be so much better off in more fertile grounds?" If his voice got any louder, the rest of the clan would know their lead 'shinobi' were squabbling like children. "If such threats are what scare you, brother, then perhaps we should ensure we have a weapon-"

"SILENCE."

Tera idly wafted the fan again, pursing thin lips together as her little sister squeezed her sides enough to limit her breath.

Something nearby the northern corner of Grass, a weapon, that the clan was to return to. Which her worthless father assumed could counter any threats led by a GOD OF SHINOBI and his village as
well as the harsh and uncompromising shinobi clans gathering together in Earth.

The only things near them were mountain ranges stabbing a line between them and both Earth and Waterfall, and a stretch of sea to the north.

Past the sea, perhaps?

Or within the mountains?

"We will go south. That is my order to you, as your clan head." Her uncle informed his little brother flatly, almost tonelessly, as the so far missing shadow of the man started to grow as he rounded whatever light the terrible play was being cast by. "As you were too impulsive, father left me in charg-"

Copper eyes widened at the shadows' movements.

"NO!" Tera was too late anyways, Momo hampering her movements and the act done by shinobi speed.

Their best… cut down by his own brother.

Wrenching open the fragile wall harshly shattered the entire frame, and through the papery splintered mess she hurled bladed winds into the spot her worthless father had stood to remove him from doing more damage to their best shinobi left.

Momo, her darling little sister, startled and shocked at the violence and movement both... yet she ran to their uncle's side to try and sustain his life so better aid could be given to save it.

The eldest of the man's children placed herself in the empty space between the two of them and their treacherous kin. Both war fans unfurled, all but radiating the sheer rage she held for the wretched creature that stumbled out of the way of her windy blades because as shocked as he was that they had been eavesdropping he was still a ninja.

"Back off, girl. I am-"

"KINSLAYER!" Tera bellowed over him with a tone and volume that shocked just about everyone in range to hear her, even herself.

Her samurai responded beautifully, anyways.

Too late.

Even with the startelement, she did not raise her voice when softening her tone did just as well and rarely earned her sour looks from the very honorable warriors nearby, and the betrayal announced for all to hear the wretched man dodged the first few that lunged for him.

Didn't kill, as if he started slaughtering the samurai he could never take control of a clan that held more of their number than ninja, but evaded them with infuriating ease.

Until Rokkaku got into things.

Her elderly samurai, who wasn't but most expected him to be older because of her eternal teasing of the man, was of a level more than she could reach. Who had been prepared for conflict between himself and shinobi thanks to the constant efforts of two kunoichi trying to fold him and his men into a shinobi clan.
He could match her wretched, worthless cretin of a father.

...well, Orochimaru had to get that kind of a sensibility from somewhere. Why not the family he gained his looks from?

Pushing the bitter thoughts aside roughly, the kunoichi darted to the water held within the pond under the willow tree. Two steps, two water clones to aid keeping the women and children out of the fight between a shinobi and a samurai trained to deal with such.

Then she hesitated, still standing on the water's surface, because as much as she loathed it when 'honor' and bushido ways interfered with her orders and life... Rokkaku likely would not forgive her for interfering in his fight on her behalf with such a criminal wretch as a kinslayer she named her own father as.

Katsutarō, no family name now he had betrayed them so deeply, was a shinobi poison master with the elements of water and earth to his skill.

Water her elderly samurai was used to countering from both sisters he trained, a weak variant of earth from the younger. General shinobi things of a caliber higher than what the girls could show him did startle the man and throw him off somewhat, earning nicks and wounds she would have to doctor the hell out of in case his opponent got desperate and started poisoning his strikes regardless of what it could do to the people that lived here he wanted to lead.

Tera stood in the middle of the pond, the only great concentration of water in the compound that could be made use of if not for the rain barrels which were more than half empty after refilling the water feature after the summer months.

The earth could not be altered greatly without risking the people and homes they were either going to abandon or shore up for weathering the coming conflicts.

It was destroyed anyways.

Rokkaku took her words earlier that same autumn to heart, using everything he had against the older shinobi. Swift strikes before any hand signs could be formed, that exceeded what reach his sword had with crests of powerful waverly chakra, bearing down with his sword before the poison master could ready whatever he fumbled his fingers around.

He was still without the main parts of his armor, and almost ignoring the chakra elements that struck at him from both the ground and whatever water source he was near.

Tera's water clones helped keep the women and fascinated children out of the way, those that hadn't heard her unlady-like shout gossiped with their closest neighbor for why such a fight was going on in the middle of their clan's compound behind a line of grim-faced samurai. She still lost a few anyways, likely a toddler child when a collapsing house fell on top of him and pinned him cruelly to the ground, one of the married pregnant women when she couldn't move out of the way fast enough and ended up smashed into the ground in a sickening puddle of gore.

...that had been her step-mother, recognized in the split second she had to realize if she didn't pour more chakra into trying to hold up the house over the toddler he would die yet one of the women was in equal trouble and she could possibly save her if she left the child to die.

It wasn't so much conscious choice as sheer shock staying her hand. Then the guilt started.

The crack of thunder rolled overhead, heralding the rainstorm they had been expecting for most of the last week. With rain pouring down in sudden bucketful's, both her own and the wretch she
called father had more range to work with.

Most of those protected were now homeless, it was getting into winter, and they had yet to decide what the hell to do about uncle.

Only the drills, arguments, and respect for her elderly samurai kept the teenager in place.

Rokkaku did her proud, he did take down her father.

By allowing some kind of knife strike too close home in order to open the craven male's stomach.

Tera dashed for the samurai, ignoring the greasy tubes of flesh that squelched underfoot as she got her tiny bit of ninja revenge against the absolute idiot she shared blood with, who sank to the ground just as his opponent did but only nursing a wound that scored a livid bloody line down his face.

...he was going to lose the eye, if she could keep him alive long enough to somewhat heal.

"Kaku-sama," she would not babble nor panic, neither would help him, "lay down, please."

A warm, almost hot compared to the chilly late night rains dampening everything, hand gripped her wrist while she was tugging at his armor to give her the buckles so she could clamp down on the too many slits in his flesh. Irked, she glared up into the blue eye that peered at her through the haze of recent battle and misty near-mountain air.

"...thank you-

"Do not thank me. That is the only time I will stand by, Rokkaku-sama."

The man had the temerity to roll his eye at her.

"I also do not give you permission to die on me, samurai-sama. You made your bed with us, lay in it."

"My honor is restored." Rokkaku informed her almost airily, following her insistent silent instructions to leave the rest to her and rest already. "You trusted me to my samurai 'thing', while it was also part of your shinobi 'thing'. I think... I am..."

"No. I said no."

"Foolish girl. Do you really believe this will kill me?"

Samurai were nearly as hard to kill as shinobi, but those were not the only two killers one had to be wary of.

Death by sickness, by accidents, by sabotage, by being crippled from this and asking for a way to end such existences were still possible.

Rokkaku was losing a lot of blood, it was cold and muddy with whomever's poisons spilled into the water and ground from the destroyed houses. The poison garden had also been rather torn up during the fight, Tera had little medical salves on hand that they hadn't packed away for the Leaf shipment, and it was almost winter.

"Why not shut your mouth, samurai-sama? I have work to do, you are interrupting me."

(ooo000ooo)
Terazawa became painfully aware how often she would split her leader duties with her elderly samurai while Rokkaku was bedridden, and uncomfortably confronted with how often she would seek him out to speak with over the last few years. Even if it was mainly to argue, bicker, or just tease the man.

She hadn't been able to save the toddler boy she had sacrificed her stepmother and the unborn child for. Too much damage, too much blood loss, and not enough time. He died before she could finish stitching up the rent in his skin to hopefully keep his blood inside.

Momomi, even paler these days as the weather worsened and their possible survival became more perilous, was running errands for Ideka's Sekanji healer wife to hopefully heal their uncle just a tiny bit more so he would wake.

Tera... honestly did not expect anything.

Whatever that wretch she once called father had used against his own brother had seemingly also gotten into her elderly samurai's injuries, as the man had yet to wake after succumbing to sleep after standing in for her.

Probably a neurotoxin, from venom she had never studied. Only since herbs had proven their worth to know, and because the rare few venomous animals in their slice of the Land of Grass she could catch.

She could get into now, the entirety of the Sekanji's poison library was open to her without someone to bar her way. She would, the moment she had the breathing room to see if there was a treatment for getting it into your own wounds she might yet be able to use on either man.

Worst of the situation was that... well, they couldn't rebuild.

They could strip other houses to somewhat fix the broken but stable ones, even scavenge for the parts from the utterly wrecked and unstable few houses, but then the 'repaired' homes would likely not be winter-safe.

Leaving whoever decided to risk it to freeze to death unless they also chopped up the broken homes for more firewood, and risk burning the compound to the ground as they used the fire pits in each home for more than they were built to contain.

Placing an order for building supplies, or sneaking bits and pieces from the local area, would start some to wondering what happened or who needed such things. If the slightly destroyed state of their compound became known, someone would try to take advantage of the disorder and health issues it might cause them to raid the poison using clan for the medical supplies before they could use what they have on their own doomed members.

Selling medicine only helped when there wasn't a shortage of such that made them a tasty target for the opportunistic and desperate. Winter made it hard to travel, and increased the possibility for sickness if you pressed on too long, but the possibility was still there.

The only bright sides Tera could see was that the fight had stayed well away from the poison library and the main laboratory, as insanely mad as her father must have been even he knew full well breaking either of them could release enough poison that nothing would live here ever again.

Six chests of medicine and herbal salves sat in the laboratory right now, waiting for the Village Hidden in the Leaves' teams that would take the chests so the Sekanji would hold up their end of the contract.
Tera could *not*, in any kind of good conscious, accept any more *or* shinobi jobs as the temporary clan head until things became more settled. Perhaps not even then, until some of the few children over the age of ten could be trained up to perform the same tasks as their remaining shinobi and not lose their minds while doing the work.

Two shinobi, two kunoichi, and twelve samurai. Six additional men-folk that followed her here she had yet to lose one of, one more in the elderly family healer that was very pale and not up to nursing anyone right now nor give orders. Twenty-seven women, four pregnant, with fifty-four children. Twenty-nine mostly fatherless sons, and twenty-one equally as fatherless daughters.

The rate of miscarriages and still-born children were appalling, especially in a clan of poison users… *even with* the better nutrition and someone not unwilling to assign bedrest if needs be.

Burying her face in her hands, the kunoichi slightly hysterically wondered who the ever loving *fuck* put her in charge of all that.

...right, baby brother still reeling from being suddenly orphaned wasn't yet ten. Neither of the last shinobi they had were back yet.

The only other one with leadership experience was her elderly samurai who was ill and not aware, which just left… her.

Helplessly, Tera started laughing. A bit on the manic edge of things, but it was something instead of crying.

She had suspected that a bit of an insurrection was in the wings… this had not been how she *ever* imagined it would go.

(Rokkaku woke a few times before he passed on, mostly to scold Terazawa for lingering at his bedside when she had people to care for and duties to fulfill. The injuries he had, many and varied in severity, became infected and before long she could not rouse him awake again. With her clan head all but paralyzed entirely, unable to communicate with the outside world even through flexing his chakra in a pattern, Tera assumed control of the Sekanji Clan officially once the two remaining shinobi returned and were informed to either fall in line and teach the next generation so she could save them or leave. The samurai was cremated and his remains buried in the family graveyard with full honors, her kinslayer father burned with the ruins of their home they could not salvage and his ashes dumped into the sea.)
'Start of winter' was the time limit they had been given by Hashirama, and while more could be manufactured over the winter from the stores of herbs gathered up throughout the year they also had their own needs to account for.

Terazawa had the seven finished chests of medical salves and tinctures moved to the main house, six for the Leaf and one more for the Shimura Clan.

To the four-roomed building her uncle had once lived within.

Well… he still lived, but it was questionable if he realized that.

With her uncle, she also moved all of her orphaned half-siblings in with her and Momomi… thankfully some still had a mother left at least. It made for cramped living, but better they be together and warm than have the room to become deadly chilled within.

The elder Sekanji sisters former abode was then made available for some of those rendered homeless, and more yet were moved to the side of the compound that wasn't nearly shattered, and yet there were three partial families she had living together in the kitchens.

Tera ordered those that were of age to comb through the rest of the destroyed or abandoned and dismantled for any poisons or experimental notes, as well as for anything the lone two shinobi could make use of to teach the children.

Korenaka and Sanemune, the last two Sekanji shinobi, were odd characters to her.

Korenaka was a wire-thin man with dark green crests topping bruised eyes on ill-appearing white skin, one who seemed ever exhausted and almost listless on a good day. It could've been attributed to the years-long desperation to complete as many contracts and jobs as came their way, paired with the fact his wife had a few more children with mismatched colors to their own, as it could be to simply pure shock he came home one day to half the compound destroyed and a girl in charge.

Sanemune was even quieter if not as thin, as his wife was lost some time ago to a difficult childbirth and the disbelief in him when she gave orders and other men obeyed was not entirely encouraging. Tera still pinned her hopes on the only male she ever recalled with acid yellow slashes spanning over his black eyes that offset his slightly pale but not white skin to teach the children, as he was really good at teaching shinobi things.

Had a slight issue with teaching the girls that wanted it, ninja tricks and Sekanji Clan secrets, but did it anyways as no one could countermand her orders.

No one but Katsutsune, and her uncle wasn't speaking even if he wanted to.

Years upon years of orders and commands from customers and very little downtime had worn both men down to the bone, to the point she had little difficulty at first to get them to follow her own.

It was entirely likely noblewomen had hired some Sekanji poison users for their own means, and that meant at least a few prior encounters with females in charge had desensitized them to the very idea. Clan law likely took care of the rest, she was the eldest with the purple crests which meant she was the one of the few able to lead.

She still expected to have to talk to both in some few more months, but hopefully they would not
take it badly.

Without Rokkaku, she felt just a slight bit more exposed than she ever had before. Depressingly, as she hadn't realized how much she leaned on him until this.

Much to their credit, the samurai had no issue with her or trying to fold the two shinobi back into the clan. Even without the man that led them from a nobleman's manor to a nearly decrepit shinobi compound, they had… strangely, been proud of her for allowing Rokkaku's death. Not his death, his battle that caused his death.

Tera pressed already bloodless thin lips together firmly, breathing through the riot of emotion in her. Honestly, her elderly samurai had been more of a father to her than the kinslayer had ever tried to be. Ironic then, that they killed the other in the end.

Whatever was the cause of that last argument?

She knew her uncle had wanted them to go south, her craven father wanted them to return to something they had historically guarded. Even if poison users did better with more fertile ground than the most northern reaches of Grass, they had remained in the empty reaches of mountain plains backed by the seashore for generations given the vast Sekanji graveyard.

For a weapon.

That she knew nothing of.

Useless thoughts, and Rokkaku would give her that stupidly amusing look for fiddling around with nothing while there was work yet to do.

Coppery eyes burned, and she shut them instead of stare without seeing at the compound's gates.

She had to go through her uncle's things, to see what they were beholden to do still that wasn't already done. For contracts and any recorded agreements, in the slightly messy records detailed in his study. See if there was any mention of ancient things her clan guarded, or if abandoning the half-decimated compound would not hurt them more.

Then come spring they would have to strike out from their ancestral clan grounds for something new… or rebuild.

Mashi came running up to her, chakra signature betraying more than a bit of pain because his mother was gone and his father a known traitor however dead the man was. "Aa… Tera-sama?"

"You are still my little brother, no matter what happened." She informed him almost tiredly, to try countering that hesitation yet again. "What is it, Mashi-kun?"

If she couldn't get the kid to look past their shared genetic contributor, and his utter failings as both a family member and as a shinobi, then she wouldn't be able to step aside in eight or some odd years in his favor. Tera didn't mind managing a few people, ten was kind of pushing it and she had… another to help with that for the most part, but a whole clan was another matter.

It was easier to judge and second guess someone else when you were just a clan member, but when you were clan head…
...she was never trained, nor prepared, for this. Sixteen might be perfectly alright to marry at or have a child within, but not to get the headship of your entire desperate family heaped on your shoulders.

Worst would be nine so she would suck it up and deal, but still.

Scrolls were shoved onto the porch next to her, the child running off again without really saying much of anything.

Tera was utterly unsurprised, and so opening her eyes she turned her attention to what she had been given.

Yellowing scrolls, probably easily older than even her. A light blue cotton bound the back of the scroll and protected the writing inside, a strip of yellow ribbon held them closed. They were not fancy, for sure, but well cared for. The kanji for 'Wakizaka' was pressed into the wax that held the ribbon shut.

...what had been Mashi tasked to do today?

Sliding a finger under the ribbons to lift the wax seal so it could be reused, Tera slid the scroll out of the ring of silk and rolled it open.

...oh.

Wakizaka Shimiko wasn't a bad name, really. Rather pretty.

A scroll for the 'soft physique' technique was… interesting to hold sixteen years after her own birth. Over a decade since the woman's death.

Likely… twenty-some odd years? For how long Shimiko had been married to that craven male?

Five children, two survived, and her kinslayer father never thought to pass on the ninja technique she brought from her family to the daughters that it really belonged to?

Ah… hello scorn.

A feeling was a feeling, which was better than the drugging numbness that lingered after Rokkaku's surprisingly peaceful death. Tera made the most of it, snagging the other scroll and rising to her full height.

Time to dive into the likely disorganized mess that was her uncle's 'study' turned sickroom.

The Sekanji Clan was putting their faith into her, to survive. She had best get on it, grief was for when she had the time.

(ooo000ooo)

The group that came to take the Leaf medicine was the same Akimichi, Yamanaka, and Nara squad that opened relations between the Sekanji Clan and the Village Hidden in the Leaf.

A good choice, Terazawa was surprisingly fond of Naras for all she had met two only once before and the clan's samurai knew the three had come here before and left peacefully. Any others would possibly be imposters they would not know how to differentiate from real Leaf squads of shinobi, which was honestly a worry she held for weeks now.

All twelve of her remaining samurai moved the six chests of salves and tinctures into the plains
that ringed the Sekanji Clan compound's walls, she and Momomi moved the last one themselves and then just waited for the squad to get close enough to speak to.

They weren't light things, the chests of ordered medicine. Made of local bamboo specifically at a carpenter's shop in the nearby town and lined with cork from Earth, the tins and pots within were thick enough to safely travel yet still packed to the brims with the carefully extracted herbal remedies and manipulated into the forms they were best applied in.

Ikeda had taken to writing up seven different sheets of instructions, a set for each remedy or salve and what was too much or what wasn't for what illness or injury, with a vengeance ever since they buried the remains of his childhood friend. If her slightly paralyzed scribe hadn't had a wife to watch him and help him come to terms with her elderly samurai's death she would do it, but until he did something too out of character she would leave him be in his grief.

Simply give him things he could do, which seemed to help him the best than simply being tasked with nothing per usual, helped more than enough according to his wife.

Tera tapped her left hand war fan against her shoulder, coppery eyes locking on the team reported by a samurai-wife herbal hunting pair and waiting for the Leaf team to get in range to give her orders.

Frankly, with what they had informed the Senju brothers of about their production abilities, they had two chests extra for their village. Greif made for busy hands, the four for the village and one for the Shimura Clan with one last one for themselves had been added to by three more… two of which they would just send with and one they would keep for their own needs for later traveling.

Three shinobi might be able to handle four while also keeping on guard, but not all six and still keep an eye out for bandits or simply the desperate that would also want the medical supplies or just the contents of what was so protected. The chest would survive a fall from shoulder height and a bit of rough handling, but more than once or so and it put the contents at risk. A seventh one was just asking too much on top of the contractual ones they were coming to get, so she had to send at least two or so more men with them.

The only out-of-country task she would send her people on was fulfilling any outstanding contracts, of which this was the only one she could not otherwise edge around until spring.

If the situation within the Sekanji Clan came out to either the Senju brothers or anyone else in the Leaf… she'd have to just deal with it if, although more likely when, it came up. Samurai were not shinobi, she couldn't justify sending one of her two remaining true ninja when there was so many children to teach and the gap in their security would need some filling due to this.

Momomi was learning, more importantly. Hopefully she would become even better than her ill-trained elder sister, who was trained more for samurai things than she had ever been trained as shinobi.

Tera would not compromise her little sister's training.

"Terazawa-sensei… that's a bit more than we were expecting."

"I am aware, thus why I will be sending pack mules." Gesturing with the fan at the three most of her more shinobi tolerant samurai that hadn't immediately returned to their posts or went inside the compound to rest for the night shift, the poison mistress quirked them a slightly bitter wry smile. "Six are for the Leaf, the seventh is for the Shimura Clan. I am afraid I will have to suspend any contracts for at least a year."
The Akimichi froze for a split second, the Yamanaka glanced at her warily, but the Nara narrowed his eyes at her thoughtfully.

He was also the one that spoke. "Why?"

Was it because those of his clan were able to read others or the situation for why they were able to question her so bluntly without fear of reprisal, or were members of the Nara Clan just that confident in their skills and their allies?

"Unfortunately, we need to move." Tera informed the three of them as blandly as she could, leaving her fan folded and even sliding it up her sleeve when she caught the impulse to fan it open. "I do not mean to say we will not try to reach our end of the contract, but depending on where and more importantly what is around when we move the content and quality of what we produce may be less than ideal."

"And now you're the one making these decisions." The Yamanaka observed from behind the Nara's shoulders, contemplating her standing there passively under his blank green eyes. "Why? I thought it was your uncle…"

"...we are not entirely sure if he is still in there, or just simply mindless." If she recalled right, those of his clan were able to read minds. If there was any intelligence left to the man laid out motionless in the sister's bedroom and his sickroom, he would probably be able to tell. "Regardless, he is not able to give orders or receive guests as of right now."

"An attack?"

"Of a… sort."

Did she ask him to check her uncle, and therefore figure out what to do with the man's still living body or if she should try to nurse him past whatever it was that had him blankly staring at a ceiling for hours at a time?

Either way, she'd know and if worse came to worse… it would be one less mouth to feed and care for.

"We were told 'bother her about moving to the Leaf', Terazawa-sensei." Drawled the Nara with a limited amount of amusement and a tiny bit of that non-malicious cunning. "Straight from Hashirama-sama himself. You can come with us."

"Not this winter. We have too many young children to make such a journey in the winter months." Tera dismissed maybe a touch too quickly, because that was 'you' and not 'all of you' and she had duties she would not shirk however tempting. "My people come first, Nara-san. We are mostly residents of the Land of Grass and a few are from Earth. If we move, it will be somewhere we all want to go."

The teenaged shinobi slightly older than her huffed. "I meant them too. But if it's spring…"

"A decision will not be reached at this moment." Tera was kind of actually tempted to let them persuade her for where, she knew that while not entirely so it was one of the milder run and safer shinobi villages being built. A great one on top of one of the first, and getting an invitation to another when they were not native residents of the land would be hard. "We not only have a winter to survive, but the poison library to dismantle and pack away as well as strip everything else we will be taking with us. Regardless, you have six chests to return to your home with and a seventh I dearly hope you will not mind also keeping an eye on while another of my samurai hauls it to the
...she really didn't trust the Yamanaka just yet. Tera would nurse her uncle the best she could through the winter, if there was no improvement then she would see about requesting a member of the clan to find out what was going on in the man's mind.

She'd eat half-rations if need be, just to keep alive the only one who might have any idea of what the hell her craven kin slayer father had been so upset over.

...fuck, Orochimaru. She had forgotten that.

"Aritada-san?"

"Yes, Terazawa-sama?"

"...when you get there, ask the head of the Senju Clan about the procedure for joining his village." The samurai didn't visibly react, thankfully he was one of the more silent and easy going men if you ignored he was one of the best readers of human intent they had right now outside the two shinobi and her chakra senses, but merely inclined his head. "I may as well make the best informed decision I can."

Mist was fucked. Sand not that much better off. Rock was a military through and through and she might not keep her samurai nor shinobi long enough to secure the next generation there. Cloud was their only other safer bet if they did not pick the Leaf.

(Terazawa tried to remain impartial, to leave it up to fate and the wish of her clan to decide, but by the sixth team sent to them from the Village Hidden in the Leaves from Hashirama himself carrying letters asking what kind of compound she would like that Momomi took great pleasure in stealing from her desk and reading aloud to the rest of the clan it was pretty much out of her hands. The Sekanji Clan moved to the Leaf the very minute she deemed it no longer too cold for children to travel so far, and the last heavily pregnant woman gave birth to a healthy baby. Aided by four Naras, five Yamanakas, three Akimichis, and six very sheepish Inuzukas with nine dogs between them.)
"You are an utterly ridiculous man."

"You don't mean that, Tera-sensei." Hashirama pouted at her.

POUTED!

The so-called God of Shinobi was even more insanely childish and friendly within his village, bouncily cheerful and utterly all over the place yet not disorganized with it. Every little bit of shinobi life Terazawa had learned through mistakes and being burned on it at least once or twice before did not seem to apply to the man twice her age and with thrice her experience… as well as of a grade she did not hope to ever see.

With good reason, for sure… but thirty some odd years of combat and maybe three of building a village with other shinobi should've damped at least some of that?

...had he been worse as a child?

Warming her fingers with the cup of tea one Senju-Uzumaki Mito poured her with a small smile of apology for her husband's energy, the poison mistress felt very out of place in the Senju Clan head's home office and more the child she thought she had left far behind her.

It was very nice, green cushions to kneel upon and lacquered furniture not showing a speck of dust or a scratch of wear. Utterly lovely room in a large house built in a tastefully arranged compound rife with plants and ornamental gardens, but very much not the bare hovel she had left behind nor was the nobleman's manor in Earth she had thought 'wealthy'.

The Sekanji Clan was moving into the Village Hidden in the Leaves, the highly advanced village Tera had no idea was actually possible in this day and age. Some of the housing was wooden entirely through, left behind echoes of the shinobi before her gave away who built them, but others were more steel and concrete based structures with trees growing into and out of them.

It wasn't entirely a safe haven for the so-termed 'civilians' just yet, mainly just a growing circle of clan compounds deciding that 'sure, we'll be neighbors and pool resources' instead of raiding and attacking others or living alone with a few vassal families to supply certain goods or services.

There would be actual plumbing in Tera's new home, and the early electrical efforts were going into lights and possibly a phone invention in time. Windows, and there was the little bit added to the Sekanji Clan's new compound she had come to protest the inclusion of...

The culture shock was a… bit much.

Especially after years of making due with cramped accommodations, boiled water, and candles.

"I actually honestly do, Hashirama-sama." Tera informed him a little wonderingly, out of sorts and just really too tired to put up a front. It would do her little good, she was well aware he could read her anyways if she tried. "The letters, and the teams sent to help guard us, and now this? If I was not so out of sorts, I would be asking what the catch was. If I was not so desperate at this point, I would likely have tried to just… sustain what we had instead of accept your gracious invitation. We are a tattered remains of a clan, ill fit to do anything for years yet."

"But, you are a great clan of poison users, and some of you yet live." Hashirama waggled a finger
at her from behind his desk, only really half paying attention to the papers he was supposed to be working on and not entertaining the head of a newly arrived clan into his village. "I asked around, you know. The Sekanji poison library is kind of… infamous in some circles. You brought it with you."

"What were we supposed to do? Torch it?"

"No!" The shinobi paused, frowned, and then kind of gave a shrug with a bound that took him over the handsome if low desk and planted in front of her so he could gesticulate more freely. "Well… you could but you did ask what the requirements to join was. And that's a lot of… information. Some of it antique!"

"The Land of Grass was once a very large country, Hashirama-sama." Tera informed him, having read through a mere fraction of what was in the library over the long winter months just to get an idea of what kind of value it had. "Large parts of Fire and Earth were once under Grass, as well as all of Rain and the bulk of River. Most of that antique knowledge is useless now, divergent strains of the herbs twisting their nature for better odds of survival or just entire groves destroyed by fungus or diseases."

"Even so, the rest of it is still good. Now, between you and the Nara's own Library, we have nearly all the medical information we would need to develop more and better medicine." The grin Hashirama gave her was entirely proud, as if she had contributed the bulk of the information and not her ancestors. "With the best minds behind it, not to mention the Sekanji secret methods of refining and condensing them into better and more stable forms, we'll be the best ever healers!"

The flat look she gave him, which was likely still edged in exhaustion and a bit of the slogging weight leadership of her clan gave her, did finally knock a bit of his ever-present cheer in favor of something more serious.

"Tera-sensei, those medicine chests you sold us? Saved more lives than I ever hoped for while the Nara Clan settles in and starts cultivating their forests to take on the medicinal remedies production they'll be responsible for. We expected a hard one, as they pretty much are the only medicine makers in this part of Fire and shifting themselves here took time away from their usual jobs. The chests not only lasted through the entire winter, with some help from the Naras in preserving the best of it, but also seem to do perfectly fine with the illnesses and injuries cropping up now it's spring. Giving them more time to settle instead of rush to get things sorted."

"They should last until summer, I had thought I packed more than enough of it away for a year… but your village is… larger than I assumed." Even with taking into account they sent two extra chests, she had thought they would last longer.

Tera had miscounted. Even adding in the obvious Nara and Yamanaka Clans in with the Akimichi, there was more than eight shinobi clans in the Leaf.

There were ten, well… now eleven, shinobi clans. None but her own were remotely 'small', meaning at least a few hundred shinobi each and almost twice that in non-shinobi clansmen.

As well as three merchant families, a tailor, two cobbler, eighteen blacksmiths, four leather crafters, nine carpenter shops, and more yet she had not the time to explore. More were pouring in, in dribs and drabs here or there, expanding what services were available between the clan compounds and in the growing village they surrounded. A traveler here, a family there, maybe a craftsman looking to set up shop, and the odd shinobi clan were still showing up from the sounds of things in the 'village'. 

"You should inform your brother it is rude to eavesdrop on conversations you have with others, he is lingering outside your office door."

A sharp look, a wry smile, and Hashirama called Tobirama into the office with them. "Tobi! Come say hi to Tera-sensei!"

"Sensor, as well?"

"It is a skill." Tera observed dryly to the new shinobi as she finally sipped at the tea now her fingers were about the same temperature.

"I didn't think you would drink that." Mito interjected while the Senju brothers had some kind of silent conversation between them.

"I am a poison mistress, I know the looks and tastes of the more popular and effective poisons to put in tea." She informed the other woman with a sly smirk. "Additionally, the best ways to slip such into a tea set. I merely appreciated the heat more for a while."

"Taste?" Echoed the reserved redhead with an arched eyebrow and a politely inquiring expression on her noble-peaceful face.

"Taste. Poisoning yourself tends to be a poison user's fascination, for a master an amusement as well as a method of survival."

She and Momomi had a lot of tea over the winter, good to keep warm with and ever so much more to provide the children with amusement. Watching for her or her little sister to poison the tea was decent training to track suspicious movement anyways, however much more the girls would have use of it than the boys.

...damn. That just reminded her of what else she had to ask about.

Her uncle survived the winter, and the trip, just… there was just no change. She should see about-

"Nope. No, Tera-sensei. Whatever it is you've got to do or whatever stress you have yet to deal with, pack it away. You're part of the Leaf now, all official and shiny." Hashirama puffed out his chest proudly, a smaller smile than a grin on his face. "Let's just enjoy that first for a bit, and the fact you will survive now, yeah?"

Tera flatly stared at him. "You are still an utterly ridiculous man."

Mito waved her hand fan in front of her face to hide her smirk, and the man's brother sighed heavily, as the God of Shinobi sulked in place.

Tobirama became more interested in her than the paperwork his brother had been neglecting in her favor, crossing arms over his chest and leaning back against the abandoned desk to await her words. "How so?"
The Senju brothers had greatly similar features, but the coloring made them seem so different even with the familiar resemblance. Hashirama was dark haired and eyed, refined features that seemed so pleased and happy it made him appear as a favored hunting hound puppy in human form. He was unmistakably dangerous to any with a lick of sense, but still too cheerful to really be all that deadly to get close to. His chakra, earthly and wet but still warm in a way, merely added to his charismatic charm if one could feel it.

His brother, on the other hand, painted over those similar looks with icy sternness. Slightly more narrow features made for a sharper appearance, the red eyes and tattoos she was more than sure weren't naturally occurring sharpening said icy features into an eye catching and bloody wintery blade. Icy repeated itself in the feel of the younger brother's chakra, a still winter wetness that while at first wouldn't be deadly it could grow so if left untreated.

Gold and silver lions, really. Different in coloring, separate methods, utterly contrasting natures, yet with the same end-goal in mind. Dressed lightly, armor left behind somewhere else in favor for simple yukatas and pants belted with red and blue sash belts over fishnet mesh wire shirts, it was more obvious now than it had been back in the ancestral Sekanji compound.

Both brothers were well muscled with the strength a childhood and most of their teen years spent in war would impress on one's form, one slightly more for power and the other refined for speed.

Unfortunately, Hashirama was married and seemed utterly pleased with his lady wife and she with him as much as the Sekanji Clan head could read. While Tera honestly liked refinement over bulk... she wasn't touching Tobirama with a ten-foot-stick.

...and she really needed to take a trip to wherever had a red light district sometime soon. A hard winter and the stress of traveling, not to mention the grief and utter removal of most of the guidelines she had relied upon in short order made for a slightly stressed out poison mistress.

"...we did not just bring the Sekanji poison library, we brought the seeds. Growing the plants, in concentrations the Nara Clan mandates for variants that do not do well in forests, as well as refinement are terribly more suited to us. Children, which is really most of what I have left to contribute to the village in return for their safety, can water plants as well as any adult." Tera reached into a sleeve and pulled a packet of said seeds out of the small pocket that normally held pots of poison. "Some of that antique knowledge we have still have paired seed packets, meaning we might yet be able to resurrect the herbs or poisons in a more primitive forms for future refinement."

One of them, because she would not like to lose all of the ancient seeds at once until any deviations the Mokuton would apply to a plant were charted, was handed over to the shinobi that seemed to run the village almost entirely.

"That is passion fruit, the seed taken nearly two hundred years ago from an island even farther south than the Land of Tea. From our notes, we know it is nearly extinct on this land... and when the fruit peel oils are extracted and refined just right can be as toxic as cyanide. A nearly unknown, powerful poison few would ever know about before being applied."

In Hashirama's hands and chakra a vine crawled out of the tiny seed, deep emerald green and growing past his hands to the very floor to be joined by others in short order. The flowers produced was utterly bizarre, deep purple inner colors ending in a pure white tipped petals with white feathery fringe pouring out from the large light green stamens arranged in a geometric polygon of five prongs.

Sketches did not do it justice, as unreal as it had seemed at the time.
Tera's fingers itched to pluck it and figure out what it could be used for.

"Aside being possibly poisonous, this variety is also eaten. Depending on the color of the rind, if it is yellow it is likely not safe and if purple it is."

"It's…" Mito trailed off, looking at the flower consideringly much as one would a dirty pet one was still becoming fond of even in spite of the mischief. "...very striking."

Hashirama pulled a palm-sized purple berry out of the mess of vine tendrils and utterly different flowers, then bit into it even if his brother about choked on the inhale of his next breath.

Tera blinked, somehow not really all that shocked the shinobi would take her completely at her word.

"Huh… a bit different. Cool."

"Hashi, husband, perhaps a little more caution?"

"Give me that." Tobirama snatched the rootless plant out of his brother's hands, carrying it over to the poison mistress that gave the man the seed. "Terazawa-sama, do not give him any more seeds from your library."

"I fail to see what denying my giving would prevent." She remarked a tiny bit blandly, glad she took the precaution of selecting a seed which grew into a mainly harmless plant and produced something that required a lot of refinement to become lethal. "If he asked, I would let him select his own from the catalogs. The purple fruit will do him no harm, aside what eating a possibly extinct food from centuries ago might do to his digestive tract."

Tera examined the vines in her hands, tracing back to a stem without roots. If she scored that and placed the plant in a pitcher of honey sweetened water, would roots grow?

Before the plant died?

If any of the other passion fruit seeds would be still viable, they could then use both to track the changes Mokuton use inflicted on the fruit vines. At least in the fruit's nature and the tiny amounts of the possible cyanide-like chemical the rind of the fruit, if purple variants had any.

"Really?" Hashirama gleefully asked of her, ignoring his brother's dark look and his wife's resigned sigh. "Any more like this? I mean, a no-rash one with tasty fruit?"

"Perhaps." Tera murmured with amusement and a tiny bit of satisfaction. "I will certainly check for you, Hashirama-sama."

The man smirked at her. "You're teasing Tobi, aren't you?"

She blanked her features, the best she could while her fans were in the possession of her 'escort' outside the charming home he made with his wife and brother. "I have no idea what you may be referring to, Senju-sama."

"I'm sure." Agreed the man, a self-important nod to go along with. "You might as well use the laboratories, Tera-sensei. They're already built, in the grounds your clan is now in possession of, and why not?"

"The fact it feeds into exactly why you want my clan has no bearing, I suppose?" With a sigh to accept that however much she would like to protest more personally, the Sekanji Clan's head
beckoned for the half-eaten fruit the Senju Clan head still held. "I actually came here with more than one reason in mind. Well, two… but you have asked I put that aside for now."

If another month showed any change, her uncle could then make some decisions of his own and she wouldn't have to.

Upon receiving the berry, Tera squeezed it over her cup of tea to pour some of the juice into the jasmine scented liquid. Setting it on the tray, in case Mito might like to try it as well, the kunoichi took a sip of painfully familiar if long forgotten flavors to wet her tongue.

"I am painfully new as a clan head, Senju-samas. I ask some advice, if you feel up to giving it. The clan has a law, that while off Sekanji grounds we must conceal the marks that match us to certain branches of our family line. Thus the black marks that conceal my purple crests even now."

"Are you asking to abolish that or to expand the limit for the marking concealment?" Mito inquired after a beat to absorb that and eye the black grease marks covering Tera's eyelids and most of the skin around her coppery eyes.

"Well… there is more to the issue than just that." She confirmed wryly. "For at least a month I will do nothing to that law, to give us time to settle in and grow confident that we are safe rather than just somewhere new and hostile. However… the samurai have taken the black marks as a mark of their loyalty to my line, and most of the men are not natively Sekanji and its use has come to be a sign of inclusion. The children also see the marks as a badge of success, of becoming skilled enough they are allowed more responsibilities and the right to leave our home grounds. Do I mix and match the law for those without crests and those with, keep things equal regardless but set the limits further out, or simply cease the practice?"

"Are you really asking for advice?" Hashirama inquired curiously, no insulted pride in his face or tone but a bit of caution anyways. "Or are you just asking to hear what a more confident leader would do?"

"Half and half, and more." Tera admitted blandly. "I ask because it is a real issue, one I have to solve and could be used for multiple things if my people dislike or like it and therefore some of your understanding of such issues is of interest, and a small bit to see how another would do the same if in my position."

One of many she had to solve in the coming years, some more precarious than this minor issue, and really because she had trusted her elderly samurai for so much and his death left her without an advisor she trusted highly to at least look out for half the clan as it stood now.

Hashirama poured more than enough effort into securing the Sekanji Clan's move into the Leaf that it was highly unlikely he would sabotage them now, even if the agreement to move in included opening the poison library for the village's use. Tera could still sabotage it if things turned sour, poison the medicine instead of refine-

"Leaving it alone for a month is sound." Mito informed her placidly, taking the berry of the passion fruit vine to add to her tea as well. "The safety and comfort it will provide for the uncertain new beginning here will likely prove invaluable to you and yours."

The slightly surprised expression on her delicate features once she tasted the concoction made the younger woman highly pleased. As well did the nearly immediate subsequent sip.

Rare was when another trusted a poison mistress to dictate tea flavors, even more so when additions were suggested.
"Altering it before it can become a crutch is also sound reasoning." Tobirama continued when it appeared the lady of the Senju Clan was more interested in her tea than continuing for her.

"Well… I like setting the limits at the Leaf's outer walls, but leaving it open for individuals to decide where and when to wear the marks." Finished the God of Shinobi a bit snobbily, sticking his nose up at his brother and grinning all the while to ruin the impression before it even began. "That way, Tera-sensei and the rest of us can see how safe the Sekanji feel with us and who doesn't to investigate why."

"The samurai use it as a badge of their honor, that will not change if they feel safe or not." Countered the younger brother pointedly, ignoring the expression and treating the words as they were offered rather than paying attention to the tone. "The young as well. Only for the non-combative members of the clan would such a mark be of use, and only if they were born as part of the clan."

"But eventually, down the line even if it takes a generation or more, a different tradition will be needed. We are a village, not a compound, and we all will grow in time." Refuted the oldest shinobi in the room with a sage nod. "Yes, this generation may never entirely feel as if giving up the marks is what they want to do, but their children or the youngsters' children might want something different and that needs to be accounted for."

...oh, that was actually a very good point she hadn't yet considered. Tera sipped at her tea while she and Mito watched the two brothers debate about the tradition, accepting a refreshment to her cup when the level lowered to near empty and offering another passion fruit berry to top it all off with.

Tobirama brought up the so far unuttered point that it was likely used to prevent hostile enemies from picking out the specific children of notable clan members. A keen observation of the man, only the complete passel of her half-siblings had concealed the fact only the 'purple lines may rule' part of her clan's internal workings.

Hence the underlying reason why Tera was still in control of the Sekanji Clan even after moving them and opening such a clan treasure as the poison library to another village's worth of shinobi. The last three adult male Sekanji were two green and one last yellow crested.

If she didn't train up Mashi to eventually take over, they would likely try something if they felt really strongly about women and what they should or not do.

Mash would decide for himself if he wanted it truly when he was sixteen himself, but then she would have to move on to another as 'heir'.

Hashirama countered his brother's point by mentioning that if someone got that close to the Leaf's various clans to pick out an heir or a specific child like that, then the entirety of the village's shinobi would be more than interested in keeping the Sekanji children safe. As they would do for another clan's children.

The albino shinobi then wryly pointed out if someone with hostile intent got that close, they would have more issues than just the children to worry about.

Then it devolved into a security argument. An old one, from the sounds of it.

"I think I have what I need." Tera murmured to Mito as an aside so to not interrupt the two arguing, or one arguing and one cheerfully debating, shinobi. "Thank them for the advice once they stop, Mito-sama."
"I will show you out." Offered the redhead quietly in a way that could not be refused politely, rising with her to conduct her back through the house and to her two samurai escorts.

Both Senju brothers glanced at them anyways, but Tera merely bowed in thanks and farewell as the clan's Lady guided her out of the study.

"Hashi was very surprised by you, Terazawa-sensei." Mito observed demurely, but with more than enough fire in the glancing look over a shoulder that arrested the poison mistress' attention. "I wonder…"

"Hashirama-sama is not the one that should be mentioning how surprising another may be."

That earned her a smirk from the older woman. "Possibly, but the remark remains in my mind anyways."

"...I can count the number of times someone was nice to me without needing a reason for it on two fingers, Mito-sama. Strangely, both times from the same man." Tera informed her a touch tiredly as she followed the other kunoichi. "I perhaps pinned a bit too much on him when things turned… deadly for us, but we are still alive when almost half of what made up the life we had before came crashing down. I will take that as the blessing it is."

The Sekanji Clan could have maybe survived leaving Grass and migrating somewhere like Tea, or possibly Hot Water. Reduced in number, and inevitably with losses they could not afford, but it was possible.

Morale would have been one of many killers they would have to struggle against, and it would be harsh and just as difficult to eke out a living while settling into a new area with new threats and even more influences around that might not like a poison using clan to settle nearby.

Instead, they were here in a shinobi village that wanted them for that very deadly reason most were not happy to see a poison master. In better and pre-built accommodations, closer to the merchants for trade and luxuries, with the security an alliance of shinobi clans to help them through the tattered remains of their clan in order to rebuild.

A vast difference. A life-saving one, and after losing so many of their few numbers right after one another… hopefully it would be seen as a saving grace rather than an unmitigated mistake of her leadership in time.

"You are possibly not shockingly young, but certainly concerningly ill-prepared. The fact you made use of what was offered to you, when others of your sudden lofty position would have dug into tradition to support them without contemplate changing even with my lord husband badgering them, is a merit anyways." Mito informed her a tiny bit strongly than 'demure' would allow for, turning to behold the other kunoichi fully. "Hashi is always more pleased than ever these days, but he was so to an even greater height when you accepted our help."

Tera winced at that news, exhaustion from travel with a large number of children and the press of her duties now to the clan aside just ten minutes under Hashirama's eye was almost equally as tiring. "My apologies, Mito-sama."

The smile that crawled over red unpainted lips was wicked. "And yet you seem to understand him, even with few meetings to draw conclusions from. There are so few kunoichi, Terazawa-sensei. None I know of as a clan head. Do us proud… only… as his wife…"

"I hold no interest in Hashirama-sama as a man," offered the younger woman blandly, "I find him
fascinating, his chakra moreso, but it is painfully obvious he is more than happy with you, Mito-sama. My appreciation is only for his character and values, his skills and the aid he has offered and proven to my clan, I assure you."

That, and she was pretty damn sure Mito could out-kunoichi her easily. Without taking into account the crisply written tags hanging from red hair buns, and her Uzumaki Clan's specialty of seals.

Black eyes studied her closely, likely not doing anything for the decision if her words should be trusted, before the woman's stern looks and smile turned wry and a little amused. "His brother, on the other hand-"

"No. I am sorry for any insult, Mito-sama." Tera refuted hastily, shaking her equally as made up head of dark hair in refusal. "But while I respect Hashirama-sama highly, I hold less for his brother. Tobirama-sama is… well, an asshole."

"...pretty to look at." Mito observed almost idly, lips twitching at her use of profanity.

Pausing, because she really couldn't refute that if the kunoichi had noticed her distraction when Tobirama asked her about how the clan of poison masters would be better suited for less medical responsibilities, the younger woman nodded slowly. "I… will give you that."

The smile that graced the older kunoichi's classically pretty features was not good. "Here is the door, Terazawa-sensei. I leave you to the capable hands of your samurai to return you to your compound safely."

Tera pointedly did not swallow uneasily in her presence. "Our thanks for your gracious forbearance with our presence in your home, Mito-sama."

Not until she was halfway back to her own clan's compound, and safely miles away from the surprisingly conniving Lady of the Senju Clan.

...they could be ever so great friends, as long as the redhead left Tobirama out of the conversation.

(Terazawa eventually had two signs made, one that read 'poison' and the other 'medicine', to put over the main doors of the two laboratories the Sekanji Clan's new compound somehow found itself anointed with. The poison library was central to both, located in what probably should've been the main line's and clan head's home but was more suited for now as a library with multiple study rooms for different subjects. Of the rest of the land, and the thirty houses built for multiple generation families, she divided up between her clansmen to decorate and the poison gardens while keeping some land reserved for future greenhouses to be built near the labs. Separating out the mixed line children was a weeks-long project, putting the elderly former family healer in charge of the medicine production kept him out of her way, and tasking others with roles they could do for the clan took up yet more time. The first month of their 'grace period' to settle in passed. Tera amended clan law somewhat, and things passed mostly peacefully until the Sekanji Clan started looking outward rather than in. The Mokuton grown passion fruit vine survived.)
"-why we don't just marry the chit off and put someone else in charge?"

Momomi choked on a snicker, attracting Terazawa's attention from trying to find a merchant that might have glassware. "Little sister?"

The Village Hidden in the Leaves was actually more a gathering place than a village of people just yet, circled as it was by various shinobi compounds. Between all them were a few ninja-spots, a bar for one and the mission assignment pavilion for another, but the rest of it really did look as if a merchant or craftsman decided 'here will do' and set up shop.

Finding something specific was more luck than perseverance.

"Nothing!" The evil grin on nearly pasty pale features suggested otherwise, however.

The samurai guardsman at the Sekanji Clan Head's elbow also huffed with audible amusement, earning him a faintly reproving look of his own.

Odd, Harumune had been one of the more stone-faced of his side of the clan ever since Rokkaku's death. Why in the world was he laughing, or at least amused enough to do so while in a village full of the shinobi she thought he disliked?

Pursing her lips, the poison mistress wondered what she was missing.

They were being followed, obviously. By shinobi she did not know, nor really cared for, and if her little sister and the sternest of her samurai were so amused then they had heard something more than she had.

Tera finally turned around to confront those staring a hole into her spine, blinking non-grease marred eyelids even if that still felt strange to be so unmasked in a very populous village.

"Gentlemen, since you seem to not have the manners most would expect from another ally, can I finally ask what it is about me that you find so fascinating?"

One of the bypassing Inuzuka members, with three dogs at his heels, paused a slight bit beyond the other men's backs and backed up apparently just to witness whatever this was supposed to be.

The Hyūga clansman that spoke before eyed the heavily armored samurai that refused to move to her back and instead remained between her and the two ninja confronting her.

...or that she was confronting. It depended on one's point of view.

"I fail to see why we must put up with a clan lady that is so scared of being without a guard even within the village's walls." Snooty and frigid, the blank eyes bored into mildly amused copper. "I asked why not marry the chit off, in this I meant you Sekanji-sama."

"To someone more suitable to lead a clan, like say you? Hyūga-san?" Tera countered with obvious amusement and a sly smirk. "Why... does that mean we or another clan can dictate what your clan does or does not do when it comes to marriage? How... interesting, no one mentioned that to me yet."

Blank features froze over.
Pity, she had ever so much more already prepared and ready to be used against someone that thought she would be easily handled.

"For your information, Hyūga-san, Harumune-san and the rest of the Sekanji samurai guard me more for their own benefit. We lost the samurai-sama that led them before joining the Leaf, they stick close to me to reassure themselves that they did not fail their honor and as an expression of their grief." With another venomous smile, the poison mistress flicked her left hand fan open and shielded her then developing smirk. "They carry my shopping, so why not let them do as they please?"

The Yamanaka he had been speaking to, an older variant than the male she knew on sight if not by name just yet, with blankly blue eyes sheepishly scratched a square cheek. "To be honest, Sekanji-sama, that isn't true. The 'we can dictate marriage requirements' one."

As he looked slightly uncomfortable as it was, and more than a little annoyed with the Hyūga by body language alone, she moderated her expression into something less scathing. "I see. I wonder why he seems to think so…?"

"Yamanaka Iesue, and that is a very good question."

"Sekanji Terazawa, a pleasure Yamanaka-san." Nodding graciously at what seemed to be a only partially involved individual, if one didn't take into account their future natures and general specialization, Tera refocused on the other man. "Tell me, Hyūga-san, of what you know of poison users and masters that makes you so sure you can dictate terms to them."

"You're herbalists, you have no poison masters left."

Momo snorted in a very unladylike way. "He'd be dead in two minutes."

Tera rapped her upside the head with her right fan. "Little sister, manners. And at least ten, there is the offering of refreshments first. Would never do to be accused of less than impeccable hostess skills."

"Five." Harumune countered harshly, glaring at the shinobi in a very displeased manner.

"You're on, Harumune-san. I bet I can get him first-"

"There will be no getting of anyone, I have first dibs." Interrupted the Sekanji poison mistress serenely. "He made the foolish mistake of coming up to my attention before the both of you, so he is my toy."

"That's because you're kind of evil, lady sister. You like to torture your victims." Momo pointed out like the brat she was, free to have less ladylike manners because her elder sister took on such things for her. "At least with Harumune-san and I, he'll be out of pain quicker."

"Exactly." Purred the elder of the Sekanji sisters wickedly, as if there wasn't a concerning tick happening in Hyūga's blank forehead. "Why not let him suffer for a while? Such foolishness in his claims, we would be doing the Hyūga Clan a small favor cleansing him from the gene pool and get entertainment out of it."

"Err… Sekanji-sama-"

"I do not have to listen to this drivel." Interrupted the nicely infuriated Hyūga clansman, stalking off and sneering at the Inuzuka howling with laughter on the dusty road.
"Yamanaka-san, next time… choose your instruments with more care." Tera murmured behind her fan, locking coppery eyes on the bland seeming blank blue that stared back without inflection.

"The point remains, Sekanji-sama, killing or otherwise sabotaging Leaf shinobi is illegal."

"Did I use poison, Yamanaka-san?" Inquired the poison mistress silkily. "Had you not interrupted, we may have been able to induce a heart attack or stroke in the poor Hyūga-san you selected for us to sharpen our claws upon, through his own clan pride and rage alone."

When the man had to shake his head, as she hadn't, the teenager lady of the Sekanji Clan gave him a venomous smile of his own.

"I do so hope that law, of sabotage and murder, also applies to kunoichi and your fellow clans, Yamanaka-san." Tera observed almost idly, flicking the fan a few times. "Otherwise… why did we seek safety among your number? If you have done so, then we may need to leave yet."

This little 'incident' was either a threat or a test. Living within a shinobi village, either could be the correct assumption. Both was even more likely.

If the Yamanaka could corral the damage this might do her, she would say no more on the subject. If he couldn't then they would just have to apologize to Hashirama for wasting his time.

(ooo000ooo)

"Are you my next test, Motoaki-san?"

"Err… sorry sensei." With such an apology given, the bandaged hands of the Shimura Clan member reached out to take her in his arms.

She was without the samurai for once, or her little sister. He had probably been waiting for such a fortuitous event.

Amused, Terazawa let him do so and laid her head on his bare shoulder so the loose part of her hair would spread over his impressively muscled equally bare stomach and chest. "I feel, in the interests of being clear, I have something I need to confess. I used to have an intended husband, Motoaki-san. He died. It was so unfortunately terrible. Poison induced heart attack, you know. Simply terrible, isn't it?"

"And… that's more than enough for me." The slightly uncomfortable appearing shinobi released her from his arms, rubbing his impressive chest, just as a group of nosy people rounded the wall to see who had confessed to such a scandalous thing. "Please don't tell me you also poison your hair, sensei."

(ooo000ooo)

The Aburame stared at her from behind thick black glasses.

"Did you know there is an entire section of the poison library devoted to insects, Aburame-san? Including what flower nectar or toxic plant pollens that require specific insects to be transferred to poisonous honey or can be stuck to them without harm? Not my specialty, mind you, but it is impressively vast."

The Aburame left her nursing her tea to go investigate without a word spared for manner's sake.

How rude, he didn't even touch the tea poured for him.
The very sheepish grinning Inuzuka slunk into the charming little cafe that had sprung up sometime after the Sekanji Clan had moved into the village, his dog left outside in a very rare show of manners in the face of civilian sensibilities. "So... Sekanji-sensei-

"Do you really want to do this?"

"Not really. But it happened to us too."

"I know a way to chemically castrate you."

Surprised, the shinobi paused before slinking into the seat across from her. "Uh... and?"

A sip of tea, and level copper eyes glanced up at him. "If this is another of the 'hazing' things, and you do not wish to risk it, leave."

"...right."

He left.

"'Sup, Sekanji-sensei."

"Nara-san. How is the friend you had with toxic fern poisoning?"

The Nara that still looked like a wild man rather than a shinobi turned and walked away. "Bye Sekanji-sensei."

"...indeed."

As it was Terazawa and not her clansmen that was being 'hazed', not even her little sister nor the two shinobi and the samurai that still rather stuck close to the clan's compound, the Sekanji Clan head mostly put up with the bothering incidents.

Nearly all had rather amusing results, as the Aburmanes that camped out in a section of the poison library for three consecutive nights and the passing glance with the Nara she originally helped back in her childhood, or were otherwise easily run off as things were kept just polite or glancing enough to skate by the definition of 'sabotage'.

Limiting her range in return revenge, but it was all very civilized and not cruelly intentioned.

She informed Hashirama of that when the rumors finally reached him.

"But it's not nice!"

"Only the first one was remotely unpleasant." Tera observed, mainly to herself, idly.

Fifty-fifty chance the man was faking it, just to double-check she really didn't mind the fun.

"Did you really once have a husband that died of poison?" Uchiha Madara asked of her skeptically, dark eyes warily staring at her pot of tea on the desk she did clan head things upon.
Well... to be brutally honest, she did some clan things on and otherwise used as a writing desk. There wasn't much clan paperwork to do just yet.

"I did, an intended one. And it was a poison induced heart attack." Tera corrected pleasantly with a serene smile. "It was simply terrible. Tea?"

The noise the God of Shinobi made could've been either a laugh or a sob. It was entirely debatable, and the bulk of his expression was hidden behind a forearm he had dramatically posed in front of his eyes.

"...no, thank you Sekanji-sama." Madara refused in a slightly too cautious tone to be entirely polite.

"I want them to be able to trust us, Hashirama-sama." Eventually relented the poison mistress, pouring the tea for herself instead as both shinobi had refused through word or silence the willow bark doctored tea. "To know, that even broken as the clan is now, we will come back with their aid and they can rely on us in time. I do not mind the testing, most was in good fun."

Sorrowful brown eyes beseeched her pitifully from under the tanned forearm of the Senju Clan head's right arm. "Most?"

"The first one I could have done without, it was rather insulting to my intelligence."

In another of those exhausting mood swings, Hashirama pulled himself upright fully and snagged her cup of tea with that right hand. "So, do you really know how to chemically castrate someone? The Inuzuka Clan is practically chasing their tails trying to bribe the Aburame Clan to use their 'in' with you and figure it out for them."

Tera inclined her elaborately done up head in a nod. "I do."

Madara eyed the God of Shinobi's back as he sipped at the herbal tea peacefully, as if the other man was insane, before shifting uncomfortably and looking back at her with flat black eyes.

"Moving on, quickly please, have you given any thought to how to qualify a 'poison master' for the village's records?"

"Traditionally, for a Sekanji to be considered a master of poisons... we require a victim."

Hashirama blinked at her questioningly, distracted from the likely odd taste in the tea.

"You see... a poison user is just someone that can apply poisons to their best results. A poison master, at least to the Sekanji Clan, is someone that is so resistant to their favored toxins they can drink the same tincture they give a victim and not die while the other does." Tera admitted wryly. "It is a very grand spectacle when we can put it on, involving allowing the victim to choose or clean the cups and an impartial judge to measure out the poison in sake, and then the two take it and wait."

One she hadn't seen since her very early childhood, but it was a tradition.

"That is... slightly disturbing." Madara spoke almost casually, if he wasn't tense enough to bolt out of her study and into the compound's streets at any ill-timed noise. "You claimed to be a poison mistress."

"I was ten. Wolfsbane is my poison of choice, and the target was not a man that took 'no' for an answer." Murmured the poison mistress in question as she recalled early days of exploring Grass before she knew where not to go. "I was terribly lucky not to die when I dumped a more than lethal measure into the man's sake bottle and he forced me to drink some to 'loosen me up'. I was
violently ill for a time afterwards, but survived.

Both men froze, utterly stilling in both flesh and chakra.

"...but then again, that is why the clan has the fascination it has with poisoning ourselves so."

Pouring out another cup of herbal tea for herself, Tera sipped at it and left the third teacup empty on the desk.

Part of the reason why she had a headache that required willow bark to treat, she had dosed herself with wolfsbane some time ago and it was still bothering her a bit.

"If we trust you about the toxicity levels, can you do without the victim?" Eventually asked the Uchiha Clan's head slowly, a strange snarl of an expression still fading from his slightly pointed but pretty features.

"I suppose. It would have less impact for anyone else that would like to know what a poison master is capable of."

"I do apologize for trampling clan tradition, and I wouldn't ask if it was reasonably possible to have and always will be comfortable allowing you criminals slated to be executed." Madara offered surprisingly honestly, for a grouchy man that distrusted her entire specialty so. "But that might be closer to casual torture than a few others will like. Especially taking into account the number of children you've saved and tend to now that might require the 'ceremony' in time."

"I suppose one could see it that way." Tera mused thoughtfully over her teacup. "In this, I will bow to wiser heads. If you feel that it is a little too brutal to continue the practice, then we will discontinue it."

The Uchiha Clan head nodded his shaggy head, which very nearly pulled his wild hair over his shoulders while seated before her desk. "Our thanks, Sekanji-sensei."

"Really, Tera-sensei." Hashirama lowered his stolen cup of tea to give her an honestly thankful smile. "It might be tradition, but that one might be best to leave behind you."

"It is relatively terrifying to go through." Allowed the Sekanji Clan head with a nod of her own to finish the topic off. "Although, I have now left behind more of what made us into the Sekanji Clan of now than I ever really wanted to ever."

Wincing at that bald truth, the God of Shinobi twisted the teacup around in his hands. "So… is there anything else you feel like giving over to the rumor mill?"

"Gossip, Hashirama-sama?"

"I kind of want to surprise Mito with a bit before she can tell me for once." Confessed the tanner brunette sitting in front of her desk with an easy grin.

"What, the utterly barbaric 'poison mastery' ceremony isn't good enough?" Asked Madara a bit testily, glancing sideways at Tera and grimacing. "No offense, Sekanji-sensei."

"Call me Terazawa, or just Tera, please. I hear enough 'Sekanji' these days to be utterly confused when it is spoken, and I rather like my personal name."

"Still."
"As long as you do."

"I want something that's good." Hashirama protested loudly, pouting at his apparent best friend and co-founder of the village. "Or funny. That chemical castration one was hilarious. Tobi went even paler than usual."

Tera pursed her lips to hide the smirk her other brunette guest wasn't hiding. "Well… I suppose…"

"Please?"

Holding out an arm, bare by pulling back her sleeves, the poison mistress gathered the chakra to allow it to bend in ways that should not be possible. The scrolls of the soft-physique technique her mother hand brought into the clan was something else she and Momo had put hours into practicing over the long winter and some of the spring they had to wait before moving to the Village Hidden in the Leaf.

Hashirama poked at the arm, fascinated as it moved much as an overcooked noodle would if the same size. "Creepy."

Tera flexed the fingers, then manipulated the limb much as she would water until she could reach behind her by only bending the wrong way at the elbow and then in the middle of the forearm to pull the pins that held her hair up. "My honorable late mother was from River, her clan could do this and she passed the ability on. I cannot be tied up."

"...that is one way to put it." Madara spoke with audible distaste, eye flickering with his sharingan red even still. "Thank you for humoring the fool, Terazawa-sensei. We'll see ourselves out."

"Have a good day, my lords." Called the Sekanji Clan head after them pleasantly as her arm went back to normal rigidity.

(The sixth time the Aburame clansmen came to raid the still not really open Sekanji library of poisons, Terazawa informed them that overnight access would come with a fee. Which included dinner in, as long as they felt sufficiently brave enough to eat something prepared by a clan of poison users. Also, if they allowed their moths or beetles to eat the scrolls at all she would be having words with their clan head. They proved useful in helping the Sekanji Ikeda to order the ancient repository of herbal and venom knowledge, as otherwise her partially paralyzed scribe would be the only one sorting scrolls and the research journals, also in time to entertain the first of the Naras that swung by to double check something they had found recently and see if there were any toxic repercussions to investigating the possibility of using it. From then on, occasional visitors to obtain poison or toxins for their jobs or just to rid themselves of rats without risking their children were more common.)
"I do apologize for not speaking with you these last few weeks."

"Oh, do not worry about it." Terazawa informed Mito serenely over their tea. "I understand. It was fairly amusing."

"I heard." With that comment on nothing, the Uzumaki born Senju plucked up the passion flower the Sekanji poison mistress brought with her to the Senju compound. Tucking it into perfectly done red locks before the brass crown that spanned the distance between her buns, the seal mistress smiled slyly. "I had ever so much fun with the tidbits you felt were needed to counter the incidents."

The tea between them was a little too hot to drink in mid-summer, meaning it was mostly for show right now until it cooled off.

The best part of oolong tea, in Tera's opinion, that it could be just as good chilled.

"Do you know why I was called here?" Asked the younger woman after a few moments of demurely smirking at one another, honestly rather curious. "I do not mean to sound rude, or ungracious, but I was in the middle of an experiment using those shiny labs your lord husband supplied us and I am fairly curious over what the results were."

"I don't know the entire situation, but apparently Madara-san caught sight of something a little concerning before he left your study when asking you about the requirements for poison master." Mito informed her, the smile fading into a much sterner expression. "They are not sure if you know about it, or if it is safe to remove."

"Remove?" Tera echoed with a measure of surprise, curious now more for whatever it was the sharingan user spotted.

"Apparently, Madara-san wasn't even sure what he caught sight of. He and my husband, as well as Tobirama, have been investigating it on your behalf."

Blinking coppery eyes a few times, the Sekanji Clan head wondered what 'it' was. "Should I be concerned?"

Mito frowned faintly, thoughtfully more than anything else. "I do not know."

"Maybe." A stronger voice called from behind the women, heralding the Uchiha himself and the Senju brothers as they entered the Senju Clan head's study. They had with them the same very Yamanaka that first tested her in the middle of a busy thoroughfare. "It's a Yin Release compulsion."

Setting down the tea she had been doing nothing but holding, the kunoichi twisted slightly inhumanly to face them without needing to move her lower body. "A… compulsion, not an illusion?"

"Illusions are the more common use of such, but no." Madara admitted to her uneasily. "It's why I didn't recognize it and this took so long, Terazawa-sensei. My apologies."

"If there is something wrong at all, then I owe you my thanks for finding it." Tera informed him bluntly. "What am I to do?"
"...disarm." Commanded the man shortly in return. "We don't know what it's doing, or how long it's been there."

"I leave my war fans with the samurai when visiting, Madara-sama. The knife I use when disarmed is also not on me as I had no intent to leave the compound today, as well as the poisons aside the one in my hair while within the village limits. The antidote to my hair poison is kept in the hollow head of my hair pin, best if taken some minutes before touching it, a topical neutralizer packed in the hollow of my right geta if impossible."

"That's it?"

Tera raised a hand, causing a breeze to gently move around the enclosed room via chakra manipulation.

The Uchiha Clan head raised an eyebrow. "Aa."

Hashirama beamed at her from behind his best friend's shoulder. "I'm pleased you feel safe here, Tera-sensei."

"Safe? I feel sorry for whichever moron tries to attack you or a guest you have at home, Hashirama-sama." She commented flatly, looking around pointedly at the mostly wooden room in the mostly wooden home in the mostly wooded Senju Clan compound that had yet more wooden homes. Handsome and tastefully arranged as it all was, of course.

Mito hid a wicked snicker behind her hand fan. Madara pulled an equally disturbed face at her as she felt the described situation deserved.

"...regardless." Tobirama interjected before the topic could move too far from the matter at hand. "Do you object to having your chakra sealed for a short while, Terazawa-sama?"

"Would that not impede your efforts?"

The Yamanaka frowned, the Uchiha glanced at him skeptically, and the Senju Clan head bounced forward to take up most the room in his rather large study. "We have no idea, but if it does we'll try again without it."

"How about if I sit on my hands?" Tera didn't really want her chakra sealed off. She sensed with it, had for most her life, and relied upon the sense.

"...it will be no worse than being blindfolded." Tobirama informed her solemnly, apparently confusing most of the rest of the room except the clan's Lady. "We will guard you, you will be perfectly safe."

"It is not that I object to." She countered, then hesitated. "Mainly."

"It will be painful, slightly. A snap, at most."

"What will be?" Madara demanded testily at Tobirama's back. "Having one's chakra sealed does not hurt."

"Sensors being cut off from chakra, Madara-san." Mito informed him instead of either the Senju heir or the Sekanji head currently having a staring contest. "It is deeply unpleasant for them to lose such a part of themselves they were born with."

"Damn, I forgot about that aspect of it." Hashirama mentioned as if he had forgotten to water a
plant instead a side feature of a rare skill that she and his little brother had, then the man grimaced a slight bit himself. "Sorry, Tera-sensei."

She wasn't getting out of it. Pressing thin lips into a line, the kunoichi inclined her head to accept that. "If you all insist, then…"

Frowning darkly, and looking really uncomfortable now, the Uchiha sort of slumped without actually doing so physically. "Again, my apologies Terazawa-sensei."

"You are forgiven."

"Why only him?"

"He is adorable. You are an asshole."

Madara twitched with something like rage and satisfaction, which fit the man nicely. Much better than that antsy doom air he had about him before. "What?"

"Like a prickly porcupine." Tera confirmed slyly.

Hashirama stuffed a fist into his mouth in pure glee, and to mainly stifle his snickers.

Mito coughed politely into the ringing silence. "Tera-chan, the tea is cool."

"You will be a pricklee-less porcupine if this is for nothing, Madara-sama." Gritted out the Sekanji poison mistress with a wince as Tobirama slid an inky brush full of his own chakra against the bare skin of her forearm. "Do be aware of that."

"Oooh, watch out brother." Contributed the God of Shinobi with excessive cheer, seemingly to make up for the lack of it in the rest of them now that things were growing tense. "Although, I kind of want to see that now… a bald porcupine Madara-chan."

Tera was sipping slightly minty and tangy cool tea, not smirking over the scuffle the two of them then got into. More of a push-shove war, stopped dead when she flinched hard again as that which allowed her to keep track of things in her vicinity suddenly slammed down to nothing.

An echoing emptiness yawned in her mind, comfortable non-hostile buzzes of the powerful men's to the oddly calm dense elder kunoichi's or the slightly less Yamanaka's chakra beyond her reach and leaving her feeling bizarrely alone in a room full of people.

The tea hastily put down, and fingers curling into the cushion under her, the kunoichi tried not to look as queasy as she felt as she tried and couldn't adjust to the feeling after so long with another being more prominent.

Mostly failed, given the attention rooted to her.

"Right…" Suddenly all business, the more soberly dressed Uchiha in the room sunk to his knees on one side of the tea table and activated his swirling red eyes she could not focus on for long. "Terazawa-sensei-"

"Give me one second." Protested the kunoichi. "Your eyes move, which does not help me right now."

She couldn't tell what went on while her eyes were shut, which made her even more nauseous and uneasy with a rising panic. Unable to stand this for a prolonged period, which was nice to note and
all but the next time she had this done it would be in a safer place without so many witnesses, Tera pried uneasy copper eyes open to peer back into the spinning red staring at her.

Something, not entirely felt and yet not entirely imagined, snapped.

Not in the way her chakra senses did cut off as they were, but…

"Oh." Breathed the poison mistress, coppery eyes widening in glee as a few things sorted itself out in her mind and she finally started to question it. "Oh… mother. How… brilliant. How cruel of you."

Madara reared back from her as if slapped. "What?"

Dropping her head backwards, Tera laughed. Not even insanely. Nor madly. No, the woman's daughter was delighted.

"Who cares of the fate of the corrupted, compromised eldest? If you induce your eldest to be so obsessed with the younger daughter? At least one will live!" Still giggling, terribly amused at the irony of the embedded compulsion, bright copper flicked back down to actually see the people bearing witness to her mother's final act as such. "My mother… she did it. It's why I do not know genjutsu, even if it's the easiest branch of shinobi arts for kunoichi to develop."

Instead, not even sparing a thought for the illusionary tricks even after someone tried to use them against her, Tera went with poison. The horribly toxic, tricky path of being a poison mistress topped with her war fans and elemental chakra manipulations. The closest she came to illusions was her rather sarcastic wit, deceptions, and eye catching colors.

Enough clan pride to follow along in a historically traditional shinobi art for them?

What clan pride did she have so long ago?

Walking off with her baby sister to a secluded part of the Sekanji ancestral compound, when she had prior planned to outright abandon Orochimaru to his fate here?

Cared little for the people that shared her appearance and home to the point she still didn't know her grandmother's name whom's home she had made into her own for years?

Not once did she question it. Never unless it would have been better for her little sister, and then only reluctantly to the point she cringed from it inside.

Best it was broken now, before the preteen girl grew enough to wish to leave her big sister's side and entangle herself in life's many opportunities. It should've broken years ago, leaving a younger Tera with the developed love she had for Momomi clear of the compulsion and the information encoded so the eldest could understand why and for what her mother had done this to her.

If the eldest lived.

Repeating the lessons for her to give to Momo once the girl was old enough to understand them?

More to give Shimiko time to embed and elaborate the compulsion, and less to ensure the lessons would reach the youngest. There was part of that behind it, but with the obsession she imparted on the eldest that meant Tera would viciously murder anything that required Momo to defend herself from… even the very people the lessons were geared to help the girls deal with.
Like her terribly unfortunately deceased husband situation, aside her personal upset with being married before sixteen years of age. Allowing Momo to sabotage her elders or the people taking her sister away from her, nearly killing herself with her poison mastery instead of just wandering off, going back even when she had the staff and samurai to insert herself into a new noble's court for a much better life or become a hermit-herbalist with them.

Some of it was just the impressions and values she had left over from Erin, some of it was just simply a compulsion to return and guard her baby sister until love formed and kept her there anyways. It wasn't like she had been aware enough of how her mind should have worked to be aware of the insidious suggestions implanted.

"My strongest memory of her, likely the trigger." Managed the kunoichi after frozen moments on the opposite end of the room, waving a hand to dismiss the entire thing. "Was her telling me 'be a good big sister' so 'Momo-chan has nothing to fear'. Bedridden for two years after my little sister's birth, she had more than enough time to make it stick."

"Compromised?" Picked up Hashirama sharply, concern more than alarm on his features.

"A Yamanaka fucked me over before I ever had a chance." Tera admitted pleasantly. "Wiped my memories, could have left something behind. I know of nothing from my life before one day in the middle of summer of my fourth year, accompanying my mother to the nearby town for supplies. I've lost a lot of those now, naturally through time and just simply disuse, but still some remains."

The Yamanaka in the room, Iesue if she recalled right, suddenly looked as if wish he was anywhere but right there. "I'll... go check the clan's research logs."

"...that is brilliant." Madara allowed finally, looking faintly impressed despite himself. "Cruel as you said, but brilliant."

Likely, now he knew she wasn't calling him mother.

"Which is why you were never trained." Continued the Senju Clan head after a beat thoughtfully, turning back to consider her with actual sadness in his tone.

She confirmed it with a nod and a wicked smirk. "Yamanakas had an interesting habit of such things, way back when. Just occasionally, near us or more commonly somewhere near Waterfall, a villager would turn up with complete or partial amnesia. Sometimes programed to do certain things... lethal or otherwise. Why waste the time or effort if I would end the same? If I survived and made use of myself, it was all good anyways."

"Why would your mother do such a thing?" Mito demanded, discarding her own tea to grasp Tera's hands and still them for the Senju heir to remove the seal from her skin. "You were-"

"Disassociated. I did not know them, I did not care." Interrupted the poison mistress with a less gleeful smirk and more wry understanding. "No memories of my mother or father, no fond or ill ones, none of the clan nor the people that made it up. Fragmented impressions only, most of which made little or no sense. Mother knew this, so she ensured my loyalties and fondness for my sister as she thought she was too ill to forge the connection herself. The fact she lasted two years after giving birth was... either luck or the clan's herbs working."

They had to have gotten cunning from someplace, better Shimiko than their kinslayer father.

The very thought made her smile again, ridiculously pleased with the sisters' mother. "I should go light her some incense. Who knows what would have happened to my people had she not done
what she did?"

A shudder, chakra flaring back into her senses so quickly she suddenly had a terrible headache, she finally lost the smile for an irked frown for Tobirama.

"Must you?"

Level red eyes flicked up, then back to packing up fūinjutsu tools. "I did not believe you wanted the sensation to last longer than it had to."

No, she hadn't. Now no longer half panicked and unable to ensure she was with those she could see, Hashirama's near-blinding forest-sense, Madara's more scorching but equally blinding chakra, the crackling icy and sharp feel of the Senju Clan's heir, or even the densely packed serenity of Mito's, Tera could realize she had maybe said a bit too much.

...well, she wasn't exactly best pleased with the Yamanaka Clan as a whole right now. Spilling some of their prior naughty behavior if these men and one kunoichi didn't already know was an honest accident she didn't greatly mind.

The Sekanji Clan head merely hummed instead of respond to the Senju heir, picking back up her abandoned tea.

There was… a few things of consequence, however pleased she was to find the last legacy of her mother's. Momo would need to be told, even if she did slightly suspect these people wouldn't use the information against her little sister it paid to be prepared for most anything. Genjutsu was honestly something she should start immediately researching, if only to prevent another incident like this if she was so susceptible to compulsions.

'Save the youngest' and 'for your own good', Shimiko?

More faint impressions, the knowledge she both knew and did not know, and a slight sliver of the windy rainstorm feel of her mother's ebbing away made for a slightly introspective poison mistress.

The two of them were so similar, in nature and chakra, it was no wonder why no one else picked up the compulsion if Yin Release wasn't normally used as such.

Honestly speaking from hindsight, those two years of being bedridden had likely changed Shimiko's mind about how strong the compulsion should have been to last. Refined a touch so Tera wouldn't quite be a madwoman in the end, as she had helped the older woman care for the baby and Shimiko saw her eldest wasn't beyond salvaging as she might have otherwise assumed.

"Do you require a moment, Tera-chan?"

"No, Mito-sama. I am fine." Oddly, she was being perfectly honest in that. "I am afraid my clan, such as it was when I was a girl, was not a very kind one. It wasn't odd for someone to mistake their calculations and drop dead of their own poison suddenly, we did not grow attached to one another for that very reason. Yes, my mother used me. Cruelly so in more than just one way. However, I am very much the same woman such an environment breeds, I understand perfectly and even approve."

"Is that why there are few Sekanji poison masters left?" Madara butted in, seemingly strangely relaxed now that the fractious part of this confrontation was over with.

Honestly, now instead of tense in her presence he seemed merely more curious as any shinobi would be when confronted with a curious new facet of their lifestyles. Much like the Aburames
were when investigating the poison library, in their silent and stilted ways.

"Somewhat. That was mainly attrition. We had good numbers at first, from what I recall, even with
the odd sudden death." Tera slid the cooled tea around the cup, trying to recall what cause started
her family's issues. "Then… I think? Someone botched a mission we were assigned from the local
nobleman, and we got snubbed for a time we could and did wait out. An entire generation with
more girl-children than preferred made things a bit sketchy. Even after that things continued…
decently well, and then our shinobi started dying off in ones and twos until there is one last poison
master ninja and one more poison user, two kunoichi… one married off but came back unmarried
with an entire complement of samurai and again one master and one user, then… well…"

Her father, kinslayer and the cause of Rokkaku's death.

...she still had yet to forgive her elderly samurai for dying on her.

Depressing thoughts, indeed. Perhaps not the thoughts she should entertain in front of non-
clansmen.

Tera glanced up from the surface of her tea, smirking slyly at the cocked eyebrow the Uchiha was
giving her. "Curious to how I became clan head, Madara-sama?"

"Slightly."

"Only purple leads us." Sliding one coppery eye shut, to show that very 'royal' purple. "My eldest
half-brother, Mashi-kun, is ten. Six or some odd years, I will step aside in his favor, I dislike being
responsible for more than I must, and really I would be much better off locked in a lab somewhere.
If he decides that he doesn't wish for the headache, I will have to wait for another of my half-
brothers to be trained or for Momo-chan to give an heir to the clan instead."

"Why not have a child yourself, Tera-chan?" Mito inquired serenely, if one didn't take into account
falsely widen black eyes of pure 'innocence'. "If things are kept in the family as such?"

Well, far be it her to dash someone else's machinations… oh wait.

"I cannot." Tera announced cheerfully in return. "I am a poison mistress, I am toxic. Any child I
attempt to have will die unborn because of my specialty."

Pursed lips showed she had struck true.

Amused, the Sekanji Clan head turned her attention to the Uchiha Clan head who seemed to have
invited himself to teatime. "Tea, Madara-sama?"

"Aa… no."

Such distrust...

"So no husband for you, Tera-chan? No children?"

"I gave it up. For my little sister, for the clan." Confirmed the poison mistress faux sadly. "Also, I
gave up having some male decide he has a right to dictate to me what I must or must not do.
Frankly, I do not see it as much of a loss."

"Oi!" Hashirama protested in a wounded tone, spinning around from his desk where he had been
giving her an illusion of privacy the rest hadn't seen a reason to also give while they waited for her
to 'adjust' to the results of old sabotage. "Tera-sensei! So mean…"
"I am mean. Very sorry, Hashirama-sama."

"Forgiven, but… no romance then?" Sharp brown eyes, however fondly warm they were, with a teasing kind of grin were aimed at her from the other side of the room. "Pity…"

"I am toxic, not dead."

"Is there a way to… de-toxic yourself?"

"Detox, actually. And yes, but it will take years."

Mito smiled serenely again. "So it is possible, it will just take some effort?"

Tera's return smirk was sly. "Whoever said I would wait? I am poisonous indeed, too much so to have a child, but that doesn't prevent other kinds of romance, Mito-sama. All I touch does not always die. My samurai would be ever so disappointed if they knew…"

The utterly scandalous admittance took the other aback enough to give the Sekanji Clan head an opening. She suspected they all knew such things did happen, but to openly speak of it was entirely another even in a shinobi's home.

"As always, Mito-sama, your tea is lovely. Pity you didn't take some, Madara-sama, although I thank you for showing me my mother's last legacy. Hashirama-sama, Tobirama-sama, I'll see myself out."

The utterly uproarious laughter that followed her out was likely Hashirama, the sharper snickers possibly the Uchiha Clan head as she didn't know what his laugh sounded like. She couldn't hear what Mito would possibly add, as she was a very demure lady, and Tobirama didn't seem like one that laughed freely.

(Terazawa half expected the very apologetic Yamanaka Clan head that informed her they were looking into who removed her memories as a child and what might have been left behind with the added stipulation that she only had to ask for them to check her over if she wanted, meeting the utterly cheerful Akimichi Clan head who she had apparently saved from a long-term illness due to his fondness of fiddlehead ferns was a surprise. Momomi took her elder sister at her word when she claimed she did not mind their mother's machinations, more hesitantly at first than honestly but broadening in her return affection when nothing between the sisters really changed afterwards.)
As a newly arrived shinobi clan to the Village Hidden in the Leaves, there was a grace period of half a year given to them in order to finish moving in and source that which they required to help within the village. A clan certainly could and was encouraged to not make use of the entire grace period, but depending on the situations they were leaving that much time was considered more than enough to settle previous business.

Within that Terazawa and the Sekanji Clan had to plant the poison gardens, set up and purchase anything needed for both the poison and medical laboratories, finish sorting the poison library and ensuring those that required some information on one toxin or another could find the information, learn their duties as shinobi and a clan of the Leaf, register the few shinobi they had left and the children to be trained with the village's slightly awkward still government, and push forth any concerns they may have with any of that to the Council of Clans.

With the sale of the medical chests last year, half for four paid in advance and the two extras paid for during the winter leaving Tera with a treasury of about four chests worth upon moving her clan in, the tiny fees charged for the per-order medicine production and less-than-usual access to the poison library before it was 'open'... left her with a pitiful amount for equipping even a small-sized clan of mostly children with things they required.

Not entirely encouraged to leave the village's outer walls just yet, they were however polite and gracious they were to extend a hand to the Sekanji Clan, meant they couldn't hunt to help stretch their food stores. The medicine and remedies were being sold in bits and cautious parts, the poisons moreso, but that income also didn't greatly help the hemorrhaging of her funds.

Finally opening the poison library as agreed upon would gain them solid income from the village, steady payment for any and all shinobi to use the information within as need be was one of the agreed stipulations of the Sekanji Clan joining the Leaf. Consultation fees, when less research inclined individuals would ask a poison master for a toxin or herb that would work to specific requirement or for such-and-such needed application, would also start as soon as someone felt that brave.

One or the other of her few shinobi or samurai actually leaving clan grounds and accepting jobs in the Leaf's name would also greatly help. Releasing the Sekanji Clan children, once trained up to handle that which Tera and Momo could do by age eight, into the 'mixed team arrangements' under non-clan teachers would earn her even more with some time.

It wasn't truly dire yet, and with the understanding they had few to task to such things with one reserved for clan head duties she could likely ask for a loan or something similar from the village's slightly questionable treasury, but it was something to prepare for before it became so.
with another, that a teenager half his age ordered them now, or that they were somewhere new. He
wasn't cruelly so, just a touch more depressively passive than another would be comfortable with.

Frankly, if he died in pursuit of whichever toxin he was currently developing it would be
questionable if anyone would know until his wife or his eldest child went to see if he wanted
dinner.

"Do you want me to dissolve your marriage?" Tera questioned the shinobi's back idly, eyes sharp
and looking for the nonverbal as she was highly doubtful he would really speak anything about his
feelings on the matter to her.

Tense shoulders didn't move, as the man practically ignored her standing in the doorway to the lab
he nearly lived within.

"I could take the child that isn't yours, however much it will hurt Miki-san, and set him with his
other half-siblings."

"Is there a point to this, Terazawa-sama?"

"You tell me."

They were shinobi, however ill-trained she was she also had a noblewoman's training in intrigue to
back her up. Likely, he knew perfectly well his continued distance was hurting his wife and kids.
At this point, all he was doing was hurting.

Himself, those closest to him, and his work.

"I need you, there are not enough poison masters left. Not even users. You know the things taught
to such, to finish what Sanemune-san is training the kids for. I cannot let you go, so tell me what I
must do to help you."

"You know most of it."

"Yes, in the highly painful ways one does when no one will show them." Tera drawled out
sarcastically, finally getting a reaction from the guilty sort of start he made at her tone. "Teach,
then I will not need you and will allow you to move in here without so much as a backwards look.
Until then, survive. Endure. Come to terms with your hate or loathing of the clan, so eventually I
can let you go."

"I do not loathe the clan."

"Just my uncle and his kinslayer brother."

"He never was a pleasant one." Korenaka muttered venomously, finally turning from his work to
see her clearly as he should have upon being addressed by his clan head. "His brother, your uncle,
was only a slight bit better personally."

"I wouldn't know, I avoided them."

"Smartly." Flat black eyes under green crests sharpened, a considering look instead of that ugly
resentment flicking lightning-quick across his features. "You… it was a waste to ignore you,
properly trained… you would've been truly deadly."

"It is never too late to learn something new, Korenaka-san."
The whole clan did have a fascination with that which killed others easily.

Bit of a personal failing of theirs, but which clan of shinobi didn't have something similar?

"Thankfully, you don't much look like him."

"Momomi-chan does, however."

From the scowl on his face, he had noticed.

"I love my little sister, Korenaka-san." Tera informed him silkily. "I will be most... displeased if anything happens to her."

"I will get over it." Korenaka informed her testily in return. "Better, if I can finish off your uncle."

"...he hasn't yet improved any, I have been meaning to ask the Yamanaka Clan for a consultation..." The Sekanji Clan head trailed off, considering things. "If there is anything in his mind yet, we will follow his wishes. If there isn't... we have more than enough kinslayers in this family, Korenaka-san, I will not suffer another."

If her uncle could just improve enough to squeeze a finger in a pattern or manipulate his chakra in another, she would not be forced to admit to her shameful father's kinslayer habits. Tera kept putting off dealing with her uncle in a final method, hoping against hope that the man could possibly just decide his fate without help.

She didn't want to kill him herself, but that was also something that was becoming more and more likely as time stretched and no improvement could be seen.

"...understood."

"Besides that. Do you wish to continue as a shinobi?"

The man paused, confused. "Terazawa-sama... I am shinobi."

"Yes, but for this village?"

"I will do as needed."

"That was not what I asked of you."

Korenaka stared at her hard for a long moment. "...I..."

"Apparently, according to Mito-sama, shinobi are assigned to missions as they come in. Sometimes a clan is asked to release a different shinobi than whomever is on 'rotation' for them, but that happens only rarely." Crossing her arms over her modest chest, the kunoichi gave him a skeptical glance. "I will be placed on it in a few months, Sanemune-san will be placed on it with me so we can alternate missions that require or would benefit from a poison specialist. I can place you on it in a few months, but I will not if you do not agree. Verbally."

Momo would be going in as a 'student' hopefully, to be assigned to a shinobi pair that agreed to teach in return for a reduced mission rotation while training up their teams. The fact her baby sister could start a mastery of poisons if she picked one aside, she was a very good user of poisons on and off the field as well as a hunter and a water/earth chakra user.

Mashi, and the fourteen others over the age of ten who wanted shinobi training, would also be attached to teams as Hashirama wanted.
Then the fate of the children would no longer be solely a Sekanji Clan worry, but a Leaf one. The samurai would have more of the next generation, the part that grew up under their watchful eyes and idolized them more than they respected the clan's history with poisons and ninja. A few girls refused shinobi training, deeming it not what they wanted, as well as two of the boys. Finding craftsmen work or just being young ladies of the clan better suited for them. However, it was more than a third of the generation that grew up slightly after her taking on more clan responsibilities. Leaving her with less stress overall. Of course, she and Sanemune would need to be 'assessed' before they would be assigned ninja work for the village. Testing poison masters and users… well, it had promise to be amusing. That reminded her to speak to the samurai about what they felt as they needed to do. Hashirama informed her some days ago that another clan was in talks to join the Leaf, a former samurai turned shinobi one, and was wondering if that would help her men or just help reassure the Hatake Clan they would be appreciated even with their unconventional origin. "I think… in a few months will be fine, Terazawa-sama." Korenaka spoke slowly, almost as if he was tasting the words for their fit. "Then pry yourself out of this lab." Tera demanded shortly. "I will not volunteer you if you hermit yourself away with toxic compounds only. Whatever tasteful image you think that presents to the others, it is *not this* we need." The Sekanji Clan was notoriously white and pale to begin with. Her tan was *odd* for their number. Possessing white skin often meant they appeared *ghastly* when ill or otherwise discomforted. Shifting awkwardly, the other poison master nodded in a method that wasn't sheepish but certainly slightly unwilling chagrin. Now to talk Sanemune *out* of the traditional Sekanji poison mastery ceremony. Neither Hashirama nor Madara would be pleased to hear of it happening one last time, even if Tera admitted she didn't want the practice to continue. (ooo000ooo) "We are your samurai."

"That does not solve my dilemma, Aritada-san." Terazawa sighed heavily, rubbing at her temple. "Do I hire you lot out? Are you alright with such a thing? Being teamed with shinobi that might just make use of your skill sets against other samurai?"

Her samurai, who had very little to 'guard' these days and instead turned to training a few of the children in martial skills if asked and more being just hands to help the widowed women of the clan, were not entirely *unneeded* but certainly well past any point only honor would demand they stay with her. This one was *farming* for a lack of things and responsibilities to handle, tilling the soil with the elder children to ensure the soil was aerated enough for the poison garden's expansion now the seedlings were planted and more could be grown.
As more than a few samurai were *married* into the shinobi clan of poison users, she could hope they were more than alright with ninja tricks and behaviors. It would become terribly awkward if not.

Being alright with ninja things and being fine with 'tasked with other unknown shinobi against samurai they might've otherwise called allies' was as different as night was from day.

"The honorable Rokkaku-sama wasn't the only one learning everything you and Momomi-sama were trying to teach him, Terazawa-sama." Aritada informed her levelly, with a shrug of whipcord-like shoulders as he placed a spade on the ground to lean against them. "He translated where the two of you were too shinobi to outright say for us, and we *chose* to follow you in the first place. Make the use of us as you need."

As always, when the origin of their loyalty to her was mentioned, the poison mistress felt a slight pang of guilt.

It had not been their fault their former master was so objectionable a husband to her, nor that there had already been a saboteur in his household before she had been moved to marry the man. It just was and even now knowing as she did their motives and reasoning, as well as several of them rather decently personally, she would likely do the same and just be a tiny bit more gracious as Rokkaku inserted himself into her life as a slightly infected splinter might.

"Your home is ours, Terazawa-sama. You opened it up to us, and we made it our own." Offered Aritada in a slightly different manner. "If this shinobi mission work is what it needs to be defended now, then we will do so happily."

"...you are a headache and a half to talk to."

"I am seeking to follow Rokkaku-sama's example."

"You have succeeded admirably."

Twelve samurai to be changed into more shinobi-like men was nothing to sneeze at, especially as Tobirama suspected that with their inclusion on the mission rotation the Leaf's reputation with the local Land of Fire nobility would only just improve more. More personally, the missions Sekanji Clan's members completed for the village had a kind of tax on it that would improve her financial situation.

...maybe then she could see about ordering a microscope for the labs. If there was one in existence now.

That did bring up the number of 'shinobi' the Sekanji Clan had to sixteen to start with. A hundred ninja, no matter the type, was required to obtain a seat on the Council of Clans.

Which would bring them up to... about twenty-five or so in a year's time. Perhaps somewhere in the area of three-quarters of that hundred by the time Mashi was fully grown and able to decide if he would become the clan's head or just remain a ninja.

As Tera could keenly remember when having less than ten was a cause for great concern, and how badly off they were with merely five then suddenly only two, it was an odd thought.

*(As poisons were not what the Leaf was known for, the samurai half of her clan had more work at first. They had less issues being 'assessed' than the poison users did, for apparently paralyzing one's sparring partner right after the bout was called to begin was entirely within the rules but made it hard for any judge to figure out a rank to apply to their skill levels overall. All twelve*
samurai and both shinobi were given 'jōnin' rank, Terazawa ended up with 'tokubetsu jōnin' if only because her genjutsu skills were a bit... off for the time being and her martial skills were unpracticed given her chakra nature. Momomi, who bullied her way in and Tera was still somewhat terrifying as the more visible of the poison masters who adored her, got 'chūnin'.}
Terazawa's willingness to drop the silken kimono layers of a noblewoman to wear something very form fitting and plated with leather armor seemed to surprise her fellow shinobi. At least, that was what she was going to conclude from the stares as she traveled down the Village Hidden in the Leaves' streets for her first assignment as a kunoichi of the Leaf.

The poison mistress packed a set of kimonos away in her traveling pack, because one never knew what would become useful in their line of work, and also had her usually intricately done hair in a slightly distended high tail her samurai had taught her. Leaving a long length, given she hadn't cut the drafted thing in almost half a decade now, weighted down with oil and bound with bands of silk to prevent wild strands from escaping her hairstyle and inflicting horrible rashes on the unwary.

Brown leather armor, dusty grey pants tucked into sensible boots, a form fitting and long sleeved green shirt, heavy leather gloves, and a plate of metal inscribed with a leaf symbol attached to blue cloth tied around her neck.

Why a forehead protector?

The skull did an admirable job protecting the head, unless someone had a hammer or ax and could swing it with more than enough force in range, and frankly it was easier to kill by slitting the throat if you got that close.

"Terazawa-sama."

"Just Tera while we are outside the village later, Harumune-san." Remained the Sekanji Clan head, as nicely as she could but samurai's shoulders hunched slightly anyways, as she finished smearing on the same black grease he had around her own eyes.

"Tera-sensei!" Cheerfully, as he did most things, Hashirama brandished a scroll at her as she stepped up to his side in the open walled 'shinobi pavilion' where ninja teams were asked to meet up in for missions work. "Okay, I know we told you no…but…"

"But?" Echoed Tera in bemusement, narrowing coppery eyes to try and read the tight characters painted on the scroll's inside while it was being held by a very excitable man. "Is this about the clan's poison mastery ceremony?"

It had been the topic of their last discussion.

Ignoring the fact he now had everyone's attention more than normal, the God of Shinobi smiled sheepishly at her as he straightened up from behind the 'mission assignment desk' that looked more like part of the open-walled building than a piece of furniture. "Well…yes. There's an assassination target from the highest ranked daimyō of Fire, apparently a traitor to his court really likes his wine and…uh…women?"

The poison mistress arched an amused eyebrow at his slight stumble in speaking of such things to her, even knowing she wasn't a dainty lady who would blanch at such things. "And so you thought of what I informed you and Madara-sama about?"

"It'd be kind of perfect to take care of this as quietly as requested." Hashirama admitted freely, glancing down at the paperwork himself again. "A day's run to his last known location, an Inuzuka or Aburame to track him down if he moved, you do your deadly poison mistress thing, and then you can come home in…like, three days. At most."
"Just myself and a tracker?"

"Well... no. You're a clan head, Tera-sensei. You get more backup than that, like your samurai-san standing there." Wagging a finger as if she suggested going off alone, the man gave her another smile. "But! Assassination targets, instead of a victim?"

"...I suppose Sanemune-san will be pleased to hear it, he was most upset when I denied him the opportunity." Allowed the teenager wryly with some amusement. "Speaking of, if the next one doesn't require a female's touch to draw him in... can I request it specifically to be sent to us?"

"I'll keep it in mind." Offered the Senju Clan head with a nod to seal the agreement, giving her the scroll to pursue. "I'll send you two teammates when I put a pair together for support. Thanks, Tera-sensei."

(ooo000ooo)

For the time being, or as Hashirama put it 'until you all get along' without it actually sounding as threatening as the comment deserved, Leaf shinobi teams were in four-man squads. Unless you specifically requested a three-man, or just another teammate, specifically and could reason why to his satisfaction. Five for the ninja children teams while they were somewhat new to midway seasoned.

An Inuzuka combo did not count as more than one shinobi, on the merit of 'not even more than two dogs count as one ninja, sorry'. The dogs, smart and some capable of speaking back as they were, were also not really... independent.

They would stick with their master, even if that master was dead.

Terazawa, Harumune, and the Inuzuka called Kesai with her two paired dogs, did not a Leaf shinobi team make.

"How, exactly, did we get stuck with you?" Tera inquired silkily of Tobirama as they did the 'normal traveler, nothing to see here' thing on the last leg of their journey.

"Luck. I do a fair bit of unseen body guarding, it was my turn on rotation for the Senju Clan."

"I thought your clan was fond of the Senjus." Kesai asked of Harumune blandly as they followed the two of them some distance behind, not even trying to hide her tone or the fact the question was highly skeptical.

"Most of them," gritted out the samurai behind a stone-face she didn't need to turn to see, "just not that one."

Tobirama gave her a fairly stern look of his own. "You told brother it was ancient history."

"I did. I forgave it a while ago. That was me, however."

Unfortunately, her working kunoichi outfit wasn't equipped with the sleeves that would allow her to stick her heavy war fans to her forearms with mere chakra control. They were placed in leather reinforced holsters sewn into the pockets of her pants, and took more movement than she liked for playing with them in a conversation.

"My little sister might also be holding a grudge." Tacked on Tera, checking the fit of the fans just to be sure because while she was used to the positions from samurai training the pants were new.
"You realize, if brother catches on to such dislike, he will assign me to you until we do get along."

Responded the albino shinobi blandly, as if she said 'I' and not 'my little sister'.

"Or until we kill each other, I am aware."

Hashirama was rather cruel like that, however pleased and cheerful he seemed otherwise.

It made trying to refuse such arrangements to his face terribly difficult, she knew so from the Uchiha and Hyūga pair that seemed to loathe each other stuck with two long-suffering Senju cousins she had seen a few weeks ago.

Madara doing such team assignments when ninja-drama reared it's ugly head… was something best left unspoken of.

...or at least, not within his hearing as it seems he had his own brand of sadistic leadership qualities for misbehaving teammates. More, for those that felt the need to complain and he caught them at it.

"There is the town he is supposed to be within." Tobirama commented as if they couldn't see the start of the large merchant village coming into sight well before his statement. "What is your plan, Tera-sama?"

He was pretending to be another samurai guardsman, not a shinobi, for this leg of their mission. His unique coloring gave away the lie, but she supposed that was what henges were for.

"Well… it only requests 'quietly' as any limiter on what we may do." Tera pointed out equally as blandly. "Which I will assume is to mean without connecting the one that contracted us to the victim, or that no drawn out fights will be appreciated as your brother has requested my assistance to circumvent that. However, as you would know better than I, should we connect ourselves to the act?"

Pausing flat on the road they were strolling down so as to not alarm the 'civilians' living in the town ahead, the Senju heir glanced from her to the town and then back the way they had traveled.

"...while the reputation boost such acts would give us would help spread news around that we take such jobs, in this situation I would actually rather avoid it. It is a known traitor to the one he is betraying, however we do not know how far that information has traveled among our client's ranks. Likely not widely enough to avoid breeding ill rumors of what kind of shinobi village we are."

"Aren't we?" Asked the poison mistress sardonically, swinging the leather pack she had ordered specifically from one of the village's many and growing leatherworkers down off her shoulders so she could reach into it.

"Of course. Word of mouth advertising from a pleased noble will do us more good than rumored gossip from the merchants, and the better standing would mean more tolerance for our very existence."

"Harumune-san, run ahead and place a hold on two inn rooms. With a bath." Tera ordered after taking a moment to agree with the Senju shinobi's reasoning and plot out how to enable it, as well as accounting for what kind of things she had brought with her. "Kesai-san, how well are the Inuzuka known around here? Would your involvement breed suspicion?"

"Naw, not really." Admitted the kunoichi as the samurai left them at speed, glancing downward at slightly prominent clawed fingers then to her dogs. "It's not really been all that long since your clan stepped aside and let the alpha take us on to bring here, we're not too well known outside the
village just yet. Weren't allowed until recently or he wanted to make a point of something."

"Would you like to pretend you're a working-class girl with me the wild merchant's daughter and out for a rare night on the town?" Tera asked politely, as she had more than enough kimonos on her to give one to the Inuzuka. "We get to drink on the job...?"

"Sold. I'll even leave the dogs behind when we spot the target."

"What of myself and Harumune-san?"

"He will keep up a deception that we have retired for the night by standing 'guard' for us, to allow you the stealth to follow Kesai-san and I to where the target is. When I find him, I will order myself a semi-expensive bottle of wine, much to Kesai-san's loud disgust over 'delicate wines' over 'hearty ones' and order herself a different one. I will poison it, share a cup with the target, and then we will either leave or profess 'horror' over his sudden demise. Depending on the level of suspicion aimed our way."

It didn't say if the traitor was aware of being suspected, or what kind of training the man had. From a short period of experience with the noblemen of Earth, Tera actually suspected the traitor had some measure of intelligence and could spot an assassin after him.

Meaning no obvious weaponry, so only one fan and with the caps that disguised them as merely fans.

Tobirama would be their only security, aside what self-defense the kunoichi could put up unarmed. The dogs could easily be guard dogs but civilians had things against allowing such animals into establishments.

There was the time between entering the area where the dogs tracked their target to and actually entering the establishment he was situated, two unarmed girls would attract a lot of attention. Especially if, as she suspected, they would be heading into the red light district.

"I assume you will not appreciate it if afterwards we split up to find some 'company' for the night while we are here?"

The utterly bland look she earned from the Senju heir was actually slightly... delightful.

"Pity. We will have to come back once rumors die down later to make an honest go of it, Kesai-san."

"Sounds like a date, Tera-hime."

("-then, of course, Tera-hime sashays over to the target and goes," here Kesai deepens her voice to something approaching seductive and flutters her eyelashes hard enough to look as if she had been poked in the eye, "'good sir, could you solve a debate for us, please?'"

The wagging hip movements were entirely unneeded in Terazawa's opinion, she was certain this was the other kunoichi's way of poking fun at her but still.

"Which is better, my wine or hers?" And, of course, the guy's so distracted looking down Tera-hime's silk clad chest he agrees without even giving it a second thought."

Hashirama's gleeful snickers did not help anything, decided the poison mistress firmly. At least
Madara and Izuna were properly sober-appearing enough to hear of the process of an assassination, if one discounted the rising eyebrows.

There was no real reporting aside 'done and home', except after the fact and to the one that assigned the mission to a team upon their successful return. Or if something so surprising happened a team needed to sound out the aftermath with the people it would reflect upon. *Written* reports weren't needed, the Senju and Uchiha heads had more than enough time to listen to such things.

Having such verbal reporting done in front of the entire pavilion of shinobi awaiting their turn on the mission rotations or just looking for a sparring partner was a bit embarrassing, just a tiny smidge. *Especially* given the Inuzuka Clan's typical irrelevant disregard for what was socially acceptable or polite in mixed company.

She kept her face straight and simply pretended to be politely listening, if only because this would help the Sekanji Clan's reputation *so* much she was hesitant to tarnish anything.

The Inuzuka kunoichi huffs a bit at this part of the 'story', planting sharp nailed hands on her hips. "Guy wasn't entirely stupid, asked if she was going to take a shot with him. Because it was unopened at that point, kind of shifty I suppose given how much it cost. Tera-hime agreed, and they both down a cup… him slightly after he saw her actually drink. Like… not two seconds later he drops dead, the hime tosses the bottle over a shoulder so it'd smash open on the ground and just stalks off as if his sudden corpse wasn't fascinating."

Finishing the part of the story Tobirama tasked her with reporting, because he was an *asshole* like that, Kesai stepped back and gestures impatiently for Tera to step up for her part.

Returning the Senju Clan head's gleeful smirk with a more sedate smile of her own, the younger kunoichi picked up the tale. "We regrouped two streets away with Tobirama-sama, and returned to the inn rooms without issue. As Harumune-san had rented them the night we rested there and returned home in the morning, Hashirama-sama."

"Aww… nothing happened on the way home?" With a *pout*, really not something she would ever really adjust to seeing on his face, the God of Shinobi swung his gaze around to his little brother. "Tobi?"

"The ladies made plans to return in a few weeks." Deadpanned the stiff man without inflection.

"Hell ya!"

"Well… why not?" Tera confirmed on the heels of the other kunoichi's confirming near-shout, a sly smirk shared between the women-in-arms.

"Real pleasure to work with ya, Tera-hime."

"Likewise, Kesai-chan. I will certainly request you the next time I have the option of picking up a tracker."

Hashirama looked *so* damn proud of them.

She supposed that, to his eyes, there was a bit of historic dislike between the Sekanji Clan and the Inuzuka one. While there *had* been moments between a few of the widowed women and the Inuzukas sent to help them move, which likely had been spoken of afterwards, honestly speaking Tera had no issue with the wild shinobi clan of dog using ninjas.

There was that one she had killed way back when, but as long as they didn't dislike her clan for her
doing so then she had no real reason to object to them in return. As it was unlikely they knew of
that incident, it could remain in the past.

"Well… that's… good." Madara managed after a while. "Hashirama told me you requested another
such mission if we get it, Terazawa-sensei?"

"For Sanemune-san, he was most displeased I refused him the traditional ways we would obtain
the acknowledgement for our mastery of poison." Tera allowed pleasantly with a smile, arms
crossed over her leather compressed chest for the reporting and seeing no real reason to change her
position. Even if playing with the fans would be fun right now. "Instead of victims, I suppose
targets would do if you would allow us to salvage the tradition instead of kept it as it was."

"Damn wicked to see in action, Tera-hime."

"Thank you, Kesai-san. I appreciate the compliment."

"I think I would like to see this." Izuna spoke for the first time in her presence, although she had
seen him around the village the Uchiha Clan heir had nothing to say to her so she didn't ask about
the 'saved Izuna' comment of Tobirama's. "Brother, I would request to assist in the next mission if
you allow."

"I honestly like the thought of assassination targets more than a forcing a victim to knowingly
drink their death, Tera-sensei." Hashirama interjected while the Uchiha Clan head contemplated
the request from his heir, more serious than amused over the situation now. "Not to say I like that
such final 'exams' are what poison masters require to become so, but as it is a change as we asked
of your clan this I will allow."

"If there is no risk, where is the reward?" Murmured the poison mistress thoughtfully. "I will apply
myself to seeing if there was another traditional way or if we poison masters of the Sekanji Clan
can agree on a less final method, Hashirama-sama."

"Thank you, Sekanji-sama." Graciously accepted the Senju Clan head with a nod.

"Of course, you realize that while I might find such… they may find other such missions on their
own to volunteer for and acquire it 'unofficially'."

"If that happens, it happens." Wryly smiling, the shinobi shrugged to dismiss that point. "I can ask
you to change, but until you accept it yourselves it's merely words. The fact you try and see what
point I object to is more than enough for me."

How… honestly terrifying.

More binding than disapproval or 'shame' would apply to her and the rest of the Leaf, for nothing
would change if he tried negative conditioning with contrary creatures like wild shinobi clans.
Defying such was more likely, but if he merely did his happy pleased thing over any sign of change
faked or not… such would condition 'his' villagers to try more and honestly next time.

Putting that formidable reputation as the God of Shinobi to more use than just terrifying his
enemies and aweing his allies.

(Unfortunately, Hashirama had caught onto the subtle or not dislike the Sekanji Clan samurai held
for his brother because while as good as Harumune was he wasn't shinobi. Terazawa ended up on
Tobirama's team more than she liked, paralyzing entire bandit encampments for taking into
custody or simply applying her winds to help with the skirmishes against hostile shinobi clans on
behalf of the Land of Fire's noble ranks, but eventually even the distrust her baby sister held for
the Senju Clan heir finally died off the seventh or ninth time Tera had to gently discourage Momomi from trying to actually sabotage the man. The samurai eventually realized it was their fault their lady was attached to the albino shinobi's teams so often, and were very regretful over it afterwards with more wry respect for the God of Shinobi's methods. Tera and Kesai did eventually go and splurge for a night in a red light district a month after their first mission together. Sanemune did finally get his poison mastery, and Izuna decided he liked the man as a semi-permanent partner for his own mission work. The fact the Uchiha could set the poison powders on fire if something alarming happened apparently had actually little to do with it.)
"You're part of the village now, you can't say no because we don't have the time."

Terazawa gazed blankly down at Utatane Koharu, then thought about it.

The girl stamped a foot into the dirt when the silence stretched a touch too long to be polite. "Hashi-sensei no longer says we can't bother you about it. That means you're settled, taking on the duties of a Leaf ninja. You're a higher ranked kunoichi, teach me."

"Rather impertinent, aren't you?" Mused the poison mistress idly as she pulled a war fan out of her sleeve to play with. "You have two legendary shinobi for teachers, and you want more? How... greedy."

"You were right, Tobi-sensei and his lord brother are boys. They teach boys better. You can teach kunoichi things." Utatane informed her as if she would have no idea how true her statements were half a year after they last saw one another. "Tobi-sensei said he took a few examples from you to teach me, and it's better. I can almost beat up Homura-kun."

"With the Inuzuka, I am no longer the only kunoichi you could ask."

"There were others I could ask before you, they didn't have the 'time' to teach me." Corrected the young kunoichi trainee stubbornly, tiny arms crossed in front of an equally tiny chest. "I picked you, I never saw Hashi-sensei or Tobi-sensei be so taken aback on a first meeting. And Hashi-sensei was doing his full 'I'm a good guy, honest' best before you spiked it like it was nothing."

"He... named his moods?" Even Tera's fan stilled at the bewildering thought as she adjusted to the information. "Oh my."

"Mito-sama helps where she can, but she's taking on some of Hashi-sensei's duties so he and his brother can teach us. And, even if they're kind of embarrassing sometimes, they are really powerful shinobi." Utatane tried again, less demanding and a touch more beseeching. "My teachers keep me away from that kind of attention, I came from a merchant family closely allied with the Senju and I can't deal with it. You though, you not only dealt with them but I heard you were trained to be a noblewoman. I really do need the help, Terazawa-sama."

"Hmm... your arguments need work." Observed the tokubetsu jōnin kunoichi mildly. "Try this. 'I will tell you about embarrassing stories from my teachers trying to train me, Tera-sensei.'"

Koharu blinked at her blankly for a long moment, then repeated the offered statement in a rush.

"Very well, I accept your offer of blackmail in exchange." Grandly declared the Sekanji Clan head, using one of her war fans to shield her lower face and the wicked smirk from the girl. "Come, let us see where Mito-sama has left off and what there is still left to do with you."

Momomi was leaps and bounds beyond what Tera could do at the same age, reaping the benefits of a sister keenly interested in ensuring she knew to avoid her prior mistakes.

What improvements could she find using the girl and possibly her two legendary teachers by extension?

(ooo000ooo)
"You have… either doubled yourself twice and henged them into others, or invited those I do not
know into my home."

"Sorry, Tera-sensei. They followed me and wouldn't leave." Koharu muttered almost mulishly,
glaring darkly at one Sarutobi Hiruzen and a Shimura Clan child.

Humming, and a question niggling at the edge of her mind, the poison mistress poured the boiling
water into her tea pot. "I see. Tea then, children?"

Hiruzen paled so rapidly it was slightly amusing, and the child next to him froze so solidly it
seemed as if he had been replaced with a realistic block of ice.

"Don't be rude." Tera purred wickedly as she pulled more teacups from the chest that set next to
her writing desk. "You have invited yourselves along without thought to who or what you were
infringing upon. The least you can do is accept graciously offered refreshments, politely."

Looking as if the gently steaming fragrant tea, a special mix from the new shoots of the poison
garden that wouldn't cause a non-poison master an upset stomach, was death itself both boys
managed to mutter something resembling a polite acceptance.

Koharu looked enchanted with how scared the boys were now with only a gently worded offer and
a slight admonishment for not accepting it. "I want to learn to do that."

"Acquiring the reputation needed will be the trick, Koharu-chan." Murmured the Sekanji Clan head
pleasantly. "However, I see no reason why not to teach you to do the same."

Hiruzen winced, clutching the hot teacup between white-knuckled fingers. His little friend was
more stone than child still, black eyes a touch too wide gave away what he felt if her chakra senses
wouldn't inform her exactly what feeling coursed through his tiny body.

"So…” the Sarutobi child stated after an awkward pause on his end but a serene one on the
kunoichi side of the room. "You're teaching now?"

"Not entirely," corrected the poison mistress blandly, "Koharu-chan and I have come into an
arrangement about manners and how to wield it as a weapon. These meetings are fit around my
responsibilities, because she is a dear like that."

Utatane drowned her smirk behind her first sip of tea, pretending ignorance as her teammate
flushed slightly.

Delightful, seeing that one's lessons were being heeded. It was almost like watching Momo take
her first hesitant steps as a child and now as a kunoichi of the Leaf, almost.

"Your teachers do something special, affording the time to guide and teach you on top of running a
large clan as well as aid the government of this developing village of shinobi and their people."
Lected Tera, sipping her tea in a pause between statements. "Something I cannot do as of yet,
small and as tattered as my clan might be. Between my clan head duties, assisting the others with
clan responsibilities, and being available as a poison mistress if the Leaf needs it… well. I am not
blessed with a sibling as equally as willing and able as the Senju Clan head or the Uchiha Clan
head and their brothers."

Refreshing her tea, and Koharu's when the girl beseeched such by tipping her cup to indicate the
low level in her own, the elder kunoichi flicked coppery eyes from one boy to the next.

"We are still discussing if I should teach her poisons or not. Regardless, I am highly tempted to
give her some of the clan's 'child-friendly' poisons. They will not kill, but it will be horribly unpleasant if she can dose another." Smiling at the girl's obvious excitement at such a confession, the poison mistress sat back straighter on her heels. "Well… Koharu-chan, we should get on with the lessons of how to conduct a tea ceremony… and the best ways to sabotage it."

Blanching boy-children exchanged wide-eyed looks over untouched tea.

"...if your little friends insist on staying, we can always use the extra targets to practice upon."

"Really not necessary, Sekanji-sama." Hastened the Sarutobi child to say, planting the teacup a touch too hard on her desk and splitting the fragile china. "We just… erm… oops."

Tera’s smile was significantly less friendly and more a baring of teeth now. "You should be aware of what haste may break, Sarutobi-kun."

"I want to be you when I grow up." Koharu informed her with impressive determination in her tone, pitched to carry over her teammate's slightly panicked attempt to beg her to not kill him for the insult.

"Oh? How flattering, Koharu-chan. A good compliment, implies an obligation to continue training yourself and builds up good-will for later use."

The Shimura child's suddenly interested look said nothing good about his aims following the two students of the Senju brothers into the home of a poison mistress. He even bravely took a sip of his tea, not moving when his little friend tugged on his sleeves.

Hmm… this might backfire a bit.

(ooo000ooo)

"I find it disturbing how easily you multiply."

Koharu and Danzō both chimed an appropriate apology with differing levels of enthusiasm, both ignoring their legendary and extremely powerful teachers who were standing behind them.

The Shimura trainee had an Uchiha and an Akimichi teammate, standing before one grumpy Uchiha Madara and grouping together pointedly to suggest belonging to him and not the Senju brothers. "Very sorry to ask this of you, Terazawa-sensei. But the idiot over there wants me in the talks with the Hatake Clan, and Danzō-kun has yet to shut up about you manipulating Sarutobi-kun into begging for his life without issuing one threat."

Ignoring the sulking Hashirama, mainly because everyone else was and getting distracted would do nothing for her position right now, Terazawa tipped her head to the side. "What is it you wish to ask?"

"Watch them for a week." Tobirama informed her instead of actually ask like a normal human being, flatly.

Really, she was getting to the point of being unsurprised when he acted as such. Next step would be expecting it, worse to excuse such behavior.

"...no wonder she calls you an asshole. My little brother is on mission and will return to help out somewhat in a few days." Interjected the Uchiha Clan head equally as flatly before she could respond to that. "Will you please watch them for the time we are expected to be gone, Terazawa-sensei?"
"And what am I to do with them, Madara-sama?"

"Basically ensure they don't kill themselves doing stupid shit." A considering glance at all the betrayed looks aimed upwards at him, and the Uchiha snorted with a roll of his eyes that looked as if it should have physically hurt. "Preferably, teach the Senju brothers' brats some damn manners and keep my own from killing them."

She had plans for the week including an Inuzuka kunoichi and a hot springs they found in the local area, the interruption was not appreciated. "Would there not be better suited temporary teachers within the village?"

"We… may have gone through a lot of the other teacher pairs' patience for the kids." Hashirama offered sheepishly, coming back into the grouping basically on the Sekanji Clan compound's front step. "Just, you're already teaching two of them to manipulate others and the rest are kind of… extra?"

Tera stared at him flatly herself, pressing thin lips together.

Big, brown eyes peered back at her so hopefully. "Please?"

"...the three of you are invited to tea upon your return, so I may tell you all about how your students behaved." Tera announced in a slightly more venomous tone than she had been striving for. "I do so hope this will be worth it, my lords."

The God of Shinobi beamed back at her as if her agreement had been graciously given. "Sure! We'll look forward to it, right brothers?"

His co-founder of the village did his hunching-without-physically-doing-so bit, pointed features flattening out to a bland one of indifference. "...great."

Tobirama seemed to have the unenviable position of agreeing with the Uchiha Clan head but being unwilling to admit it, and she hoped he choked on it.


The poison mistress considered the bespectacled kid her war fan was pointing at thoughtfully, who already looked slightly resigned to being foisted off on someone else.

"...Homura-kun, correct?"

A skeptical glance was given to her, actually meeting her slightly unnerving metallic eyes from behind thin glass.

"You have a strong earth affinity, I cannot teach you that. Poisons and words will likely become Koharu-chan's specialty if she continues to learn from me. You have the frame that suggests a thin build in time, probably best suited to light weapons. What do you wish to learn while your teachers handle other things?"

"Can some-

"Hey, why'd you ask him?"
"Perhaps, Sarutobi-kun, that is a question you should ponder while asking for a samurai by the name of Aritada-san in the compound." Drawled out the kunoichi. "Continue, Homura-kun."

The suspicion she held, that the Senju brothers might not intentionally neglect their other students but focused more on what Sarutobi could learn and went from there, made her a slight bit more sympathetic to the boy-child.

"Can someone teach me my earth affinity?"

"...the Sekanji Clan does not have dedicated jutsus, child. We learn to manipulate the very element we are associated with itself from the moment we show an affinity."

"I'm fine with that."

"Seek out my little sister, Momomi-chan. You share an affinity with her and she can teach you better than I."

Tera accepted the round of thanks from their actual teachers with a bland smile, reminding them in turn that she expected them all for tea once their trip was over with.

Wondering, as they left and she went to go teach two children how to twist words and meanings to suit them better, what had changed all the while.

Hashirama and Tobirama had felt it safe enough to drag their students all the way to Grass to talk with the Sekanji Clan about medicine, and as far as she knew the Hatake Clan was willing to listen and not attack the envoys of the Leaf. Now it was apparently not as safe for student ninja, and the Hatake Clan was a samurai-turned-shinobi clan somewhere farther north than Fire but below Lightning and Iron.

(Terazawa never did manage to rid the Sekanji Clan of its infestation of brats she was not responsible for, the Uchiha Kagami practically falling in love the moment he was given a practice sword and taught the basic strikes meant he followed Shimura Danzō at every opportunity to badger the samurai for lessons when his teachers were distracted. With Utatane Koharu came Mitokado Homura who sought out Momomi for lessons on manipulating the earth itself. Sarutobi Hiruzen never stopped bothering her for wind affinity insights, and Akimichi Torifu had to be chased out of the poison garden several times before being banned entirely from there. Tera didn't poison the three delinquent teachers, given what happened on their way back to the village with the beleaguered Hatake Clan, but it was a near thing.)
The shinobi village in Lightning deciding they didn't like the Leaf 'poaching' their local clans, even if the Hatake Clan was more a former Iron samurai-shinobi clan moving through their territory, showed in several of the usually more normal day-to-day things around the Village Hidden in the Leaf.

As optimistic as Hashirama was in knitting them all together as comrades and reaching out to more of their kind, they were all mostly shinobi or the merchant and craftsmen families that supported them. Suspicion was rife within their ranks, less of a social sport and more of a necessity for survival however much more the former was made use of.

'Cloud' was the whispers, rumors bandied around while ninja sought out their former or current teammates to hear and share how the scuffle between the three most powerful shinobi of the Leaf and the Hatake Clan had gone with the so-called shinobi village in the Land of Lightning.

Terazawa listened to the same rumors that made the Senju tighten their security on the children; the Uchiha put aside their training and work for more missions; the Akimichi to have their entire armory repaired or slated to have it done; the Nara to dive into their forests for weeks on end; the Yamanaka to hit their books; the Hyūga seek out their fellow shinobi more; the Aburame to come forward out of the woodwork in the strangest of places; the Sarutobi and Shimura Clans to start sharing their hoarded jutsu knowledge; and the Inuzuka to stick closer to their paired human partners almost as they did their dogs. Then she quietly ordered the Sekanji to ramp up their poison and medicine production, to store it away for 'a rainy day'.

It might not be needed in time. However it might be, and that was what the shinobi of the Leaf reacted to best. They were still suspicious and untrusting creatures, however well Hashirama was trying to domesticate them.

The Yamanaka Clan usually had 'first' hazing duties, being as they were a clan that 'did minds'. Given the situation and what comprised the Hatake Clan, the Sekanji Clan was given the dubious honor instead.

Tera invited the Hatake Clan head and his lady wife to tea, which was considered terrible enough of an incident that her intents for such was never asked.

As finding medicine for burns, injuries, or just general sickness was one of the first things anyone with injured did, Hatake Tadakuni and Kinu accepted without really questioning it.

Well… they were originally samurai.

"I am a poison mistress." The Sekanji Clan head informed the Hatake Clan head when the two of them were seated in front of her, the tea steaming near her hand and tasty snacks set out for guests on her writing desk between them. "Most of my clan's specialty is poisons and how to use them to full effect, but due to some happenings I… inherited a number of samurai. I give you and your clan an open invite to speak with them if you would ever have need of it, Tadakuni-sama. Tea?"

Flat black eyes under a shock of white hair stared at her for a long moment. "I will admit, Terazawa-sama, I had looked into a Sekanji Clan of samurai when Hashirama-sama made mention of your men in a letter."

Hmm… was that a yes or no for tea?
"You would have best looked for a Nakagawa, and he was a nobleman of Earth before some of his samurai decided they had treated me unkindly and followed me after his death." Tera poured three cups anyways, selecting one and a kind of biscuit made of rice the Uchiha Clan was strangely fanatically fond of. "I have learned a fair bit of samurai over the years they have been with me and my clan, Tadakuni-sama, Kinu-sama, and I have tried to teach them in return."

Kinu was the first to reach for her cup of tea, cradling it in so-light-they-might-as-well-be-invisible scarred hands that were not the mark of a merchant girl nor a noblewoman. "How does 'poison' translate into 'medicine', Terazawa-sama?"

"Terribly well. We poison ourselves fairly often, sometimes just to see what a non-lethal dose will do to the human body. There is an impressive collection of such research efforts in the poison library we maintain, and the beneficial applications therein."

"Beneficial?" Echoed the Hatake Clan head, no inflection in his tone to put a burden of answering on her but inquiring anyways.

Samurai turned shinobi, indeed.

Approving of such suspicion parsed so politely, she smiled for the first time. "Oddly, most remedies are poisonous if in too great an amount. Not all poisons are beneficial even in small doses. It is a strange disharmony we study. There is nothing in the tea that would harm an unborn child."

The Hatake Clan head's lady wife snapped her dark head up from contemplating the surface of the almost orange tea. "What?"

"I was unsure if you knew. I am a chakra sensor, I can feel the separate dense lightning chakra in your own earthy nature, Kinu-sama." Tera tilted her head to the side. "Congratulations, it's alive yet."

Shakily, going nearly as white as some of her clansmen and women, the woman placed the tea back on the desk.

The prudence was appreciated, but unneeded. She had to replace the set since Sarutobi broke the fourth cup.

"Tobirama-sama likely noticed as well, but he would see it as something not his business to inform you of." Tera murmured peacefully as the soon-to-be parents adjusted to the news in near silence. "However, as we heal as much as we murder with the very same poisons, I am not so passive. Kinu-sama, if you feel too out of sorts, drink the tea. It is specifically made to calm the nerves and not harm a pregnancy, my own mother took it while pregnant with my little sister."

Nibbling on her cracker, slightly sweet since she was serving a minty and slightly astringent willow bark tea, the Sekanji Clan head politely pretended deafness as well as selective blindness so the couple could have their moment.

"Terazawa-sama, forgive us but-"

"There is nothing to forgive." Interrupted the poison mistress sedately. "It is shocking news, I expected you to leave early. However…"

Pinning the likely former samurai making a go at the shinobi way with a hard look of her own, the kunoichi smiled again. Not a pleasant one this time, more a baring of teeth than a noblewoman's demure smirk. "I must warn you, the other clans of the Leaf will test you. See it as all in good fun, I
implore you. It is not maliciously intended, but somehow tradition."

Tadakuni gave her a confused look, white brows knitting together over narrowed black eyes. "I… what?"

"You just had a very terrifying teatime with a clan head you only belatedly realized was a poison mistress and not the head of another former samurai clan, Hatake-sama. It was all so very terribly surprising, wasn't it?"

"...terribly." Kinu repeated at first blankly, then with a wry smile of her own. "Why… I feel so faint I might just need some time to myself, Terazawa-sensei. So wicked of you to leave that tidbit out of the introductions."

"Alas, I am a very mean woman." Commiserated the kunoichi sadly over her cup of tea. "I am afraid this will be talked about for weeks, and give you as much time to yourself before the next round."

"My lord husband must apparently take issue with your conduct, and visit often to remonstrate with you."

"I will have the medicine safe for pregnancy assembled and ready for him to select anything to treat that which might be bothering you, Kinu-sama."

"Really, Terazawa-sensei," bantered back the former samurai's wife, getting into the swing of things admirably well, "scaring us so. Why… I might just not accept the invitation of any further tea times from different clans."

"Perhaps not, stress and worry is not good for the baby. Neither are sudden shocks, I am afraid." Refreshing the tea in her hands, Tera then smirked up to the other woman. "You might need to put off walks around the village with your lord husband, it is he who will have to prove his clan's mettle in the coming month or so."

Sniffing in mock offense, the clan lady turned to her husband. "I think I like Terazawa-sensei."

"Additionally if Hashirama-sama or Madara-sama, or their respective brothers, ask… I did just this. To anyone else… it was simply terrible."

The fanged grin she got from the white-haired male was sharp in a not entirely physical way. "I'm reserving judgement, Terazawa-sensei."

"Alas…"

Heaving a sigh as the two of them left her office turned tearoom, the kunoichi inspected the still full cups of tea situated on the opposite side of her desk. Smart of them, really… but depressing.

No one wanted to take tea with her anymore. Not even her baby sister, off as she was doing kunoichi things or trying to recreate the rock clones from her elder sister's stories with her little minion.

...where did Orochimaru gain his fangs from?

The Snake Summoning Contract, or just nature?
Momomi, as the 'poison user lite' version the shinobi of the Leaf were seeing if they liked or not to work with before risking something more lethal than the younger kunoichi, was merely a frequently-tasked-with-missions chūnin and significantly more busy than her poison mistress of an elder sister and clan head.

It was rare the sisters could spare the time to spend together now, between the younger teen's new duties as a ninja of the Leaf and the elder teen's various duties and more infrequent mission work.

"...and Homura-kun's coming along well, we're trying to apply the 'copy hand' mistake you made in your own clone experiments into a different trick to catch someone's ankle from afar. Or even to just pin someone in place." Mused aloud the younger and paler Sekanji, turning her head to admire the colors the setting sun painted their forestry new home with. "I think we're pretty close to making actual earth clones, which will just be… fantastic for missions."

She could then give the poisons that needed close deployments to the clones and not risk herself getting closer to her targets. Terazawa entirely approved of such developments. "I see…"

"What? I thought it was impressive."

"It is, little sister." Tera corrected with a wry smile for her. "It took me significantly longer to reach the same place as you and Homura-kun are at, more hands make for lighter loads and the resulting idea is certainly interesting enough to be not only useful but life-saving."

Oddly, their extremely pale skin did not show embarrassment or flushed features too well. Well… as long as a Sekanji had the paler than normal skin. Strangely thick papery white skin made them more like simply a painted people rather than possessing translucent skin in appearance. 'Tanning' for those with such skin was always interesting to see, a bleaching rather than a darkening of tone.

Burning was still an issue, excessively so, but they had very good creams for such issues.

The Sekanji Clan head certainly could blush with her tanner 'River native' skin, which while it did give her the motivation to control such reactions before they betrayed her horribly it made her slightly envious of her little sister's skin tone.

Momo pretended she wasn't embarrassed to hear her sister's praise for her with disgusting ease. "So what's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong, bluntly put." She was just being maudlin again. "Speak to me, little sister. I do not catch up with you that often, tell your elder sister what has changed and improved in your life."

"Yeah… no. You're not putting me off." Turning to fully face the elder kunoichi, brash copper clashed with tempered same. "I will start asking embarrassing questions around the village and your few… oh."

Tera blinked blandly at the miniature and paler version of herself staring back. "Oh?"

"You don't really have a lot of friends, still." Momo deduced keenly, considering the tanner variant of herself thoughtfully. "You've got... uh... that Inuzuka girl?"

"How observant of you."

"And now you're being bitchy." Dismissed the younger teenager, crossing her arms over her chest
and peering at her fellow kunoichi-in-arms suspiciously. "You have to have more, there's a *lot* of people here… do minions count? No…?"

"And who, Momo-chan, trusts a poison mistress that much?" Tera drawled out sarcastically, waving a hand to dismiss the issue. "I did this to myself, little sister. Do not be worried, I was fully accepting at the time of such consequences and what it would mean for me. Still am for no matter the price is, was, and will always be it is more than cheap enough. I am merely… strangely emotional right now."

"You need some… how did you put it to me? You need to get laid." Taunted the other Sekanji sister in an impressively bland tone of voice. "When is your next outing with the Inuzuka girl?"

"With Kesai-chan, and not for some time still." Unfortunately, as her little sister was so correct.

"Find a guy to gain an 'understanding' with from the village, then."

"Dear little sister!" Pretending to gasp theatrically merely earned her a sardonic look that was normally pasted over her own features more often. "I am already borderline scandalous, a dead intended husband to my name and a kunoichi clan head. Such *rumors* that would breed, unable to be politely ignored as out of sight and out of mind, would just… *ruin* my reputation."

"You have the reputation of being an icy, *poisonous* bitch, lady sister." Momo put forth bluntly. "A noble one, and ever so polite, but more a toxic flower than a delicate one. Much like your wolfsbane blooms. Do you really think finding yourself male company you can stand will ruin that?"

"Yes." Equally as bluntly spoken, the Sekanji Clan head stretched out her legs as the sisters sat back against the outer wall of their home. Their porch wasn't exactly *comfortable*, as it was just wood. "We are not men, little sister. There are expectations to heed to and accommodate as to not be 'shamed' and more importantly avoided more than we are. It is unfortunate, but while a 'loose' man would be seen as merely experienced an equally so 'loose' woman is a 'ruined' one. If there were more kunoichi, if there were other women in positions of power, I would be more free."

The expression pulled in return was mostly amusing, and slightly worried. "Do I have to manage that? I confess, words and intents are more your weapon than mine…"

"No. You are safe as a 'kunoichi', as we all are considered scandalous but not terribly so. Not someone that needs to be held up as an example to others. At least in the village." Tera considered it more, because it was a worry Momo had, but eventually shook her head. "At most, as my little sister, I would expect a few snide words over how 'wild' you are from those that do not understand our lifestyle. However, as I *do* have an Inuzuka friend, most such fumbles you make among our ranks would be ignorable."

Pursing thin lips, coppery eyes flicked to the far wall of the compound. They were not entirely 'far' away from the walls, and if a shinobi visitor wanted haste over manners… yes, she could sense them.

"Hashirama-sama, Tobirama-sama, the both of you seem to have an ill-acquired habit of eavesdropping."

A sheepish laugh, more for being *caught* than the shame being caught should give such men, and the God of Shinobi slid out from behind the far corner of the handsomely built house nearest the compound's wall with a charming smile. "Nice range, Tera-sensei. How far can you feel with that?"
"When I pay attention? Far enough, although I deem doing so to the very range of my ability to be rude while in urban areas such as the village. At least when I am 'home'."

"Might want to take note of that, Tobi." Half-ordered the Senju Clan head with a wave to his albino shadow of a brother, giving the young women perched on the porch another smile a touch less bright. "Lonely, Tera-sensei? You can always come over and speak with Mito, I don't think she'd mind."

"I tend to not want to inflict my special brand of wit on others I like when I feel out of sorts, Hashirama-sama." Tera demurred politely. "Aside that, while I know Mito-sama would receive me graciously she is also equally as busy these days. Imposing so, especially if I am less than an equally gracious guest, would be frightfully rude."

"And it would never do to be rude?"

"Exactly." Purred the Sekanji Clan head with a wicked smirk. "To what do I owe the occasion of a personal visit, my lords?"

Hashirama sprawled out before the sisters, grinning at them at an equal level even with how tall the sisters were growing these days. "What did you do to the Hatakes, Tera-sensei?"

"The lady of the clan is pregnant, I gave them the news and a convenient excuse to hide her non-involvement behind while they decide when to reveal the information. Do act surprise when you hear, Hashirama-sama. It wouldn't do for a healer to gossip about their patients."

Tera nodded to Tobirama as he lowered himself to a more dignified position than his elder brother picked to seat himself, for as much as her opinion on his nature had remained mostly unchanged familiarity did breed a kind of associated tolerance. He was normally her team leader or bodyguard when she acted as a poison mistress for the Leaf.

"That's nice of you, Tera-sensei."

"Of course, it now forces the others to be more cunning or be entirely flummoxed when they try to unnerve or otherwise bother the Hatakes."

"And wicked, great job!"

Easily pleased as Hashirama was, Tera was amused to be given a contradictory set of complements in short order. "Indeed. However as pregnancy is a delicate thing, I could not in good faith allow the shocking of the Hatake Clan's Lady to occur without warning."

"I'll ensure no one bothers you about it too much when the news comes out in time." Because the Senju Clan was oddly fanatical about the safety of children, which she appreciated given how many orphaned Sekanji there were starting to feel their way into the village, she just nodded in acceptance of the offer.

"Hatake clansmen seem to be the type to be hardy." Tobirama observed, because again he was an asshole.

"Which does not entirely translate to the women that marry within the clan, Tobirama-sama. A samurai-girl herself or not, Kinu-sama does not deserve to be put at risk for our amusements."

"You believe the child is at risk?"

"I believe as of right now, it is too early for the child to be the risky aspect. The mother's condition
is more important, as she is the one providing for them both for now."

"Damn." Hashirama spoke evenly, a small pout on his face as he absorbed her opinion and weighed it against his own. "That's... hmm. Thanks for picking up after us, Tera-sensei."

"Someone has to."

"Stop being a bitch, lady sister."

Tera glanced sideways, meeting similar copper eyes staring back at her. Both sisters smirked at the same time, more fond on the elder's and wickedly on the younger's ends. "Whatever would I do without you, Momo-chan?"

Said paler miniature of her stuck her nose in the air and sniffed. "Die a decrepit old woman before you are twenty, lady sister."

"Wait." Hashirama held up a hand, looking actually slightly confused. "Tera-sensei, don't poison me for asking or anything... but... how old are you?"

She paused, counted the date into her mental assumption, and hummed. "Seventeen. Just so, actually. My birthday is August fourth."

Momo made a dismayed noise she honestly expected to occur from the Senju Clan head if at all. "We didn't do anything for it this year!"

"We are busy, and I do not like to make the fuss." Reminded the poison mistress calmly. "We can throw a party for my twenty-first birthday, and then politely ignore I have an age."

The God of Shinobi made a kind of despairing noise she had not yet heard out of him, horror rapidly overtaking his classically handsome features. "Tera-sensei! I have a child older than half your age!"

"I am unsurprised." He had likely married Mito early, and that would allow a man nearly so or at thirty years of age to have a living child within a ten year age range. More likely more than one. "And?"

Brown eyes blinked back at her blankly for a moment. "You're kind of... impressive. I thought you were easily twenty-something the day we met. I hope my daughter ends up half the woman you are."

"Likely better, Mito-sama is a woman I respect and if she ends up half of her lady mother..." With a wave of a hand to dismiss that, the kunoichi still smiled back at the now cheerful Senju Clan head. "I will take that 'impressive' as a compliment, Hashirama-sama. Do inform your lady wife, I would like to keep my guts where they are now."

The man snickered, amused and highly pleased with her words.

As he was a shinobi, regardless of how cheerful, the possibility the threat she was trying to evade likely amused him as much as the comment about his daughter pleased him was high.

It was hard to tell.  
"So... then-"

"Brother, you have what we came for."
"Shush, Tobi. The gossip! That I can use to surprise Mito with!" Grinning at his long-suffering brother, Hashirama turned back to her with viable eagerness. "So… why does the Hatake Clan head continue to visit your compound in such an obvious mood, Tera-sensei?"

"Well… I did give them the offer to come speak with my samurai if they feel the need… but, more likely as this is Tadakunai-sama we speak of, it is for the pregnancy-safe medication I invited them to pick from if Kinu-sama feels too out of sorts." Tera contemplated the man, and Tobirama because asshole or not he was her comrade, and smiled evilly at the both of them. "Really, Hashirama-sama. Asking about my loneliness when you ignore your own little brother. I make the time for my little sister…"

There was a slightly surprised and highly wary, on both brothers' ends, pause. The Senju Clan head gave her a wry smirk for a split second before turning a more horror-filled expression on his heir.

"...Tobi! I'm sorry!"

"Get off me." Still rather smoothly sliding out of the lunging choke-hold the God of Shinobi tried to catch him in even when they both started in a seated position, Tobirama shot her a seething look before bolting off to avoid any more of his elder brother's 'love'.

Oh my, she had finally got a reaction of a level she had been looking for.

How… interesting.

"Oh no. I know that look, lady sister. I'm going to go find Homura-kun, plot away from me."

(As Terazawa eventually took Utatane Koharu on as an apprentice poison mistress in the making with the understanding that clan secrets were secrets, she saw more of Tobirama than she normally did so in the first half year the Sekanji Clan was part of the Leaf. Strangely, while smirking evilly around the man did make him nearly as grumpy as Uchiha Madara was normally the albino Senju Clan heir didn't avoid her person nearly as much as she had assumed he would now she knew a 'weakness' of his. Fascinated by the change in their usual interactions, she didn't manage to avoid Hashirama throwing her a belated birthday party with her own little sister's help. The Hatake Clan managed their 'hazing' period more gracefully than anyone else yet to date, earning them a better reputation even after Tera's warning was widely known to the other clans. The reasoning was solid, and Hatake Naname was born healthy anyways.)
"I need to come visit you more often." Mito informed Terazawa as the two of them waited for the rest of their respective teammates for their missions. "I confess, I haven't mainly due to the Senju paperwork… but that is no excuse."

"On the contrary, Mito-sama, that is an excellent excuse." Remarked the Sekanji Clan head wryly, well aware that however much her own had built up over the months with occasional pauses for mission work it had to be just a drop in the bucket for a clan well over nearly two hundred people. "As I have found others really do not like it when I serve tea, I will even suggest you bring a blend you like. The teapot included, if you feel that necessary."

The redhead seal mistress formerly of the Uzumaki Clan elevated her nose only just high enough to suggest a sneer without committing to the expression entirely. "Hardly, I would like to request your headache tea when I can fit in a visit. Possibly with some of the passion fruit juice to cut the bitterness? Please, Terazawa-sensei."

"Of course, Mito-sama. I would be delighted." Depressingly enough, she would be honestly delighted too.

Rare as it was now that she could fit in tea with her tiny apprentice or her little sister, it was even rarer to have tea with someone else she wasn’t related to or responsible for. The risk, and the queer pleasure she gained when someone took it, of taking tea with a poison mistress was too much for some.

...alright, all of the guests she had ever really received.

Hashirama did not count, he was probably half forest-kami rather than man and she actually doubted her mainly natural herbs or toxins would react as they should with him.

Madara made a sound that caused both women to turn to him, but the slightly dark expression on his face had mostly faded by then. "Perhaps, Terazawa-sensei, you should stop offering tea so politely. It makes most assume you poisoned it and want a test subject."

"Is having manners somehow taken as evilly intentioned these days? I confess, I did not realize that had occurred since last I checked."

"Yes, brother. I too am surprised to hear of it." Izuna remarked idly, as one of Mito's teammates for sealing something some nobleman wanted secured in the capital city of the Land of Fire he was more than close enough to overhear the conversation entirely.

The look the eternally grumpy Uchiha Clan head pinned on his heir over the mess of mission scrolls he was trying to match half-made teams to was delightful. "I dare you to take tea with Terazawa-sensei and say that again."

Giving his brother a supremely unimpressed look, the younger Uchiha turned to the poison mistress in question and smiled sedately. "Headache tea, Terazawa-sama?"

"Willow bark infused tea does wonderfully to rid oneself of mild to harsh headaches, lower inflammations of blood or flesh including sore throats, and is good to take when one feels feverish or achy with any illness." A slightly wicked smirk crawling over thin lips in return, Tera dug out her black grease paint to apply before her team left the Leaf when she noted Tobirama's arrival. "Also, it is delightfully bitter even offset with mint or fruit juice as Mito-sama requested. Very
good to take with sweeter things, Izuna-sama."

She stared at the pot of a paste made from purified grease and finely ground charcoal for a moment.

Willow bark was the root herbal extract that would later on be refined and concentrated until it resembled the 'aspirin' she once knew of in another lifetime.

Not quite as strong nor as fast-acting as it could be merely infused in water, but Tera had to wait for a Bunsen burner type affair she could use to boil off the unwanted or wanted chemicals from the juice of a plant and condense them in a separate container using glass tubes to collect the steam. One that could be programed or set for a specific temperature preferably, but she could make due with a thermometer if she must.

"...is she alright?"

"She's plotting, give her a second."

"I can hear you."

"What was it this time, Terazawa-sensei?" Mito inquired silkily instead of address that, giving her clan heir and brother-in-law a nod as he stepped up to the group lingering near Madara's desk. "Who next to terrify into politeness? More of your science?"

"However did you know? Really, Mito-sama, if you would just give over that mind-reading ability…" Tera glanced backwards at Tobirama herself to acknowledge his presence as there and looked back to the two she was talking to, actually unscrewing the metal lid of the pot. "I was actually thinking of perhaps refining the tea into a different form, a pill to be taken instead when one does not have time for an entire pot of tea. However… I confess, that is actually rather impossible for right now."

"Why can't you?"

"Because I cannot hold a flame at an exact temperature. Minute differences in heat could boil off something unwanted into the steam, which then when condensed into a new liquid caught in another container may harm instead of help." The poison mistress waved a hand not holding her tin of face paint, mind turning back to the issue and wondering how to solve it with the tools she had available to her now. "It is… annoying to know what to do but be unable to accomplish it so ideas and theories can finally be expanded upon."

So much could be refined from the information in the poison library if she only had the tools.

The silence near their group eventually roused the Sekanji Clan head out of her own thoughts, and blinking copper eyes blankly she stared back at the looks she was receiving.

"What?"

"I begin to see why it is your clan is so well known as poison masters." Tobirama spoke for most of them if the looks were to be believed.

"It is very easy to kill with something obviously toxic. It is harder to do so with something most would not see as dangerous, and moreso to heal instead."

"We, of course, mean no offense Terazawa-sensei." Mito interjected a touch dryly. "However… that is a very… interesting extrapolation of what is currently known about lighting things on fire,
which we may know a touch more of than most due to our Sarutobi and Uchiha brethren."

"Is that why salt added to a pot of water boils faster?"

"That, Izuna-sama, is a fallacy actually. It is harder to boil salted water than it is to boil pure water. You just believe so because it's in small enough amounts of salt-to-water to be ignorable and you've done something to 'help' but never really timed it instead of just wait." Tera corrected thoughtfully as she dabbed a finger into the paint to apply as street traffic started picking up now the sun had fully rose. "Easily checked, depending on the levels of salt to water ratios you use. Or just by attempting to boil sea water."

Izuna looked over to his still grumpy elder brother. "I want a mission to the seashore next."

"You'll get whatever you get and be happy with it." Refuted Madara sourly, frowning down at his paperwork that he was more staring at than working on. "Blow up the kitchen for all I care."

"...oh my. That would be hard with salt water, Madara-sama."

"Unfortunately, entirely within his abilities." Deadpanned the older shinobi back. "Why, if it wasn't for the cooking lessons our lady mother gave me-"

"Do be silent, brother."

"AND the fact he can at least eat just about anything as long as it's slightly edible-"

"I will set you on fire."

"The rest of your team is here." Tobirama commented blandly before Madara could continue with his rather ruthless teasing of his little brother and before said brother carried out his threat. The shinobi standing just a touch behind Tera and a little between both her and Mito looked entirely unbothered by the twin ugly looks he received for the interruption on the Uchiha side.

The poison mistress looked back at the wife of the Senju Clan head with the one copper eye she wasn't smearing grease paint around. "I believe Tobirama-sama might be hiding behind us, Mito-sama. Shall we step aside?"

"I would love to join in on your mischief, Tera-chan, however I believe it is not just my own teammates that have arrived. Good hunting."

"Travel safe, then."

"Since you and Tobirama are to ensure it, I believe such might just be a tad unnecessary."

"Bandit hunting, again?" Tera asked of the stoic shinobi that hadn't moved even with Izuna and Mito leaving to join with their third teammate as she switched which eye she was covering with paint.

"If you would be a touch less efficient in it, we would not be assigned such as often."

It was probably more because Tera's abilities were more mass-death or one-really-dead-person related than actually anything else, and a bit because Hashirama was very conscious about helping others without making it seem as if others relied on his gracious nature to give them work. Without the mission work, however 'below' her station as a clan head, she would be rather badly hurting for money right now. "Oh yes, make it my fault. You are no slouch on the field yourself, Tobirama-sama."
"Quit flirting and go hunting already." Madara snapped testily, per his usual when teams took too long to move for his liking so it wasn't taken personally, flinging a scroll at the Senju Clan heir's head instead of in her direction even if she was the last one to speak. "You are supposed to clear the route Izuna's team is to travel first, then circle around the village as much as you can in six days."

"Delightful, clearing bandits at speed."

(ooo000ooo)

"...that is not a bandit encampment." Kesai announced softly as if they had not realized that.

Tobirama didn't seem too interested in replying, crouched below their respective branches on the ground. Likely seeing if he could find more of the chakra signatures beyond Terazawa's range. Their new Hyūga teammate for the mission, Hiratoshi, had his clan's kekkei genkai eyes active and likely doing the same at a closer range as if she wasn't already keeping an eye out herself.

Really, two sensors on the same team was more than overkill. Tobirama was just entirely so on his own, even so. Adding a Hyūga was just a step beyond that.

As the arrangement was likely temporary, they had several different clan shinobi attached or mixed out on the remaining fourth squad member over the last few months, Tera found stating the unneeded unnecessary and instead focused on the Inuzuka kunoichi.

"Well... I suppose one could make the assumption that if they stole or killed anyone, they are technically bandits."

"Not raiders?"

"Depends, raiding for what or who? 'Bandits' would imply a limited chain of command and a local presence, would it not?"

Moto, the bigger of Kesai's two canines with white and brown speckled on his coat, snorted softly at her.

"I hold you all no grudge, it is in the past now." Tera commented softer still before turning back to the topic at hand. "Continuing. Worse of all, if we cannot call them 'bandits'... we cannot actually interfere even by insisting to know what they are doing."

The Inuzuka wrinkled her nose much as one of her dogs might, not looking away from the far group. "Why the hell do you say that?"

"We are not the only 'allowed' shinobi in the Land of Fire, and we certainly have not been given leave to stop or otherwise bother merchant caravans or travelers without due cause. They may be on perfectly legitimate business, hired through a nobleman or woman for this or that issue they had not wanted to bother or 'impose' on the Leaf for, or on nothing more than a guarded merchant run to acquire goods from a slightly more distant village than what is local to them. As we do not know, labeling them bandits now would only give us short-term security if their real reasons is otherwise made apparent to someone else before we intercept and it is not as it appears."

Tobirama glanced up at her with thinly slitted red eyes as he focused on her through the distraction of his senses, and in turn Tera glanced pointedly at the expression on their Hyūga's face. He was probably about her age, but honestly speaking he didn't have the poker-face of his clansmen and looked as if he wanted them to engage the group they were spying upon anyways. Right then, just because they were there.
Which, as for her previous stated reasons, would be a bad idea.

Hiratoshi wasn't stupid for all he was likely eager to prove himself to the Senju Clan's heir and the brother of the God of Shinobi, and the shinobi about her same age settled back into a less emotive expression.

"Kesai, track them backwards. Take…" here the squad's team leader trailed off, looking between the poison mistress and the Hyūga.

Frankly, she didn't envy his decision.

Tera was long-range wind specialist, which meant distant help for the Inuzuka's more short-to-mid range techniques and abilities but also kept them from entangling each other if they took separate targets. Additionally, she had the chakra sense to at least keep an eye on the surrounding mile or so of forest and pastures that made up the Land of Fire if she wasn't searching for something specifically.

However their newest teammate was a hand-to-hand specialists which meant the better likelihood of extracting themselves out of a trap or tricky situation easier without widespread death or destruction, being able to tag-team an opponent if there was one of greater skill, and the byakugan eyes on top of that would account for 'watch the tracker's back' issue.

Did Kesai need an eye closer on her back, or just leave it up to Tera to poison the air before any attackers could maneuver in place around the Inuzuka?

Either the Hyūga or the poison mistress had to be sent if any backup was to be had, Tobirama was their best combative shinobi and it was more likely he could out-think or out-maneuver the group of scruffy travelers better than the rest of them put together.

"...Hiratoshi with you."

Surgical precision over overkill, then.

Well… Tera's wind-borne poisons and Tobirama's speed together for a group, however the number?

This was assuming there wasn't a poison master over there, who could treat inhalation toxins quickly.

She had yet to figure that out, so if there was she was going to have a bit of a…talk with him.

Settling in on her branch to wait as the other two darted off after the two dogs, which basically meant sitting down against the trunk for the time being, Tera went through double-checking the integrity of her poison containers instead of twiddle her thumbs uselessly.

"Tera, have you given any thought to… the Mokuton, or how it works?"

"Vaguely, and only what I can do by observations alone."

Out away from the village, away from Leaf shinobi and the implied protection being among them gave, they didn't tend to use their ranks or full names. If, which was something neither of them were prepared to rule out, then using them would just give someone an idea who to target first.

Names were just as risky, but when one's companion was albino and wearing Senju marked armor as well as utterly uniquely striking that those few details would identify him in a crowd of people…
well, she would claim Tobirama was just too pretty for his own good.

She would too, the moment it became relevant to actually announce as blandly as she planned to.

"Do you think you can understand it?"

"I like to believe there are a few absolutes to the world. The day will always end, the night always comes afterwards, and if we can weaponize your brother's cheer then I could probably take over the known world… and I might try if I wasn't entirely disgusted by the idea of how much paperwork that would give me." Tera peered down past her own slightly scarred hip to the man idly watching her. "I believe that everything has an explanation, it is just a matter of phrasing the question correctly and understanding enough to make sense of the conclusions."

"What of an eclipse?"

"Measure the time, the missing daylight hours are still accounted for… so that means, if you experiment with shadows and how they act using a light source to collaborate the information, something passed between us and the sun. Like how there is still light even when storm clouds cover the sky in midday. We get some, just not all of it because something blocks it. My theory is currently that the moon passes between us and the sun on such occasions." Which was true, just not something she could prove just yet.

Or… it was true in a different world, and the conclusions drawn there might not apply in reality here but she was going to go along with what she knew until proven otherwise.

Tobirama's armor didn't creak, he kept it in good repair and too well padded for it to be metal on metal, but there was a slight unnatural noise from below her that corresponded to his chakra moving. Likely leaning against the tree which made the noise bark against lacquered metal. "Will you study the Mokuton?"

"Why ask? The last time I so much as mentioned wondering how it worked, you very nearly stabbed me to death with your eyes alone."

"I did not know you." Announced the shinobi flatly, as if that wasn't entirely obvious nor a dodge around the question.

"I highly doubt you can claim to know me even now. Comrades in arms or not, I barely know more than you are good at being elsewhere when someone tries to kill you. You have greater chakra senses than I do, prefer water if you must use your chakra, and are entirely still an asshole personally."

"I know you are a kunoichi of the Leaf. That you will interfere for someone else's health and safety even if they belong to a different clan if you feel it is at risk, regardless if it might negatively impact you and merely try to mitigate the damage if so or try to manipulate it so it won't harm you. You honestly like to question things, incessantly, until it fits into a box you can label… and if not, you will keep investigating until you can invent one."

Tera pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"Poisonous as you claim to be, that does not stop you from seeking out companionship. From accepting that others see their duties in different ways that you do, yet even if you can heal just as much you will also kill with the same ease because that is your duty. You will teach, in your own ways, if someone can present a good enough reasoning to you… and more than likely, they will not understand why they receive it."
"Okay." She interrupted a bit flatly herself before he could continue and start getting into details she would like to prefer she never betrayed herself with. "Your point?"

"I know you will not use what you learn to harm my brother."

"...this is the most I have heard you talk in months." Pointed out the poison mistress just a touch blandly. "Whatever is the occasion?"

"I think you may be able to understand it where I do not." Admitted the Senju heir, still without inflection. "Brother has been trying to teach me, or his children, yet he cannot. Either I just do not understand what he is doing, or I do not have the right terms to understand."

If Tobirama, a shinobi that could glance at something with chakra nature twice and know it inside out, couldn't understand it Tera held a suspicion understanding was a touch out of reach. "I make no promises I will not be able to keep."

"Understandable."

"I might have a few theories." Relented the Sekanji Clan head, reluctantly. "Most of which I am sure are wrong or ill-conceived. If your brother does not mind participating in a few experiments, I might be able to narrow down or create a new theory you could use to better your understanding of what he does."

Given how sharp the chakra signature beneath her went, Tobirama probably had dim views of 'experiments' and 'brother' being used together in the same sentence.

Tera plucked a pinecone to pelt at his head. "Not like that. I mean things like growing plants I can inspect and manipulate in a lab, perhaps growing a few hundred seedlings from seeds taken from the same plant, and only when that all is exhausted would we stop and reconsider the experiments' scope."

Utterly unsurprised when she failed to connect, the shinobi below her was fast, Tobirama gave her an unimpressed look in return for the assault.

"Asshole. We experiment on chakra construct clones or ourselves, not our fellow humans unless at war or the intent is to kill. Rarely a volunteer, more often those we have to kill. There are lines in the sand for us, I dislike the implication you keep heaping upon me."

The Senju Clan heir stilled for a moment, inspecting her closely, then tipped his head. "...my apologies."

The poison mistress inspected him back in turn, then glanced up past the forest canopy they had taken refuge within while the others investigated the trail of their suspected 'bandits'.

...no, the sky wasn't falling.

Hmm... well, there went that theory.

The man had yet to apologize for almost getting her killed as a girl.

Pushing off the rough bark, because as lightly armored as she was sitting on a branch was not comfortable, Tera dropped to the pine needle covered forest floor. This close to the border they shared with the Land of Hot Water, evergreen plants tended to have the advantage over leafy ones.

As tall as the Sekanji Clan head was now nearly fully grown, and while she was pleased to be
'unsightly' tall for a woman, she could just about stare level at his tattooed cheeks. As he was probably around or near six feet in height, she wouldn't complain.

"Alright. If he asks, and is willing to put up with me asking him to grow things in volume and occasionally on demand at strange times repeatedly for probably years, I will study the Mokuton. However much I suspect that after him such a thing will be near useless."

He nodded in acceptance of her terms.

...seriously, white shaggy hair and a white shaggy fur collar… and bright blue armor plates. In a pine forest, she could not think of a better 'kill me, I'm here' sign right now.

"Can we swap the Hyūga for a sword user? I honestly know how they fight better than a hand-to-hand combatant, and I'm still getting used to Kesai and her dogs however much help trackers are in a forest."

Tobirama shrugged in a more absent than dismissive manner. "That is up to brother, until we finally get one we like to work with someone else will be tasked to be our fourth on an ever-widening rotation."

"A Hatake then? Because since you complained about my samurai…"

"They repeatedly mistook their orders."

Tera paused, and thought about that. "You cannot really say so in so many words. You did request water."

"Not for it to be dumped on my bedroll."

"Then you should have been clearer over where to put it. We needed the kettle for dinner."

"The water was for dinner."

"You have control over water chakra, you could have caught it."

Tobirama rolled his eyes at her instead of respond.

"...is it just me, or are our teammates coming back with haste?"

"It's not just you."

"Oh… joy."

(After the scuffle with the fake-bandits-really-raiders that sacked an entire town, and one incident with Terazawa's 'No, really, it's slightly toxic. Do not touch my blood' minor injury, Izuna did somewhat survive his attempt to take tea with both a poison mistress and the wife of the Senju Clan head. With most of his dignity even, if only because he bolted an almost too-hot cup of tea ten seconds into it just to claim he survived to his fairly annoyed brother's face. Quite a few fire-natured shinobi tried to throw fireballs into the sea or briny rivers when they passed by them, and more than enough salt-water buckets were rusted from the same, that the Sekanji Clan did good business with burn salves for a while.)
Rediscovering Paths of Descendants Past

"I'd apologize, but you really did kind of bring this on to yourself." Momomi informed the Senju brothers blandly, waiting around because Terazawa demanded her help for the next round of experiments. "My lady sister's mad scientist moods are rare, but she gets ever so demanding in such."

...so Tera had needed a hobby to distract her from worries and stress and just general paperwork evils, and this was both useful and fun to do.

A childhood fascination of hers, trying to replicate what she once knew in the now using tools not suited for such. More was available to play with now that she was no longer using a banked fire pit and old kitchen pots, and really she knew the general guidelines for advancing several schools of thought but figuring out how to get there when all she knew was what to end with was interesting for all the headaches.

Sue her, it was fun.

"Alright, Momo-chan shut up." Taking the balls of mud from the plate she had them arranged on, a beaten metal thing she had always intended to throw out ever since Grass but it never seemed to accept being lost or discarded, the poison mistress spun her newest guilty pleasure.

A rolling chair.

 Entirely metal, a bit squeaky, kind of hard on the rear end even after years of wood or one's heels or nothing, no backrest, and it really looked more like a stool than what she knew as a 'chair', but a seat she could roll around the lab and not have to actually get up if she forgot a piece of an experiment halfway across the poison lab.

A push, and the kunoichi rolled over to the table her 'guests' were loitering near since she informed them that half of the things in the room could very well kill her entire compound if they were not careful. Bringing the plate of mud-balls with her.

"I'm glad one of us is happy." Hashirama commented a tiny touch wryly, looking horribly out-of-place in a lab dedicated to death as the poison laboratory of the Sekanji Clan. It was also perhaps a touch too clean for a man as earthy-forest-natured as him, although his brother fit in a lot better.

"That seems like fun."

All the Sekanji poison masters had private labs to arrange and stock as they liked, right now there weren't enough of them to even half-fill the first floor even accounting the few widowed women that manufactured the more popular poisons in bulk a few rooms over.

"There is science to do, I am always happy with such." Tera informed him primly, setting the plate down on the table. "This experiment, you will be getting past Momo-chan's chakra to grow the seeds inside the mud."

"I thought you were done with seeds after the daisies were grown?"

"I cannot understand what it is you do by studying the secondary effects. I know what you altered, and some of the how if not all of that, but the why still escapes me. Aside which, discounting the practice in spotting the changes Mokuton inflicts on the specimens, it was more of a test to see if this route of experimentation was worth exploring for a general understanding of what you do."
In a less professional state of mind, the Sekanji Clan head would admit to selecting the daisy seeds just to see Tobirama twitch as his brother grew flowers in that all so dangerous first experiment. Many Senjus had been very skeptical of allowing her to study their clan head's abilities, and revenge for the doubt and general getting used to the idea were never wasted efforts.

The point behind the selection delivered in the most pointed way she could without actually pointing it out, daisy flowers were not poisonous so the man should at least trust her not to select an experiment that might prove hazardous to his clan head's health, half the flowers were dissected instead.

A quarter grew right outside the medicine labs, and the last quarter was allowed to wither before also being sliced apart to see what there was to see.

That was alongside seventy-five naturally grown daisy flowers. She'd go pick twenty-five more wild daisies to investigate alongside the twenty-five planted ones in a few weeks and repeat it once a month until a variation was found or nothing could be compared.

Which would be so much easier with a damn microscope rather than the magnifying glass she had instead.

Additionally, she had Mokuton grown herbs growing across naturally grown specimens of several different species, for the study of if Hashirama changed the nature of anything by intent or accident. As the originals were still developing under the same strict conditions, in a lab located in the medicine lab's empty second floor, that study was still pending.

Kesai was going to grow annoyed with her if she missed yet another of their spar-spa-bar dates. The help with fighting off a close quarters specialist if she needed to was appreciated more than the Inuzuka probably knew, and so Tera would spring for the bill on their next few bottles of sake when they found a bar in whichever little village or bigger city they traveled to next.

Well, she just wanted the gross results of this experiment then she would pry herself out of the labs too. She tanned, and while her slightly more 'normal' skin tone didn't show the abuse as well as it would on the rest of her clan… she was kind of pushing it as it was.

Three months mainly living out of her lab instead of making a point to be seen as one of the 'Sekanji poison masters', of skipping the next 'hazing' round of the Kurama Clan, of turning down a few of the rare invites she had to visit others. The Sekanji Clan head was keenly interested in this field of study for all she suspected it wouldn't matter for long, but perhaps she might've gone at it too long and a break was needed.

As the mud-balls were scored with various number of marks, and they corresponded with her scroll of notes left open on the table with them, Tera handed the one with the least amount of marks to her little sister. "As we practiced."

Momo pulled a beautiful blank face at her, cupping the purified earth in her hands and forming a rocky shield of her own chakra around the seed inside. "Hashirama-sama?"

Obligingly, the God of Shinobi placed a finger on the mud cupped in her hands and sprouted the little bean plant.

"Little sister?"

"...that was odd." Momo eyed the tiny plant in her hands now, and the mud it had sprung from. "I… think I felt what you were looking for, lady sister."
The point of the earth chakra shield was not to impede Hashirama's Mokuton. Tera didn't see a reason to state such just yet, merely giving the second least marked ball of quickly drying purified mud over. "Again, see if you can replicate the feeling."

While growing flowers or plants when she asked might not be all that exciting, she felt rather slighted by how much more attention the Senju Clan head was suddenly paying them now 'something' was being considered.

The tiny bean sprout was grown just a tad too quickly for Momo, and the younger kunoichi had to shake her head. "Perhaps Tobirama-sama can catch it better than I? He is a better sensor than us both, lady sister, and it is his clan's ability."

"I wished to know if your ability was enough. Between you, I, and him we have a full range of weak-mild-strong chakra senses." Scooping up the next ball of mud, double checking it to her notes, the poison mistress turned to the now very tense Senju Clan heir. "Try for yourself, Tobirama-sama. A small amount of earth chakra to surround the seed inside."

Even with her words, it took a full second and the strawberry plant practically shot out the bottom of the handful of raw earth almost fully grown.

"...a touch less enthusiasm, Hashirama-sama."

"Sorry." With a sheepish grin for her, and another for his mildly annoyed and yet still tense brother, the God of Shinobi relaxed himself and touched a finger to the ball of now semi-dry earth.

Tobirama's brow knitted together when the new tendril of a strawberry bush pushed through his fingers. "...Terazawa-sensei, what am I feeling?"

"If I am right… well… once more, then we will compare our findings. This time me, Hashirama-sama."

A third clump of earth, one without a seed, was cupped in Tera's hands.

The tiny bush that sprouted just under Hashirama's fingertip was easily recognizable as a Mokuton plant and not a naturally occurring one.

She didn't have an earth affinity, or any skill in manipulating earth natured chakra.

"Aa… I think I'd like an explanation now, Tera-sensei."

"There was no seed. Whatever it is that the Mokuton does, it happens without seeds. The requirement is not a prior existing kernel of plant life and his ability, it is possible the Mokuton-plants are native to Hashirama-sama himself."

The expression that crossed Hashirama's face was both confused and a slight bit wary, but he accepted the Mokuton grown plant from her hands anyways as that was part of the deal she had to agree to in order to study the Senju kekkei genkai. "But… it's earth."

"Without a seed, the parts of a seed, or any previously grown plant matter to be utilized. All this is, isrotted plant matter so destroyed it has no form of itself. There were probably still plant cells in there, still viable and another possibility to how the Wood Release ability worked as it did, but Tera via Momo had taken pains to ensure there was nothing not 'earth' in the mud as leaf remnants or tiny stick fragments. "Again, this does destroy a few of my previous theories… but it sustains in the face of two of them. Once I've finished processing the data, we might even have a candidate."
As Tera couldn't check the earth so closely to make out cell structures so faded and destroyed they were near-invisible to the naked eye, the earth would be weighed and compared to the plants grown.

"Joy, being interrogated on my day off." Momo deadpanned, sliding out of her reach even augmented with the war fans she left outside of the building.

"Sorry, Momo-chan. But really, thanks for the help." Hashirama informed the girl, utterly pleased to hear there was some kind of progress on the study he had commissioned from the Sekanji and showing it. "It means a lot to me."

Her little sister twitched, not desensitized to the God of Shinobi being so personable and pleased in her presence, and shuffled herself a little to take possession of the newly washed plants Tera was extracting from very specifically separated mud piles on her working table using water controlled with chakra. "...you're welcome."

"Go plant those in the containers waiting in the next lab over, Momo-chan. I will catch up with you once I am finished here for your observation."

More observations were painted into the specially sealed scroll Tobirama made for her once she started her research, which was property of the Senju Clan just as much as the tiny bush seedling still in his brother's hands.

Including the fact that even with the pile of mud left over from the full grown strawberry plant, it was generally the same size as the others. She'd know for sure when she weighed the earth to compare to the amount she started with, but they looked like similar mounds of mud.

While energy to grow was very much a requirement... where did the mass come from?

...well, there had to be a reason why Hashirama's cells were so damn-

"Son of a bitch."

Tobirama about yanked his very special looking sword hilt off his belt at her exclamation, thankfully he didn't ignite the Sword of the Thunder God as he kept in mind her warnings of what kind of experiments the labs were for, warily eyeing her for a long and silent moment. "Was such necessary, Terazawa-sensei?"

"...I know what's happening." Frowning as her understanding of chakra sciences warred with the high-school and some college education Erin once got and bits of a leisure activity containing details of this life she really couldn't use all that often, the Sekanji Clan head turned back to the men. "Or at least... I think I know what's happening with the Mokuton."

Right section, wrong chapter. She had been in the ballpark, at least.

"I do know, because they are stable and somewhat easy to see with a backlight if you squint, there are such things as plant cells. Named because they very much seem like cells of a type, that make up the leaves and what thin slices of wood I have been staring at nearly constantly for the last few months. I suspect there are the same kind of cells making up animals and humans, I cannot see something that would be smaller than plant cells and yet be elastic or strong enough to make up parts of a human body. The question needing to be answered is how do the plants grow at all if there is the same level of earth left over and no seed to start it?"

Put that together with the Senju Clan head's very special naturally green chakra, which was so powerfully healing in nature that even Uchiha Madara had been unable to scar the man's flesh
through several years of war and several hundred attempts, and you had replicating human cells turning into still replicating plant cells.

Was it not just the chakra she had to investigate?

Was the Mokuton half a medical technique?

Tera had no blessed clue how medical chakra came into existence, right now it was all thread and needles with the odd green-glowing chakra coated hand that could be applied to heal minor injuries or reapplied to help seal up larger flesh wounds. Medical jutsu was... well, there was no medical jutsu.

Used too much, medical chakra had a terrible habit of causing necrosis or infections or worse yet malignant tumor-like growths. Useful for kick-starting the healing process, but a rough and chancy discipline entirely. Most of it likely learned because someone saw Hashirama healing someone years ago with special dark green chakra and wanted to try replicating that, which eventually spread in use farther and farther even if the best most others could do was a light green and sealing skin closed.

Good enough to prevent the need of stitches done in the field, and to keep the blood inside the human body.

Whoever started it, or for what reason, she might need the skill.

Apparently, that was her next branch of study the minute the men left her lab.

Kesai would understand... if she sprung for the spa trip the week after next.

Both Senju brothers looked between her piles of meticulously arranged dirt and the plant sitting in Hashirama's hands.

"...uh."

"Intelligent, brother."

Hashirama gave Tobirama a rare exasperated look over what seemed to be a reflexive pout. "I don't see you coming up with anything."

"Obviously, putting Terazawa-sensei's words together with the question, you are doing something to supply the plant's size entirely. Something this experiment was to see if such could be felt. This is on the assumption that any kind of summoning would have been caught by us, if such would have supplied the necessary start."

"Something I cannot see, and therefore cannot observe just yet." Tera finished a bit awkwardly. "I apologize, Hashirama-sama, Tobirama-sama, but we will be forced into a pause while I gather the tools I will need to continue this line of inquiry or find a new one to investigate."

"Are you kidding? This is the most progress we've seen in years." Appearing entirely thrilled, even the tiny Mokuton bush in his hands included looked kind of peppy under the strong lights of her personal lab, the God of Shinobi shot her a grin. "What do you need to continue?"

"Ideally? A microscope, but if one cannot be found then a few more magnifying glasses would not hurt." It would be a bit tricky, especially if she had to try and hold three to get the magnification she needed to see human cells, but may be possible. "Land of Wind glasswork, unfortunately."
"Think we can import a glass-crafter?"

"...Hashirama-sama, a glass-blower is the proper term for such craftsmen."

Tobirama finally put his sword hilt away and palmed his face. "I think that might just be a lost cause, Terazawa-sensei. My brother is an idiot."

The man suddenly started sulking, the plant in his hands wilting a touch around the edges.

"While we await the tools, I will study medical chakra. To investigate if what Hashirama-sama does has anything to do with how he can heal grievous bodily wounds, and if so how to refine such chakra another starts with in order to replicate what he can do for later application in a different study. As that will take some time-"

Another lightning-quick change of mood startled her. "We're kidnapping you. Tobi!"

Almost before Tera could process that cheerfully given admission of hostage-taking, Tobirama grabbed her arm and his elder brother's and wrenched them from where they once were to somewhere else entirely.

Hissing at the pain suddenly being somewhere with stronger natural light than the interior and somewhat more harshly yet apparently dimly lit poison labs inflicted on her, the poison mistress shut both her eyes and hoped she wouldn't get a migraine from the sensation.

Not that being flicked around the known universe was any better, especially for her and her sense of what was around her, but she had grown used to that after nearly an entire year on Tobirama's squad.

Worse of all, it was the middle of a Fire's winter. Chilly, wet, and miserable to be standing there in only a few layers of a worn yukata and cotton under layers that could be sacrificed to toxic concentrated compounds or flame easily enough.

"Hashirama-sama. I. Am not. Dressed. To leave my compound."

"We kind of noticed, even your hair is down which is kind of odd to see really. But! Tera-sensei, you need a break. Even Koharu-chan says she hasn't seen you in weeks. Madara made mention of it, and how much Danzō-kun is complaining of your disappearance." Without sight, she could yet still track the wildly moving and almost as searing ball of concentrated chakra that made up Hashirama's non-physical feel. The gesture to all of herself was not appreciated right now. "I appreciate the help, really I do. And I like you have so much fun with it… but you can't live in your labs Tera-sensei."

"More the pity. Koharu-chan should be researching and comparing poisons and the methods to apply them right now, she does not need me over her shoulder until she presents her preferred picks to me. Without decorum lessons, Danzō-kun has nothing to invite himself along to." Drawled the poison mistress, slumping a little when she felt Mito moving around. Likely to join them, and she really wasn't put together to call on another lady the rank of the seal mistress. "Also, I would like to lodge the protest that I was not able to secure everything in my lab before your 'kidnapping'. Hashirama-sama, if any of it gets contaminated… we will have to repeat the experiment."

"Which I am totally willing to do… the moment it looks less like you just recovered from a terrible fever."

"That does not show up on me nearly as bad as my clansmen."
"...you mean it gets worse?"

He was teasing her, but Tera rose to snap the bait anyways. "You should have seen Korenaka-san before I kicked him out of there. Those with white skin can show bruised eyes and gaunt appearances in ghastly ways."

"...Tera-chan."

With how reproving Mito sounded, the Sekanji Clan head just sort of gave up. She couldn't even argue in a straight line, much less match wits with the God of Shinobi, his formidable lady wife, and the man's still asshole-ish brother to at least get dressed had have her handmaiden found to put up her hair.

Prying one copper eye open, thinly because even the waning sunlight as the burning ball in the sky dipped lower to rest for the night was nearly too much for her, Tera warily eyed the newly arrived redhead to the group in what seemed to be the backyard of the Senju Clan head's home. "Blame your lord husband and your brother-in-law, Mito-sama."

"When was the last time you saw the sun, Tera-chan?"

"...might have been a week ago." Allowed the poison mistress dryly, prying her other eye open as she adjusted more to the light. "When I asked Momo-chan for a bit of help."

"And ate something not taken in bites between whatever you are doing?"

Tera blinked a few times, looking between the highly disproving redhead to the sad-puppy look Hashirama was giving her. "...what day is it?"

She didn't even need to look to know Tobirama's expression was probably equally as narrowly disproving.

"We have results, though."

"We commissioned the study months ago, Tera-chan. While I am pleased to hear some progress has been had, it will take years at this rate. You need to pace yourself." Coming down off the porch, Mito took her other arm and pulled her gently out of Tobirama's grip. "Come. I will loan you a few kimono, we will put your hair up, and you will have dinner with us. If you immediately go off back to what you were doing, I will see to it Tobirama kidnap you every night so I can tuck you in bed."

"You likely mean that as a threat, Mito-sama, but as the last time I was 'put to bed' was when I was four and my mother was alive…"

"I am sure I could do it significantly embarrassing enough to ensure there is no repeat of this intervention, Tera-chan."

"I am sure you would." Tera admitted a touch wryly. "I will be good, Mito-sama. Kesai-chan alone will likely see to that if I beg her."

(Inuzuka Kesai was delighted to be given permission to bother the Sekanji Clan head whenever she felt like it in hopes she would save Terazawa from another 'Senju family dinner', especially if she missed one of their spars. Tobirama also started occasionally showing up to 'prevent her from overworking', not that his habits were all that much better from what Hashirama had to say about it that one night she spent in the Senju compound. More often it resolved into Tera explaining her theories and conclusions to the Senju Clan heir while they obviously were not remotely near the
Sekanji Clan's laboratories, occasionally ending in debates about this or that which advanced her ideas of what 'chakra' could be applied to. Most others only once tried to eavesdrop or ask what they were talking about, and when even Madara wandered off claiming a headache from trying to listen to them Tera belatedly realized she had another friend. In the asshole that very nearly got her killed as a child, which she had not intended to gain.)
"So… why now?" Yamanaka Inokata asked of her without inflection in his tone as he was led into her uncle's sickroom. "You've been here for a year now, you could have asked for help at any time."

"And admit my father was so craven to strike at his own brother, our previous clan head?" Terazawa murmured a touch sardonically. "An even attempted kinslayer as family is not something to be proud of, Yamanaka-sama. Aside that, while before I could pinpoint no real improvement in my uncle's condition… it wasn't until recently that a turn for the worst was noted. Without a way to establish communication and ask for his wishes, all I can really do is wait."

Tera had been using what money she earned as a tokubetsu jōnin kunoichi to pay a girl from the clan to care for her uncle while she had other things to do, more often her handmaiden, as she had not the time to do it in and her little sister equally as busy. If she wished to be cruel about it, the man finally dying would release that financial obligation to care for relatives and give her more money to pour into the clan's coffers instead.

A year of being unable to move or even communicate had not been kind of her formerly healthy and very active uncle. Gaunt and sallow skin, even with the white tone, sagged off his frame. As much physical movement as Tera could force him into, mainly manipulating his limbs for him, prevented a total reduction of muscle bulk but the issue of non-activity was hellish on his form anyways.

Frankly even with tasking the caregiver with reading to him from various things, what few fable books there were in existence to scrolls of information from their own library to his own research journals, if he was aware it was possible long hours of being trapped in his own mind at night or whenever he was left alone might have already reduced the formerly quietly proud man into a madman wreck.

...and, quite honestly, Tera didn't really like Yamanakas all that well.

She had less issues with the Akimichi and Nara Clans, and even less so with the Inuzuka Clan. She didn't really favor 'clans' all that much beyond acknowledging they tended to share their specialties with one another, keenly aware how fast one clan's character and stance on subjects could change with a little time.

The people that made such up… was a different story.

"At this moment, all I ask is to find out if he can understand or comprehend anything."

Inokata knelt down next to the prone body that share a few similarities to her own self. "Easy enough. One second, Sekanji-sama."

Opening a listless black eye set in sunken sockets, the Yamanaka Clan head made eye contact with the completely paralyzed man and his chakra signature flared so oddly to connect to her own uncle's.

Tera waited, strangely nervous.

The 'weapon' her clan had 'traditionally' guarded was still very much unknown to her, no mention in the research journals and scrolls that documented her ancestors' research efforts and findings. It was entirely possible what she knew now was all that was known, and her father wished to find it
rather than abandon the duty entirely even if he had less than an idea of what kind of weapon it was.

Equally so, it was likely it was verbally handed down through the line of clan heads and her uncle was the last one to know exactly what weapon they had guarded.

"...he's fully aware."

That was... both good and not.

"He asks to talk to you."

"How am I to do so?"

"Place a hand on my back, then just don't lash out."

Hesitantly, Tera obeyed the instructions and delicately laid a hand on Inokata's back.

Someone else manipulating her chakra was a terribly invasive feeling, but she stayed any uneasy rolling of her wind affinity in order to allow the shinobi to do whatever it was he was doing.

Suddenly finding herself in a nearly picture-perfect if outdated replica of the Sekanji compound back in the Land of Grass, accompanied by a Yamanaka that had likely never visited that stretch of rocky grasslands, was jarring. "...oh."

The sky was overcast, as it was so often in the wintry months when they risked being snowed into their homes for days. It was raining instead of snowing, which was a bit odd to see and not actually feel hitting her skin. Conversely, the grass and ground was nearly *brilliantly* green and brown, the grass blades looking as if no one had bent them to pass yet and the paths almost neatly swept of rocks and litter.

It was bizarrely mismatched, as if pieces of fonder times were stitched together to recreate a whole image of something she really didn't see as a home.

Even so, Tera's chakra senses gave away the lie.

She could still feel Momomi with Homura, experimenting with the variants of earth clones they wanted to try to make using the empty land where she intended to commission a greenhouse in time. Koharu's keen blip of fire, darting around the poison library and badgering the new-father Ikeda juggling a baby boy in his good hand about this or that plant and where the notes are stored for them. Sarutobi Hiruzen's fluxing chakra nature bothering one of her samurai again, likely for another round of go they had tricked the kid into and utterly regretted doing.

A burning ball of dense fiery winds overpowering the lesser known signatures nearby, Madara taking on the duties of matching shinobi squads to the day's missions not half a mile from her clan compound's gates. While his own little brother Izuna burned brightly among even their bonfire-bright of a clan compound a few hills and a forest tip away from the Sekanji, likely the one teaching their students this day.

The blinding sense of forest-glee that was Hashirama looming in the distance as he went about his clan head duties, a sharper bite of wintry water which made up his brother going about his business somewhere in the village closer than the Senju Clan compound. Mito's dense serenity as she likely amused her husband while keeping him on track. The daughter of the God of Shinobi Inari learning something tricky with a tutor she didn't really like all that much but respected. Kesai's roughhousing with her dogs with others of the Inuzuka, fiercely gleeful earth sense the other
kunoichi only got when trumping one of her clansmen in a spar.

"Damn." Inokata breathed out, glancing blankly around at their imaginary surroundings with equally blank lavender eyes. "I've never had a chakra sensor share this with me before… that's… wow. How far out can you feel, Sekanji-sama?"

Well… if he wanted to know.

Tera expanded her senses, concentrating actually this time instead of taking a glancing impression around which was indefinitely politer than pinpointing everything. It had not been all that long ago doing so was just survival orientated, and she quickly sorted the impressions she got.

Each and every one of her remaining twelve samurai, sharper than the elemental chakra sensed shinobi flicking around the village and humming dutifully pleased as they went about the village for various tasks asked of them. One of her fellow poison masters with a water-sense to him, likely Korenaka, being darkly amused as he worked away in his part of the poison labs. Some few widows and wives of the Sekanji Clan, occasionally tinged with grief or sorrow but most content in their chores and making their next meal or more medicine for the village. A riotous sense of children, mainly earth-natured but few more with water and a couple with fire bright sparks to them, training in the empty spaces around her clan compound with various tempered chakra-sensed teachers.

Her handmaiden Yura, given the day off, seeking out fine cloths and silks to purchase with her saved up pay and likely intending to buy more ornaments to stick in Tera's hair on the sly from her amusement.

The elderly clan healer, tiredly pleased and so very thankful he no longer had to work on poison but merely medicine and expanding his grasp on such without being expected to save the lives of a terribly rough band of people when they did foolish things, and his muted chakra of watery-acid-fire toiling away as a utter contrast to the poison master a building away.

Inokata's very wispy-feeling chakra under her fingertips, not entirely insubstantial but very slippery for all he had an earthy-sense to him.

Her uncle, a very wet sense of a waterfall's force. Dying yet, ebbing and twisting in ways that were not healthy even at rest.

"Sekanji Katsutsune. Uncle."

"Terazawa." It wasn't quite his voice as she recalled it, somehow less actually spoken and more a memory of what he thought he sounded like.

Uncle and niece stared at each other hard.

They weren't a loving family, not even politely distant. Frankly, she had barely known her uncle for years. Even when she became all but the only of-age heir, he didn't really do all that much to help her and just let her fiddle around with the samurai and the former courtly servants instead.

Bitterly attached might actually be the only real way to put it.

"Wasn't that more than enough of what you needed? To save us in the end?" Katsutsune observed wryly, tiredly leaning his mostly remembered bulk against the four-roomed house he had lived within most of his life. "You would have resisted being put in charge of the clanswomen, just because of some half-forgotten sense of being overlooked."
"Half-forgotten? When it was left to me to raise Momo as mother wanted, without help?"

"If you wanted the duty, you could deal with the sacrifice."

How very… pre-Konoha.

Yet still, Tera understood. The reasoning behind it, which her uncle couldn't hide because there was a Yamanaka trying to pretend he wasn't present for old ninja family drama. He bridged them, so a sense of communication could be established, but things and feelings brought up tended to drift along the same bridge.

"What weapon?"

"...so you were listening."

"I could hardly do otherwise. I needed to ask you to retain one of the shinobi to teach, yet my craven wretch of a father got to you first."

Katsutsune made a bitterly amused face, oddly as she had seen him deal with temperamental shinobi they were related to and snotty courtly 'lady tutors' alike with merely a bland face of indifference. "Around the time of the Sage of Six Paths, Grass was a large military state. It fell, obviously, and some parts of what made it so powerful remain. Two groups split about what to do with the remains, the Grass Flowers that wanted to make use of it and the Grass Fruits that wished to ensure it was never used again. Obviously, the clan hails from the Grass Flowers."

Ironically, as flowers were sometimes toxic and therefore possibly where the Sekanji Clan started their study of poisons. 'Cutter' was the clan name, but no one was afraid of a florist.

"Where is it?"

"Beyond us, pass the sea. An island with a castle, lowest level." The former head of the Sekanji Clan gave her a look. "We ensured no one did that, remember girl? Anyone that passed our clan compound was killed off."

...nothing said 'search here, morons' like a zone of utter death.

The grin that cracked her uncle's face was not a nice one. "Eventually, people got the idea that we didn't like that."

"...which might actually have to do why we were so reduced in number, wouldn't it?"

"Assuming if the Grass Fruits did as they claimed, who else would be left to know there's something there?"

"Anyone with an ounce of suspicion for what we 'guarded' so heavily." Tera examined her uncle's still amused features. "Were we all that is left of the Flowers, uncle?"

That ugly grin faded into a grimace. "I cannot answer that, too much has been lost over time and just general age. Now what will you do, girl?"

"Do? Nothing. I will inform Hashirama-sama of clan history, but aside that I have no interest murdering off the remains of our clan to try and 'retake' what several generations of shinobi and poison masters have likely trapped and secured far better than I could understand."

"You always were smarter than Katsutarō. Part of the reason he disliked you so, niece."
"Because I wasn't my dead elder brother?"

"Because you were always at least three steps ahead of where we expected you to be." Another wry expression, more than she had seen out of the man in real life. "As well as at least four steps to the side, different and never really needing the guiding hands… but so bitter we didn't give it to the point you unnerved just about everyone with guilt or hatred both. You were what your stillborn brother should have been, yet it was the fourth child, the third girl, he fathered that survived and actually lived."

"I had many issues as a child." Tera stated diplomatically. "Mother was the only one to ensure I had anything like familiar loyalty or fondness for the clan."

"Issues… is a way to put it."

"What is it you now want, uncle?"

"What else can you do with me? Kill me, Terazawa. This is no kind of life."

"Korenaka-san has asked for the… pleasure."

"Fine. Bastard's a bitter cousin on my mother's side of the family but at least family, if you don't want to do it…"

"I never hated you to the point I wanted your death. You were merely there."

"I noticed. I heard you protest your father's action just before he struck me."

"You were the best we had left."

"Not anymore." Katsutsune remarked almost whimsically. "Goodbye, niece."

"...uncle." With a nod to what was likely only an afterimage of the man she vaguely knew just from close association, the poison mistress turned to the Yamanaka that brought her to his mind. "I am ready to leave, Inokata-sama."

The snap of chakra which was the breaking of the bridge between her and her uncle was not as disorientating as suddenly being back in the room of her home where she had set the man's ruined body to be tended.

The Yamanaka Clan head got to his feet, following the Sekanji Clan head out of the sickroom and into the wide kitchen/dining room that opened to all six of the rooms this house contained. One was the bathroom, oddly wider and obviously a repurposed room to act as such just fitted with water pipes and the features to make use of such. Three were bedrooms, her own as well as her little sister's and the last her uncle's sick room. One was her study, which had a sliding wall to be opened up to receive anyone coming to speak to her without requiring them to go through the house and be an actual 'guest'.

The last one held a water heater, odds and ends they might need but had no dedicated places to store them, as well as a few old chests that originated from Earth and had been used and reused for the traveling part of moving to Konoha.

"He's still alive." Inokata pointed out, refusing the offering of tea she silently asked with lifting the kettle in his direction by shaking his blond head. "You could ignore him asking for death and try to rehabilitate his body until he can control it again."
"We have tried. My craven, worthless father used a kind of neurotoxin taken from a specific breed of cold sea snail, Yamanaka-sama. The body is fine, healed and mostly whole... it is his nerves, as his spine was what was cut into with such a toxin. There is nothing left to heal."

The shinobi lingered yet, through her putting a copper kettle to boil and getting out the tea blend Mito recommended to her their last get-together.

"Was there something else, Yamanaka-sama?"

"...while the two of you were talking, I might've been paying more attention to your chakra senses. It's different, to say the least." Curiosity was a besetting sin of shinobi, so that was forgiven the same moment it was confessed as he had informed her he did so. "Just... when your past was brought up... something distinctly not you reacted."

Tera blinked coppery eyes at him blankly. "More things in my head? I assure you, Yamanaka-sama, I have been getting training in genjutsu and how to disable such. However ill they work against someone with a chakra sensory ability."

"More things?" Echoed the head of a clan of mind-reading ninja, slightly incredulously.

"Hashirama-sama and Madara-sama apparently felt as if spreading that news about was not in their or my best interests. Long story short, Yamanaka-sama, my mother put me under a Yin Release compulsion after a rogue Yamanaka eliminated my memories and any sense of self I might have held then. To breed familiar loyalties and fondness for my little sister."

"Huh... that's... brilliant."

The poison mistress smiled wryly, turning around to see the man still lingering in her home fully. "It was what Madara-sama and I concluded as well. I would speak to Hashirama-sama before making use of my mother's tactic, he and his lady wife seemed rather displeased at the time."

"I suppose asking if you had an imaginary friend as a child is utterly useless..."

"Why?"

"You have a very good sense of self right now, Sekanji-sensei. This other thing... it was older than you and I didn't think you were a woman of self-deception."

...Erin?

Trying to turn her attention inward was a lot more difficult than a Yamanaka made it seem, and she couldn't feel anything out of sorts within her own mind or chakra. "I... do not feel anything not myself."

"You wouldn't, it's mostly dead and already part of you. In enough time I wouldn't be able to find it. If you had a childhood imaginary friend, and given your chakra senses, it would've had to have been with some kind of chakra signature of it's own. Or at least you fooled yourself into thinking it did. Whatever one of my clansmen did to you, most of it impacted that sense of self and the shards were incorporated into your own sense of it now. Not entirely seamlessly, but mostly."

Which likely meant Tera killed off what was left of Erin. Whatever lingering sense of the other woman had shattered, or perhaps even the press of eking out a life in this realm of existence had drowned her voice out because it wasn't able to help her survive, and there wasn't much left of the other at this late date.
Had there been some way to save her?

"Mostly dead, Inokata-sama?"

"Even now still just fading. Whatever you did, and a sensor with a childhood imaginary friend is a fascinating concept Sekanji-sensei, I would appreciate it if you could inform my clan if one of your or one of your little sister's children develop the same."

"We will see. It will be more likely Momomi-chan will have children, she knows more than enough to gain a poison mastery of her own but refrains from either disinterest or a hope for a family of her own."

(Korenaka supplied a poison, to the specification that it could not hurt the already invalid man, and Terazawa was the one to dose Katsutsune with it. It took less than five minutes for the body to die, and for one of the few last remaining pieces of Tera's past as something other than a leader or a kunoichi noblewoman to vanish like so much smoke. The funeral rites were not well attended, few had known the former Sekanji Clan head had been alive at all much less what had happened to him that left Tera the one in charge. Katsutsune's ashes would be the first of many Sekanji to come to be buried next to the clan compound's walls. Tera made plans to return to Grass and obtain both her mother's and Rokkaku's ashes to transfer to their new compound in Fire and add when she had the time.)
Reforging of a Bonshō

Inuzuka Kesai took one gigantic step pass the still standing gate. "And... now I have succeeded where the entirety of my clan has failed for years. Damn, I'm good."

"Indeed? Would you like-"

"Nope. You ain't ruining this for me, hime." A fanged grin was shot at Terazawa over a shoulder, the other kunoichi whistling as she strolled off to take up a spot on the walls. "Besides which, you use poisons and I get to use Moto and Nori."

Tera glanced down at the two panting dogs at her ankles. "...what if I get to use Moto and Nori?"

"Oi! Lazy-fur-butts! Move it."

While their Inuzuka teammate went off to guard the walls with her dogs, and the new if rather silent Akimichi teammate went to do the same on the other side of the compound walls, Tobirama merely stood there.

"Nothing to say?"

"I was invited in." Reminded the stiff man blandly.

"Probably for the best. Poisons do not care for how strong one is, they kill all the same."

"Is that your way of asking for some time, Tera?"

"No... I do not greatly mind the company. I miss them, but while grief is a hard thing to afford the space and time for... I managed it eventually well after they were gone."

Rokkaku's sword was still implanted over his final resting place, and her mother's own grave was worn with both the passing of seasons and repeated care.

The poison garden of the Sekanji Clan's former compound seemed to have survived the uprooting somewhat, brambles and bracken quickly taking over the formerly neat earth and choking out most of what herbs or flowers that had re-sprouted after they had left it to seed.

It seemed as if nothing had been touched after the Sekanji Clan abandoned their former holdings, likely half because it was a ninja compound and half due to the fact they were a clan of poison users. No one seemed to believe it was worth risking whatever toxic hell such a clan of people would leave behind, especially as not everything could be taken with them.

The thatched roofs were rotting, some more than others given which had been re-thatched recently and which hadn't. The wood making up the houses still stood, some shattered remains of her father's last act broke the appearance of a peaceful if somewhat abandoned hamlet tucked into the foot of a mountain range.

As it had been an orderly move, there wasn't lingering debris of packing and another's things strewn about the worn dirt paths winding from here to there. Aside the long-broken few huts, there wasn't damage to suggest why the Sekanji Clan finally abandoned their rocky reach of Grass.

...which probably contributed greatly to anyone's suspicions there were traps and toxins left behind for the unwary.
Entirely likely, given they were poison users and a few the children of such ninja.

Tera finally started moving, because as much as her uncle's likely long-awaited death had removed some of the strain from her financial situation she couldn't afford to pay for a four-man shinobi team for long. However nice Hashirama was for allowing her to request her team for this, it was still an escort mission even if the one they were escorting was herself. With the members of their team, including a clan head and a clan heir, specific requests were expensive.

The rites for a funeral wasn't all that special, or at least not in the Sekanji Clan. If you died, preferably with honor instead of doing something even they saw as criminal, you got a pyre and a clay pot.

One to be burned on, the other to contain the ashes in the clan's graveyard. Stone pots, molded from those with an earth-affinity, was for work and clay was for personal reasons.

It hadn't been something she paid a lot of attention to... until Rokkaku's death.

On the closest side of the compound to the mountain range, there was a plot of land completely empty. So long as you didn't dig.

The wall near this part of it was marked and painted over repeatedly, names of long dead Sekanji Clan members etched as some kind of final marker that they had existed and someone remembered them.

Momomi had to tell her which of the tiny stone statues was planted over their mother's grave, Tera had never really bothered to learn which it was until it came time to bury her elderly samurai.

"Here."

The sword had somehow gone a year without care or protection from the elements decently well, and pulling it from the earth it had been stuck into was the work of seconds. It wasn't rusting just yet, but it probably needed to be sharpened.

Tobirama got distracted by inspecting the dead man's sword, while Tera excavated the terrain around where she knew the pot was. "He was a samurai, right?"

"The samurai. Rokkaku-sama was one of my terribly unfortunately deceased husband's samurai, and he found the fact he never trusted me before his lord and master's death to be some kind of personal failing of his honor. In the aftermath, after I identified what killed the noble, he decided to gather up the… only sons and prospect-less samurai that would have to either move on anyways or become ronin and follow me to address that 'failing of his honor'."

"...didn't you kill your husband?"

"We were never married, merely arranged to be so, and… well, why would samurai follow the one that murdered their lord?"

Tobirama moved slightly, picking up the sheath from the ground next to the grave where she had dropped it after planting the sword a full year and some months ago. "Rumor around the Leaf is that you either poisoned them with something that requires them to stick close or die… or you bewitched them somehow. Depending on who you ask."

Tera smirked, amused because there was probably a way to do that first one as outlandish as it sounded. "In truth, there was a saboteur embedded in his staff before I got there. Not to say I was best pleased to be arranged to marry a man five times my age and expected to live in a gilded cage
such as the courts of Earth's nobles, but I didn't have to kill him."

She… merely supplied the saboteur with an early opportunity he had been a touch too surprised to react well too.

As that wasn't a claim of not killing the man, just that she didn't have to, it was still truthful.

Tera's searching fingers hit something smooth and not-natural, and after widening her hole she managed to extract the simple clay pot from the earth.

"Do us all a favor, Tera. Do not mention such to my brother."

"Why?"

"He will inform Mito, who might spread it to Madara. Then we will get all the missions the Land of Fire noble ranks wish to discuss with a shinobi team. I am not fond of noble courts, yet they seem fond of me more than I like."

"...a touch late with the warning, Tobi. I informed Mito of what happened with my terribly unfortunate husband and his death almost immediately after the news made the rounds in the gossip mill."

The aggravated sigh the man heaved at her was delightful.

Placing Rokkaku's ashes to the side, Tera shuffled over slightly so she could investigate where Momo informed her their mother rested. Going slower this time, for she knew where but not exactly so, she tried to feel out the likely more fragile pot of clay and ashes.

"What do you think of the Akimichi, anyways?"

"It isn't the first time I've worked with Atsukane, he is..."

Tera frowned, slid her hand over a bit under the ripped and matted tangle of roots, and searched a different section of the hard and cold earth. "I believe the term you are looking for is a 'fan-boy'."

Tobirama shot her a look, annoyed and finally actually showing it around her made the contortion his tattooed face went through still fascinating despite half a year working with him occasionally and sometimes stealing his girl-child student to corrupt. "It is difficult to find Senju that do not immediately obey my every suggestion as an order, and harder still to find other shinobi that will not do the same."

"Your brother is the God of Shinobi."

"Exactly. I am not."

"You are also the Senju Clan's heir."

"For now." Dismissed the albino shortly, somehow un-ironically. "Brother has more than enough time to either amend clan law for kunoichi to lead us or have Mito bear a son. Moreso, these days."

"That still makes impressing you the closest most get to impress the man who earned that ever so weighty moniker, Tobi. He doesn't go on many missions unless it is with you or Madara." Sitting back on her knees and thinking about the issue she was having, the poison mistress eventually shuffled backwards a little and ripped up the grass with her wind affinity to spare her nails. "You are seen more often, are a lot more approachable than Madara, and yet will stand there and listen
while another speaks even if Izuna has long since learned to avoid being caught so."

Interesting that the Senju were thinking of just letting Inari lead, but really not all that surprising.

The Inuzuka didn't have any gender-based laws, and a few of the others hadn't due to situations very much like the one Tera found herself in. The only acceptable candidate being a child and yet another of the same 'line' and heritage being female and more than old enough to understand the weight.

Of course, that did mean very strange marriages of older women to too young boys happened to sort of divert some of those 'line inheritance' issues. Simply reagents were also sometimes used, less often because that meant the entire clan would accept such and not suspect the 'reagent' of manipulating or abusing their position.

Society norms were changing, as they were no longer stationary and lone shinobi clans or roaming ones. A different 'normal' was coming to be, as strangely as that felt to apply to ninja.

Tera had been a clan head before moving to the Leaf. Given the agreements and arrangements struck between the Leaf and her many growing clans, the situation before joining the village was forgiven and what was then just was.

She had her leadership confirmed by Hashirama, by joining the Leaf as they were, and therefore none of the other clans could do more than grumble that the Sekanji had a kunoichi leading them. The 'no sabotage' rule preempted quite a lot they could have otherwise done to her, and to her clan, to try and make her step down earlier or to put a male in her spot if their sensibilities were that pushed.

The poison mistress was a trend-setter before there had been a trend to set. Did that make it a non-trend?

"Ah... here." The urn her mother's ashes had been placed within was not nearly as unmarked as the urn with her elderly samurai's ashes. It was still whole, but the lid seemed to have broken in half some time ago and mixed what was in it with a lot of earth. "...I do not think this will survive a trip back to the Leaf."

"If we take enough precautions it will."

Tera carefully dug around the pot, freeing more of it and checking to see if anything else had broken.

Tobirama crouched across from her little pit, pulling a scroll of paper out of a pocket of his pants. An ink bottle and brush were unsealed from them, and the man wrote out a set of three additional seals on the empty part of the paper. "Set them on these."

(ooo000ooo)

"Couldn't you have gotten my mother's as well?"

"You can certainly do so once you are clan head, Mashi-kun." Tera eyed the request for yet more burn salve, wondering what the hell Madara was doing with his Uchiha to need that much on hand. "However, as I had to pay out of my pocket to retrieve Rokkaku-sama's remains, picking up my mother's was just convenient. More for my little sister than me, in truth."

Mashi, her eldest half-brother, eyed her paperwork-covered desk warily.
Smart of him.

Over the year, and a few months, the Sekanji Clan had been in the Village Hidden in the Leaves it had grown exponentially. At first there were the tiny requests, something for fever here or there and a couple rashes from the local flora. Easily handled as they were building up the stockpiles, even with them trying to document and account for the native species of plants with a corresponding section of the poison library.

Now she had requests for bulk medicines to treat everything from childhood fevers to excessive blood loss.

The Naras had given over what seemed to be the village's basic needs when it came to herbal remedies as of the Sekanji joining, taking advantage of that offer to be subordinate to them when it came to production with a vengeance so they could focus more on the forest-grown herbs, medicinal research, and their deer.

That list of 'needs' had to be amended both when a new clan wandered into Hashirama's grips and when the new census was taken at the start of the year to account for the travelers and people still wandering in.

She was going to have to request a few Nara clansmen to help shore up the deficiencies in how many hands she had available, or ask one of the other poison masters to help her refine the processes to need less hands overall.

Perhaps some could be worked into bigger batches.

"Do you require something else, Mashi-kun?"

The 'genin' shuffled in place slightly, scuffing one sensible ninja-sandal against the dirt path leading up to Tera's office. "...can you stay clan head?"

Startled, the poison mistress jerked her eyes up from the Uchiha request to see her little brother fully. "Mashi-kun, you will not be clan head in days or even for years yet."

"I want to learn poisons."

She eyed him in exasperation. "We all learn poisons."

"I mean… bloodroot. Then I'll probably branch out into animal poisons, since everyone else does herbs..."

Tera rubbed her forehead. Her blood, with wolfsbane doses done over years to ensure a slowly rising level of poison lingered in her body to provide her immunity to it, was toxic enough to begin with. She really didn't want to know what the other two poison masters of the clan took, nor what any body fluids they had were contaminated.

It was how her uncle had hidden his preferences from everyone, and she didn't have the information to call bullshit or not yet.

"Lady sister… we need poison masters more than we need to replace you."

"You are not putting this on me right now."

"I would apologize, but… I am not sorry." As that was spoken with an evil eye for her desk, she could really see why he wanted to give a miss to the entire headache.
"A poison mastery will not prevent you from being clan head."

"Unless I pick one of the poisons with a nasty background in inducing madness."

"If you so much as try, I will take you over my knee." Snapped the poison mistress. "Mashi-kun, why do this now? You have years yet before you will be anywhere near the age where I would contemplate stepping aside."

"Because, now that my teachers have deemed the group I'm with good enough, we're starting to leave the village's walls. A few... others have taken it to mean I should replace you already." Mashi pushed himself up, dusting off the shorts he was wearing more absently than because he cared how dirty he might be. "I don't want to deal with that, I can't do that. Contemplating leading a shinobi squad when I hit Momomi-sama's rank terrifies me. Trying to do what you do is... even scarier."

"You will not have to leave our former home and try to find a new one in a new village." Pointed out the tokubetsu jōnin kunoichi blandly. "With any luck, such things are far behind us. All new things are scary, get over it. If you take over for me, only once you're sixteen brat, I can then focus more on the poison labs."

"Either way, you or me lady sister, we will need more hands. Why find something new if what works still works?"

Cradling her forehead with the hand not holding an inky brush to write out orders or amendments to proposals laid out over her desk, Tera stared blankly at the miniature copy of her uncle through one open copper eye. "Two years. Two more years, just occupy the position using me and that 'sixteen or no' thing, and then take another look at the situation. If you still do not want to be clan head, I will find a new heir."

Regardless, she needed to speak with Hashirama. No one was going to get away with trying to talk her little brother into something he didn't want.

To be brutally honest, Tera actually didn't really feel all that much affection for her 'heir'. He was her brother, yes... but up until they were suddenly orphaned she had not known him and he her.

She'd try for him, helping him out with their other siblings or tasking him to do 'diplomatic' minor things with a samurai to help him, but that was it. Like most the rest of her clan, when it came to those she was suddenly lumped in with rather than her little sister Momo or the samurai and servants that picked her to follow, she could quite happily deal without their nonsense.

The fact she would take care of them anyways was... how did Tobirama put it?

Her 'duty'.

Tera didn't really like being 'clan head'. There were perks, and someone in her position earned a lot more automatic respect that she likely would not get otherwise, but it did not outweigh the headaches.

The very minute someone else was in charge, she would be taking off for either the nearest red light district to get completely hammered in broad daylight or locking herself in her lab for three straight months.

...perhaps Kesai wouldn't mind helping with 'debauching' her reputation so utterly no one would look twice at her again once she didn't need it...
"I don't think my mind will change, lady sister."

"I was… afraid of that."

(Terazawa next met up with Mito a few days later, explaining how simply awful it was someone had spoken to her preteen clan heir and how the boy decided that instead of letting himself be manipulated against what the clan needed he decided he would abdicate for another sibling instead and could not be talked out of his decision. Especially awful as that now meant she had to serve as clan head of the Sekanji for more than a decade to give her next half-brother time to learn the duties and not the most of a decade she would have already had to serve. That such a meeting, and discussion, took place in the pavilion of shinobi awaiting mission assignments was happenstance. That Hashirama had been bothering his little brother and his co-founder of the village the same day Mito and Tera had a set of missions to be assigned to was merely luck. Mashi still did not change his mind on his stance of wishing to avoid paperwork and the headache entirely.)
"Apologize."

"I am very sorry, Sekanji-sama."

Terazawa eyed the Uchiha, one of the two teachers Mashi had as a student ninja of the Leaf, skeptically for a long moment. "...very well."

Izuna gave a rather bland smile that wasn't really much of a positive expression of his mood as he physically held the other Uchiha shinobi in a bowed position for much longer than anyone would do even if apologizing. "Honestly, Terazawa-sama, I don't really believe him."

"Neither do I, Uchiha-sama, however… I suspect as much as you or I might be able to force him to say the words, actually believing them is something Uchiha-san is not prepared to do as of this moment."

Which… really did not help right now.

It took Madara less than three days to hunt down which shinobi tried to pressure the Sekanji Clan heir to the point the genin abdicated immediately instead of simply fill a slot until another heir could be found. The fact that such sabotage came from his own clan had the man very, very pissed off.

However, the damage was done.

Tera now did not have a heir for her clan due to outside interference, as Mashi talked his own little brother out of filling the positions and the rest of her half-sibling boy-children were under the age of five. Able to be named such but unable to be trained immediately to take over for her in a few short years, and more just names of eventually possible heirs instead of someone in training to take over for her.

It wasn't just her baby brother who would bear the long-term ramifications of this, it would be the Uchiha Clan as well. They were shinobi, suspicion was always hard to shake even when it was applied in casual or well-intentioned ways.

Flexing the antique wood of her Land of River war fan with long fingers instead of flutter the weapon of silk and sharpened steel in her face, the poison mistress turned back to the assembled 'Council of Clans'.

"Ironically, as he has now insured the occurrence of the very reason he felt such actions were required, I do not feel as if anything further can be sought from this incident." Tera informed Hashirama a bit blandly, because while she wasn't happy at all someone had messed with her heir there really wasn't a lot more she could demand to be done over it. "I thank you all for seeking the truth out on my behalf."

"You are not going to cry sabotage, Sekanji-sama?"

Glancing to the Hyūga Clan head, who was really kind of a dead-fish personality wise and therefore tended to slip through people's memories even when they really shouldn't overlook him as one of the noble clan shinobi heads, the kunoichi had to shake her head in return.

"Honestly speaking, Hyūga-sama, my clan's former heir had his confidence shaken well before the
Sekanji came to the Leaf seeking protection while we rebuild ourselves. By the same incident that left us suddenly orphaned in one blow and myself in charge. If just words were able to encourage my little brother into abandoning his duty to lead the clan now, even from a teacher he should heed as is proper, then in the long run he may have done the same after I spent the years to train him or otherwise harmed my clan by his reaching clan head then abdicating in the end. My clan's laws state if you abandon duty once you may not return to the position of leadership, so if I had stepped aside only for him to do the same... I can use this. I will, not happily but it is not entirely beyond salvaging somehow."

There would be more words, rumors and slander with outright opinion stated as facts, as the Sekanji Clan heir abandoned the duty from such it would imply that the clan head might be susceptible to the very same. The poison mistress could look forward to at least a decade of rumor-management and fighting, which was ever so much harder to do within the minds of very opinionated people.

Madara hadn't exactly moved all that much since he threw himself into his chair so grumpily at the start of this 'hearing'. He kept his expression half-hidden by a lot of wild hair and a general moody glower most of the time anyways, the outright nasty glare on his face had actually caused several of the shinobi and heirs outside the room 'guarding' their clan heads from sabotage while assembled in the closest thing they had to a government aside himself and Hashirama to shrink back from him.

Tera could honestly see why, and with chakra senses the sheer disapproval of the gathered clan heads actually weighed down on her a little just as much as the one they were 'disproving' of.

Madara's on the other hand… was an ugly rage and only that. Hard to look straight at even if she was not the one he was murderously angry with.

*Hashirama's* expression added to it?

She had expected more a kicked-puppy rather than the utterly blank and merely contemplative air the God of Shinobi had about him right now. Which wasn't fair of her, she knew the Senju Clan head could very well be serious if required and his exhausting mood swings were more a thing for when he was happy or wanted to throw someone off.

Somehow, it made the non-expression worse than his usual moping when something didn't go his way and when someone teased him as inconsequential or a bit dim. Forcing those that normally saw the happy-go-lucky shinobi in his silly moods to realize Hashirama now thought of the ninja forced into a bow as a threat and not one of 'his villagers' at the moment.

"We cannot let this go, Sekanji-sama." The same legendary shinobi now informed her in a completely level tone, eyes warmer when they looked at her and less so when it came to his 'brother's' delinquent clansman.

"I do not expect you to do so, I merely state that on behalf of the Sekanji I will not be seeking out further damages to be addressed." Tera tilted her head to the side and considered things, then shook it again. "Effort on my behalf will be better spent training up one of my truly young siblings into taking on a heir position more so than trying to avenge my lost one as of right now. I leave it in your hands to prevent another heir from abandoning the duty out of fear and the desire not to be manipulated against the best interests of my clan."

She didn't have to release the next heir to a teaching pair for instruction, it was just convenient to do so and mainly encouraged to help knit relations between the clans. This happening at all meant the next one would not be trained as a shinobi of the Leaf but instead as a Sekanji Clan shinobi, and
she couldn't otherwise knowingly risk her next heir in such an already sabotaged manner while they were impressionable.

Which… this was also not good for the camaraderie the Leaf was trying to build between clans.

Also, in being gracious as she was in her role as a clan head of an admittedly minor ninja clan over the sabotage even with the expected outcomes happening anyways, she could use it to further her eventual hopefully equally as gracious admittance to the Council of Clans.

While if Mashi had not abdicated then she only had seven-six years of being clan head of the Sekanji and their numbers would not improve that fast even if everything went perfectly, she now had a decade to wait before someone else could take over for her. More, if another heir was scared off and she had to await whatever children Momomi would have in time.

Which was just time for the Sekanji to repopulate their clan and more, making that 'hundred shinobi' law loom in the distant future as a reality instead of a distant possibility.

Meaning it was now more than likely she would still be clan head when it came time for the Seknaji to join their shinobi fellows on this very council.

Their samurai did count, unfortunately.

Tera wasn't looking forward to it, she had more than enough paperwork.

"We appreciate the vote of confidence even in the face of this incident, Sekanji-sama." Sarutobi Sasuke informed her wryly, tone desert dry. "Be sure of the fact this council will seek to insure this does not reoccur."

She was tempted to say she sincerely hoped not, for previously thought of reasons, but refrained as she really didn't know half the shinobi that made up this council all that well. Now she actually had to seek them out and get to know what kind of men they were, as it was no longer something she could task a heir to do instead for when it became relevant to the Sekanji after her reign.

Tera now had to go visiting around the Village Hidden in the Leaf, instead of invite others to tea in her possibly-terrifying usual polite manner and accept the avoidance as 'best I can do' even if that was what she wanted regardless of the distrust.

It was going to be uncomfortable for a lot of the others at least, more than just for her. Especially for finding such reasons for a poison mistress slash herbalist to visit other clan compounds.

"The Sekanji Clan thanks you all for the consideration in this matter." Said mistress of toxins opted to end on instead of anything else, the formal words to end the 'interview' with a lesser shinobi clan appealing something to the council.

Bowing, mostly to Hashirama and Madara who really had tried to ensure the very first kunoichi clan head of their village had not needed to worry of such things while sheltering her wounded clan under their wings, Tera left them to debate the final outcome of 'clan sabotage'.

(ooo000ooo)

"You realize this will reflect badly upon you."

"Better just me than the clan, lady sister." Mashi informed her bluntly, standing next to Tobirama because she asked her nominal squad leader to ensure the child was not unduly bothered too much while waiting with the rest of the clan heirs awaiting news and new orders from what the Council
of Clans was assembled to meet over. "I can accept being thought of as a delinquent leader more than I can accept the very real possibility of mistaking something because I was tempted with or by another into ruining our clan and the work you have put into trying to save us."

"It would not have been as bad for you as it was for me." Terazawa reminded her former heir and eldest of her half-brothers tiredly, rubbing at her temple because the ache there had not gone away for days now. "At least, not the start of it. I would never step aside until you were fully trained and ready, but now you have insured that will never be possible."

"If you make your thoughts on the matter known widely enough, most of the damage would be mitigated with the results of this hearing." Interjected the Senju Clan heir a bit blandly for the subject matter from his spot as a wall-flower, as if he wasn't trying to give a preteen ninja advice on how to avoid the repercussions of his actions while they were with the heirs of the major clans that made up the Leaf. "Being aware of your own faults and seeking to ensure they will not harm another is not as ill-thought of as simply abandoning a duty due to the pressure or expectations it would make one suffer."

"I am not that optimistic, Senju-sama." The child shrugged the advice off, although he did nod to show he heard and would likely heed it to the shinobi that had once been his senior and not entirely out of his rank as he was now. "Even as my lady sister would say 'those who matter know or will seek out the truth and those who don't do not matter', I cannot actually believe it however I try to repeat it to myself. I am not forged as you and my lady sister are, in the face of overwhelming odds and the very real possibility of death staring you down alone to the point you know exactly what you are capable of and how to handle it. Being tempted to actually try asking my clan head into stepping aside early, before realizing how bad of an event that would be in the very next lesson I had on how to manage a clan of poison masters and the duties within such, made it brutally clear I am likely not who should lead us next."

Tera flatly stared at the little brat for a few long seconds. "Well… at least the decorum lessons stuck."

"I now rather look forward to what you turn Koharu-chan into, myself." Tobirama mused thoughtfully.

She shot him a slightly exasperated look. The fact that Sarutobi Hiruzen sunk backwards behind the Nara, Akimichi, and Yamanaka heirs was slightly amusing enough to refrain from commenting however much a headache she had at the time.

"Lady sister, you do realize that with the frequent and lingering headaches you have reached the utmost level of toxicity you are capable of and now risk death." Mashi reminded her neutrally, as if it wasn't a clan-related health issue and not one to discuss openly in front of-

Wait, the albino and tattooed shinobi who was now very interested in this topic of discussion was her squad leader.

"I am aware. I was hoping to reach a point my spit is toxic enough to use as a weapon, but will be easing myself from that ledge in truth now that I know it is impossible." She was being honest, Tobirama's 'scary face' was not needed. "And you, Mashi-kun, I do know full well what you are trying to do."

"If you will not listen to me or your own younger lady sister, then I see no other recourse but to inform those you will listen to."

"I listen perfectly well, I was aware I am between the 'safe zone' part of toxicity and the 'sudden
"death' limit."

"It is just somehow tradition to see how toxic one can make themselves with their chosen poisons, even when we risk those we desperately need to stay alive."

Tera pursed thin lips, annoyed she had to give the kid that point.

It was a clan-wide fascination and hobby, and for most masters of poison a long-sought after dream to make themselves as poisonous as possible. Which rarely worked, depending on the toxins used, but attempted anyways because 'why not?'

Thus why she remembered her clan had a terrible habit of dropping dead suddenly, even when they were the best poison users in the Land of Grass.

"You are a brat, and abdicating on me."

"I have already abdicated." Mashi claimed to her face, with audible relief in his tone she honestly could understand. "I can help you manage the others, lady sister, but it is best if I do not place myself in the way of more temptation than I can safely handle."

"You've stuck me with all the paperwork for the next decade at least."

"Better you than me."

The snort, hastily stifled as it was, was totally the Shimura Clan heir. Asshole number two quickly looked away and pretended he and the rest of the clan heirs sans the Uchiha's wasn't eavesdropping terribly on the Sekanji Clan representatives.

Tera pointed her folded fan of windy death in Tobirama's very unimpressed face. "I blame you for this. He's going to be insufferable until I ease back my doses of poison."

"Which you should have done months ago when the headaches started lingering past your dosages." Mashi reminded her pleasantly, as if he wasn't ensuring his former fellow heir knew the issues he couldn't watch for anymore as an heir to a poisonous clan. "I apologize for leaving it up to you, Tobirama-sama, but my lady sister is a stubborn one."

"I do not mind, Mashi-kun." Spoke the Senju Clan heir levelly, which did not go with the narrow-eyed glower on his tattooed face. "I appreciate the information you have left to me to use in order to ensure the clans and clan heads of the Leaf remain in good health."

About to protest she could watch herself, she hadn't yet died thank you very much, the Sekanji Clan head found her words preempted by the doors she had passed through not too long ago suddenly being blasted off their hinges by a large amount of fire chakra.

Not aimed such, just a general bleed-off of Madara's roiling temper. He really did have an explosive one, apparently literal in this case.

After a pause, wherein most the shinobi readied themselves for attack rather than put out the flames, Tera flicked open her fan and put out the embers using wind pressure alone. Tricky to do without spreading it, but learned over the years she had camped out in the wilds of Grass as she hadn't wanted to be the reason another wildfire sprang through the dry plains during the summer when water was hard to come by.

"Thanks, Tera-sensei!"
"...not a problem, my lords!" She called back through the ruined portal, wondering why Hashirama was now suddenly ever so cheerful given the issues they had assembled to deal with, then turned to the gathered heirs as the very wall regrew doors behind her. "Someone should still douse that, however."

Tobirama sighed and unfolded his arms as he pushed off from the wall, the only other one in the antechamber that hadn't immediately gripped a weapon. "I will, this discussion is not over Terazawa-sama."

"Mashi-kun and I have paperwork to do, to ensure his removal as clan heir is documented and the reasoning such for later generations to review if another such incident occurs. Very sorry, Tobirama-sama, but we will be unavailable for some time." Quickly pressing a hand to her brat of a younger brother's back, the poison mistress and head of a clan of such creatures smiled politely as she physically shoved him to the door. "Please tell Mito-sama not to expect me this week, will you?"

(Terazawa didn't avoid another 'intervention', Tobirama had more than enough patience and cunning to outwait the week then inform his brother of the apparent health issue with his 'best head for science-y things', and annoyed by such she tasked Mashi to keeping track of the health of all Sekanji poison masters for the rest of his 'miserable leadership-free life'. The Uchiha that tried to manipulate his student against the best interests of another clan was stripped of his teaching rights, his partner a Shimura Clan shinobi given the same treatment for not reporting or stopping the sabotage, and said Uchiha remained under a kind of 'clan arrest' with missions only done with a more senior Uchiha to ensure he didn't try such against anyone else with orders to never interfere with the Sekanji Clan again. It wasn't the last time someone tried to manipulate Tera to step down, but it was the last time it was caught so easily. It was also the last time she had an heir in more than just name that was trained up decently well who also wasn't born in the village.)
Deadly Humors

The Nara and Sekanji Clans had a decent relationship, for all it was based mostly on 'thank fuck someone else killed themselves on this first' and a differing of a secondary specialty in medicine and herbology that could be related if one squinted and ignored the usual outcome of the second's development.

What Nara clansmen that came by the compound of poison users were generally there to see which of Terazawa's various dead relations or ancestors might have investigated the components of their findings and who killed themselves on seeing how toxic their possible remedies might be. Half the risky part of testing and developing new medicines, willing human testing, done well before it became relevant and saved the Nara a few false-studies already in the three years the Sekanji had been part of the Leaf.

It was patently obvious who became deathly ill and who just dropped dead in such ledgers, by how the writing styles changed slightly or were written by someone else entirely as the study was declared 'lethally toxic' at what point, and that it had happened to Sekanji poison masters fairly often.

However, due to the very reason they were visiting, many Naras tended to remain rather aloof from the descendants of the ones that did the research and murdered themselves on it. It wasn't maliciously intended, but just based in a lot of awkwardness.

There wasn't a socially acceptable way to say 'thanks for your son/husband/brother/dad/uncle/grandfather/cousin-somewhat-removed/distant ancestor/ect. He did good work before he killed himself, didn't he?' without coming across as... a touch insensitive.

At best.

Naras were not fans of stirring up that kind of drama, however much the Yamanaka Clan might be, which was why the relationship was not all that close if really respectful. Mainly because of understanding that awkwardness on both sides and seeking to lessen the feeling as the information was being put to some good use and would keep being so if the Nara clansmen returned.

Shikatema was the current clan head, not really a frequent visitor but at least someone Tera knew decently well from meetings on how much of the medical stockpile needed to be refreshed or resupplied every quarter of the year and how much more needed to be stored away once a year. He was the cousin to wild-man Nara, Yoshitaka, she originally helped out first with her knowledge of toxic things.

Yoshikata was the Akimichi Clan head's old childhood friend and teammate, not Shikatema who had a different set of cousins to his inter-clan alliance mandated 'team'. Hence why he asked her about the fiddlehead fern poisoning issues, and not the Nara Clan head.

Apparently the Naras had some half-incomprehensible babble of a formula to keep each of their three clan heads from being trained together and putting all their heirs at risk at once. They were debating on removing it, the utterly bewildering formula which included what moon phase one heir was born on and how it corresponded to how many of the next generation another of their allied clans had, but for now that was merely speculation.

"Terazawa-sensei... what do you know about spotted sicknesses?"
Almost automatically offering the tea which was nearly never accepted as just a time-buying delay, Tera put down her brush and sat back with her own cup as she warily eyed the man standing in the doorway of her study washed in the strong light of the early day. "The pox? A bit. I take it you are not asking just because, Shikatema-sama."

"Two of the blacksmith families that heed to the Akimichi Clan suddenly came down with it, and some of it spread to a few of our own kids before they would admit it. Apparently," and here the man's tone turned a lot more bitter than the bland drawl he normally spoke in even if his features didn't tighten, "they didn't wish to 'bother' us about just a bit of an illness."

"...well… fuck." There really wasn't anything else to say about that. "We don't have regulations in place for epidemics, do we?"

"I barely remember the last time there was an outbreak of a fast-spreading sickness like this among even shinobi children. I do recall how much it kills, Terazawa-sensei."

"That… that is mainly because few actually have the stomach to study the sickness after it has reaped it's victims, Shikatema-sama. Which, as you probably suspected and have come here to ask, we did."

Even Tera couldn't keep up a facade of false-bravado however much she had trained herself to do so in the face of everything she was hit with, because this was going to be truly painful as most, like her, suspected with the 'advance' state of the village such illnesses would be hard pressed to grab hold of the villagers.

Which was true when it came to sicknesses like cholera and yellow fever, but not the smallpox virus or influenza… or worse yet, the plague spread by insects or animals and not squalor. Focusing instead on just injuries that shinobi were famed for, which was actually really her responsibility rather than illness although she did that anyways because it was available to make for the Naras, she had completely put the idea of a plague outbreak out of her mind for later contemplation.

Which she never did get around to doing with all the other distractions she had at hand.

Many would not have done as she had, and gotten both herself and her baby sister sick of smallpox while children still in order to build up an immunity to the virus later on in life. When it became deadly to get and have to suffer through.

"If it is what I suspect it is, the children will mainly be fine. If it isn't… well, either way I need you to go to Tobirama-sama and ask that he allow you to read over the study. Exactly that, and if so you will be beholden to keep that quiet… but some of what I wrote into the 'observation' sections might help you two figure out a way to keep things from spreading or fight it off in your specialty. I apologize for the ramblings, I did not expect this."

"More fools us, Terazawa-sensei." The Nara Clan head didn't immediately wander off in a stride that would alarm no one, instead the solidly built and very darkly toned shinobi remained planted in the way of her leaving through the open wall of her study. "...you're going in."

"Yes. With as much of the anti-itching, blister treating, rash preventing, fever fighting, and astringent medications as I have, as well as most of which will fight off fevers and otherwise stave off the bitter conclusions as long as I can." There was no guarantee it was the smallpox virus, it could be another 'spotted sickness' mutated and twisted from anything she could identify. "One of us that knows how it spreads have to go, Nara-sama. I have been studying poisons and medical chakra these last few years. You are smarter than I and focus more on development of medicine. If
anyone can make sense of half-suspected ramblings and concentrate that into something that can help… it will be you and not me however much I know my own mind."

"I can't-"

"You have to. The Sekanji Clan is well trained to follow decontamination procedures, as am I to the young still learning what their duties are. Almost everything we do is deadly, while you train up more to aid us it has to be someone from my clan to put it in place among the sick and protect them. I leave you and the Nara Clan my poison masters and users once they return from missions, the library and the labs, and will send the samurai to the Akimichi to aid in whatever help is required. I only ask you help them while I am otherwise occupied, Shikatema-sama." Tera reconsidered a bit of that, then gave the man a wry smirk. "Of course, I hope you do not mind if I task one samurai to keep my little sister from following me in. If I die… the clan requires an heir to take over for me."

"Which leaves me moving whomever I don't want to risk in with your people, and puts making more medicine as something I can task my people to do instead of risk them going back to just get sick too. I know full well what you're doing, Terazawa-sensei." Even still, the Nara Clan head looked rather annoyed with the situation. Impressively done poker-face considering she was probably ghostly pale even with her 'River native' skin tone. "And… I have to thank you for your consideration and graciousness in doing all this while you risk your neck and safeguard mine…"

"Hardly. If I risk myself, I do not put my people at risk unknowing of the true extent of the illness."

Shikatema gave her a pointed, old-fashioned look that suggested she do physically inappropriate things far away from him. In silent volume, even.

Good gods above, could the shadow-shaded shinobi glower if he felt like it.

Morbidly amused, the poison mistress raised a shoulder in a shrug that would be suited more for the tea rooms and dining halls of a noble court. "One of us has to do it, and you have more numbers. In the most brutal terms, you will still lose more people than I will in the end if nothing can be done yet you can absorb the hit better than I can even now while continuing to produce the medication needed to combat the illness."

The Nara stared at her hard for a long second, then turned and punched the doorjamb violently before spinning on a heel as if he hadn't split his knuckles open on her home.

"Shikatema-sama." He paused, but didn't turn around to face her. "Focus on the blood. If I am right, that is where you will find what I suspect might aid us now. Some children tend to live and become immune to variants of the pox, some just die completely in a plague, others beat the odds and never become sick of it again and I had both my little sister and I infected with the type of sickness children survive best in hopes of preventing some variants from catching hold of us later in life. Something allows that, that reaches from everywhere there is skin to the mind."

"...and the blood would be the best available method by which anything would travel from both places to others." Finished the shinobi darkly, running a tanned and now bloody hand over the back of his neck. A sigh, heavier than one normally expected from the bothered Nara clansmen, and he did turn back to see her once more fully. "Good luck, Terazawa-sensei."

"I will need much more than mere luck, Shikatema-sama."

(ooo000ooo)
"...oh dear."

Izuna snorted harshly at her soft words. "It never fails to surprise me how polite you are, Terazawa-sensei. Even when telling another to go fuck themselves elsewhere."

The poison mistress inspected the newly arrived and very speckled-looking Uchiha Clan heir for a moment, kneeling down to help him with some of the fast-dwindling supplies of anti-itching and the closest thing she had to an antibiotic cream. "Well… I do not see what loss manners cost me, Izuna-sama."

The still very prideful and level-headed heir to the Uchiha Clan took the container from her and applied it himself, spreading it first on the welt of red spots inching up his neck that were the scabs this illness caused it's victims. "Time, perhaps? I know full well you can swear when you like to, and will drop the manners the moment they get in the way of what you need to do. Right now isn't the best time for such."

"In actuality, right now is the best time for such."

Morale and just general human decency were safeguarded by one being 'polite'. If Terazawa could manipulate the really desperate and slightly terrified sick she was nursing to what she could only hope was their survival into being passively irritated but not hostile then she would use it until she was blue in the face. Especially as they were forced to do nothing but wait, wait and die.

She was a long-range tokubetsu jōnin kunoichi, close range she could manage one or two attackers on her own but if more pressed… she couldn't use poisons against those with already compromised health without killing them herself. She already had to use her chakra affinities to corral those desperate harassing the nurses a few times already, mainly water with one incident with wind, but that would not last in the fact of a mass riot of ill patients.

"...brother said to inform you Shikatema found what you directed him to, they're working on whatever it was. No one but he and Tobirama really understand your notes, even after Hashirama tossed the entire 'observation notes' in everyone's faces in hopes someone could follow your bewildering thought process."

"I believe that is the nicest way anyone has ever called me 'a bit of a mad science geek'." Tera murmured wryly, earning herself a harshly hacking laugh from the deathly ill Uchiha.

Three weeks, of nursing a steadily growing number of sick with dwindling supplies and burning the dead as they died, for the Nara Clan head to find and start working on what she wrote down in bits and pieces and rambling discourses in her study of the Senju's Mokuton and Hashirama's cells. That was not good news, she had been hoping against hope it would have been found faster and already be in production.

Recovering his breath, the shinobi glanced upwards at the night sky over their heads as yet more of the recently admitted sick got sorted into categories for the gloved and masked 'nurses' to attend to.

They weren't… all that close to the Village Hidden in the Leaf, a rather distant cottage-affair of the Nara's expanded with canvas tents and a wire-mesh fence to keep others away while the epidemic ran it's course through their villagers.

All of it would have to be burned the moment the last sick one died and a week after the last one that might survive had his or her fate decided. From the cottage to the tents and even the very clothing they were all wearing… to the very dead this illness wrought out of formerly living loved
Tera studied the man's profile thoughtfully as he rubbed the medication into the sores flecked up both arms.

While she had never asked about Tobirama's 'saved Izuna' comment, it had been because she suspected if she waited long enough the man's fuse would finally blow sometime and she would learn the details without actually bothering him for it. Unfortunately, Izuna was probably the most level-headed Uchiha in existence and it really did seem as if she would be forced to wait for Tobirama to provoke an incident instead.

Which was so utterly unlikely even if the two so obviously loathed one another she'd be waiting long after they all were dead of old-age.

Morbidly, she was still curious and this very well might be one of the last times she saw him conscious or alive.

The 'spotted sickness' wasn't smallpox, it might be a crossed breed monstrosity of typhoid fever and some kind of plague instead. Partially appearing as a pox, mainly as a rash with sores. It was still draining on the body of those fighting it off, for all it's wildly across the board secondary effects. Whatever it was turned more unpredictable in adults even if the children proved oddly resilient to the mutated pox virus at first. Especially shinobi children and adults.

Chakra naturally fought off most internal sabotage, especially in trained stores of it, it was why it was harder to kill ninja and samurai both.

However… in this illness… that merely meant the virus ate through one's chakra stores then showed up on the skin to be identified once that store of internal energy drained to the dregs. Well after it rooted itself into the sick and was already spreading farther through every sneeze or cough.

Which was why, even after isolating the ill far away from healthy villagers, Tera and her volunteer nurses still got an ever growing stream of sick to tend with their shipment of supplies and letters from loved ones to keep spirits up.

It had gotten into the shinobi ranks, and no one knew for weeks.

She had in fact lost one of her samurai to the illness not hours ago as well. Two Hatake clansmen were trying to whittle game pieces and other amusements while they waited with impressive patience to die or live, and a speckle of other clan shinobi pitched in however they felt best suited to do or rested instead as they got progressively more ill.

It wasn't shocking to finally see one of the clan heirs come into the sick 'zone' to join the lone clan head in herself, but terribly disappointing.

"You look rather dreadful, Terazawa-sensei." Izuna commented as if hadn't the look of a man who had lost a good fifty or so pounds of flesh himself in the last month alone, through worry or stress or just the sickness eating away at him.

"Aa… well. That."

"That." Repeated the Uchiha Clan heir blandly, fever-bright black eyes flicked over her own heavily masked and neatly meticulously garbed features as much as might be seen. Which was basically the skin around her eyes and some of her neck. "What is it?"

"Stress, and a lot of worry." It was mainly true, after all.
Alas, she never could evade an Uchiha as much as she could somewhat step around another sensor who half-relied on the sense of what emotion tainted another's chakra.

"Aa... and?"

"And... well, poison masters of Sekanji caliber are normally a step away from being deathly ill simply because of what we are. It is terribly easy to get us to appear as sickly as we really are."

Still true. Being or becoming toxic was not a natural state for the human body and even after nearly a decade of being so, her body still tried to fight off the poison. It was a delicate balancing act even with her rather forgiving poison of choice, adjusted in the face of winter-illness and spring-fevers to fall-allergies and just general injury.

Even with the neck to ankle covering, the ragged cotton tucked into boots and gloves, and the masks supplied to keep most of their air untainted... there were only about three 'nurses' that hadn't contracted the sickness yet themselves.

Tera wasn't one of them.

She had an impressive amount of trained chakra stores, for what seemed to be 'kunoichi norm' from a life using the very wind and water as weapons to spread her poisons or just extra hands, but it wasn't enough in her to fight off both wolfsbane toxicity and the infectious disease.

Unfortunately, with the issue of the poison in her blood she had specifically developed over a near decade, that also mean it wasn't safe for anyone but her to tend to her own sores.

"I suppose I should get out of your way." Drawled the ill Uchiha Clan heir dryly, not really looking as if he could physically remove himself from his likely unwilling half-lean half-collapsed position against one of the few sturdy things to lean against.

"You could, but I have a question."

"Hn?"

Ignoring the grunt, which was standard Uchiha-speak for 'what' anyways, the kunoichi sat back on her heels. "When I first met Tobirama, without it being a glancing thing in the middle of his battle that my water clone interrupted, he said 'you were the one to save Izuna'."

Izuna didn't have any scratched opened sores, thankfully as she was conserving what medical chakra she had to help those just a bit worse off to try and add them to the 'suffering but mildly' ranks, so Tera had to fiddle with the mostly used tub of skin cream soother they were overdue for a new batch of instead of his injuries or her war fans left in the Sekanji compound for Momomi or Koharu to inherit.

"...that."

"Yes, that."

The shinobi eyed her through one eye thoughtfully. "If you tell me what is really going on."

Ah... well, caught neatly was she.

"I am toxic, Izuna-sama. It is all well fun and good to drink poisons and be fine afterwards... or to use my own blood to poison an attacker that gets too close to me when I am injured... it is another thing to have injuries or bleeding sores another might touch without thought."
Tera also had an incessant headache she hadn't had the match of since the one time she nearly overdosed on her own wolfsbane, and the rashes were rather uncomfortable really. Especially in cheap cotton yukatas they didn't intend to keep for long after the owners were healthy or dead.

The utterly grim look that passed over the Uchiha heir's face was probably sign enough he knew she was sick as well.

"Well?" Prompted the Sekanji Clan head with fatalistic good humor. "Your turn."

"Tobirama invented his teleporting trick and tried it out on me first." Izuna informed her in a bland tone of voice. "Had it not been for some slip of a girl darting into the way… it is entirely possible he thinks it would have been enough to kill me."

"Thinks."

"Drove brother mad for the first few months your clan was here. Trying to figure out if you knew and would do anything with that." Scoffing, even if that derailed in a nasty wet cough that sounded truly as if he had inhaled water, he aimed a rather dizzy seeming scowl into the night air. "Then you never said anything. Water clone, anyways. You wouldn't have gotten the information back through it like that asshole can do with shadow clones. Damnably annoying, blasted things."

"I did watch from the sidelines for a moment, a little late to see the initial reaction to my clone's movements."

"So you didn't know until he said something."

"...well, no. Do you know I call him an asshole fairly often myself?"

"Which is why I still like you, even if you are going sweet on the prick."

Tera twitched, scowling even if he couldn't really see her do so covered as she was. "I beg your pardon?"

"Given." The, slightly ghastly, slash of a grin that cracked the Uchiha heir's face did not improve his currently ragged formerly pretty looks any.

"I have enough people in my life trying to set me up with one male or another, I swear to the kami below if you try to pick any of it up to try now… with someone you dislike so, even? Whose side are you on?"

Mito never had really stopped her slightly ridiculous campaign to hitch her to the Senju Clan heir somehow, much to Hashirama's well-intentioned amusement and his brothers as well as Tera's chagrined exasperation. Kesai had recently gotten herself a fairly stable 'mate' herself, and seeming entirely too willing to try helping her clan head friend find a 'not entirely disgusting mate' of her own. Even Momo, newly sixteen and given leave to find her own such company armed with the ways to avoid complications from it, had started picking up on how much she liked males with nicely muscled forms and dragging her lady sister to various parts of the Leaf for 'covert' drooling over such.

They were friends, it was entirely possible to have a male and a female be friends.

The point being, the poison mistress was ever so much done with 'love' and 'emotion' to the point she really would like to become a nun. If there were such things here.

Izuna sort of dissolved into a crackling kind of laugh, wheezing half as much as he was choking on
his own air.

Annoyed, she slammed a breath of it back into his lungs as she had become terribly accustomed to when someone tried to stop breathing on her.

The Uchiha's subsequent choking on that at least mollified her irritation somewhat. Even if she couldn't do it as hard as she wanted for fear of bursting the organ and his chest open.

Once he had his breath back, refusing another lungful of air by chakra manipulation with a shake of his head, the shinobi beckoned her over more. "I kind of needed that… get me up, Terazawa-sensei, and tell me of what use I am best put to."

"Keeping spirits up." Tera informed him flatly which made him grin that ghastly smile anyways, wry and bitter and entirely terrible to look at however good looking the man was normally. "The best you can do for us all right now is ensure everyone has something to think about or do that will not get in the way."

Hauling him upright took a bit of doing, as sick as they both were he still weighed more as he wasn't hovering on the edge of 'deathly ill' for most of his life or female, but she managed it.

"Izuna-sama… if the worst happens, I will be below. It is against Sekanji decontamination protocol to send anyone after a deadly ill poison master. We used to have the mountain range above our home… but, well. At least for the first decade, until the surroundings become less toxic."

The shinobi paused before taking a step away from her, turning back just to lean in and flatly tell her to her face, "No."

Then he wandered off in a semi-straight line to the first of the tents that looked like it required help.

Irked because it was regulation within her clan not to do such a thing yet really kind of grateful because she didn't want to die at twenty-one, the Sekanji Clan head could really only stand there for a few moments until someone else tried to stop breathing and she was called to assist.

*(Tobirama's shadow clone smashed open the back room of the cellar where she locked herself in to die at the end, after Shikatema developed not only somehow penicillin but the first vaccine of the Land of Fire as well as finally got the pill production theory she had to work with semi-compatible tools for it and a seal master's help. Terazawa tried to lecture Tobirama about how stupid of an idea it was to fetch her at first as she was too weak to realize it was a clone, gave up not even a minute in because by then she had little to no energy to complain with only to be told her poison would not harm him for clones couldn't harm the original that way, and then got yelled at by quite a few people from her village leaders to her apprentice and little sister to everyone in between in return as she was practically skeletal looking by the time Izuna recovered enough to tell someone where the Sekanji Clan head had gone to die. Still within quarantine, but out of the way so her internal toxicity level would not harm someone else. Half the villagers that got sick died in the end anyways, more from the civilian ranks than shinobi, but then again half of them lived and the rest of the village was inoculated in short order to prevent a resurgence.)*
The Price of Competence

Hashirama and Madara sought permission from both the Nara and Sekanji Clan heads to make the inoculations and vaccine research widely available, Shikatema was more interested in his antibiotics and Terazawa more focused on making pill-forms of everything she could so it was granted without much fuss.

As the process of making a vaccine was really something the entire world needed desperately more than the Leaf needed the leverage or the money medical extortion would give them, especially now they finally had a stable treasury and some kind of reliable income from their medicine production on top of ninja work, it wasn't really all that surprising the God of Shinobi would make such a thing widely known to all that could make use of such. A bit that Madara was fine with it, but as he so very nearly lost his little brother and clan heir… Hashirama was also a kind of force of nature one just got out of the way of or just suffered through.

Tera was more than a bit distracted trying to dodge 'bed rest' after the horribly draining process of heading up the nursing efforts of an epidemic then nearly dying from it and refining 'pill production' to really have been paying attention to much else.

Writing village procedure for future epidemics was heaped on the other clans not so badly hit by the sickness, thankfully. She’d still have to look it over, because as she told the Nara Clan head Sekanji were trained to do decontamination the moment they could understand the word 'no' and could troubleshoot any further issues before it arose as she had the experience leading the effort once before.

However...

A fucking bottle of aspirin took her nearly twenty fucking years, and the help of one of the greatest medical minds of the age trying to make something else entirely. If that wasn't really kind of pathetic she didn't know what was.

Figuring out how to tune the equipment to ensure the part of extract she wanted boiled off and left the chemical residue she wanted behind was tricky, moreso because each batch had to be babied through the entire process. Worse, given the horribly cobbled together setup being used, it was terribly easy for the somewhat stable flames to reach a temperature that was either too high or too low if not watched.

Staring at a thermometer for hours was not taxing, the only real reason Momomi hadn't fetched Tobirama to haul her bodily out of the medicine labs every other hour or done it herself.

Scraping up then sifting the dried residue left over and plucking out bits of hardened sap or leftover tree bark that escaped through the steam of boiled willow bark strips was nothing more than repetitive work she could do in her sleep. Compressing the final powder to a pill form using purified water steam and a press was a rather gleeful thing for her still.

Tera would very much have liked to bask in the still-warm bottle of aspirin in her hand. It was beautiful, utterly lovely for all they were grainy off-white disks of headache-prevention. Again, crude and rough but the tangible sign of progress anyways.

If she wasn't careful, she'd start waxing poetically and writing the tiny bottle of twenty pills in her hand poetry.
Now she had to figure out how much a 'small pot, or two cups' worth of willow bark tea translated into how many aspirins of what size. Dosage for both her body type and a male of similar mass to standardize prescription, develop some kind of mass production of the damn things, and convincing suspicious shinobi that 'yes, a pill or two will relieve a headache' and not cause them to die horribly for her amusement instead.

Tera was not really healthy looking, not only a few months after getting so horribly ill she had nearly died of the sickness’ complications even after getting treatment by those immune and protected from her poison. Slightly gaunt still with a awkwardly boney frame to appear on, and easily tired so quickly she was getting fed up with the weakness. By the point she had been at, which had been only a touch better than Izuna's but worse yet because it wasn't the only thing wrong with her, staying awake for more than a few hours those first few days after Tobirama 'rescued' her had been difficult.

Hashirama very nearly outlawed the whole 'poisoning yourself' bit, only stayed because Madara grumpily pointed out it could be useful for more than just the insane reaches the Sekanji took it to. Tera chipping in with a wry 'we could, but it would make our dropping dead habit worse in ways' eventually had the man relent on the matter reluctantly.

Besides which, Madara had no room to point fingers at her. The 'grand Uchiha fireball display' that became their new 'coming of age' tradition and not the 'go out and kill a Senju' thing they used to have was just as stupid. The number of times she had to slather burn slaves over someone's face was just...

...she had a point to this, right?

Right. She had a terrible habit of wandering thoughts when really tired.

Getting immediately thrown under the wagon when the top nobleman of the Land of Fire wanted to meet one of the minds behind the vaccination research was something she was going to hold against Shikatema for years. Asshole, probably number four, had only just sent his heir as a runner to warn her of him doing such, and wishing her luck.

Tera had fifteen minutes to bolt out of the labs, get dressed in something not easily discarded if containment was breached, and find her newly married handmaiden Yura or do her hair herself.

When she really should've still been basking in the wonder and awe of her motherfucking aspirin and not just informed the really high ranking nobleman wanted to meet her and was already on his way to her home.

Someone was going to be poisoned for this. She didn't know who, but the whole 'it's legal in a spar' thing when it came to paralytic poisons was still available to her. There were a lot of such to pick from, and Tera would ensure it was the most painful but not 'sabotaging' one they had.

(ooo000ooo)

A not-even-preteen Koharu darted past her, twice the size of herself when master and student first met, carrying the 'for really important guest' china to her study while Terazawa practically failed to figure out what to do with her hair in the compact mirror set on the wall much as picture frames were usually done. Eventually just electing to wrap a length of white silk around the base of a ponytail into a samurai style and call it good, the Sekanji Clan head followed her apprentice into the room she would be receiving nobleman guests into.

Momomi was already present, elegantly folded into a silk three-layer kimono in a contained
position much as her handmaiden would be if Yura had remained in the clan compound that day.

Failing to contain two large hanks of her lanky hair which tried to flop into her face, Tera irritably pushed it to the side and practically dove for her own 'position' just in time for Hashirama's chakra signature to knock on her study's sliding wall. "Tera-sensei? You in?"

"Koharu-chan, please."

Abandoning her own work in setting up the desk for tea to Momo to handle, the youngest kunoichi darted over to the wall and just managed to make it not seem as if the girls had been dashing about constantly for the last ten minutes. "Hashi-sensei?"

"Koharu-chan! I take it we're interrupting lesson time?" The God of Shinobi looked utterly pleased anyways as the sliding part of the wall revealed him and the 'guests' he had brought with him. "Oh good, we don't have to risk killing half the village trying to dig you out of your labs Tera-sensei."

"As my preoccupation is the medicine labs these days, Hashirama-sama, that is a much reduced risk."

Madara looked as if he wanted to add 'thank fuck' to that sentence, but refrained with a seething-like of look over the couple in twelve layered kimonos. Instead he, very brusquely and a touch short to be really polite or well-mannered, introduced the pair as the utterly demanding noble pair that ruled over other nobles of Fire.

Tera was practically half of herself these days, but even she saw twelve layers of silk way too much for a late summer afternoon. Impressively enough, the couple pulled it off decently well… if you ignored the bright yellow and pink accents.

The pointy and obviously unnatural padded shoulders were a bit… off-putting. As was the woman's complete face-paint kind of makeup.

Bowing herself in half to the really important guests, the kunoichi indicated the two cushions before her desk with a sweep of her folded fan. "If our honored guests will humor this one by joining us?"

Helping himself down first, Tsuchimikado Nakaari the highest ranking Fire Daimyō decided to get into a staring contest with her while his wife demurely seated herself a touch farther back behind her husband.

Interesting, because the extra cushions were mainly used by either Hashirama and Madara or Koharu and Danzō if it wasn't someone seeking a prescription for whatever ill. Tobirama and Kesai were more likely to physically haul her to bed recently than humor her by 'taking' a cup of tea with her. The last time she bothered herself with which was closer to her desk and which wasn't, which was less than half an hour ago, they were evenly placed equally as far from her desk as from the opposite opening wall.

Hashirama promptly grabbed his co-founder and bailed on her, wrenching the Uchiha Clan head well away from the nobles. Not too far away, but away enough to only remain next to the highly suspicious samurai guardsmen loitering about and generally glowering at the Sekanji version who were more tiredly amused at such than offended in return.

While Madara had been one of the better clan heads to deal with the occasional advent of nobles to the Village Hidden in the Leaf, the man's notoriously touchy temperament had become somewhat concerningly more volatile with the near risk he had with losing his heir. Izuna wasn't even back to
full health just yet, much like the rest of the surviving plague victim shinobi still recovering
months after becoming deathly ill, and while he was in 'recovery' the clan head had little patience
for anything these days.

Koharu, who was behind their ever so lofty ranked guests, had the freedom to pull faces as the
silence stretched. Tera would be smacking the girl upside the head for doing so while this was
going on, but from the ninja-quiet huff behind her Momo appreciated the entertainment while the
silent judging of worth and self-confidence was going on.

Tsuchimikado Mochime, the nobleman's lady wife, had eyes sharp enough to catch anything the
kunoichi gave away and while her little sister was well trained… she wasn't well practiced against
those that played for keeps like nobles instead of to deceive as other shinobi.

After Nakaari had satisfied with whatever he was weighing her worth for, the man huffed sharply.
"So… you would be Sekanji Terazawa-sensei? One half of the team that developed those
'vexinations'?

"The ideas might have been this ones'... but the work was supplied and refined by one Nara
Shikatema-sama, honorable guest." Which was utterly true so take that you son of a bitch
"It is he
who proved the concepts this one merely wondered over for years to refine into such."

Subservient phrasing when dealing with really high ranked individuals while being a professional
in service-related roles was a bit of a pain, but given Hashirama had always had the goal of being
'the best healers ever' she could suffer a bit of awkwardness.

"Forgive this one's rudeness, would you preside over tea with these lowly servants? Only… as this
one is a poison mistress," here Tera pulled her capped war fan out to 'demurely' shield her very
nasty smirk, "it will be my apprentice in decorum to perform the tea ceremony."

If she actually required to touch the tea in order to poison it, she would be a poor Sekanji indeed.

Koharu had the warning, she was already in a low bow before either noble could cast a dismissive
glance at her. Her apprentice stared at the floor so her hair buns were mainly the only thing seen of
her, while her appearance was weighed against her still somewhat ill-looking master, but
eventually Nakaari gave a nearly fierce nod.

"Koharu-chan, come. Put this one's lessons to use."

More staring, but at least the wife was neatly distracted almost glaring at the younger kunoichi and
practically daring the girl to screw up the customary and intricate making of matcha green tea.
Momo brought up some of her not-so-secretly hoarded Akimichi-made sweets to go with it, sliding
the tray with edibles onto the desk halfway between Tera's and the nobleman's positions.

One of these days Tera would find who her little sister had an 'in' with in that clan and get some of
her own, but for now stealing Momo's would have to do.

She could not wait for someone to 'rediscover' chocolate. Or coffee. She'd murder for some half-
assed coffee these days.

Her apprentice in more than just decorum did her proud, thankfully giving the first bowl not to her
master of poisonous words and substances but to the nobleman awaiting his rights to be served
first. Nakaari inspected the frothy light green tea, the black and purple painted bowl-like cup and
how the colors contained the bright spring-like liquid inside, took a sip, nibbled on one of the daifu
cakes before taking another sip, and then passed the bowl on to his wife.
Everything was repeated equally as measured as her lord husband, from eyeing the tea to taking her own sips, and it was passed to Tera.

Thankfully, there was a bit of ninja decorum to skip anything further. Poison mistress as she was, she was not remotely 'allowed' to pass the tea on to anyone but others that knew how to handle poisoned drinks. Once the bowl was in her hands, it was 'contaminated' and everyone would politely pretend they had more than enough.

"Adequate." Declared the noblewoman with a prissy little sniff. "A bit more polish, Terazawa-sensei."

"Something that is never wasted to accomplish, Tsuchimikado-sama." Apparently agreed the Sekanji Clan head in a mummer, which was mainly just lip-service. "Please, for your gracious consideration of these lowly servants we thank you for presiding over our tea ceremony."

Koharu had done perfectly, but claiming otherwise was just 'modesty' to these kinds of people.

A few less interesting pleasantries were passed around, and a lie through her teeth how she loved the noblewoman's kimono and the rich colors they presented to the eye, before the noble couple decided they had enough of Tera's hospitality and retreated to their guards.

Tera popped three of her new aspirin pills immediately after they left.

Then she got a 'love letter' from the couple's son not a month after the 'meeting'.

(Tobirama was the one she eventually had to yell at for the consequence of being eyed like a prospective bride in her own home, and the semi-unkind rumors that would cause her among nobles or the shinobi that dealt with them as they debated her 'worth', because Hashirama and Shikatema had somehow known and bailed entirely on her if she was anywhere near them. Madara was still impersonating a rolled up hedgehog and being an asshole entirely to whomever tried to speak to him while Izuna huffily worked on his recovery far away from his overbearing brother, and Mito was too amused at the entire thing to do more than humor Tera's bitching. The letter somehow disappeared on her, when she had intended to keep it to at least give her students some idea of the insults one could give while making it sound incredibly flowery and flattering. Another month and a oddly worded letter she couldn't actually make heads or tails out of arrived, confusing her entirely as a few of the phrases sounded like she had a perspective 'match of your kind' that the possibility of such a higher ranking pursuit was infringing upon when in fact she didn't have one to hide behind at all. The letters stopped after that, but the rumors on her possible 'gold digging' or 'seeking above her station' and other such nonsense would never go away entirely.)
"There is now a shinobi village spoken of in the Lands of Wind. The Village Hidden in Sand."

"Hmm… they do have a lot of that. That's what, eight now?" Terazawa reapplied her now mint-green looking chakra to the dead frog's sliced skin again, studying the fragile flesh for exactly when something turned from 'knitting together' to 'decaying' and why. Again. "Has anyone given thought to what to do once every Land has a 'ninja village hidden in something'?"

"Brother is convinced we might be able to reach out and ally together once things are 'established', Madara is of the opinion war will loom on the horizon once things reach that point."

Tobirama very pointedly did not look away from the dying light outside her personal lab's tiny and high set windows. Tera very pointedly did not look up or ask him to close the blinds so there wasn't a glare on her bendy-framed and fixable magnifying glass as she awaited the inevitable decay of what she was doing.

Asshole was becoming very good at chivying her out of the labs on what he considered 'on time'. Really now, the study would end when it ended and if need be she'd sleep in.

It wasn't like she really had to go on missions to keep her clan afloat and not in debt to anyone anymore. She now had upwards of nearly thirty working 'ninja' of various ranks, which ten were samurai masquerading as such but still counted. Clan tax on hiring her ninja out on the Leaf's behalf meant she had a very good revenue of cash now.

As long as they didn't die out there.

She really would like to just get out of the village more often herself, but Kesai had 'settled down' with her mate and the two rarely saw one another these days. Tera was horrible at keeping in contact with those she did not interact with often, but thankfully the brash kunoichi was fully willing to more than haul her own share of the relationship and occasionally save the Sekanji Clan head from the headaches around her.

Unfortunately, what she was doing was part of the 'Mokuton' research still ongoing five-six years after being commissioned. Which meant a member of the Senju could 'oversee' her efforts on their behalf if they wanted.

Having proven it was Hashirama's cells and his healing chakra providing the start and added mass to most plants he manipulated with that, a smaller amount for already grown plants and seeds to a greater amount to give rise to a Wood Release unique one using a latex byproduct coating the God of Shinobi's hands to catch it as it happened, it now fell to Tera to figure out how to transfer that to somehow passing on the Mokuton without a genetic and natural predisposition for it.

Latex, and the thin rubber refined from it, was so much fun. The Naras might have almost mugged her for the recipe, and finally traded her one of those highly coveted microscopes for it which she had to immediate stick in the medicine lab, but it helped so much in medicine production and science applications. She finally had impervious and easily replaced gloves for handling really toxic compounds. The stoppers and rubber rings to provide seals to various glass pipe fittings in order to prevent toxic leaks were just really bonus on top of that, for all they were fragile and awaiting replacement from a better rubber source.

Returning to what was left of the Mokuton study, she had to develop a method for teaching another
how to do the utterly unreal kekkei genkai and 'transplant' the 'seed cells' and keep everything alive and working. Hashirama's end-goal, if he couldn't pass the ability on naturally then why couldn't someone else pass it on for him to his line?

One could steal a sharingan or byakugan, could you not?

Then why couldn't someone steal, with permission mind you, the Mokuton?

It was a naturally occurring, chakra based ability of the human body. Just… not as easily identified as very special eyes or other such bodily organs.

Which ended with her studying medical chakra induced cell division now she had the tools and experience to do it with, while Tobirama loomed like an icy prick in the background and got more disproving the longer she was spending several consecutive hours studying things in his brother's name. This was probably a feature of how one 'grew' Mokuton plants, hence why she was studying it while also reinvestigating 'skin grafts' to perhaps transfer the kekkei genkai, but was a component that was required so it had to be done first.

"Do you not have students to teach?"

"Koharu-chan is attempting to terrify Saru-kun by poisoning a tea set, who is attempting to catch it while Homura-kun attempts to evade their notice by replacing himself with one of the earth clones your little sister taught him. While not breaking the 'civilian friendly' scenario they were placed in." Deadpanned the albino shinobi behind her. "And, before you can ask, yes I am aware they are doing as I tasked them. You can feel it just as I can."

Tera heaved a, pointed and fake, sigh as she tried so delicately to not botch this 'healing'.

The frog was dead, so it wasn't animal cruelty or torture, so when she inevitably did so-

"Oh."

"What?" Tobirama, always keenly interested when she had another 'breakthrough' no matter how often it set her back in trying to understand his elder brother's utterly unreal ability with plant life, immediately loomed over her shoulder to behold the same thing she was staring at blankly.

"I… did it."

The incision she made in the amphibian's skin, to practice what levels of 'healing' helped and which would inevitably make it all worse, was sealed and whole. No sign it had been sliced open minutes ago, healed as it the creature was alive enough to survive the injury and showing faint lines as if it had been healed some time ago instead.

Taking stock of what kind of chakra levels she had left, which was… not really all that lowered given she had been trying to apply the minty chakra in a very tiny increment and avoid the necrosis that always happened when one tried to press healing with chakra so far…

For an inch of an incision.

"...what the hell is your brother?" Tera demanded in exasperation, twisting her neck around to shoot the man an utterly flat expression.

Tobirama gave her a matching flat look in return. "Why do you ask this again?"

"The power levels alone? This is apparently refinement in nature. If your lord brother tries, he can
heal gaping rents in flesh stretching from shoulder to hip in seconds. Completely. If anyone else with this 'healing chakra' tries equally so, they cause an overload in cell division and things tend to rot. One apparently must be of light touch and even more measured restraint to heal with chakra, yet not him."

No wonder there wasn't anything like 'chakra healers' or medical jutsu to date, it was utterly opposite of what one had to do to copy the 'God of Shinobi' and his healing... who probably really had no blessed clue the gods gave little green apples how he did what he did.

"...it can't be just earth and water chakra. There's... damn it all, we're missing something else." Something that allowed him to heal as he did when all experiments using another resulted in death of the flesh, something that allowed him to twist that which existed naturally to his will.

And on that side of the theory, why did just 'earth' and 'water' somehow make 'wood'?

Fire and earth made lava, water and wind made ice. Water and fire created acid or steam, earth and wind resulted in sand or dust. Water and earth then really should make something equally as dead and not-alive, rust perhaps?

What changed 'rust' into 'wood'?

An alive component. A natural component of living things.

"What else is there?"

"Tera, speak. I am not a Yamanaka clansmen. For what reason do you ask?"

It hadn't been all that long ago since they last shared a mission, there weren't a whole lot of 'can kill by simply being there in seemingly natural ways and not getting into fights because you can't fight poison' missions, a few jobs occasionally required a poison master and the Sekanji Clan head was the tokubetsu jōnin 'reserve' one which was nominally on hand at all times. Tera absentmindedly explained her realization in response to the order, mechanically cleaning up her experiment and noting down how one actually healed with chakra and not killed the very thing one wanted to save.

Yet another finding in a separate field of study she had admittedly limited interest in and even less time to do it justice as she'd like, one she should probably give the Naras the next time she and the clan head met to go over the medicine stockpiles and how much more they would need until their next meeting.

"Natural chakra." Tobirama simply stated in return, causing her to give him an utterly confused look.

"What?"

"Tera, what limits a chakra sensor? If there was nothing that could interfere, a 'vacuum' as you term it, then one such as we could sense for miles without resistance or reaching a limit. Yet there are limits, to both our own ability and the Hyūga's byakugan kekkei genkai, which according to you means there is something there. That something is all around us and never really noted aside the arbitrary limits they impose. A facet of life nominally overlooked." After stating such as if she should already know it and he thought her a bit dim or too scatterbrained to have come to the conclusion on her own right now, the shinobi tilted his head back thoughtfully. "You have not really seen my brother fight to his fullest, among his abilities is the one to pull on such natural chakra to the point his skin changes darker in patterns around his face-"

"Your brother is a sage." Breathed out the poison mistress as her mind finally kick-started down
the right track the other was on. "...why did no one tell me?"

"He is the God of Shinobi." Tobirama pointed out blandly. "By what do you mean 'sage'?"

"One normally has to go through the Summoning Realm and the animal tribes therein to become a sage, a Sage of Toads and the like, they are the ones that know how to teach and draw from natural chakra without petrifying the users. Yet, apparently as you did not know this, your brother is a sage of natural things. Even more ironically, a natural sage of natural things. Not influenced by what animal totem he can summon which taught him, just that of natural life." Tera slouched onto her rolling stool-chair, tiredly and bewildered and really so very done with this for the day. "Yet again, your brother slightly more terrifies me. Thank kami-sama above he is so truly nice in character."

A second to absorb that kind of utterly mind-numbing bomb, because she really did feel like cackling even if she equally felt like crying over the four-steps-back-or-anywhere-else she always seemed to run into, and the beleaguered single scientist of the Leaf tiredly rubbed her face with one hand not holding a rapidly drying length of scroll.

"...more than a three part kekkei genkai. One is sage given control over the life in the world, to moderate your lord brother's excess and chakra into something survivable when he presses, the modification of his very cells which supply the seeds and elements to grow his own plant life is two… and… medical chakra in such tempered amounts mixed in to supply the growth for three. Then control… mixing of such into what aims he has. And..."

Four then… six?

A few could be mixed into previous steps, but to do it unconsciously?

...how did something like Hashirama exist at all?

Medically applied sage-chakra?

Naturally. To fight with and heal all in the same breath.

"I know how it works." Tera tiredly informed Tobirama a touch blandly, really just way too tired to really appreciate the starting bubble of thrilled triumph lodged in her chest. "I know how he could pass it on, to teach another. Some of it might require a small amount of aid from an outside source before he or I can find you a way to do so without it, but we are in the 'testing on another' phase of the study now. Finally."

Five going on six years of study on it. So many back steps and slides to the side, advancing one field of study just enough to reach the next step only to snag on the lingering questions another implied by consequence. This last bit, three years of learning to create 'medical' chakra and two of study into why and how, might not have been entirely needed on the information side as much as it had been on the real practice… had anyone told her exactly what the God of Shinobi could do aside his leafy-plant bullshit.

Honestly, she might not know exactly all the parts in how things happen or the best method for it to be passed on… that was for much later. When there wasn't such a press on figuring out how Hashirama could pass on the Mokuton before the looming war Madara foresaw, before the man's eventual death.

For now, though… she had the components, knew the process, and could see where one who did it naturally failed to teach another to do as he did because he didn't understand it completely. Why it took her son or nephew yet more decades of development and research in order to finally pass it on
The production of the result the Senju had asked of the Sekanji, the consequent medical chakra and the cell-information that supplied the vaccinations and all those other little finds she had to invent then seek past immediately afterwards to try and solve the God of Shinobi's question… well.

She'd have time again. To explore as she would and not immediately switch to the next study to keep showing the Senju that there were results and asking a minor clan as the Sekanji to study the God of Shinobi's prized ability was not a mistake. However long it was taking, whatever side-studies that had to be made first.

As to not disappoint the men that took a chance on a minor ally of one of their clans to help them with medicine while not stabbing them in the back for reasons of their own. Then helping more after her clan proved itself as they were by taking on the Sekanji's struggles to merely live, so they could heal and come back as a slightly changed but still a clan of poison masters, would be a good idea.

...Tera felt like crying again. She laughed delightedly instead, turning on the fairly stunned Senju Clan heir standing stock-still in her personal lab. "I did it! Tobi, I know-"

Apparently taking her at her word, the shinobi plucked her right up from the stool and immediate flicked them around the known universe again.

"-how it works!" Tera blinked in surprise a few times to re-orientate herself, then turned her head just enough to take in Hashirama's and even Madara's fairly equal bewildered expressions. "Hashirama-sama, can I kill your little brother?"

With a slightly startled but really way too good-natured laugh for the question of that sort, the God of Shinobi blinked back at her innocently as their abrupt arrival was adjusted to. "But Tera-sensei, why ever would you want to do that?"

"Well… for one, it is not pass my 'allowed' lab hours and yet he abducts me from it anyways-"

"Terazawa-sensei finished the study, brother."

All the men arranged in the little meeting room which made up the 'Council of Clans' of the Village Hidden in the Leaf froze. Completely. Some in pure terror, which she sympathized with, but most out of pure shock at the reason behind their sudden interruption.

"AND, thank you kindly for interrupting, I am not dressed to go visiting. I am dressed to immediately abandon the labs if anything too toxic is spilled, which is not socially acceptable attire to go meet with other clan heads." Tera finished her statement a bit mulishly. "Furthermore, I can walk perfectly well yet he insists on plucking me up to abscond with without so much as a by your leave."

Hashirama opened his mouth, shut it while blinking rapidly, and then the grin started. "Tobi, you should probably put Tera-sensei down. I kind of want to hug her too."

"I am not a party favor." Announced the poison mistress flatly, aimed mainly to be something announced widely to a room but more importantly to try and avoid such a thing. "He is excused, slightly, for we are teammates and sometimes these things happen… although the lack of risk and danger to my continued life is not present to force such and I really must take exception to such a thing."

"Please?" The Senju Clan head was way too bouncy in honestly delighted glee right now for
anything such as 'disapproval' to moderate even a touch of his behavior, it was likely a lost cause.

Considering the man asking, happy by nature and so delightedly pleased even if he did kind of terrify her by merely existing, while the Senju Clan heir finally put her on her feet… the kunoichi sighed. "This once. I do not wish to risk even more rumors of my character or such other nonsense which delight in giving me headaches."

Suffering the hug, yet again swept off her feet as if a child to be cradled in what really was only just pure boundless elation one might as well suffer silently because trying to scold that would be like trying to scold the sun for rising, Tera belatedly realized she still had the scroll of her secondary findings in medical chakra while in the pursuit of forcing cell division. As apparently she had a habit of playing with something long and hand-sized idly while thinking, for all her fans were weapons of a wind user's war, she absently finished rolling it up and tossed it to the semi-drowsy appearing Nara Clan head.

Shikatema, of course, caught it before it impacted his head.

Asshole.

As Hashirama's continuous babble of 'thankyouthankyou' was pretty much all they would get out of him for now, the scroll was more interesting while one of the co-founders of the Leaf was so distracted.

Giving the entire clan's absently done disinterest in all things not their realm of experience, not quite lazy in temperament but certainly the forerunner of such inclusive trait as being 'intelligent but lazy' clan of shadow manipulators... added to by long hours putting effort into their research or forest and less for social niceties like not slouching or keeping up appearances, a Nara's surprise and suddenly focused attention was a jolting thing.

Shikatema's chair slammed back on four feet, the man himself straightening up as he rolled more of the research she only just completed out from the reel of paper and silk so he could read it over.

"I apologize, Shikatema-sama. I will be forced yet again to relay my secondary findings for you to take to the next level, and I do promise to eventually return to assist but for now... I think it best if I just give you that for now."

"Not a problem, Terazawa-sensei." Flattening the open scroll's length on the table before him, which included how to refine one's medically altered chakra to actually heal instead of merely encouraging so and the methods she had used to figure that out, the shinobi clan head didn't even bother to look up at her while speaking. "Greatly appreciated, as always."

"I will be making a nuisance of myself about where you've taken the findings the moment this is over with, mind you."

"Noted."

Then he ignored the spectacle and eventually got the Akimichi and Yamanaka Clan heads involved with what he was so neatly distracted by.

"I take it we are not going to be getting back to what we were discussing." Madara observed in a sarcastic tone, kneading his own forehead in apparent exasperation or pain. "Terazawa-sensei, do you have any of those kami-be-damned headache pills on you?"

"As of now, no. I was not able to fetch my usual equipment before Tobirama-sama became..."
hasty." Actually being able to see the shinobi over the God of Shinobi's shoulder for once, both the Senju brothers were admittedly taller than even her, the kunoichi scientist frowned thoughtfully at him. "If you wish something stronger, Madara-sama, you only have to ask."

The darkly glowering shinobi made a grunt instead of actually reply with words for a long moment, then dropped his hands to pin that ill-humor on his co-founder. "Hashirama, quit molesting the sensei and finish your thought so we can go."

"We need a village head, because we're kind of too big to not have an established chain of command for emergencies!" Hashirama tossed over his shoulder, immediately bolting to his little brother's side with a disorientated poison mistress in his arms. "Handle that, brother! We've got clan-things-bye!"

Tera was then abducted without so much as a protest given yet again.

At least Mito laid into them both for such behavior once the Sekanji Clan head managed to squeeze her word between the God of Shinobi's rapid-fire-babble of 'itsdoneitsdoneitsdone!'

(Madara cheated, dumped the issue on the Akimichi Clan head as he knew how to network separate clans into a whole unit already, and stalked off to handle his own headache instead as his fellow co-founder abandoned him first. When Hashirama finally got back to the issue he had been trying to inform the assembled council of clan heads about, there was already a 'three-pronged-leadership' model to look over and possibly establish. Given the difficulty and hazards of teaching someone natural sage-mode, and the whole 'skin-cell' transplant that was more an idea than proven study, the actual continuation of the Mokuton was done in three parts. Someone was taught the sage chakra gathering ability, if they showed good control and could refrain from petrifying themselves as Terazawa warned of, the transfer of cells would be done next by skin graft, then the actual Mokuton teachings finished it off. A few Senju accepted the risk of learning uncontrolled natural chakra, a few ended up killing themselves from petrification much to Hashirama's utter regret and sadness, but Tobirama as well as a few more of the cautious Senju clansmen succeeded in learning and acquiring the Mokuton two years after Tera found out how it worked. Then Hashirama figured out to 'transfer' the 'seed-cells' himself, which made learning 'nature-sage-mode' easier by allowing a bleed-off of the chakra gathered, rendering Tera slightly speechless and a bit more annoyed as she dumped the 'surgical skin grafts' and the possible 'organ donation/replacement from donors' on the Naras as well. Then left them to it, as it was also helping some of the more reckless Senju clansmen who hadn't heeded her 'it's risky' warning, in order to go drink herself insensible for a day or three.)
The Inevitability of Time

Terazawa, as the Sekanji Clan head still, had open office hours.

It was… more or less required, given her preoccupation with her sciences kept her in her personal lab more often than not in the evenings and mornings were for tending the growing number of her non-combat clansmen and ninja-samurai others.

Sorting out marriages and folding new people and babies into the clan, giving leave for this or that child leave to switch to ninja-samurai training instead of shinobi poison use in exchange for another child that really was better suited for pure ninja-things, listening to her people's concerns and suggesting ways to mend riffs between lovers or friends alike to how to manipulate their way out of someone else's dislike.

She did most of her rumor control and fighting in such times, given that she wasn't really a widely seen figure to the village these days and could do so herself. Such a second-hand war of opinions made the Sekanji notable for the various research efforts they took on with or without the Nara Clan and liked for such equally as much as the kunoichi clan head made them seem a bit 'fringe-ish' for most residents of the Leaf. Other days they were those weirdos that followed a woman, who could make one suffer painful stomach cramps or sudden illness so generally leaving them to be weird on their own was the safer option.

Poison users weren't, thankfully, widely social creatures and could deal with such. It had reached almost the same level of reputation they once enjoyed back in Grass, wherein the clan was deadly yet could be applied against one's enemies if you could reach an accord with them but otherwise was a bit too toxic to really bother much. A status quo, in other words, if one ignored the semi-absent slightly malicious askance most of the civilian and a fair few high ranked but not clan head or heir shinobi held for her personally.

Tera was a kunoichi, one with intelligent cunning and form to winds laced with poison, but she was honestly seen as more a 'sneaky mad scientist' than she was a ninja woman. She'd live with that happily, if only it would stay there and not require frequent tending to avoid slipping into 'mad woman' or just 'crazy bitch of the Sekanji'.

The production and regulation of medication didn't exactly help her much, but then again it was entirely a ninja-thing to have a clan of poison users be in charge of measuring out medication so the civilians and lesser shinobi probably saw it as 'just a ninja thing' and not a good nor bad trait to be applied.

To be wary of, for sure. Still no one took the Sekanji Clan head up on her offers of tea unless supremely confident she wouldn't kill them or dose them with something nasty and likely embarrassing. Hashirama, Mito, and strangely Izuna were the only ones to accept on odd occasions.

Afternoon, as in after lunch and before it reached halfway between midday and sunset, were the hours the first poison mistress of the Village Hidden in the Leaves set aside to teach her various clingy brats and help anyone that required some medication or toxic compounds if they couldn't find another poison master to help them.

Which, just after the conclusion of the Senju Clan commissioned study, had gotten terribly busy to the point the Sekanji Clan had had to inform her visitors that if it was just to bother her about things on the God of Shinobi or the Mokuton study… she would be ensuring they spent the next
few days suffering from something that could only be identified as *food poisoning* and not *sabotage*.

...it didn't really help all that much.

Tera didn't greatly mind the children, half-grown now and still bothering her for random things or leave to bother her clansmen for this or that reason, but Shimura Danzō had come to her with intent this day.

"There's something… wrong, with Madara-sensei."

"Migraines." Admitted the poison mistress thoughtfully, having long since noticed and logged the Uchiha Clan head's persistent ill-humors over the last few years. "They are… just not something I can fix as of yet, Danzō-kun. As the more severe variant of simple headaches, they are either triggered by external stimulus or a consequence of pushing himself too hard and for too long in a shinobi's lifestyle. There is no 'work through it', Madara-sama tries and it should be obvious by now it cannot be done."

"He was always grumpy, but it wasn't until lately that he's getting more… vicious in it." Danzō admitted, turning his long-untouched tea around in his hands even if he knew full well the older kunoichi wouldn't try to spike it with anything. "He's snapping at Izuna-sensei too, which…" Was so out of character for the grumpy Uchiha Clan head it was concerning in the extreme.

"There *are* ways to find and avoid the triggers, to try and mitigate the pain, but as of now I have no greater pain relief than the aspirin pills."

"There is one?" The preteen Shimura shinobi glanced up at her, naturally suspicious and calculative as he might be the prepubescent boy-child was not the match for Tera's sharp coppery eyes. "Why don't you-"

"It is highly addictive." Opium, but not the opiate-based compounds such as *morphine*, was a known drug. Knowing that it *could be* refined more and being alright with opening that box of evils were two different things. "And I know myself, Danzō-kun. I dislike defeat highly, if someone comes to me with pain I cannot treat I would prescribe it even knowing I may get a patient addicted to the medication."

Slight issue being one of the few that could measure out some of the medicine the Leaf stocked, Tera got to fill prescriptions and listen to *everyone's* medical woes about why they needed it. She was fully up to the task of doing the job... however the poison mistress got to hear a lot about things that were, in a word, disgusting. Fixing them was an amusement she relied upon when things got stressful or she reached another wall in her research efforts, failing at even that woke that bitter disappointment in herself she had ever since suddenly becoming clan head in a violent fashion and her 'first' act as such was sacrificing her own pregnant step-mother for a toddler that had not lived anyways.

"Besides which, Madara-sama should seek my aid if he wishes for it. Not be nagged into it by student and brother alike. Doing so, with a man such as he, will only reinforce his reluctance to seek treatment."

"Damn it, Terazawa-sensei."

"Good afternoon to you as well, Izuna-sama."
Giving up the subterfuge, half-assed though it was, the Uchiha heir slunk around the opened wall of her study and at least out of the late winter rains. Somehow not looking as a half-drowned rat, the Uchihas were really way too pretty for everyone's own good, Izuna gave her a slightly annoyed stare down.

It rather lost it's edge as the man was now dripping rainwater on her study's tatami-matted floor.

"Tea?" Tera purred with a wicked smile.

"Danzō-kun, beat it." Dropping, wet clothing and muddy boots and all, onto the spare cushion set out for guests the older man rubbed his face rather tiredly as his student did so. "I know you don't use that ability to feel chakra all that much in the village, what tipped you off?"

"Aside the fact you used one of the children I also teach? Danzō-kun is good, a natural even, but I know his tells." Murmured the poison mistress wryly, refreshing her own cup simply for the taste and liquid for the conversation she had been expecting for some time now. "I do use the ability when home, just not generally close enough to pinpoint who is where. Bonfire bright the Uchiha Clan compound might be to such a thing, but you and Madara-sama burn even brighter. It is hard not to know if you are nearby, especially radiating worry and exasperation so."

"...I should've used Kagami-kun."

"On the contrary, he seems to have been infected with my samurai's regard for me and might have tattled on you immediately."

"The kid is way to straightforward sometimes." Izuna mused to himself, somehow appearing as slick as a rain bathed jungle cat might when he really should appear as a bedraggled cat dragged in from a storm.

Really, why did shinobi have to be so damn pretty?

"Surprising then, that he's probably better than the other two put together." Finished the Uchiha with a sigh.

Tera didn't say anything, merely nursing her tea as she waited for the other's patience to run out.

"...it's getting bad. He's popping your pills like their sweets, and refuses to so much as ask for a new bottle when he needs it." Admitted Izuna after several long minutes of staring thoughtfully at her desk. "I really think it's only because you hand them out so readily that he's not snapped yet."

Aspirin helped headaches, soothed inflamed joints, reduced fever, and just general health-related reduction of stress. There was also the placebo effect to keep in mind, belief was a bewildering aspect of medicinal research that stumped even Naras. Given the general occupation of those around her, shinobi and samurai with their physically heavy lifestyles and mission-related injuries… it helped so much it was utterly sad.

Of course the poison mistress used them as a catch-all for mainly everything that didn't require specific remedies to treat, and taking them regularly did help the heart.

"Any remedy is and can be poisonous, Izuna-sama. Even aspirin taken too often and too much at once might harm more than help." Cautioned the Sekanji Clan head a bit worriedly. "I certainly do not mean to say take them away from him, not if they help him so, but… if it is not reducing the severity with one or two a day then something else needs to be done."

"Is there any way to make them stronger? Reduce any ill-effects? That is what you do here, right?"
"We and the Naras, and I do not know. We are still researching all the effects of such, it is something that will take time-"

"He can't *sleep* these days, Terazawa-sensei." He interrupted a touch too strongly to be really calm or as unaffected as he was appearing, the lie given away by how hard he was grasping the material of his long Uchiha greatcoat draped across his knees. "An hour or two, in pitch dark places, maybe. Even Hashirama-sama can't relieve whatever it is."

"...we have sleep inducing poisons, Izuna-sama." She reminded him slowly, waving a hand to the poison lab not too far from her study. "Which, as they are not medication-grade, are available for purchase to any with a Leaf headband."

"It's a *plate* of armor inscribed with the Leaf we picked to represent us. A *forehead* protector."

"On a headband. Yes, I am aware."

With a roll of his eyes, the Uchiha heir rose smoothly to his feet and, still ignoring the puddle now seeped into her tatami mats, wandered off on her without so much as another word.

Tera blinked down at her tea, pursing thin lips.

...she really should start looking into morphine.

Tsunade, when her more likely nephew than son was born and she placed on his team, might really appreciate having most of the laboratory leg-work done for her before she took the Sekanji Clan head's infant start into honest and actual medical jutsus. She was kind of interested in how much further the Slug Sannin could go with the major headaches out of the way already.

"Aa… lady sister?" Momomi inquired hesitantly.

Startled, Tera snapped her head up to see the other kunoichi clearly. "Momo-chan… who do I need to kill and does it *have to be* an accident?"

"This is *nothing* like that, lady sister!" Darting from the doorway that lead into their home to the opened one showing the hammering rain drumming on the Sekanji Clan grounds, the now lanky if still shorter younger kunoichi slid the office's wall shut to signal privacy was needed to any visitors and turned back to her only to grimace. "Just… don't be mad?"

"Mad? Momo, there is *nothing*-

"I'm pregnant."

Tera stared into coppery eyes so similar to her own, set into a white-pale face softer and less worn than her own features. Then she expanded her chakra senses to inspect her own little sister's painfully familiar chakra of earthy-wetness, as if the sun baked the rain soaked earth after a heavy storm, locating the tiny kernel of not-sunbaked-earthiness mostly hidden by her own. "...oh."

"Oh?" Repeated the still chūnin kunoichi blankly, nearly nineteen and still living with her own sister instead of seeking out a husband or a lover to dwell with instead. "What does 'oh' mean?"

"...we're a clan of *poison* users, herbalists. And… you got yourself pregnant."

Momo blankly stared back at her elder for a long moment. "...of course that would be what you'd get huffy over."
"Momo-chan, I specifically told you how to avoid such complications. I taught you the method, how to find the herbs and how much to use." Tera drained the dregs of her tea and set the cup down firmly. "Apparently my lectures have been remiss somehow, I think we need to go over them again."

"We really don't have-"

"Yes, yes we really must." A pause, and the poison mistress then shrugged. "Are you going to keep it?"

"Um… I don't know?" Momo glanced down at her still flat belly, her coppery eyes sliding to the side and a bastardized kimono-clad shoulder lifting in a shrug. "I guess? I mean… none of our half-siblings seem really all that interested in being heir even now…"

Mashi was a brat, and warned his passel of siblings off taking the rank because others really did try to influence the various children named heir over the years. There weren't any others that abdicated on her, but that was more than likely a good possibility if Tera tried to heap the headache of headship on any of them in truth.

"My wants or desires should have no bearing on your decision, Momo. Would you like a child, some immediate family instead of half-siblings or cousins, yes or no? As always, I will help you little sister. No matter what you pick to do with your life."

"…I kind of want it, Tera. I want a kid, to teach and guide as you did me. Besides," and here her little sister dropped most of the worry-tenseness to her frame and selected the non-muddy cushion to drop onto, as she wore pants her wide-sleeved top tucked into which allowed such movement, "the guy was really pretty."

"Oh?"

"Even taller than you, and he had such wonderful hands."

Amused, the elder of the Sekanji sisters leaned back a little and poured them both a cup of tea using the cups set aside for if and when the usual set was broken by surprised or depressed patients seeking help. "Trying to make me jealous, little sister?"

"Built for speed, too." Continued the younger kunoichi with a sly smirk, accepting the cup happily now that she knew her 'accident' would not force a rift between them either through argument or disappointment. "And had some very decent stamina, for all he was a wandering-type I've never seen in that part of Fire before."

"Pity." It was too, Tera might've gone out to seek her little sister's baby daddy if he lingered just a touch longer than normal. Would do so, once she asked to know where her baby sister's last mission took her to from one of the men that assigned such.

Knocking up her sister, even unknowingly, was a crime in her books.

Depending, on if he was really as pretty and good as her little sister said, she might not kill him for it.

"Whatever did he look like?"

"I'm not that stupid, Tera." Momo smirked wickedly, humming over her cup of tea for a long teasing moment. "If I tell you… you'll go off and see for yourself… and might kill him. Strange though… he had some interesting coloration to his eyes."
Tera blinked at the younger woman. "His eyes?"

"Yellow, if you can believe it."

"Momo, dear little sister, we have copper eyes."

"...point, my lady sister."

With a bemused little smirk of her own, the poison mistress left her little sister to her probably reminiscing day-dream and contemplated things.

Orochimaru was her nephew, then.

Her beloved little sister's son.

...a traitor to the Leaf eventually. The same village that helped her save her clan, welcomed them in with surprisingly little callous disregard for her being the clan head at the time even if it was seeping in insidiously now years after joining, and was founded by the brothers of a decently good friend or three.

"Well then. Let us see about that, little Leaf snake."

"Lady sister?"

"Merely talking to myself, little sister." Tera deflected warmly, setting into the thought of being an aunt with surprising ease for all she had been concerned her disinclination to have a family or bear a child herself might ruin a few things.

She wasn't exactly a feature in Inari's life, invited to the sixteen-year-old daughter of Mito and Hashirama own wedding to another Senju clansmen or not. More so for the parents than the young woman's own behalf. If she too was pregnant... Tobirama would know. Asking might be a bit out of character for her, but could be easily explained with the advent of her own 'aunt-hood' looming now.

Who knew where Jiraiya had come from, but the Toad Sage had some distinctive features she might be able to find if she took some really long walks around the now bustling village right outside the Sekanji Clan compound's gates.

...how soon until the first war? The second?

War was honestly not something the poison mistress was looking forward to, but she would go to fight in it if she must. It was just... she might not recall the details any more, but this did have to mean the fight between Hashirama and Madara was nearly around the corner. As well as the death of the God of Shinobi.

While Tera herself was not much of a warm and loving creature by nature, she had grown rather stupidly attached to the Senju brothers as well as the Uchiha ones. Every night she could literally feel as if the Uchiha Clan banked their bonfire-bright selves to one side, with a normally very pleased forest-god of Hashirama's chakra nearly seep into the world from her other with a shock of icy water trail near at his side. It was... very soothing to fall asleep to.

It would be surprisingly painful to let them go.

As well as the morphine, she should probably design some kind of personal air purifier before she and the rest of the Leaf went to war against other poison using clans in other hidden villages. She
might be fine if she could recognize any toxins in the air and blow it away, but that was probably asking for a bit too much.

"...do you think, if I can find him again, he might be willing to come to the Leaf?" Momo inquired a bit hesitantly, forcing Tera to strain herself in order to recall what their previous topic of discussion was about.

"I do not see why you should not try. Becoming a father might be something he would like as well... but are you sure you would like to take that chance? Good in bed might be one of his virtues, but you can never really tell the true character of someone at a glance."

"He was... really nice." Spoke the paler version, still more in the memories of her mind than taking tea with her older sister. "Silent, mostly, but nice. Seemed kind of more amused and a little tired before I sat next to him, and he didn't mind sharing a drink with me even before I offered 'recompense'."

"I believe Kesai-chan was looking for a reason to go 'hunting' out and about, now that she is a mother as well. A nice tracking mission with a non-hostile target might be just as she was looking for, to get away from her kids for a few days." Tera offered a touch wryly, a little more than bemused over how this male had addled her little sister's mind after one meeting and most of the night of companionship. "Are you truly considering this?"

"I... don't mean to say the men in the Leaf aren't nice or anything, Tera. They can be, your male springs to mind for all he is rather stiff and his brother moreso if already taken. It's just... they know us as poison users and masters and that's just... difficult to get around." Momo informed her slowly, seemingly still searching out her own mind for the truth of the matter. "Apparently, having a specialty that is nearly impossible to fight against makes us... risky for more than just casual acquaintances."

"I have a male?" Parroted the poison mistress with a measure of surprise, as that was really the only part she could comment upon.

"Tobirama-sama puts up with you in your mad scientist modes, can even understand and keep up with you in such humors. He doesn't mind if you are not 'put together' as the premiere Lady Sekanji poison mistress, and are just Terazawa the kunoichi or the greatest mad scientist of the Leaf. I really have no idea why you keep pushing the poor male away so." Her little sister wagged a finger before Tera could protest any 'ownership' of the Senju Clan heir. "I think he's already half in love with you, for the Mokuton study alone. You know how much he loves his brother, and you were the one to make Hashirama-sama's dream of passing his ability on to someone else come true."

"By killing quite a few of their clansmen." The older woman nearly snarled, still upset at how many of the Senju had risked such a stupidly dangerous way to die if it would only please their nearly god-like clan head in learning the Mokuton themselves. Not surprised by such, but still regretful it hadn't been necessary in the end. "That was... that did not end very well. And then... Hashirama-sama learned to pass it on himself in time, without me."

"Would he have learned to do such without your investigation on their behalf?" Momo pressed on keenly, strangely intent on this discussion happening now even if they had lingered a bit overlong closed into the clan head's study and there were likely more visitors to sort out waiting in the rain. "Think, lady sister, of how much effort and work you had to do in order to get the Senju there. Of all the headaches and late nights, inventing entirely new schools of thought and then discarding it for the next if it would only just get you that much farther. If that was not a labor of love itself..."

"We owe them quite a bit. I might even owe them your life, Momo."
There were some things Tera couldn't exactly wave off, as far as she knew if she hadn't absently more than really intentionally agreed to study the God of Shinobi's ability it wouldn't have been passed on until her baby sister's yet unborn son got ahold of the research and conducted his own investigation. Actual willingness to pass on the ability ensured the second variant of the Mokuton users had more control and an easier time of learning it, and Hashirama had 'gone back over' the few that learned Tera's way to fix what he could.

Fix the partially petrified limbs when moronic shinobi trying to please what was the closest any of them would come to a true god pressed too hard with something so risky.

Stone-like their various limbs now may be, but partially petrified wood users were still nearly awe inspiring and being able to ward off a blade's strike with stone-skin was a… interesting ability.

Really, Tobirama surviving it whole when learning the scientist's way was rather honestly surprising. They were so lucky he didn't end up petrified like the others, she would've-

Tera slapped a hand over her face. "Momo, do shut up."

"Yes! Finally." Grinning in a manner that her elder sister really did not like, the pregnant sister rose to her feet in a quick movement. "I will leave you to your thoughts, lady sister. Why, I feel my time now is more useful finding the father of my child and inviting him to join the clan if he would like. Do not wait up for me, I fear I might be some time yet."

Well… the younger sister was a romantic at heart. If she felt as if nesting about and trying to improve the quality of that nest was to her liking, the poison mistress wouldn't protest. Much.

"Sister, Tera." Pausing before she opened the wall again to the tapering off late afternoon rainstorm, Momo smiled sweetly. "You keep informing me that in everything I do you will support me, regardless of what it is about. Trust that I too would do anything to support you as well. I know, with what mother did, the start may be false but the love we have is true. I would like to see you happy as much you want me to be, without it coming from cloistering yourself away for hours a day in a lonely lab of death."

"Well… you always were far nicer than I." Drawled the Sekanji Clan head wryly as she fought a rather strange swell of bitter fondness. "Please do not inform him of how high up the clan you are, little sister. I would like some amusement if you will not allow me to… remonstrate with him for his actions contributing to your current condition."

The brilliant smile flashed at her reassured the elder sister that there would at least be some interesting events in her near future, even as the younger woman dashed off into the evening to locate the named Inuzuka tracker.

...now Tera had to decide if she really was overly fond and interested in a very good friend of hers, whose death she had just been pondering about.

(It happened while Terazawa was trying to reverse engineer how to refine opium into morphine so a little relief from whatever it had really been could be given. Something, a more vicious argument than normal or just things building up to the point even Madara couldn't stand the pain, snapped what was left of the Uchiha Clan head's usually quick-firing but equally quickly-cooled temper into something wretched and the two co-founders of the Village Hidden in the Leaves fought at what became known as the Valley of the End. Rumors abounded around for what had been the tipping point, either trying to domesticate a warlord of an Uchiha grade was just simply impossible to some insidious influence had bent the man's mind to madness or just some element of the village's evolution from a hamlet encircled by shinobi clans affair to an actual bustling town in and of itself)
with just spotted clan compounds within the limits of such. Leaving behind a bewilderedly shocked
numb heir to become clan head, three very shell-shocked students left reeling, and his entire clan
of people who shared his blood wondering in various levels of hysterics what had happened.
Eventually, though none knew the start of the rumor, someone asked if that was not Madara’s way
of committing suicide to end what tormented him so. Hashirama would never speak of the fight nor
why it occurred at all, and the last rumor had the man even more still and silent if repeated
anywhere near him.)
Hashirama was 'hatted' with the title of 'Fire Shadow', reluctantly filling in the secondary external advisor with Izuna once the former heir took over the Uchiha Clan. Shimura Yasunao, Danzō's cousin and the equally new Shimura Clan head, joined them as the internal advisor.

One head of the entire village of ninja supported as their leader, one advisor he picked to concentrate on the diplomatic and mission related affairs of the village and one for the inter-village issues.

Terazawa was a bit bemused at the entire arrangement, but eventually shrugged it off. She might be erroneously recalling how things should have gone these days, because Hashirama and Madara did have that fight which ended with a presumably dead but missing in action former Uchiha Clan head.

Besides which, the God of Shinobi was not talking about anything to do with Madara's sudden and flashy disappearance. If he, who was the only other one present for the incident and entire fight, would not say anything then it was not her place to question him. Nothing, not on his former co-founder nor why Mito had been called into the fight... nor that utterly inhuman burning surge of pure and utter loathing that Tera caught only a slight impression of yet left such a lingering insensible terror in her mind...

However much she really bitterly missed that burning ball of windy fire flirting about handling business with a grumpy and slightly dramatic intent around her. A bit of a sourpuss entirely Madara might've been, but he was one of the pillars upon which the Leaf was founded and they listed ever so slightly with his disappearance.

...in entirely unrelated news, apparently the ninth-tailed bijū seemingly had evaporated into nothing. No one quite knew where it had gone, nor why it happened so conveniently close to the fight the Leaf founders had... and from last anyone had seen it's wreckage as the nine tailed fox hunted for what it would, it should have reached the coast somewhere due east of the Leaf by now.

Recent events might contribute to how much sadistic glee she got in unnerving her darling baby sister's lover and father of her baby. Kiyosue, no clan name just yet, was a really rather interesting specimen of a male.

As Momomi had claimed, he was rather silent and had occasional melancholy moods when the whim hit him. The typical dark hair with slightly pale skin did not really speak of any native land all that well except of just a general 'northern's' coloring, and the muscles gave away a mercenary bent of lifestyle with more than enough active but ill-used chakra to make a decent shinobi or samurai if taught, but the eyes were of an interesting shade of yellow. Lamp-like, slightly shadowed due to a hard life, but clear enough.

The fact he was honestly pleased her baby sister had him tracked down and informed of his unborn child bought him only a tiny bit of leniency. Kesai was greatly amused at the entire affair and had invited herself along to the 'family dinner' just for the entertainment as both a 'friend of the family' and the tracker that had searched for nearly three months to find the male.

Momo, a bit of a belly that swelled with the child pushing her normal kunoichi attire askew as she really had little that wasn't waist-cropped kimonos or yukatas to fit into pants or long shorts, was delighted to be the only one cooking. Especially as she got to add in that her 'poison mistress' of a sister might not be able to resist spiking the food with something within Kiyosue's hearing.
Then Tobirama invited himself in without so much as dropping a word beforehand.

Pausing at the admittedly strange grouping they all made, Kesai didn't exactly stop being an Inuzuka kunoichi with the birth of her twin sons but she had missed most of their last few missions and Momo hadn't really informed any but her usual squad and the clan of her pregnancy just yet, the Senju heir blinked blankly. Looking first in askance at the new male as he stepped around the dogs lounging near the doorway, then giving the really only Sekanji heir ready to take headship if need be a glance over as he fully entered the large kitchen/living room, finally turning to Tera with a question in red eyes once he had the components in mind.

"Tobirama-sama, would you like to meet the father of my sweet little sister's new baby bump?"

Kiyosue might not have known a Sekanji from just another family that might have distinctive markings of any career path as he only just learned the black grease paint wasn't natural, or an Inuzuka kunoichi from any other ninja if it wasn't for the dogs, but even a wandering mercenary such as he knew more than enough to identify the shinobi Senju Clan's heir on sight when tipped off by the personal name.

This was the Village Hidden in the Leaves, and he had to go through one very amusing security check just to enter with Kesai once he had been informed he was wanted back by a woman he had a one-night-stand with because of a small issue of a baby conception. Three days of being detained, being held as a 'wanderer mercenary' just to check if he had any ill intent behind him by both questioning and Yamanaka, and finally Momo going to confirm that was the male she wanted invited in.

It would spread rumors of the Sekanji Clan head's little sister was pregnant by outsider about to become another member of the Leaf, but Tera really didn't mind all that much. The truth was not something she was ashamed of, and it was a legitimate way to broaden the gene pool of an inclusive shinobi clan. The sire was not normally contacted in such instances, the samurai of the clan were all very bemused if thankfully mainly alright with the happening after so many years working alongside shinobi, and as she couldn't carry a baby to term then fudging a bit with the truth and claiming it was at least planned would keep too much vicious gossip about Momo's character from taking root and lingering long after the baby was born.

Besides which, while she might very well be semi sure all her half-siblings were accounted for… the purple lines that marked the clan head's line of blood in the Sekanji Clan might be more recessive than the rest of the colors… or more dominant. Not being able to check that, Tera had at least widely encouraged the next generation seek companionship or at least sires outside of the clan.

Tricky to do, poison users and all, but not impossible.

Tobirama, apparently bored of staring down the really nervous new male, inclined his head shallowly and glanced at Kesai next.

"I'm fine, squad leader. The boys are driven me up a wall, or seven, but they're alright. I was looking for a bit of work that would be decently distracting and mostly safe just ta get them used to me leaving for a bit, the hime was very accommodating to point her little sister my way." Grinning in that wild way of her clan, the Inuzuka kunoichi slouched even more against the wall while petting Nori absentely. "What brings you by?"

"A query."

Blinking the coppery eyes she shared with her little sister, the Sekanji Clan head tilted her head to
the side questioningly. The albino Senju stared back at her blandly.

"You did not inform brother nor I, or Mito, of such developments, Tera."

Ah… he had picked up on it.

Using one of her bladed war fans to hide the smirk, the poison mistress hummed lowly. "Well, you three are most certainly invited to the wedding. If there is to be one. A funeral is not too out of the question either."

Kiyosue was not a slow man, for all he was of few words. Already on his feet given the rank of the newly arrived really important shinobi guest, he slid with slightly clumsy stealth more to where Momo was cheerfully humming herself as she plated up various foods to serve as dinner.

"Momomi, by chance, is your 'lady sister'...?"

"The Sekanji Clan head? Why yes, we were trying not to alarm you too much with more information than you might like… sorry for not telling you myself. I had planned on it after this, but… well. Duty waits for no one."

Tera smirked wickedly now, half folding her fan so the rest of her 'usual squad' could see.

"She might not be a 'nice' woman, per say, but she loves me so." Continued the youngest kunoichi in the room, placing two plates of fried rice and some kind of stir fry into his hands to set on the dining table. "The baby will also be clan heir, Kiyosue. I'm… sorry, if that's a bit much to take at once."

"No. Merely… just… surprising."

Tobirama very blandly rolled his eyes. An impressive ability, given the usual use of such expression. Echoed half a second later by the triplicate snorts from the canines or canine like kunoichi in the room.

Ah well, the male would learn. Eventually. Lying to shinobi or just trying to deceive them was a difficult thing to accomplish if you had little experience with ninja or the act itself.

"Dinner then, little sister?"

"Stay over there, lady sister. I know better."

"Would it be too much trouble to include another, Momo-chan?"

"Of course not, Tobirama-sama. We would be honored."

Hmm… fuck. Tera hadn't quite figured out her feelings on the matter of her squad leader and teammate.

"You know, I would be a poor Sekanji indeed if I had to touch anything to poison it."

"...poison?"

"Well," Momo admitted to her hopefully future husband in a bit of a faked embarrassed manner, "we are a clan of ninja poison users. I can use them, as most other Sekanji, but my lady sister is a master of such things. She's truly toxic."

"Made missions a bit of a bitch." Kesai recalled fondly in a conversational tone. "Either it was over
with too quick, or you had to hold your breath for a while as the enemy dropped dead all of a sudden around you. Then there's that toxic blood issue."

"I believe that was what my beloved baby sister was speaking of, Kesai-chan."

"Ah. Right." Pulling a faked thoughtful face, the other kunoichi shrugged. "Did come in useful a few times, when they thought to ambush us while they tried distracting the squad leader with some kind of trick. Especially your poisonous hair."

"It is rather amusing when they will poison themselves without my aid." Allowed Tera as dishes were transferred to the rather small dining table by a still cheerful Momo and one slower and highly wary Kiyosue.

Who wasn't yet looking as if he regretted accepting the invitation to be part of his child's life in a ninja village. However they poked and prodded him for his limits and the elements that made up his character in probably unkind ways.

Interesting.

Perhaps her little sister's rather romantic nature was shared somewhat?

Or was the male just really duty-bound and seeking to make the best of things he could?

(ooo0000oo)

"He's not bad. Bit green."

"Kesai-chan, he isn't shinobi. Dealing with us takes either long experience or a shared interest in our fields of study." Terazawa reminded the Inuzuka kunoichi idly, walking with the other woman through the darkened streets of the Leaf to give her baby sister some time to calm her male down after a fraught dinner with shady characters as Tobirama's occasional yet partial mission squad. "We are a murderous, inclusive, rather shadowy, and utterly unapologetic of such. Even our own civilians, the supporting families that have dedicated their lives past and present to aiding us through the warring era of loose clans to the now of coexistence, are sometimes not understanding of our ways."

They never really did find a fourth squad member they all liked equally well, and they had a lot of those.

"Kiyosue-san at least was mainly honest in remaining still." Commented the Senju heir equally as absently, merely following along for reasons of his own. "Interesting for that at least, if not practiced as some would like."

"Exactly. Hime, I don't think your baby sister could do better than him. Sure, might be better fighters and shinobi around these days... but really, strength isn't everything." Kesai waved a clawed hand in the air between them, then shrugged. "If she's gotta live with him, that kind of grit and perseverance while raising a ninja child would be... ideal."

"For all that he is merely a mercenary sell sword, he does have an interesting amount of untrained chakra to him." Allowed the poison mistress after a moment's thought. "Not that my baby sister is a bad kunoichi in and of herself, she had not taken a reassessment since the Sekanji joined the Leaf and could probably reach my own now, but even untrained power that can show up in a non-shinobi or samurai mercenary can only improve the child's own stock later in life."

"Perhaps," Tobirama interjected a touch wryly, "she has not done so for her elder sister and clan
head has not done so either. You have improved as well, Tera."

"I am fine with my rank. I made it to tokubetsu jōnin on my own, mainly, before we joined the village."

It wasn't like getting the full rank advancement would do much for her. Clan heads didn't really often go on missions all that much, it depended mostly on if they felt like it or if a specialty was needed and none of the others of the clans could fill in.

Or they were requested by rank or name.

Tera had a few rare ones like that, occasionally around the Land of Fire yet more often for noble-things as Tobirama had dreaded all those years ago when accompanying her back to the ancestral Sekanji Clan compound. More when the plague outbreak earned her some unwanted fame in those circles, less often from distant villages fearing the emergence of other illnesses that might murder off their entire population.

...so they hired a poison mistress to come out and inoculate them against such. Yet again, ninjas and logic tended to have a merely passing acquaintance whereas common sense was normally scorned.

Tokubetsu jōnin also suggested she was merely so for either the clan head rank or for her poison specialty, not for any real combat or assault specialty. Which made her winds, sharpened for death or blunt for shock and laced with so much death or illness as they could be, all the more surprising.

"...has it been half a decade already?" Questioned the poison mistress after a moment of more thought, oddly circling back to that very point.

Kesai snorted with good humor. "I know, right? It seems… kind of like yesterday we were out there and running around desperately to hold things together for just another year or so."

Tobirama made his 'I'm not entirely paying you all much attention but keep the conversation going' hum, snagging his kunoichi subordinates' attentions even as they continued in an aimless walk he was now subtly guiding by merely distancing himself so they could have 'girl talk'.

"Desperately would be the word for such. You realize, that had Hashirama-sama and Tobirama-sama not been there with their students that last raid… we would have had to kill you."

The Inuzuka clicked her tongue, getting Moto and Nori to pick a woman each to shadow and 'guard'. "Yeah… we knew. You were the only ones in range that would have what we really needed after a bad scuffle for most of Earth, however toxic of a revenge you left behind it might've been worth it if we could just have surprised you all into not reacting as quick as you usually are."

"Were you on the field that day, Kesai-chan? I will admit, I did not closely inspect all but that last… oh."

Counting how many dogs were to one Inuzuka was a tactic for getting to recognize one on sight, not a very good one but one used anyways. Even taking into account one or more dogs might be sick or otherwise impaired and not following their master around. It was honestly impressive how much just removing the dogs suggested one wasn't an Inuzuka Clan member.

"Oh indeed." Mocked Kesai with good humor, patting the canine padding along at her hip. "Moto was injured and not able to run, hime, your backswing tactic took both me and Nori out in an instant."
"...I suppose, in hindsight, that was why Hashirama-sama was so very pleased with us not picking a fight with each other while on mission."

"I figured you didn't really hold grudges at all, hime. That, and ya let me pick fun at you yet would share the joys of the mission with me if you could... well, wasn't much of a point. Really. And you're great fun to have, if a little wordy and a bit of an icy bitch if you're distracted or something needs to be done quick."

Tera dropped one of her fans in hand just to tease the other and because it seemed it would be used in short order as she picked up on what Tobirama was more focused upon. "My, my... Kesai-chan. You should choose your words a touch more carefully... such scandalous meanings could be taken from such frank assessments of my... virtues."

Catching on that they were getting in range, the Inuzuka cackled as she tilted her head back and took subsequent sniffs of what might be drifting on the air. "Virtues, is it now? What of our ever so and equally icy squad leader? Got any... virtues for him?"

Damn the woman.

"He... is one of those strong yet silent types, is he not?" Evaded the Sekanji Clan head wryly. "And, as with many shinobi, so very pretty."

"That's all you got?"

Tera eyed the other kunoichi from over her open fan with a large dose of exasperation. "Do you really wish to do this, now?"

Kesai, even knowing the younger woman would get her revenge eventually, grinned lavishly at her. "What, embarrassed hime? I'll admit he's tasty to eye up, won't you?"

"Of course." Forced the poison mistress in a faked even murmur through clenched teeth, striving to control the stupid blush as she was not a blushing maiden. "But... well, he is right there."

And... not really moving as far anymore, even if this tactic called for him to 'leave' the kunoichi pair somewhat 'obviously' on their own as they did wicked woman things no male liked to put up with.

...oh dear.

The numbers hadn't changed for a few moments, making it unlikely he was changing what tactic to use. They had frankly sprung too many traps with this before such a night, a well-working maneuver for just this sort of incident he had not made any mention of changing to them before heading out to intercept.

The only real change, from any number of previous occasions outside their village's walls much like this one, was that Kesai was being very blunt and nosy about what the other kunoichi thought of their team leader.

"See... there's the thing. We got ourselves a good working pair of betas. Hunter types, not the ones you want to find down a dark alleyway staring back at ya with bared teeth, gentle if need be but more suited for the chase and fight. One's keen of sense the other wickedly intelligent, for all they're both smart and able to pick up what the other does. By nature, it'd be smart to breed such a pair... wouldn't it?"

"Well... if it's by nature... the bitch isn't a breeder." Tera informed her silkily, rather put out by the
entire conversation now. "That kind of thing… just sometimes doesn't happen."

"And if the male sticks around her anyways? 'Cause it sure as shit ain't my gorgeous self, pupped already with another mate."

"Are we discarding the allegory already?"

"Give over, Tera-hime." Coaxed the Inuzuka wickedly with a few snapped fingers to signify how many she picked up so far. "What is there to be afraid of?"

"Temptation." Tera refuted stoutly, probably a bit stronger than she really should have done and a wave of her fan to confirm the numbers. "Opening that door leads to more. I am not a 'good' woman, if there was another to lead the clan and now with my little sister finding her own family away from me… there would be little in this village that would hurt me by dying or leaving. I would be free to leave, to do as I thought as a child and become a hermit herbalist happily away from others that delight in making issue with myself or how I live."

Kesai clicked her tongue again, getting her dogs to reposition themselves to be waist-high obstacles to any sudden rush. "Never took you for a coward, hime."

"I am, a rather craven one in truth. I do not have a large heart, it is a twisted and very small wretched thing. Easily shattered, you know."

"But there's the rub. You do love, in your own twisted way. Otherwise you wouldn't put the fear of the kami into your little sister's mate, in informing him just being 'somewhat interesting' ain't going to be enough for her. Not to you, nor your people or those you befriend." A lascivious start or not, the other kunoichi's smirk was bitterly wry now. "It ain't going to last, hime. Scorn it now, and be lonely forever, or take a chance-"

"And what? Break when it's over?" Tera shot back a bit scathingly. "Because it will be over and I will break in the end, for I am the foolish sort who will not look back once I take such risk. My toxins, my poisons, my sister, my clan, this village. I may not like them all equally, in truth some tax my patience in full, but I have put my faith in them and we all made out so much better for it against the odds. When will I take a risk that will not pay out so well? The next one? Once I press my toxins just that little bit more to see what I can become? In trying to handle yet another infectious disease, only for that one to be one that cannot be cured?"

"Hmm…" Rocking back on her heels, Kesai gave her a much reduced but utterly less irked grin. "...interesting that you didn't put anyone but your little sister on that list. 'The village' is it? What about those peppy brats you keep sighing over? Your apprentice? The Senju Clan's head, the alpha, who ran that risk on ya? You were ever so slightly depressed and mopey once the news broke that Madara, the other alpha, left us just out of the blue like that. I hadn't thought the two of you were friends… for all you delighted in teasing him."

"...it is painfully obvious for those with a sense for chakra that Madara-sama is… not here. I live next to the Uchihas, Kesai. I spent nearly every night of those last few years with him also unwinding for the night in his own home just on the edge of what I can feel. With a sense of his burning windy fire stalking about, in his very grumpy but also very prideful care of duty to those he invited into this village with Hashirama-sama, it was comforting in the early rocky days. As you are right, we were not the greatest of friends but I saw him as a part of my life anyways through sheer proximity, his loss is still a gaping hole in my day now. Do I make that worse with the next one, when Hashirama-sama is already yet another of those that I can feel at nearly all times? His wife? All things die and end, Kesai. It is the only single truth I will never question."
"So what about me? Our little pack's alpha over there?" Waving a hand at Tobirama, who somehow managed to turn around without Tera noticing the movement for all she was rather taught with nerves given the topic and what was moving against them, the Inuzuka kunoichi sighed rather deeply. "You let us fuss over you, ban your pert noblewoman's ass from your own labs even if we really don't have the right to tell you no. Not when what you do tend to end in life-saving ways that letting you do as you please might advance a day or two quicker. You won't even give us unsightly rashes from touching you without permission. Do we already count in that wretched thing you're trying to pass off as a heart?"

"I think." Announced the poison mistress flatly. "We should get to work."

Seizing the first of the non-Leaf ninja attempting to both eavesdrop on the conversation yet also avoid notice, the Senju Clan heir hoisted the heavily garbed man off his feet to dangle in the air for a few moments. "Welcome to the Leaf."

A heavy fist knocked the man into the far wooden fence that separated the neatly regimented housing district that was a completely civilian sector of the Village Hidden in the Leaves.

...a touch hard, for all he was one of a pair of ninja sneaking about the village without really being one of them. Additionally, one needed to be kept in good condition for the Yamanaka Clan to… 'process'. As the other one was a bit occupied trying to dodge two canines intent on ripping out his tendons, which included a lot of unfortunate blood loss and gnawed limbs, meant that one should've been the one painlessly restrained to be sent.

A shine of metal, four squiggly markings set in two rows of two columns, and the Sekanji Clan head sighed.

Mist, so nine 'ninja villages hidden in something' now existed.

The last of the 'Great Five Shinobi Nations' were now established.

War it was, then.

(Terazawa, using the activated charcoal that her clan used for generations to get around their children swallowing nominally lethal amounts of their parents' poisons, created a kind of half-mask affair that would filter about two hours' worth of breathing air no matter how finely pulverized the poison used against the wearer would be. It took most of two months, keeping her out of the house and more importantly in her private labs, while Kiyosue adjusted to the fact his to-be-wife and mother of his baby was a very content kunoichi poison user. And that his very new to-be-sister-in-law was a not particularly nice poison mistress that ran their clan, meaning his yet-to-be-born baby would be the heir because Tera was utterly tired of being clan head so regardless of gender the baby would be next and that would be that. Tobirama very pointedly snatched the prototype half gas mask away from Tera to toss at a confused Nara instead of let the Sekanji Clan head test her own invention, hauling her off in a not particularly nice manner to be yelled at by both Mito and Hashirama for attempting to do it herself with something highly toxic instead of by level headed Naras and by grades of toxicity in a slower method of sensible testing.)
Weddings were not one of Terazawa's favorite things to plan. They were Mito's, who had help with the cheerfully humming Momomi and Inari both as they amended 'tradition' around a pregnancy bump and the slight issues of a toxic clan of people that liked to poison what they all ate on occasion.

Such was rare these days, but admittedly it still occurred. Thus why no one else of the Leaf ate with the Sekanji clansmen in their compound even if it was offered as an option.

"I confess, I honestly contemplate on moving myself either to my labs or the library. Some days, living with a sibling who has a 'significant other' can get dreadfully… noisy." Admitted the poison mistress while the redheaded seal mistress frustratedly tried to calculate somehow to serve dinner without having nearly all or none of the guests eat anything for fear of the Sekanji's random toxic amusements.

In spite of the fact doing such thing to the really only Sekanji Clan heir while she was pregnant would have them very nearly flayed alive for such a crime by the clan head herself.

"I used to fear Tobirama felt the same, if we are being truthful." Spoke Mito rather demurely for the topic raised, blissfully ignoring her equally as pregnant daughter delightedly listening in and Momo's wicked snickers. "He did not truly mind all that much, and although the mornings after could be awkward depending if I recalled his chakra senses and that yes, he did know what I did with his brother… it was more a blessing to have him at hand when things got fraught than honestly upsetting."

"Really? Any tips to keep my lady sister close then, Mito-sama?" Asked Momo in delight, leaning back on her palms to give her some time not bent over her protruding belly. "For as all as I am perfectly happy with the way things are going, with my condition and intended both, I do not wish to lose her to distance or loud and incessant baby noises in the dead of night."

"You forget, baby sister, I did assist our mother with you. I am fully aware, and prepared for, soothing your child back to sleep without bothering you for even most of the child's lifetime."

"That," announced the former Uzumaki blandly with a tiny hand fan to help her point in Tera's face, "is a blessing I will be forced to hold against you. Do you know how many times Inari-chan kept us all awake as a babe? How distracted she drove us all, fearing something was wrong with her?"

Inari, the sweet young teen that she was for all she was married and with child herself, winced. "I am sorry, mother."

Sweet and apologetic as her words were, the glance she shared with the pregnant Sekanji was just a touch too sly and amused to have been fully honest.

"Momo had an interesting time as a babe, Mito. Have I ever spoken of the-" Tera dodged the fluttery paper tossed in her direction with great amusement, snagging one of the invitations out of the air to inspect as if they had been handed over instead. "...the Shimura Clan, dear baby sister?"

"They are allies we had before the Leaf, and I like them." Dismissed the chūnin kunoichi with a shrug. "That, and have you ever seen Motoaki sopping wet? He's got a fine ass."

"I like his abs, especially as he insists on showing them off so."
Mito coughed, looking faintly incredulous as she glanced between the sisters and not the work before her. "So... you will eye random village shinobi, then? I had thought you kept such attentions... away from the Leaf’s members."

"Whoever said he was random?" Asked the poison mistress in wicked amusement. "I, and Momo, knew Motoaki-san from well before we all joined you and your Leaf. He never really was a fan of clothing that covered that rather magnificent chest."

"He's got more than enough to flaunt." Agreed the younger Sekanji in the room dryly. "Alas... I am afraid I must simply stop such wandering attentions once I am married... although... Kiyosue has some fine biceps of his own."

"Given the fact two of us are married, one is to become so, and the last seems content in being a spinster..." The redhead trailed off, tilting her head and setting her tags to swinging. "I am not sure if this conversation is one we should be having. I do not doubt your admittedly sharp senses for chakra, ladies Sekanji, but... well... it is more than likely the walls have ears around here."

Given that it was the Senju Clan home, and her husband and brother-in-law had skill in manipulating plant life as well as a fair chunk of their clansmen... well, Tera could see why Mito perhaps didn't want to continue the conversation topic. Everything did seem as if Hashirama was somehow still part of the very walls in this part of the village, and if he could use that or hide from her senses through such she was not aware.

"Are you done with your work, lady sister?" Momo obligingly changed the subject, reluctantly picking up her ink brush to finish filling out the invites. "I thought you were budgeting and setting the limits for this?"

"Really, Momo? My baby sister is to be wed, and you think I shirk my duties?" Tapping the short stack of bills, and they really were bills and not actually just paperwork of administration bents, with her fan the second eldest kunoichi in the room gave an elegant shrug. "I... set aside a dowry for you, Momo. The very minute the clan had no need of my work to keep it afloat, I took occasional missions on yet afterward... and built up more than twice of what I had when I was to be wed. It is why it took me so ever long to gain a microscope, for you are still more important than the work the clan does for me. Of that, what you wished for is still all within the limits and more than enough will be left over to supply at least a few months of time in which to merely be pregnant and then a mother before you need to remotely consider going back to kunoichi work."

"...really?"

"Of course. I will never ask you to stop doing what you like, but I will advise you to at least put as much of it aside as you can at first." Tera's smile got a bit tart, half recalled memories of helping Shimiko with baby Momo then raising the girl herself later on making the poison mistress a bit nostalgic. "Babies grow fast, Momo. It took you less than two years to go from a squirmy armful reliant on me for everything to a speedy toddler trying to get into everything and insisting you could do it all yourself to impress me. Blink once, and you really might miss something spectacular."

Mito gazed over at her still listening daughter. "Take heed, Inari-chan. Tera's words ring true even to me, and they might help you as well."

"Thank you, Terazawa-sensei. We both appreciate your wisdom."

"If the ending of such a statement is 'you old bat' we will be having words later, girl."
Inari giggled, grinning and not confirming nor denying anything.

Well, for all the woman was more a home maker than a kunoichi she was still both a ninja and a pair of exceptional examples were the ones to raise her. Inari gained more her father's nature, to go with her rather bewildering strain of blonde hair and amber eyes from somewhere in her genetic history. Senju tended to be rather colorful family, for all their head was dark haired and eyed himself.

Tera supposed, if she had to be truthful, the girl's uncle might've had some small things to do with that as well. There was no telling what colors Tobirama should have had under his albino coloring, and no not even the fact the Senju brothers' mother had naturally white hair as she had been a Hatake before her marriage mattered all that much. He was still an exceptional shinobi himself, for all his coloring made him stick out as a sore thumb.

...and here she was, thinking of him yet again when the prick was not remotely near enough to cause any wandering attentions.

"What are you plotting now? I warn you, Tera, you try to escape to your labs and I will not hold your lovely little sister back from recruiting any she wishes to haul you back out."

"Genetics, and I was pondering not plotting." Sniffed the Sekanjii Clan head in mock-insulted manner. "There is nothing I can do with genetics just yet, for all I know some of how they work."

"...I do not believe you have ever spoken on the topic before." Mito observed dryly, setting her own ink brush down finally with the air of a woman that had completed some herculean task. "What, pray tell, are 'genetics'?

"The study of how and why one looks as they do, what traits plants and animals can be bred for, and the art of tracking one's family line backwards. Admittedly more of an Inuzuka field of science than my own, or any farmer or herbalist worth their titles, but still a science."

"Looks, is it? And in this company even…"

"Shush."

"Erm... Terazawa-sama? Would... 'genetics' explain why I am blonde when my lord father is dark and my lady mother red of hair?"

"...did you honestly worry over that? Dear girl, you are completely natural as their daughter if a bit of a lucky case." When that didn't get the pregnant Senju to stop her hopeful look, the kunoichi scientist sighed slightly. "One's 'genetics' is made up of all parts of their direct ancestors, from your parents to their parent's parents to uncounted generations before even them. If someone in that chain has hair just as fair as your own, there is always the chance you will inherit such instead of what features your parents have if they both have more dominant coloring to pass on. Take Tobirama-sama for example, if you must... where did his coloring come from?"

"A... Yuri clansman some time ago?"

Well, the latest new arrival to the Leaf all did have nearly equally red eyes themselves, for all they really weren't a 'clan' of ninja as reduced in number as they were now.

"No, he is an albino in looks. The white hair, red eyed, and pale of skin? All marks of a 'jackpot' in the genetic lottery, a statistical improbability if still possible in all of us. If he wasn't so, he would have tanned skin as most other Senju do. Take two such... equally colored animals and breed them together, it is more likely a babe whelped from such will also have a genetic discoloration such as
albinism. If not, the next generation after the children of a pair would have a lesser if still possible trait of such lingering in their genetics to come forth if luck runs that way. Long enough, enough times a scramble of genetics are done and a new creature comes forth, there will be another albino in the line eventually."

"Why is this an Inuzuka study and not your own?" Inquired the Senju Clan's Lady idly as her daughter absorbed that information and fit it into whatever she worried of. "It seems you know more than enough to expand on it as well as everything else you have ever seized around the throat."

Tera sniffed in mock insult, flicking her fan open and fluttering it a few times to kick up a room-sized gentle breeze in order to keep the pregnant women cool this late into a summer's evening. "Because they study and advance it every time they breed their dogs. The current generation of Inuzuka dogs have wider snouts, shorter legs, and smaller paws do they not? Yet the older generation all have barrel chests, long legs, and wide paws. Our latest generation of Inuzuka canines are bred for tracking in forests and such work, precision and keen senses over speed or stability. Whereas the older one has dogs good for the shifting sands of Wind under paw, seeing around the rocky heights of Earth without giving their presence away, and running in the wide open plains of Grass. They somehow consistently get those results, excluding the rare few much more similar to the older generation than the new one was bred for."

Mito gave her a semi-suspicious look. "What if you breed two animals close together in that 'genetic lottery' you speak of?"

"Ah… well. That… is not good." Glancing downward to coppery eyes so much like her own and their deceased mother, the poison mistress kept up the fan's movements to refresh the women in the room. "If two are too closely related, you start seeing more of those 'recessive' traits like albinism show more and more often. Unfortunately, that also means that one's genetic pool is smaller to draw from… meaning if anything is… I suppose 'corrupted', when passed on it will remain that way and not be replaced by a healthier trait from a different line. The excessive bleeding trait of some noble lines, for example, where they cannot protect themselves by forming scabs to keep their blood within themselves if ever injured."

Inari's pretty face twisted, a slightly disgusted look on her fair features at the news. "How does that apply to clans and the like, Terazawa-sensei?"

"Well… clans such as the Senju and the Sekanji are a human inventions. There are pack animal groups, those that live in extended family 'pods' or 'flocks' or even 'herds', but to actually intelligently control one's genetic inclusions or who produces a child with whom… make for some fairly interesting… methods to 'preserve' clan features."

As much as she highly disliked the method her uncle had mandated to 'preserve' the Sekanji crest colors, it was a legitimate one. To expand and issue one's genetic line as far as possible was a part of human nature, just the way her family had gone about it encouraged accidental 'inbreeding'.

The fact Momo went so far outside the Sekanji Clan for the sire of her child and was inviting him into the clan was… mainly manipulation by her elder sister to avoid such a thing.

Orochimaru would either ensure he was born anyways or there wouldn't exactly be the same Snake Sannin in this coming generation as the story Erin once knew of. Tera wasn't really sure which possibility she liked better.

Flinching back before Mito could smack her nose with the hand fans the other wielded much as poison mistress wielded war fans, the poison mistress gave her friend a fairly exasperated look.
"There was no plotting, just reviewing some internal clan issues."

"Yeah… but you didn't even greet us." Hashirama observed from the doorway of his own study, grinning just a touch off from his usual sunny expressions. "I feel kinda left out, Tera-sensei. I still get to officiate, right?"

His smiles had been that way ever since Madara left them so abruptly and Tera privately suspected nothing would ever right the God of Shinobi’s strangely tilted bent these days, much like how village life listed ever so slightly with the absences of a snarly grumpy Uchiha Clan head poking things back up with his general spikey behaviors.

Izuna was good, more than a match for the weight of leading the Uchiha Clan and calculating out missions in shinobi teams with who to send where for what issues, but he was too reserved to have the same flair doing such.

"Why ever would I greet you all? We were **assured** that you both would never interrupt such hazardous things as plotting women, were we not?" Leaning back, because she suspected they all were completely done with the wedding chores this day, Tera smirked back at the brothers still warily lingering in the doorway instead of entering the room fully. "Overlooking two such as you and your brother is an impossibility, I assure you both. And yes, Hashirama-sama. If you still wish to preside over the marriage the task is yours."

"I appreciate it, Hashirama-sama." Momo chipped in with a sweet smile of her own, stuffing the last few dried invitations to be handed out sometime in the coming weeks. "...Kiyosue probably more than I, he is **still** wary of any sudden movement my lady sister might make in his presence."

"And if your sister is the one presiding over the marriage, he'd probably never take a sip of the sake." Snickered the Senju Clan head gleefully, yet a touch wryly even so. "Ah… well… anyways! Tera-sensei? Is there any way to measure how **fast** or how **strong** one is?"

The pause was him likely thinking of what Madara would say, or think when informed later, only to belatedly recall the man was gone and such was only now speculation. Good recovery, but she and likely the rest of them caught it anyways.

Tera might understand only a fraction of why the shinobi did as he had, suspect more, but it would not change the fact none of them would really forgive Madara for the damage he left behind to fester without him to plug the wound and drain the pain from their 'God of Shinobi'.

"Depending on the comparison you wish to standardize them to, yes."

Hashirama blinked at her blankly, ignoring Tobirama shoving a pointy elbow into his side just to gape rather unattractively. "...oh. Really?"

"How fast can you run one mile?" Inquired the poison mistress smugly, snapping her fan closed even if both pregnant women sighed at the loss of the breeze. "Time the run three times and take the average by adding together each time then reduce the number by a factor of three, extrapolate backwards to how fast one can run a second using the sixty seconds per sixty minutes per hour measurements, then go forward and reach how much distance one is able to run per hour. That can then be applied judging how far two points are on a map. Thus, not only how fast one is but a semi-accurate judgment for how fast one could reach outer points if healthy and running full out for the entire time."

"Make note, Tobi!"
"There is such a thing as a memory, brother." Tobirama pointed out blandly, passing his brother to actually fully enter the room as it did appear as the women were at a stopping point only to do as asked with the Sekanji Clan head's brush and some of the extra paper sheets they were figuring and plotting things out on. "Why factors of three?"

"Averages. One might be in their best condition one run, their worse the second, then bored of the task the third as their mind wanders. More than three might worsen or better the averages, but that is both a good or bad prospect given what you want the number for. Adding them all together gives a standard between the highest point reached and the lowest that one is running." Tera paused, reconsidered things to take into account shinobi speed, and continued. "Might be best to measure ten miles in that event, if can be done in an hour, given what we can do and if you want sustained speeds rather than sprinting speeds."

"Might still be useful for the young." Pointed out the Senju heir absently as he painted the characters needed to record her equation for later use. "For strength?"

"That is harder to quantify. Depending on how you wish to measure it, and if we are to take a risky or simple risks to do so. Either take a stack of ten or so planks of some material and count how many one can break, more for the taijutsu specialists I believe, or take two such planks and attach a strong spring to the inside of a contraption made of them as well as a length of metal positioned so the 'target' board will not hit it containing a washer or plug of some kind. Hit one end dead center, measure how far in the spring compresses or how far that washer or plug moves, measure an average from whatever rank for what should be their level of strength. It really depends on how, mainly, as strength does not really relate too easily to any one activity."

"And now we've gotten into way too much science for me." Momo deadpanned teasingly, gathering up all the envelops she and Inari had finished. "Alas, dear Mito-sama, Inari-chan, I bail on you both for the sake of my sanity."

"This, little sister, is math. The calculation of one's surroundings, the tracking of numbers such as funds and other hard amounts, and such." Sniffed Tera in a faux insulted manner, crossing her arms in what should be a defensive posture. "But fine. If you wish to abandon your poor lonely-

"Can you and do you use it when you're being the Leaf's best mad scientist?" Interrupted her baby sister wickedly, accepting the stack of papers Mito gave her with a thankful smile. "Because if you can..."

"You all conspire against me. Science is not baffling."

"You insist so, but the proof is sorely lacking."

The poison mistress frowned, sulking just a tiny bit at her own words being thrown back in her face. "It would serve you ever so much if the baby you carry is just as I am when it comes to such 'baffling' things."

"Inari-sama spare me, please." Momo glanced to the equally named girl with a sharp grin of her own and a mock beseeching expression. "Please?"

Laughing again, the slightly more pregnant Senju accepted the hand up her fellow pregnant Sekanji held out. "We shall see. My kami-sama namesake is a rather mischievous one, perhaps you should make a few offerings? I happen to know the chefs make good Inari sushi, shall we go gather some?"

Hashirama did at least look a touch brighter with how pleased his daughter was with her new
Tera let them get away with it, and it didn’t have anything to do with Tobirama asking her for more measurements she might know and how to quantify them for various feats the human body could be trained to accomplish.

(Terazawa would never decide if Kiyosue was relieved or even more unnerved by the God of Shinobi presiding over his marriage into a Village Hidden in the Leaves’ clan of shinobi. The former mercenary, who had adjusted to life within such a place in some remarkable time, did at least pick up tips from the Sekanji’s rather sneaky samurai to sharpen his skills and prepare himself for becoming one of them. He did, finally, adjust to his sister-in-law and new clan head eventually. Halfway through Momomi’s pregnancy when Tera never minded being roused from whatever she was distracted by, sometimes in the middle of the night, to make some of the younger sister’s childhood favorites the two did finally reach an accord of their own. Kiyosue kept Momo pleased and happy, and Tera wouldn’t spike his food with something to make him ill for days on end with a sweetly poisonous smile of her own.)
An End to a Shared Dream

Senju Tsunade was born two days before Terazawa's own birthday, on August the second, and Sekanji Orochimaru was born nearly two months later on October twenty-seventh.

...now all they needed was an orphaned Jiraiya to wander up to a Leaf patrol team, and the fabled legend would be complete for the coming generation in full.

Tera, as one of the few that knew exactly how to heal and mend torn flesh or other bodily harm using the medical chakra she refined that the Nara Clan was still investigating and was friends of one mother's parents and the sister of another, delivered them both. Hashirama was apparently not very good when it came to helping with childbirth, and his first granddaughter alone made the man a bit jumpy to being with.

Momomi, slightly paler than her normal skin tone was these months, just about cried on her elder sister's shoulders for how much stress and frustration the new-mother would've suffered through without her. From the money worries to the late night feedings to just generally hands available to help ease her burdens. She got patted on the head, usually absentely as the poison mistress was rather fascinated by her nephew, and reminded that this wasn't the elder's first round of child-raising.

Orochimaru inherited his mother's skin tone, hair color, and the purple crests, but the eyes were a metallic yellow. Nearly physically identical to the River native that was the Sekanji sister's mother from what structure was slowly developing in his yet soft bones, but a touch more masculine and with influences from his wandering former mercenary of a father around those unique eyes as he grew rapidly.

The pointed nose and thin lips was unfortunately a Sekanji thing as much as their crests and skin tone were.

Kiyosue, who had never questioned exactly why they all were sure he was the father of the baby, was equally as fascinated by what addition his contribution impressed on his son. He was also equally as glad that his sister-in-law was sticking around, especially in the times a late night crying fit woke him yet he didn't have to feel guilty for lingering in bed when it was soothed by the Sekanji Clan head instead of him or his equally tired wife.

Frankly, between the new-father and the new-aunt even with the new-mother's own natural preoccupation over him, baby Orochimaru had very little to fuss about as there was nearly always someone nearby.

The name didn't come from Tera, Kiyosue asked it be the child's name be such in honor of a long deceased comrade in arms he owed his life to. As it was a good name, and a strong indicator that the man had really been the father of the Snake Sannin she was expecting, the Sekanji Clan head agreed to the request if Momo approved.

She had. They supplied the clan name after all.

Aside baby news of wonderful-ness, because Tera might honestly be a bit besotted by the child of her beloved little sister however he was to end up in the far future, there were… less good news these days.

All five 'Great Shinobi Nations' knew of one another, had a meeting including the representatives
or leaders of each, and apparently it didn't really go well. The Land of Fire, as well as the Village Hidden in the Leaf, was smack dab in the middle of all of them.

Now Hashirama, who really should be spending more time at home with his family to get to know and help out with Tsunade's baby years, was racing across the lands with his lady wife in tow. Aiming to accomplish something he didn't speak of to anyone else aside his own brother, who was often left in charge as he harried off to do whatever it was.

Tobirama and Izuna still utterly loathed each other, watching them conduct business was a treat to any ninja interested in the polite and mild way the two men conducted a kind of silent cold war. Thankfully such behavior was limited to personal things, none of it seeped into the respective jobs each covered for the Leaf just yet.

Unfortunately, she was friends of a type to both. Taught both of their respective passel of students various skills because they were all nosy little buggers she had never really managed to run off completely. Someone they knew they could complain to without fearing the words spoken in ill-temper and haste would not come back to haunt them. Both men were not the type to 'lose', and as such her office hours were starting to become a little… pinched.

Koharu, her journeyman apprentice in poisons and words, and Danzō, less poisonous in nature and more in words for all that his main teacher's sudden and abrupt abandonment had sharpened into something nasty as much as it was cunning, were both very tired of being used as scouts in such a competition.

"I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong, Tera-sensei." Confessed the newly named Shimura Clan heir, ignoring her offered tea per his usual sour habits patterned off his MIA teacher however much he would refute such in scathing ways these days.

"Danzō-kun, I informed you years ago that the way women conduct wars of words will not entirely match a war of words between men." Reminded the poison mistress, allowing Orochimaru to gum a non-poisoned hank of her hair specifically left out of her normal hairstyles just for him however much it got in her face. "You, my student, require more thought. Words are pretty and numerous, can be sharp and wicked just as they soothe and temper, but the tone and the method of using such changes from one to another. Ponder the implications, study the usage between commoner and noble alike. It is not just what you consider the words to mean, there needs to be consideration to how another would use the same."

Seriously, the trust these day. The tea was not poisoned. They both knew it to be so.

Koharu made a pretty scoffing sound, nearly to her adult size at almost fifteen and just a lovely student indeed, more suited to the homes and discussions between nobles than it's use in a rather provincial doctor's office... however far removed a medical doctor and professional doctor of science would be.

"When I say 'severe' and what you hear are two different things, I can assure you. I say severe and think of minimal beauty among something most do not think of as, much like a sharpened kunai would be to inspect or even Tera-sensei's own beauty. Perhaps a grace of sharpness. When you hear it, you think of a sharp disparity… don't you? Between your own level of skill and Izunasama's, or just a sharp drop of the rocks up on top of the mountain. Both still sharp in usage, just a touch removed in application from what you or I would mean to say."

"The meanings can shift and slide, depending on the way they are ordered or just by inflection." Continued the master of such matters, wryly amused her long ago 'noblewoman' training that horse-faced and entirely overly done up first victim of Momo's was being put to such a use. "Men
tend to go blunter and sharper, for all the meanings can slide. Women seem to be more precise and
evasive in such, so while you can effectively structure an argument against one such as I… your
teacher will require a very differently worded but similarly structured one."

Danzō huffed in an entirely sour manner, hunching both shoulders in something that did give a
bitter pang of remembrance for how his main teacher used to do the same when confronted with
what he didn't like but couldn't rip apart. "Oi, brat. The girls are ganging up on me, help would
you?"

Orochimaru ignored the words, tugging yet more of the stringy hair to knot up as he would.

"I believe this means you are on your own, student." Tera informed the chūnin wickedly, sly
fingers tugging the strand of dark hair up so she wasn't half pulled forward by her nephew's grip.
"For shame, trying to turn family against one such as I."

"All's fair in love and war, Tera-sensei."

"How fiendish, using my own words against me." Breathed out the Sekanji Clan head in faux
surprise, laying one hand not occupied with baby over her heart as if shocked truly. "I would be
proud… if you could use such effectively."

The Shimura shinobi rolled his eyes, scratching at a cross-shaped scar on his chin he had received
some time recently. "Pinning you in a war of words would take more than I can do right now,
sensei. I will outfox you eventually, just not yet."

"Like you could." Koharu refuted delicately in a snotty noblewoman's scornful tone, ruined by the
rolled dark eyes. "Tera-sensei will fall to my words before you can master your own."

"That'll happen when you can finally poison her. Which isn't happening, harpy."

"There are many silent killers in the poison library." Returned the kunoichi wickedly with a face so
straight it looked ironic. "So many ways to refine them all into new and unknown forms. Some of
which… well… it'll look natural at least."

"I see your teachers are not the only ones that have a rivalry. Or is this a young love story?" Tera
inquired mildly, making them both blanch.

"Tera-sensei, don't even jest about such-"

"With the harpy? Are you mad, sensei?"

Both paused, looked at each other, then back to her. Both gave her such delightfully exasperated
looks.

"So cruel, master." Koharu informed her in a patiently wry tone.

Danzō gave another huff. "We got the point, you'll make us suffer as much as we make you."

"Do keep it in mind, yes? We wouldn't like to get a field test of rumor mongering, would we?"
Smirking sharply at the two rapidly shaken heads, Tera readjusted her nephew so his returning
father could have his bonding time with his son. "And… now it seems as if I am finally free.
Which of your teachers are you going to inflict on me this day?"

"Danzō got a lesson, so it's Tobi-sensei's turn." Koharu informed her sweetly, tossing her head so
her bangs would at least move out of her eyes even if the greater length remained in the same
covered buns she had worn most of her life now. "Such a pity for Izuna-sama."

The named Shimura made a haughty scoff in her direction. "I got here first, harpy."

"But, alas, she was with a patient." Reminded the younger kunoichi faux sadly, inspecting her nails. "Meaning it's usage of her time that decides the terms of our arrangement."

"You did more talking than she did."

"Mmm, no. No I don't think I did." Flicking the same hand dismissively, Koharu smiled slyly. "I only went over the usage of one word. She had to remind you about tense and usage, which took longer."

Danzō made a respectable sneer. "Banter doesn't count."

"Banter always counts."

Kiyosue blinked at her guests a bit oddly, glanced backwards to where a line would form if Tera had patients to deal with, then quietly stepped around the two teenaged ninja that could likely match and exceed his skill in battle to pick up the merely months old Orochimaru for daddy-time. Not silently, but without words and with a peaceful enough intent no one reacted to his movements much.

The poison mistress gave him a wry smile as she pulled her hair free of Orochimaru's rather strong baby grip.

Such a silent man was a blessing to have around her these days. Especially as Tobirama heartily disliked being abandoned so by his brother for whatever aims the God of Shinobi was chasing, and Izuna was equally as disgusted by the result of the event yet had few he felt he could complain or seek the company of without damaging some of what their respective older brothers had dedicated so much of themselves to build.

(ooo000ooo)

As the first, and really only thing, Tobirama informed her of when he stepped into her home was a terse "There will be war" Terazawa invited him to her lab instead of wait for him to talk in her study where it was entirely possible to eavesdrop upon if one was determined enough and they distracted.

It was possible. If really unlikely.

There wasn't anything that really spoke to Tera to develop more these days, she had finally found a method to refine moonflower into a stable toxic drug form and most of her inventions or developed sciences were all being tested or developed more by others. Leaving her with an oddly sedate personal lab, for all that she now shared the building with more than the original two poison masters the Sekanji had to them upon joining the Leaf.

Besides which, her nephew was a hell of a lot more interesting than toxic compounds or science these days.

"It won't be now." Tobirama informed her eventually, staring a bit blankly at the tiled flooring that made a non-porous surface to be easily cleaned up if anything spilled. "I... we, might be able to stave it off for a few more years. Perhaps a decade. But... even given what brother is attempting to do, I..."
"Conflict is human nature, for all we enjoy peace we are still the creatures a lifetime of struggle against overwhelming odds and fractious warfare with each other created. Seeking out the next threat to eliminate before such can act against us is still a tactic we use even now." The poison mistress could only shrug herself when red eyes crept back up to study her instead. "In truth, I suspected such would occur long before I even joined the Leaf. No one likes to be thought of as 'lesser' than something they believe they should be 'same' as, however much it gives a tangible goal to work towards. If not in steel and blood, competition between us would be brokered through other means."

"Are we trapped in such?" The albino shinobi was not greatly expressive in feature or form, but his chakra made up for that lack. However bitterly wintery his signature was showed how disturbed the man felt. "Yet more war, when the goal of this very village was to safeguard the children from the atrocities of such?"

"Well… they now have a completely safe place to be protected within while we hammer out the level of threat taking each other on would inflict on the war-hungry. Now a village's worth of shinobi will fight and die in their place, to give them the time to no longer be children. If you do not like the idea, find another way."

"That is easy to stat-"

"No. No it isn't." Tera interrupted a bit flatly, slightly nettled such a smart man was being rather stupid right now. "Your brother and Madara-sama, whatever he did in the end to hurt us so, were at war. Your clans were at war, your fathers before them were at war, and for fuck's sake Tobi even now you war with Izuna! You lost how many brothers to it? How many clansmen? How do you consider putting that history of atrocity and counter-atrocity aside to seek a peaceful co-existence with each other easy? You were here for all of it! Can you honestly say it was all too easy?"

The blank stare was not encouraging, but the first blink was. The second included a thoughtful frown, the third came with the straightening of formerly bowed spine.

"You are smarter than even I, Tobi. However much I am 'creative' or whatever others like to heap on me in my so-named 'mad scientist' moods, insane I suppose, the fact you are so defeated at the first great hurdle we all must pass to keep our home as it is now… it is not encouraging." Stepping around his now rather intense stare, slightly uncomfortable under such because she had just yelled at the 'temporary Hokage, play nice while I'm gone guys!' using his own history against him, she retreated to fiddle with her random assortment of glassware. "We do not need a new Hashirama-sama and Madara-sama pair if what you say is true, peace will not help us now if the others do not wish for it. We now need a planner, a plotter, to divert the waves of the coming conflict into a new form that will not hurt us so. You may not be able to dam it, but can you bleed it off somehow? With Izuna, who also was a little brother who worked around their elders to help them establish this dream of theirs into something real?"

"...perhaps." Spoke the man eventually, while the kunoichi scientist absently cleaned her equipment because she could think of nothing else to do.

"I do not wish for war." Tera informed him lowly, fingers ghosting over the same vial of glass she used to finally refine her latest toxin into something usable. "I will fight in such, because this is where my beloved little sister lives with my equally delightful nephew. If I must murder off entire battalions of opponents to keep such alive and happy, I will do so. I made no bones of my toxicity, of my control over wind and water both, I simply am. Murderous and poisonous equally. The same reasoning is why these other opponents move against us, believing that we present a threat to their own and are equally willing to do the same. If I die, then I know the village will care for my loved
ones for me. So I will go to war and do as I have stated with a clear mind and no regret against similarly clear minded opponents that will not regret their actions in turn. How do you get around that, Tobi?"

"Overwhelming power."

"Is that it? Are you the same warmonger Madara-sama was called behind his back? To only think of war and the tools of such the only way to stave off future conflicts?"

Tobirama really didn't like the comparison.

Fair, Tera didn't really like the suggestion. "I said I would, not that I want such. Did you lie to me? Claiming that the village was to save the children from the consequences of war? Is this really only to consolidate what powers existed in both the Land of Fire and others to 'overwhelm' any opponents that picked a fight with you?"

"No!" The table the shinobi had been leaning against sprouted a few branches, the one he stood at with the God of Shinobi in the first breakthrough of the Mokuton study, ignored for now as the Senju heir stood fully and glared back at her finally. "Tera, you know full well what the village was built for, what the Leaf itself was to guard. You made use of such aims, for your clan and your family both. All those children you sacrificed an ancient duty and your own ancestral home for, your freedom and the peace you wished for alone and by yourself without the burden of leadership or the war you still wage with opinions and rumors, now young men and women feeling their way into adulthood under your wicked fingers. You nephew, even now growing in peace with others he will eventually live and work with and for. How dar-"

"Then GET OFF YOUR ASS AND THINK!" Snapped back the kunoichi, spinning around and leaving the glass to shatter behind her so she could face that glare she had merely a reflection of to study before. "If it is WAR you wish to AVOID, FIND US A NEW WAY! As your brother, as Madara-sama, did themselves between the clans. Dominating the Uchiha Clan proved impossible to survive the attempt of, so why do you think of such now? Should there be another endless round of senseless slaughter before we realize it will not work as it should? Do not follow their footsteps, you will do us all no good chasing the shadows of such men you are not the same as when faced with a different obstacle to our shared dream, forge your own path and manage nations of shinobi in ways that will prevent such."

Honestly, the number of people that had or could yell at Tobirama was likely counted on one hand. The man really should not be so taken aback that even he could suffer her likely wickedly nasty tongue, as she scolded him almost as much as he disproved so pointedly when she risked herself.

"So then… this is where the dream the 'God of Shinobi' shared with others has gotten us. Will you let it fall into ruin, or plot around such looming threats? I know how to fool the body into death or health, how the world around us works as far as I can reach, but in truth for all that I can be nasty and vicious with words I do not trust nor even suspect I am the match for one that studies the mind or how humans behave. You are the one I rely on for such, why you seek my aid in such now is beyond me."

"...because, you are not afraid of telling me I am foolish when the whim hits you." Admitted the Senju heir with nearly visible irony. "Such brutal honesty is hard to come by, these days."

"Well… brutal is very much what we are, isn't it?"

Tobirama sighed heavily, glancing backwards at what his variant of his brother's natural ability had wrought on her work table. He smoothed a hand onto the wood, getting the bulges and the few
fronds of new leaves to retreat back into crafted straight lines.

"I always suspected that thing was veneered instead of honestly oak." Tera remarked idly, sliding shards of glass to one side with her rubber soled lab shoes. "Why do you come to me for me to just yell at you what you already know? Honestly, Tobi, you could just seek my company to talk."

The man was silent for a suspiciously long moment, even if the table was back to it's faked state of pretending to be solid wood. "Sometimes, Tera, you are shocking enough in argument to shake loose new ideas. About… what Kesai and you argued…"

"No. Tobi, I will get over it. I just am foolish, and a touch of an idiot sometimes as you well know."

"If I don't want you to?"

"...will you break me so, Tobi?"

(Hashirama and Mito had gone around the Elemental Lands sealing the bijū, monsters of utter destruction and natural chakra that still yet ran around the world in their own aims, rumor and hearsay was not entirely avoidable in such aims as the God of Shinobi might have liked. All nine of them, for all the nine-tailed fox had not been spotted for nearly a full year by that point. Then they were sold, eight of the nine, to the other 'great' shinobi nations. A few of the others, feeling slighted in being termed 'lesser' and not involved in how the nine were split between five, grew rebellious against anything that held one of the hidden villages located in the larger countries as home. The meeting, the 'first' Kage Summit, within the bijū were sorted out and sold within was as fractious as the first unofficial meeting of the 'kages', leaving Hashirama just a touch more melancholy as even the God of Shinobi realized that war was more than likely inevitable between them all. Tobirama's invention of the chūnin exams did soothe a touch of his elder brother's flagging spirits, especially as one by one the other ninja villages started copying the exams and some talk happened of sending teams of green or rookie genin to attempt another village's exams in turns. The first cautious, the Leaf teams of course, arrivals were a bit jarring for all but they were conducted and judged only a touch unfairly as regulations and terms were smoothed out. Thus, a few more years could pass calmly if somewhat tense moments between two or more of the villages to give all more time to establish themselves and prepare.)
A Breath of a Prayer

Village of shinobi mercenaries or not, there were still civilians making their homes and lives around the pillars of ninja clans that defended and protected their chunk of land. Civilians that did not range great distances from the village's walls, that sedately maintained the village's services so returning shinobi could relax or find a new amusement to take their minds off clan or world issues, and did need some consideration for such things.

Festivals were a new thing, to both Terazawa and the Village Hidden in the Leaves. Thrown because things were really darkening outside their walls, in conflicts between the 'hidden villages in something' the kunoichi had termed it so long ago and each other in nearly insensible glancing meetings between two shinobi squads of each, but morale was something that needed to be kept up even in the face of such things. The poison mistress might never had witnessed one herself before this, but it wasn't just her who was insanely curious at this social event the civilians of the Leaf had wanted to celebrate the day of 'founding'.

Orochimaru was fascinated. Hand in kimono with his lady auntie and the Sekanji Clan head, the toddler pumped pudgy legs in order to inspect everything and how they all worked. From the hanging silk lanterns everywhere and why they cast the colors they did, to the games of skill and risk set up to amuse those without ninja skills, those set up with the intent to entertain the shinobi anyways, the food venders and why it tasted so much better in a festival than at home, why everyone and even he had to be so 'fancy' for it.

Karma was a lovely thing indeed, however much her little sister wailed over it.

As Momomi and her husband Kiyosue were having a 'date night' with the distraction presented, and Tera never minded being gifted with babysitting duties, the child had been informed he may walk as he pleased as long as he could maintain some kind of sight-or-touch connection with his aunt. Orochimaru, tiny and indomitable in his own ways, pondered the restriction and then fist a handful of the expensive silk his clan head was wearing to solve it without anyone becoming upset with his decision.

He did ask her why he had to, later out of his mother's hearing.

Tera pointed out his size compared to most walking the streets, how closely packed the civilians were even after ninja abandoned street level to roam the rooftops much as they were doing now to seek out another lane of amusements, and how easily it would be to overlook even his striking looks in such a press of humanity.

The child pointing out the obvious in that she and his mother always knew where he was anyways even if she couldn't see him entered the two in an impromptu discussion of chakra sensing and how to find if one had it or not. As she had not wanted to get into 'kidnapping', 'extortion', 'murder', or other such 'child-related sabotage' just now with the happier mood all around them, the alternative discussion was more than fun for her.

Which was how Hashirama found them, balancing a gleeful Tsunade on a shoulder as he skipped over wandering around at civilian speeds for his own aims. "Tera-sensei! Little Orochimaru-kun! Good evening!"

"Hashi-sama, we were having… de-... de-?"

"De-lib-er-at-ions." Tera supplied with a touch of a wry smile as brassy yellow eyes peered up at
her for help. "Is '-rama' still so difficult for you, my little Leaf snakeling?"

Orochimaru puffed out his papery pale cheeks in a pout. "His name is hard, lady aunt."

"No it isn't." Tsunade refuted in a manner that could be taken as snottily if a level or so more scornful than how her childish voice pitched it, right now she merely sounded bossy and self-sure, a fistful of ryo bills in one hand and another of her grandfather's still dark hair. "Grandpa's got a easy name."

"You just call him 'grandpa'." Pointed out the Sekanji heir in his sardonically childish way when he felt like pointing out the patently obvious to those that tended to ignore such things. "Your opinion does not count, Tsunade-hime."

"Don't call me that!"

As their respective charges fell into bickering, the God of Shinobi gave her a smile that for all it had become tilted from the start of the Leaf's founding was now just normal to most. "And… they're at it again."

"One would think we would have gotten used to such things from how often they do so." Tera drawled out wryly, straightening her back with a sigh of relief as her nephew got into it with the Senju Princess about what was and what wasn't hard for them to pronounce at the towering age of three. "I once thought of bottling your boundless cheer and weaponizing it to take over the world… now I just really want their energy levels and I'll call that good."

Hashirama laughed at her, swinging his granddaughter down to be on the same level as her little childhood friend now they were pretty much ignoring their respective minders in favor of resolving their little tiff. "Mad scientist indeed, Tera-sensei. You get it to work, and I'll hand over my hat for a bit."

"No sale. I have more than enough paperwork."

The Senju Clan head, in that ever so slightly strange over-coat and hakama like dress which was his clan's 'formal' uniform for things of state or diplomacy which was still strange for her to see the shinobi in for all they were his 'robes of state' these days, sat himself upon the rooftop the Sekanji Clan head and heir had been perched upon for their 'deliberations' with a sigh of relief of his own. "This was a really good idea."

"Who's was it?"

"Koharu-chan's family. Well, them and several that petitioned the 'Hokage's' office." Dark eyes flicked over the faces below, a half-grin of slightly sorrow tinged amusement on his face, before the man who took that office glanced back to her. "So! Tera-sensei… I heard such an interesting rumor..."

"If it was me poisoning Izuna-sama, it's a lie. He was ill before he sought out a remedy from me, the fact they coincide is entirely coincidental."

"More about the Shiranui family, and their asking about possibly marrying their head to your clan."

"Oh yes… that." Tera commented blandly, still annoyed and rather irritated at the arrogance of that incident. "They… thought that, as they are also a poison using ninja family, I would be ever so pleased to just hand them my clan and retreat demurely into the background. Gaining them our position as a long-established clan of the Leaf as well as our role as the main poison suppliers and the control of the poison library."
"Tobi put their petition to be heard by the Council of Clans through three walls and dared the Shiranui family head to retrieve it." Hashirama informed her with a sly smirk. "Then informed them in a completely icy way of his when really pissed off that you did have a seat on such, and interfering with established clans of the Leaf was not accepted."

"Well… and?" Asked the poison mistress blandly, irked her war fan was already in her hand and fluttering in her face. "He is my-"

"When was the last time you took a mission on? For that matter, with him or without?" Interrupted the God of Shinobi wonderingly, blinking puppy eyes up at her. "I mean, even Kesi-chan's no longer claiming him as 'squad leader' even if you all keep in contact the best you three can even now."

Pursing her lips, she gave him a wary coppery stare down over the ancient silk. "Do you have a point, Hashirama-sama?"

"Is it so hard to admit you two are friends? Really good ones?" Ask Hashirama a bit tiredly, kicking one geta-clad foot against the wall of the building they were admittedly loitering on. "I'm pleased with such, Tera-sensei. Even if Mito keeps trying to push you two together, and I suppose I don't help much with that, Tobi's rarely made friends. One that isn't intimidated by him, or more interested in his ranks, or just me and the rest of the Senju Clan. You and Izuna are really the only ones he has, for all trying to call him and Izuna friends gets me into spars with him."

"They are still in that phase of 'shit, that asshole really is good and I might be carrying on too much with 'dislike' so what do I do now' than to the point of admitting the other isn't so objectionable as they thought and claimed for so long." Tera informed him bluntly, drawing a laugh out of the Senju Clan head. "It's… not quite so simple in the case between Tobi and I, Hashirama-sama."

"Why? Because you two really are-"

"Hashirama."

The God of Shinobi sighed heavily, staring over the village he had built with his brothers claimed such or not with a wryly dark smile of his own. "Yeah, yeah. I know. We can be happy and all but you can't because of clan heir and head and bloodlines and so on. Sucks, majorly so."

"What does?" Tsunade inquired innocently from behind them, blinking tawny eyes and holding hands with a slightly sulky Orochimaru as the two babysitters turned to include them. Likely, her nephew had been trumped in their argument and ever so reluctant handholding was his 'forfeit' for such an event.

"Politics, little hime." Tera informed the girl with a wry smile. "Politics are sucky."

"Then study them." Her heir pointed out blandly, tugging on her kimono so she would seat herself and make her lap available for him to climb into while Tsunade did the same with her minder. Mostly so he could let go of the girl instead of be pulled into the lap of the God of Shinobi. "Master them, make them your own."

"Not my field of study, little Leaf snake. I left that to wiser minds as I took on the natural world around us instead."

"She's really good at that." Chipped in Hashirama with a proud smile she finally felt somewhat deserving of over his granddaughter's blonde head. "Saved us a ton of effort and work, your lady aunt."
Lazily waving her fan, the Sekanji Clan head pulled a fresh breeze that wasn't muggy with the heat of lit lanterns and the press of human bodies so close together. "Hardly, I merely… what does your lovely mother call it, little Leaf snakeling?"

"Mad scientist-ing." Orochimaru supplied, proud to be contributing to the conversation between adults and with the praise his aunt was getting.

"Right… I just mad scientist it all up, and perhaps saved you some time here or there."

"And lives, and my kekkei genkai, and gave us better medication, and-"

"Shush. Or I will take away the wind."

"Aa… let's not be hasty now." The God of Shinobi smiled in a bitterly touched fond way at her. "I'm glad you and yours joined us here, Tera."

She smoothed down Orochimaru's dark hair as he studied the street below for their next target of 'investigation' and smiled back. "I am glad I did as well, Hashirama."

(Hashirama died as he lived, chasing his peace to the bitter end among those that were not suited to such and confused on how to reach it if even they did realize they might want it. Not two months after the conversation with Terazawa he darted away from the Leaf with his little brother in tow to solve some scuffle or another between them and another hidden village, only to die in Tobirama's arms in the end. Without Madara, the only one to go toe to toe with him and prove that ‘God of Shinobi’ or not the man was still just human and had human limits to mind with the temperament to remind him if he forgot such, the Senju Clan head drained himself in sorting out such conflicts to levels where even his own powerful medical sage-mode added with his brother's lesser variant couldn't save him. He passed on his hat, the one he often jokingly tried to trade off with various other clan heads in return for some petty favors or amusements, for the last time.)
The Last Gasps of Mantra

In a completely strange reversal of their habits up to now, Terazawa was the one to keep Tobirama from burying himself in his Hokage work.

She did not appreciate the irony.

Especially as the Ansatsu Senjutsu Tokushu Butai, or the ANBU agents the Second Hokage established from the blank-zodiac animal-masked beginnings Hashirama pressed on those that were ninja but lost everything they once held dear instead of allow them to suicide, knew perfectly well she could be counted on to save their kage from causing himself an ulcer or a migraine from tending to his building paperwork. With her usual habits and where she might be as a known thing, including the semi-exasperated order from 'the Second' to prevent the Sekanji Clan head from accidentally committing suicide alone in her labs and therefore keeping them both from working too hard, it was an easy thing for them to bother her at all hours.

Again, Tera didn't appreciate the irony. Just so that was known.

Warily eying the blankly masked Dragon, who she suspected was Uchiha Kagami yet would likely never call him out in it because they were supposed to be 'identity-less' and from how the chakra signature twisted in an attempt to hide such it was equally likely it was just one of his many cousins instead, who opened the office door the scientifically inclined kunoichi stepped pass the masked shinobi into the dimly lit Hokage's office.

"Izuna went to bed hours ago, as a matter of fact I was abed before your minions decided to evict me." Tera pointed out in a ruthlessly bland tone as red eyes flicked up to see her and then back down to the paperwork in the man's hands. "I know you know of a way to do your paperwork without even being in the office, this is a flimsy excuse."

"I will be sure to disall-"

"No, no you will not." She interrupted dismissively. "Put those down, we are going to have tea then you are going home and to bed."

It was the first anniversary of Hashirama's death, and Tobirama's 'hatting' as the Hokage. Tera wasn't surprised the man's little brother, who lived and dwelled so peacefully in the God of Shinobi's shadow for so much of his life, struggled a little like this when thrust into the limelight beyond his elder brother's painful removal.

All those that knew the God of Shinobi personally hurt with Hashirama's passing, even those that had only seen the man from afar and never met him outside his 'official' roles, but really. Tobirama should've been with his family so they could grieve if they wished, not locked in a dim office staring blankly at white papers painted with stark black lines.

Tsunade had a sleepover with her nephew tonight for that very reason, the little girl really just desperately wanted a distraction from the gaping hole her grandfather left behind and yet sobbed into Orochimaru's bed clothing anyways after Tera put the children to bed.

Telling the current Hokage any of that would not help this situation much, so she rather silently went about making tea from the kettle and the little burner stove she semi-suspected the ANBU put into the office just for incidents where she was called in.

"...I need to ask you to give Orochimaru-kun to the village."
Tera's head snapped up, stringy dark hair she hadn't bothered to put up this late at night getting in her face and being irritably shoved aside so it wouldn't burn or stick in it's new position. "I beg your pardon?"

Tobirama dropped the pages of work he had still yet to do, rubbing at his face tiredly with both hands. "He good at ninja training, phenomenally good-"

"And the last time I gave an heir to the village to be trained-"

"I know." The albino shinobi cut her off, now running those long fingers through his hair instead of just covering his eyes. "It won't be to an Uchiha clansman. I can at least promise you that."

"My clan's heirs, and since I've had so many of them to date, never tend to stick when the village can reach them. I am tired of being clan head, Tobi. I hate it. Even now, as one of a handful of the last 'original' clan heads and somehow that gives me even more respect than being a kunoichi one. Why would I subject Orochimaru-kun to that?"

"I care for the child as well, Tera. I have watched him grow into himself bit by bit with you a fair number of times. I do not ask this of you lightly, not when… not when he's so open to suggestion and someone else manipulating his expansive curiosity for ill." Dropping his hands, Tobriama glanced over to her tiredly as the kettle behind her whistled. "I will build an academy, for ninja trainees. To standardize what they learn and so we can build off it without running into so much 'clan training' issues."

"The Hyūgas and their 'no weapons' rule, I suppose? The Shimura and their 'any and all jutsu you can learn' even if they can't use such in the field without killing themselves issue? The Akimichi, Nara, and Yamanaka Clans block on how their shinobi are distributed even if one or two would be really nice to have on other teams?" Drawled the Sekanji Clan head sarcastically as she turned back to the tea making efforts. "I... I really do not want to give Orochimaru-kun's training over to anyone else, Tobi. My nephew and heir is a very curious boy, and I did not instill a measure of 'skepticism to unknown adults' yet as I did not expect anyone else to train him for us."

"It will not be now. I mean... when he is a slight bit older. Another year, perhaps."

"Like five is the age to start being cautious about whose advice you take and who's to scorn."

"Tera, please. You are now the sticking point for the rest of the clans on the council I have spoken to-"

"Likely as they know I will not-"

"And if you don't, then standardizing the shinobi ranks into something I can track with paper instead of personal knowledge-"

"-risk yet another heir to their petty machinations-"

"-I will put vetted teachers in place, that know better-"

Tera slammed the kettle down onto the counter she was making tea on, ignoring it as the metal split but keeping the liquid contained via chakra control. "Yes, because that will make it so much easier for them to yet again reach my heir! My nephew this time! Spread it around, make it so I cannot track who did it again!"

"I do not ask this lightly of you, Tera." Pointed out the wintery colored Hokage, the silver lion that had licked his wounds and sought to carry on alone even if his golden brother was dead and gone,
calmly as if she wasn't yelling at him again. "I do not want the same things to recur when your time should have ended long ago. You've done more than enough, for both your clan and this village, and you should join the ranks of the retired clan heads instead of die in the office as so many have already. I ask you to trust me when I say I will not allow it to happen again."

"That, my lord, is a bit below the belt."

"Shinobi." Tobirama dismissed wryly, rubbing at a temple as she sorted out the broken kettle with the mysteriously appearing new one. "Hiruzen was asking for a team, I am contemplating placing Tsunade-chan with him. With Orochimaru-kun, if you agree. You know Saru's character, Tera. He will not compromise your heir."

Sniffing as she throttled back her irritation, the poison mistress ran her mind over what she knew of the teenager.

Hiruzen never did learn to ask politely or bargain with her instead of demand 'rights' to her abilities he didn't have, and as such she had never really taught him anything. Koharu's frequent meetings with her old master of decorum and poisons revealed that the Sarutobi heir was mellowing out a bit in his maturity, but had intensified his drive to learn all he could about chakra natures and how to apply them.

Danzō at least was more frank in how he assessed his childhood friend, calling the other shinobi a bit of a goody-two-shoes with freakish skills.

From that utterly nasty-worded and hot-headed young man, such was actually probably a declaration of pure love and eternal brotherhood.

"He was excited, wasn't he?" Asked the Sekanji Clan head in a desert dry tone, gathering up the tray of tea and carrying it over to drop on top of the Hokage's paperwork headache. Settling down into a chair she had been sure had once been on the other side of the room, Tera poured out a cup for them both. "Now that there's a real excuse he can use to learn all I know of manipulating wind chakra without needing the manners of asking a superior for some instruction."

"Well… it may have been mentioned." Tobirama allowed blandly as he sat back actually with the teacup in hands instead of sit like a board staring at paperwork raised only waist high. "Once… perhaps twice. I recall a few mentions of such at least."

Adding one person to that list of people who would accept a cup of tea from her, when it was already reduced by one as Hashirama was no longer able to steal a cup to see what else she could lace it with to aid instead of harm, was depressingly pleasing to her.

She needed more friends… but Tera was also depressingly aware the Village Hidden in the Leaves of now was not the village she joined so many years ago.

There wasn't a burning ball of windy flames flouncing around taking care of business grumpily, a gleefully cheerful forest-god eclipsing the sun in residence, in the village anymore. The flex and changes years of coexistence and building and populations booms they all suffered gladly had mutated the very feel of the streets, of how it seemed to thrive in these later years. The bright ideas of the founders, both gone and bitterly missed equally by those that had worked with them and shared the vision they wanted to bring into reality, tarnished the dream into something that was both breathtaking and mundane.

That made the people, caught between the lingering of the 'original' and 'first generation' citizens of the Leaf and the newly produced 'second', 'third', and the start of the 'fourth' generations, take a
Tera never would be able to. Running water in pipes, for one. Taking a shower after a hard day of training. Electricity. The lack of candles for needing light after darkness fell. Medication for any and all ills, supplies stockpiled for both winter and emergencies, the very safety of walking down a street without needing to hold onto a weapon as a second or third resort for warding off harassment or assault by both genders and children alike.

...the common decency laws Tobirama had to pass nearly the second he had taken over the Hokage's office. Wherein it was made illegal to beat a wife or child in one's home, to harass sexually any girl on the streets of the village, and equally made it so kunoichi defending themselves from such could not be slammed with 'assaulting a civilian' in revenge.

That had been a debacle and a half, especially as the originating incident happened right after Tera took a seat on the Council of Clans. The first kunoichi present on such, given a criminal shinobi-civilian matter of that caliber to deliberate over.

At least the incident had not been entirely awkward for just her to hear the accuser blather on about before he noticed the Sekanji Clan head sitting on the council giving him a 'what the ever loving fuck are you on' and 'can I study stupidity?' look.

Hearing Izuna drawl 'well, had you tried that with any male shinobi you'd probably be dead. Why are you complaining, again?' had been highly entertaining afterwards. Hashirama had gotten all of three steps out of the council chambers before half-keeling over in giggles, leaving a slightly exasperated Tera to explain to his heir the issue and what laws might need to be drafted to avoid more such incidents.

"Share." Demanded the Hokage tiredly.

"The first criminal charge I got to hear as such a lofty member on the Council of Clans."

Tobirama near about snorted his tea.

"Never fails to amuse me, for sure." Tera remarked wickedly, sipping her tea peacefully as she curled up tighter to fit her long frame into the confines of her seat. "That poor moron's face, both when he spotted me and when Izuna commented on his thoughts about the matter."

"That had been a…” trailing off, the Senju Clan head puzzled over a diplomatic term to use for a long moment, "...fascinating issue."

"I'm sure. If you insist, I will give Orochimaru over to be trained by the Leaf. However," glancing over to the man she was curled up beside, the Sekanji Clan head sighed softly, "I will be meeting these 'teachers' you wish to staff a school of shinobi with. Several times, often. For as long as they are in charge of my heir and nephew's education."

"If that will make you comfortable with the arrangement, I have no objections." Tobirama allowed with a wry smile as she uncurled herself to pour him more of the chamomile tea. "Thank you, Tera."

(ooo000oooo)

With Momomi making dinner, something she had mostly fallen into after marrying Kiyosue and never really stopped doing when she was home, and her husband sharpening various weapons in a regimented pile next to him Terazawa mostly studied the scroll of barely mastered medical techniques.
Medicine was really just a side-project of hers, not a passion. However, as she had been a founding pioneer in the field while trying to help the Senju Clan retain their former head's kekkei genkai, keeping up with new discoveries was never a wasted effort.

Besides which, it was something to relax with after a semi-traumatic Council of Clan meeting in which Tobirama maneuvered around stonewalling clan heads using his influence with her to shove a village-wide change in procedure through anyways.

"Why can't you bring him back?"

Mito, relaxing in the corner of the rather peaceful corner of the Sekanji Clan head's home and present to take Tsunade back to the Senju compound after dinner, blinked open her dark eyes and looked over to the scientist kunoichi staring back at her with a bitterly amused smile.

Then Tera closed her scroll and looked to the children.

"Tsunade-hime, death is not something I will study to twist the nature of."

"Why not? Grandpa called you the best, he said you can do anything with your labs." Stomping a foot, entirely depressed with even a year to get used to the lack of the man, Tsunade sniffed and dashed tears from her eyes. "Even uncle Tobi does."

"Because, as much as I can fool the body and the very nature of the human form into believing itself to be healthy or sick, death is the end. I like it as such, I am content in the knowledge that all things end. Even if it someone I love, I will not twist life back into someone so gone."

Orochimaru, silent and still and so afraid of the subject even now, glanced from his little friend to the adults listening in on the conversation. "Lady aunt, maybe-"

"Little Leaf snake, nature has it's own way to do such."

Blinking eyes, one pair teary and tawny and the other brass yellow and wary, stared up at her.

"If you wait just long enough… the people we have lost and mourn so come back in new forms. Hashirama-sama may be gone, but the components that made him into the man we all loved still exist. In you, Tsunade-hime. In your lovely lady mother, who is his daughter." Smiling wryly, Tera indicated her own nephew with a hand not occupied by a medical scroll. "Orochimaru-kun is the splitting image of my dearly departed mother, with her nature and so much of her cunning just with my father's skin tone and clan looks. Should I then seek to bring her back so greedily, when I have something of her now? Overshadow him with her presence? He does not really understand why I love the woman so years after her death, aside knowing she is his grandmother. Is that fair to him?"

"It's not fair to us." Tsunade informed her as if that was news to be distributed widely for safety of all, dashing yet more tears from her face and climbing up onto the couch to bury her face into the Sekanji Clan head's lap. "Why did he have to go?"

"...because that was his dream. To make peace with everyone, no matter how much his views and personality startled us all so. Hashirama-sama was never the type to send another to do what he could do himself, especially when it came to this village he built with his best friend and brothers. Should we have denied him the right to pay for his beliefs with his life, to validate himself and how much he held up his values to others, just to keep him a touch longer? Kept him caged, so he couldn't be the man we loved so yet would be safe from any and all danger? That would have killed him as surely as that last mission, worse yet would have made him so disappointed with us and risked his hate. However much it seemed he couldn't, to attempt such would have foisted a
lingering resentment even in his good nature."

Orochimaru slid closer, fisting a hand yet again into the silks Tera wore in her role as the Lady Clan head kunoichi of the Leaf. "Do we have to wait? We manipulate everything else..."

"When I go, will you deny me my rest?" Tera asked of the child wryly, petting Tsunade's golden locks idly as she cried out a broken heart yet again. "Even knowing I am a relic of a kunoichi, of a time so brutal and hard that it has twisted me into a very cruel woman? To deny you in this blandly and talk of it so bluntly to those scared of the subject? I've worked so hard, Orochimaru-kun, to provide a home and a life as safe as I can... to the point I am very tired. Those of my generation are, yet we still remain and try just that little bit harder to smooth out the snags for you and your generation to take over for us in time. What use will I be, a decade from my death? Two? I will know nothing of what is socially acceptable, nor who runs the villages then, or to what use I may be put to as even my sciences advance pass what I can do now. A useless relic of a bygone age of warring clans and wild shinobi, out of place and time to the point I damage what you wish to preserve of me. I am a tool of war, child. A tool being used to forge peace, and that has dented me ever so much already."

"What if there is war?" Asked the Sekanji Clan heir of her, just a touch demanding and still very scared of the entire possibility of her own death hurting him as much as his little friend hurt. "And... and we don't know what to do? How to fight something so beyond our current knowledge?"

"In that, Tobirama-sama has preempted all of us." Admitted the Sekanji Clan head with a bitter smirk. "There is a way, a kinjutsu he locked away as forbidden, to bring back a long lost shinobi to the wielder's order. But... honestly, it is yet more tools of war. Something temporary, to draw forth the skill and power of bygone days. Notice still, even as much as he loved his own brother, he does not use such. Such twists the mentality of those gone before into something not shared by them in life, because death changes everything it touches."

Dropping the scroll to her lap as well, Tera cupped her nephew's cheek and smoothed away his tears with a thumb.

"If you ever have need of me like that, Orochimaru-kun. I will never mind being called back from my rest to aid you. Otherwise... if it is just because you are scared or because you miss me, I will be most upset."

"But I love you."

"I love you too, little Leaf snake. However, immorality is for fools and cowards to craven to risk their all and make the best of it with the limitations we all share. I am neither. When it is my time I will go gratefully, knowing I have done the best I can for you and my little sister. In mastering my craft to the best I could, in surviving all that I did up to that point. If you deny me my death then what was the point of all those risks, all the frustrations, all the pain?"

Orochimaru pulled a face, finally. A frustrated one, as he tried to plot around her words with all his admittedly formidable four-year-old cunning. "You would be alive."

"Without the threat of death, life would not taste as sweet. The pockets of peace and safety we carve out would have no meaning in sharing it with others as there would be nothing we have to protect each other from. Without death, there is no life."

"...I don't want you to go."
"I do not wish for that either, we are about to have dinner." Tera responded dryly, startling a laugh out of the girl still sniffing into her really expensive silk kimono. "Children… give thought to what Hashirama-sama would think upon his resurrection, if you press for yet more. He would, even now a year after his death, be completely confused and almost superfluous to the village. We have picked up the pieces of his dream, continued it beyond his influence or direction, and are still working to broaden it yet more. Perhaps in ways he would not like, unknowing of the issue behind why or for what, and perhaps in ways he would love. Would it be fair to him, to shove him back into this when he has already paid with his life in his pursuit of his dream? To prevent Tobirama-sama from growing into a leader out from under his shadow? It may not be fair to us that he was taken so soon, but that does not mean it would be fair to him to yank him back without intent to let him risk what he will in his own life."

Tsunade, the brat, stole her scroll of medical techniques. "Then, I'll keep people alive so they won't die."

"A fair goal, hime." Allowing it, as again medical things were really just a side-project for her and this princess should and would be the one to dominate the field in time, the Sekanji Clan head sighed a bit heavily. "I seem to have become ever so wordy in my old age…"

"If you are old, what does that make me?" Mito inquired with a wry little smirk of her own.

"Hmm… if you care to know, I believe the term is 'fossil'."

"Dinner!" Momo, the utterly lovely baby sister that she was, called out cheerfully before the widowed wife of the God of Shinobi could respond.

Orochimaru lingered near her as everyone else moved to the dinner table. "I don't like it."

"It is always alright to be afraid of death, little Leaf snake. I am too, for all I will accept it." Tera informed him bluntly. "If we were not, there would be no care put in to surviving life and all the hurdles within. I at least have another decade in me, perhaps less and perhaps more. I am not an old woman yet, I still have more I can do so I shall do them."

"But… it's getting worse." He informed her lowly, taking very tiny steps forward to join the rest of them for dinner because he wanted to speak of this issue with her and air it all out so he could understand and place what he felt. "Out there. Beyond the walls of the village."

"Little Leaf snake, again. I am a tool of war. For now, it is not your worry. Live and grow, for it pleases me to see you do such ever so in this haven. Allow me to put myself to use one last time in your name, to protect you and this home I have found for you, before you have to worry about war or conflicts of killing."

(There was no sudden yet measurable mark for when the conflict later termed the 'First Great Shinobi World War' started. It was both an eternal thing that began long ago as well as something sudden and new, given the shift of war between clans to the war between shinobi villages and the differing scale as things were changed to accommodate the greater numbers of combatants available to fight and deploy. In spite of the work the Leaf put into preserving the peace, into solving conflicts in other ways, war was still a resort most of the world was more than ready to pull on when things didn't work out in the way they wished them to. Depending on how one tried to mark it, it either began before or right after the First Hokage died or halfway into the Second's reign… when the very first of the Leaf shinobi squads were sent out with the intent of pacification through force in mind instead of diplomacy.)
"Not going to try and tell me it was a bad idea?"

"I don't know, Tobi… with how much of your guts I could see when your ANBU pulled me here I think the point was made already." Terazawa drawled bitterly, smoothing the bandages with worried fingers laced with the minty green chakra she refined to help encourage the Second Hokage into healing just a little bit more. "If you didn't have the Mokuton…"

"I would have lived." Tobirama informed her tiredly, pressing a hand to one equally tired eye and merely waited out her stressed fussing with patience she never really knew where he pulled from to have. "Izuna was with me."

"Oh yes, the fire-mad Uchihas. While you were growing wood. Thank fuck you had one of them to set it all afire."

"I resent that!"

"The word is resemble, Izuna-sama." Tera snapped over a shoulder, to where the Uchiha Clan head had his own bed in the infant hospital of the Village Hidden in the Leaves. "Do try to make some sense, if you would. Otherwise, I feel as if I must note down you have a concussion… and the recovery of such is at least a week of bedrest and no training for two. On top of what you have now for recovery."

"The Gold and Silver Brothers were declared as criminals, at least."

"Which is so very good. As they tried to kill their kage and the one seeking a peace treaty with them."

The albino shinobi sighed again, still tiredly. "Are you quite done yet, Tera?"

"Why didn't you take me with you? Any other medically trained shinobi that can heal at least a papercut? Someone that could keep your very lifeblood within your body if you pressed too far?" Demanded the Sekanji Clan head equally as tiredly. "Are you always going to do this? We lost one Hokage this way, sprinting off to handle matters of state on another's soil. Must we lose another before such a thing is avoided?"

"Those of Cloud respect strength, not cowardice."

"And it was strong of you, indeed. To sprout more than half a forest into their rocky mountain home in the fight… draining yourself to the point they nearly gutted you."

"The Second Raikage was more the target, keeping him alive so we may have the treaty still was important." Tobirama pointed out, levering himself into a half-reclined position even if she glared at him for putting his abused body through the motions. "Which, as he did, means it is likely they will not mind re-opening talks with us. Securing our northern borders, when we have so many other theaters of war to watch and manage."

"So flashing out of there like a yellow lightning bolt with the equally drained Uchiha Clan head will not harm relations?" Tera lifted a hand, pointing one finger up and swirling it around sarcastically. "Yay."

"Would you rather fight with them more? To-"
"Who murdered off their entire battalion of shinobi when they tried to advance into Fire?" Asked the kunoichi bitterly. "I did, Tobi. All of them, in a second with three breaths of toxin each the scouts could pinpoint for me. Even if it makes the shinobi I work with cringe from me more. Do not ask me to be glad such measures were required to even open a line of communication with them, that you nearly killing yourself means we still have that option. I am not that kind of woman, I would greatly rather resent them for being so stupid as to force us to this in the first place."

"Speaking of… we need you on the eastern front, Tera." Izuna spoke mostly to the ceiling, not nearly as difficult a patient if it wasn't for that very issue. "You know poisons, and that's turning into a Mist-thing entirely it seems."

"WHO THE FUCK IS GIVING HIM PAPERWORK IN A HOSPITAL?"

"I am a ninja." The Uchiha drawled back dryly, pulling up one arm even if he was hovering on the edge of exhaustion just to poke at his ear with a pinky finger. "Also, ow. Volume control, hime. We're in a hospital."

"Exactly when did I become a hime? I think I would have recalled such an occasion." Tera asked sardonically, as it seemed all she could do was wait and amuse them with words or just banter at this point rather than help them heal more.

"You mean you two were trying to keep it a secret?" With a sarcastic laugh, Izuna pushed himself to the side to see both the kunoichi scientist's bemused face and even Tobirama's glare. "Well… if that's the case maybe you should stop running to his side every time he so much as beckons, hime."

With a sigh, the Second Hokage rubbed his temple. "Please, you are just-

"Also." Interjected the now highly amused Uchiha as he made himself comfortable in his new position before the albino shinobi could finish his thought. "The whole 'send the Hokage to bed' thing? Seriously? The rumors alone that started…"

Tera gave Tobirama, who was very pointedly not looking her in the eyes, a flat copper glare. "Your ANBU are a bunch of gossipy hens. Who's idea was that, anyways?"

"Rooster started it. The mixing of those particular orders." As if he hadn't just thrust one of his prized black ops subordinates under the wagon, nor sidestepped her question of the origin of the ANBU's creation entirely, their ever so vaulted Hokage picked at the lengths of white cotton holding his internal organs where they should be and not all over the floor instead of look up and meet her eyes. "How long are we to remain here?"

"For Izuna? Three days and he's free. For you? A week."

"Tera-"

"Your. Guts. Were. Showing." She spoke over him ruthlessly, crossing her arms and glaring back at the semi-frustrated look he was giving her. "I honestly would rather ban you for a week on top of that, because for all the good that side-study into the Mokuton did for medical chakra… it's not a cure-all. A week is how long it will take to at least ensure you are whole if not sound of body, because healing organs is a tricky thing still. A week, just the week. Please."

Tobirama subsided back into his sickbed, half reluctantly and a touch apologetically.

"And you, Izuna. Three days, then if you can stagger your own ass out of here you may go." Tera informed the Uchiha Clan head, stalking over to snatch the folder he had tried to shove back up
under his thin hospital pillow and failed in only because he was not entirely coordinated just yet. "If I catch any more of these, I will add days."

"Oi, hime, that's mine."

Holding the paperwork over his head, out of arm's reach, the Sekanji Clan head huffed. "And?"

"What do you see in her?" Izuna asked exasperatedly, sprawled out like he was a fashion model the civilians like to dress up and drool over in some of the tailoring shops and not hovering on the edge of complete chakra exhaustion. "Seriously, I'm more than sure I could find you a girl with a sweeter nature."

"Nauseatingly so, I suspect."

"Tobirama, I have a perfect taste in women."

"Oh my dear kami-sama." Tera breathed out, glancing between the two admittedly strongest shinobi left in the Leaf these days. "Is... this a dick-measuring contest?"

"Tera."

"What?"

Ignoring the reproving and equally disgusted comments from each, she tossed the paperwork on the bedside table neither shinobi could reach at the moment without falling out of their respective beds and merely turned around to leave them to it.

She had better things to do than listen to that.

(ooo000ooo)

Orochimaru was very pointedly washing out his long hair in the sink. In the kitchen part of the home the head of the Sekanji Clan lived in with him and his parents. Not the bathroom, where such personal hygiene care was normally done.

"What ever happened to cause you such issues, little Leaf snake?" Terazawa asked obediently to her heir's expectations, pausing in her preparations to immediately head out directly east to join the ranks fighting off the Mist ninja nibbling at the Leaf's flanks. "I thought you disliked my poisoning of hair habits."

"There is an idiot in the shinobi academy of uncle Tobi's." The tiny and self-possessed Sekanji heir informed his elder and superior, in a tone that left no room to question his low opinion on such. "A loudmouth of an idiot, who thought I was a girl."

"Oh my."

"Why such a moronic example of a ninja child is in my class..." Finishing with cleaning his locks of whatever substance was so objectionable, the boy-child slung the wet hanks of hair over a yukata clad shoulder and cleaned up his work station as they were all taught to do no matter how 'benign' their work was in nature. "Hopefully upon the 'graduation' event, he will no longer annoy me so."

"One can only hope." Murmured the poison mistress, not hiding the silken slide of amusement from threading her tone. At the utterly disgusted look aimed up at her through brassy yellow eyes, she smirked back wickedly. "Does this... 'loudmouth idiot', possess a name?"
"I would not *dream* of sullying your very presence with such, lady aunt." Orochimaru snarked back in a tone as dry as the summer sun, wandering over to see what she was doing out of her 'normal' silks and ornate hairstyles and in her kunoichi leathers and dark strands gathered up in a samurai's ponytail. "Are you… leaving again?"

"I am afraid so, the Mist shinobi to our east seem to think they are the only ones that can employ poisons. I aim to remind them they are very wrong in such arrogant assumptions." Straightening her boots and tucking her loose pant legs into them to prevent anything being able to crawl up them, Tera sighed lightly and stole a hank of wet hair to tug fondly. "Again, I expect you to obey your lovely mother if and when she orders something. As I leave her headship while I am otherwise distracted and you are a touch young to be bothered with such worries."

He snagged hold of her hand before she could release him, frowning at her in distaste. "Again?"

"Again, I am sorry. I hope to be free on the day you are to graduate, but even if events conspire against me… I already know you will have done me proud. The clan as well, but more importantly me."

Orochimaru smiled, pleased in a way that wasn't sarcastic or sardonic as was his normal expression of amusement these days, brassy yellow eyes under purple crests dipping to the floor first before releasing her fingers and he looked back up at her. "His name is Jiraiya."

"Oh? How… unfortunate."

"How so?"

Tera smiled at her nephew fondly, with a touch of bitter irony. "There is a legend, with one Tsunade, Orochimaru… *and* one named Jiraiya. It is not a good legend for the one you represent, my nephew. If history repeats itself…"

"That is only because morons fail to learn from such and to avoid the mistakes." Scoffed the child, sliding up to the same couch she was reassembling herself from 'lady kunoichi' to 'poison mistress shinobi'. "Can you tell me it?"

"Let us see how much I recall so many years after I last heard it… there once was a great evil snake. It was a terrible, twisted entity that wished mindlessly for more and more power in it's greed. It attacked one of the noble courts, aiming to take over what it destroyed… only for the main nobleman to be saved by one called Orochimaru."

The equally named child raised an eyebrow at her. "It was your father's idea to name you such, not I." Teased the kunoichi wickedly. "This Orochimaru wasn't truly just a wandering warrior darting out of the mists of the unknown to perform a great deed, he and the evil snake had a pact and in truth he was little more than a puppet. Unknowingly of such influences the nobleman appreciated his rescuer in full for his actions and named him a son and heir, thus dooming his line and house."

"That is not an entirely *bad* tactic." Admitted the namesake dryly. "Ah… it is very respectable indeed in that respect, little Leaf snake. But this evil snake was not done, it wanted more. There were two seals held by subordinate clans, badges of the nobleman's power and right to rule his fiefdom that allowed him to raise armies in his own name. Both clans were eventually destroyed in it's lust for power, and Orochimaru tossed the heirs for both off a cliff to die… a boy and girl who were named Jiraiya and Tsunade respectively."
"Oh dear." Orochimaru sighed heavily, cradling one paper pale hand to his equally as colored forehead so he could rub it and what could be either exasperation or a building headache. "I see where this is going, lady aunt."

"More than likely."

"You may as well finish it, so I know what to avoid."

"Jiraiya and Tsunade were saved by a wandering sage, who realized who they were and took them in. They then trained, to avenge their clans and restore their honor as the evil snake twisted what remained to it's own will, in Toad magics and Slug magics for each to master. Unfortunately, Toad magics fell to Snake magics, which fell to Slug magics, which fell to Toad magics in turns. Locking them and Orochimaru in a stalemate for years, as no one could grasp the upper hand as the Slug magics of Tsunade's kept Jiraiya's Toad magics from being overwhelmed and as such could not be used to overwhelm the Snake magics Orochimaru wielded as part of his pact with the evil snake. Eventually in the end, with a sword that could cut the waves found in or near hell, Jiraiya and Tsunade managed to kill the great evil snake and saved Orochimaru... and asked that he be pardoned in the end as he was controlled to do so much evil than wishing to spread it willingly."

"Kill the brats, or teach them as a master myself. Don't be greedy." Huffed her heir sourly, scowling as he reviewed the entire story for any more flaws. "No pacts with evil things that wish to puppet me, and get the sword first."

"Sounds good to me, little Leaf snake."

Orochimaru snorted sourly, shoving his distaste with how predictably the story ended and considering new points without such an influence bending his opinions. "But... Tsunade-hime is my friend..."

"You are lucky in such, I only had your mother for the longest time." Tera informed him wryly, lingering even if she really should be going. "And... I suppose Rokkaku-sama was a friend, for all he was more a subordinate samurai in rank. And then the clan moved here, and most I could call friends have now died in service of protecting this home from various ills."

...Kesai would probably not appreciate being the reason the team's 'hime' started crying. For all the Inuzuka kunoichi was buried and gone now with so many others. Even the Sekanji graveyard was growing with disturbing ease, both the former remaining shinobi they once had had their own places as well as a good half of her samurai followers were buried in spots around the compound's walls.

It hadn't use to be this bad, and in truth she couldn't pinpoint when it changed from easy missions for nobles and merchants to even the rural farmers on occasion to full out war with their so-called shinobi village 'neighbors' and a steadily growing death toll for all.

Perhaps the warring clans era never truly ended?

"You have me, and mother still, and father. We will be your friends."

"Your father... he's still just there to me." Admitted the elder Sekanji blandly, snatching another lock to tug playfully as she got up. "A good fighter, for all he was a mercenary for most of his life and we are another type entirely who tend to have more... dramatic fights. But... more your mother's project than one of mine."

He shot her an exasperated look. "I love him."
"You are entirely entitled to do so, not only as his son but as who you are to him. I still view him as one might a mangy stray brought home and fattened up to be the family dog. Or emergency dinner."

Her heir snorted, trying and mainly failing to hide the smirk at her words. "Good luck, lady aunt."

"I have the winds with some water and poison… against water using poison users." Tera sighed heavily. "I will need a touch more than luck, dear little Leaf snake."

(ooo0000oo)

Fourteen shadowy shinobi slunk out of the wet muck that made up the shores of this particular island, breathing through heavy masks instead of the sea air and inching almost painfully slowly to the flickering firelight higher up the muddy beach.

A whisper of wind, and the tubing connecting the masks to hidden tanks of air were sliced through suddenly. The hiss of escaping air had all of them jerking backwards, releasing their picked poisons into the air to buy them time to recover from the sudden assault.

Terazawa stomped her boot down, pinning one of the ninja attempting to ambush the faked campsite into the muddy water until he drowned fully and stopped thrashing on her. A fan, ancient and splashed with colors unnatural to the murky surroundings but an unmistakable signal through the heavy mists for it, waved idly to blow off the powders lacing the salty air and call forth her subordinates.

"The rebreathers taint the air eventually, to the point users of such will become dependent on the altered airflow to breathe and lose the ability to do so normally. They will not live long enough to bother us more."

The Nara she was speaking to removed the dark green painted metal that was the Leaf's version of a gas mask she made way too long ago and proved so desperately useful in this facet of the war. "Noted."

Drowning, or choking on one's air because you could not breath it in truth, was still a horrifying way to go.

Lifting tired copper eyes off her victims this round, the poison mistress sighed and waved her fan a few more times to ensure anything that was poisoned was brushed with winds strong enough to blow it mostly off. "I do hope you recall your decontamination procedures. I can try as much as I can, but the risk is still present."

"That is why we were sent. These ones to study, the rest to die." His partnered Akimichi reminded her cheerfully, very out of place in this wet and poisonous hell. "We'll take care of this one, you should probably go see if the other traps sprung."

Likely, they had with less insured results.

The Yamanaka on this team, positioned to keep a wary eye out for any sudden character changes in his teammates or the early signs of toxins taking root, merely inclined his head as she passed him. Far enough away to suggest both respect and wary distance.

Hopefully the gas masks had truly prevented any real harm. It didn't seem as if Mist had broken into the topical reacting venoms just yet.

Of course, that was just a matter of time as things were readjusted for them taking on surprisingly
well prepared Leaf shinobi in facing poison users. Tera expected it now, but merely so she wouldn't
be surprised when it finally happened.

Even she, who preferred herbal compounds and toxins, had a few naturally occurring venoms on
her these days of constant warfare and conflict.

Stepping over the water, a risk given Mist shinobi tended to go under the waves than over, and the
Sekanji Clan head trudged through the salty white-capped tides to see about the other muddy dots
masquerading as islands they had set up this operation upon.

Tera was tired, not stupid, and still a chakra sensor.

A hand tried to grip her ankle to pull her into the water, but the limb was bent out of reach using
the soft-physique technique of her mother's to ensure it moved inhumanly enough to not be
preempted and she threw six sharp blades of wind into the cresting waves in return.

Ignoring the bloody patch of seawater that bloomed below, and the chunks of body parts starting to
bob to the surface, she finished her trek to the next island without further issue.

The Sarutobi clansman had died by sharp implements instead of toxin, caught a bit by surprise by
the next grouping of fifteen having split around the island to attack both sides at once. Simply
patting the Senju who seemingly thought he should have caught such a thing in his wood before
the death could happen under his command on the shoulder, really the most she could pull up to be
considerate with as that likely was not the last dead body of her night, the poison mistress bent to
try and save one of the Uchihas that seemed to have not been as fast as one would wish with his gas
mask.

Washing one's lungs gently with purified water was equally as distasteful for both patient and the
one with a water affinity, but preferable for all the irritant as it might reduce the amount of toxins
breathed into a non-disabling or lethal amount.

"There you are."

"Izuna, it was not that long ago you were in the hospital."

"It was two weeks ago." The Uchiha Clan head reminded her dryly, ignoring that getting out to her
position in the Mist-Leaf conflicts would take at least half of that measure of time, glancing down
worriedly at his clansman who was spluttering on her water. "Will he live?"

"If he does not risk more toxin, perhaps." Tera couldn't promise more than that, she wasn't entirely
sure what variant of the airborne toxin the man had gotten nor what the inevitable results would be.

They didn't quite know fully just yet, it would only be known when and if the man and others
suffering from it died of it in the end.

"You were the one to send me out here, why are you here?"

"You're being swapped out." Under her highly unimpressed look, because nearly all Sekanji poison
users and master that could be spared were in the north-eastern region of the Land of Water's sea,
the man rolled his sharingan bright eyes. "Turns out Sand also has a fascination with poisons now
to go along with their creepy fascination with puppets, we need someone with your skills in Wind.
They're all wind users too, apparently. You'll have a blast."

"...son of a bitch."
"Yeah… apparently you're not all that special now. They copied you in your 'winds of death' thing." Izuna continued with relentless cheer, impressively enough not forced humor to try and keep spirits up. "You'll be taking a good contingent of Sarutobi, Shimura, and Uchiha fire experts. Have fun."

"Oh lovely, flaming toxic winds. Just what such needs."

The Uchiha Clan head snickered. "Almost regretful the icy prick sent me here instead, I kind of want to see that…"

Tera pressed fingers into the ache in her temple, sighing heavily as she discarded the tainted water into the sea. "You fucking Uchihas and your bloody pyromancy."

"It's a living."

(It was the last time Terazawa saw Izuna alive… or otherwise. The Uchiha Clan head made use of half-forgotten experiments in learning to boil seawater and applied it to the war fronts in Water, which did cripple the assaults the Mist shinobi tried to throw for a time. However, it also created a weather pattern of horrible and sometimes toxic storms. In one such washes of poisonous rains, the already half or more constantly drained Izuna used his fire affinity to the greatest reaches he could press it to defend a perfectly placed assault team until they could press the advantage home… only to disappear entirely into the explosion of water and fire chakra laced washes of steam and deadly toxic rains. His body was never recovered, for all the Uchihas that tried to defy the logic of water trumping fire to search for him and at least bring back the eyes they guarded so viciously.)
"Holy hell, there's a girl-Orochi-teme!"

A smack of skin on skin, her heir palming his face just a touch too quickly to prevent the noise. "That, moron, is my lady aunt. The Sekanji Clan head. The last original clan head of the first generation of the Leaf."

Curiosity was a besetting sin of all shinobi, Terazawa turned around to behold not only her nephew but Tsunade's upset face as well as the tiny child with white hair and black eyes gaping up at her.

In the middle of a semi-busy street.

...rather unattractively.

Allowing herself to smirk slyly in amusement for a second, the older kunoichi slipped her war fan out of her sleeves and fluttered the ancient weapon to shield her lower face and conceal her really amused grin. "Oh? Dear nephew, my darling heir, you did not inform me you were such friends with... I believe this is Jiraiya-kun?"

The children and she were to meet up for one of her randomly free periods, in between war deployments and missions and just general time off to handle clan things. Momomi took good care of the clan in Tera's absences, which meant the poison mistress had less to do in her 'recovery' periods.

A bit surprising they found her on her way to their meeting point, but not entirely unexpected.

"We are not friends, lady aunt." Orochimaru refuted nastily, taking a deep breath and letting both it and his irritation go before peering up at her apologetically with his brassy yellow eyes. "The dobe was just leaving. Tsunade-hime has had more than enough of his antics-"

"Oi. She can speak for herself, Orochi-teme."

"And I say beat it." Tsunade demanded shortly, glaring at the white haired child but gripping her nephew's yukata in one hand to keep the child between the other two. "Terazawa-sama only has so much time to spend with us, stop infringing."

Jiraiya looked mortally wounded by such a demand from the Princess of the Senju Clan, depressed and a touch sulky, which enabled Tera the opening to bend down and seize his face to inspect without him jerking away from her.

Tilting the now wide-eyed child's face upwards, the kunoichi smoothed her thumb over the tiny red spike bleeding off from his left eye to possibly cut through his cheekbone in time. "Oh?...hmm... you wouldn't have originated from Waterfall, would you?"

"What?"

"What?" Orochimaru repeated in the next second, spinning around with more irritation than intentional dramatics to behold his apparent daily irritant. "...no. Lady aunt, you can't mean to say..."

"Red is one of our crest colors, and I distinctly recall one of my cousins with red crests being married off to a merchant family in Waterfall. The last of who could have passed on her colors to a
descendant, and if it twisted any…” The poison mistress dashed her heir's hopes with a touch of surprised amusement, letting Jiraiya go and ignoring the three giant wary steps backwards. "If he does not know, then I might not be able to connect him back into the clan… well, just yet anyways."

...it was entirely possible Jiraiya was a distant cousin. How… amusing.

"So… the Snake, the Slug, and the Toad. Back together once again." Tera lightly observed aloud, unfolding her tall frame to inspect the child-sized sannin who would become such looming legends to eclipse her generation's brutal shinobi in the fullness of time. "Wherever will you three go from here, I wonder?"

"That is a legend, a history, which does not have to apply. That from all accounts we should not apply." Orochimaru informed her pointedly, utterly unhappy with the revelation he might be related to the tiny Toad Sage still just gaping with shock and horror entirely. "Jiraiya-san is entirely unsuited to shinobi life, and he should drop out. Which would thankfully leave us a Toad short."

"Oi." Again with that same startled shout of protest, the named white-haired child shrugged off his surprise for the moment to turn to her own heir and glared back into the metallic eyes that seemed to be a feature of her line. "You don't have the right to tell me that, teme."

"You know… there were more legends of a 'Gallant' Jiraiya."

"Lady aunt, please."

"We are Sekanji, my little Leaf snakeling. Our humors are strange as they are wonderful. As of now, you amuse me so." Purred the clan head wickedly, sliding the frame of her mother's ancient war fan though her fingers idly. "I somehow find myself with most of an afternoon free… would you children like to hear how your namesakes are recalled, as well as what else I may remember?"

"I recall the story, aunt. I can certainly inform the moron later."

"You'll tell it in as few words possible, Orochimaru-kun. And cut out anything remotely interesting." Tsunade reminded him a bit pointedly, stepping from behind her little childhood friend and away from her stalwart defender from the unwanted attentions of a classmate. "I would like to hear it, Terazawa-sama."

"...sure." Jiraiya tacked on after a moment of studying her form in what he likely assumed was covertly, still adjusting to the fact there was in existence a 'girl-Orochimaru' and such might actually be his distant family.

Badly, which meant he would be easily manipulated for more amusing reactions.

"Perhaps not in the middle of a road. A tea house, instead?" Without waiting for them to agree, Tera took a few steps to the side and aimed for a decent one in sight. "Coming, children?"

"...yes." Orochimaru snagged Jiraiya by a sleeve and shoved the other boy-child onwards, on his other side from Tsunade. "Let's."

"Hey! What's suddenly got into you?"

"Terazawa-sama's the foremost expert on poisons in the Leaf. One of the first poison mistresses." The Princess of the Senju informed her persistent little friend cheerfully. "If you have bad manners, she's likely to poison you."
Jiraiya glanced to her, which she caught over a shoulder with a smirk, and then back to the two other namesakes of that ancient legend. "...crap."

(ooo000ooo)

Sarutobi Hiruzen's saving grace in the end was Biwako, his newly married wife.

"I am terribly sorry, Terazawa-sama." The younger kunoichi informed the Sekanji Clan head a touch exasperatedly, bowing in her apology. "I will insure he knows how to properly ask in the future."

Koharu snorted inelegantly, dodging her master's reach because the current Sarutobi Clan head had her war fans to experiment with the wind. "Seriously. Almost twenty years, getting your heir to teach as a student for the opportunity, and his wife's interjection to learn to ask nicely. Go Saru."

"Dear girl, it is not you who should apologize. We all learn at different rates." Tera interjected diplomatically, a bit annoyed by the lack of her fans to play with in this conversation. "It might have taken him a touch longer… but that does not mean the lessons were in error. Merely… that his teachers were bad."

Danzō snorted on the poison mistress' other side, roughly as men could get away with and as women couldn't quite do just yet. "Wonder what that says about your teachers, harpy?"

"That our teachers had better things to mind than our manners? Like say… skills?"

"I sincerely wonder if the two of you are trying to hide something with such snark."

Instead of rise to the bait, both merely glanced at her with amusement.

"Not going to work, master." Koharu informed her cheerfully, stretching out likely tired legs as they took advantage of a rare peaceful moment of instruction to relax within. "I have a boyfriend, and his clan name isn't Shimura."

"Good." The Shimura Clan's heir grunted as he leaned back to watch the play of leaves in the wind be manipulated by his childhood friend. "Leave my clan out of your machinations."

"Are we sure about this?" Tera inquired silkily, inspecting her chipped nails instead of reach again for fans she did not have on her. "It sounds to me as if you are dodging the accusation, not disproving such."

"It does kind of sound like they are in denial." Biwako admitted slowly, unsure as she wasn't someone that knew the Sekanji Clan head all that well to know if she was teasing or not. "But… why would they lie?"

"Why, indeed." Purred the older kunoichi wickedly. "Are we not shinobi?"

"Master!"

"Teacher, no. We only just finished dealing with your last round of 'rumor mongering'."

"Then be better than I." The poison mistress informed them both haughtily. "You, Danzō, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Believe you are the only one that can understand, the only one that can see, and doom yourself into the inevitable role of being the villain and the architect of your own un-mourned downfall in the end. You, Koharu, there are always more than two ways around situations. More than three, or even four. If you do not like the situation, then change it.
before it becomes so. Be *proactive* than *reactive.*"

Her former apprentice in decorum and poisons blinked back at her with her dark eyes, a wryly bitter smile on her face. "And for Homura, if he was here?"

So many of the previous generations were dying off, suddenly or not, it wasn't unusual to have the older shinobi try desperately to press just a last few lessons on before they too died. Tera honestly didn't expect to last much longer herself... and was actually half looking forward to it.

She wasn't as greatly skilled as her contemporaries had been, she merely just lucked out in a specialty that could not be fought off and the skills of a chakra sensitive with the very winds to call upon for anything else. Her luck in such was more than overdue to run out.

Orochimaru was in the Leaf, he had his teammates and his teacher set up for him, there was little else she had to do.

A relic indeed, and tired with it.

"*Him.* He may be your rock, to lean on and adjust from, but the earth can be as much *mud* as it can be solid stone. Perhaps he should look into the nature of *concrete,* to solidify in place what you have already conquered."

"What about Kagami?"

"He'll be fine." Deadpanned the Sekanji Clan head flatly. "Before you ask, I do not know your other teammate at all that well, Danzō."

"Well... he *did* try to eat half your poison gardens." Admitted the Shimura shinobi dryly.

The Sekanji Clan head sniffed with irritation. "Someone needs to go pry my war fans out of Sarutobi-san's grips, it seems as if some or all of us are being called back to war."

(ooo000ooo)

"I do not believe we are getting that peace treaty." Terazawa observed just a touch dryly.

Tobirama sighed heavily beside her, kneading his forehead. Still in the position he had come to a stop in when he realized what lay ahead of them yet.

Koharu, white-faced nearly as much as the Sekanji could become, crouched in the branches above them and peered down to her teachers. "Master, Tobi-sensei, aren't they *outlawed*?"

"That just means in the end *Cloud* doesn't have to be held responsible." Observed Danzō bitterly as the rest of the Second Hokage's Escort Team dropped down so they could plan for what the two chakra sensitives could pick up. "We won't be able to retaliate *officially* for this."

Torifu settled his powerful bulk, for no Akimichi was anything remotely like 'trim' as many expected shinobi to be but his clan used that to their benefit *so* well, against a tree. "And we were *so close,* too."

Kagami merely settled in to wait, silent and obviously not happy but willing to do anything that might be ordered just so the team could survive just that little bit more. Hiruzen and Homura, who rounded out the team, followed his example and that left the kage and the Sekanji Clan head in the center of a semi-circle of subordinates.
The Kinkaku Force was an, admittedly outlawed as her former apprentice had asked, group of some twenty-some strong shinobi who once followed the same Gold and Silver Brothers that interfered with the last round of peace negotiations. All... nineteen of which Tera could feel bearing down on their position somehow unerringly.

The poison mistress was a known companion for the Hokage in this next hopeful round of negotiations, they had sent on word when she argued her way into the team with what happened the last time, which likely meant they had something to counter toxic winds. Eventually, most of the other shinobi villages had figured out how to fight off Sand's shinobi... and that it applied to one of the poison mistresses of the Leaf.

Her concern over her luck running out hadn't been idle speculation.

Well... Hot Water... or were they in Frost now? Iron?

Either way, the pine forest was a pretty place to die in. A bit chilly, a little dim, but one couldn't have everything.

"Tera, can't you-"

"No." The poison mistress murmured regretfully. "I never got it to work, Tobi."

She was a weapon of mass death, and sometimes destruction, but only when she had the element of surprise. A bewildering large number of her opponents expected her to fight with her hands, or to use chakra in obviously threatening ways. A fully prepared ninja who knew to expect poisons rendered her quite ineffective in her usual use.

She would be just as dangerous to the team as to anyone else caught unaware but not to the point the risk was worth it, if their opponents were half as smart as it seemed. Keeping a pocket of untainted air around a teammate was also something she never mastered the skill of.

Tera could slice the rebreathers the Mist ninja used, but if the Cloud shinobi had a different method she wouldn't be able to strip them of it to be of use.

She had tried to find a way around such, but as she informed the Hokage it had never really worked and could not be counted upon.

"We need someone to play decoy." Tobirama offered after pondering their situation over in his head, kneeling down to see his team fully for what was likely the last time and leaving Tera to keep track of their opponents and how fast they were closing in. "To distract and disorientate our opponent so the rest may live, to continue on into the future."

They were shinobi, it was a valid tactic.

"I'll do it." Hiruzen volunteered like the slightly idealistic idiot Danzō continually called him.

"Tobi-sensei, we-"

"No, Saru. That is not what I need you to do." Sighed the Second Hokage, a wry smile for his former student now. "Someone from your generation needs to take on the Will of Fire into the next, and the one after that. That someone will not be me, so I name you Third Hokage."

"Sensei-"

"They likely have a sensor." Continued the albino shinobi ruthlessly over an aghast Koharu in an even tone. "So they will not be fooled by my own signature disappearing and another stepping
forward to distract. It will have to be me, but the rest of you... you all can live. Carry on. I order you all to do so."

There was a slightly awkward pause.

"Tera."

"Nope. You promised me. I'm holding you to it."

"I lied." The Second Hokage informed her pointedly as he turned to see her instead of their subordinates.

She turned back to the group, war fans already in hand, and gave him a pointed copper stare back. "I am aware, I am holding you to it anyways."

Tobirama took a deep breath. "Please."

"No." Tera dashed cruelly, more amused than really anything else. "With me, Tobi, or not at all."

"What of Orochi-"

"I leave him in Sarutobi's hands. You did also promise me he would be fine in such."

"The 'official' story Cloud tries to put out will not be that you had a lover's spat." Pointed out the Shimura Clan heir strongly, ignoring the irritated looks he got for announcing such so bluntly. "I don't care how true it is, stop it."

"There weren't a whole lot of people left that didn't know." Homura mused thoughtfully to himself. "It'd be believable."

Ignoring that Sarutobi spluttered in shock, which meant at least some hadn't. Stupidly gossipy ANBU.

Kagami pointedly pretended she wasn't glaring at him. "I don't care, we're leaving our Hokage to die in a somber and serious mood. Not because his secret lover-wife-girlfriend-whatever had an argument with him and they got too distracted to really fight off Cloud's delinquent forces."

Tobirama heaved yet another sigh, dropping his face in his hands. "You corrupted them all. It is almost like trying to deal with my brother again."

Tera shrugged that off, running her eyes over the weapons of her mother's she would be using one last time. "It's what I do, besides... you're overly dramatic in your own ways. Begon, children. This is the end of our era, and the dawn of your own. Make the best of it."

Koharu darted to her just long enough to give her a hug, giving her teacher another one before running after the rest of the shinobi rather reluctantly slinking off to make use of the coming fight between the Second Hokage and a poison mistress against the Kinkaku Force in their retreat.

"Tobi... I am sorry I couldn't have a child. I told you I couldn't, I sabotaged the possibility long before I met you."

She earned a raised white eyebrow as they squared up to the rapidly closing in chakra signatures. "I knew you couldn't. That wasn't why I was with you, Tera."
"It's probably my only regret now." Continued the kunoichi depressively, swinging those heavy fans to cause six blades of wind to cut into the advancing forces now in range to throw things at. "That… and… had I continued longer, gave you up, I likely would have come to loathe the Leaf."

The forest turning and impaling three shinobi on sharpened pine spears was a rather grotesque sight. "Going out on a high note?"

"Hardly." Sliding around to account for the two that darted around in hopes of a backstab, Tera broke her ancient left war fan keeping a blade from impacting her Hokage's shoulder while he focused on the greater number of their attackers, tossing wind blades in return with her right. "I told you I was a cruel woman. Selfish. I let Izuna go, Hashirama, even Madara. They, and you, were what made the Leaf into home for me. I want to go out with my home."

"Hopefully," Tobirama spoke around a grunt of pain as a blade ripped into his left arm, grabbing the limb and turning it into stone in truth before shattering the offending limb, "they'll do better than us."

"They're the next generation." The poison mistress reminded him through gritted teeth as her arm lost human rigidity to avoid being broken and she wrapped it around another's to control the blade he held and stabbing himself with it. "They always do."

(Terazawa died… almost exactly as Erin had. The college student waitress died in robbery gone wrong, protecting a small boy from one of the robbers armed with a knife and was stabbed twice in the chest. The kunoichi poison mistress took two blade-like earth jutsus to the chest, to give Tobirama that much more time to ensure their attackers regretted it in the end.)
"MAY WE HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE?"

The Third Raikage, another in the line of individuals named 'A', exploded out of the mountain spire topped 'Raikage's Office'. Aiming for the individuals that had just blown in the Village Hidden in the Cloud's front gates wide open and called out for his attention so brashly.

A telescoping staff scooped the powerful martial arts master out of the very air and slammed the tall and dark skinned shinobi into the ground. Sarutobi Hiruzen flipped the Monkey King Emma's Adamantium Staff from around, retracting the staff as his fellow shinobi Leaf poured out of the very shadows of the village to mainly painlessly take down any Cloud ninja attempting to aide their kage in the fight.

"As it seems," Hiruzen continued rather coldly, advancing on the shinobi he had slammed into the ground, "we need to reach you through a means you understand better… will this beat it through your head we would LIKE A PEACE TREATY?"

"Told you I could get him to do it." Utatane Koharu informed the darkly scowling shinobi with a crossed set of scars on his chin, lazily wafting an ancient Land of Rivers war fan in front of her face to occasionally conceal a wicked smirk. "Pay up, grumpy."

"Do pay attention, harpy. We are not done just yet." Shimura Danzō informed her testily, pointedly looking away from the kunoichi with hair buns acting as the whole incident was nothing more than a stroll through a well-manicured garden and not a stealth infiltration to finally get the peace talks over with.

"He does have a point, Koharu." Uchiha Kagami reminded her lowly, sliding from yet another shadowy corner to join them in his 'daylight' working uniform and not the Dragon ANBU mask he usually wore when working for the Leaf.

Spinning the still vibrantly colored fan around her hand, the kunoichi ran her eyes over those that hadn't caught on to the Leaf invasion fast enough to prevent their 'assault'. "We couldn't let them get away with it again, or there would be a third incident where 'oh... sorry, they were criminals. Nothing we can do~' will become the norm for them."

The kunoichi's poisonously sweet yet utterly sarcastic tone was pitched to carry far, causing a few interesting reactions through the civilians being politely herded away from the 'Cloud-Leaf style diplomacy' going on in the center of their village.

"Cloud shinobi are strange."

"Like you have any room to say that, Leaf." One of said Cloud ninjas spluttered, apprehended before reaching the three 'advisors' of the Third while the hard-love style beat down was going on so the terms of a peace treaty between Cloud and Leaf could be finally hammered out.

A peace treaty… in A's blood. A bit of Hiruzen's, but really more desirable than his life and yet another failed 'peace negotiation'.

"What the hell is this supposed to be, anyways? You won't survive this insult-!"
"Well! The first time we tried this… with the last Raikage 'A', our Second and yours was attacked. Happens. Why not." Koharu continued lightly in that venomous tone that left no one with the illusion she believed the words she was using, admiring the reflection of the high morning mountain sun off the bladed tips of the heirloom weapon in her hands. "No one died, after all… but the second time it just so happens the very same Cloud-unit that followed the same attackers of that first meeting… wander unerringly where our Second traveling through the forests in the base of your mountains to attempt the peace talks again. Killing him, who was our teacher as well as kage, and a dear master of mine because she would not leave him to die alone. Whatever are we supposed to think about your so-called 'diplomacy methods'?

"We do not require a third example of your customs, thank you." Kagami tacked on dryly in a carrying yet strong tone, reaching back over a shoulder to palm his sword as more attention was aimed at them rather than the slug-fight between the Third Hokage and the Third Raikage. "We might be peace-loving forest hippies, but we can learn new tactics. If this is the only way you will respect our strength instead of slide around like a pack of honorless rats around the requested treaty… well, as I said. We can certainly learn new tricks."

"We can butcher you as you can us." Danzō informed anyone listening in a dark tone. "We would not survive it, we would not gain anything from it. But if you insist…"

"Is THAT what this is about?" Roared the individual named 'A' in pure rage, swinging a double-fisted blow onto Hiruzen who caught it on his staff even if it shoved the kage back feet in revenge. "It is NOT OUR FAULT!"

"Prove it!" Roared back the Hokage, using the motion of his Summon and weapon and it's ability to telescope in length to crack the other man across the face with the butt of his staff. "THEY were YOURS, EITHER YOU'RE NOT THE STRONGEST because CRIMINALS DICTATE YOUR FOREIGN POLICY, or are you just COWARDS TO THE LAST!"

A deep breath, and the Fire Shadow spewed out an entire curtain of pure fire chakra to hammer his 'burn' into the mind of the Lightning Shadow. Who had to immediately light a fist with lightning chakra to ward off the fiery 'protest' and create a safe spot for him to remain in to endure the wash of flames and launch a counter the moment he could.

The Shimura Clan heir made a dismissive wave of one hand, using wind chakra tricks taught to him from the former best wind user in the Leaf he got before his childhood best friend managed to learn his lessons from the same woman to contain the fire in a limited area.

By this time, with the utterly eye-catching fight being hammered out through fist, staff, fire and lightning chakra going on dead center of the Village Hidden in the Clouds, more high ranking shinobi of the village were responding to the invasion alarms they had.

Only to be bewildered as rumors reached them of a very peaceful yet very violent protest of their 'foreign policy' being hammered out. Seeing the event was something else entirely, and more shinobi than the first-responders or the on-site Cloud shinobi that the Leaf infiltration slash containment teams ensnared into their delaying tactics out of the way ended up watching the surprisingly civilized fight going on than being alarmed that there was one going on entirely.

That didn't mean the Leaf team was lacking in their 'interference blocking' tactics even still. They were all mostly ninja as the civilians were trying and mainly succeeding in staying out of the way. The reason why Danzō had to use his wind chakra was to keep the widespread fire chakra from eating into the barrier team's erected 'spar containment/jutsu experimentation' seals.
Unfortunately, enough chakra thrown at it would get the barrier to fall and allow 'interference' in the Cloud-Leaf style diplomacy going on. It wasn't *entirely* an obvious flaw in the fūinjutsu barrier supplied by the widowed Senju-Uzumaki master of it that lived in the Leaf, but one that shouldn't be strained to contain two kages' worth of chakra techniques and the cautious sniping the Cloud shinobi managed around the blockading Leaf shinobi mostly pinning them in place or in standoffs.

As most of the 'infiltrators' were mainly all the Akimichi, Yamanaka, and Nara teams that could be spared from the war efforts with more than a few Mokuton using Senju peppered in… it wasn't a *greatly* large concern. The fight was *very* eye-catching, enabling the always *shockingly* stealthy Akimichi-Yamanaka-Nara teams to pin their 'targets' in place so things could finally be worked out between their villages.

By shadows, by mind control, by giant-sized armored shinobi who really should never be able to *be* overlooked. With a few snarly trees, just to top it all off.

Getting *out* of this incident would be… *interesting*.

Koharu fluttered the ancient war fan idly, mostly just playing with the recovered Sekanji Clan wind user's weapon. She couldn't use it as it was intended, as she didn't have the wind affinity to pair with it. Males that could be called wind users, like the shinobi standing next to her with the Shimura Clan name, generally preferred larger and more 'weapon' fans than a demure 'noblewoman's secret weapon' as this.

The paired fan to the 'right' one in her hands was also… shattered. The fabric of the 'left' fan was fine, bloodstained but fine, but the frame was both wood and steel and the pieces might not fit back together to be 'repaired' and remain 'original'.

The kunoichi wondered, mostly idly and with a measure of tired grief she would likely never rid herself of, what Sekanji Momomi would have done with her sister's weapons now the kunoichi that wielded them was… no more.

...she *missed* her master of poisonous substances and words, and it hadn't yet been a week. Informing her heir and nephew that his beloved aunt would not be able to attend his academy graduation or ever coming home again would be… painful.

They had recovered her body, her and the Second Hokage both although the aim was more 'officially' for him to keep the Mokuton from being stolen from the Senju, but the spirits of those two individuals was gone. The bodies were merely husks of what had once been vibrant if reserved ninja, which had been rather towering figures through most of her life.

"Do *not* start crying, harpy." Danzō informed her in a tone pitched to only drift to her and not anyone else standing farther than Kagami from them. "That will *not* do anything for the image we are trying to present."

"I am *aware*, grumpy." Sniffed the kunoichi in insult, taking a deep breath and sighing with it as if bored rather than sad.

*Convincing* Hiruzen of this being the more 'effective' method to attempt yet *another* simply diplomatic request for a peace treaty… had taken a bit of doing. Luckily, as the Hokage in question had still been reeling a small bit from learning he was one of the last few shinobi 'close' to the couple to know the Second Hokage had a lover and they had been involved for years… well.

It made convincing him that the last and likely only lesson that kunoichi passed on to him applied in this situation as well a bit easier.
Everyone did learn at different rates, and sometimes one teacher just couldn't get some lessons across evenly enough that everyone learning from them understood it. If those of Cloud only respected strength rather than words, and didn't respect them, then the Leaf would learn a new way to get the request across in a way those of Cloud understood better.

If one tried long enough, even a bad teacher could get across a lesson to an unwilling student. Eventually.

Terazawa's last stand with Tobirama had *certainly* left an impression behind in the mind of the Third Hokage.

Spinning the fan one last time, as it seemed the 'conversation' between the Third Raikage and the Third Hokage was finally getting into 'what the hell do you want?' and 'peace, weren't you listening?' parts of the 'Cloud-Leaf diplomacy efforts', Koharu let the weapon snap shut for a final time. "Well… now we go from infiltrators to diplomats, here's to hoping they don't try killing us."

"I am still uncertain as to how we are to… extract you and the Hokage, if things turn for the worse." Kagami informed her lightly as an aside, releasing the hilt of his sword uneasily which did encourage some of the lower ranking Cloud ninja to do the same warily. "I can understand using the barrier teams as temporary secured holds while we descend the mountains, with some of the Senju to keep things contained as we retreat if there are no still surviving barrier teams or flanking tactics are tried… but from inside Cloud?"

"We're not. Hopefully, they'll let us go in the end."

"I do *not* like this part of the plan."

"Noted, grumpy." Koharu sighed again, this time regretfully, tucking the folded fan into her belt so she could take it back to the new owner of the weapon back in the Leaf. "But… as this infiltration part was *your* part of the plan, and the part after is *mine*… suffer."

"...there *is* a backup plan, right?"

"A shit-ton of firepower while we run like hell back through our 'insertion' method." Admitted the kunoichi wryly, patting the highly disturbed looking Uchiha on the shoulder a few times. "We want peace, not yet more war. Trust has to start somewhere, and while we have enough shinobi to avoid anymore 'accidental' criminal interference… eventually we're going to have to trust them on the whole 'we are possibly allies' part. This part was the part Hiruzen wouldn't budge on."

"Next time, *I plan the entire thing.*" Danzō hissed at her in irritation.

"*Your* plan would be pitched warfare until we're *all* dead."

"There's *nothing* wrong with."

"There's everything wrong with that." Koharu reminded him pointedly, jabbing a finger into his chest and no longer bothering to conceal her words from eavesdroppers or just those in range to hear her. "War is the coward's way out. The easy resort of those that have no other methods or the courage to create more. It didn't work between the Senju and the Uchiha, it was something else our teachers reached for in the end. Why the *hell* do you think it will work here?"

"Stop using teacher's words, harpy. You're not wise enough to pull them off."

"I would if you would *listen to them.* Master's not here anymore to remind you, grumpy. So *I* will."
Danzō was preempted from retorting by an earsplitting *crack*, the Raikage and Hokage meeting again in a martial exchange yet the staff remained whole while the Cloud kage limped a step backwards with a wry and sharp laugh before launching another attack. "...I cannot believe this is working."

Koharu sniffed in insult, sticking her nose in the air. "Of course it's working. Strength is their whole thing. We're strong, we just didn't want to fight them anymore. They thought that meant we were weak and this has shown them we're not, just really annoyed right now."

More and more of the 'cautious' disarmament was being warily echoed by patches of Cloud and Leaf shinobi, which did nothing for the suspicious eyeing but eventually when the really young ninjas were let go in pairs or groups first it encouraged yet more to stand down as nothing really violent was offered to 'object' to.

Aside their entrance, but that wasn't something the Leaf teams would be apologizing for.

"There'll probably be a few dead from this still." Danzō commented idly, watching what she was. "That won't do much for you 'soft diplomacy'."

"Of course there is, we did break into their home and all but took their kage hostage." Koharu dismissed a bit bitterly. "But nothing else was working, so that is a risk we ran willingly."

"How did you even GET UP HERE?" A bellowed, a bit tiredly now because for all he was a martial artist master and a kage-level shinobi and thick with the muscles such a man would have developed over his lifetime… his opponent was an equally trained ninjutsu specialist with a weapon that could not be broken he wielded with equally war-honed and long-trained skill.

"We MARCHED a BLOODY FOREST up your DAMN MOUNTAIN!" Hammering double-handed swings of that Adamantium Staff form of his Monkey Summons to punctuate his words, Hiruzen ended the combination strikes with a rib-blow that forced the other man back as the staff extended yet again. "Uchihas and Kuramas are masters of genjutsu, the Yamanaka Clan can fool and reprogram the mind, the Naras master the shadows for their amusements, and the Senju control trees. How else do you think we snuck all these shinobi into your very front yard?"

Holding a hand to his greatly abused ribs, the Raikage frowned in a more puzzled manner than with the sheer irritation and rage that had been his main expressed emotions for most of the 'fight', rising back up to his full height but not launching immediately into another attack. "So what is this?"

"Yet again, we would like a peace treaty. Without more 'criminals', those that believe us weak or not worth the consideration, interfering and cutting the talks short." Insisted the Hokage strongly. "We could keep warring, but we of the Leaf have already seen where that leads. Neither of us can usurp the other right now, in time perhaps one or the other could claw out that last advantage and 'win'... but it would be a bitter pyrrhic victory in the end. Killing too many of our shinobi, our people and our *children*, and destroying that which we envy from the other. Instead, as our Uchiha and Senju brethren did before us, we would like to be friends."

"The Gold and Silver Brothers, as well as the Kinkaku Force, were acting *without orders.*" Insisted the darkly skinned but blond haired and green eyed Raikage, feeling out any damage to his neatly trimmed beard as he considered his opponent and the lack of true hostility from the Leaf teams.

"You *do* realize, that it was *twice* they interfered, how that makes you seem from the outside. Correct?" Hiruzen observed a touch bitterly, ready to counter any sudden attack but entirely more willing to speak instead. "Admittedly criminals were the tools… but for the same cause? Years
removed from each incident? More like 'scapegoats' than just unfortunate happenings, intentionally done such, to any that will not take you at your word. Our Second Hokage was coming here, assisted by a clan head poison mistress to replace the former Uchiha Clan head as his advisor, yet they knew exactly where he was and how to evade her toxins."

"We are aware it does not appear as if they truly were criminals." A pointed out in something close to a 'tart' tone himself. "Which was likely the entire point of the sabotage they wanted to continue. Yet here you are, again."

"The happenings do not change the underlying truth of why we continue to come here." Countered the Third Fire Shadow tiredly. "We can war more, kill each other off in an eternal struggle that will be won by fluke or by atrocity neither could live with peacefully, or seek a truce with a strong opponent we respect. We will accept, with some difficulty now but that cannot be changed, that you are truthful in seeing them as criminals and unwanted in their efforts. Now that this has been aired out so none may mistake it, may we please be friends and not enemies?"

"Interesting way to ask, Monkey King of the Forest."

Hiruzen snorted, releasing his weapon and Emma's form to return to the ape form he usually had. "I am following the steps our First, the very same Hokage that put aside the inherited fight with his eternal 'enemy' and instead built our village with him. Hashirama-sensei was a very unconventional shinobi who taught me. If just words were not enough for your people in the end, then we will change our approach into something they will understand now."

Glancing over his people, his civilians who were all untouched if somewhat blockaded and the Leaf shinobi teams nonlethally retraining somewhat less peacefully protesting Cloud ninja, the Third Raikage snorted sourly himself. "Shock tactics?"

"Well… your people weren't listening."

"We could just crush you all now."

"You could." Danzō interrupted darkly, straightening up from his 'side-talk' with the other two advisors of Hiruzen's. "We will make you bleed for it, but it is entirely possible as this is not an 'assault' infiltration. Yet, that would confirm in the end that it wasn't criminals that 'sabotaged' you all… wouldn't it?"

"I have… heard your complaint, and proposal, kage of the Leaf. Now what?" A inquired with a measure of annoyed bemusement, rubbing his jaw and the bruise showing even on his darkly tanned skin around the blond strands of his beard.

"Kagami."

"I hear, Hokage-sama. Pack it in!" Shouted the normally even-toned Uchiha, getting most of the obstructing Leaf shinobi to suddenly pull back so the startelement of both his loudly pitched words and the sharp retreat as the 'infiltration' forces started their slow but quickening reversal of the situation. "Let's go, men!"

"Ahem."

"And ladies." Amended the Dragon masked ANBU General wryly, nodding to Koharu pretending blissful ignorance as he led the bulk of the Leaf forces out of the Village Hidden in the Clouds. "Back to the trees, I don't believe our friends will greatly appreciate leaving the masquerading forest on their doorstep and earth tunnels that connect their roots back to Frost."
The Raikage raised an eyebrow at his fellow standing opposed but not hostile.

"Well… as I said, we will take you at your word. With some difficulty." Hiruzen reminded the other a touch bitterly as Emma the Monkey King dismissed himself. "We loved our Second, one of the last men who established our village in the beginning and led us even with the rest dead and gone before him. Now he, and his lady love, are gone."

"…that rumor was true?"

"Terazawa-sama was the Sekanji Clan head. Apparently, the plan was for her to leave it to her nephew upon his sixteenth birthday and then finally marry Tobirama-sensei, who was the Senju Clan head. No matter how much otherwise they would claim to that point." Admitted the Third Fire Shadow, a bit wry in this topic. "Which… will never be possible now, nor is there a child from them to hold on to in their bitterly missed wake."

The heavily muscled and towering form of the Third Lightning Shadow dipped slightly in a slump. "That's… cold. Tobirama-sama was a strong opponent, a real tribute to your village to face in battle. I do regret hearing it, Hiruzen."

"As do we, Raikage-sama. Now can we talk as friends?"

"Now. Let's talk, Hokage-sama." Loosening tension-taut muscles, the other kage gave his fellow a slightly bloodstained fierce grin. "But we're having a rematch as soon as we're done."

(ooo000ooo)

"That, was so damn risky."

"Hashirama-sama would be proud, though." Homura commented to Kagami wryly, helping other Sarutobi earth specialists in pulling the earthen walls down on themselves to close the breeches and tunnels that enabled the Leaf teams the security to do their invasion/diplomatic assault. "Madara-sama perhaps a touch less so, but you know if the two of them were doing it they'd go alone and somehow do it all without the small army. And Tobirama-sensei would heave that so put upon sigh then somehow get the details nailed down exactly as we wanted it while they were having their argument on whose idea was the part that worked."

"Wouldn't be the only one proud of us." Koharu reminded him a touch bitterly, blinking rapidly and wrenching her dark gaze down to the frost-touched ground under their feet. "Ah… fuck. You'd think we'd get used to burying off our teachers."

"It doesn't get easier. But they would never accept burying us first, so..." Danzō informed her blandly, tiredly staring off into the distance over the pine trees where the Second had made his last stand with only a poison mistress as backup. "Hiruzen, how are you dividing the offices now?"

The slightly battered Third Hokage sighed, pulling a somehow not-broken pipe out of his armored 'Sarutobi' war uniform and placed it between his teeth. "Homura, take the internal seat. You've got the temperament to deal with that headache yet didn't grab onto ANBU or your clan for the excuse of not taking it. Danzō… either you or Koharu are to take the external advisor's seat. I expect the two of you to figure it out yourselves."

Two students of a recently dead mistress of poisonous words and manipulating intents exchanged a look between them.

"I'd be better on the sly, no one still pays much attention to a woman serving tea and just generally being out of the way."
The Shimura Clan heir snorted sardonically. "Bald-faced lies. Mito-sama might've been the first kunoichi of the Leaf, but teacher was another no one quite managed to forget about no matter how demurely she wafted that fan about. She just sat there waiting for someone to do something stupid she could retaliate for and everyone knew it. If that's the trend of things for the future, harpy, you'd do better on the hot seat while I guard your back."

"You are better on the 'brutal hard truths' end, you'd need the office's authority to make the hammer you can bring down just that much more heavy. Face it, grumpy, the paperwork's yours."

"...fuck you, harpy."

"How are the two of you not screwing yet?" Homura asked exasperatedly, rising to his full height and turning back to the rest of the Third Fire Shadow's teammates and advisors.

"I." Koharu insisted in a wounded innocent tone. "Have taste."

Danzō, obviously pleased to be given the 'responsibility' but arguing for the sake of it, scowled heavily. "No one would survive screwing that."

The kunoichi smiled poisonously. "Care to bet on that, grumpy?"

"This is now going to be my daily life. We're now going to be stuck in an office most days, and I won't be able to just order them to spar in a different field or remove myself." Hiruzen observed in a wondering if defeated tone that begged someone for patience, fixing his own eyes on the dark sky over their heads. "How did it end up this way?"

"Karma." His best friend informed him in the tone of someone conveying a worldly truth of the universe. "You were a demanding little shit as a kid. Took you twenty years to learn to ask politely."

"...I kind of don't want to leave." Admitted Koharu after a pause as the rest of the assault-diplomacy teams readied themselves to either return to the Leaf or head off to the war front they had been pulled from to secure the north one. "Leaving and going home would mean… they're really gone and it's up to just us now."

"They did the hard part." Kagami reminded her with a half-smile, fingering the blank Dragon mask he wore for what seemed most of his days these years. "Most of the groundwork is laid, most of the fighting is done, now we just have to pick up the pieces and live with it. In the village they already built, within the guidelines they wrote, and with the children they left behind."

"Yeah, 'we have it better'." Dismissed the kunoichi tiredly, fingering an ancient war fan stuck in her belt. "You don't have to go back and tell a pair of kids who will become really influential later their aunt and uncle aren't coming home anymore now too."

"Aa… right. Good luck with that."

"COWARD!" Koharu hollered after the masked shinobi that somehow instantly disappeared from the clearing, huffing sourly when only her voice echoing off the pine trees sounded in return.

They were shinobi, worse yet forest dwelling shinobi in a forest. The only sounds were those talking casually and the shifting rustle of plants as animals went about their business around those strange human creatures.

"...how did I miss that?" Mused the still smoking Sarutobi Clan head, running a few battered fingers through his small goatee in something approaching confusion. "In hindsight, it really does
make a whole lot of sense…"

"You may be a slight bit gullible, Hiruzen." Homura informed him solidly, a kink to the line of his mouth under his glasses giving away his thoughts on the matter. "You were probably the only one to take Tobi-sensei at his word when he denied it yet the rumors continued lingering for years."

"Ignoring the fact he never could look teacher in the eye while doing so or even a few hours afterwards." Danzō chipped in blandly. "And then there was that 'ANBU send her to send him to bed' thing… no one was fooled by the denials after that."

"He kind of sucked at lying to those he liked about personal information, didn't he?" Tacked on Koharu, smirking wickedly at the exasperation their Hokage was all but radiating. "Good thing Tobi-sensei rarely had to."

"...well. Continuing." Hiruzen interrupted before yet another detail could be added to what he had apparently missed about his main teacher and one of his teammate's masters being somewhat secretive over the true nature of their relationship, clearing his throat and removing the pipe stem from between his teeth. "Danzō? Are you going to take the external advisory seat?"

"Why not."

"Oh my, contain your enthusiasm."

"Shut it, harpy."

Sighing, the kage rubbed at his forehead.

Then he had to put out his trimmed goatee as his pipe's burning bowl got a bit too close to the facial hair.

"...ladies and gentlemen, our Hokage-sama."

"Do be quite, Homura."

"Damn it, STOP FOLLOWING ME!"

"But hime-"

"STOP CALLING ME THAT TOO!" Tsunade roared over a shoulder, sprinting as hard as she could because she knew her childhood friend. Knew how desperately Orochimaru didn't want to lose his lovely aunt.

Blinking hard, because she'd rather grieve with him than the stupid toad-boy following her, the Princess of the Senju Clan slid to a slightly messy halt in front of the samurai guardsman that held the gates of the Sekanji compound secure for them in the day.

Aritada smiled a bit crookedly at her, stumping over on a wooden peg leg to open the sliding wooden gates for her. "Might want to check… her labs, hime."

"Thank you."

"But what happened?" Jiraiya demanded in exasperation, still sprinting after her somehow when he really should've keeled over in a gasping puddle because he never had this kind of stamina in school.
Tsunade whirled around before she passed the poison library, irritably shoving one of her ponytails back over her shoulder as she glared fully at the boy. "There's a Third Hokage-sama now, figure it out dumbass."

The white-haired boy frowned in a puzzled manner, which just really made her want to smack him, before he blanched. "Wasn't Hokage-sama your uncle?"

"Great uncle." Snapped the kunoichi trainee shortly, striving to not cry in front of the other kid. "And n-not anymore. Now it's his student, who's Sarutobi-sama."

"So… why are you here? Why'd you even go to school today, when even the teme didn't?" Jiraiya pressed, actually somewhat smartly of him so she threw him a bone.

"Because it wasn't just my great uncle, that lady you called 'girl-Orochimaru'? She died with him, Orochimaru-kun's aunt."

"Oh… she was… nice." Tsunade snorted roughly, the distraction keeping her attention off the underlying why they were speaking of the topic. "Cause you were with us. Aunt Tera wasn't a nice person, unless you were somewhat close to her. Or she thought you could be amusing. Which was both in your case, just so you know."

"My sister was very much the woman her life made her into, Tsunade-hime." Sekanji Momomi informed them both, a bit sadly, as she descended the steps old Ikeda kept the poison library within. "It's a Sekanji thing, to not get close to one another or even strangers you know decently well. We don't test our poisons or toxins on other people, on those we live with nor on those we are suppose to help. We do test them ourselves, on our own bodies. It… makes for an awkward time as a family clan, as occasionally one or two of us might just suddenly drop dead with nothing to be done about saving them."

"Is that why the teme is such a… teme?"

"Jiraiya-san. For your information, this is Orochimaru-kun's mom."

Blushing hotly, the white haired boy suddenly looked anywhere but at the copper eyed and paper pale kunoichi joining them on the dirt paths that traced lanes into the grounds of the Sekanji Clan compound.

Momo, the possibly new Sekanji Clan head or just regent, smiled wryly at him even if he wasn't looking. "It is nothing I haven't heard before, hime. And… it is entirely possible, young man. We are a hard clan to get close to, because we are so defensive and jealous of our hearts even among those we should be safe in loving. Orochimaru-kun learned those lessons at my lady sister's knee, how to be chancy with it and what to risk in the end."

"That's… really cool of you. The whole 'don't poison other people' part. Even if..." Jiraiya offered awkwardly, rubbing an elbow as he peered up to her warily. "I'm… sorry?"

The kunoichi shook her head. "Just don't spread it around. We are very much the 'weird geeks' in the ninja ranks, and we honestly like it that way. If everyone knew we didn't test out new toxic compounds on those that annoy us… my lady sister's office would've been overrun by those seeking to curry favor or otherwise waste her time. Now mine, I suppose…"

"Are you the new clan head now, Momomi-sama?" Tsunade inquired, stubbornly not thinking about why that had to be asked.
"No hime, I am Orochimaru-kun's regent. Tera had me trained well, but frankly I have none of her effortless skill in dealing with others." Admitted the older kunoichi blandly with a bitter smirk. "My sister was my shield... well, more like the dagger kunoichi one would wield in the off-hand. Sharp enough to kill, fully willing to do so, but more used to ward off threats and the like. She kept me safely out of the way from such things, so as to not be pulled into power struggles and force me to split my attentions from what I wished to do and what we must do as the line of the clan heads. I know how to do it, now that my 'wild' years of growing and finding out what I wanted and can do myself are over... but that wasn't until I actually asked her to help with the duties that pulled so harshly at her at times. I am also... very much her pale copy, in ways. I could match her in straight pitched battle by the end... but she could plot circles around me in everything else."

"You all keep saying she wasn't nice, but she sounded like it." Pointed out the white-haired shinobi trainee a bit suspiciously.

"Because we were close to her. Ask any random Uchiha clansmen, or Hyūga, or even the more moderate clan's shinobi that had to deal with her, and they would claim the former Sekanji-sama was a bit of a bitch." Momo remarked fondly, a slightly bitter wry smile on her pale face. "She could be, too. Tera was very much a woman of self-honesty, of the brutal time before the Leaf, and so very cold for taking it on so I would not have to. It really wasn't until after we moved here that she thawed just a small bit, and widened her pool of 'hers' to include others that were not forced upon her or she was otherwise responsible for. Until the war started, and she stopped accepting new people in."

Sniffing hard, the young Senju kunoichi rapidly blinked and pretended she didn't just start crying at the reminder of everyone that had been lost so far. "So now, if your idle curiosity is satisfied, leave."

"I was concerned." Jiraiya spluttered in offense, then the boy paused and glanced from the mother of one of his classmates to another classmate. "I'm sorry. Tell the... erm, tell Orochimaru-san I'm sorry his aunt's gone too."

"...you should probably go. He's not going to be in a good mood." Tsunade pointed out after a beat when it looked as if the other kid didn't know what to do now. "I got to go make sure he won't bury himself in aunt Tera's labs, or anything else like that."

"Thank you, hime." Momo informed her warmly if a touch tiredly, taking the steps off the path to return to the Sekanji Clan head's home. "Dinner is at the usual time."

"Okay!" Tsunade hesitated, and looked back at the kid still standing there. "Seriously, go. Orochimaru-kun's going to be in a foul mood, if anything. You're not going to help much."

"If... if you need me to run interference or anything, with our classmates, I'm totally good with that. The teme too, I suppose."

"Thanks?" Tried the Senju Princess a bit awkwardly, surprised by the offer at all much less coming from what was probably the worst kid in their class. "Um... I might even take you up on that tomorrow. He's going to be nasty for weeks at least. I'm not going to be up to talking to a lot of people myself..."

Jiraiya gave a dismissive shrug. "That's... if I knew my parents, and they were as cool as his aunt, I'd probably be the same way if one died."

"...why do you chase after me, anyways? I never got that part."
"I want some help. I'm an orphan, I don't have anyone to teach me the tricks everyone else seems to already have."

"Oh. Seriously? Bribery and manipulation will get you more than straight out asking with us. Unless you ask Sakumo-kun to introduce you to his already graduated elder sister Naname-sama for more straightforward ninja tricks, but the Hatake Clan is really more samurai than ninja even now and they might not be able to help you any more than you can pick up yourself."

Jiraiya paused with his mouth open, shut it with a bewildered blink, and then snorted a bit depressively. "Figures."

"I accept your offer of services rendered instead."

Tsunade informed the kid prissily, sniffing more to keep the tone light enough she wouldn't break down now that most of the interruption was dealt with. "Survive Orochimaru-kun's venomous temper every day, and I'll ensure you at least have the tricks in time for team assignments upon graduation if not for class. He might even help, eventually."

"Ha!"

"...no."

"Yes!"

"I said no."

"We're on the same team, teme! Now you can't stop training me!"

"Why?" Orochimaru wailed into his own hands, getting not really sympathetic pats on the shoulder from his kunoichi teammate as she joined the other two invited to Training Grounds Seven.

"Sorry? But... at least we ensured he wouldn't drag us down?" Tsunade tried with a bit of a bemusedly wry smile of her own. "He's... half-decent these days. Not nearly enough to get his grades up, but that's not really a terrible thing if it makes the others overlook him."

"Oi! For mostly self-trained, I am fantastic."

Hiruzen blinked down at the group of newly graduated genin in confusion. "Would someone like to explain to me what is going on?"

The Sekanji Clan heir drew in a bracing breath, dropping his hands to seize the front of his former male classmate and now shinobi teammate's yukata and drag the startled kid forward so he couldn't avoid sharply annoyed yellow eyes under the thick purple crests of his station. "You. You, possible distant cousin or not, you will not embarrass us. If we are to be forced to deal with you, you will be more than just adequate."

"Well... he's got a bit of a back-step already, and that's not even counting clan skills."

The Princess of the Senju Clan observed in a more amused tone. "There's the Senju and the Mokuton, and my medical studies... and then there's you and your Sekanji poisons and chemical toxins, the unreal fixation you somehow have on learning jutsus... what the hell are we going to turn him into to fit on our team?"

"Traps?"

"Eh... between us? Medical shinobi are trained to be careful, and poison users are all about the
details. Pretty sure we can cover them ourselves."

Idly scratching the back of his head, the Third Fire Shadow wondered if he really should've copied his teachers in taking on at least a team of students to train while being the kage of the Leaf. He could've passed them off, no matter how much Koharu sniffed at him because Tobirama informed Terazawa her heir would be safe with him and he would be letting their teachers down if he didn't take the team.

"A weapon specialist, perhaps?" Mused the Sekanji heir thoughtfully, only to snort after a moment. "I want a sword of my own in time, when I have the reach for such, so perhaps not."

"Taijutsu?" Suggested the Senju Princess next a bit less confidently. "I mean… we will need close quarters. To give you breathing space and keep me covered if need be."

"What elemental affinity do you have?" Demanded Orochimaru shortly, only to earn a blasé shrug from the white-haired child he was still gripping. "Perfect. We shall have to ask my mother… hopefully it is somewhat compatible or at least helpful to someone with a water-earth affinity."

"You didn't get your aunt's wind?"

"No, it seems as if that will be something I shall be forced to work for."

"So… you don't have their sensory skills either?"

"Unfortunately not, it seems."

"Pity. And with the Senju kekkei genkai, as well as medical chakra, it's not really required for me to use or develop my affinity. Or useful, I suppose."

"That, hime, does not mean you should not. Merely some care is required. Your uncle, for example, was the greatest water user in existence even before he picked up the Mokuton ability."

Hiruzen coughed pointedly.

"How did you get on jutsus, anyways? That's more a Sarutobi or Shimura Clan thing." Tsunade wondered aloud.

"...my lady aunt said I may not bring her back from the dead for idle whims, but that there is a forbidden jutsu to bring back the dead for war. If there is ever to be another, I would like to use it and speak with her." Admitted the pale skinned and dark haired child with the metallic yellow eyes as if the jutsu he spoke of wasn't supposed to be a secret. "Perhaps fight with her at my side to show her that I have succeeded in what she asked of me and that the clan she sacrificed so much of herself to save still thrives. Then speak with her once more. The point being, I will require a lot of knowledge on how jutsus work and how to use them in order to make use of such a thing."

"Okay. So long as I can hug her. Grandpa and uncle Tobi too, if you don't mind."

Orochimaru sniffed in insulted dignity. "There will probably only be one fight in the existence of reality where all three of them are required to aide us. And that would be if a kami ever tried to murder us all."

"I don't care. If it ever happens, I get hugging rights." Dismissed the tiny blonde with a little huff of insulted dignity of her own.

"Hugging dead people."
"You're not going to be able to turn it into something creepy so I retract my demand, Orochimaru-kun."

"Children." Tried the Sarutobi Clan head a bit exasperatedly.

"You realize this is in the theoretical stages, yes? I will require more skill, more chakra, and more faith from the Leaf itself to ever get my hands on uncle Tobi's work on jutsus. They won't just hand it over as the clan will aunt Tera's labs and her research notes when I reach sixteen or become a poison master myself."

"We'll get there."

"Students." Tried the Hokage again, a little shortly this time.

Wary yellow, confused tawny, and flat black but curious eyes turned to him.

"...I am the Hokage, and your teacher. Welcome to Team Seven."

"Oh." Orochimaru commented blandly.

"Nice?" Tsunade tried warily.

"Hi." Jiraiya informed him cheerily.

Hiruzen palmed his face in exasperation. "Fūinjutsu."

There was a beat of confused silence.

"Jiraiya-kun can learn fūinjutsu if, as you say, his grades are not entirely representative of his skills. Hashirama-sensei relied on his wife and his brother for such, even Terazawa-sama relied on Tobirama-sensei for a few things. Seals, which are a bit of a hard shinobi art to classify, can be his main talent along with taijutsu for the added front-line cover Tsunade-hime might need in time. They are versatile, useful in many ways, and also might be something you come across in time."

The Sekanji Clan heir sucked his teeth for a second. "...that would just work."

"Not many outside the Uzumaki Clan know it." Offered the Senju Princess.

"What do I need for it?" Wondered Jiraiya curiously, as if they weren't debating on his future skill set as a shinobi.

"...calligraphy. Nearly perfect calligraphy." Admitted the kage after a moment, keeping his face in his hands.

"...well, that's out."

"Oi. I can do it." Jiraiya refuted Orochimaru's blunt dismissal hotly, a rapid flapping of fabric as if one of the children was waving an arm around wildly. "I did everything else you two heaped on me."

"Well... that is true." Tsunade remarked almost idly, as if she wasn't manipulating their third teammate into being so stubborn to recklessly charge headfirst into any remote possibility of learning the skill. "I suppose."

The horribly finicky skill only one clan in existence studied to the point of mastery and would require massive amounts of practice and patience to become skilled with. Encouraging a hot-
headed young shinobi who had a lot to prove to anyone else looking in at the team because he was the orphan on a team with a future clan head and the Senju's own Princess granddaughter of their First Hokage under the Third Hokage's tutelage.

Dragging his hands down, Hiruzen peered at the three tiny shinobi trainees still bickering about his knees either on or kneeling on the ground. On the topic of their third's future abilities, and what routes would be worth it or not. Then twisting their teammate's slightly gullible and excitable nature into making him stubborn about learning it so as to keep his motivation up through being taught the trade.

Well… if he ever got called away to handle some matter of state, at least they wouldn't kill each other. A small bonus, even if that rendered his plan with the two bells in his pocket a bit defunct.

"Hokage… sensei? What are you to teach us, anyways?" Demanded Orochimaru, as an afterthought.

"Call me Hiruzen. And that is very much something I am wondering myself right now."

"Well, you can teach him," here Jiraiya was jerked about a small bit but suffered it patiently enough, "taijutsu or calligraphy. I require more lab or just research time myself, and the hime just requires patients to experiment on these days to put what she knows into use. Both of which an instructor not familiar with the subjects will aid little with."

"Sounds good to me." Cheerfully agreed Tsunade, then she got derailed when the Hokage started rubbing at his temple. "Ooh, ah… Hiruzen-sensei? Do you have a headache? Can I fix it?"

"I, children, will be teaching you teamwork." The Hokage informed them a touch wryly, which really did not gain much of a reaction. "And… how to fight a superior opponent, how to mix and match your own specialties to make up for any lack in the future missions you may be placed upon, and your duties as shinobi of the Leaf."

He was pretty sure some of the stranger team-bonding sessions of Tobirama's could be of use, and there were a few incidents with Hashirama in the field he could adopt a few tricks from. And… perhaps the Forest of Death the Senju were currently spreading to reinforce the village's walls and practice their crafts could come in use.

Since it had been Hashirama's fault the entirely stone complex that should have been the Hokage's Tower was a near-unlivable wild mess of Mokuton-infused forest, they might as well get more use out of it.

"If we put you down, will you leave us alone to develop ourselves?" Inquired Orochimaru silkily, nearly a dead copy of his own aunt's tone when she felt highly unamused… or amused, or found a way to twist something to amuse herself.

Or anytime she was near Hiruzen, really.

...poison users, right. The clan probably had equipped their heir with everything that unwary usage wouldn't kill the user. Koharu had been pressed with more than a few of those from her master, and frankly getting dose with some of those once was more than enough.

Hiruzen snorted out a breath of fire from one nostril and it didn't burn his beard, thank you Homura.

The suddenly hyper focused attention of the children was not gratifying. Really.
"...I want to learn that." Jiraiya commented almost wistfully.

"Damn." Orochimaru huffed, tucking something away back into his sleeve.

"Now you started it." Tsunade sighed.

"I will be learning that first."

"Oi. I have dibs, teme!"

"WHAT. DID. YOU. DO?"

"Erm…" Hiruzen spoke slowly, still staring at the burned scorch-mark on the ground which was lacking one of his three chūnin students to occupy. "...this… is not good."

"You think?" Hissed Orochimaru, sounding more frustrated than the shocked look on Tsunade's face suggested the other two of his students were in truth. "You knew how easily Jiraiya-san can be encouraged, Hiruzen-sensei! We had him decently trained up! Now who are we to take as a third teammate?"

"Orochimaru-kun." It did at least get the Sekanji Clan heir to stop the words, but the seething look in sharp yellow eyes did not fade. "I… am not entirely sure what he did."

"He saw the sequence for Summoning you did to call the Monkey King Emma, and then tried it." Offered the snarly young man a touch sarcastically. "What happens if you do not have a Contract yet try to Summon something anyways?"

"...I have no idea." Hiruzen admitted in bewildered confusion.

By all accounts, one needed to sign in blood on a Summoning Contract. Then start negotiations with the Summoned creatures to actually use them in battle or just even as messengers. The Hokage hadn't heard of anyone trying without actually signing a Contract first.

"Frankly… nothing should have happened."

"Oh great." Tsunade sighed heavily, something she had been doing for years now when the Hokage accidently encouraged her teammates into doing things which might work out well but were really rather hazardous for their health and his peace of mind.

Twitching at a learned response, because if one of his two rather competitive students in shinobi skills was missing and only one left that would mean-

Hiruzen whirled around, two seconds too late to stop the Sekanji heir from following his fellow teammate's path.

"...well, it was fun while it lasted." Observed the Senju Princess a touch sarcastically, learned either by close association with the Sekanji Clan and their penchant for such or from Hiruzen's own teammates and friends turned advisors as she sought their help for kunoichi things. "Hiruzen-sensei, if my teammates are not returned I will be taking this up with my clan head and lady mother. Just so you know. And, I'm telling Koharu-sensei and Danzō-sama. You can tell Momomi-sama her son seems to have disappeared into the ether."

Koharu, definitely his teammate's brand of her former master's venomous sarcasm.

"Wait." Commanded the jōnin-sensei of Team Seven a touch quickly, otherwise known as Team
Hiruzen as the number had been recycled for the next round of shinobi graduates but it didn't seem if any other 'Team Seven' would stick for more than a year or a day. "I will… speak to Mito-sama."

"What will that do?"

"She and I were speaking, while Jiraiya-kun had his lessons… I think I can track them still. Hopefully." Finding a crystal ball would be somewhat tricky, but surely some glass bauble would work just as well for the short term. "They are not 'into the ether', they… erm… I have no idea, but I might be able to find out and to keep panic from spreading unwisely while we investigate."

Tsunade gave him a highly unimpressed look over folded arms.

Since when was the kunoichi the 'responsible' one on the team?

Hiruzen wisely did not give word to that wonder, even if the preteen girl in question had her own horrible habits of tracking down even a drop of pain in her surroundings to practice her Mokuton-enabled healing skills and figuring out how to reverse engineer them to teach another how to do the same healing without the kekkei genkai or twist what her healing could be applied to in truth, and dashed off with measurable haste to the nearest merchant's corner.

Crystal balls, or even a glass bowl, would be… Wind Country glassware. Still rather pricey things, if more common in the markets than they had been in his childhood or even during the war.

(ooo000ooo)

"I am not speaking to you."

"Oh come on, it's funny!" Jiraiya perked up like some kind of twisted-humanoid mole creature upon sighting her where their teacher said they had reappeared, simply covered in mud and leaves that glimmered just a touch strangely in the afternoon light, giving Tsunade a bright and excited grin as they wandered closer to her and their usual training field. "Hey, hime! You won't believe-"

"You two morons left me and Hiruzen-sensei in the middle of lessons! Next time, be morons on your own damn time!"

"But just check this out!" Heaving the heavy scroll he had been balancing on his shoulder on the ground before her, the white-haired shinobi spread it open to reveal… a Summon's Contract.

A new Summoning Contract, a massively important looking one, for all it looked downright ancien.

For the Toads.

Tsunade blinked blankly down at the fragile looking paper, holding only just Jiraiya's bloody signature and hand print. Glancing to her other shinobi teammate who was less dirt encrusted but ruffled in a way she really didn't see very often earned her a bitterly disappointed sigh and another of the heavy scrolls he had been carrying with more care to what it was rolling open to lay over the Toad's Summoning Contract.

Snakes, again equally as ornate yet old, with only Orochimaru's blood and signature slotted into the first available space.

"...think if I do it too, I'll get the Slugs?"

"No, hime, you are perfect the way you are. There is no need to-"
"Pretty sure, yeah." Jiraiya interrupted with a gleeful smirk cracking some of the drying mud on his face, wagging his equally dirt encrusted eyebrows. "Then think, that legend Orochi-teme's aunt lady told us will be continued into the next generation."

"Aunt Tera, and we do not need to repeat history." Orochimaru carried on tonelessly, blatantly ignoring the young Toad Summoner's words and even his own ruffled appearance to try and derail this topic of discussion. "Frankly, as I have not tried to kill either one of you by tossing you off cliffs, that legend is defunct."

"She never did say what they went on to do afterwards, and Hiruzen-sensei's kind of… like a sage or something because he's old, right?" Tsunade mused thoughtfully, tapping a finger against her lower lip as she pondered. "Perhaps… because we have yet to forge the rest of it?"

They weren't dead, just a bit battered and a tiny bit more as if they had been tested like against their team's jōnin-sensei who was really a kage in some skill or another. Orochimaru probably lucked out because most snakes preferred dry places with access to water, whereas toads were very much mainly water-dwelling creatures by nature.

The utterly betrayed look her old childhood friend gave her was very, very sweet revenge indeed.

"Just no pacts with evil things that want to puppet you, Orochimaru-kun. Or swords-"

"I get the damn sword." He interrupted huffily. "As I get samurai training on the side as it is, I might as well use it for something."

"And we gotta teach the kids, not try to kill them." Jiraiya tacked on cheerfully just to be heard.

"Shut. UP."

Puzzling over it a few more seconds, the Senju Princess shrugged. "Alright, tell sensei I'll be back in two days myself. Oh, and he's really mad at both of you."

The Hokage would be really mad at her too, but sometimes it did pay off to have such reckless teammates. A Summoning Contract, a new one just for her, was a good bribe to try for herself.

"...is this how the old-timers say the first one got started?" Jiraiya inquired almost idly, slugging one Sand shinobi in the gut with a heavy fist and then spinning to drop kick the man in the back of the head. "With the minor 'scuffles'?

Orochimaru slid, in ways that the human form could not perform naturally, into the guard of another such opponent only to take hold of various limbs and twist himself unnaturally again. As the pop of joints being wrenched painfully out of alignment would have concealed his words, the Snake Summoner first dealt with his opponent before rounding on the next and responding. "Perhaps. There was a fair bit of confusion on when hostilities were formally offered to all, so there is no agreed upon starting to the conflict."

This one held a sword, so the Sekanji heir slid his own from the sheath held upon his back and focused on that threat instead of the kunoichi with the needles.

"Oi, stop leaving me the ladies!"

"I thought you preferred them."

"Not like this." Complained the barely teenaged Toad Summoner hotly, getting the desert-girl to
rushed him in her own offended haste and end up with a sealing tag slapped to the back of her neck rendering her useless. "And… she's down."

Formally trained in their own variants of bushido or not, the Sekanji samurai and Hatake Clan had developed between them a style of kenjutsu that would and could certainly trick even shinobi kenjutsu masters into fooling themselves into believing they knew the style of an opposing swordsman. Making use of the information was merely something that honored that side of his clan, and satisfying as he had yet to find a sword he really liked.

Going through his opponents' swords was just… well. At some point even samurai honor could be twisted enough to 'grave-rob' a bit.

A *crack* of fist on meat covered but solid bone had both of her teammates ducking to the confusion of their last few opponents, as the Slug Summoner punched a man so hard he *flew* over their heads. "Damn it, *I said* LEAVE ME ALONE!"

With a disgusted huff, Tsunade then went back to patching up the wounded jōnin-sensei of the team they had been sent out to reinforce.

"And you, stop moving."

Orochimaru took advantage at the admittedly surprising chakra control exercise of his female teammate, sliding his few feet of steel into his greatly distracted opponent's belly instead of draw things out more with the blades. While he was so low, he swiped some of the blood from a minor cut on his left hand to Summon one of the Snakes. "We are missing one, Katsumata."

A flick of a red tongue was aimed in his direction, and the black scaled viper slid off to hunt.

It was admittedly a risk to Summon *in* battle right now, but the Sekanji heir had something trained up to cover for him.

Two booted feet slammed into the shinobi attempting to take revenge for his fallen fellows, propelling him *away* from Orochimaru as Jiraiya flipped off his face into a backwards somersault in order to land on his own feet. "Watch yourself, snake-man."

"Do be quiet, *toad-boy*."

"Hey, just cause you're two weeks older than me doesn't give you a right to call me *boy*."

"Did you two forget about something?" Sneered the very last standing Sand ninja a bit disgustedly. Likely half from how quickly his team had been dismantled by a trio of shinobi more than a decade younger than him, and partially from being ignored.

Orochimaru scoffed, and Jiraiya blandly gestured to the man's feet.

He hesitated before actually checking, just in case it was a distraction instead of a reason, then looked down just in time to see the crown of a fast-growing palm tree that slammed into his chest and catapulted him *far* away from the admittedly sandy stretch of the Fire-Wind borders.

"And that's that." Tsunade announced with an annoyed huff, getting to her feet and dusting off her hands. "Do you two really think there's going to be a new war?"

"It's been nearly a decade since the last ended and we attempted to then 'demilitarize' each other through word instead of murder." Observed the Snake Summoner sardonically as he resettled his weaponry back into place and shifted intents from combat to hostage taking, focusing on the
severely wounded or otherwise incapacitated Sand ninja. "Long enough for some to lick their wounds and try their luck again. The Village Hidden in the Sands has little exports, unlike the Leaf and medicine or Cloud with their... well, with the trade we give them and the advantages they make from it."

"I'm pretty sure Cloud's got... something." Jiraiya interjected, mainly sheepishly as he failed to come up with a Lightning Country export as well as he hauled one of their kunoichi to the 'prisoner' group. "They've got... rocks."

"Minerals." Tsunade interjected shortly. "They do a lot of the salt trade, maintaining some of the ports to Snow and Rock and to those across the sea to the other few shinobi nations out there, and some of the mining they get out of their mountains. Not gold, silver, or iron, but others."

With a snort, the white-haired Toad Summoner placed his contribution to their team's mission down and side-eyed the pale but darkly haired Snake Summoner. "You almost sound... excited there, Orochimaru."

"It's the reasoning I need, now I just need the technique." With a pointed frown on his equally pointed face, the Sekanji huffed and bent to pick up his very smug black viper from the ground and inspected the blood around her fangs. 'I do not look forward to war, but if there must be one anyways...""

"...Orochimaru, why did your Snake bite my patient?"

"Because, that is not the teacher we have been sent to locate and assist. Where are the students?"

Blinking, the kunoichi ran tawny eyes over their surroundings without truly seeing them. "Erm... that is a good question. Fuck. So now what?"

"We send a messenger back, and either wait for a tracker or put Jiraiya's Toads to use."

"Oi, do you know how bad a Toad's sense of smell is? Why not one of your damn Snakes? At least they're hunters. Or the hime's Slugs? They've haven't been used yet either."

Orochimaru sniffed in mock insult, but dropped the amusedly tolerant viper to the sandy brush underfoot next to the new-sprouted yet fully grown palm tree. "Well... if you don't wish to be of use..."

"Seriously speaking, through." Tsunade interjected before their third could get huffy over the slight. "War?"

"We are not that good yet, hime." Pointed out the Sekanji heir quietly. "Fourteen and chūnin for half a decade, jōnin expectations or not in months if not another year or so, being released from under Hiruzen-sensei's watch merely meant we can be put to use without requiring the kage of the Leaf to leave his office unattended so often anymore. In two years, we both may end up in control of our respective clans. A reduction in field missions would dull our edges, as much as Jiraiya or teacher might spar with us to keep it sharp... it will rust somewhat. If the war truly hits home, will we be as effective as we are now? I would like to hedge my bets, regardless of other motivations."

"But will it get that bad?"

"Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

"Another of your aunt's sayings?"
"She had a fair few." Agreed Orochimaru with a dismissive shrug for the Toad Summoner. "What did we all learn the last round? That war will not do us much. Now, we see how many heeded that lesson and reached out to an ally to build with or who failed to learn anything and wishes to fruitlessly bash themselves against another’s bulwark."

"Mist, I don't think they forgave us for turning their own 'specialty' against them the last time." Tsunade admitted bitterly.

Jiraiya scratched the back of his shaggy white head. "Rock, probably. They're… hard-headed, for sure."

"And Sand is desperate for anything, however much they cannot afford more conflict balanced on the edge of the desert without many resources as they are." Orochimaru finished pointedly. "And more, the so-called 'lesser' shinobi nations that nip at our heels or otherwise harass us in hopes of dealing some kind of damage to make one of the 'great' nations fall."

The three of them exchange a trio of looks, from wary to bemused to an almost seething expectation.

"Again, what I said stays Orochimaru." Tsunade reminded the Snake Summoner in a tone that would not be dissuaded. "I get hugging rights."

(...I would say something… but… pretty sure your current new 'look' says it all." Koharu informed Danzō pointedly.

Holding a hand to the bandaged of his now ripped out right eye, the Shimura Clan head snorted harshly as he stalked over to 'his' desk. "Harpy, try not to confuse yourself by your own tongue."

"I don't know, Danzō-sama… you know what they say about blind men and the one with one eye left. You could make it a thing."

"Spare me."

"Spare me," Hiruzen interjected pointedly as he let himself into their office not even moments after it had been shut, frowning just as pointedly at the darkly and more somber dressed shinobi with snow white bandages wrapped around nearly half of his face, "did the medics really let you go this quickly, my friend?"

Danzō blinked his remaining eye at the other man blankly as he seated himself.

"That's a 'no', in case you didn't catch it." Remarked the kunoichi lounging half on and half off her own desk blandly.

"Danzō-"

"Time waits for no one." Interrupted the shinobi, turning a few pages of the never-ending reports from spies and informants that basically bled from this part of the Hokage's Tower complex. "Especially not with what's brewing. I can sit and sedately go through paperwork with one good eye, instead of act foolishly and press a healing injury to the point it worsens. Speaking of."

Danzō pulled his copy of the missions report, the very badly ending diplomatic one to the reaches of River and Rain which never even got that far north he wrote up while still being nagged by nurses not to strain his remaining eye, and tossed the cylinder of paper to their kage.
"We aren't getting even a trade agreement out of River."

"Not even…?"

"The fact one of the former members of their clans has a surviving daughter and a grandson in the Leaf did not make an impact, that I was the one giving the news made no impression, nor the fact said grandmother's descendants were interested in opening a line of communication. Apparently the Wakizaka Clan is a merely minor one, not influential, there."

Their Fire Shadow sighed heavily. "Well… it was a long-shot at all. While we may respect the Sekanji Clan… it is not a wide respect for them as much as it is for their work."

"Or their varied and many ways of killing things using chemicals and plants." Koharu reminded him bluntly. "Orochimaru-kun's good, I won't knock your student, but… how many Sekanji do you see in the village these days? They kind of… hermited themselves away when master died."

"They're not widely sociable in the first place." Danzō bluntly informed the room on the heels of her comment, just a touch more sarcastically. "And of course they did, teacher was probably one of the few that bothered to let others gape at her without blinking an eye. The rest react more normally to those that want to stare at their skin or who still just eye them suspiciously to see if they can spot a genjutsu hiding their skin tone or figure out what the eye crest colors mean."

"White skin, that pale? Isn't natural."

"It is for them."

"They speak with the Nara and the Aburame Clans." Hiruzen put in thoughtfully before the two derailed whatever it was by nitpicking, tugging on his goatee absently in lieu of the pipe he was missing.

"Because the Aburames are such a clan of social butterflies." Danzō scoffed dryly, rolling his one remaining eye. "And the Naras barely bother to actually put effort into their relationships if they don't have to. Their only saving grace, and the few reasons why we know they've yet to murder themselves off producing and experimenting with poisons or whatever medical breakthrough needs testing, is the Hatake Clan. And for a clan of former samurai living in a shinobi village, they're not all that outgoing either."

"Why are we on this topic?" Koharu asked of Danzō curiously.

"If it wasn't so obviously hard to disguise oneself as a naturally born Sekanji, due to that skin and their crest colors having some kind of meaning they never say anything about, I'd be concerned they're the best route of infiltrating the village."

"You talk to one for two seconds and it's obvious who was born into the clan and who married into it."

"Exactly. And we just opened them up somewhat to 'desperate family members seeking lost connections'."

"Momomi-sama and Orochimaru-kun were both skeptical of anything coming from talks that mentioned them." Pointed out the kunoichi, straightening up in her office chair as the talking got somewhere interesting. "They're more than well aware to not immediately let just any 'distant relative' into their compound without putting them through processing by Yamanaka."

"But news will get out, Momomi-sama admitted a fair few women of her clan was married off in
Grass before they had the troubles that drove teacher relocating them entirely here. We just used it as a lever in an admittedly failed negotiation attempt, when it spreads that remote connections to our clans are being looked for at all it will be tried once or twice."

The Hokage sighed, fixing his stare on the ceiling. "I take it you bring this up for a reason?"

"We're going to need more security, a process by which long-lost 'clansmen' can be processed without obviously doubting them in case it might just be true, and a watch for even afterwards as there would be no telling when one's path could be traced back in order to know if they want something specific or just to rejoin their clansmen." Danzō shrugged, settling himself in his chair a bit moodily. "I tried, Hokage-sama, but... it will come back to bite us if we're not careful. Especially as River's shinobi have no reason not to spread word themselves."

"Well... given you lost an eye, no one's saying you did less than your best." Pointed out Koharu with a general gesture to the other shinobi's entire face. "Why is this something we're going over instead of say Homura? As he's got internal security under his office, you'd probably be better off telling him than Hiruzen."

"For if we pump more stringent controls on who enters-"

"It'll look fishy." Danzō finished for Hiruzen flatly. "No matter what we try to do, be as 'transparent' or whatever about why we'd do so, adding in more rules on top of the highly suspicious ones already since it seems another war is brewing will make others wonder why. Few will cotton on to the 'a Leaf clan has connections outside of the Leaf' as the true reason, and as to why we didn't do it before any connection came to light... the timing of the broadening hostilities won't really affect that at all because everyone with sense is doing the same, yet us seeking a trade agreement will increase it more than just that?"

"...yeah. That does sound shifty from the underside."

"So..." The wounded shinobi flicked his remaining eye from one to the other consideringly. "...we need something not visible to trigger those suspicions."

Hiruzen tugged on his goatee instead of respond for a long moment.

"We already do, don't we?" Questioned the poison user in the room warily. "The ANBU of Tobisensei's. Kagami and his group."

"There's not really a whole lot of them." Countered the Shimura Clan head. "Do we pull them from their missions and work just to cover this? Pull apart that plan of Tobirama-sama's, the military police thing Homura's trying to somehow implement and toss it on them? I've got a better idea."

"What are you suggesting, Danzō?"

"Spies. Infiltrators. Long-term saboteurs." Shrugging, the shinobi gave a dismissive wave of a hand. "Maybe moles. Those inserted into other lands and other villages to specifically do one and only one non 'suspicious' task or prep the 'lay of the land' for future agreements, or to be those 'turned formerly or prior clansmen' routes others try to gain a ear in our homes. We can't just control rumor and slander from just here, or showing our 'might' as you do following your teacher's path. Mine had... less straightforward methods."

"Your teachers were sharingan users." Koharu interjected with a smirk. "They could do it all with a glance. And unless you're saying break up the Uchiha Clan into some kind of splinter-cell organization, 'seeking new grounds so they can rebuild and strike back at such craven creatures..."
that make up the Leaf', is that even possible?"

"Izuna-sama didn't put anything into place?"

"Izuna-sensei was an Uchiha, worse yet one of the best of his generation aside Madara-sensei himself. He's got things in place, half of which I can't use because I'm not an Uchiha to reinforce things when they slide." Danzō crouched his shoulders into something very much like the bastardized love-child between a shrug and a defensive slouch. "The framework to a Leaf spy network is in place, growing out day by day, but Izuna-sensei didn't expect to die as he had in the field even if he had alternative plans waiting for his successor. Some of it's unraveling, nothing which will harm us but it is degrading. As I can't do what he did, I have to approach things a bit more from the side."

"What are you suggesting, Danzō? Bluntly, not this nibble at bits and pieces tactic you use to get around 'distasteful' things." Hiruzen commanded a touch flatly himself, eyeing his old childhood friend with a touch of wariness.

"...sending civilians... or children, in to do this. Without the suspicion fully adult individuals would incur."

Koharu blinked twice, then scowled as she slid down her seat and stared off into the middle distance blankly. "...I thought the whole point of the village was to keep the children from being forced to do such things."

"It is. Danzō, my friend. Is there any way to avoid that?"

"No." Bluntly denied the shinobi shortly. "Even if I stuck to civilian and adult agents, they would have children where they live. Asking them to not live in spite of their orders is more than I can do. More than I can realistically rely on. If so, would these children then be forced to work within and with foreign militaries and with childhood friends grown at their side of their own? Should I ask those children instead, to betray everything they know for some likely viciously gossiped about village of their parents? Do you want me to ask that? Between the ages of five and ten, asked to perform six or ten years of service themselves with low-risk busywork just keeping their ears open, and then allowed to return for 'deprogramming'."

"And then what?" Drawled the kunoichi venomously, waving a hand into the air between them. "Oh... yeah, thanks and all... but we don't trust you anymore since you didn't grow up here so you're going to be watched for the rest of your life.-"

"No." Refuted the Shimura Clan head again, a touch hotly. "When, not if, we extract them and replace their 'node' with a new individual they'd get the choice to return or stay out there or go somewhere else. After we deal with the issues such work might inflict on them and let them destress from that kind of mission. If they chose to stay here, why wouldn't we make use of that kind of loyalty to us?"

Hiruzen rubbed his face tiredly. "And this ties back into the clan-related discussion... how?"

"...more for the hostile shinobi villages. A loose Sekanji, or Uchiha, or whomever, out there and doing their own thing? Visibly identifiable as such, if not a obviously 'fully' trained one with their specialties. A recognizable clansmen of the Leaf, who may or may not even know they are or are not related? It's going to be tried, why not control those it'll be tried through before it even becomes an issue?"

"Not without the clan head's approval." Mandated the Third Fire Shadow strongly, holding up one
of his hands to prevent the obvious rebuttal. "Not written, not documented, but at least one or two people per clan you involve must know, Danzō. Accountability is a right all the clans were given, you cannot block them in tracking their various members if they work under the Leaf. Visibly or not."

Danzō scowled, but eventually nodded. "Orphans, and those… how did the Yamanaka term them… 'at risk' children forced to grow up too soon? Can fill out the rest of it. Perhaps even masquerade as one or two clansmen without really being one as well."

Koharu kicked her booted feet back up on her desk with a dark scowl, slouching with her arms crossed over her chest. "I still don't like it."

"This is war, harpy. You and Saru might dance about it as you wish, but my job is to ensure it doesn't slide into something even worse."

"This is going to come back to bite us so hard…"

"No. It won't." Danzō bit back just as bitterly. "I know what I'm doing. I know the individuals I'll be approaching. They're not the type to change loyalties on a whim, especially if I can amass enough of a reward for them like 'a safe life as a paper-pusher' or 'entrance to a shinobi village as a full ninja'. Orphans of violence or just unfortunate fates, street rats left to run wild, those that are overlooked in the Red Light districts, they have their own brand of looking at things. They'll have the same finely tempered steel to them as teacher did, as our various instructors who bit and clawed a way to live in a world without a village to safeguard their soft bellies, before they crafted the Leaf for us all. They'll murder, lie, and steal for just one more edge… I'll give them something to do it all with first, then once they do the jobs and come back a reward tangible enough to keep doing it."

"...you're going to be running an orphanage. A ninja orphanage." Deadpanned Koharu flatly. "And… it'll even be a benevolent thing to most looking in from the outside once the kids return as full adults with a 'secret' mission under their belts and with a forehead protector to gain their rights here. By doing nasty things to other villages under their noses."

"...yes."

The poison user paused deliberately, fingering her lower lip, then slowly started smirking in a bitterly amused way. "Damn, grumpy. So much for that eye of yours blinding you to what's in your face."

Danzō gave a supremely unimpressed look with his lone remaining eye.

"What would you do with the returning 'agents', my friend?" Hiruzen interjected before the two of them got into another little petty fight, folding his hands behind his back and wearily waiting for the rest of it. "Pay them and let them go, train them up to be shinobi?"

"They'll have a year or so of some training." Admitted the other shinobi flatly. "At least. A year to test them, figure out how far they can press things and what they're really like personally so as to figure out if we want them, then when they come back… they can be folded into a different kind of shinobi 'branch' if they want."

"...such as?"

"We have several so far. The various research branches, the Intelligence Department some are calling 'Torture and Interrogation' these days, the various little paper pushers we have at hand running errands and files from department to department. There are a lot of things that would
benefit from a few extra hands."

"Some of those kids are going to try to use you instead."

"Of course they are." Grunted the one-eyed shinobi, unamused by Koharu's next obvious point. "Depending, that might not be a bad thing. I want them too, to try and 'manage' my offer for their best, and then find out that yeah I'm the best option they have so they'll commit to my line in the end. A few it's not going to be enough for, the dumber ones that can't see beyond their own noses or those too broken, but more than enough will to pay off in the long run."

"We had better not gain the reputation of taking in the desperate and orphaned just to murder them off in creative new ways, Danzō."

"...of course not, Hokage-sama."

Hiruzen sighed heavily, nodding to the two that controlled the 'office of the exterior advisor' for him. "Then I will not object to your plans. While you balance the darker boughs of the Leaf against our enemies, try not to forget why we do this."

The one-eyed Shimura Clan head waited until the office door closed behind their kage. "...that still sounds so damn corny."

"We're the Leaf, we do tree-puns." Koharu informed him needlessly, finally pulling her own work over to review and make changes to if need be. "Really bad tree-puns, with a few speckles of fire-puns heaped on top."

"That doesn't make it any better, harpy. Especially not coming out of Saru's mouth." Grunted her very normally sour co-worker. "I would've said roots, if we needed something on the dark side myself."

"Like that's any better."

"...I think now."

"Now?" Tsunade repeated, mostly in shock but a little exasperation threaded into her tone, trying to keep Jiraiya still enough to piece his left leg back together. "For fuck's sake, Orochi. We've nearly gone the entirety of this so-called 'Second' war without needing that. Why now?"

"Because," Orochimaru observed cuttingly, making use of the Senju's Slug Summons to negate the poison the Salamander Summon was spewing so readily in order to remove one of the Rain ninja from his kunoichi teammate's small bastion of calmness, "now we are up against someone that uses poisons and I do not know how to enable our survival against these odds. She was very strict on the underlying reasoning to me, hime."

"...she was the first Leaf poison mistress. One of the best, she might've known him." Jiraiya, who really only knew the individual they were talking about through stories and secondhand accounts, pointed out while Tsunade kept his leg from becoming something distinctly not leg shaped. "Matches, at least, some of what she said."

"And he's another of her 'generation'." Finished the Snake Summon in satisfaction, pulling on the earth itself to form up another copy of himself to buy some more time with. "Hanzō the Salamander might not have had something he felt was worth his life, her insight to how he might twist next will be more than worth it."
"That kind of turns him into a sour, old man clinging too hard to his old 'glory' days." Retracting some of the wood, borrowed from their nearly ruined surroundings as Hanzō had not cared for the collateral in his way in this fight, with her Senju bloodline the Slug Summoner finally let their third go again. "Stay off it as much as you can, Jiraiya."

"How?" A gesture to their surroundings, including the mud-clone of Orochimaru nearly getting beheaded by a snap of a Salamander's jaws, and the Toad Summon made a few awkward hops over to the Snake Summoner. Taking a deep breath, their teammate spewed out a mouthful of fire of his own to light the poison gasses still lingering in the wake of the earth clone's death to give the Summons a bit of a fire-breath problem. "I'm with the teme, what else can we pull out we haven't that's been countered already? We're running out of options."

Tsunade was prevented from replying, even if she had anything more to offer, in fending off the twisted amphibian that leaked toxic gasses everywhere before it could overtake their position she retreated to in order to tend their injuries. A tree, of no distinct subspecies, grew from her borrowed wood just tall enough to wrap its normally rigid truck around the creature's maw and hold it shut to afford them the seconds to readjust their position before it snorted the toxins instead.

Straight into another nest of Hanzō's ready shinobi forces that had massacred the rest of the Leaf teams they had been deployed with. Which included the leader of Rain himself on a high building just waiting, requiring both shinobi of Team Hiruzen to focus upon so she was left with encouraging the ninja to avoid jumping into the fight if there was an opening to attack their leader wouldn't kill them for.

Jiraiya, still slightly damaged in spite of her healing and weakened more now this second day of the fight than the rest of them, did pause to supply the fire to light her trees aflame. Burning leaves crackled and hissed when they ignited the pockets of poisons only to fizzle out against wet Salamander flesh and the ever present drizzle the lands were known for. It provided more than enough light for Tsunade to start cracking skulls into wooden prisons to keep them out of the way, a punch apiece as they couldn't twist about the fading daylight to surprise her for now.

There were no other Leaf forces left in the area, and with just the three of them and their Summons against the entirety of Rain's forces…

"Orochimaru! Do it."

"Jiraiya! I need a minute."

"Working on it." Taking the Snake Summoner's position in warding off the heavy scythe he was fighting, the Toad Summoner spread some of the blood leaking from his mouth onto his left hand and slammed it to the ground. Two more Toads were added to the fight, one armed with a sword of his own to replace the Sekanji Clan head. "Now!"

Injured or not, Jiraiya could afford them a minute with just a little help.

Orochimaru hit the ground heavily, forming up yet another earth clone to assist his teammates with that brushing contact with the mud, before darting over to one of the dead bodies of their own former comrades.

Tsunade didn't watch, too distracted with preventing interference, but even she noticed when the rain stopped being a nuisance.

Things just sort of stilled… something not entirely felt but something even nature itself took note of despite how the shinobi tried to ignore such a sign that might just be a distraction.
Then in a utterly *vicious* gust of wind picked up each and every one of the men the Slug Summoner was trying to discourage from attacking her teammates then *slammed* them into the nearby walls or broken homes.

"...oh my. Hello, my *darling* nephew." The resurrected Sekanji Terazawa observed mildly as coppery eyes surrounded by unearthly black sclera flicked from one of Team Hiruzen to another and finally resting upon Hanzō the Salamander, flicking an ancient Land of River's war fan open to conceal the lower half of her face. "I take it you require a measure of aid?"

Chapter End Notes

And with this, we are now caught up to the version on FF.net

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