Trial of Man

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Trial of Man

by misCOWculation

Summary
[AU] The peaceful city of Akatsuki is taken over by hostile forces when the country of Amegakure is invaded. Suddenly, what they once had is now a luxury, but their will to survive burns strong beneath newfound oppression.

fem!Deidara/Sasori

Notes

Naruto world logic is poor as it is, but I might just be able to make it poorer than it already is with this fic. So before it gets underway, I would like to say a few things.

1. SasoDei is currently my OTP, and while I am not against the big gay popsicle of political correctness, I cannot stand reading or writing yaoi (ironic, considering the pairing is a M/M). Which is probably why a lot of people mistake me for a guy before reading my profile (or username, seeing BTS has a larger female demographic, though I know a few male fans). Point is, yaoi isn't my thing, which is why I'm making Deibae a girl. Plus, I love fem!Deidara.

2. About the poor logic I (somewhat?) addressed in my opening sentence, this is why I brought it up: In this AU fic (yes, AUUUUU), chakra still exists but doesn't work in the same way as it does in the anime/manga. The purpose of chakra is to enhance taijutsu abilities ONLY (there are exceptions, which will be talked about very soon). There will be no ninjutsu, genjutsu, or whatever-jutsu (yes, I'm looking at you, Jiraiya).

3. On to the exceptions. Some individuals are able to manipulate their chakra in strange ways. This is called kekkei genkai in the fic. YES, I am aware that it does not follow the same definition as it does in the original source. Which means Sasori's chakra thread manipulation and puppeteering is considered a kekkei genkai in this universe. A kekkei genkai can be taught to others, just like a martial art.

4. I was watching Ip Man when this came to me. So, yes, I based it off Ip Man (2008). It might possibly go into 2 if I'm bothered. I haven't watched the third one with Mike Tyson in it. I plan to.

5. Guns with chakra-enhanced bullets exist. Don't question it, please, because I do not have an adequate, long-winded explanation. Just... technology, like whoaaaa.

6. Everything (chakra, guns, kekkei genkai) exists at a relatively human level. We're not talking superhuman here.

I hope you read all that, otherwise you're going to be horribly confused.

Now, let us begin with the happy times...
Drums beat in the Akatsuki town square, smoke rising the combination of burning incense and firecrackers. In the heart of Akatsuki—a perfecture-level city in the country of Amegakure, civilians gathered to watch a display of taijutsu led by different taijutsu masters—all with their own style of fighting. In the center of it all, a lion dance was happening; the lion hopping and shaking its shaggy head as it entertained the people.

"HA!" A man grinned as he thrust his palm forward, his disciples following the movement behind him. His legs were wide in a stance that was unfamiliar to civilians and rival masters. "HA!"

His pupils repeated the kiai with great bluster, "HA!"

But the rival schools were not to be outdone. The three other masters present all seemed to get the same idea at once, and began to up their game by performing more complicated katas that were exclusive to their schools.

"Ah, look at all of them," a woman in a nearby dango shop said, pointing the sharp end of her dango stick at the performance. Her nose was scrunched up at the stench of the lingering smoke, and she lifted one hand to brush her blonde hair away from her face, snorting in trivial annoyance when it fell over her left eye once more. "They don't know what true art is, un."

"Maa, maa," the brown-haired shopkeeper smiled, her eyebrows slanting upward in fond exasperation. "I'm sure that you could teach them a lesson or two, Deidara-chan, but please refrain from blowing them all up." She paused before smiling. "And if you can't, at least try to spare my husband."

"What, Obito-san?" Deidara finished the last of her dango and tossed the stick to a nearby bin. It bounced against the wall before clattering into the can. "Are you sure, Rin? Because your husband is an idiot, un."

Uchiha Rin couldn't help but sweatdrop at Deidara's deadpan. "Deidara-chan..." Before she could further chastise her friend and regular customer, a little boy came running into the store from the back door, a dirty red ball in his hands.

"Has the performance started yet?!" he demanded, eyes wide.

"If it isn't brat number one," Deidara remarked, and the brown-haired child whipped his head toward her. He grinned widely—it was the same smile that was normally seen on Uchiha Obito's face when he was helping an elderly woman cross the street.

"Deidara-nee!" he exclaimed, running forward to hug her around the waist.

The blonde woman grunted, placing one hand on the boy's head and pushing him away. "Okay, okay, enough of that. Don't you want to see your dad fall on his face?"

"Deidara, please," Rin said sternly, scooping up her son in her arms. "Save the corrupting for someone else's children."

"Will otou-san really fall on his face...?" the boy asked hesitantly, his eyes growing watery.
"Of course not, Daichi." Rin's voice was firm, but soothing. She used her slender fingers to comb knots and thistles out of his hair, souvenirs from playing outside since early morning. "Your father is an amazing taijutsu master."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Deidara muttered when embers fell upon the sleeve of Obito's gi.

"Otou-san's on fire!" Daichi suddenly cried.

"Yes, he is, isn't he?" Rin said absently, placing Daichi back on the ground to wave at another customer that had just come in. He was a regular, and simply helped himself to a table and flipped open the newspaper he'd been carrying. He had glasses perched on his nose.

"No, he's actually on fire!" Deidara and Daichi said in unison, watching Obito fall out of his disciplined movement as he tried and failed to extinguish the flame that had ignited on the sleeve of his gi. His students cried out in alarm and one tried to use a fan to put out the fire. They all squawked when it simply made the fire grow bigger.

"WHAT?!" Rin gripped skirt lifted it up to ease her running toward him. "Obito, you idiot!"

"Rin, get back!"

"SENSEI, BE CAREFUL!"

Too late. Obito had walked backward into the lion dance performers with the promise of more chaos.

Deidara found herself unable to watch the scene anymore, though she had a very large grin on her face. How a retard like Obito ever became a master in the Uchiha Style escapes me, she mused to herself. She turned to Daichi, who looked a cross between bemused and very concerned. "Ne, Daichi-kun, why don't we sneak out the back and make a few things blow up? Like that old lady's cat?"

Daichi, who absolutely despised Tora the cat, brightened up. "I'm in! You're so cool, Deidara-nee!"

"Ohoho! You know it, un!" She winked at him. "Which is why I'm everyone's favorite senpai, un."

The unlikely duo left the dango shop and made their way to a courtyard, where multiple children were running about. There were a few old men and women loitering about as well, and Deidara could see the Nara patriarch and his heir playing shogi under the shade of a tree. It was quite a funny sight to behold—Nara Shikamaru was a few years younger than Deidara herself, and looked terribly out of place surrounded by people more than twice his age.

"He's going to beat you in three moves," an old woman was relentlessly stage-whispering into Shikamaru's ear, sending his father, Shikaku, sneaky glances.

"Obaa-san, please!" Shikamaru said through gritted teeth, his eyebrow twitch. "Man, this is such a drag..."

Deidara pitied the boy but focused her attention on Daichi, who was headed for a group of boys standing in a circle and talking.

"Deidara-nee's gonna play with us!" Daichi told them, and the little boys all straightened, eyes bright.

"Really?!"
"Wow!"

"Is she gonna blow something up?!"

"Please blow something up!"

Deidara sighed dramatically. "Oh, I don't know, boys..." She relished in their disappointed looks (hey, it meant that they cared about her art!) before rectifying, "I'm just messing with you, un. Now..." The young woman held up her hands, tongues sticking out of the mouths of her palms. "C1 or C2?"

"C2! C2!"

As Deidara played the trickster with her explosions—none of them strong enough to truly harm anyone—the boys ooh'ed and ahh'ed at appropriate times, pleasing the explosions specialist greatly. She could be quite flexible with her art, able to mold her explosive clay into all sorts of creatures that impressed her young audience, but she had yet to produce an explosion strong enough to take down a highly trained martial artist. She mostly relied on her explosions as deadly distractions, going in for the kill with close range combat on her opponents.

Not that she had killed before—no one that wasn't a criminal had in the peaceful city of Akatsuki. There simply wasn't reason to. But her sparring partners always claimed that they felt like they had been run over by a horse and cart when she was finished with them.

"Hmph!" a girl with pale blonde hair that was standing aside sniffed, putting her nose up at the mini-explosions display. She had a doll clutched in the crook of her elbow, one that she held close to her. "That senpai is such a boy! Okaa-san says that she's never gonna get married!"

That got her a slap on the wrist from her big sister, Yamanaka Ino. "Hitomi," the blonde girl scolded. Ino wore her hair in a similar fashion to Deidara—they both had 'canary wing' bangs covering an eye. But Ino's pale blonde fringe was flatter against her face, while Deidara's had a bit more volume and brighter color. They also had their hair tied up in ponytails, though Ino's was a full one while Deidara had the lower half of her hair down to her shoulders. "Deidara-san is a respected taijutsu master. She's proving that girls don't need to get married to be sustained."

"She needs to take care of her looks better," Hitomi said gruffly.

Ino tilted her head. "Well, that I can agree with." Though her fringe is to die for...

"Ahh, ahh!" a boy shrieked when one of Deidara's clay spiders got too close for comfort. Squeezing his eyes shut, he smacked the clay creation away, sending it flying toward Hitomi.

"Look out!" Daichi cried, unwilling to see the pretty Hitomi harmed. No! Hitomi-chan! He ran for the girl he admired, his shoes slapping against the cobblestone.

Hitomi screamed in terror, dropping her doll, while Ino tensed, pulling her sister close to her.

Suddenly, the spider stopped in midair. Hitomi blinked, as did Ino and Daichi. Attached to the spider was a blue string—a chakra string.

Ino gaped. No way! A kekkei genkai? She looked around for the user. But who...?

Her train of thought was broken when more chakra strings grabbed on to the clay spider, pulling it apart. Deidara watched dispassionately as it fell to the ground in pieces, harmless.
"You should be more careful with those," a bland voice sounded, and Ino twisted her neck so she could see the speaker: he was standing on the stairs above the sisters.

"They won't explode until I will them to," Deidara argued, crossing her arms and defiantly staring down the red-haired man that gazed at them from the top of the stairs. He had brown eyes that were impassive, but Deidara had the feeling that those chocolate orbs were just as capable of producing warmth. "There was no danger."

He raised an eyebrow. "And you expect me to know that? How could I..." He jumped off from the staircase, landing in front of the Yamanaka sisters and striding toward Deidara until they stood a meter apart. "When you're merely a brat."

"... Excuse me? Brat?" Deidara lifted her chin, her lips twisting into a scowl. "You look like you're barely older than me, kid. You have no business calling me a brat and insulting the control I have over my art, un."

"Art?" The man scoffed, making Deidara bristle. "Don't be ludicrous. Those... tricks of yours are not art."

An irk mark appeared on Deidara's forehead, and her visible eye twitched in outrage. "Oh? And who are you to know about fine art?" This... bastard!

"What? You call those explosions fine art? Fine art is something wonderful that's left long into the future... eternal beauty, if you may. What's the point of something that disappears as soon as it's born?" As if to make a point, the man scuffed his boot against the remnants of Deidara's clay spider.

"You're mad!" Deidara blurted, taking a step toward him. "And your interpretation of art is nothing short of idiotic, un! Art is something that blossoms for an instant before withering away. Art is beauty that lasts for just a single moment. To me, the essence of art... is an explosion!"

"Ridiculous. Art—"

"Is a bang, un!"

"—is something lasts for all posterity."

Electricity zapped between their gazes (they were the same height, which made it all the better). Then Deidara lifted a closed fist.

"Whatever your art is, mine is superior."

His eyebrows lifted. "Care you put your money where your mouth is, brat?"

Deidara launched a punch, one that Sasori blocked. He retaliated, striking for her neck and nearly hitting the mark, only for her to grab his arm and fling him in an arc over her head. But he held on to her, throwing her to the ground and knocking the wind out of her. Ino gasped in awe when Deidara used her legs and grab around his waist and twist, allowing her to stand while he toppled to the ground. But the red-haired puppeteer wasn't down for long, and before long, the two were exchanging blows again, though Deidara's male counterpart seemed to be getting the upperhand.

She noticed it, too, as she kicked him in the chest and threw multiple bombs at him, five of which he caught with his chakra threads, using them to knock the others out of the air. The clay exploded around him, covering his vision with white smoke, and Deidara used the opportunity to dash at him, the smoke whipping around her.
"Everyone, everyone!" Daichi was calling, waving at the intrigued civilians. "There's taijutsu happening!"

"A taijutsu battle?" An old lady raised her eyebrow, smacking her lips. "Haven't seen one of those in a while. And those loud displays in town square don't count."

"True, very true," said a balding man, turning to the Naras. "Shikaku, weren't you once an expert taijutsu user as well? How does it look from here?"

"Well..." Shikaku observed their battle with sharp eyes, Shikamaru leaning forward a bit to get a better look. "From what I can see, it's clear that Sasori is more experienced when it comes to close combat. He's also a puppeteer, but he seems to be without his puppets today, so Deidara might be able to utilize that."

Sasori popped a pair of puppets out of a storage scroll he was hiding underneath his cloak—the black cloak and red clouds that were affiliated with Akatsuki and Amegakure itself—and sent them to attack Deidara.

Shikaku was forced to reevaluate. "Or perhaps not."

"Sasori?" Shikamaru echoed. "So that's his name..."

"Yes. He's a very skilled taijutsu user, though he isn't very well known outside of Akatsuki. He prefers to keep a low profile, unlike most."

"Deidara," Sasori said suddenly. "That's your name, is it not?"

"It is," Deidara affirmed, narrowing her eyes. "And you're Sasori, un?"

"Correct. Try to keep up, won't you, Deidara-san? We've got a show to put on. Don't disappoint our audience."

"Oh, it's not me you have to worry about—" She swept her leg underneath his legs, but he landed on his hands and flipped back onto his feet. His puppets momentarily wavered in the air as the chakra thread connection was interrupted. "—it's—"

"What is going on here?"

The crowd stopped cheering and clapping as an icy voice cut through the air. Then the civilians parted, allowing a dark-haired boy to pass, a team of police officers following behind him.

"Uchiha Sasuke!" Ino whispered loudly. "The Chief of Police's son..."

Deidara paused mid-dash, her body relaxing into a non-threatening pose as Sasuke neared, Sasori doing the same before turning his body toward the Uchiha boy.

"I heard he activated his sharingan recently," a woman whispered to her husband. "Now they have him leading teams to test his worth, apparently."

"He's pretty cute," Hitomi mumbled, much to Daichi's display. But the boy was quickly shaken out of his crestfallen state when Sasuke directly addressed him.

"Daichi. Get back to your mother."

"Y-yes, sir..."
But Deidara stopped him by pulling him closer to her. "Is there a problem, Uchiha-san?"

Sasuke let his gaze linger on her protective form before staring down both her and Sasori. "The problem is that you're creating disturbance in a public area."

"Disturbance?" Sasori said coolly. "I think you'll find that what we were doing was more akin to an instrumental player's street performance than a... disturbance."

"The civilians were clearly enjoying it, and no one was in danger, un," Deidara added.

"Regardless." Sasuke's tone was clipped. "I must insist you leave."

"Yo, Sasuke! My favorite cousin!"

Sasuke's eye twitched comically as Obito's boisterous voice filled the air, and the boy inwardly groaned.

Deidara snickered at Sasuke's expense earning an amused look from Sasori.

"Otou-san!" Daichi immediately ran up to Obito when the man emerged from the crowd, Rin close behind him. Both parents had soot on their faces.

"Hey, kiddo!" Obito crouched and ruffled his hair. "Giving Sasuke trouble? I'm proud."

And just like that, the tension defused. The civilians dispersed, falling back into friendly chatter, like the whole confrontation had never happened.

"Obito," Sasuke deadpanned.

"Hm?"

"I had it under control."

Sensing Sasuke's ire, Sasori quickly interfered, "Uchiha-san. Nothing dangerous went down here today, I assure you." His lips quirked upward slightly, making Deidara stare. Who knew that the guy could smile? "I must say, you're doing a remarkable job at policing. But try not to let it get in the way of everyday life. No rule deserves to be followed to a tee."


"Duly noted. Deidara-san?"

Deidara turned her head slightly toward him. "Yes, Sasori-san?" Was he going to ask for a rematch?

"You are a brat with no taste in art," Sasori stated, striding off with his cloak billowing behind him.

"You—"

"But I think a rematch is in order," Sasori interrupted before Deidara could finish, his eyes just a tad warmer than they had been when he had 'saved' the Yamanaka sisters. His cheeks were flushed from the heat of battle, as were Deidara's. "Someday. I'll be waiting, brat."

When he was gone, Obito let out a low whistle. "Man, is it just me or is it getting hot in here?"
Rin smacked his arm and Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"Really, cousin," the younger Uchiha muttered before spinning on his heel. "Come," he said to his officers. "We have elsewhere to be."

"Come over for dinner tonight!" Obito called after him, waving. "Rin's making tomato and prawns!"

"You're welcome, too, Deidara-chan," Rin told the blonde woman.

"I feel like something might explode if I have to sit with him at a table, un," Deidara warned, wiping dust off her hands on her dark green gi.

Obito merely shrugged. "What's dinner without a few flames and chaos?"

"Speaking of flames," Rin began.

Obito blushed. "There was a pothole, okay?"

Daichi glanced between his parents, then at Deidara, who shrugged.

"I'm unmarried," she told the child. "Don't go looking to me for answers, un."

"Baa-sama. I'm back." Sasori hung his cloak on a coat hanger as he walked to the kitchen, where Chiyo was making dinner. Wordlessly, he picked up a knife and started cutting up vegetables with enviable efficiency.

"You look ecstatic," Chiyo commented as she boiled a pot of water. She threw him a sideways glance. "As ecstatic as my grandson gets, anyway. Get into a good fight?"

"Mm." Sasori looked out the window above the sink, watching young children play outside under the grey skies of Akatsuki. "She had little appreciation for fine art, but she was a worthy opponent."

"Was she like the rest?" The rest being mainstream martial artists that promoted their schools and styles.

Sasori shook his head. "No, but she has made quite a name for herself. She's Deidara. The explosions specialist."

"The one with the... odd kekkei genkai?"

He remembered the mouths on her palms. "Yes, her."

"Ah."

They fell into a comfortable silence before something sly entered Chiyo's wizened gaze. "You know, I hear she has a fourth mouth."

Sasori hardly twitched. "Oh?"

"Yes. And you'd never guess where of all places."

"And I suppose this is the part where I ask where?" Sasori placed his knife down and dumped the vegetables in a bowl before running it under the tap.
"Oh, hush, you. Apparently, it's on her chest."

Sasori paused before turning off the tap. "And?"

"Aren't you curious?" Chiyo pressed. "Curious enough to investigate, perhaps?"

Sasori gave her a sharp glance. "Baa-sama, what are you insinuating? Don't be so quick to assume such things about me..."

The old witch cackled. "Oh, come off it, you." Then her face grew comically serious. "You're nearly thirty, you know. It's time to go wife-hunting."

"Baa-sama, please; can we not have this discussion? I don't have time for a spouse. My art requires full dedication." He paused, then added, "Plus, women always want useless things."

Sasori didn't flinch when Chiyo's butcher knife embedded itself into the wall beside his head.

Chiyo clicked her tongue, disappointed. "Not even a twitch? I must be losing my touch."

Sasori gave a long-suffering sigh. "Baa-sama, you've boiled your water to the point where the pot is half empty."

But Chiyo was untroubled. "So it is. You know what it represents? Your longevity without a wife by your side."

Sasori remained unimpressed. "She's barely twenty."

"And your grandfather was twice my age when I married him," Chiyo shot back.

"Regardless, I'm not interested."

Chiyo shook her head. "Ah, you... You're going to die a lonely virgin."

"Baa-sama."

"Hm?"

A blade stuck out from the wall close to Chiyo.

"I can take a hint," Chiyo said grumpily. "Now start cutting that meat—dinner isn't going to make itself."

So, to Sasori's relief, the subject was dropped for the meantime.
"Where's the other little one, un?" Deidara inquired as she accompanied the Nohara-Uchiha family back to their dango shop, which was just one of the many establishments they owned. The family business mostly ran in the production and distribution of cotton products. When Rin wasn't at the dango shop, she was running the cotton mill with her husband.

"Asleep upstairs," Rin explained, referring to the room they had above the shop. They were wealthy enough to afford more than one estate. "Ever since Daichi turned eight last month, Hikari's been so impatient about her birthday."

"She's turning five in November, right?"

Rin nodded, her eyes growing wistful as she watched her husband and son—both of whom had overtaken the two women. Obito had picked up Daichi and was swinging him around, the boy babbling gleefully as he felt the breeze rush against his face.

"... Does it hurt, un?"

Rin snapped out of her stupor. "Come again?"

Deidara's cheeks went slightly pink. "Like... the process, un. Does it hurt when it... comes out?"

"Oh! Oh, yes it does. Very much so." Rin saw no point in lying to the younger girl. If Deidara wanted to have children in the future, she had to know what to expect. Or, at the very least, what not to expect, like a painless childbirth. "It feels like your insides are being torn apart, sewn back together, and then ripped apart all over again." She said all this with a smile that made Deidara scoot a few inches to the left.

"That bad?"

"Oh, no, I'm one of the lucky ones. I have childbearing hips." She gestured at her waist. "That made things a whole lot easier for me."

"Right, un. More reason not to have any brats for me."

Rin giggled at the repulsed look on Deidara's face, an expression that was combined with a hint of fear.

"Hey!" Obito rejoined them, carrying Daichi on his shoulders. "What have you lovely ladies been talking about?"

"Childbirth," Rin said chipperly.

"Undescribable pain that no woman should have to go through," Deidara intoned at the same time. Immediately, Obito balked. "Y'know, even walking into a conversation about your monthly bleeds would have been better!"

"Oh, come off it, you," Rin admonished. "It's not as bad as you men like to think. It's like pushing a small watermelon out."
"Imagine a lemon coming out of your penis, un," Deidara added unhelpfully with a small grimace.

Obito lurched into himself as if he had been punched. "Urk!"

Rin rolled her eyes, placing one hand on her husband's shoulder and the other on Deidara's shoulder. "Honestly. You martial artists like to think you're all tough and able to handle the pain, but you can't even handle a single conversation about the miracle of childbirth."

"Deidara-nee looks pale," Daichi piped. "So does otou-san."

"Kid," Deidara managed to bite out. "Don't ever mess with your mother, because she will end you, un."

As they exited the courtyard, a boy with blond hair ran past them and squawked as the string connecting his fox kite to his hand snapped. Uzumaki Naruto stared haplessly after his fox kite.

He refused to lose it to the wind.

"Come back here!" Naruto cried, running after his kite. It drifted past the wall, and Naruto struggled to climb over it, tumbling over to the other side and wincing. But his bruises and scratches could wait—that kite had cost him most of the meager pay he got working at the Nohara-Uchiha cotton mill. Most orphans didn't have any toys—Naruto, at fifteen—had one, which was a white kite with the face of a fox painted on its surface.

The kite floated along the wind, moving in and up-and-down and side-to-side manner, until it finally landed in a tree within the walls of a mansion. Naruto skidded to a halt outside the stone wall, looking up in awe at the house, noticing the fan crest hung across the balcony.

An Uchiha house! Naruto thought wondrously. But it's way outside the compound, and there are no sentries around.

In Akatsuki, the Uchiha family ran the police force, which was composed of both Uchihas and non-Uchihas. The Uchihas themselves all lived in a part of the district; their living quarters weren't too far off the police station.

Curious, Naruto scaled the fencing, his pants nearly snagging in some crevices in the stone. Quiet as a mouse, he tip-toed to the tree, using a wall to help him get closer to where the kite hung. Dammit! It's too high! I'm gonna have to climb it.

Meanwhile, a family of two—soon to be three in a few months, if the woman's slightly rounded belly was any indication—ate dinner inside the house, servants bustling about in different quarters of the place.

"Itachi-sama," one of the servants said with a hasty bow. "The one called Hoshigaki-sama seeks your audience. He is waiting outside."

"Hoshigaki-sama?" Itachi mused, garnering a curious glance from Izumi, his doe-eyed wife. He excused himself from the table, striding to the open front doors, where a large, blue man with gills was waiting.

He'd heard of Hoshigaki Kisame of the near extinct Hoshigaki clan. He was supposed to have a very dangerous kekkei genkai—the ability to eat up chakra—though nobody knew how it worked, for he kept his secret under very tight wraps.

Itachi cocked an eyebrow. "You are..."
Kisame grinned, the action being incredibly shark-like, and revealing a large row of sharp teeth. "I am the master of the Demon Shark, Hoshigaki Kisame. I just started up a martial arts club in Akatsuki..."

"Congratulations."

"And I've heard that you, Uchiha-sama, are an expert in Amaterasu. I'd come here today with the request of a... friendly spar." Kisame's smile grew wider, but Itachi was unfazed, simply returning the smile, albeit more politely and less... bite-y.

"Now would not be a good time," Itachi declined, closing his eyes. "Perhaps another day."

But Kisame wouldn't hear of it. "But I'm already here, aren't I? No harm in playing around for a bit. I won't take up too much of your time." The shark-man's eyes gleamed. "It'll be private. No one else shall know who wins or loses aside from ourselves."

Confident, isn't he? Itachi inwardly smirked. "It's not a matter of winning or losing, Hoshigaki-sama. You see..." Itachi turned his body, staring mournfully at the dinner table, where Izumi was waiting. "I'm having dinner." He gave Kisame a thumbs-up, his eyes twinkling. "We're having stew tonight."

"Geh..." Kisame sweatdropped, not particularly caring what the Uchiha was having for dinner. "In the case... I'll wait for you."

"If you have the patience, then by all means, come in."

So Kisame stepped inside and waiting by the lounge, opposite the Uchiha's humble dinner table. The shark-man watched them eat with beady eyes, his gaze lingering on the piece of fish between Izumi's chopsticks before she popped it in her mouth, chewing. Outside, Naruto was still trying to get his kite, using a stick to try and poke it out of the tree. He had found that the tree was not suitable for climbing the hard way; it had too few branches and Naruto had too many bruises to dare dry again.

"Hoshigaki-sama," Itachi's voice cut through the comfortable silence as he addressed the elephant in the room. "Have you eaten dinner yet?" When Kisame shook his head, Itachi invited, "Please join me—we can eat together, then."

Five minutes later, Kisame was earnestly devouring the rice the servants had whipped together.

"Uchiha-san," he said after swallowing, addressing Izumi. "Your cooking is wonderful."

"Ah, it's not my cooking." Izumi chuckled. "While I like to think I'm quite capable in the kitchen, I find that it benefits everyone when the servants cook instead."

Kisame's eyes fell to her pregnant belly. "Right, of course. Apologies for assuming."

"Oh, no, you're all good, Hoshigaki-sama. Anata, correct me if I'm wrong, but Hoshigaki-sama is here for a spar, isn't he?"

Itachi glanced up from his rice bowl, and Kisame could have sworn that his eyes flashed red for a second there. "He is," he confirmed. "After we finish eating, we'll have having a friendly spar."

"Yes... friendly." Kisame felt the need to emphasize.

Dinner was mostly a quiet affair, and Kisame and Itachi had moved to the lounge to have tea while
the servants cleaned up after them. As Kisame drank from his cup, Itachi watched him from behind his bangs.

This man is undoubtedly a schemer. He insisted that I accept his challenge under the pretense of a 'friendly spar' so that he can make a name for himself and his new school by beating me. Itachi took a sip of tea. Shame he's not well-versed in the art of subtlety. If he were, I might find myself having more respect for the man. "I'm glad you enjoyed the food."

"Hm? Oh, yes, it was excellent." Kisame's eyes were glazed over, indicating that he was extremely bored of these mundane affairs.

"That's good." Itachi met his wife's gaze from across the room. Izumi had a knowing glint in her eyes, and she mouthed "good luck" and "be quick" before exiting the dining hall. As his wife retreated, Itachi turned to the remaining servant who was cleaning up the rest of the plates. "Oji-san, leave it. I'll take care of it later. And close the front doors as well."

The servant—an old man—nodded once before complying with Itachi's orders and making a hasty exit. The movement of the man caught the attention of Naruto, who was by the window in a new attempt to get his kite back.

Ehh? What are those two guys up to? Naruto wondered, blinking his large eyes.

"Hoshigaki-sama." Itachi stood before removing his Akatsuki cloak and placing it on the chair he had been sitting on. "Shall we?"

Kisame took one last sip of his tea before straightening, his eyes gleaming at the prospect of a challenge. "Yes, let's."

They moved further away from the dining table, Naruto's eyes following their movement. There were twigs and leaves stuck in his hair, and Naruto hoped that helped camouflage him.

Kisame clutched one hand over his fist. "Please!"

Itachi did the same, albeit with less flair. "Please."

Then they got into their respective stances, Naruto's eyes growing wide.

Taijutsu users! He squirmed in his hiding spot, his kite forgotten for now. This is gonna be so cool!

Kisame moved first, attacking Itachi with his arms in a series of powerful punches, his feet moving along with the rest of his body. Itachi, with even more grace than Kisame, allowed himself to be pushed back, deflecting Kisame's blows with ease. Then, somehow, Itachi managed to get Kisame's back to face him, and struck at his spine, sending the shark-man spinning backward.

Naruto gaped as Kisame sent a kick at Itachi, only for it to be grabbed; he had to resist from crying out in awe when Itachi all but smacked Kisame's large frame away with only his palms, which looked delicate to Naruto.

"Hehe..." Kisame cracked his neck. "You're good, Uchiha-sama."

"Where is your Samehada?" Itachi had heard that Kisame's sword had something to do with his chakra-eating powers.

"At home. Figured I didn't need it to defeat you."
"Aa. Have you caught your breath?"

Kisame narrowed his eyes. "Save your concern for someone else."

They moved out of Naruto's perspective and the boy pouted, only to be excited again when he saw Kisame flying back into view and slamming into the front doors of the Uchiha mansion. Itachi was soon upon him, striking in all sorts of places that Kisame couldn't entirely defend. With the strike of a palm, Itachi sent Kisame into the front doors again, only for the shark-man to be struck on the side by a wooden table.

Itachi raised an eyebrow. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Kisame said gruffly. "Again!"

"Aa. Here I come, then."

It was a thorough defeat if Naruto ever saw one. Not five minutes later, Kisame was lying on his stomach, with Itachi air-punching him in the head and neck, showing Naruto what kind of damage he could have dealt had it not been a friendly match.

Itachi didn't need to see Kisame's face to know that his pride had been greatly wounded. "Hoshigaki-sama, thank you for being lenient with me." With that, Itachi helped him up to his feet by picking him up by the armpits.

"... Thank for sparring with me today, Uchiha-sama."

Suddenly, the front door opened from the outside, and both men tensed, Itachi relaxing when he saw who it was.

"Itachi," Sasori greeted, carrying a box of something by his side with his chakra threads. His brown gaze flitted to Kisame, immediately losing what little warmth it had. "You were at today's taijutsu display. Hoshigaki-sama, I take it?"

"I am," Kisame confirmed. "And you...?"

"Sasori."

The shark-man's gaze widened ever so slightly. "Akasuna no Sasori?"

"No. Just Sasori."

"I see..."

Itachi smiled. "What brings you here, Sasori?"

The puppeteer retracted his chakra threads, allowing the box he was carrying to sit on his hands. "A gift from my grandmother. She says that you should come over more often." His gaze flattened slightly. "The woman adores you for reasons that I will never know."

"Tell her I said thank you.” Itachi took the box, sniffing at it. "Chicken rice?"

"It'll still be fresh tomorrow."

Kisame let out a low whistle. "Chicken rice, huh? My own gran used to make that. Before, well, you probably already know the story."
"Indeed," Sasori intoned. "Also, Itachi, tell your brother to take his head out of his ass. Being stuck-up won't do him any favors in the eyes of the public, Police Chief's son be damned."

Itachi smirked. "I'll make sure to pass on the message. Hoshigaki-sama, allow me to escort you out..."

Kisame was walked by Itachi to the front gates, Sasori following close behind before diverting to the side, having noticed some movement in the trees.

Sasori narrowed his eyes, his fingers tingling as his chakra threads began to form. His feet padded against the ground silently, and he paused when he saw a blond boy trying to jostle his kite out of a tree with a long stick. Unfortunately, the stick was just a little too short to reach the toy.

"What are you doing here," Sasori deadpanned.

"Gaah! Geez, don't sneak up on me like that, dattebayo!" Naruto glared at the puppet master.

"You're on private property."

"So are you."

"Yes, but I'm not trespassing." Sasori glanced up at the kite. "Yours?"

"Well, yeah. Oh, hey! Did you see the two guys fighting?! It was so awesome. It was all boom, and pow, and smack! The big shark dude never stood a chance, dattebayo!"

Sasori cringed away from the boy. Had this imp no concept of 'inside voice'? "No, I didn't see."

Before the boy could continue, Sasori used his chakra threads to grab the kite out of the tree, passing it to Naruto. "Here. Don't lose it again. Not everyone is as kind as me."

"Kind?" Naruto scrunch up his nose. "You seem kind of a jerk... but you're cool as well!"

"Eh? I'm a jerk but I'm also cool?"

"Uh huh! Like that Kakashi guy!"

"Kakashi? Where have I heard that name before?"

But Naruto wasn't up for talking more. He ran toward the wall and scaled it with relatively more ease than he had before, now exuberant that he had his kite back. He sat on top of the wall to wave at Sasori. "Thanks for helping me, senpai!"

He disappeared to the other side of the wall, leaving Sasori to stare at where he had been before taking his own leave.

Dawn had just arrived when Deidara awoke from her slumber, groggily sitting up in her bed and rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. She lived nearby the Uchiha district, where the police station was. Her home wasn't big, and the majority of her wealth came from the trust fund of her deceased parents.

The long-haired woman was making herself tea when a very loud voice from the place next door declared, "Yosh! Another day has arrived, and the flower blooms youthfully yet another time!"

Deidara groaned to herself, knowing what was about to come next. Might as well be prepared, un. She wasn't planning on doing any fighting today, as she would be hitting the market, so she
dressed in a plain blue yukata. She had just finished tying up her hair in its usual style when someone knocked on her door.

"Deidara! Are you up? Today, we shall do five-hundred laps around the Uchiha district!"

"No thank you," Deidara said as she opened the door, her face not even twitching when Maito Gai grinned back at her. "I have plans today, un. And while I can appreciate your dedication to fitness and general well-being, I'm not a complete nutcase like you, un."

Gai turned his head to the side, sticking his nose in the air. "Well, I suppose that's fair. Women aren't usually able to handle my training regimen..."

"Cut the misogyny, un. That stopped working a long time ago." Deidara shoved past him, tucking a storage scroll that had her purse and her clay creations contained into the sleeve of her yukata.

Gai was irked. "As usual, your cool and hip attitude—which is reminiscent of my Eternal Rival's—is my downfall! As punishment for not being able to convince you, I shall do five-hundred laps around the entire city. And if I cannot do those five-hundred laps—"

"You'll leave me alone?" Deidara suggested dryly.

Unfortunately, Gai stuck by her side, insisting on accompanying her to the market.

"It is only right for me to escort a fair lady like yourself!" Gai proclaimed, and Deidara struggled not to roll her eyes for the umpteenth time.

"Thank you, Gai." Deidara didn't sound very thankful at all, but Gai was not deterred.

"You are most welcome! And if I should fail in my quest to protect you, then I will—"

Deidara never got to hear what he would do (though she had a good guess of what kind of ridiculous challenge he would assign to himself next) as they had reached the market place. It was bustling as usual, with shop vendors opening up for the day and inviting customers inside to try their food or buy their clothing. The marketplace was built around the Nohara-Uchiha cotton mill. In the Nohara-Uchiha building, there was space for other vendors as well, including a man that sold kites and another that sold goldfish. Both were popular with the children, and the Nohara-Uchiha couple got part of the earnings as per their agreement with the shop vendors.

"Kakashi! My Eternal Rival!" Gai cried when he saw Kakashi behind the counter of the kite shop, reading an orange book.

The silver-haired man sighed through his mask, closing his book (but making sure to mark the page he was on). "Yo, Gai." He leaned outward so that he could see Deidara. "Ah. Back with more goods to sell, Deidara-san?"

"You know it, un." Deidara released the clay from her storage scroll, her creations sprawling across the table. Kakashi took one—a small dragon—in his hand and examined it with his good eye. The other eye—his left eye—had a pink scar across it, a souvenir from when it had been rendered useless.

"Non-explosive?" Kakashi questioned casually, setting the dragon to the side.

"Do you even have to ask? I'm not an idiot, un." Deidara planted her hands on her hips, looking around. "By the way, where's Obito? I was expecting him to be here today, bothering you to hell and back."
"Oh, he's having a friendly meeting with one of his cousins. I wouldn't expect him to be out for a while."

"Cousins? Any idea which one?"

Gai, who had been thoroughly ignored for the majority of the conversation, interrupted, "Kakashi! As soon as your boss comes back—"

"We're co-owners, Gai."

"—I challenge you to a noble round of juggling poultry!"

Kakashi blinked slowly. "What."

Deidara couldn't help but stare when Gai produced a squawking chicken out of seemingly nowhere. When did he...?

"I have heard from a very credible source that juggling chooks is considered an art in a distant land!" Gai insisted.

"Art?" Deidara scoffed. "Yeah, right, un. Whoever said that must have been dropped on the head a few times. There is nothing beautiful or remotely artful about juggling chickens."

Kakashi sighed, knowing how vehement Deidara could get about her art. "I'll pay you a few thousand ryo for everything, Deidara."

"Only a few thousand? You're swindling me, Kakashi, un." Nevertheless, Deidara handed over her clay creations in exchange for the money. As she counted her money to the side, absently watching Kakashi serve a customer while Gai bothered him about juggling chickens, she noticed a blond boy loudly talking to a group of people.

"And he hardly moved! But he pushed Hoshigaki-sama's whole body away! With one hand!" the boy shouted, bouncing up and down excitedly. "Itachi-sama is so cool!"

"Right?!" a girl added, nodding excitedly, her blonde fringe covering the right side of her face. "Itachi-senpai is so handsome..."

Yamanaka Ino, Deidara realized, remembering how Ino had hugged Hitomi when Deidara's spider had 'attacked' them, ready to take the brunt of the damage if it meant protecting her sister. And that boy must be one of the orphans working at the cotton mill if his clothes are any indication. In contrast to Ino's clean appearance, the boy was dressed scruffily, his hair uncombed and his face dirty. Why would someone like Yamanaka, who comes from a rich family, hang out with a no-name orphan, un?

"He pushed him with one hand?" a younger boy repeated, skeptical. He was likely also an orphan, his state of dress being similar to Naruto's. "That sounds fishy to me, Naruto."

"Believe it, Konohamaru, the only thing fishy about the match was the shark guy!" Naruto continued on with his account of yesterday's events. "Anyway, Itachi-sama totally had him beat, but Hoshigaki refused to admit defeat, and jumped on Itachi like an angry dog, dattebayo!"

Daichi, who was practicing serving customers with the goldfish man, was listening intently to the conversation. Wow, Itachi-nii is so cool... He turned to the grandpa that ran the shop. "Ojii-sama, can I go and bring tea to my otou-san and Itachi-sama?"
"Go right on ahead," said the grandpa.

"Thank you!"

"Hey, did you hear that?" Deidara said to Kakashi once he was free of his customer. "Hoshigaki from yesterday's taijutsu display was beaten by Itachi of all people, un. Isn't that guy a pacifist?"

"Don't be so quick to write him off, Deidara," Kakashi chided, his eyes lifting momentarily from his book. "Itachi may be a pacifist, but he's fiercely protective of his family. He's not an idiot either—he knows that he needs to be able to defend himself and his family, which is why he created the Amaterasu fighting style. It's unique only to him, and perhaps Izumi-san, which is why it's not easily countered."

"Indeed!" Gai agreed. "I once challenged Itachi-sama to a sparring match, and found myself devoured by the gaping jaws of defeat! Even now, I train hard in hopes of defeating him! That goes for you, too, my Eternal Rival, Kakashi!"

"Huh." Deidara raised both of her eyebrows at Gai's declaration. Despite his exterior, Gai was a very proficient taijutsu user, and well respected in the community for his skills. He had no kekkei genkai either, which made his prowess much more impressive. He was even considered part of the "Big 4", a group of master taijutsu users, which also included Uchiha Obito, Deidara herself, and Uchiha Shisui.

"Maybe later," Kakashi said when Gai opened his mouth to challenge him to chicken juggling. "You know, when I'm not... alive."

Deidara snorted at Gai's dismayed expression before noticing Daichi hurrying past with a tray of tea in his hands. "Hey, kid! You're going to spill that if you hold it like that, un." She walked over to Daichi and took the tray from him. "What's the rush?"

"Deidara-nee!" Daichi looked faintly embarrassed. "Well, I know that otou-san is meeting with Itachi-nii today, and I wanted to congratulate him on his win against Hoshigaki-sama..."

"Aa." She smiled down at him. "Let's go, then. I'll help you carry it, un."

"Thanks, nee-chan!"

"I thought Hoshigaki was good, but his defense was pretty terrible," Naruto was saying as Deidara and Daichi passed the group of teenagers. "He was beaten up like a loser dummy, dattebayo!"

Deidara's lip curled. "That kid has no business speaking so flippantly of a taijutsu master, un," she muttered to Daichi. "Don't end up like that, or your mother will skin you."

Daichi cocked his head. "But if he can do it, why can't I?"

"Because he's an orphan. He doesn't know any better because he never had anyone to teach him. He doesn't have parents," she clarified when Daichi still looked confused.

"Oh..." Daichi blinked up at her. "Do you have parents, Deidara-nee?"

Deidara smiled. "I did, once, but not anymore."

"What happened to them?"

"Ah, well..." Deidara shrugged. "Life, un. Then death. They're one thread, the same line viewed
from different sides. I suppose that they were closer to one side than the other, un."

As they neared the room where Obito and Itachi were conferring, voices drifted through the air. It was mere idle conversation, so they wouldn't be interrupting anything special.

"Morning," Deidara greeted. "Daichi wanted to bring you some tea."

"It's freshly brewed!" Daichi added.

"Aw, thanks, squirt!" Obito chuckled, taking a cup as soon as Deidara set the tray down on the table. "Hey, Itachi, you take one, too."

"Thank you, Daichi-kun," Itachi said as he took the remaining cup and the pot.

"Y-you're welcome. I, uh, um..."

Deidara grabbed his shoulders and pushed him forward so that he was standing closer to Itachi. "Hey, stop stuttering, un. You wanted to come up here, didn't you?"

Itachi's features softened ever so slightly at the sight of Daichi twiddling his thumbs. He's a lot more nervous than Sasuke used to be...

"Yes!" Daichi blurted. "You're super cool! I heard that you fought with Hoshigaki-sama of the Demon Shark! And you beat him really quickly! Is that true?"

"Naruto?" Obito suggested.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Was the duel supposed to be private, Itachi-san?" Deidara inquired, sensing the tense vibes that had suddenly sprung up around Itachi. From what I've heard, Hoshigaki-sama recently started his own school. It would be detrimental to his reputation if his defeat were to be made public.

"Ah, Deidara," Obito said hesitantly. "We have a lot of things to discuss. Could you please leave us for now? You too, Daichi."

"Aww..." Daichi pouted.

"Right, I'll leave you to your private business, un," Deidara said, taking Daichi by the hand. "Come on, kid, don't make that face. I'll blow something up for you, if you want?"

"Okay!"

Kisame walked into his dojo, sipping tea and acknowledging the greetings his disciples gave him before returning to their katas. It was a good morning. Too bad it had to be ruined when one of his newest disciples ran up to him, looking frantic.

"Hoshigaki-sama!"

"Yes?" Kisame raised an eyebrow. "Problem, Goshiki?"
"I heard that you were beaten by Itachi-sama—"

Kisame spat out his tea.

"—everybody in Akatsuki knows about it by now!"

"Nonsense!" Kisame snapped, trying to regain his composure. *Shit! What the hell?!*

"One of the orphans at the cotton mill in the marketplace was talking about it!" Goshiki insisted. "Uzumaki Naruto!"

"Hrr!" Kisame pushed his empty tea cup into Goshiki's hands, marching off to the marketplace. *How dare they! How dare they!*

Back in their private room, Itachi sighed contentedly as he took another sip from the tea Daichi and Deidara had brought in. "Whoever made this... has excellent taste. Wouldn't you agree, Obito?"

"Definitely." Obito hummed. "You know, Itachi, everything in Akatsuki is costly nowadays. It means that the economy is good, and everyone can afford to spend money. Clothing is an essential in our daily lives, and they'll be lots of demand for clothing in the near future. Rin and I have the cotton mill, but we were thinking to hire thread-spinners as well. To do that, however, I'm going to need your partnership."

"And my expenses," Itachi added.

Obito grinned. "Yeah, and that, too. But it'll be a good investment!"

"Business has never been my forte."

"Ah, but it's mine!"

Itachi wasn't swayed. "I'm not in need of any money at the moment."

Downstairs, Kisame stormed in through the entrance, his fearsome sword, Samehada, strapped onto his back. "Who the hell is Uzumaki Naruto?!"

"That's me!" Naruto, who was sitting at a table with his friends, turned in his seat and raised his hand up. There was an empty ramen bowl in front of him.

Kakashi looked up from his book. Gai had gone somewhere else, and he'd been hoping for some peace and quiet. The silver-haired man sighed, putting his book down. *I can never catch a break, can I?*

Taken aback by Naruto's blatant behavior, Kisame lifted his robes and stalked over to the Uzumaki orphan, grabbing him by the shirt and lifting him up in the air effortlessly, much to the horror of his friends.

"You rascal! You ruined my reputation! Do you have any idea what kind of damage you have caused?!"

There was a breeze of wind, and, suddenly, Kakashi was there, pulling them apart. "Maa, maa," he chided. "This kid is my... ward. Why don't we talk? But before that, you should probably calm down, Hoshigaki-sama. This is a popular establishment, after all."

"Your ward?" Kisame's lip curled in disgusted anger. "He ruined my reputation! He said I was beaten by Uchiha Itachi. What the hell is going to happen to my martial arts club?! Who will want..."
to be my disciples?"

To the side, Daichi was cowering at Deidara's side. The woman herself didn't look too impressed at Kisame's behavior, though it was warranted. The man's reputation had gone down the drain, after all. He was likely having a case of tunnel vision, and didn't see the additional damage his outbursts were having on his standing.

"Is everything going to be alright?" Daichi whispered.

"Everything will be fine, un," Deidara reassured him, patting his head. "Kakashi's got this. And I'm here, too, you know."

"Ah, I see. Naruto, I think it's best if you apologize."

"What?!" Naruto was outraged. "I didn't do anything wrong! I just told the truth, dattebayo!"

Deidara sighed. Has this boy no brain? There are some things that just don't need to be said, un.

"Enough of your bullshit!" Kisame snarled, grabbing at Naruto again. "You—"

"Maa, maa, maa, maa, maa, maa," Kakashi protested again. "Hoshigaki-sama, please calm down." He shot Naruto a stern glare, but the orphan boy was unrepentant.

"Wow, six times!" Konohamaru muttered in the background.

"Itachi-sama is upstairs!" Naruto growled. "Go and seek him out if you have the guts, fishbrain!" Then he turned and took off upstairs to where Itachi was staying.

Sharing an outraged glance, Kakashi and Kisame followed him, along with a crowd of people.

"Come on," Deidara said, picking Daichi up and following the crowd. "Hardly anything ever happens around here, un. Like hell I'm missing this!"

"Don't be too angry," Kakashi was cautioning Kisame, but the shark didn't seem to be listening. "Hoshigaki-sama! Argh, Naruto, you idiot! You're making my job very, very difficult!"

"Itachi-sama!" Naruto called into the open room where Obito and Itachi were. "There's this weirdo trying to kill me just for telling the truth!" The crowd caught up to him and Naruto turned back momentarily. "Itachi-sama, tell these guys that you beat Hoshigaki-sama in a spar!"

The dumpling that had been on a journey to Itachi's mouth fell onto his plate as Kisame glared murderously at him, Obito, Naruto, and then Kakashi.

Then Deidara spoke. "Ne, Itachi-san, did you enjoy the tea?"

All heads turned to the brazen woman, who looked unaffected by everything that had happened thus far. "Daichi brewed it himself, you know, un."

Itachi managed a smile. "It was delightful, thank you for asking."

"Is Izumi well?"

"She is."

"Uh," Obito cut in. "What's going on here, guys? Kakashi?" He looked to his longtime friend for answers. Kakashi merely shrugged, pointing at Kisame, whose chest was heaving.
"Itachi-sama," Kisame began. "You've got to clear my name."

"Hoshigaki-sama..."

Kakashi, who had had enough of the smug look on Naruto's face, whacked him across his head. "Oi, Naruto. Why would you bother Itachi-sama for all this bullshit?"

"I'm not lying or anything!" Naruto shot back. "I saw the fight when I was picking up my kite! It's the truth, dattebayo!"

Kakashi shook his head. "Even if it was true, you shouldn't have told everyone. There are certain things that shouldn't be said." This boy was seriously going to be the death of him.

"What's wrong with admitting to the truth?!

"Oh, a whole lot of things, un," Deidara chuckled dryly, capturing Naruto's attention for one moment.

"Because it might cause embarrassment for others!" Kakashi hissed.

"What embarrassment?!" Naruto shouted, like he didn't know of such a thing.

"What embarrassment?" Suddenly, flames seemed to burn behind Kakashi as he stood up straight and loomed over Naruto, who was quickly losing his bluster.

"Uh..."

"I'll show you what embarrassment is. ONE THOUSAND YEARS OF DEATH!"

"GWAAAHH!" Naruto went flying through the air, nearly hitting his head on the roof as he fell to the ground and hopped away, clutching his rear end.

Deidara went slack-jawed, her face becoming shadowed, as did most of the people gathered, as Kakashi had jabbed his fingers up Naruto's ass in what seemed to be a very painful manner.

"Deidara-nee?"

Deidara glanced down at Daichi, who was trembling.

"I... My body no longer feels safe."

"You and me both, un."

Itachi sighed, getting up from his seat and walking over to Kakashi. He placed a firm hand on the silver-haired man's shoulder. "Kakashi-san, there was really no need for such... drastic measures."

Someone coughed in the crowd; the sound was covered by giggles.

"What's with all the commotion?" a voice growled, and the crowd grew quiet and parted. "Am I invisible or something? Why the hell were you all laughing?"

Daichi further hid behind Deidara at the sight of an imposing figure. Or, rather, Uchiha Sasuke. Sasuke's military boots clicked against the wooden flooring as he approached Kakashi and Itachi. In the room, Obito had his legs kicked up on the table, intending to watch the proceedings with a grin.
"Captain," Kakashi said smoothly. "It's no big deal—"

"What's no big deal?" Sasuke lifted his chin to look the taller man in the eye. "I saw everything. I'm warning you all..." He turned to the crowd, his sharingan spinning in his eyes for the added intimidation factor. "Anyone who causes trouble on my turf will be dealt with."

Obito rolled his eyes. Sasuke, Sasuke... what a ham!

"I wasn't causing any trouble," Kisame said when Sasuke's gaze lingered on the shark-man. "My name was ruined. I am only here to claim justice."

"Justice? I am justice," Sasuke sneered at Kisame before turning that sneer to Itachi, who was gazed back impassively. "You barbarians are fighting all the time with no regard for others." He turned that terrible sneer onto Deidara, too, who sneered back. "What kind of age is this? The Stone Age? Still talking about taijutsu? This is the age of guns!" To make a point, he pulled out his own gun, making a few civilians flinch back. "Guns. Got it?" The boy moved in a circle, eventually ending up facing Itachi, pointing the gun right at his brother's face. "And you... you disgrace to the family!"

"Otouto—"

"Quiet," Sasuke commanded, his voice dangerously low.

Itachi fell silent, though his eyes, still coal black in the face of Sasuke's red sharingan, were unyielding. Then his arm shot up, wrapping his hand around Sasuke's hand—the one that held the gun.

Everyone held their breath.

"Deidara-nee, what's happening?" Daichi whispered.

But Deidara didn't answer the boy this time, too focused on what was going to happen next. Was Sasuke really going to shoot his brother in the face? What happened next was almost too fast for her to catch.

Itachi's pointer finger, in one swift movement, pushed the round of bullets from the gun. It bounced once against the wall before clattering to the ground, the chakra-enhanced bullets spilling out.

Sasuke glared murderously at him.

Itachi merely stared back, eyes expressionless. Then he walked past Sasuke, bending down to pick up the bullets and the casing. "Otouto. We taijutsu users are energetic. Sometimes, we talk too loud. But that doesn't mean we are uncivilized." He dropped the bullets into Sasuke's hand. "We are civilized people. So please do not pull the gun out on us again."

"Oi, Sasuke!" Obito decided it was time to make his entrance, pushing between Kakashi and Itachi to get to the younger Uchiha. "You're working too hard, as usual. Hey, Kakashi, go set up a table. It's on me, 'kay?"

Kakashi shrugged before doing so. "Your funeral."

Sasuke, who rather liked Obito despite his loud, obnoxious disposition, scowled. "Fine." He turned to the crowd. "What are you looking at? Get lost!" Alarmed, the civilians all left, leaving only Deidara, Daichi, and Kisame to remain behind. Unbothered, Sasuke gruffly allowed Kakashi to lead him to a table.
"Well, Hoshigaki-sama," Deidara spoke up. "As you please."

"As you please," Itachi repeated, and both martial artists put their hands together in a show of respect.

Kisame, who had significantly calmed down, did the same. "Aa."

When Kisame was gone, Itachi turned to Deidara. "Did you fight with Sasori yesterday?"

"I did, un. Problem?"

Itachi smiled. "None at all. Tea?"

Deidara shrugged. "I don't see why not, un. Wanna come, Daichi? You can sit with your idol."

"C-can I?"

Itachi nodded. "You're welcome, too, Daichi-kun."

"T-thank you!"

Sasori was the last one to enter, and Obito gave him a short nod as he sat down opposite Itachi and him.

"Why so secretive?" the puppeteer asked.

"I'm not a businessman," Itachi replied, tossing a brown pack of money at them both. "This way would simply be better. Obito mentioned he had another partner he scouted for his ambition. I didn't realize that it would be you."

"Aa. And I didn't realize that we'd be partners as well."

"Take this to buy the equipment and hired help you need. Pay me back if you make a profit."

Obito blinked. "You sure? It might take a while."

"Take your time."

"One more thing I want from you two," Obito said, and both men tensed. "It's about my son..."

"Daichi-kun?" Itachi said.

"Yeah..." Obito rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, grinning. "I just wanted your input on something. Do you think that I should start training him? Or should I wait for a few more years?"

"I'd start now," Sasori suggested, crossing one leg across the other. "It's never too early to start learning how to defend yourself, especially in a world full of taijutsu masters."

"Agreed," Itachi put in. "Except... Don't go overboard."

Obito nodded. "Then it's settled. Thanks for coming. Oh, and Sasori, tell your grandmother that the rice was great."

"Wha—" Sasori glared at Itachi. "That was for your mouth, not his."

The younger Uchiha shrugged. "Does it matter whose mouth it goes to, as long as somebody is
fed?"

"Hrr, I suppose..."

Obito laughed heartily. "We're going to make a great trio. Our clothes and cotton will be known as the finest in the land. I just know it!"

Chapter End Notes

We're still in peacetimes ^^

For now.
Part I: Hyacinth

Chapter Summary

Sasori and Deidara clash, we see the Big 4 together, and Daichi and Sasuke bond.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The wind blew through the trees, and a rustling noise reached Deidara's ears. She stood in the middle of the training field with her eyes closed, her fingers held up in front of her face. She was vaguely aware of Gai practicing his taijutsu on the other side of the field, vigorously attacking the wooden training dummy. It spun at the same speed that Gai moved every time he struck it.

They weren't the only ones occupying the training field behind Obito's house—the man himself was there, as was another one of his many relatives, Uchiha Shisui. Daichi watched from afar, sitting on the low branch of a tree and swinging his legs about.

"Katsu!" From seemingly out of nowhere, Deidara flung her explosive clay in all directions, each of the explosive devices hitting a wooden training dummy. They were merely C1 level, however—she was aiming for excellent control and aim, not power. As soon as they were hit, she engaged one in combat, striking fast and hard with her arms and legs, the training dummy deflecting each blow with its wooden arms. "Ha!" The wood splintered and promptly exploded as she gave it a palm strike in the center.

"Deidara!" Obito's voice shouted as he stopped his own training. "You know how expensive those are?!"

"You're rich, un," she shot back. "Buying a couple more hundred won't even make a dent in your bank account!"

"Alright, ladies," Shisui gave a long-suffering sigh, but smiled anyway, putting his tanto back into its holster. "I think a break might be in order. We've been training since dawn, after all. Just look at where the sun is."

"Yosh!" Gai joined them, retreating from his own training corner, and gave them a hearty thumbs-up. "Our wives are sure to be waiting at home with excellent home-cooked meals!"

Obito sweatdropped. "I'm the only married one here..."

Deidara snorted. "Somehow."

"Hey!"

"Otou-san, you did great!" Daichi jumped down from the low-hanging branch and ran toward his father as fast as his short legs would allow. "But Deidara-nee was so awesome as well! She made one explode!"

"We could have done the same," Shisui pointed out, giving Deidara a sly glance. "We just have more control, that's all."
"Subtle," Deidara huffed, crossing her arms. Her green gi was covered in dust—the other members of the Big 4 were in a similar state.

The members of the Big 4—as they were known as by the general community—retreated back to Obito's house, where the servants had set up a table full of food for them. Rin was out managing either the dango shop or the cotton mill, and Hikari was sleeping somewhere in the house.

"No rice?!"

Deidara wasn't the only that winced when Obito shrieked that out.

"How did we run out of rice?" Obito demanded, the servant cringing back away from his whiny master. "It's, like, a staple food!" When the servant proceeded to babble something about rats getting into their rice stores and that the problem was currently being tended to, Obito sighed out, "There's only one thing to do now..."

"Go out and eat?" Shisui suggested. He hummed thoughtfully. "But then this spread would go to waste... Any ideas, Gai?"

"All we are missing is rice," Gai said, nodding. "I suggest that we buy our own rice field and harvest the crops! Then we shall all live together happily with a kangaroo in our backyard!" He yelped when Deidara whacked him across the head with what seemed to be a paper fan.

"That would take way too long!" she shouted. "And what the hell's a kangaroo, un?!"

"Maa, maa," Obito calmed them down. "It's okay, I know a lady that makes the best chicken rice in the world."

About fifteen minutes later, Sasori entered the house, a deadpan expression on his face and carrying a box of takeaway. He had a long-suffering look about him, one that was far more developed than Shisui's own expression of long-suffering.

"Delivery," he intoned, using his chakra threads to place the box on the table. "What?" he said when he caught Deidara staring at him.

"Nothing, un. Just..." She struggled to keep down a laugh, biting her lip. "Nothing...!"

Gai, on the other hand, guffawed with wild abandon, and Shisui and Obito couldn't help but snicker as well.

Sasori sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in embarrassment. "I knew I shouldn't have agreed to baa-sama's uniform requests..." He was dressed in a ridiculous red button-up shirt and pants with a sash around his waist. There was a rooster insignia stitched on the back of the uniform, a far cry from the scorpion crest he normally wore on the back of his attire.

"It's not that bad," Obito tried to comfort him, holding out his hands.

Sasori deadpanned at him.

"Okay, it's pretty bad," Obito amended. "In any case, wanna join us for lunch?"

Since Chiyo's Chicken Rice was technically closed today (as were many food establishments, thanks to it being a weekend), and Sasori had only delivered because he and Obito were business partners, he sat down at the table with the rest of the Big 4 and Daichi. He also shed his uniform to reveal that he was wearing his normal clothing—a grey tunic and dark pants—underneath, scorpion
insignia and all.

As they ate, they made idle conversation, Daichi merely listening as he poked his rice with his chopsticks.

"And then she exploded it!" Obito was telling Sasori, who was picking up some chicken from a dish.

"Tsk," Sasori clicked his tongue, his brown eyes shifting to Deidara, who'd been listening with a small grimace. "How typical of you. Brats your age never have the kind of self control that comes with age."

"Brats my age could kick your ass, old man," Deidara retorted, her grip on her chopsticks tightening. "You know, we never did have their rematch... I was just releasing some of my frustration."

"Oh boy," Shisui said through a mouthful of rice. "Do I even want to know the story behind this one?"

"Long story short, they had an argument about art," Obito explained. "Hey, Gai, care to do the honors of refereeing the match? Shisui and I are going to be teaching Daichi the Uchiha Style this afternoon."

"If that is what my friend wishes, it shall be so!" Gai agreed. "May we have a clean, youthful match."

Sasori raised an eyebrow. "You know, I came here to eat, not fight."

"Does it matter?" asked Deidara. "You're here now, un." She lifted a palm, the mouth on it sticking out a tongue as Deidara smirked. "What? Too chicken?"

Normally, such a jibe wouldn't have roused Sasori. But this went deeper than that—Deidara wasn't mocking just his courage, she was mocking his occupation as well, as well as that ridiculous getup. So Sasori steeled his gaze. "I look forward to our match. Perhaps there's something more than bark in you, brat."

Shisui chuckled. "Ne, Daichi, got anybody in mind for a rival?"

"A rival?" Daichi echoed. "Do I need one?"

"Well, sure. Gai has Kakashi," Shisui gestured to Gai, who nodded, "Those two have each other, apparently," Sasori and Deidara spared him a brief glance, "and your dad has me and Kakashi."

"Kakashi again," Deidara commented. "I'm pretty sure that orphan from the fiasco the other day considers him his rival as well, un."

"Kakashi..." Sasori mused. "Wasn't he once a samurai?"

Deidara was taken aback. "Was he? I know he was a warrior once before retiring, but a samurai? Seriously? That arrogant troll (who also happens to be my source of income...) was a samurai?"

"I'm certain," Sasori answered, his voice hard. "His father..." He trailed off, refusing to say anymore on the matter. "Do you want to start?" he asked Deidara. "I don't have all day, you know."
Obito snorted. "You make it sound like your a busy man. All you do is wake up, eat, train until the sun sets, sleep, and repeat the process again."

"I go for walks sometimes," Sasori stated mildly, as if that justified his mundane routines. "Not to mention that Chiyo-baa-sama has me running deliveries when she's not bothered to. The woman's more fit than young men less than half her age..."

Once they finished eating, they immediately vacated to the training yard again, the Uchiha occupying a space for themselves to train Daichi while Sasori, Deidara, and Gai had the rest of the barren, tree-surrounded field to themselves.

"Alright!" Gai boomed, standing with his legs spread apart and his arms crossed. "I want a clean match, you two! Which means no more than one gallon of blood spilled from the both of you, got it?"

"Combined or individual?" Sasori inquired.

"Combined!"

"Well, then... that gives me less leeway. No matter." He popped two puppets out of the storage scroll he always carried with him. "You'd better watch your head, brat. Or you might find yourself without it."

"Bite me, asshole."

"Match... begin!" Gai announced.

Sasori sent his puppets forward to meet Deidara, and she traded blows with one, then the other before throwing a bomb to obscure the three of them. She burst through the smoke after that, and met Sasori in close combat. Even as he levitated the puppets with his chakra strings, Sasori was still able to fight her at the same time. She spun out of the way of one of his puppets, only to run right into the other one.

There was a click, and a large blade flipped out of the one of the puppet's limbs. Deidara skirted out of the way just in time, flipping through the air and elbowing the other puppet in its wooden face. The one with the blade came after her, and she dodged quickly, grimacing when it manage to make tear in her gi. The blade swung at her again, slamming into the ground when she jumped out of the way.

Using the momentarily stuck sword as a makeshift platform, she ran up the large blade, littering small amounts of clay between its joints before leaping off to face the other one. "Katsu!"

There was a loud explosion that distracted Daichi from his basic katas, earning him a smack on the head with a wooden pole, courtesy of Shisui.

Deidara was still fighting the other puppet when Sasori officially jumped into the fray, spurred by the fiery destruction of his other puppet, and forcing the blonde woman on defense.

His elbow knocked against her jaw and nose, and she nearly caught her tongue between her teeth. As her teeth clattered together, she swung her leg upward, landing a hit on nearly the exact same place that he had struck her.

There was a whirring noise and a load of kunai rained upon Deidara, courtesy of the puppet. Cursing, she evaded the weapons to the best of her ability, but some still managed to cut her. Grumbling, she spat out a wad of blood and mucus which had come from her bleeding nose. Sasori
had rigged the launch of the kunai so that there would be painful criss-cross cuts across the victim's skin, the wounds on Deidara's arms and legs being testimony of that.

"Looks like I've drawn first blood," Sasori said, massaging his jaw as they stood apart from each other. "You've been extremely troublesome, blowing up one of my puppets like that... You're lucky I don't normally carry with me more than two at a time."

"Heh..." Deidara grinned, her teeth red as she wiped the blood dribbling from her nose away. "Does that piss you off? Exploding one of your precious puppets with my art? I've told you before, my art is superior."

"And yet, you are the one bleeding out onto the Uchiha training grounds, not me." An irk mark appeared on his forehead. "And yes, I'm damn pissed. Do you have any idea how long it takes to build one from scratch, brat?"

"I'm glad that you're angry." She shifted into a stance, ignoring the blood dripping down from her cuts. "That makes me extremely happy, you know. Now why don't we prove whose art is superior once and for all?"

Sasori sneered at her. "You'll be calling me Danna after this."

Gai coughed into his fist, a slight blush adorning his cheeks from the implication. "How youthful their rivalry is!

They gave him no verbal response, Deidara answering by dashing toward Sasori, only for her punches to be blocked by his puppet's. Her chakra flared through her body, and she cracked through the puppet armor, making Sasori frown.

Deidara's hand disappeared into her sleeve before reappearing with pre-molded clay between her fingers. "Ready to fight me on your own? I'll destroy your other dummy if I have to."

"It wouldn't be a battle of art if I were to do so," Sasori pointed out, floating his puppet beside him like it was a shinigami. The thing was larger than he himself, and had a face worthy of nightmares.

"True, un. Take solace that it'll be probably be going out with a bang."

Their battle resumed once more, Deidara alternating between hand-to-hand combat with the puppet master and trying to destroy his annoying puppet with her clay.

"You have excellent chakra control," Sasori remarked as he blocked Deidara's fist. "You could do a lot more with that clay than just explosions."

"Yeah, but..." Deidara broke through his defense, forcing him to leap a few steps backwards. "There's nothing artful about that. Because art...!" Sasori held up his forearms just in time to shield his body from Deidara's heavy blow. "Is a bang! Katsu!"

"What—"

There was an explosion that engulfed Sasori, and smoke billowed out. When the smoke dispersed, Sasori was still standing, albeit glaring with cuts and burns littering his body. "What the hell did you do?"

"I'm creative," Deidara replied, a smirk on her face. "When you told me that I could do a lot more than explosions, I improvised, un. Created a thin clay armor on my fists that I spread onto your clothing in small chunks every time I made contact with you."
Sasori's gaze darkened. "I see." Jaw rattling, his puppet flew toward Deidara, blades at the ready, but though she was wounded, she was still agile enough to dodge them without risking further injury.

"You're slower, un," she taunted. "I'm not the only one who's 'bleeding out onto the training grounds' now, am I?"

"You'll be bleeding a whole lot more when I'm done with you, you insufferable brat."

More blades appeared on the puppet, these ones curved like a person's rib cage, and swung mercilessly at Deidara, who had to run up a tree at the edge of the field to escape the puppet's wrath. She jumped backward as the puppet twisted around and continued to attack her. She scowled when the tip of a blade nicked her. She was tiring quickly thanks to the wounds she had gotten earlier in the fight, and she would lose if she didn't do something quick.

_Dammit!_ she cursed inwardly, having to backflip unsteadily to dodge one particularly fast moving blade. More clay emerged from the mouths on her hands, and she threw them at the wooden behemoth, turning her attention on Sasori, who had shifted his stance in preparation.

Deidara could feel his chakra probing at her body, testing if she had anymore of that clay armor on her hands. _I shouldn't have told him... shit, I'm so screwed._ Satisfied that she was clean, he defended himself, their blood mixing as they fought hard and fast.

Perhaps it was the heat of the battle that got to him, but Sasori was no longer dividing any time to attacking with his real body and attacking with his puppet. His puppet lay strewn on the ground, useless, as he fully engaged with Deidara, who hadn't noticed what he'd done just yet.

"Deidara," Sasori said as he swept her feet out from under her, his eyes never leaving her as she got up instantly. Both of them were breathing heavily. "You should pay more attention to your surroundings."

Her gaze sharpened. "You—" She hissed when something sharp sliced across the back of her right shoulder, sending a spray of blood flying through the air. Muttering curses, she involuntarily fell to her knees. _The puppet! Shit!_

"It's over," Sasori declared.

"Fuck... it's not." Deidara glared up at him, her eyes cloudy with pain. A chill went down her spine when she felt the cold blade of Sasori's puppet resting on her neck.

"Yes, it is, brat. You fought well. It's time to give up."

"Asshole..." She bared her bloodied teeth at him.

"I think you mean 'Danna'."

"Oh, sorry," she bit out sarcastically. "Forgive me for my insolence, Danna."

A muscle twitched in Sasori's jaw. _On second thoughts, it doesn't sound as good as I thought it would, especially coming from her mouth._ "I changed my mind. Don't call me that."

"Get a healer over here, Danna, and we'll see." Deidara buckled underneath her own weight, and Sasori caught her before she could hit the ground. It would do her no good for her to get even dirtier than she already was, what, with those injuries and all. He looked up and saw Gai running toward them. His puppet lay on the ground, forgotten.
"That was a youthful battle!" Gai proclaimed. "But for now, it would be extremely unyouthful for you two to stay out here and bleed! Come into the house—Obito has gone to get a healer. Well done, you two. The power of youth runs through your veins!"

As Gai chattered on about how great they'd been while helping Deidara and Sasori walk painstakingly back into the house, Deidara hummed, the sound nasally thanks to the blood clogging her nose. "You know, I think I'll stick with calling you 'Danna' from now on, un." She smirked at Sasori, knowing how much it irritated him and enjoying every moment of it because of that. "It has a nice ring to it, don't you think, Danna?"

"By calling me that, you're admitting that my art is superior to yours," Sasori told her, scowling.

"Nonsense, un. It just means that I respect your art because you bested me in battle. Your puppets still have nothing against my explosions."

"Tch. Think what you like, brat."

Both of them flinched when Gai began to cry, tears rolling down his cheeks in comical waves. "The senpai and the kohai! Master and apprentice! How youthful this relationship is!"

"I am not her master!" Sasori snapped, wincing when he felt the large burn on his cheek throb with a vengeance.

"Like hell I'd ever be this guy's apprentice!" Deidara added indignantly.

Gai sat Sasori on a stool and laid Deidara on a spare futon in the drawing room, hastily collecting towels. Shisui came to relieve him from all the work, having left Daichi to perform his katas until he perfected them.

"You two seriously messed each other up," Shisui said as he dabbed at Sasori's wounds with a wet cloth, Gai doing the same for Deidara. "I mean, I get that you're rivals in art and all, but man!"

Obito arrived soon with the healer in tow—a pink-haired woman with the brightest green eyes any of them had ever seen. She was wearing the traditional healer grab: a white outer garment with gold highlights. When she removed the cloak and hung it on a nearby chair, it revealed that she wore a plain red yukata underneath.

"This is Haruno-sama, one of the best healers in the city," Obito briefly introduced. "She'll be taking care of you two."

The woman bowed. "Nice to meet all of you. Please call me Sakura-san. --sama was used to refer to my shishou."

Obito gave her a friendly smile. "Tsunade-sama from the north, right?"

"Right." Sakura returned the smile before getting straight to work. "Medical jutsu is classified as a very rare kekkei genkai—once I heal you, you'll feel brand new." She gave Sasori and Deidara a look. "However, I don't want you two fighting or training for at least a few days. It wouldn't do to have your body undergo immense strain after just being healed."

"Doctors," Deidara muttered, while Sasori made a noise that sounded like begrudging agreement. Either to Deidara's remark or Sakura's orders, nobody was sure.

"Yeah, well, this doctor is about to save your life," Sakura said in a clipped tone. "Now don't move..."
The healing process took about fifteen minutes thanks to the intensity of Sasori's burns and how deep the gash on Deidara's back was.

"Don't sit up so soon!" Sakura admonished when Deidara attempted to do just that.

"My joints are stiff, un," Deidara complained.

"Just give your body five minutes to adjust," huffed Sakura. "Please," she added as an afterthought, evaluating her bedside manner in her head. At least she wasn't as bad as her master yet.

Yet.

A servant hurried to them, bowing hastily. "Obito-sama, Sasuke-sama is at the door."

Deidara's mood soured. Sasuke again? She hadn't seen him since the Hoshigaki-Uzumaki fiasco a few weeks ago, and had hoped to keep it that way. That boy had a stick so far up his ass, it was messing with his brain as well.

"Oh, right on time," Obito said. "Let him in. He's supposed to be teaching Daichi how to use a gun."

"Excuse me," Sakura interrupted. "Is this the same Sasuke as the Chief of Police's son?"

"Indeed he is," Shisui said. "Hey, Gai, you might want to step aside before my cousin tries to arrest you... again."

"But I'm not disturbing the public this time!" protested Gai. "I wasn't even disturbing the public last time."

"You threw a chicken at an old lady," Shisui pointed out.

"Just a minor accident. Happens to the best of us."

"So it is that Sasuke," Sakura sighed sadly before steeling her eyes. "Stupid jerk..."

"Can I sit up now?" Deidara said loudly. "Danna—Sasori's already gone to get his ugly puppet."

"Hm? Oh, yes, you can, but take it easy. He really roughed you up."

Deidara grimaced, sitting up and popped the joints in her shoulders and neck. "Got history with Duck-Ass?"

Sakura blinked. "Duck-ass?"

"Y'know... because his hair looks like a duck's ass, un."

Sakura held a hand over her mouth, snickering. "Oh my god, you're right! Now that I think about it..."

Sasuke strode into the room with Obito, looking thunderous as always. At the same time, Sasori returned from his venture outside, carrying his storage scroll in his hand.

He glanced at all of them once, eyebrow cocked, before going to the training field to meet Daichi.

"He could have said hi," Sakura grumbled. She turned to face them all. "You two should be fine now, so I'll take my leave. And don't strain yourselves!"
Sasori and Deidara exchanged a glance before the latter smirked.

"Oh, we won't," Deidara said. "Right, Danna?"

His wrist flicked, and there was suddenly a blade sticking out of Obito's table—the kunai had barely missed Deidara's nose.

"See? He agrees, un."

"That was a gift from my grandmother," Obito piped up, only to be ignored.

Sakura gave them a dry look. "Might not want to do that in front of a medic next time."

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"Daichi! Over here!"

Sarutobi Konohamaru was waving at Daichi in an invitation to join him, Naruto, and a few others at the table. It was lunchtime, and the orphans at the cotton mill were on their break.

"How's your training going?" Konohamaru asked when Daichi took a seat next to him. There were plates of skewers in front of them—from the smell of it, there were once fish balls stuck the sticks. Naruto was devouring his fifth bowl of ramen while Moegi and Udon were picking at their teeth with toothpicks. Ever since Daichi had started training with his father and Shisui—one half of the Big 4—the orphans had started to tentatively approach him. Daichi knew that prior to starting his new training regimen as a taijutsu user, they had thought little of him, especially since he was their boss' son and heir to the company—a boy set up for life while they had to work for their meals. But they showed interest in him now, and he wasn't about to pass up the chance for new friends.

"It's cool, I guess," Daichi said, trying to downplay everything. But when Yamanaka Ino and Yamanaka Hitomi showed up at the cotton mill slash tea house for tea, Daichi raised his voice. "I'm learning all sorts of new things, like how to slice a man in half five different ways!"

"Uhh," Moegi said, tilting her head to one side. "Is that possible?"

"How can you slice someone in half in five different ways?" Udon wondered, rubbing his nose to chase away a sniffle. "I thought there was only one way, 'cause, y'know," he sliced his arm downward, "this is the only way that you can have matching halves. Symmetry is very important."

Out of the corner of his eye, Daichi saw Hitomi turn away from them. "Uhh..."

It turned out that Naruto was a lot more perceptive than he let on at times. His eyes gleamed. "Oh, I see what's going on here!"

Daichi gulped. "You do?"

"You like her!"

"Not so loud!" Daichi hissed.

"Who, Hitomi?" Konohamaru scowled. "She's pretty and all... but she's a snob. Like her sister. And isn't she younger than you?"

"Oi, Ino isn't that bad," Naruto defended. "She can't help being born rich, y'know. And she's not a snob!"
"Only by two years," argued Daichi. "And she's very mature for her age."

The orphans all watched Hitomi throw a tantrum because the lady serving tea had accidentally spilled a very minuscule drop on the girl's doll. Ino was trying to get her to calm down, looking frazzled when Hitomi grabbed her cup of tea and threatened to hurl it at an innocent patron.

"Are we talking about the same girl?" Moegi wondered, voicing everyone's thoughts.

Daichi grew indignant on Hitomi's part. "Hey!"

"We're calling it like we see it," Udon said, Konohamaru and Naruto nodding once in agreement.

"Oi, you guys!" A girl who wore her chocolate brown hair in twin buns was waving at them. "Break time's over! We have to get back to work. Lee can't spin the cotton wheel himself, you know."

"Coming, Tenten!" Naruto called back. "See ya, Daichi. Show us some of your new moves next time. And that sword you use to cut people in half, too!"

The younger orphans all voiced their agreement and Daichi sweatdropped nervously.

*I haven't learnt any cool moves so far*! Daichi thought miserably. *I shouldn't have said anything about cutting people in half...* A shadow loomed over him and Daichi looked up backward, his eyes meeting Sasuke's. "O-oh, hey, Sasuke-sama..."

"Daichi." Sasuke scoffed. "I bet you're regretting showing off so much, huh? Especially to a dobe like Naruto."

"Yeah..." Daichi sighed, plopping his chin on his open palms. "I just wanted them to like me."

"What's the point of that? You're going to be their boss in the future. They're your future subordinates, nothing more."

"But...! I want to be friends with them. I don't have that many friends, y'know."

Sasuke made a noncommittal noise. "Daichi, I know I put a lot of emphasis on guns and modern weapons, but..." His coal gaze slid to Daichi. "I also put great value in the art of kenjutsu."

"Huh?" Daichi blinked. "You mean like swords and stuff? Like Hoshigaki-sama?"

"Exactly, though our styles are nothing alike." Sasuke took out his katana from the holster with a *shiing*! "Daichi... what do you say about learning kenjutsu? I can't teach you how to cut a man in half five different ways—because, frankly, that's impossible and you're an idiot for ever suggesting the notion—but I can teach you how to gut an opponent and *twist* in just the right way so that his intestines are shredded."

Daichi's eyes grew wider. "When can we start?"

Sasuke stood. "Tomorrow, first light. Do not be late. If there's one thing I don't tolerate from a student, it's tardiness." Daichi didn't know why but Sasuke pinned his harsh stare on the silver-haired man that worked at the kite shop.

Seemingly oblivious, Kakashi yawned underneath his mask and flipped to the next page of his orange book.
A/N: I wanted to build more relationships before the invasion, so there.
Chapter Summary

Orochimaru comes to party, but gets spanked by Itachi after being a major dick.

Sasuke shows up at the most dramatic times I swear, and never does anything that useful, like the action cop that takes all the credit after the heroes have defeated the villain. I intentionally made him like this, but he gets some more screentime during the wartimes which shine a light on his behavior.

This is the last happy chapter and a lot of time has passed since the first chapter, if you've been following along the months you'd notice.

The war begins. Meaning things go to hell for everyone next chapter.

Summer gave way to autumn quicker than anyone expected, and Izumi’s belly grew rounder every day. Itachi had halted his training for the meantime to care for her, despite the insistence of the nurse maid that she was just as competent, if not more. The money that he had given to Obito was put to good use—the elder Uchiha had expanded his factory and made a new sector dedicated to thread-spinners. They were currently undergoing training to use the factory equipment, and some of the orphans had been rotated to thread-spinning as well to balance out the numbers.

Chiyo’s Chicken Rice shop was as busy as ever, and, more often that not, Sasori found himself donning a pink apron and serving hungry customers at his grandmother’s restaurant, which was located in the martial arts district, nearby the Nohara-Uchiha dango shop. Sometimes, Deidara came in for the sole purpose of annoying him. Sasori did not take well to it, but since she always made sure she was a paying customer, Chiyo refused to ban her from the store. Well, at least her company wasn't always unpleasant, especially after a long day of bitter old men complaining that they'd seen a cockroach in their tea. (Sasori had personally poured that tea himself and there as hell weren't any damn cockroaches).

"You know, Danna, you should consider making pink your permanent color, un."

"I will if you dye your hair to match."

"I'm an artist, not insane."

Akatsuki was thriving as the leaves fell to make way for the coming winter, and Naruto found that he was able to afford another kite since his old fox one had been damaged when he dropped it in the sewer by accident.

"I'm just a few short!" Naruto persisted in pestering Kakashi, who looked like he needed a pair of earplugs right then and there. "Come on, Kakashi-senpai—"

"I have to make a living, too, you know," Kakashi replied calmly, keeping his eyes on his book.

"I eat plain ramen for breakfast, lunch, and dinner!" Naruto whined, pulling the sympathy card.

"So? You love ramen."
"Kakashi!"

Kakashi smiled underneath his mask, not missing the way Naruto had dropped the honorific. "I can't give you one you want... but I do have a kite that's within your budget. Deal?"

"Well..." Naruto looked back at Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon, who were sitting at their usual table and looking over expectantly. "Oh, fine. But only because my kohais want to play and I have to be a good senpai, dattebayo."

"Pleasure doing business with you, then!" Kakashi chirped, and the coins disappeared into his pocket. "Now, let's see, where was it..."

When Naruto received his kite, he was bitterly disappointed. "What the hell, Kakashi?! It looks like the same paper I wipe my ass with!"

"Sorry, no refunds," Kakashi said, his eyes curving upward as he smiled like the troll he was. "Have fun! Ah, youth..."

"KAKASHI! I'll tell your boss!"

No one had ever seen Kakashi's 'boss' before (or co-owner, according to Kakashi), and many suspected that there was no boss or co-owner to begin with, and that Hatake Kakashi was just being a major troll.

Naruto, however, had yet to come to that conclusion.

"Go ahead, Naruto," Kakashi said nonchalantly. "He came this morning."

"Dammit! I missed him again?!"

"Mm. Tough luck, eh, Naruto?"

Grumbling, Naruto left with his new kite, half-complaining and half-apologizing to Konohamaru and his gang for the kite's poor craftsmanship. Kakashi relaxed his posture, slumping into his chair and putting his legs up on the counter. As he was about to delve into the magical world of Icha Icha, a woman approached his shop, her hands folded around her heavily pregnant belly.

"Kakashi-san!" Izumi beamed at him. "Good afternoon!"

"Ah, Izumi-san." Kakashi's feet returned to the floor, nearly sweeping off some old newspapers off the counter as he straightened in his seat. "How are you? Are you holding up well?"

Izumi gave him a lovely, but weary smile. "I'm doing fine, Kakashi-san. Well, as fine as I can be, anyway. I haven't been out in so long—since the baby's due in three months, Itachi's been swaddling me." She rolled her eyes. "I appreciate the effort, but it's wholly unnecessary. It's like he forgets that he trained me in his Amaterasu as well. And should that fail me, I always have the Uchiha Style to fall back on."

"Men," Kakashi said, clicking his tongue, earning a laugh from Izumi.

"How odd it sounds coming from you," she remarked. "Anyway, Kakashi-san, I'm enjoying the chat, but I actually came here for something. I heard from a friend that this is the best place to buy children's toys."

"Well, I'm not saying that it's the best, but it's the best."
Izumi grinned wryly. "Of course, Kakashi-san." She eyed the shelves behind him, which were filled with all sorts of knick-knacks, including kites, lanterns, spinning tops, bouncy balls, and some of Deidara's clay sculptures. "Hmm... Anything you would recommend for a toddler?"

Kites were out of the question, obviously, until the unborn child was able to walk without falling over. But those clay sculptures of Deidara's were pretty cute, and there were a few without sharp edges. She had taken the liberty to paint them as well, and their beautiful colors were sure to brighten up a child's day. So Kakashi took a couple off the shelf and placed them on the counter, allowing Izumi to examine them herself. As she did, coming back to the tengu one more than once, Kakashi also added a spinning top and a red rubber ball to the mix.

Izumi seemed to be torn between the tengu and a fox, and Kakashi was about to recommend one or the other when a voice whispered into Izumi's ear, "I suggest taking both, un."

"Ah!" Izumi whipped around, and Deidara stepped back so that their heads wouldn't bash together. Immediately, she perked up, placing the sculptures back on the counter to grab Deidara's hands. "Deidara! Am I right or am I right when I say that you made those?"

"Hmm.. the latter, un." Kakashi's eyebrows lifted into his hairline. So, I'm guessing that this is the 'friend' that recommended Izumi to come here? Makes sense, considering some of the clay figurines go to Deidara. I didn't even know that they were friends...

"The tengu is so cute!" Izumi gushed, holding up the figurine. "But so is the fox...!"

"Hey, you're rich and I'm not," Deidara reminded her, hooking one arm around her shoulders. "Take both so I can eat tonight, un."

"I concur," Kakashi added. "I am but a poor man in the face of the independently wealthy like you, Uchiha-sama..."

"Oh, stop it, both of you! If it makes you happy, I'll buy both. Also, the carving of the deer up there and the rubber ball, please." Izumi took her purse out and began to rummage through it for the appropriate amount of money.

"Great!" Kakashi clapped his hands together.

"Nice choice, un. Why don't you buy another one?"

"Good try, Deidara, but you might want to work on your persuasive skills a little more," Izumi chided as she handed Kakashi the money.

The blonde woman shrugged. "Worth a try. Wanna get lunch with me at Danna's?"

When Izumi had first heard Deidara refer to Sasori as 'Danna', she had automatically assumed the worse, only to be left blushing in embarrassment when Deidara hurriedly revealed that it was nothing like she was thinking. Apparently, Sasori found the term to be irritating, which fueled Deidara's insistence on calling him that. Sasori didn't really show much ire toward it anymore, however, and Deidara suspected that he'd just grown used to it. And so had she. Not calling him Danna was just plain weird now.

"Sure, I have time. Thanks for everything, Kakashi-san."

After bidding Kakashi goodbye, the two women made their way down to the martial arts district,
where loud, enthusiastic kiais could be heard as the masters of each school located there drilled their students.

Rin was working at the dango shop today, and she waved at them as they walked past.

"Danna!" Deidara said cheerily as they strolled into Chiyo's Chicken Rice. "Got any seats?"

Sasori, who was bent over a table to place a cup of tea in front of an elderly woman, nodded, and Izumi could clearly see how familiar that they'd become with each other. "Back corner. I'll wipe it down for you. And you'd better not stick a dango you dropped on the floor under the table again."

A small blush appeared on her cheeks. "That was one time! And I was going to take it off, but I forgot..."

He snorted. "Just don't make a mess, brat." Sasori's gaze flickered to Izumi, and he dipped his head in polite greeting. "Izumi-san."

Izumi gave him a small wave. "Hi, Sasori-san. Umm, nice apron."

Deidara suppressed a snicker, and Sasori gave a long-suffering sigh. "Thank you, Izumi-san."

As the two sat down at their allocated table, they picked up bits and pieces of conversation going around the shop. Most of it was about the economy, and how good it was.

"Akatsuki's future looks bright," said a middle-aged man to his brother. "Did you hear that the Nohara-Uchiha family have expanded their business? Apparently, Itachi-sama is an investor. But that's just a rumor..."

"Really? That's pretty amazing," said his brother. "Any idea what they've done with it?"

"They're going to be making clothes instead of just fabrics and raw cotton."

"The Yamanakas have a hand in the thread-spinning business, too," a gossipy old woman said to her equally gossipy friend, their prune-y lips painted a bright red. "The heiress—Yamanaka Ino—is good with mending, and has entered into an apprenticeship under the head thread-spinner."

"Yamanaka Ino? But she's rich!"

"I know. But she hangs out with ruffians, like that Uzumaki boy."

"The one who ruined Hoshigaki-sama's name?"

"Yes, that one."

"How did that get out?" Izumi whispered to Deidara, frowning slightly. "Itachi didn't want anyone to know about his involvement. He likes to keep a low profile." She pursed her lips. "The only person I told was you and Rin. Perhaps someone overheard. I should really be more careful..."

"It's fine, un," Deidara reassured her. "It wouldn't hurt for Itachi to gain a little recognition for all the things he does. He's actually pretty involved in the community, un."

"Well, I guess not." Izumi patted her belly. "I hope nothing bad comes of it. We already have our hands full with the little one, and he hasn't even been born yet!"

"How do you know it's a he?"
"Gut instinct." Izumi winked at her. "You'll know the feeling when you enter pregnancy, Deidara."

The blonde woman shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not even sure if I want to have kids. Especially with how Rin described the childbirth part..."

Izumi gave her a sympathetic glance. "Oh, she gave me the same talk. I think she just takes joy in scaring her juniors because it asserts her status as a more experienced woman."

"Geez, she must have a lot of time on her hands, un."

Sasori appeared just then, putting all end to baby talk as he placed a plate of half a whole chicken, ginger and shallot, and two bowls of ginger rice down on the table, each thing attached to a chakra string.

"Aw, you know what I want," Deidara said with a smirk. "I didn't realize you thought of me that often, Danna."

Sasori raised an eyebrow. "You do realize that this is the only thing we serve besides tea, right?"

She waved a hand at him. "Same difference, un."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Training ground behind Obito's house again?"

"Three o'clock," Sasori confirmed before leaving.

Izumi blinked slowly. "Okay... What was that?"

Deidara shrugged. "Ever since he beat me bloody in a fight, we've been using each other as sparring partners and measuring sticks almost every day. So far, he's ahead of me, but that's only because he's been doing this longer than me, un." Her eyes burned vehemently. "I nearly beat him last time! I didn't see him sit down for a week."

"I recall that you were avoiding chairs around the same time," Sasori said as he walked past with another plate of chicken for another customer, having overheard her.

"It wasn't fair only you to had to stand up, un." Deidara grinned, her teeth sharp. Then she turned back to Izumi. "After the kid's born, wanna spar? I've gotten better, you know."

Izumi sweatdropped. "I only won last time because Itachi spent hours training me in that move."

But she brightened at the challenge. "But sure, why not? It's been a while that I've been able to train, let alone fight, so go easy on me, okay?"

"Like hell," Deidara said, leaning back into her chair. "If I did that, I doubt that there'd be much left of me."

"Hey, hey! Don't play your abilities down so much. My only advantage against you is my Amaterasu. My sharingan never activated, remember?"

As the two females kept each other company in the restaurant (and by extension, Sasori as well), a group of individuals dressed in unfamiliar fighting robes were ambling down the street. The symbols that they wore on the back of their clothing was foreign as well, but those well-read would be able to distinguish them as warriors from a northern country—Otogakure.

"Ehh," the only female in the group muttered, chewing on a senbon in her mouth. "So this is the
heart of southern taijutsu? Doesn't look like much."

"Can it, Kin," the leader barked.

"Tsk. Sorry, Akado-sama."

The five martial artists were well known in Otogakure, Akado Yoroi being the confident leader and Tsurugi Misumi being his second-in-command. The remaining three were Tsuchi Kin, Abumi Zaku, and Kinuta Dosu. They were quite powerful in their own right—they had to be if they were being trained by the ruthless Yoroi.

"Hey." Yoroi tapped a passing man. "Do you know where we can find the martial arts district?"

"Huh? Oh, just go straight and turn left. You can't miss it—they're pretty loud."

"Right."

The man went on his way, and Zaku muttered something about "getting the friendly on with the locals" but shut up when Misumi sent a half-glance his way. The passerby had been correct when giving them directions, as they arrived at the martial arts district in no time at all. Trailing behind the five foreigners was a long-haired man wearing a large straw hat that shadowed his facial features.

In the Akatsuki town square, all four taijutsu masters with a school were training their pupils outside their respective dojos. Kisame had the least amount of people training thanks to the smear on his name; the other three—Obito, Hyuuga Hiashi, and Akimichi Choza—had an ample amount.

Striding confidently, Yoroi and his disciples (and Misumi) approached the nearest master—Hyuuga Hiashi. The man raised a perfectly arched brow when he noticed Yoroi.

"Can I help you?" Hiashi inquired.

"You teach martial arts here?" Yoroi demanded.

Hiashi, not appreciating the tone very much, pursed his lips. "Yes. Why, do you wish to learn?"

Yoroi smirked infuriatingly. "Who's the master?"

"I am."

Yoroi put his fist into his open hand, Hiashi reluctantly returning the gesture. "My name is Yoroi. I come here as Akatsuki is famous for its martial arts. I am a master of the Hidden Snake. I'd like to test our style against Akatsuki's martial artists."

Hiashi stepped back from him, a sneer on his face. "Practice?"

"Yes."

"Tch. Provocation, rather... Stand aside!" Hiashi whipped around to his pupils. "This a battle between masters. Come."

"Oh, it's not me you'll be fighting," Yoroi said casually, and the group of foreigners parted to allow a man with long hair and a large straw hat to pass. "Wouldn't it be better..."

The man removed his hat.
"... To fight the grandmaster of the Hidden Snake, Orochimaru-sama?" Yoroi finished, bowing to his own master, his disciples following suit.

People began to murmur, and Choza, who had gone to get a snack while his disciples practiced, pushed his way out of the gate of his dojo. "What's the matter?" he asked one of his students.

"Orochimaru-sama," Hiashi repeated with a grimace. "One of the famous Sannin, I see... No matter. I'll send you back to the north with your tail between your legs."

Orochimaru's chuckle was raspy. "We shall see, Hyuuga-sama..."

The two men stood apart from one another, Orochimaru with his arms crossed and Hiashi making a quick display of his prowess with the Gentle Fist before moving into his own stance. Orochimaru uncrossed his arms.

The wind blew dust across the square as the crowd watched with bated breath. In the chicken rice shop, Deidara and Izumi glanced outside, curious as to what was happening. Sasori stopped midway to his customer's table to watch as well.

The Hyuuga struck first, gracefully and silently with open palm strikes. But Orochimaru deflected them all effortlessly, and Hiashi was barely able to block the strong kick that went his way. Grimacing, Hiashi tried again, but Orochimaru fought harder and faster, and was able to parry each and every blow. Then he spun and kicked backward, his foot landing on the Hyuuga's sternum, and forcing him back. While Hiashi was down, Orochimaru took no chances—like a snake in the grass, he bit his prey (not in the literal sense). Everyone winced as Orochimaru kicked Hiashi across the face, sending him tumbling away. But Hiashi used his momentum to force himself up, just in time to block another one of Orochimaru's devastating kicks.

Normally, the civilians would be roused by a taijutsu battle.

But nobody seemed to be enjoying the mostly one-sided fight. Hiashi's ankle was compromised when Orochimaru planted his heel into it, and used his other leg to strike Hiashi up the chin, stretching his neck painfully.

The fight continued until Hiashi dragged Orochimaru to the dusty ground with him, and slapped his foot against the pale man's cheek. Hissing, Orochimaru turned his body in the dirt, using a leg to repeat the same move to Hiashi, only much harder.

There was a loud crack.

Hiashi's cheekbone had been fractured at the very least. He was slower to get up, and slower to hit, something that Orochimaru used to his advantage. He dodged all of Hiashi's open palm strikes, before sending a closed fist his way and punching Hiashi brutally across the face.

The Hyuuga patriarch flew backward with a snapping noise, falling harshly onto the ground, dust settling onto his clothes.

"Very good, Orochimaru-sama!" Yoroi praised like some kind of overzealous fanboy.

The crowd was silent. Nobody clapped for Orochimaru's win. They simply stared as Hiashi was helped up by his students. Ignoring the Hyuuga, Orochimaru set his sights on his next opponent, Akimichi Choza, completely oblivious to Obito's vengeful glare.

This man was a snake. He fought with no honor.
"Where do you think you're going?" Chiyo demanded when she caught Sasori trying to leave the shop. "I know there's excitement going on out there, but you mustn't interfere." She glanced at Deidara over Izumi's head. "That goes for you as well. This a matter of honor and pride."

"I know, un," Deidara ground out. "But..."

"You feel useless just sitting there," Chiyo acknowledged. "As do you, Sasori. Are you two going to challenge him?"

"No," Sasori answered for both of them, ignoring Deidara's outraged expression. "He's obviously considered the best of the north if he is a grandmaster." Sasori's eyes sharpened. "The best deserves the best, wouldn't you agree?"

Deidara narrowed her eyes. "What the hell are you up to?"

Izumi bit her lip. The best of the best? Does... does he mean...?

Chiyo seemed to catch on. "I see. I like it when you use your brain."

Sasori sniffed. "I always use my brain, baa-sama. If I didn't, I wouldn't be alive right now."

"You didn't use to," Chiyo said vaguely, shaking her head.

Deidara had caught on as well, but she wasn't a happy camper about it. She was still sore about the loss she had suffered at the hands of that supposed pacifist the other week. "Fine," she said begrudgingly. "But the only reason I'm letting this slide is because I want to see snake-boy's ass kicked, un. Very, very thoroughly."

Neither of them could do that, they knew. Hiashi was one of their best, yet Orochimaru had made the Hyuuga his plaything. Sasori and Deidara would only stand a chance if they faced him together, something that they weren't willing to do just yet for a number of reasons.

Outside, they could hear the flurry of more fists—the sound of Orochimaru engaging Choza in battle. The rotund man was far hardier than Hiashi, who focused more on precision and lethal or debilitating attacks, and the Akimichi taijutsu style was mostly centered around raw power and beating your enemy into submission with your fists. It lacked the discipline the Gentle Fist had, and while it was effective in its own way, it would not work against a grandmaster like Orochimaru, who had speed, agility, and sheer force on his side. The Hidden Snake was truly a formidable style.

From their position, Sasori, Izumi, Deidara, and Chiyo saw Choza slide across the cobblestone on his stomach painfully. Then he was still—knocked out by a blow to the temple.

Kisame had it no better—refusing to take out his Samehada for a simple spar was his downfall. Had the chakra-eater been present, he might have been victorious. But his defeat was more graceful than the others, simply standing up and brushing himself off to save face before limping back to his dojo. More slander on his name would do him no good.

Deidara's lip curled. "Obito's next, un. Can the Uchiha Style stand up to the Hidden Snake...?"

Sasori sat down next to her. All the customers were busy staring outside, just like them. "I doubt it. Obito may be a master... but the you can tell from the way he moves that the northerner is in a league of his own."

"Well, shit, un. I suspected as much..."
"You dare?" Obito was snarling in a rare display of anger. "Your taijutsu is unique and formidable... but there is no honor in the way you fight."

"Honor?" Orochimaru hissed. "And who are you to speak to me about honor, boy?" His tongue swiped over his lips. "Regardless... you're the south's last chance. Tsk, it seems like no one here can defend themselves, let alone fight..."

"You bastard!" Obito rushed at him, backed up by years of intensive training in the Uchiha Style. The heats of all watching beat quickly as the two danced around each other, Orochimaru putting the Uchiha on the defensive.

"Hang in there, Obito-sama!" some were shouting. "We're depending on you!"

Obito fought bravely.

But it wasn't enough.

He went down with a blow to the head.

"OBITO!" Rin burst through the crowd as soon as the match was over, having not been allowed to interfere. She bared her teeth at the Sannin as she crouched over her husband. "You sick fuck. Get the hell out of my sight!"

Orochimaru clicked his tongue. "I can respect a wife's duties. Come." He turned his back on them and walked to Chiyo's Chicken Rice, his team trailing close behind him.

"How did you know he was coming here?" Izumi wondered, staring at Sasori. She'd been pondering how Sasori would get into contact with Orochimaru without leaving the store.

"He can't keep his eyes to himself," Sasori said shortly. "It was obvious. And from the state of their clothes, they've been travelling on the road for a while now. This is the only restaurant in the vicinity that's not a sweet shop. It's only natural that he would come here."

And he was right. Because ten minutes later, Orochimaru and his gang were all seated in the restaurant and gnawing on the bones of their chicken, their rice bowls empty.

"No one in Akatsuki knows any martial arts at all!" Zaku laughed obnoxiously.

"I thought everyone was supposed to be good," Yoroi added. "Turns out that they were all just bums."

"They can't even fight or defend themselves," Kin said, practically quoting Orochimaru. "Looks like we'll be raking in the money pretty soon..."

"Indeed," Orochimaru chuckled. "My martial arts club will be the most popular in the south."

Sasori scoffed as he picked up their empty plates and bowls, eyeing the leader. "You think you're so tough after beating a few nitwits?" *Forgive me, Obito.* "Wait till you beat the best, then you can talk." He turned to leave, but Orochimaru, who had narrowed his eyes, called after him.

"And just who is the best? You? Her perhaps?" The snake-man pointed his chopsticks toward Deidara, who was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed, Izumi standing awkwardly beside her with her pregnant belly.

"Oh, no," Sasori answered. "We're good. Better than your lackeys at any rate, and strong enough to
kill you if time permits. But he's better. Better than all of us."

"Who is it?" Yoroi snapped. "Tell us already."

Sasori smirked. "Why, Uchiha Itachi, of course." He left them gaping, and heard Orochimaru mutter, "Go."

"Anata!" Izumi burst through the doors, where her husband was sitting on the lounge with a cup of tea, unwinding after an afternoon of training. "There's a man—a grandmaster—who is coming over here right now to fight you." Her eyes flashed indignantly. "He has done nothing but insult us, including Obito. Anata... I know this is sudden, but you're Akatsuki's last chance."

Itachi listened to all this in silence, the only sound being the clinking of his cup against the table. "Who is he?"

"Orochimaru of the Sannin. From the north."

Itachi nodded, standing. "I see. Izumi—"

"I know." She took his hands and kissed him. "I'll be safe in the other room. Try not to break anything."

Izumi vacated the hall just in time. The front doors flew open and a huge crowd of people—mostly civilians who had come to watch the final showdown between south and north—led by a pale-skinned man with long hair streamed into his house.

His poor manners did not impress Itachi. One did not simply storm into a private estate without any warning.

He knew that Orochimaru and he would not get along the moment the snake pushed his servant out of the way.

"Itachi-sama," Orochimaru greeted eagerly, if not impatiently. "I have heard great things about you. You are a master in Amaterasu, a deviation of the Uchiha Style, correct? I am Orochimaru-sama, founder of the Hidden Snake."

Good lord, Itachi thought exasperatedly, his hand twitching as if he wished to strangle the other man for his insufferable monologue. It's like Kisame all over again. The key difference being that Kisame at least tried to be polite.

Orochimaru opened his mouth to speak again, but Itachi held up a hand.

"That's enough," he said. "From the looks of you bringing so many people with you, you're after a duel with me."

"Of course." Orochimaru saw no reason to deny truth from them anymore. "I intend to open a successful martial arts club. I've heard that you are the best, and it's only logical for me to test my prowess against you."

"Is that so?" Itachi raised an eyebrow calmly. "If you want to open a martial arts club... you have no need to fight me. Just find a good place to open."

"Don't be ridiculous." Orochimaru narrowed his eyes. "You have every intention to fight me. I can
see it in your eyes."

"Can you, now?"

They stared challengingly at one another, and the crowd began to clamour in anticipation, urging Itachi to fight and defend the southern martial arts. While the Uchiha liked to keep a relatively low profile compared to other taijutsu users like the masters of the four schools or the Big 4, his reputation as a formidable fighter was well-spread. None had ever seen him in action before, but they trusted the city gossip.

Itachi stepped aside. "Then by all means, come in. The rest of you, please stay outside."

Satisfied by his compliance, Orochimaru and his team strode inside after Itachi. Despite his clear instructions, the crowd followed as well, though most remained outside since there wasn't enough space for everyone.

"Out of the way!" A team of police officers, led by none other than Uchiha Sasuke, parted the crowd with their orders. "Move, move." The doors were wide open, allowing the officers easy access.

Sasuke wasted no time in approaching his brother, who was giving the crowd of people an uneasy stare.

"You morons," Sasuke seethed at the gathered people.

"I'm glad you're here, otouto," Itachi said, unruffled by the glare that Sasuke sent him. "Could you please escort these people out of my house? This room is too small."

Sasuke seemed miffed, but it was obvious that something bigger than the hostility he had toward his brother had reared its ugly head. Itachi had no doubt that his younger brother had heard of the crushing defeat each of the four school masters had faced at the hands of Orochimaru alone.

Hesitantly, Sasuke took a step forward and whispered in his brother's ear.

"Itachi," Sasuke said through gritted teeth, and for a second, Itachi heard a child version of his brother shouting for his aniki. "As much as I hate to say this... Make sure you win for our honor." He spun on his heel to face the people. "Everyone, out!" The combined force and authority of the police officers sent the crowd out the door, though they stayed gathered in the front yard. Sasuke was the last to leave, and he gave his brother a short, begrudging nod before closing the front doors, leaving a medium-sized crack for observation purposes.

Now, only Itachi, Orochimaru, and the rest of his group stood in the hall. Orochimaru's group lined up at the side of the room while Orochimaru and Itachi faced each other.

Orochimaru must have been itching for battle, because he jumped at Itachi instead of waiting for his opponent to attack first, like he normally did. He lashed out with his long arms, and Itachi caught his blows, even when Orochimaru went high and low in a demonstration of amazing flexibility.

Orochimaru was slowly but surely pushing Itachi backward, though the Uchiha had yet to do anything but defend himself, his face stoic as ever. Orochimaru did the high kick that had done major damage to Hyuuga Hiashi, only for Itachi to merely bend backwards like a drooping willow tree branch, totally avoiding the snake-man's leg.

Itachi parried more heavy strikes from Orochimaru, his eyes—onyx and not red with the sharingan
—never leaving Orochimaru's face, even when the pale man lifted his leg to kick. Itachi lifted his own leg, stopping Orochimaru's kick with a loud crack that had the people on the sidelines wincing.

Orochimaru jumped backward, putting distance between himself and Itachi to regain his composure. He sunk into his stance once more, Itachi doing the same except with his Amaterasu stance.

Seconds had barely passed before Orochimaru went on the offensive again, spinning around in the air to give his punch more power. But it was parried once more, and Orochimaru hissed in frustration when the barrage of punches and kicks that he delivered next were all dodged or blocked.

After going in for a low, Orochimaru ended up on the ground, but sprang back up with shocking speed, Itachi barely making it out of the way as Orochimaru's feet soared through the air...

And smashed the table that had an expensive China vase sitting on top of it.

Itachi frowned, showing feeling for the first time since the battle had started. "That was Ming."

Orochimaru stared at the smashed vase. Then at Itachi. "I'll pay!"

"Aa."

The battle resumed, going much like it did before, the only difference being that Itachi was now attempting to attack and succeeding half the time. Blood sprayed from Orochimaru's nose as his head snapped backward, courtesy of Itachi's powerful punch.

Baring his teeth, Orochimaru did an axle-leap into the air, cartwheeling. Itachi dodged just as Orochimaru's heel damaged Itachi's dinner table and sent the glassware toppling to the ground.

Scowling, Orochimaru promised, "I'll pay!"

"Aa."

Itachi rolled up his sleeves, folding them to keep them in place. "I can't let you break anymore things," he deadpanned. It was time to get doubly serious.

Orochimaru went for Itachi's legs again, but the Uchiha evaded his sweeping kicks. Then he lashed out, landing a harsh kick to Orochimaru's side. Orochimaru spun in the air again, but Itachi caught his heel this time and spun him around and around before releasing him, jumping up, and kicking the woozy snake-man away.

Orochimaru rolled once, then twice on the tiled flooring, his team rushing to where he stilled. But he quickly got up, shooing them away and glaring furiously at Itachi.

They rushed at each other once more, exchanging blows before Itachi's forearm caught Orochimaru in the chest, making him fall. He halted his fall by landing on his hands and flipping upright again, but Itachi was on his case once more, and the snake-man's defence was hurried and clumsy.

Itachi's leg swished through the air in a motion that Yoroi couldn't even catch, and then Orochimaru was flying backward, half-landing painfully on the floor and a chair.

He did not get up.

His team was instantly by his side.
"Shit, boss!"

"Boss, you okay?"

"Get up, Orochimaru-sama!"

"I'm up!" snapped Orochimaru. "Now, Dosu..." He jumped into the air, and Dosu pulled the sword he carried out of his holster, throwing it into the air after Orochimaru.

The Sannin caught it, and slashed at Itachi with every intention of hacking him to bits. And he might have succeeded, had Itachi not been the grandmaster of Amaterasu. The Uchiha evaded the blade with a grace that came only from years and years of hard work and training.

The next time Orochimaru thrust his sword at Itachi, he grabbed his arm and swung him around, tossing him into the air. Orochimaru recovered, landing on his feet, the end of his sword hitting the ground with a metallic noise.

Itachi glanced to his left, where a brown feather duster sat in a vase. He grabbed it by the wooden end, dodging Orochimaru's sword just in time. Itachi flicked the feathery end of the duster into the Sannin's face, making him splutter from all the feathers that got stuck in his mouth.

Orochimaru spat out the feathers, infuriated by the indignity he had suffered. He thrust his blade at Itachi, who parried with the wooden end of the feather duster in such a manner that it wouldn't be cut in two. Mostly, he just avoided the sword, snapping the wooden end of the duster at Orochimaru's wrist every time he got near enough.

The Sannin swung his blade at Itachi's legs, but he jumped and landed safely, narrowing his eyes. Itachi's eyes flickered red momentarily, and he wagged the end of the feather duster as if he was scolding a naughty child.

Even more enraged, Orochimaru attacked with more energy than ever, slicing and slashing the places where Itachi had been, spinning and moving his feet expertly.

During the spin, Itachi managed to spank him three times with the feather duster, making the Sannin jump and hiss.

Yoroi coughed into his hand.

Having lost all sense of self after that, Orochimaru shrieked with rage and ran at Itachi with the sword held above his head.

Itachi stuck out his arm, the end of the feather duster digging into Orochimaru's armpit just in time to stop the sword from touching him.

Itachi thrust the duster, sending Orochimaru stumbling backward.

His disciples breathed heavily, unable to believe their eyes.

With a vengeance, Orochimaru lunged at Itachi again, slashing his sword, only for Itachi to slap his hand so hard with the feather duster that the pale man was forced to drop it. As it fell, Orochimaru nursing his hand, Itachi kicked the blade aside, and the sword rotates three times in the air before landing tip-first into the door.

Outside, Sasuke lurched backward, nearly falling over himself.
Once more wouldn't hurt, Itachi decided as he snapped the feather duster's wooden end against Orochimaru's rear end again, making his spine arch in agony. Orochimaru scrambled to turn around, only to be met with a feather duster digging into the skin of his throat.

A hideous snarl on his face, Orochimaru was forced to halt, breathing heavily.

"Are you still going to open that taijutsu club?" Itachi felt the need to ask as he cornered Orochimaru against the wall.

"What's the point?" The Sannin hissed at him. "My northern arts have lost to your southern ones. Do you not see the problem of that?"

"You're wrong. The problem isn't the origins of the art." Itachi's coal gaze bore deep into Orochimaru's soul. "It's you."

Slowly, Itachi moved back, letting his arms fall to his side, still gripping the feather duster. Gagging, Orochimaru massaged his throat.

Sasuke was curious as to what had happened when the doors suddenly opened, sending the crowd shuffling back to make way for those coming out. Orochimaru, looking wholly embarrassed and furious, led his team down the path the civilians had created for them.

"Who won?" someone asked.

"Obviously, Itachi did," Sasuke answered, sneering at the Sannin as he walked away. "Did you see the look on his face? It is obvious he lost."

At that point, honor and pride was restored, and the citizens began to shout, "Go home! Go back to the north and don't come back!"

Orochimaru didn't say a word as he left, nor did anyone from his team.

In the distance, Sasori and Deidara were warming up when they heard cheers coming from the mansion of Uchiha Itachi.

They exchanged a glance.

Nothing needed to be said. Deidara grinned widely at her sparring partner, feeling a renewed energy flowing through her veins. "Shall we?"

"Aa." Sasori emerged a puppet from his storage scroll, eyes gleaming. "I won't hold back."

"I'd be offended if you did, un."

They leaped at one another.

"Sasuke-shishou?" Daichi glanced up at Sasuke a week later. "You seem distracted today."

"Hm?" Sasuke spared him a glance. "It's nothing. Now prepare yourself. Don't wail if you draw blood."

In the near vicinity, Obito and Rin eye watching, pride shining in their eyes as they watched their
son grow up.

Life went on as usual.

Until the war started.
Interlude: Anemone

Chapter Summary

Interlude.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Not all wars started with a bang, Deidara came to realize when Akatsuki was on the verge of entering the cold season. Some wars crept up on you like the shadow of a cloud, but the consequences were just as ravaging.

And there was nothing beautiful about it—no, there was nothing beautiful about hell.

Damnation was not a burst of flames hot enough to melt your skin like wax. It came with fire at first, but it was followed by ice and murk, and controlled not by demons but by man.

On September 7th, the Second Tsuki-Ame War began, and Amegakure was invaded by enemy forces from Tsukigakure.

Akatsuki was overrun by Tsukigakure military forces. When met with resistance, the invaders slaughtered indiscriminately, and burned entire sections of the city to the ground. Those who tried to flee the city were immediately caught and killed on sight with bullets to the brain. If they were taijutsu users, they were hauled back and executed via firing squad.

The chakra-enhanced bullets were saved for the strongest.

Deidara had been sleeping when the city was overrun, and she'd awoken to the smell of burning smoke and death.

Her and Gai's apartment had been among the first buildings to be burned down. Gai had stayed over at Kakashi's that night, and it'd been up to Deidara to save the civilians.

She couldn't.

In fact, she barely saved her own skin.

It was hell on earth. Nobody knew where their friends and family had gone, and those who had been lucky enough to stick together through the burning and the shooting did their best to stay together.

Deidara was one of those nobodies.

And in the span of a month, Akatsuki's population had been reduced from 300,000 to just over 70,000, with only a few dozen factories in the whole city remained in operation.

The city burned and crumbled, much like Deidara's clay when it was left under the sun for too long.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: I realize that this is short, and that is because it's an interlude. Also, Tsukigakure is a bit different than in the anime. For one, Kaguya leads it (I thought it'd be fitting, haha).

And, holy cow, 30 views? I didn't realize that this got any attention at all.

Part II starts the next chapter.
Part II: Holly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The woman’s breath was ragged as she ran, bullets fired from behind narrowly missing her narrow, malnourished frame. There was already a bullet embedded in the soft flesh of her left shoulder, and it would do her no good to be wounded further. Saliva dribbled from her mouth as she panted, freezing in the chill before it hit the ground.

She let out a sob when a bullet grazed her leg, making her stumble. Boots clicked behind her—the soldiers were getting closer, and she was slowing from the wound in her calf.

But she had one advantage that they didn't have—she'd lived all her life in Akatsuki, while the invaders had spent less than a month getting themselves settled in. The woman took a detour, one that she was intimately familiar with. She pressed her back against the wall, tears staining her cheeks and her bladder threatening to loosen as the soldiers passed her, none the wiser.

"Dammit, where is she?!" the soldiers spoke a language that wasn't native to Amegakure, but the recently self-liberated female was sharp, and she'd spent her time in captivity picking up on the Tsukigakure people's tongue.

"I think she went this way. Hurry the hell up!"

"Right!"

Her legs shaking, the woman slid down the wall, making her spine—which visibly pressed against her pale skin and thin robes—ache. But it was nothing that she couldn't handle—the still-healing lashes running across her back were testimony of her torture.

"I'm so screwed," she sobbed quietly, wiping at her eyes and mouth with her dirty hands. "Goddammit...!"

Tears still streaming from her eyes, she tilted her head skyward to look at the grey sky before her. She had no sense of time left in her, though she suspected that it was nearly sunset. The skies had been perpetually grey since the invaders took hold of Akatsuki. Winters were always morose, but the cold season this time around was more sullen than usual.

There was no use in simply sitting there and waiting to be recaptured, she decided, and stood up on wobbly, too-thin legs. She made her way down the rest of the detour, limping thanks to the fresh, bleeding injury in her calf. Thank the gods that it hadn't started snowing yet—she didn't need to be sold out by her own trail of blood on the ice.

For the first time in three weeks, she was tasting fresh air. Her hair was once a beautiful blonde that was the envy of many of the city's women, but now...

She couldn't tell whether the majority of the dirt on her hands was already there to begin with or had come from passing her hands too many times through her hair in times of great stress.

*I was cultured,* she had thought bitterly. *A true, fine lady. I had pride. Men twice my age were after my dowry. But my father is dead, and I have yet to see my sister again.*

Her lip wobbled. What was pride in the face of what she had suffered? The indignities she had
willingly put herself through just for a bite to eat. Nausea stirred in her gut, and she stopped to puke across the alleyway ground. There was hardly anything regurgitated—just mucus and water. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. She suspected that it was sometime last week.

The beautiful figure she had cultivated with dieting and exercise was ruined, but such trivial matters were the last thing on her mind. What she needed right now was safety and food.

A near-silent footfall reached her ears and she froze, pale blue eyes widened in fear. No, no, no! NO! She whipped her head around frantically to search for something sharp or heavy. There was nothing. Just the half-frozen puddle of vomit at her feet.

The footsteps came to a halt. Then a distinctly female voice called out gently into the night, "Ino? Is... is that you?"

Ino. Yes, that was her name. She'd almost forgotten. Had left it behind three weeks ago, in her father's glorious manor. The woman—no, teenager, felt something akin to electricity surge through her as she added her name to her identity again.

"Sa... Sakura?" Ino whispered, turning around to show the other woman the lines beneath her pale blue eyes.

The other woman pulled down the hood of her brown cloak, revealing black hair—black hair that was cut into the same hairstyle as Sakura's. She had brilliant green eyes, and a mouth that was used to being pursed thanks to all the insufferable martial artists she was used to healing.

Of course, Ino thought dazedly. She's Tsunade of the Sannin's apprentice. Her pink hair makes her too recognizable.

Sakura tentatively approached her, treating her like a scared animal. Her eyes were brimming with unshed tears. "Ino. Ino-pig, it's okay. I've got you now."

Ino stared at her, expressionless. Then, choking down a sob, she leaped into Sakura's arms, releasing that sob with a violent half-cough half-snort.

"Shh... Shh, Ino... I'm going to bring you somewhere safe. I promise. It's not too far from where we are now. I can't believe you came all the way here on your own... I'm so proud of you, Ino," Sakura whispered soothingly into her ear. "You've always been a fighter."

A blonde woman meandered down the street, her posture tense despite the vicinity being mostly empty. She was wearing all black, from her tunic and pants to her cloak. It wasn't a color she preferred over every other hue, for she claimed it made her feel like she was about to go to someone's funeral, but she was left with little choice.

All her other clothes besides the sleepwear she had worn that night had been burned along with her apartment when the Tsukigakure soldiers invaded. She had scrounged up this outfit with the meager savings that she had been able to take with her before her forced eviction.

Deidara lifted her cold hands to her mouth, expelling a breath of hot air. The lips on her palms were chapped and blue, preventing her from creating any clay. She kept her clay on her person at all times, and it had yet to run out.

It was used sparingly nowadays.

Compared to others, Deidara had relocated rather quickly, fleeing to the other side of the city,
where the soldiers were less trigger-happy and more about serious marching and whatnot. She could tell apart the ones who gave their hearts to their duty and those who were corrupt—and being a woman in a district full of corrupt, armed soldiers was a death wish, so she'd turned tail as soon as she could.

She did not dare wander too close to the city's heart, where the Nohara-Uchiha cotton mill was located. At least, not on days like these, where it was foggy and she could barely see one-hundred feet in front of her nose.

Deidara was alone. Completely and utterly alone in the decrepit apartment she now lived in. She agreed with the self-suggested notion that she was going to lose her mind sooner or later, for all she could do all day was chop wood and toss them in her rickety furnace. It was either that or freezing to death.

Beneath her cloak, she hugged herself, shivering as the cold bit into her skin. Her attire was warm, but not warm enough for the wintry chill that had descended upon the once prosperous Akatsuki.

The folds of her cloak parted as she lifted her hands to her mouth once again to keep frostbite away.

Her belly growled—she'd been living on nothing but meager amounts of rations and rice for the past three weeks. Her food had run out yesterday, and there she forced herself to leave her new home in order to search for food.

Nothing was open. No restaurants, no shops.

Deidara gritted her teeth when her stomach complained again. She'd lost weight—not as much as others, but the weight loss was still there, and she briefly mourned the fit and powerful body she had traded for this shaking mess.

Sasori would have surely snarked her for it, for the deterioration of her body went against his view on art.

Sasori.

Deidara blinked, wiping dust from her right eye. *I wonder how he's doing. Is he well? Or barely scraping through like me? Whatever it is, I hope he's surviving, un.* Lost in her thoughts, she spluttered when she walked right into a rag hanging from one of the store signs. Stepping backward, she scowled immediately upon realizing just what it was.

A Tsukigakure flag.

As if the emblem of the Moon Country would summon soldiers, Deidara pulled the hood of her cloak forward, not liking how her field of vision was further narrowed. She raised her arm to the push the damned thing out of her way, continuing on her search for some kind of store, or perhaps someone to steal from.

Deidara circled the entire district in no time at all, and her belly remained empty. *What I wouldn't do for some of Chiyo-baa's chicken rice...* The thought of the mouthwatering, silky chicken did little to quell her hunger pangs, and only worked to sour her already sullen mood.

She returned to the flag hanging on the store sign by its metal pole. Feeling dirtier than she already was—her new apartment had no hot water, and since it was so cold, she refrained from bathing as much as she could to conserve body heat—she grabbed the flagpole and flooded her arms with chakra, yanking it out of its place.
It was surprisingly light, but the metalwork was of good quality. She felt no guilt when she smashed the end of the pole into a closed down store. Simply exploding it or punching it until it exploded would have attracted too much attention.

Not that smashing the hammered-up windows was subtle, either.

The wood gave way to glass, and the glass gave way to an empty space. Perfect.

Deidara wriggled through the window, careful not to cut herself on any stray shards. An infected wound was just about the last thing she needed right now. The shop was just as frigid as the weather outside, and Deidara rummaged through boxes of miscellaneous items before finally discovering some bags of rice in the very back of a shelf.

She left the store with two bags of rice over either shoulder, and her heart feeling lighter than it had been in days.

She had dropped off the rice at her apartment and was going back for more—what she wouldn't do right now to have Sasori's skill in chakra string manipulation—when a wailing reached her ears.

It was muffled, as if they didn't want to be heard.

Or were being prevented from being heard.

Nevertheless, someone had heard, and Deidara's natural curiosity reared its head. Her mind made up, she cautiously approached the noisemaker, her boots silent as she moved.

The fog cleared just enough for Deidara to catch sight of two Tsukigakure soldiers kicking a shivering form on the ground.

I should go, Deidara thought absently. I can't compromise my position for a stranger.

That would have been the logical thing to do, at any rate, but Deidara had been famed for her brazen and rash nature during her time as part of the Big 4.

Deidara glided toward them like a ghost in the wind, the winter breeze flapping her cloak around. In the fog, she looked like a shroud of vengeance. The soldiers would have certainly thought so had their backs not been faced toward her.

She disposed of them quickly and quietly. They were not dead, merely unconscious—it would be too dangerous if two soldiers in the Tsukigakure faction suddenly went missing in such a quiet place. The last thing Deidara needed was to be suspected to be a rogue taijutsu user and executed by firing squad.

Who would eat all the rice she had collected? The rats?

Deidara gazed impassively at the limp form curled on the ground before making sure that the two had massive bruises on their faces, courtesy of her fists. She had smelled the alcohol on their breaths the moment she neared them, and she knew that their superiors would not take kindly to them reappearing completely buzzed with their faces busted.

Alcohol was blamed for many things, and Deidara couldn't help but appreciate that, if only momentarily.

The person—child; no, girl—was still breathing, though the rise and fall of her chest was shallow. Her right cheek had boot-prints stamped on while her frail arms were beginning to bruise.
"Yare yare..." Deidara frowned at the girl, unable to make out her face thanks to the matted brown hair falling across her eyes and nose. "What a pain, un..." *But I can't just leave her like this.* So, cursing her soft heart, she picked up the girl and made her way home, the extra bags of rice forgotten for now.

She'd have to come back out later before curfew, especially since that she had an extra mouth to feed.

Sighing, Deidara looked heavenward, wondering when everything had gone so, so wrong.

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The grey clouds stretched overhead in every part of the city—Deidara and Ino weren't the only ones who looked appealingly to the sky that day for some kind of sign.

Naruto didn't complain as he cranked the machine, spinning the cotton that the large metal bucket contained. The white fluff went up and down, up and down, like energy in a transversal wave.

Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon were working in another part of the factory today, doing a job that put their small hands to use. When Udon went past Naruto to get a rag, the boy saw the black smudge on his face and concluded that his three kohais were doing some kind of repair on one of the other machines.

"You all can go home now!" their supervisor announced a few hours later, when the time was approaching eleven o'clock. "Excellent work, everyone."

Normally, such an announcement would excite Naruto, but that would only happen now if he had a proper place to sleep.

Konohamaru, Udon, and Moegi were in the same position. The apartments that the Nohara-Uchiha family had provided for their orphan workers free of charge had all been destroyed, or at least partly destroyed.

Their supervisor, Iruka, gave them a sympathetic look as he locked up for the night, a knowing look in his eye when the orphans remained behind.

"Make sure that you use the blankets over there," Iruka advised before the last non-orphan worker left and he had to lock up. "Goodnight, everyone. Keep warm and don't sleep near the equipment."

"Yes, Iruka-san," the orphans chorused. There was no returning to the orphanage for them—when they had left to work, the matron's parting words had ensured them that they would no longer have any place at the orphanage.

Iruka let out a deep sigh before smiling crookedly. "Goodnight, guys." Then the door slid shut and locked, leaving the children in total darkness, save for a sliver of moonlight from an open window.

There was a crack and a hiss, and Tenten's face appeared in the darkness, glowing orange from the match she held close. Someone pushed a short candle forward, stubby from many nights of use, and Tenten held the match near the wick of the candle until it finally caught fire.

The flame burned brightly in the dark, and the youngsters all huddled around it, sharing their body heat with one another.

"Tenten," an orphan wearing a green tunic said. His name was Rock Lee, and he hadn't much happiness in his life, being born without developed chakra coils. When he wasn't working, he was developing his own martial arts style, hoping to become as good as the Big 4 someday. He
especially looked up to Gai, but they'd never exchanged a word to each other due to Lee's working times clashing with the hours Gai tended to show up during.

Nobody had seen Gai since the night of the attack. The same went for Kakashi.

"Yes, Lee?" Tenten whispered back, rolling her shoulder to get comfortable when a younger child clung onto her white-sleeved arm.

"It's very cold," Lee admitted to her, running a hand through his untamed, spiked hair. "Could you by any chance pass that blanket over there?"

Tenten nodded, eyes warm. "Of course, Lee. Here." She passed a brown blanket to him, which he then spread over his and Konohomaru's—the younger boy was sitting next to him—shoulders

"Anything happen today?" Moegi asked. "Any news on the outsiders and the war?"

She was talking to Naruto, who normally went outside during his break despite being advised not to. He was male, civilian enough, and young enough that the Tsukigakure soldiers paid him no heed.

"Nah, nothin'," Naruto said with the shake of his head. "But I'll be sure to let you know if something happens, dattebayo."

There were a total of seven orphans that worked in the factory. Tenten and Lee were the oldest, followed by Naruto, then Konohomaru and his friends, Moegi and Udon. The youngest was the little girl who was still attached to Tenten's arm, Chihiro. She was nine years old, while the rest were already in their double digits.

She was slowly nodding off, her head on Tenten's shoulder.

"I miss Daichi," Udon said suddenly, looking a little embarrassed. "He was kinda full of himself, but he wasn't bad or anything..."

"He was a good kid," Naruto agreed. "I wonder how he's doing?"

"Last time I heard, he was training in kenjutsu with the Chief of Police's son," Moegi put in, thoughtful.

"Hah? Sasuke-teme?!" Naruto shouted.

Tenten shushed him sharply, jerking her chin at the girl fast asleep on her shoulder. "Not so loud, you idiot."

"Sorry," Naruto muttered, having the grace to at least look a little ashamed. Kakashi's Thousand Years of Death had certainly humbled him.

They made idle chat after that, dropping off to sleep one by one, until Naruto was the only one still awake.

Naruto rolled to his side, careful not to jostle Udon, who he was sharing his blanket with. It was barely big enough for the both of them, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The sound of gunshots outside did not bother his jaded ears.

Instead, it lulled him to sleep, his last thoughts for the night being his pondering on when he started hating the sight of the moon so much.
Deidara's fireplace burned brightly and hotly as the woman lay on her couch, sculpting the most random things. It was late at night that she got time to herself—the rest of the day she normally spent looking after herself and her home.

On her bed was the girl she had picked up. The girl's clothes—the remnants of a Once beautiful kimono—was drying on a chair near the fireplace, leaving the child naked underneath the woollen blanket, a rare item that Deidara had stole from another without them even knowing that it'd been her.

Her face was familiar, though Deidara couldn't put her finger on it. Perhaps when the girl woke up, she would speak of her identity.

Deidara was ready to fall asleep and wake up the next morning with a stiff neck when the girl stirred, groaning softly.

"Mrrghh... Onee-chan?" She blearily blinked sleep out of her eyes, sitting up with a wince. "Owww..."

"Oh, you're awake, un," Deidara spoke from the couch, causing the girl to startle and try to scramble out of the bed. "Hey, don't move around so much. I'm not going to hurt you."

The girl stared at her, wide-eyed and chest heaving. Then she blurted, "It's you! The lady who keeps making explosions...!"

"Hm?" Deidara lifted an eyebrow, her lips quirking upward in a soft smile. "So you've heard of me, un. Then you must know that I don't blow up little kids. Just annoying cats" un."

"I... dunno." Biting her lip, the girl lowered her gaze to stare at her hands, which were placed cupped on the blanket covering her legs. "What the?! Where are my clothes?!" Her voice was hoarse from disuse, but the shriek still got through.

Deidara used her thumb to gesture at the drying kimono. "Over here. You won't be wearing that anytime soon, unless you want to catch a cold."

"Don't you have anything else for me to wear?"

"Mm... My pyjamas, but I'm not sure if they'd fit you." Deidara shrugged, making a move for her miniature closet. "Then again, I'll bet that anything's better than naked with you. How old are you, anyway?"

"... Six."

"Tsk. I knew a kid that was still clinging to his mother's breast when he was six, un."

"Umm..."

"That was supposed to be funny," Deidara said as she tossed the girl her pyjamas. "At least laugh a little, un."

When it became clear that the girl wasn't going to lighten up anytime soon, Deidara stopped her poking fun. She'd probably been through a lot in the past three weeks, just like everyone else. And from what Deidara had observed, the child was used to being pampered and living a spoiled life.

It must have come as a shock to her, to have everything she took for granted ripped away from her
"What's your name kid?" Deidara eventually asked, handing her a warm cup of water.

"Hi... Hitomi."

"Holy shit. The Yamanaka?"

"Uh, yeah."

Deidara reached for her hair, finding the strands to be clumpy. "It's mud. Your entire head is muddy. You owe me a new pillow when this is all over, un."

"I didn't ask for you to bring me here!" Hitomi snapped, her eyes welling up with frustrated tears. She balled up her tiny fists, shaking. "I shouldn't be here! I want my onee-chan!"

Her annoyance was building up far too quickly than she would have liked, but Deidara quelled her irritation. "You'd be dead without me. A six-year-old spoiled brat isn't going to make it far out in the cold."

Hitomi was flabbergasted at Deidara's seemingly unflappable attitude. "I-I..."

"Go to sleep, you brat," Deidara ordered, pushing her back onto the bed. Great, now I sound like Danna. "And I'm washing your hair tomorrow, whether you like it or not, un. You're filthy."

"I must look so ugly," Hitomi sniffled as she laid her head on Deidara's pillow.

"No one here cares whether you're ugly or not," Deidara said frostily. "Just be grateful that you're still alive, un. What's appearances in the face of death?"

Despite everything, Hitomi's temper flared. "This is why okaa-san always says that you're never gonna get married!"

"Sleep before I throw something deadly and explosive at you."

With a squeak, Hitomi pulled the blanket over her head.

Wonderful. Now her blanket was going to be dirtied as well.

Rotten girl, that Yamanaka.

"Sakura!"

Shizune, Sakura's assistant, burst in as Sakura was disinfecting Ino's wounds with her bountiful medical supplies.

They were currently living in the city's underground, where there were abandoned buildings abound for the taking. The makeshift medical hut was where everyone that had fled to the Underground went to when they needed healing.

"Shizune, what's the matter?" Sakura demanded, standing up. "Ino-pig, I'm going to wrap that for you in a moment." In peaceful times, when she had chakra to spare, she would have used her chakra to knit Ino's flesh together. But now, Sakura had no such liberties with her chakra reserves.

"We've got a newcomer," Shizune informed her, her voice urgent. "And he's badly hurt. You must
come right away. Itachi's with him now."

The Underground Faction, as somebody had dubbed it, was led by Uchiha Itachi, whose home had been seized in the attack and was now used as an army base. It wasn't the cleanest place, but everyone living down here had all did their best to make it more suitable for living. It was the safest place down here—not many knew that Akatsuki was built on top of an older city, and there was no way foreigners would ever know such a thing.

"Am I also a newcomer?" Ino asked hesitantly. "Billboard-brow?"

"Hell, yeah, and you're not going anywhere. We're safe down here, Ino."

"Are we really?"

"As safe as we can possibly get. I'll be right back—don't move!"

A large man was being held up by two shorter men, and Itachi was standing over him, examining his injuries.

"Hoshigaki-sama," Sakura gasped quietly. "I can't believe it..."

Kisame lifted his eyes, giving her a sharp, but crooked, pained grin. "Hey, girly. Are you just gonna stand here, or heal me?"

Itachi gave her a nod. "Sakura."

"On it, Itachi. Is Izumi okay? I haven't had the chance to check up on her this week."

"She is fine." Itachi sighed heavily. "I wish that our child won't have to be born during such difficult times. I wish that this war would end soon."

Kisame coughed, "Wishful thinking, Itachi-sama... I have a feeling that this war isn't stopping anytime soon... Kaguya's a ruthless bitch. And Pein won't back down to the likes of her, either."

Kisame had seemed so polite before, if not very strained. It seemed that it took a war and an invasion as well as losing half a gallon of blood to loosen his tongue. "Careful," Kisame warned when Sakura got too close to Samehada.

"And what on earth is that?" Sakura asked brusquely.

"My crazy lover. Who else? Anyway, just don't get too close, for your own sake. She bites."

Sakura gave the wrapped sword a single glance before working her magic on Kisame's brutal injuries. It was cases like this that Sakura saved her chakra for. Just last week, she had been forced to amputate on the dirty sewer floor. It was only thanks to the healing properties of her chakra that the patient didn't die from infection or blood loss.

"Shizune, get the scalpel. He has a lump of metal in his arm."

"On it, Sakura."

Itachi frowned. "A bullet?"

"I do remember getting shot there," Kisame slurred, woozy from blood loss. "Dammit, Itachi, you're a genius..."
"His body healed over the bullet, most likely," Sakura explained. "I'll have to reopen the wound to remove the lump, or else it'll be infected."

"Geniuses, both of you."

"I can't tell whether he's being sarcastic or not," one of the men holding up Kisame whispered to the other.

"Me neither, Izumo."

As Itachi and Sakura worked with Kisame, Ino's mind was racing as she sat in the medical room, chewing on her lip until it was on the verge of bleeding.

Tears were streaming down her face, as she remembered what her captors had done to her.

She felt dirty.

"Ino?" A white-eyed girl stepped into the room.

Ino blinked slowly. "Ha... Hanabi-chan?"

Sasori glanced outside his window, watching soldiers march through the streets, enforcing curfew.

He rolled the blinds down.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It begins. Pretty much everyone is in their own unique situation. Itachi p, Izumi, and Sakura are running the Underground hideout, Deidara is by herself (though not anymore), the orphans still work at the cotton mill and sleep there too, Ino just returned from hell, Kisame looks like he just went through hell, and Kakashi and Gai are nowhere to be found, Sasori is still living with his grandmother, and Hanabi seems to be living with the Underground Faction due to some unknown circumstances.

And where did Sasuke, Obito, and Shisui get off to?

If you're out there reading, please review, as they really make my day ^^
Hitomi's state was even more pathetic than Deidara had first thought when the girl got out of bed the next morning. It'd been nearing the evening when Deidara had found her—had been evening when Hitomi awoke and they exchanged some words.

Deidara hadn't had a good look at the girl until now, when the sun had risen behind the perpetually grey clouds.

There was a huge yellow bruise forming on the child's face, and her hair was ratty and clumpy with mud. She was stick-thin, even thinner than Deidara herself, and her legs looked like they could snap at any moment.

"Hungry?" Deidara offered her a bowl of rice when the girl approached her small dinner table, just big enough for three people.

Hitomi hesitated.

"I'm not going to bite you, un. How much do you want?"

"How much are you gonna give me?" Hitomi's voice was weak and watery.

A small irk mark appeared on Deidara's cheek when the girl answered her question with a question of her own. "I can't tell you that until you answer my question, idiot."

"I'm not an idiot!" Hitomi bleated, for her parents had praised her for being clever once.

"Then stop acting like one." Deidara frowned at the girl. "I have water boiling over the fire. You'll get some to drink soon. For now, get as much rice as you want from that black pot over there." She gestured with her thumb at said pot, which sat on the dusty kitchen counter.

"It's filthy here," Hitomi said, feeling the need to return to her aristocratic snark. Perhaps it brought her a sense of normalcy, so Deidara simply agreed for both of their sakes.

"Yeah. Yeah, it is, isn't it? But it's better than toughing it out on the street, un. At least there're less rats in here."

"Rats?!" Hitomi looked horrified at the thought. "What rats?!"

Deidara raised an eyebrow, leaning back in her chair. She brushed her bangs away for a bit before answering, "Just where have you been living before I found you? You certainly weren't on the streets, un. You were caught, after all, something that someone living outside would have avoided. And you flinch at the thought of rodents. So where did you come from, Yamanaka?"
“I… I can’t tell you that!” the girl replied stubbornly, crossing her arms before wincing. The movement must have jostled an injury beneath her clothes (which were the pyjamas that Deidara had lent her for the night).

“Yeah?”

“Yeah!”

A staring contest ensued, Deidara’s china blue eyes boring into Hitomi’s paler ones. Then the Yamanaka lowered her gaze, her lip set in a pout that eight-year-old boys might have found adorable.

But Deidara was not eight years old, nor was she a boy.

“You’ll tell me sooner or later,” Deidara said, seemingly nonchalant about the fact that Hitomi was keeping information from her. *If she was a spy for Tsukigakure, I doubt that would have knocked her around that much. And she seems… honest, somehow.*

“I won’t,” Hitomi sniffed.

“We’ll see, yeah.”

Grudgingly, Hitomi sat down at the table with a small bowl of rice that she had gotten from the pot. She ate slowly, taking miniscule bites so that she wouldn’t upset her stomach.

Deidara watched her from behind her own bowl. “Where’s Ino? You were calling for her last night.”

Hitomi startled, nearly dropping her bowl on the ground. As she recovered, she tried to set her banged up face into a glare. “I don’t know.”

Pieces started to come together in Deidara’s mind. “Were you looking for her? Is that why you were outside?”

“N-none of your business, y-you…! You unmarried girl!”

Eyes narrowing, Deidara flicked a grain of half-hard rice at the girl’s forehead, making her yelp. “Unless you want me to leave you to those dogs outside, then you’ll keep your idiotic comments to yourself, un.”

“Ow...” The girl sniffled, tears of frustration welling up in her eyes. “I hate you!”

Deidara nodded calmly. “Good. I wouldn’t want to be liked by someone like you.”

Huffing, Hitomi screeched her chair back and stormed into the bathroom, sliding the door closed behind her. Sighing, Deidara leaned back in her chair, passing her hand through her hair. From her experience entertaining Daichi and his little friends, she’d thought that she’d been good with kids. But Hitomi was a whole different story, the little brat.

“She can’t be all that bad,” Deidara mused to herself as she finished her rice and took the bowl to a damp corner in concrete room. As she washed the bowl with a hose that trickled out rain water—the same water she boiled to drink—she could hear a muffled sobbing coming from the bathroom, the Yamanaka girl likely crying out her frustrations in false solitude. *She seems more concerned about Ino than herself.* She stood, wiping her wet hands on her pants, and bringing the bowl to the kitchen counter to dry it with a rag.
There was a pile of wood on the other side of the room waiting to be chopped and burned, but Deidara thought that it could wait. The fire was still burning strongly, and would stay that way for perhaps another hour. So she removed the cloth draped over a training wooden dummy in a corner of the apartment space. As she fiddled with it, testing its durability, Hitomi slid the bathroom door open, her eyes puffy.

"Feel better?" Deidara asked without looking over her shoulder.

"No," Hitomi spat petulantly, crossing her arms and marching over to the couch to flop her body down, her eyes troubled.

"Un." Satisfied with the state of the training dummy, Deidara started to 'spar' with it, the thing spinning along with her chakra-less strikes. The training dummy was one that she had robbed from Obito's open training field during her escape to a safer part of the city. The Uchiha's house, like Itachi's, had been seized by the Tsukigakure military, though Deidara didn't know what they were using it for.

Silence reigned, the only thing piercing the quiet being Deidara's breathing and the *clunk* of the wood as it was abused by her arms and legs. The tunic she had was getting worn—she resolved to go out and get a new one tomorrow, and perhaps some clothes for Hitomi, too. The girl couldn't just stay in her pyjamas and her torn kimono she'd been wearing the night Deidara had saved her.

"Why do you do that?"

Deidara paused, the wooden arm of the training dummy tapping gently against her wrist. She turned around.

"What's the point?" Hitomi went on, resting her chin on her arm. "Taijutsu... doesn't do anything against guns."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" Deidara replied, leaning against the dummy. "Paint my nails?"

"I—"

"You don't know what you're talking about. Taijutsu has saved my life more times than you can count." She returned to her training. "It's a valuable skill to have. Sure, there are guns—" Deidara smacked the arm of the dummy particularly hard. "—and other modern weapons, but your body can be an equally deadly weapon if you put time and effort into training it." The wooden arm flew at her face at a speed that Hitomi could hardly catch, but Deidara stopped it with one hand. "But that's not everything. Martial arts is about self-improvement, discipline, and respect." Deidara turned to Hitomi again, watching her still form on the green couch. "I'll admit that I don't always have all of those things at once. But I'm one in a million practitioners, un. I could be worse off."

She paused. "I could have ended up like you."

She expected Hitomi to snap or screech at her. But when the little girl remained in a pensive silence, Deidara accepted her stillness, returning to her training with unwavering efficiency.

As she watched Deidara train, Hitomi sunk into the couch, her body frail and breakable, but a tiny place inside her heart starting to burn. *Okaa-san always said that a lady's duty is to get married, love her husband, and have a lot of kids. Okaa-san would never approve of Deidara. But her mother wasn't here. Truly, Hitomi didn't even know if the woman still lived. Ino didn't wanna marry. Which was why okaa-san that if she didn't pick a suitable husband in one year, I'd be the heir. That's what happened to the Uchihas, after all.*
Uchiha Itachi from the main house had married to a commoner, giving up his status as heir apparent for her. The only thing his wife had going for her was that she was an Uchiha, albeit an unimportant one.

Hitomi clenched her fists. *I don't want to end up like that. All alone. Even if he seems so...* Itachi’s subtly-smiling face whenever he walked through town and greeted his friends and family was etched in her mind. ... *Happy.*

The next time Hitomi looked up from the hands was when Deidara was draping the cloth over her training equipment. The woman turned on her heel, arms folded. "Put on your kimono, we're going out for clothes and maybe food." There was no way she was leaving Hitomi by herself—there wasn't enough trust between them for that. "Try not to get in my way, un."

Hitomi harrumphed unhappily before doing as Deidara said, taking her sweet, sweet time if it meant making the older female annoyed.

"You're lucky I'm not like Danna," Deidara said frostily, having picked up on that Hitomi was doing.

"Danna?" Hitomi echoed.

But Deidara yielded no answers as she led them outside, pulling her cloak over her head.

"Do I get one, too?" the Yamanaka inquired, tugging Deidara's outer garment. "What if they attack me again?"

"They won't," Deidara said gravely, a horrible truth coming to her mind. "Not if they see you with a man."

Hitomi looked at the woman strangely as they ventured outside and went down the stone steps. "But you're not a—"

Deidara smirked. "Yeah, but they don't know that, do they?" The cloak was large and bulky enough to disguise her womanly figure, and Deidara's voice wasn't high to begin with. "As long as I grunt enough, and pull you around, you'll be safe."

Despite herself, Hitomi smiled a little. "Men do grunt a lot, don't they? Big brutes."

"They do, un." A few men that she knew came to Deidara's mind, and she frowned. "But not all of them are brutes. Some of them are... suspiciously effeminate." Her voice lowered. "Now hush." She felt Hitomi nod once. A small burst of happiness came over her when she remembered the time that a large man had come to Itachi's house with intent to court the Uchiha, unaware of the former heir's true gender. The dent Izumi had in her frying pan had never been fixed. Deidara suspected that the woman kept it there as some kind of trophy.

Deidara was glad that Hitomi had at least some awareness about the dangers of attracting too much attention outside. She stayed quiet the whole time, until they reached a clothing store in relatively good condition.

"Why didn't you ever get new clothes?" Hitomi inquired.

"Because I never had any need to. I don't like coming out unless I absolutely have to."

"Oh." That made sense to Hitomi. Back when she had still been staying with the others, before having given into the urge to wander out and search for Ino, they had hardly gone outside either. It
was quite a gloomy place, though the nice lady that had been Ino's friend before the war broke out did her best to keep things lively.

The store had already been raided judging from the broken window, and Deidara glanced once, then twice, about their surroundings before leading Hitomi inside, lifting her finger to her lips in the universal hushing gesture when the child stepped noisily onto a shard of glass.

"I like this one," Hitomi told Deidara, pointed at a wrinkled pink kimono. "It's like the blue one I'm wearing, except prettier."

Deidara immediately scowled in disapproval. "No way. You'd stick out like a sore thumb. Pick something more inconspicuous, un."

"But it looks nice."

"If you want to be thrown on the ground and raped by a Tsukigakure bastard with a beer gut, then go ahead," Deidara snapped, huffily going through the store for something more appropriate.

Hitomi flinched at her tone. "Can't I just wear it at home, then? And what does 'ra-aped' mean?"

"No," Deidara responded to her first question curtly. "There's no way we'll be able to take that back with us without being noticed. The patrols circle the district in their vehicles every five minutes. They glanced at us the first time around. Imagine what they'd do if you gave them more reason to be noticed, un."

"But—"

"Enough," Deidara bit out. "Just shut up. I'm not carrying that."

As Deidara sifted through the clothes, shoulders tense, Hitomi grabbed the pink kimono and began to strip with a speed that came from changing into different outfits in small frames of time to meet different suitors more than twice her age. When Deidara turned back around, Hitomi had long finished putting on her original, ratty and torn blue kimono above the pink one.

If Deidara noticed, she didn't say anything, though she had an indiscernible gleam in her eye.

On their return journey, they ran into another vehicle, a mode of transportation not commonly seen before the invasion. Akatsuki, which had put great emphasis on ceramics, fabrics, and agriculture, had done all of their imports and exports by more primitive means. But vehicles had been on their way here, until the Second Tsuki-Ame War broke out.

"You know, you're filthy," Deidara said bluntly when they got back to her apartment. "And don't think I didn't see that. I might not have seen you change into it, but you're loud. And smug."

The triumphant smirk on Hitomi's face dropped. "Are you gonna take it back?"

"What would be the point in that? It'd be easier to throw it in the fire, un."

Hitomi's eyes widened as she protectively hugged her body. "No! Don't!"

Deidara snorted, rolling her eyes. "I'm not going to. I'm not that spiteful, kid. But I'm going to need you to take off all your clothes." The woman rolled up her sleeves. "Because you're getting a bath whether you like it or not."

Hitomi was nonchalant as she removed her clothing, tossing the kimonos on the couch. "Okay. My
hair is super dirty, and I like baths, anyway."

"Oh, really?" Deidara inwardly smirked, though she kept her face passive. "Even cold ones?"

When Hitomi blanched, Deidara had to resist the urge to cackle in delight.

Half an hour later, Hitomi was blonde was more, squeaky clean, soaking wet, and naked and shivering in the secluded courtyard behind Deidara's apartment. She bared her teeth at the houseowner.

"I hate you!" she seethed, her tiny frame shaking.

Deidara, who was equally unimpressed with her wet fringe plastered onto her face, threw a towel at Hitomi, nearly bowling her over.

"Hate you, hate you!" Hitomi screeched, tossing the towel on the concrete in a temper.

Deidara glared at her. "Feeling's mutual, yeah."

There was a plip! as a drop of water fell onto a larger body, sending ripples outward. There was no natural light in the Underground, merely a few torches that had been smuggled in and lit. The entire system was too large to explore, the dangers of getting lost prominent. The 'small nation', as Sakura liked to jokingly refer to it as, was compacted into a small area of run-down buildings. There weren't as many people there as a nation would have, but there were still aplenty. Most were civilians who couldn't fight to save their lives and had no special skills, but there were those who were inherently useful.

Sakura was their go-to medic, and Shizune was her assistant as well as fellow medic. Both of them had apprenticed under Tsunade of the Sannin when they'd still been living in the north, but, somehow, Sakura had ended up being the more popular of the two. But Shizune held no grudge against her, and both were highly efficient healers, able to help with scratches as well as large-scale operations (though the latter was incredibly rare).

There were a few martial artists prowling around as well, including Itachi, Izumi, and Kisame, who had arrived last night and was still out of commission for now. There was no leader, but many looked to Itachi, who had been heir apparent and independently wealthy in his old life, for guidance.

And, finally, there was Hanabi.

The Hyuuga heir, who spent most of her time above ground looking after her father and dodging patrols.

The water continued to drip as Hanabi led Ino into the small hut she stayed in whenever she wasn't above ground. Ino glanced worriedly up at the ceiling, expecting the flimsy covering to collapse on them at any moment.

They hadn't talked much last night, just idle 'how are you's' that Ino didn't see the point of partaking in but had done so anyway, because she was a lady and ladies were not rude—

"What do you want?" Ino asked wearily, rubbing her head. "Hanabi-chan..."

"Ino-chan," the younger girl addressed, her back straight and her eyes solemn. "I spoke to Sakura
last night, and—"

"About what?" Ino interrupted, clenching her new yukata. They were both kneeling across from each other, a wooden table being the only thing separating them.

"It wasn't much," Hanabi amended. "Just that you'd been through a lot and that I should leave you alone, but..." Her eyes grew sad. "I just wanted to know... Did you see Hinata?"

Ino was taken aback. "What?"

"Please!" Hanabi blurted, fisting her hands. "I need to know. I know you just got back from hell, but please don't... run away from me. My onee-chan—"

"I didn't see her!" Ino shouted, choking a sob down. "I didn't, I didn't!"

Hanabi, horrified at herself for making Ino cry, reached across the table for her. "I'm sorry—" She flinched back, blinking when a sharp pain went through her hand. Ino had slapped her hand away.

"Don't touch me," gasped Ino. "Oh my god, don't—" She backed away from Hanabi, curling up into a ball, unable to articulate properly. "Hah... Don't..."

"What," Hanabi whispered as Sakura, alerted to Ino's cries, burst into the room and tended to Ino. "Did they do to her...? And do I... really understand her?"

Obito sighed deeply as he cranked the metal that spun cotton. Not all of his staff knew it, but he and Rin were labouring away at their own cotton mill. He would be on the verge of bankruptcy in a few months; all his thread-spinners and new equipment had amounted to nothing in the end, and he chuckled mirthlessly as he imagined what he would do to pay Itachi and Sasori back. Probably with a lame apology.

They were getting no sales. The pay of his staff had been cut down significantly. At least half of them had gone, actually, because there was no food in the area to spend their pay on. Money were just useless lumps of metal to them now.

Chiyo's Chicken Rice had shut down a few days ago, as had many other restaurants. There simply wasn't enough to go around. Obito suspected that the wily old bat and her equally wily grandson had shut down their store in favor of hoarding food. Obito was just surprised that it had taken them this long to do so.

Perhaps they pitied the rest of the community.

But in the end, their own skins came first. Just as it should be.

"Obito." Rin, the purple markings on her face ever so bright, approached him through the chaos of cotton and workers, her eyes tired. "I found out where the missing money from the safe went." She gave him a crooked smile that didn't fully reach her eyes. "Hikari hid it under her bed to protect it from bandits."

"Oh." That was all Obito could say as he felt his heart soften in a twisty sort of way. "That's sweet of her."

"Yeah," Rin heaved a sigh. "It was a nice sentiment. Obito, I've been meaning to ask for a while... Just what happened to the Uchihas?"
Obito stiffened, stopping his cranking. "Rin..."

"Oh, no," Rin said sharply. "You're not getting out of this so easily. I let it slide last time because Daichi was in the room, but I'm an Uchiha, too, if only by marriage. They're my family, whether you like it or not."

Obito sighed, smiling tiredly. "Man, I such a strong-willed wife. All the women I know are so aggressive..."

"Stop stalling, Obito. I have to know."

"They were mostly left alone," Obito began reluctantly. "The police force has been dissolved. But some of them have been assimilated into the Tsukigakure forces."

Rin's eyes narrowed. "What? Who?"

"A few nobodies desperate for survival..." Obito closed his eyes, looking ten years older. "And Shisui and Sasuke."

"WHAT?!"

Rin's outburst earned them a few glances before the workers went back to minding their own business.

Over the shock, Rin lowered her voice, brow furrowed. "How could they? These people are our enemy. Are they really that desperate? Would they really throw their Uchiha pride away?"

"They would," Obito gravely confirmed. "Pride is a dominant force in the Uchiha family... but self-preservation is an even greater force, one that reigns over every human being. Why do you think that the crime rate has gone up so much, even without the police? We're all desperate to survive, Rin."

"I know," she said quietly, her voice spiritless. "I know, I know." She stepped back. "I'm going to check on Daichi..."

"If he asks about Sasuke, please don't tell him anything."

Rin frowned. "Obito—"

"Rin, please."

There was a pause.

Then Rin sighed. "Fine. But he's going to find out sooner or later."

"That bridge can be crossed in the future."

Little did they know, Naruto, hiding behind some machinery, had heard the whole thing about Sasuke. Clenching his fists, he stormed back to his station. Sasuke-teme... how could you abandon Akatsuki for them?! "What's wrong, Naruto?" Tenten asked when she noticed his foul mood. "Were you finally banned from going outside?"

Oh, if only it was that simple.
"Chiyo-baa-sama, I'm off," Sasori said as he closed the door. "You know where."

"Tell me the news when you get back," Chiyo replied before the door fully closed. Sasori and Chiyo lived above their closed chicken rice restaurant, and the man had to descend a flight of stairs before finally reaching the tiny lobby. There was a criss-cross metal barrier which he had to unlock and separate so he could leave the building.

He walked the length of the central district before turning left to take a detour that not many knew about, as it was covered by broken wooden fencing and looked like the epitome of a dump.

Sasori was wearing a plain black cloak with a high collar, as it was too risky to be seen wearing an Akatsuki one. If one looked closely, they could see the remnants of red thread from where he had pulled out the string that formed the cloud patterning.

The detour led him to an open space that had a few high buildings surrounding it. There were a few drunkards lingering about.

Nothing special. The only building that had its lights on was a beer hall that had the Tsukigakure flag hung over the store's original sign. Sasori got a few sneers from half-dead civilians before he disappeared into the beer hall, the bright lights inside staining his eyes.

_Ingenious_, he couldn't help but think as he looked about the place, seeing Tsukigakure soldiers left and right. The hall was filled with raucous laughter and the clinking of beer glasses as off-duty soldiers squandered their time away. _No one would ever suspect..._

The beautiful barmaid behind the counter eyed him with her jade green gaze, her midnight bangs falling demurely over her face as a man burped while trying to flirt with her. There was another with her—an unassuming young with his long hair tied in a high, spiky ponytail. It reminded Sasori of a pineapple's brush. He was cleaning a glass, his gaze lazily flitting across to him, much like the black-haired woman's.

... _that the most popular hub for enemy soldiers would be right above the Underground._

Sasori looked out the window. It was already well into the night.

"Alright," the woman—_Sakura_—said cheerfully, clapping her hands together. "It's been great having you boys here, but it's time to pack up! Don't you guys have work tomorrow?"

There were some collective groans, and Sasori noted that all of the soldiers seemed relatively young.

Nevertheless, scum was still scum.

There were calls and shouts of "she's right", "dammit", "Akatsuki girls are super hot" and "at least they know how to party" before they all filed out.

"Come again," Shikamaru called after them, sounding extremely tired but still very unassuming. Just another civilian labourer in the city and not a master strategist.

The bar's doors closed for the night when the last soldier was gone, and Sakura made sure to triple-lock every single door and window before she dropped her act.

A crease immediately formed in her brows. "I've been letting those dogs grope me since eleven in the morning with only a few breaks. Now are you coming or not?"
"I see your temper hasn't improved," Sasori remarked as Shikamaru opened up the doors to the cellar, where they kept all their alcohol.

"You're right about that," Shikamaru drawled. "Even when she's playing the whore, she's still as troublesome as ever..."

"I'm right here, you know," Sakura snapped, kicking him in the shins.

"Ow—shit! Troublesome woman!"

"Keep talking and I'll tell Izumi that you were the one who helped Choji break into the food stores!" Sakura said fiercely, jabbing a finger at his chest. "For a genius, you sure can be stupid sometimes!"

"It was one ration bar!" Shikamaru snapped back. "And he was still recovering from, you know, getting forcefully evicted from his own house!"

"Enough," Sasori said blandly upon reaching the bottom of the stairs. "We're here."

They walked behind an alcohol shelf, and moved a crate to the right, revealing the covering of a manhole.

"Ladies first," Sasori offered Sakura.

"Well, at least you've kept your manners during the war."

"Don't get too ahead of yourself," Sasori told her, borrowing a phrase from Shikamaru, "Women really are troublesome things."

"Ugh, chauvinists, the both of you."

"I don't try to see based on gender," Sasori said as they climbed down the ladder leading to the Underground. "I make my judgement based on skill and personality. It's only a shameful coincidence that nearly all the females I've ever met leave something to be desired for."

"Nearly's better than all, I guess," Sakura huffed. "So who do you put in the 'not-so-troublesome' category?"

"My grandmother."

"She's pretty scary," Shikamaru admitted, having met the woman once before. "I'm glad she and my mother have never met."

"Oh, hush you," said Sakura. "Is there anyone else, Sasori? Surely, there's got to be more than one woman."

"Sakura, if you're trying to hit on him, I don't think it's working," Shikamaru felt the need to advise her.

"I'm not! Geez!"

"There's..." Sasori trailed off, running a list of women he knew in his mind. "Izumi-san is alright. And Deidara makes a worthy opponent in battle. And her companionship isn't terrible. I haven't seen her since the invasion began. Her apartment was one of the first buildings to be burned down. His heart twisted at his next thought. She must be either dead or hiding out in another part of the city. Perhaps she was even lucky enough to escape, though I doubt it."
"I remember her," Sakura commented, her feet tapping on the ground as she landed safely. "Obito-san called me over to heal you and her. It must have been a brutal battle."

"Aa. It was."

"She normally came to the courtyard to entertain the kids," Shikamaru added, remembering how the young boys had been thoroughly impressed by her explosions. "I remember that Obito-sama's kid was one of them."

"How is he, by the way?" asked Sakura. "Obito, that is."

They were all walking toward the main camp now, their boots slapping against the wet floor.

"Doing as well as he can be," Sasori replied.

Shikamaru clicked his tongue. "That bad, huh? At least he's not living in the sewer."

Nara Shikamaru's home had been one of the many clan homes burned down during the first week of the invasion. His mother had passed away in the attack, while Shikaku and Shikamaru had managed to get away. Akimichi Choza had made a similar escape, but he and Choji, his son, had been separated during the frenzy. Choji had ended up with the Underground Faction, and everyone could only hope that Choza was okay as well. The man was a martial artist master, after all.

But Inoichi's family...

Shikamaru felt nausea settle in his gut as he thought of Ino, who had arrived last night. He hasn't spoken to her yet. Had been too scared to see what they'd done to her.

"We're here," Sakura eventually announced, lifting her arms up in a stretch before biting her lip in worry. "I'm going to go check on Ino. Shika, take Sasori-san to see Itachi."

At the mention of Ino, Shikamaru grimaced. "Right." He was surprised why Sakura hadn't pressed him to visit Ino yet, but he was also relieved. He'd have to face the music sooner or later, but...

Later sounded a whole lot better for present-Shikamaru, nevermind what future-Shikamaru thought.

"Sasori, come in," Itachi invited when he noticed Shikamaru and Sasori standing by the open doorway. His home was a dimly lit, simple stone building, complete with a table and some cushions he'd brought from his mansion.

"I never did ask," Sasori said, cocking a brow. "How do you get clean down here?"

"The bar upstairs has showers. We all take turns during the night."

"I see." Sasori pulled out a storage scroll, absently noting that Shikamaru had left them to talk. "Where is Izumi-san?"

There. Itachi's gaze had grown troubled. "She's in the medical building. She's due in two months, and she's been having a few aches and pains." His eyes dropped to the scroll Sasori was holding. "Are those..."

"Yeah." Sasori popped out some miscellaneous items from the storage scroll. "Pregnancy vitamins, poisons and antidotes, and home-made medicines."

Itachi managed a smile. "Thank you. You're a good friend, Sasori."
"We weren't friends before," Sasori said carefully. *Business partners and acquaintances with shared interests, but never—*

"Then we are now," Itachi said simply.

Sasori offered him a nod, the frost in his eyes melting a bit. "I was hoping not to get too attached in times like these."

"Better to be too attached than to be not attached at all," Itachi advised. "Sometimes, I think you see yourself as one of the puppets you create, and not an actual human being. One that can experience the same emotions that I and everyone else do."

"Emotion?" Sasori closed his eyes. "I'm familiar with emotion. Especially..." He opened his brown eyes, his gaze sharp as flint. "Pride and cockiness."

"You're burning," Itachi said abruptly. "You're on fire but you don't know it."

"Burning?" Sasori frowned before his facial features relaxed. "Yes, I suppose I am. *I'm on fire and I can't feel a thing... how poetic of you, Itachi. But I am not as much of a lifeless puppet as you seem to think I am.*

Some raised voices came from the outside and Itachi stood, giving Sasori a glance. "Get someone to escort you back up. Hanabi-chan knows the lock configuration. Perhaps you can ask her. The next time you come around, Sasori... please tell me everything you know about Sasuke. No one else has been able to get close to central."

Sasori, who was halfway out the door, paused. "You might not hear what you want to hear."

"Is he dead?"

"No."

"Then tell me. But not now." Itachi swept past him, red and black Akatsuki cloak flowing behind him in a majestic display. "Until next time, my friend."

"Until next time," Sasori promised, and the man who was on fire parted ways with Uchiha Itachi.

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Hitomi woke up early in the morning to go to the bathroom. As she was returning to bed (Deidara's bed; the woman was sleeping on the couch), a sight made her pause. The sun was beginning to rise behind the clothes, and there was a single crepuscular ray shining upon the covered training dummy in the corner of the apartment.

Hesitating, Hitomi changed course and, her feet nigh silent against the cold concrete ground, she approached the training dummy, pulling the sheet off.

It was taller than her, and stood majestically in the room, its wooden arms appearing sleek but used. Hitomi stared at it a little while longer, not daring to touch it lest she be hurt or wake Deidara up. Then she shook her head and, standing on her toes, tossed the cloth over it again before going back to bed.

Unbeknownst to her, Deidara had woken up the moment Hitomi flushed the toilet. While she remained draped over her couch like a lazy jungle cat, her piercing blue eyes had been watching her the whole time.
A/N: Sasori and Chiyo are allied with the Underground Faction. Obito and Rin are approaching bankruptcy but are still keeping the cotton mill in production. Ino is traumatized. Shikamaru is clueless and scared of what he will find. Sakura is tired of being groped. Hitomi can't stand cold water. And what on earth is going on with Sasuke and Shisui? Itachi and Daichi are unaware of Sasuke's involvement with Tsukigakure. But for how long? Hmm...

And let's not discount Gai and Kakashi... they have a pivotal part in the story.

I just finished Violet Evergarden last night, hence the burning comments. I was crying 80% of the time during the anime.

Sasori spoke of pride and cockiness... is a backstory in order?!

If you're out there reading, I'd appreciate a review ^^
"Sasuke-sama! I swear I'm going to beat you one day!" Daichi panted, grinning as he pointed his training sword at Sasuke, who was balancing his katana across his shoulders, his posture as relaxed as an Uchiha's could be. Daichi was almost a carbon copy of Obito, though his hair was less spiky and his jawline was pointier, much like his mother's. His hair reminded Sasuke of Shisui's hair, though his bangs weren't held up by an Akatsuki forehead protector. They fell across his face in random spikes, and Sasuke figured that the boy would have to get his hair cut soon.

"Big talk for a small brat," Sasuke said, shifting his weight to his right foot. "You've barely been training with me for a month."

"I train every night!" Daichi declared, lowering his sword so that the tip touched the ground. His breathing was slowly evening out; they'd just stopped an intense sparring session. "I'm going to become the best kenjutsu user in Akatsuki."

Sasuke rolled his eyes. "To impress the Yamanaka girl, I suppose..."

"Hitomi? Well..." Daichi scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "I mean, that'd be nice and all, but what I really want to do is protect my family."

Sasuke considered this, and Daichi continued.

"Especially Hikari. She's my imouto, and a big brother should always protect his imouto."

_Something flashed in Sasuke's eyes. "Should they?"

Daichi nodded. "Of course! I love her more than anything in the world. I'd be pretty useless if I couldn't protect her, y'know."

_There was a brief silence before Sasuke had his sword out in front of him again. "Enough talk. Come at me."

_"Ready or not, Sasuke-sama!"

---

"Are you ready or not, Sasuke?"

Sasuke blinked, inwardly shaking himself out of his daydream. He shifted his gaze upward to meet Shisui's concerned eyes.

"The Uchiha Squad is waiting outside," Shisui informed him, cringing at the name. "Not to diss the General's creativity, but..."
The two Uchiha shared a room in the secondary military base that was once Obito's house. When the General had seized it and Itachi's mansion, he had decided to put Obito's training field and multiple training rooms to use. The Tsukigakure soldiers were not necessarily martial artists, but the General was, as were a select few.

In what was once Obito's vast lounge room, there stood three Uchiha-blooded soldiers, their backs straight and waiting tensely for Shisui and Sasuke to come out so that they could begin their duties for the day.

"Sir!" They saluted in unison when Sasuke entered the room, Shisui following closely behind.

Their patrol took them down the usual routes, where complete and utter strangers glared at them. Had they been regular Tsukigakure soldiers, the civilians would have most likely put their heads down and went on with their day.

But they were Uchiha.

Akatsuki's very own Uchiha.

The betrayal ran deep for the citizens, and while Sasuke struggled to maintain his impassive demeanor on his worst days, Shisui was outright smiling as they patrolled. There were no lines of guilt on the older Uchiha's face, and Sasuke had to wonder why. There was a little bit of sadness in his gaze, but no guilt.

Noon rolled around quickly, and Sasuke soon found himself in Obito's lounge again, having a brief recess with his squadmates.

If he were to be honest with himself, up until they became his subordinates, Sasuke hadn't bothered to ever know and remember their names. They were an all-male squad as far as he knew—there was one Uchiha that refused to take off their mask. It was to the point where Sasuke actually started to wonder if they slept with it on. But for the sake of making things easier for himself and the others, the masked Uchiha was referred to with a male pronoun. They—he—never complained, so everything worked out.

Their names were Uchiha Yano, Uchiha Ashikaga, and Uchiha Kagami.

Sasuke's hand tightened around his cup of hot water. *How convenient that the masked one would possess a unisex name.*

The door opened and an officer strode in. "The General wishes to see you, Sasuke-sama," the man said, keeping his eyes fixed on the Uchiha in question. When Sasuke didn't place his cup on the table immediately, he added, "Now."

And that was how Sasuke found himself in the audience of the General, with his wild black mane and his unforgiving eyes. He was tall—possibly taller than Sasuke would ever be, and he always radiated some kind of crushing, dominating aura.

But those things weren't too important.

No—to Sasuke, the most important thing was—

Sasuke bowed low. "Madara-sama."

General Madara was an Uchiha.
A week had passed since Deidara had rescued Hitomi from the streets, and the young girl was currently scrubbing the black pot that Deidara used to cook rice. The woman herself was training in the corner. They'd decided last week that if Hitomi were to stay here, she would have to at least try to earn her keep. Her duties in their shared home were mostly just folding laundry and washing dishes. Deidara couldn't trust her with chopping the wood, tending to the fire, or cooking. And it was fine with Hitomi, because in her spoiled life, she had never done such a thing.

"This won't come off," Hitomi muttered as she scrubbed at a brown stain on the side of a rice bowl. "Grr...!" She abandoned the bowl and left the tap running to search in the cupboards for something useful. The cupboards were mostly bare, but there were still three medium-sized bags of rice left, which was greatly comforting for the girl. As she returned to her washing duty, Deidara left her post to tend to the fire, tossing extra logs into the orange flames.

The fire burned with the same shade of orange that the Uzumaki orphan liked to wear. It was an obnoxious color, but in dark days like this, the hue was somewhat comforting.

Deidara rubbed at her visible eye with the back of her wrist when it got irritated by jumping embers. After making sure that the fire was okay to keep on crackling, a few embers landing on the cold stone floor, Deidara retreated to the bathroom.

The bathroom was small room, with only a simple squatting toilet and a rickety sink and smudged mirror. She'd never gotten around to cleaning the mirror, so, after washing her hands, she used her wet palms to wipe away the dirt on the glass.

She couldn't help but frown at her reflection.

Her once pristine golden hair was much duller than it had been, as if the misery lingering in the air had decided to suck out the bright color to keep it company. There were bags starting to form underneath her eyes, and, with a brief annoyance, she realized that those hadn't started to form before Hitomi took over the only bed in the apartment.

_Damn_, she thought, splashing water on her face, her bang tucked behind her ear. _I look like shit. If only Danna could see me now; he'd never let me hear the end of how human bodies are so fragile._

She exited the bathroom, spared Hitomi a quick glance, and returned to her training dummy. There was a window nearby that was constantly shut as to not let the cold air in, but there were no curtains available to be drawn over it.

Akatsuki was well known for its agricultural produce and ceramics, and Deidara could see the remnants of a potato farm in the distance. The family that owned it had passed away some weeks ago, and the crops had been raided for its produce.

Deidara clicked her tongue at the displaced dirt. _What a waste..._ She struck the dummy in front of her with her forearm. _It's just empty land now. Though I bet I could still find a few potatoes there if I really tried._

"I'm done!" Hitomi announced, putting the rice bowls on the kitchen counter, ready to be used again. "I dried them just like you taught me how to..."

"That's good," Deidara said halfheartedly.

"What do I do now?" Hitomi bounced over to the couch and flopped onto it.

Deidara paused, then shrugged. "Dunno. Remember that book we found in the trashcan last week? Go read that, un."
Hitomi wrinkled her nose. "But I've read it five times already. Can I read the other book instead?"

The 'other book' that Hitomi was referring to was a book that had been discovered in the same trashcan as the children's book that Hitomi thought boring. Deidara had only nine pages so far; she'd restrained herself to one page per day so the story could last until the war ended and everything could start reverting back to normal.

"No," Deidara said, holding up the palm of her hand and sticking her hand-mouth's tongue out.

"Eh?! Why not?! Huh?!!"

"Because I'm reading it, un. Besides, it's not a kiddy book. I'm not even sure if you can recognize such complicated characters yet. Now go read your stupid book... or go out to the back courtyard and chase butterflies or something. You like butterflies, right?"

"Ino-nee did," Hitomi said miserably. "Not me. I liked moths better."

Deidara stared at her. Then she joined Hitomi on the couch, nudging her legs aside to make space. "Moths? Why moths?" Now that she was closer to the girl, she could see that the misery had sucked away her color as well. From a distance, Hitomi would have looked like an unpainted scarecrow, or doll if she was wearing her kimono.

Hesitating, Hitomi picked up a piece of red string from the couch and began to fiddle with it. "Well, you know..."

The string was from her Akatsuki cloak, Deidara realized. She had been forced to remove the red cloud patterns from her cloak the night she escaped her burning apartment. The Tsukigakure soldiers, being the bastards they were, would have attacked her for patriotism or some shit like that. It left minuscule holes in the garment, but it could have been worse.


It was times like this that Deidara found herself to be reminded that Hitomi was only six. "You and me both. Rats... are ugly things, un. They thrive during times like this."

"Why? Everybody else is hungry."

"Which is why I think it's disgusting." Deidara wrinkled her nose at the thought of the ravaged potato farm.

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

They fell into a silence, and Deidara was about to get back up and start training again when Hitomi blurted, "What's the story like so far?"

"Hm?"

"The story you were reading!" Hitomi impatiently clarified. "Even though you're only, like, a few pages in, something has to have happened, right?"

Deidara sat back down. "Un." Well, it wouldn't hurt to tell her. Better to tell her now than have her nag me all day about it. "The story starts with the protagonist waking up in a hospital."
"Eh? Pro-tago-nist?"

"The main character."

"Oh."

Deidara settled into the couch a bit more, and Hitomi instinctively pressed up against her more, listening intently.

"She just came from a war," Deidara continued. "A war like the one that's happening right now."

"What's the war about?" Hitomi pressed. "Why are they fighting?"

Deidara snorted. "Who knows? Humans fight for the most idiotic things, un."

"You mean like you?"

"Keep talking and you won't hear the rest," Deidara said haughtily.

"Okay, okay! Geez..." Hitomi pouted before fixing her attention on Deidara's story again.

Deidara recounted the events of the story as far as she got up to Hitomi for the next fifteen minutes, both females comfortable enough with each other's presence to sink their bodies into the couch.

"... and that's all I got up to," Deidara finished.

"No way! It was just getting exciting! How is she gonna live like a normal person? Since the war's over."

"If I knew, I'd tell you."

"Can't you read faster?" Hitomi pleaded.

"Nope. It's my book and I'll read it however fast I want to read it."

"Ugh, you're a jerk."

"Shut up, brat. Why don't you tell me a story instead, if you're so great."

Hitomi huffed. "I don't have any stories..."

Deidara huffed right back at her, narrowing her eyes. "Then don't complain to me about this."

"But...!" Knowing that she had lost, Hitomi's pout returned and, with a harrumph, she turned her nose up at Deidara. Rolling her eyes, Deidara simply knocked the back of her knuckles against the girl's head, making her wince.

"Talk to me later when you have a story to tell," Deidara told her before removing herself from the couch and returning back to her training post. I doubt that she'll have much to tell. She sighed through her nose, adjusting the wooden arms of her training dummy. Then she held her hands behind her back and attacked the post with her legs, leaning backward, forward, and to the side to avoid the uppermost row of arms that spun along with the bottom ones.

When one arm slapped her cheek, she hissed, and resisted the urge to angrily headbutt the thing.
"Why don't you use your hands?"

Deidara inwardly groaned. *The brat really can't keep her mouth shut for five minutes, can she?* But she couldn't really be blamed, seeing as she was still a child and children were biologically wired to be egocentric. *This one's a little too egocentric, yeah.* Because, you see, when two big egos shared a small apartment, a little irritation here and there was bound to happen. She forced down a blush that was threatening to appear on her cheeks. *Of course she had to see me get bitch-slapped by a dummy.*

"Well?" Hitomi prompted, either oblivious to Deidara's souring expression or simply uncaring. *Her cheek is going red...*

"I need to train my legs as well," Deidara explained to her as simply as she could. "I can't focus on just my upper body all the time."

"But I see you use your legs as well as your arms," Hitomi pointed out, and Deidara's eyes sharpened ever so slightly.

*She's observant, at least. Not a bad quality to have.* "That's true, but I'm still too reliant on my arms. I'm supposed to be training my entire body, not just one half of it."

Hitomi looked like she had some sort of semblance of understanding. "Oh, okay. Still, I wouldn't wanna get slapped by wood. Doesn't it hurt?"

Deidara returned to attacking the pole with her legs. "No," she said sarcastically, her patience wearing thin from the girl's questions. "No, Hitomi, it feels like a gentle caress. Of course it hurts!"

"Geez, sorry! You're so grumpy! No wonder you're never gonna get married!"

"I told you to drop the marriage thing! I bet I could get plenty of guys if I wanted to!" By now, Deidara had long given up on training properly. It was a little strange for her to be having an argument with a child, but she couldn't let those blows to her feminine pride go unchecked.

"Nuh uh! You don't look after your face enough. And your hair's always greasy."

"I rarely wash it for good reason, un," Deidara snapped. "I'm not foolish enough to let the water sit in my hair and give me a temperature." She was tempted to add a snide "like you have room to talk", but decided against it. She wasn't going to stoop that low just to win an argument against a goddamn six-year-old. *She's right about my face, though. I'll start passing for a living corpse, soon.* Like the rest of her body, her face had narrowed remarkably, any hint of baby fat now lost to living in poverty and oppression.

"So what? No guy would wanna marry you because you're always blowing things up," Hitomi shot back, changing her argument.

"If they can't appreciate my art, then that's their problem. It's part of who I am and I'll be damned if I let them walk all over me, un."

Hitomi opened her mouth to retort before closing it again, considering Deidara's response.

The blonde woman raised an eyebrow at her deliberation. "What?"

"Nothing... just that..." Hitomi lifted her chin. "You're just like onee-chan. Okaa-san always told her to be more ladylike to suit her appearance, but..."
"Ah." Deidara leaned against the wall, her arms folded across her chest. "I remember that she always hung out with that Uzumaki brat." She noted Hitomi's decidedly displeased look. "Don't like street rats, do you?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, neither of us have much business disliking him for just that..." Suddenly, the ribs jutting against her skin felt more pronounced than ever, and her hipbones felt uncomfortably sharp. And judging from Hitomi's distinctly uncomfortable demeanor, she was feeling the same way. "Anyway —" Time for a subject change; no use in making ourselves feel worse, un. "Your sister had the right idea."

"The right idea?" Hitomi echoed, unsure.

"Yeah," Deidara affirmed. "She stayed true to herself."

"Oh. But she had other friends, too." Better friends, Hitomi added silently, knowing that Deidara would probably snark her if she made the remark out loud. "Like that Billboard-brow that she hangs out with."

"Right," Deidara said dryly. Billboard-brow? Really? What an unorthodox friendship they must have, un. Then again, she wasn't really one to judge, considering her (former) interaction circle had consisted of multiple Uchiha, a green-clad, enthusiastic taijutsu user, village kids, and a puppet-obsessed man who worked at a chicken rice shop that was run by his grandmother.

It came quickly, but it was overwhelming nonetheless.

The nostalgia felt like a kunai to the gut—sharp and stinging. It continued to throb as Hitomi droned on about Ino's other friends ("... Shikamaru, and there was the fatty..."), and Deidara's heart twisted as she realized for the first time that her once-thriving interaction circle now consisted of a child, a training dummy, and skulking rats. How she wished she could feel the summer breeze on her face again as she and the other members of the Big 4 had a battle royale, as the smoke from the clay that she had exploded made her eyes water—

"Are you okay?" Hitomi asked, breaking Deidara out of her thoughts.

"Hm? Yeah..." Deidara blinked, her lashes damp. "I just hate being stuck here." There's nothing to do except wait. The city's on lock-down—no one who isn't Tsukigakure gets in or out without getting a bullet through the head.

"... Me too. I miss Ino-nee. Umm..." Hitomi frowned. "Do you miss anyone?"

"Yeah." Deidara pushed herself off the wall and grabbed a wooden arm that belonged to her training dummy, adjusting its position. "Yeah, I do."

Hitomi didn't bother her for a while after that.

Daichi hadn't been outside his room for a while. The practice sword that Sasuke had given him on their first day of training hung proudly on the wall—the grandest display among mediocre things.

Daichi hadn't seen Sasuke since the invasion started, and it'd been over a month—nearing two—since then. Even now, as he headed downstairs to use the bathroom in their second home—the one above the dango shop—thoughts of his mentor plagued his mind.
Sasuke-sama... what happened to you? Where did you go? Are you fighting in the war? The last thought caused dread to fill his heart, and he tried to chase it away by arguing that it simply wasn't logically for a non-military man to be on the front-lines. Not to mention that there was no way Tsukigakure would have allowed him to leave the premises of the city.

There was a rustling noise when Daichi left the toilet, and he paused. Then he went over to the kitchen, where the sound had originated from. He peered around the doorway, his breath hitching when he saw his mother crouching over what was the remaining rice they had in a black pot. It was very meager—the amount wouldn't even begin to feed Hikari.

Rin seemed to realize, too. She dug further into her cupboard and pulled out a few potatoes in a jar. Boiled potatoes were what most people were eating nowadays. They could be grown using human feces, so it was a go-to food for people lacking the usual resources for growing crops.

His mother was a smart woman—she probably had a small patch of potatoes growing behind the store.

What Daichi didn't know was that the small meal of rice and water he had had last night would probably be his last meal containing rice for a long time. Rice was rare nowadays. As the Tsukigakure occupation continued, food had grown incredibly scarce, even for former successful business owners like Obito and Rin. Money meant nothing—no one would give up their food for worthless lumps of metal. A few of the workers at the cotton mill had stopped coming to work despite their previous claims of staying.

They'd been looking extremely thin and weary during their last days at work, and no one had any doubt of what had become of them.

Daichi retreated further down the corridor when he heard a footfall, hiding in the bathroom and peering out ever so slightly. He recognized the footsteps—it was his father, but Daichi didn't want his mother to know that he knew of the food shortage in their household. He didn't particularly feel like being swaddled, told that everything would be okay when it clearly wasn't, and sent off to his room like a naughty child.

"Rin?" Obito called, disappearing into the kitchen. That was when Daichi, quiet as a mouse, crept out of the bathroom and pressed his back against the wall, listening intently.

In the kitchen, Obito had noticed the little amount of rice that they had left. He frowned, lines carved into his face from worry and stress—lines that hadn't been there before. "There really is none left..."

Rin nodded grimly. "All we have now are potatoes, but the garden is small. And they're not finished growing yet." She held up a potato. "This was the biggest one I could find."

Sighing warily, Obito accepted her words with a defeated air. *We really have fallen on hard times. If this keeps going, we're only going to wait ourselves to death.* Sasori had come to see him a few days ago, with news from Itachi.

The Underground Faction were experiencing the brunt of the famine, the stolen supplies they used to sustain themselves not able to provide for everyone. More than half of their population had already starved to death, and Sakura had nearly gotten shot after being caught after curfew smuggling medicine and dried noodles out of a store. The beer hall that was located above the Underground's entrance was still thriving as there was no shortage of supply on alcohol, but pretty much everything else was thinning out—including the people.
Obito was almost beside himself with righteous anger when the fact that Akatsuki once had a thriving population of 300,000 people came to him. He clenched his fists, eyebrows furrowed.

"Obito." Rin stood and clasped his shoulder, looking him in the eye. The silent plead was there: *Please don't do anything rash.*

"How pathetic do I have to be," Obito ground out, his hands shaking. "That I can't even provide for my own family."

"It isn't your fault, dammit!" Rin snapped, her own hand trembling as she clutched Obito's shoulder tighter before pulling him into a forceful embrace. "It isn't your fault..."

"Stop, Rin."

"It isn't your fault!" she repeated vehemently, her eyes burning as she drew away from her husband. "Don't you dare pin the blame on yourself. This is a situation that neither you or I can control. But we can survive."

How? The desperate, searching question hung in the air for so long that even Daichi could hear it from his position on the other side of the kitchen wall.

Eventually, Obito calmed down enough to reason, "Whoever's running the place isn't stupid enough to let the whole population die out, despite everything. They'll do something about it, I'll bet."

And sure enough, they did.

Sasori grunted in annoyance as he burned his hand on the handle of the pot. Muttering curses, he pressed the burned area to his side for a moment before reaching for what he had been reaching for again—a ladle.

Chiyo entered just as Sasori was about to emerge from the kitchen with two boiled potatoes on a plate.

"Baa-sama?" Sasori said, his tone questioning.

"Have you heard Madara's announcement? He's the Tsukigakure General that runs Akatsuki."

"Announcement? What announcement?" Sasori placed the plate of potatoes in the middle of their small, round dining table, the hem of Chiyo's dress swaying back and forth as she bustled after him, taking out a piece of brown paper from her apron pocket.

"Read it," his grandmother urged. "And tell me what you intend to do with this information."

Is this announcement truly that important? he wondered as he took the calligraphy-covered paper from Chiyo, who was looking unusually grave but somewhat excited at the same time. When he read it, Sasori could see why.

*Defeat a taijutsu master and win one bag of rice to feed your family at the Nohara-Uchiha grounds,* the paper read, the sentences curt and concise. Straight to the point. Normally, Sasori hated beating around the bush, and would have appreciated such a thing, but he despised how cold and clinical it'd come out. There was no doubt in his mind—this message was clearly directed to those Madara considered sub-human, which was all of the Akatsuki's remaining population.
The paper crumpled a little under Sasori's grip.

"We're running out of food," Chiyo stated bluntly, a perpetual frown on her face. "Keeping a low profile and disregarding your title of Akasuna no Sasori means nothing now, my grandson. What will you do next?"

Sasori met her stare evenly. "I'll do what needs to be done. Nothing more, nothing less." He turned the paper around, finding nothing useful. Then he crumpled it and tossed it into a dusty trashcan. "But first..." He tapped the table, gesturing to the potatoes and giving his grandmother an expecting glance. "Itadakimasu." You wily old bat, he added silently.

Chiyo snorted. "There's no getting past you, is there?"

Madara had an adviser that Sasuke hated with a burning passion. His name was Mizuki and his only purpose was to fawn over Madara on his bad days as far as Sasuke was concerned.

Wherever Madara went, Mizuki followed behind him like some kind of twisted puppy. The only comfort that Sasuke had was that it was highly likely that Madara found Mizuki to be as much of a nuisance as Sasuke did. But Mizuki's father was apparently some kind of high-ranking official in Tsukigakure, which was probably why the General even bothered to keep him around.

Today, Sasuke was forced to stand next to Mizuki—who was sandwiched between him and Madara—and watch the hapless citizens of Akatsuki file in through the door to challenge Tsukigakure taijutsu masters for a reward. They were standing on the upper level of the room, and looking down at the ring.

The reward was one bag of rice.

For some, it was worth risking life and limb to provide for their families.

Most were just desperate to survive, and seeing the desperation in their eyes made something in Sasuke's stomach coil. Most of them were civilians with no battle experience, he quickly realized.

What happened to them next was brutal, and Sasuke refused to watch, staring at the opposite balcony instead. Footsteps reached his ears, and officers took their places behind the three of them, eager to watch civilians—whose only crime was their futile hope—being beaten to near death by master martial artists.

A civilian shouted at them in the Amegakure dialect that only Sasuke could understand.

"Translate," Madara instructed, and Sasuke did so instantaneously.

"He called us dogs, Madara-sama," Sasuke translated, wondering if this man was suicidal.

Madara's lips curled upward in a cruel smile. "Then his only hope is to win."

Sasuke did not dare ask what the consequences would be if the man lost. But he soon found out when, inevitably, the man suffered the hands of defeat. He was going to get up and go home like the rest of the few men that had gotten away still able-bodied when there was a crack of thunder, and a hole opened up in the man's head as a bullet passed through his brain.

Sasuke stiffened at the noise, which had originated from Mizuki. Mizuki, who had pulled his gun out somewhere during the fight, was smiling contentedly, smoke coming out from the muzzle of his gun.
The thud of the man's body was sickening, and Sasuke's stomach lurched again. They killed him. They actually killed him. His eyes were wide with shock as the body was dragged away by a lower-ranking officer, and the next contestant was called up. They wouldn't have if he hadn't called us dogs. If Sasuke hadn't translated the man's words.

Sasuke had seen death before. It was inevitable now that they were living in times of war. But what he had seen were people whose souls had long departed. Sasuke had never seen a man killed right in front of his eyes before.

He'd boasted of his skill as a swordsman to Daichi and others who'd been willing to listen, but he had never put his training into practice before. Had never had to.

Sasuke was trembling. No. This is a mistake.

His mother appeared in his mind, mouthing the words, Survive. She'd died in his father's arms from injuries she had received while out in the market, and Fugaku had cradled her body all night.

This isn't survival.

Sasuke could have sworn that cold water splashed on his back. Survival wasn't supposed to be like this.

When Madara had stormed the Uchiha compound asking for people to join his army, Sasuke had been the first to volunteer, still grieving for his mother. She'd told him to survive, and he would best flourish on the winning side.

People weren't supposed to die like that.

Are you a fool? Sasuke argued with himself, clenching his clammy hands. You knew what you were getting into when you joined. This has been happening all around you the whole time. One man doesn't make a difference. He felt like barking out in hysterical, mirthless laughter, and would have had Madara not been there. I am heir. I cannot break. Itachi forsook me with a clan.

In front of Sasuke was a massacre.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

But there was light—one, small crepuscular ray—when the first winner appeared and claimed his prize.

Sasori, Sasuke immediately recognized. The puppeteer fought with his arms and legs today, and defeated the taijutsu master he was facing with relative ease. He seemed as malnourished as the rest of the civilians, but there was a hint of color on his cheeks from the fighting, and his face was still looking as timeless as usual.

Mizuki blinked, disappointed.

"Give him the rice," Madara commanded, and someone tossed the bag of rice at Sasori's feet. Sasori hooked one foot underneath the bag and kicked it upward, catching it with one hand without spilling any of the precious grain. The man's brown eyes never left Sasuke's face before he took the rice and went.

The darkness returned again, and the massacre resumed after that.
A/N: ahhhh idk

Here's a list of relevant OCs in the fic

Uchiha Daichi - Rin and Obito's son, 8 years old

Uchiha Hikari - Rin and Obito's daughter, 5 years old

Yamanaka Hitomi - Ino's younger sister, 6 years old

Chihiro - orphan girl, 9 years old, working at the Nohara-Uchiha cotton mill

Uchiha Kagami - unknown gender, wears a mask constantly, like damn, dem Uchihas really like masks don't they or is that just Tobi

About 2 months have passed since the invasion started as of the scene with Obito, Rin, and Daichi, just in case you missed the parts where I mentioned the time.

IK Shisui seems kind of MIA most of the time, and I don't plan for him to get much screentime in this fic because he isn't a major, major character, though he does play a role.

Also, Uchiha Kagami is not the same Kagami as Uchiha Kagami... that sounds confusing, but yeah. It's a different Kagami, not the canon one.
"Shh..." Sakura hushed as she placed a damp cloth over the woman’s burning forehead to try and further bring down her fever. "You'll be fine in no time. For now, please rest."

"T-thank you..." The woman's eyes closed, and her breathing evened out as she fell into sleep.

"Just doing my duty," Sakura murmured, even though she knew the civilian lady was already asleep and had no chance of hearing her. She pulled three thin blankets over her, until everything except for her nose and above were covered.

The Underground's makeshift medical center was not impressive, to say the least, but they had to make do with what they had. Sakura could hear shuffling and an irritated groaning coming from the other side of the small hut. It was where Kisame was currently recovering, and the area had been curtained off.

Sakura pushed past the curtains. "Hey, big guy. I don't think you should be moving around too much." She crossed her arms. "If you don't do what I say, you'll be in a world of further hurt."

Kisame, who was sitting up and seemingly trying to touch his toes, stiffened before shooting her a sharp grin. "What kind of medic threatens her patients? With that kind of bedside manner, I'm starting to doubt whether you're qualified or not."

"When you've trained under Tsunade of the Sannin, proper bedside manner is just one of the many things that go unaccounted for. I don't mean to toot my own horn, but if Shizune and I weren't here, you'd be dead." She shrugged. "Such is life."

"Adorable," Kisame said in a tone that indicated he clearly meant otherwise. There were dark circles under his eyes; he had not rested well for the past few weeks thanks to the combined pain of his injuries. Sakura had administered pain killers, but refused to give him doses that wouldn't allow him to become virtually numb.

She hadn't looked in a mirror for a while, but Sakura strongly suspected that she didn't look too spiffing either. After checking on Kisame's health, she stepped back from his bed with an approving nod. "You're healing up nicely," she said in a clipped tone, going back to her medic mode. "I bet that you'll be up and about in a few days."
"Then why does it hurt so much? My back."

"Because I had to cut it open multiple times to retrieve shards of glass embedded in your flesh," Sakura replied without even a blink. "Speaking of, your body has amazing healing properties—far beyond the average human's. You're in good shape for your age thanks to your taijutsu training. That's got to be a factor, but it still doesn't explain why you healed most of your superficial wounds so quickly."

Kisame shifted in his bed, gingerly lying back and clasping his hands over his stomach. "Clan thing," he said shortly, obviously not willing away to give away whatever secret that was behind his fast healing.

Sakura nodded, knowing how people could be protective of clan secrets. The Sharingan was one such example—no one but the Uchiha knew a lick about it. But the general assumption was that it copied movements and seared them into one's memory. The Hyuuga's Byakugan was also an anomaly that no one except a Hyuuga could replicate; the eye gave the user the ability to see through surfaces. To make sure that chaos would not erupt, there was a ban placed on the Hyuuga's Byakugan, stating that the dojutsu could not be used outside of combat. It went for the Sharingan as well, but considering the police force had been made up of mostly Uchihas...

But this was no time for secrets. Sooner or later, Sakura vowed, she would find out the secret behind Kisame's healing factor. She left Kisame to rest and exited the medical hut, looking around her surroundings. The place was mostly empty, with most hiding out in abandoned buildings. The Underground's population had experienced a great decline thanks to the shortage of food. Lack of water was of no concern for now as it rained regularly, but they were slowly being drained of their rations. Right now, there were only about twenty people left that were living in the Underground City. After a successive chain of deaths—mostly civilians unused to hunger and sickness (but then again, weren't they all?)—many had chosen to up and leave. It was their decision—no one had stopped them. Sakura, Itachi, and Shikamaru had guided them through the beer hall and let them outside.

Sakura's shoulders drooped as she dropped the front she put on in front of her patients, the life seemingly sucked out of her. *I feel dead on my feet. A nap is seriously in order...* She lifted her head to eye the building that she knew Ino stayed in. She visited the blonde girl every day, and Ino was slowly, slowly getting better. They'd been good friends before the war, and a stone of guilt and hopelessness had formed in the pinkette's belly with each passing day. But Ino hadn't inquired as far as she knew, and the subject of Hitomi had simply never come up.

Yamanaka Hitomi. Five years old. Blonde. Female. And had memorized the lock combination of the beer hall, gone outside to search for her sister, and had never come back.

There were the sound of voices when Sakura was about to retire to her room for the night. Shikamaru and Choji were returning from their shift at the beer hall, and carrying a few bottles of alcohol. They noticed her immediately, and went straight to her.

Shikamaru held out a bottle as some kind of offering, his brow raised.

It was tempting, Sakura had to admit. *But I'll end up staying up all night and be even deader in the morning.* She shook her head. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"It's no fun if only two of us are drowning our sorrows," Shikamaru remarked casually, his arm and the bottle dropping to his side. "Choji's a sad drunk."
"Hey," Choji objected. "Last time you said I was chatty. Make up your mind, why don't you?"

"Too troublesome..." There was this look in Shikamaru's eyes that made Sakura fear for his health. His will had brought him this far, but even that was slowly crumbling.

*Because of Ino*, Sakura realized, that guilt returning again. Shikamaru often visited Ino with her, and tried to ease the long-haired girl into opening up more. Sometimes it worked, other times the presence of a male was too off-putting.

"I'm sorry," Ino had said meekly last time. Ino had never been meek before that. She'd been outspoken and fierce, and—and—

"On second thoughts," Sakura said, "I think I'll join you in drowning those sorrows."

Shikamaru handed her the bottle. "Wise choice."

*Hardly,* Sakura thought as they retreated somewhere else. *Then again, when have I ever made wise decisions?* Sasuke's face flashed through her mind. *Now's not the time. Just open the bottle already.*

The sun was not yet up when Deidara's eyes snapped open. She lifted her head off the arm of the couch, her neck cricking uncomfortably. She looked around the room, seeing nothing but darkness, and swept her legs off the cushions.

*Dammit,* she hissed inwardly when she stubbed her toe on something. The woman continued to fumble her way through the dark, trying not to wake Hitomi, who was undoubtedly still asleep in Deidara's bed.

The last clothing raid they had done—when Hitomi had picked up her pink kimono—had ensured that both of them had adequate sleepwear and outdoor clothing. The tiny courtyard behind the apartment was often frequented now that Hitomi was around, leading to dirtier clothes.

Deidara tied her hair differently this time, pulling back all of her locks in a bun, including her famed canary's wing fringe. Hair curled around her ears, but that was of no concern. *I think the dinner table's over here.* She reached out, feeling smooth wood. *Yeah, okay. That means the door...* She moved to the right, one hand outstretched in front of her. Her fingers and hand-mouth found the door, and she exited the room to meet a cold outdoors. Her apartment was on the uppermost floor, meaning that she had to walk down a flight of stone steps.

It was a little less dark outside, as the very top of the sun was starting to peek over the hills, whitening the clouds that shaded it. Deidara's stomach grumbled—a grave reminder of what she was about to do with an empty stomach.

She walked through the streets without her hood, her posture slightly slouched in the perfect depiction of a worn and weary civilian man. She was glad that it was dark, as her left eye was particularly sensitive to light, hence why she kept her hair the way she normally did.

*If she made it quick, she'd be back before the afternoon.*

Deidara pulled out a brown piece of paper from the sleeve of her solid black Akatsuki cloak. *Obito's house... that's miles away from here.* But she was hungry and there was a young mouth to be fed, so she'd have to suck it up and deal with it. *I'm not sure how much one bag of rice is, but...* A quick assumption and some simple math calculations told her that one bag would be enough for about three weeks between her and Hitomi. The girl was already malnourished enough
as she was—she needed to be fed more than she was currently eating. *This is such a pain. I really wish I’d left her to those soldiers, un.* She certainly meant it now, but she knew she’d not mean it in the future. The girl had rubbed off on her, and Deidara was paying the price for her soft heart.

As she journeyed to Obito's mansion—now a Tsukigakure stronghold if the flyer was any indication—she recited the story that she’d busied herself with over the past week. She was nearly halfway done with the book that had come from the bin; despite trying to limit herself to one page per day, that cursed curiosity had taken over her.

The sun had almost fully risen when she saw Obito's house in the distance. Deidara quickened her pace, and a growling vehicle containing about ten Tsukigakure soldiers drove past her without even a glance. Deidara grimaced. *Those machines... those were going to be ours if they'd never come. Obito was boasting about getting one. Good thing they didn't notice me...*

She was just another hungry civilian, after all.

Ten minutes later, however, another patrol approached her. And this time, they were foot soldiers. Deidara halted this time, feeling cold water splash onto her back when one of them called out to her.

"Where're you going so early in the morning? Curfew ended not long ago."

Deidara turned to see two dark-haired men—one of them was wearing a mask—staring back at her.

"Maa, leave him alone," said the one with the mask, turning to the other one. His voice was slightly distorted. "He's probably just trying to earn food for his family, just like the rest of them."

"Hn." The man—the *Uchiha*—without the mask harrumphed and turned away. "Fine. Let's keep going, Kagami. Sasuke-taichou is expecting us soon."

*Sasuke. Taichou.* Deidara gave them a stiff nod as they passed. *I can’t believe this. That brat would really turn on his own? And for what? Survival?* Well, if that were the case, he couldn't certainly be blamed, especially when there were clearly other Uchiha that were on the other side of the coin as well. *Regardless, if the people knew, morale would stoop even lower than it already is. Do they?* Sasuke had been an emblem of justice for the majority of the community, despite being a teenager still trying to find his place in the world.

Her chakra rolled off her in waves of anger and disbelief, and a few clay spiders dropped out of her sleeve and crawled into an abandoned building. *Screw this. I'll be out of here before they know it. Katsu!*

Deidara's cloak whipped behind her as the building exploded with a loud *boom!* and flames burst into the air. She'd obviously exploded something flammable. Her piercing blue eyes, large against her gaunt visage, practically glowed with a new vengeance as the fire reached its peak height. That pitiful excuse of a police officer was supposed to be Daichi's mentor—his role model. She'd never had any illusions about him like the boy, but she'd never taken him for such a coward. What had happened to that famed Uchiha pride?

The answer came to her a heartbeat later, and her rage died down almost as fast as it came. *Pride,* Deidara thought numbly as she neared the former Uchiha premises. *What a worthless thing it is now.* She wasn't the only one there—there were perhaps two other prospective challengers that lived in the nearby vicinity that had come for a battle. *Something like pride...*

They were escorted to the indoor arena by Tsukigakure soldiers.
... Will only get you killed. Deidara's heart wrenched with an indescribable feeling as she thought of the building she'd blown up just minutes ago. It had crumbled under her might, weak from lack of care and maintenance. Just like everything else; we're all crumbling to dust here.

The Tsukigakure martial artist that another was fighting before her bowed to him in a show of respect. The man was too tired to replicate such a display.

It was over too quickly, really. He left bloodied and bruised and without supper. From the way his clothes hung on his thin frame, Deidara had the suspicion that he would not be making it through the night, especially with injuries of that caliber.

"Next," the proctor on the upper floor droned out, and Deidara tilted her head backward to see the bored face of a white-haired officer with a bandanna wrapped around his head. Their eyes met, and the officer scowled. "That means you, pal. Go on; don't be shy. You're getting a free meal out of this."

Fucker, Deidara absently thought as she stepped onto the ring, her opponent bowing to her. It was the same taijutsu user that had fought against the civilian man from before.

She slid into a stance. "Please." Her voice rang out, rich and deep.

"Please," her opponent uttered in return. His own stance was one that was utterly unfamiliar to Deidara, but if she was anything, it was versatile. She was both predator and prey, and that meant learning how to adapt.

Their arms met, and the larger man attempted to jab her through her defense. Deidara's bones shuddered but the blood in her veins was roaring, and she smacked the his cheek with the palm of her hand.

He stumbled backward, obviously surprised at the amount of strength she was hiding beneath that cloak. The Tsukigakure man rolled his shoulders, and charged again, this time more careful with his movements. Unfortunately for him, his mass was not directly proportional with his speed, and to Deidara, he might as well have been a turtle. She jumped and skipped backward to dodge his punches and kicks before leaping up into the air and striking him in the neck. The man was out like a light, and Deidara landed gently on the tatami mats, her cloak billowing out for a moment before settling around her thin form. She glanced upward at the proctor, eyes narrowed. "My reward," she wanted to say, but the man had a gun and she had a brain that she did not want blown out. So Deidara kept her silence, and, eventually, someone tossed a bag of rice at her feet. She picked it up, and a pang of disappointment hit her when she realized just how light the bag was. Forget three weeks, she mourned, this won't even last two.

The soldiers escorted her outside before leaving her somewhere with nary a nod or blink. Grunting, Deidara straightened and began the long walk home, the sack of rice slapping against her thigh as she moved.

She was nearly home when a shouting caught her attention. Wearily, she lifted her head, her hair falling around her face, having come undone from the high knot she had made in the morning. After a moment's deliberation, she untied her blonde locks, allowing her fringe to fall back over her eye.

Let me guess, she thought dryly, tossing the sack over her shoulder, resigned. Another damsel in distress. A look won't hurt, but I won't be having anymore brats near my house. She wasn't sure if she could trust her heart, and walking towards the suspicious noise was always an inherently
Deidara's eyes widened ever so slightly when she saw a girl a few years younger than herself break a man's nose with an open palm strike. There was already another man lying on the ground, his limbs splayed out awkwardly. The girl looked to be ten or eleven years old, and her dark hair whipped around her face as she steadied herself, panting slightly. She pushed her hair back and turned to look at Deidara, Byakugan activated and pulsing. Everything about the young preteen radiated command that was not easily broken, and Deidara shifted her weight in preparation for a confrontation.

"What do you think you're doing?" the girl—a Hyuuga, it would seem, if the dojutsu was any indication of her heritage—demanded. Behind that commanding exterior, there was also weariness that came from weeks of running, hiding, and altogether hoping for the best. "You..." She narrowed her eyes. "Who are you? I've seen you before."

"Who am I?" Deidara's voice was hoarse from disuse, and she cleared her throat. "No one too special, un. What about you, Hyuuga? Which one are you?"

"Answer my question," the Hyuuga said sharply. "I'm not in the mood for games. I'm on an important mission."

Oh, she was just adorable, wasn't she? Deidara chuckled darkly. "What do you know, so am I. But those dead soldiers are going to be a problem for both you and I if you just leave them here."

Because, yes, they were obviously dead. She hadn't seen it, but Deidara was almost certain that shards of bone had pierced his brain when the girl had struck him upside the nose. And from the way the other man looked—with his limbs splayed awkwardly; lying face-down—he was dead, too. "You must not be from around here, un." Deidara pretended to be preoccupied with looking around their surroundings. "Patrols come around every five minutes along that main road. About one out of three of them take a looksie in dark, dangerous alleyways like this, un. Idiot," she added as an afterthought, because it'd been too long that she had wound someone up.

"I—" The Hyuuga sucked in a breath between her teeth. Hadn't thought of that, hung unspoken in the misty morning. "What do you suggest we do?"

"Well, I do have a few... devices, but they're too loud. There'll be more soldiers coming in... approximately three minutes, so I suggest stuffing them into that bin over there."

There was a beat, and the two girls stared each other down.

Then;

"Wait, that's it?" The Hyuuga did a slight double take before recovering. "Just... stuff them in there?"

Deidara cocked an eyebrow shrewdly. "If you have any better ideas, I'm listening."

Moments later, the two bodies had been shoved into empty trash cans.

"Now," Deidara said, dusting her hands. "What's a kid like you doing out here?" She kept on ear out for the approach of soldiers, but there were none.

"... Hanabi," the girl reluctantly said. "My name is Hyuuga Hanabi. And as for why I'm here... that's none of your concern."

"Then you can call me Deidara. I'd love to stay and chat a little longer, but I'm hungry and the brat
that lives with me is probably hungry."

"Oh. You have a daughter? A younger sister, perhaps?"

Deidara immediately scowled. "Hell, no. I'm nineteen. And hell will freeze over the day I'm related to that thing." She looked around warily. "It's not safe out here. Don't stay here for too long, Hyuuga-chan."

Before Hanabi could protest, Deidara disappeared around the corner and made a mad, but silent, dash back to her home, not stopping until she reached her front door on the uppermost level.

The kid could take care of herself a little too well, Deidara had decided. She didn't need to be further burdened, and Hanabi had been there for a purpose—one that she would not disclose—which gave her less reason to bring her into her home.

"Though, she silently mused. *I have a feeling that this won't be the last I see of her. The Hyuuga are not allied with the Tsukigakure military in any way, last time I checked.*"

Deidara hadn't even stepped inside when a small figure tackle-hugged her, sending her stumbling backward a few steps. "Wha—Hitomi?"

"You were gone!" Hitomi yelled, glaring up at her with tears in her big blue eyes as she pulled away.

"I had to get us food, yeah," Deidara explained, uncomfortably. Why is she so...?

"You were gone," Hitomi repeated, more quietly this time. She looked down at the cold stone floor. "I... thought you left me for good."

"I..." Deidara let out a frustrated sigh. "Look, kid, even after all the trouble you caused me, you're still here. Why the hell would I leave you now, hm?" She moved inside, closing the door behind her. The older blonde tossed the bag of rice onto the dinner table, and then turned to stare down at Hitomi, arms crossed. "Well?"

Hitomi bit her lip. "I thought I was gonna die!"

"Don't be so over dramatic. Like I'd let you. Besides, you could survive a few days without me if you really tried, un."

"So what?" Hitomi looked like a hen left out in the rain.

Sighing again, Deidara tentatively reached out and ruffled Hitomi's hair. "So, nothing. I'm here now, okay? And trust me when I say I won't be going out there for a while. The food will last us approximately two weeks if we ration it." She hesitated, then went on, "After that, I can't make any promises. I'm going to have to go out for supplies, whether you like it or not."

"Then let me come with you! Maybe then I can find Ino-nee—"

"No way," Deidara interrupted. "You'll only get in the way."

"But—"

"Shut up, I'm going to make breakfast."

"Argh!" Hitomi glared after Deidara's retreating back. "I wouldn't be a li-ah-bi-li-ty if you trained me! So there."
Deidara halted, and Hitomi shrunk back. Had she said something wrong? Perhaps she had used the word 'liability' in the wrong context.

Hitomi's tiny heart beat faster as Deidara turned around with something pensive in her eyes. Perhaps... she would say yes?

"No," Deidara flatly refused.

Ah.

"Ehh?! Why not?" The seriousness of her request had officially gone over her head, and Hitomi stepped forward. "Is it because I'm a girl?"

"Little idiot!" Deidara snapped, temper flaring. "In case you've forgotten, I'm a girl, too! I don't want to train you because you have absolutely no idea what you're asking of me, un."

"Then I'll train myself!"

"Fine."

"Fine!"

Deidara kept one eye on her when Hitomi stormed over to Deidara's training dummy and began to move it around experimentally. *That little brat better not fucking break anything, un.*

Barely five minutes later, the wooden dummy's arm had whacked Hitomi across the head and caused a red mark to appear. She cried out in pain and whimpered, clutching the mild wound.

Deidara, who was over by the fire warming herself up as well as waiting for water to boil, sighed and got up. "And this," she gestured mockingly to Hitomi, "is why I said no. Hurts, doesn't it?" It didn't appear that the skin had broken, and Deidara had seen the little force the arm had hit Hitomi with, so she would be fine in a few minutes.

"I won't give up," Hitomi hissed, hating the haughty look on Deidara's face. "You'll see... I'll be strong enough to find Ino-nee."

That made Deidara pause, staring into nothing as Hitomi attempted to 'train' some more. *Right, the Yamanaka heir.* She'd suspected for some time now that Hitomi had left whatever safety she had once had to search for her big sister. It was something that she could grudgingly respect and perhaps admire despite the foolishness behind it.

Frustrated with her lack of progress, Hitomi whacked the row of spinning arms closest to her, causing them to gyrate violently. She yelped and flinched, but then Deidara was there, stopping the movement by grabbing one of the arms and holding it in place.

Hitomi tilted her head backward, eyes wide. "Huh...?"

"Sunrise, back courtyard, tomorrow morning," Deidara said brusquely, letting go of the now still arm. "Don't be late."

The water had finished boiling, and Hitomi could only stare after Deidara as the older girl went to tend to it.

Then Hitomi burst into a fit of quiet giggles and she smiled. *Yes!*
“Explain,” Sasori said forcefully, eyeing the giant bruise on the side of Obito’s face. His eye was swollen and half-closed. "Explain to me why the hell you thought it was a good idea for you to face two at once."

"Ah, well," Obito chuckled, the sound coming out strangely. Both men were currently seated in the kitchen of the Uchiha’s home above the closed dango shop. "You see, there was this old lady that I helped cross the road... and she told me a sad story about how her son died fighting the big bald one. So I asked to fight him as well to avenge the old lady's son."

"Meaning," Rin said icily as she walked into the room, carrying a medical kit with her. She placed it on the table between the men and opened it up. "That this absolute idiot decided to put his life on the line for an extra bag of rice." She looked conflicted—torn between grateful, mad, and worried.

Obito winced when his wife started to dab at a laceration on his cheek with a cotton bud. "Oh, suck it up," Rin whispered. "And don't go out to fight again. Not now, anyway. And don't ever do something so foolish again!"

"Maa, Rin..." Obito gave her a tired smile. "I'll try not to."

Sasori grumbled. "Your idiocy astounds me, sometimes. At least Rin-san is sensible."

"Hey, no hitting on my wife," Obito joked lamely. "Ouch, hey!" he complained when Rin dabbed particularly hard.

"My hand slipped," Rin demurred, a hint of mischief in her eyes. The small sparkle quickly disappeared. "I know how much you always pester Sasori-san when he comes over, and I'm sure he's tired of hearing about having to find a wife."

"Sorry," Obito apologized to both of them. "In these bleak times, I guess I'd just like something new to look forward to."

"Yes, well," Sasori looked out the window, "This is not up for debate. And I'd rather not hear about it; I get enough of it from the old dungeon bat."

Obito cackled. "Dungeon bat!"

Sasori cracked a small smile. "Aa. Speaking of, I should get going before curfew starts. I'll see you next time." Itachi will be pleased to hear that Obito is doing fine. Still being an idiot, despite everything. As for Sasuke...

That bridge could be crossed later.

Sasori was long gone and Obito had returned to the factory when Daichi and Hikari tumbled out of their hiding spot in the bathroom.

"Did you see otou-san's face?" whispered Hikari. "What happened...?"

"He got beat up," Daichi uttered, his face flattening into a frown. Otou-san...

"Daichi-nii?"

"Huh?"

Hikari held his hand. "I'm scared."
"... Don't be. Nothing's gonna happen."

"Swear on it?" Hikari held out her pinky.

Daichi hesitated. When he looped his pinky around hers. "Yeah, swear on it."

"A competition for rice?" Itachi echoed.

"Exactly what it sounds like," Sasori replied. "You should participate."

Itachi looked around at their campsite. "No. We have enough food as it is, right now. We are running scarce, but we will be able to scavenge more. But if things become worse..." Itachi closed his eyes. "I will do it."

"... It's because of Izumi, isn't it?"

"She's due any day, now," Itachi confessed.

"I understand. I should go."

"Sasori; always in a rush."

"I have to be, if it means dodging soldiers past curfew." Sasori turned his back on the Uchiha. "Goodbye, Itachi."

Sasori had just left when Hyuuga Hanabi returned from her daily explorations above ground. "Itachi-san," she said. "I found Deidara."

A brown-haired girl with her hair tied in a low ponytail was sweeping the Nohara-Uchiha teahouse front when a colorful kite caught her attention.

Chihiro tilted her head to one side.

A hand clamped over her mouth before she could scream.
Hyuuga Hanabi was a strange case in this new world of theirs. Her family still lived, though the heir was missing, and while their existence was not as comfortable as it once was, they still scraped through.

Well, the Main Family did, anyway. The Branch Family...

Were simply irrelevant for the most part.

But for Hanabi, the second daughter of the Hyuuga Clan Head, Hyuuga Hiashi, she simply had no reason to be spending her days—or nights, even, when she was feeling particularly bold—skulking around in the Underground with the homeless.

Or at least an outsider would think as much.

"I was out looking for my sister," Hanabi reported to Itachi, her small face stoic. The mask she wore was not as well trained as Itachi's, but it would be soon. It would have to be—Hanabi was the next up-and-coming taijutsu prodigy ever since Itachi had been disowned. "When I encountered two soldiers from Tsukigakure. I took them out, but I made a grave oversight. Deidara discovered me before anything could happen, however, and helped me in... disposing of the bodies."

Itachi blinked slowly, and Hanabi could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. His thought process was one that she could never figure out, and she took solace in knowing that she probably wasn't only one who felt that way.

"Where?" Itachi prompted at last.

"North-east from our current location." She listed off the distance and described the general area. "She implied that she was living with someone—a younger female by the way she spoke." Hanabi paused. "I think she might be looking after the girl. She was... thin, thinner than the population down here, that's for sure."

"Thank you, Hanabi-san." Itachi dipped his head lightly to her in acknowledgement. "Deidara... is another person that can be saved."

Hanabi raised a brow. "Does this have anything to do with that escape plan I've been hearing about?"

"Not particularly. Hanabi-san, my head is not the only thing I think with, despite what yohe might think," Itachi reminded her gently. "Rest here for tonight. You can return in the morning."

"What are we going to do about her? And the girl...?"
"You'll know when you're ready," he said vaguely, seeming a little lost in thought before his gaze focused. "Oh, and Hanabi-chan?"

She startled at the sudden sharpness his voice had taken. "Y-yes?"

"Be more careful next time."

"... Yes. I will."

Izumi sighed deeply as she accepted the canteen from Sakura, sweat dotting her forehead. She'd come down with a slight fever last night, and Sakura, whose last patient had made a full recovery, was devoting almost all her time to Izumi. The woman was due any day now, which made the prospect of an illness particularly dangerous.

"The baby's late," Izumi spoke up once she had finished the water. Her brown creased in a worried frown. "Sakura... there's nothing wrong is there?"

"No, no," Sakura assured her. "It's normal for your first pregnancy to go past the anticipated date. In fact, many women carry for forty-two weeks or forty-three weeks rather than forty-one." She touched Izumi's shoulder, her hand warm. "Don't be worried."

Izumi let loose a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "In a way," she started, her face wan. "I'm glad. I don't want my baby to be born in such a place." Guiltily, she lowered her gaze.

"Of course not," Sakura's voice was barely above a whisper, "No one would."

Both females turned when Itachi entered the medical hut, the lines etched in his face more pronounced than ever.

"Anata," Izumi greeted, a gentle smile gracing her lips as Itachi lowered himself to hug her—the Uchiha woman was currently seated on a makeshift bed.

Itachi breathed in her scent before sighing silently. *I'll need to have a word with Shikamaru and Shikaku soon. Those seals need to be figured out as soon as possible.* After some exploration of the Underground City, a route outside Akatsuki had been discovered, but there were protective seals of long ago guarding the entrance.

What was most odd about the seals was that it seemed to have been recently falsified. They—Itachi, Shikamaru, and Shikaku—kept that information amongst themselves. There was no use in stirring up panic at the notion of there being an outside force that none of them were seemingly aware of.

"The baby's going to be fine," Izumi was telling him now, their hands entwined. As he had wandered in his thoughts, he'd taken a seat next to her, and now her head was resting on his shoulder. She reached over to the side and pulled a small bundle of cloth into her lap.

"As long as you keep eating well, it will be," Sakura cautioned, holding up a finger. "I know that it's tough around here—and thank the gods that Sasori was able to bring us some food and medicine last time—but you have to eat well. Do you understand?" She shot Itachi a look. "The acoustics down here are amazing, Itachi. Are you going to... fight?"

"Sakura," Izumi sharply interrupted. "Do not force such a thing on him. He and the others are working hard enough by keeping everything in order and organizing patrols and raids. Not to mention figuring out the seals."
"I meant no offence." Sakura was struggling to keep her voice even. "But you have to look at the bigger picture! If we were to send fighters above ground to win us food, it'll benefit everyone, including the child."

"I am not an idiot, Sakura. I know that. But how could I?" Izumi stood up, shaking the bed as her face paled. "How could I send my husband out there, knowing that he may not ever return? Surely, Sakura, you must understand!"

"That's enough," Itachi intervened, his tone placidly bland. His gaze met with Izumi's, unwavering. "Izumi... you will not make these kinds of decisions for me. We don't know when those seals will break; we should have started looking into a more long term solution weeks ago."

"Itachi, you...!" Izumi clenched her fists, torn.

"Let's not rush into things just yet," Itachi murmured, taking her by the hand. "I'm not saying that we're going to be fighting for their entertainment. Food and seal-breaking are our current priorities. But to fight for it... we are not so desperate."

"For now," Sakura stated, crossing her arms.

"Knowing you, you'll take action when the time comes," Izumi said before crouching down to pick up the bundle of cloth that had fallen to the ground when she stood.

"When it is necessary, yes," Itachi confirmed. "Do not mistake me as caring for every single soul in this place equally." It was cold, and perhaps more than a little cruel, but he would not lie—what was their 'nation' of underground dwellers if not a group of individuals with their own selfish desires? "Our family comes first." He said this to Izumi, completely ignoring Sakura's presence. He could feel her chakra buzzing around her anxiously, but it was nothing new. They were all on edge.

Izumi looked up at him, her eyes searching. "You do realize our family includes you, too, right?" When he nodded, she relaxed slightly. "Good. I don't want you going off and doing... something suicidal. You've always been too kind. But I suppose if you weren't, we would be in this position. If you weren't kind, you would still be heir."

All three of them fell into a silence, and Izumi unfolded the cloth bundle to reveal two small clay figurines—a tengu and a fox—and a wooden carving of a deer.

"Am I interrupting something?" A blue head poked through the doorway, and the oil lamp in the room illuminated Kisame's face. "I couldn't help but overhear something about seals, Itachi-sama."

"Hoshigaki-sama," Itachi acknowledged, moving away from his wife toward him. "Why don't we talk outside?"

Kisame looked up at the iron wall, which was painted with all sorts of seals that were unrecognizable. "Whoever did this must have been a true seal master." He paused. "And older than a fossil."

"We came to the same conclusion," Shikamaru voiced, his voice less drawling than usual.

"We've determined that some of the symbols are variations of symbols that are normally used in the north," Shikaku added. He was favoring his left leg, and Kisame strongly suspected that the man was nursing an injury. "So, Konohagakure. A land that has bred some notable samurai in the past four hundred years."
"A variation, huh?" Kisame stroked his chin. "I've seen a lot of variations in my travels, but never something as complicated and utterly unfamiliar as this."

"Well, you tried. Thanks anyway," Shikamaru said, slouching. "Breaking these seals... is the only way to get this damn wall to open up."

"Sealing is like a language," Shikaku mused. "A dialect; that would be more accurate. Each seal-master has a unique way of sealing in the sense that they like to change up their strokes so that it differs from the traditional, textbook way." He tossed Kisame a side glance. "It's not surprising that you and I cannot comprehend it. The Nara are acclaimed geniuses... but it will still take time for us to decipher this and counter it with the appropriate seal."

"That's not reassuring at all," muttered Kisame, his hand twitching as he nearly reached for Samehada. But not even his sword could cut through the reinforced iron. He doubted anything short of a massive explosion would do—and even then, he wasn't sure if the seals would allow for it to open. Not to mention the dangers of setting off an explosive Underground.

"We've made some progress," Shikamaru informed him. "That quadrant in the top left can be countered with what we have so far," he pointed at the appropriate area, "but it wouldn't be the best idea to do that without knowing how to do the rest."

"Of course," Kisame agreed. "Everything here is connected, which is..."

"Extremely troublesome," Shikaku and Shikamaru said in unison, shooting each other a knowing, amused glance. Kisame sweatdropped slightly. The resemblance between them is uncanny...

"Tea," Hanabi announced before entering the hut Ino stayed in. "... Hi, Ino."

"Ah, Hanabi." Ino offered her a tentative smile, shifting on her futon. "Tea again?"

"Yes," Hanabi answered patiently. She's opened up a more since the last time I saw her. I need to know if she saw Hinata, but... baby steps. "Uh, I would have brought biscuits, but, y'know..." The war. The soldiers. Everything.

"It's fine. Thanks for... coming to see me. Shikamaru stopped coming over a few days ago." There was a sadness in her voice that Hanabi managed to place, and she frowned. "It's not his fault," Ino swiftly added when she saw her disapproving look. "I just...!"

"May I hold your hand?"

Ino hesitated. Then she held out her hand. "If you want."

"Shikamaru's an idiot," Hanabi said bluntly, squeezing her hand.

Ino chuckled. "That's fair." She breathed out, leaning back and supporting her weight with her palms. "But then again... I haven't exactly been myself lately. If only Naruto could see me now, he'd call me pathetic and give some kind of empowering speech..." Her eyes hardened. "I fucking hate them."

A rock formed in Hanabi's stomach. She had long since figured out what had happened to Ino based on her behavior and clues...
"What they took from me." Hanabi felt her eyes water from keeping them open for too long, fixated on Ino's furious expression. She was shaking now. Not from grief—she had had a long time to mourn what she had lost—but from pure fury. "I'll never get it back."

Hanabi sensed a "but" coming, but she stayed silent, the teapot—tea was a very rare thing; she'd brought this particular brew from her home—steaming in her hands.

"I want them to burn," she rasped, her fingers twitching. "All of them."

*But she's one teenager against an entire army*, Hanabi thought to herself, frowning. *This should have never been her war to fight. It's not even ours, it... we... we're just caught up in the crossfire.* "Ino, don't do anything reckless," Hanabi warned. "I won't pretend to understand how you feel, but please don't. There's... too many of them."

"You think I don't know that?!" Ino shouted, and Hanabi cringed as the blonde's ire turned to her. "Do you really think that...!" Seething, she wiped at her eyes. She wiped at them so hard that Hanabi figured that her vision would be blurry for at least a few minutes. "I've lost... my family. My sense of self. And do you know why?"

Hanabi didn't know, no.

"Because I was too weak to defend myself. Too slow to run." Ino stood, turned around, and, taking a deep breath, undid the sash around her yukata and let it fall.

Hanabi had to steel her nerves at what she saw.

Burn marks. Wicked, unforgiving burn marks marred the porcelain skin on her back. They had scarred as ugly as possible.

"I need to get stronger," Ino whispered, picking up her garment and redressing. "If I won't... I'll never survive."

Hanabi shakily stood up. "I could try and help, if you want." This wasn't about Hinata anymore. For now. "But I... I've never trained anyone before. Maybe you should ask one of the taijutsu masters down here. Like... Itachi-san or Hoshigaki-sama."

"... Maybe," Ino eventually said, tying the sash around her waist. "But if I ever get out of here alive, there's two things I want to do."

"And what are those?" To her relief, Hanabi's voice was unwavering. She wasn't sure how to deal with this new development, but showing weakness would do her no good. If there was anything that she had absorbed from her father's teachings, it was to never show your enemies and allies weakness and hesitation. She'd stumbled enough—she would stumble no more, she vowed.

"I'm going to seek out Tsunade the Sennin to learn her kekkei genkai. Forehead can help me with that," she said gravely. "I'm not losing anybody else. And the second thing..."

Hanabi leaned forward.

"I'm going to do whatever the hell I want. And I'm going to live by that rule for the rest of my life."

"... I like that rule," Hanabi confessed passively, her eyes flashing.

They drank their tea in silence after that.
"She wasn't there," Ino said suddenly. "That's why you've been coming." Hanabi opened her mouth to protest but Ino cut her off, "Our families had diplomatic relations. I know how your dad raised you. To think with your head before your heart. So, no, I haven't seen her. Hinata... she wasn't there. But at least you have some hope... my family on the other hand... they all perished in the fire."

"No," Hanabi said before she could even think about it. "Your sister. She's alive." Wheels began to turn in her brain. "She was here with us, before she... left us."

Ino's eyes widened, and the blood drained from her face. "And none of you stopped her?" she breathed.

"We never knew. But I have a feeling... that she's alive."

Ino nearly flipped the table as she stood up, her posture rigid. "Someone's going to pay."

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Hitomi stared up at the bell tied up on a low tree branch. She and Deidara were currently in the back courtyard, and she had just gone through some basic katas.

"You want me to kick the bell?" Hitomi inquired dubiously. "B-but..." It's so high! Who can even kick that high?!

"You're not going to complain, are you?" Deidara raised an eyebrow. "Because if you are, there's no point in even continuing, un."

"Uhm... what's the point of this?"

Deidara had to give her some credit. She snorted. Clever brat; wording her complaint in a question. Well, if she was going to play dirty like that, then Deidara didn't see any point in sugar coating anything. "The point is to improve your flexibility. Because right now, it's pretty fucking terrible."

Hitomi's ears burned at the curse word, but she nodded anyway.

"Of course, that's not the only kind of flexibility training you'll be doing." Deidara gestures to a pair of higher branches parallel to each other. "If you think the bell exercise is bad, think again, un." She paused. "I don't expect you to kick the hell on your first attempt. You'll be spending fifteen minutes on it, before we move on."

"Yes... sensei."

Deidara narrowed her eyes. "You're the one who bugged me into doing it. Don't get watery and weak on me now."

"Yes, sensei!" Hitomi repeated, straightening. I'll need to use the high kick that she got me to do this morning. Her leg shot up, but not straight. This was going to take a while, and they both knew it.

Deidara had moved her training dummy outside, so she occupied herself with it while Hitomi attempted to kick the bell, sweat already dripping down her forehead in glistening beads. Of course, she had an eye on Hitomi as well, making sure that she didn't accidentally do something stupid like fall forward and hit her head on the tree trunk.
My very first student, huh? Deidara mused, her muscles moving on autopilot. Hopefully, it doesn't turn into a complete disaster. Obito was the only one of us who ever took on a student, as far as I know. Gai and Shisui were too busy for that kind of stuff. Gai with his "youthful" activities, and Shisui with the military police. She hadn't known Itachi very well, and had only ever spoken to him when she came over to visit Izumi, but the man had liked keeping a low profile so she doubted that he had ever taken an apprentice before.

"Argghh!" Hitomi cried in frustration, briefly distracting Deidara from her thoughts. The younger girl soon returned to her vain attempts, allowing Deidara to immerse herself in her training.

A red-haired man with a slightly peeved expression appeared in her mind, and her lips quirked. And finally, we have Sasori no Danna.

Sasori, whose perspective of art clashed so terribly with her own. Sasori, who she took joy in driving up the wall (sometimes it was the opposite, but she was mostly her instigator). Sasori, who she used as a measuring stick and vice versa. Their relationship was not perfectly mutualistic, but it worked out nicely.

Deidara paused. He could be dead as far as she knew. The thought didn't sit right with her, and she pushed it to the back of her mind. He's too skilled to be dead. I've seen the way he chops chicken at the shop. Anyone who segments a whole chicken like that in ten seconds is someone not to be trifled with. He's alive. He has to be.

"Fifteen minutes is up," Deidara announced, halting the moving arms of her dummy and striding back to Hitomi. "That was... pretty terrible, un."

"Ugh."

Is she tired already? How cute. She probably thinks that nothing else I put her through will even compare to the bell exercise. Oh how she would enjoy proving her wrong.

At the end of the day, Hitomi was dead on her feet. She could hardly make it back up to the apartment, which meant Deidara had to carry her on her back. It wasn't the most pleasant experience, considering the cold sweat on their skin.

"Mrrghh... Deidara?"

"Yeah?"

"... That was kinda fun. I guess."

"Good. Because tomorrow will be even more fun. In which 'more fun' is a euphemism for 'harder', un," she quipped, grinning.

"Urgghh..."

Deidara dumped her on the bed and promptly started up another fire. "Sleep tight, kid."

"Hate... you..."

"Hitomi, run!" Ino yelled, grabbing her sister by the hand and whisking her away. Behind them, their house burned, flames taller than the both of them combined rising into the air. Eyes wide, Hitomi allowed herself to be dragged along by her sister, her entire body numb.
Everything was burning. Her dresses. Her dolls. The diary that she kept underneath her mattress. It was all burning.

"Where's otou-sama?" Hitomi demanded as they fled through the night, combining with a crowd of hysterical civilians whose houses had also been destroyed. "And okaa-san?"

"Dead," Ino whispered, her breath coming out in pants. "They're... gone." Tears rolled down her soot-covered face, and she didn't even flinch when someone jostled her.

Gunfire rattled the air, and the crowd shouted apprehensively, moving frantically at random for shelter.

"Hitomi?!" Ino screamed when their hands separated, the smaller girl shoved aside by a terrified woman. "Hitomi! Take my hand!"

"Nee-chan! Help! Help me!" Ino shook as a rough hand grabbed her shoulder and wrenched her away from where she had last seen Hitomi.

"Help! Help...!" Ino and the crowd faded away into darkness, and Hitomi continued to wriggle and shriek desperately.

In the darkness, Hitomi's eyes snapped open, her pupils dilated and her face wet. "Ino-nee," she rasped out, her throat parched.

She heard a light snore. Deidara. She could hardly see anything, meaning that she would never be able to get past Deidara, a trained martial artist.

Biting her lip, Hitomi flopped her head down on the pillow again, her thoughts whirring in her mind at a rapid pace.

Tomorrow, Deidara said she would be going out early to do something. That's my chance! Her blood began to race in anticipation. It'd been a week since Deidara had started training her, and she had most of the basic katas down. Despite having been pampered most of her life, her child's body was incredibly adaptable, and her flexibility had improved greatly. Her fists clenched around the sheets.

If I'm careful, I'll be able to take a quick look around while she's gone and be back before she notices. Just a quick look, in case Ino-nee is around... With that thought implanted in her head, she drifted back to sleep.

Deidara knew it would be a shitty morning when a drop of dirty rainwater was thing that had her sitting up on the couch groggily, muttering angrily. The sun had risen behind the clouds not long ago, so Deidara could see the current source of her ire: a leaky roof.

"Of all the..." Like the living conditions here aren't bad enough, un. I'm going to have to find a bucket and move the couch.

Her mood worsened when she remembered what she intended to do today. "Right," she uttered, her head spinning from having sat up too quickly. "The bodies..." She'd been paranoid ever since her run-in with Hanabi and their hasty disposal of the Tsukigakure soldiers. What if they find out? constantly plagued her mind, and she'd decided last night to check if they were still there. If they were, she'd move them somewhere less prone to discovery.

Like an annoyed badger, Deidara quickly got dressed in her usual outfit: a fighting gi with her bastardized Akatsuki cloak wrapped around her shoulders, shrouding everything except for her feet
and head from sight.

Hitomi was still fast asleep, the lazy creature. No matter. When Deidara got back, she'd make sure to give the Yamanaka girl a rude awakening.

Deidara closed the front door behind her and descended the stone steps, the early morning breeze blowing in her face and nearly pulling the hood of her cloak off.

She took a detour, successfully dodging a few patrols and four streets worth of walking. Deidara grimaced when the scent of rot hit her nose, and she hurried past the cold, dusty body of an elderly man with his eyes pecked out by crows.

_That was so fucked up._ Deidara felt her stomach flip but she pushed the feeling back. She blocked out the image of the old man and pressed forward, the bottom of her boots scuffing against the stone walkway.

Eventually, she reached the alleyway where she and Hanabi had had their confrontation. It looked mostly the same, and there was no evidence of there having been any searches for the missing soldiers.

Deidara sagged with relief. Then she steeled herself and marched over to the trash cans where she and Hanabi had stuffed the bodies. She reached for the lid. _Here goes nothing, un._

There was nothing in there.

Deidara felt the blood in her veins chill and turn to ice. "What the hell?" she whispered, alarmed. Arm shaking more than she would have liked, she checked the other trash can. Again, there was nothing. "Who...? Shit."

Her foot landed in a small puddle, a spray of water sent up her pant leg and she ran through the alley and back to her home. _If they're gone, it means that they know. It has to be!_ But there hadn't been any searches or raids in the area. If there had been, it would be loud, and she would have known and most certainly fled with Hitomi in tow.

Hitomi. Oh god, Hitomi. Deidara had a kid in her care, and she might as well have damned the little girl with her own carelessness.

She slowed when she reached a popular route for patrols, and then quickly scuttled back to her home, her heart thumping in her chest.

Back up the stone steps she went, and she slammed the door open, a grave expression on her face. "Hitomi—"

The rock in her stomach expanded to gigantic proportions when she saw that there was no girl in the bed, or anywhere at all. Swearing, she searched through her home, checking the bathroom and the courtyard.

Hitomi was gone.

"Shitshitshitshit," Deidara hissed, stomping back to the front door. _Did they take her?!_ Warily, she entertained the idea, but the relatively unchanged state of the apartment said otherwise. If she had been taken, there would have been signs of a struggle. Hitomi was a fighter beneath that bratty, passive exterior—there was no way she would have gone down without a fight. Unless she'd been taken at gunpoint or sedated. Deidara shook her head. No, no. The bed was _made._ Hitomi...
"Left on her own, the stupid brat!" Deidara punched the wall without her chakra, making the entire room shake for a moment. Her knuckles began to ache, but she couldn't waste anymore time. *I cannot believe her!* she fumed as she left her apartment once more and practically jumped the entirety of the stone steps. Her heartbeat had pretty much elevated into a constant state of furiously fast beating, and there was a nervous sweat beading on the back of her neck despite the cold, making her blonde hair stick uncomfortably to the nape.

Somewhere along the way, in those two months, Deidara had come to care more for her than she liked to admit. Hell, she'd basically taken that kid in as her own. Now a week after commencing her training, she was gone?

*Think about it,* she told herself as she searched, trying not to appear too suspicious to the soldiers patrolling the streets. *Think about why she left. Nobody does anything without a reason, no matter how stupid it might be. What could Hitomi possibly gain from wandering outside? She knew I was going out today, un; it's not a coincidence.* It clicked almost immediately.

Ino.

Everything led back to Ino, annoyingly enough. Deidara wasn't a fan of one track minds, and Hitomi was proving to her biggest source of ire yet today.

*She must have left to find her sister,* Deidara concluded, narrowing her eyes. *Hitomi, you fool! Did you think that one week of training would ensure that you wouldn't be hurt out there? If you die...* Her heart jumped to her throat and she shook that morbid thought away.

Deidara slowed to a stop, checking her surroundings. *Where would Hitomi look? Certainly not out in the open. She'd be skulking around alleyways and unpopular paths. She'd...* Out of the corner of her eye, she caught movement. Standing at the end of the road was Hitomi, and she was looking up at someone.

Deidara tensed. *A Tsukigakure soldier?* But then the morning mist cleared and Deidara's eyes widened.

Sasori, clad in his red-less Akatsuki cloak, stared back at her, equally stunned at her appearance.

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That morning, Chiyo burst into Sasori's room with a familiar box in her arms. Sasori, who'd already been awake and was working on one of his puppets, looked up, frowning.

"A delivery box?" he questioned. "We've been out of business since the invasion."

"Cut the sass, boy," Chiyo said briskly. "This contains a medicine I brewed for an informant of mine who lives across the city. I'm not sure if she's still alive or not, which is why I need you to bring this to her. She was ill with pneumonia the last time I heard from her."

Chiyo had an elaborate 'spy' network across the city, funnily enough. Elaborate for an elderly, retired taijutsu master at any rate. It was mostly composed of old gossips like her that had managed to survive the initial stages of the invasion, but Sasori knew that there was one particularly valuable informant that had ties with the Tsukigakure force. She was a woman with Tsukigakure blood running through her veins, and had moved to Akatsuki a few years ago. Thanks to her origins, she had certain ins with the military, but her heart belonged to Amegakure and Akatsuki.

"Ah," Sasori raised an eyebrow, "So her. How cavalier of you, baa-sama, to send your only living
relative into the fray for a mere an informant."

"I told you to cut the sass, didn't I?" Chiyo said gruffly, shoving the box in his arms. "You sneak around in the dark well enough. If it gets too dangerous, return here immediately. You're too strong to have your strings cut by cannon fodder."

In the end, it turned out that Chiyo's informant had died from her illness, if the body in the living room had been any indication, leaving Sasori in a black mood as he stored the medicine in a storage scroll.

He was passing through an unfamiliar neighbourhood when a tiny figure in the mist caught his eye. *A child? Out here?* Sasori grimaced when he neared and saw her young face.

The girl saw him, too, and she blinked, shirking back warily.

"Stop that," Sasori ordered, stopping in front of heel. "If I was really an enemy, you'd already be on the ground." She was skin and bones, this girl, and looked as if the wind could blow her away.

"Who are you?" the girl bleated, taking a stance.

Sasori blinked slowly, as much surprise as he would show in the face of this child. *She's had martial arts training, hm? Not bad, but she's going to have to do a lot better than that.*

The morning mist that weaved about them began to clear, and Hitomi took a step backward, looking up at him with a strange mix of fear and defiance.

And that was when he saw her, a seemingly pale imitation from the girl he had known. She stood not too far away from him, her hood having fallen off to reveal dull, blonde hair. The Akatsuki cloak she wore—she'd taken out the red strands, like him—billowed slightly around her form, giving her a ghostly, ethereal look.

Their gazes met, and Sasori allowed himself a small, surprised intake of breath.

*Deidara.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

A/N: Ooft. Sasori and Deidara finally reunite.

Shikaku (who hasn't been mentioned much in the story at all but was with the Underground all this time), Shikamaru, Itachi, and now Kisame are working on breaking the seals preventing them from leaving the city. If you remember, Akatsuki was built on top of the remnants of the Underground City, and that sealed wall was the old gateway.

Ino transforms her shame and grief into anger and determination.

The orphans haven't been mentioned much, but they'll return.

But what happened to those bodies? And where is Hinata? What happened to Chihiro?
Part II: Southernwood

Chapter Summary

Sasori and Deidara stuff, plus a sprinkle of Chiyo sass, Hitomi awkwardness, and a snake comes to join the party. Again. Where's Itachi when you need him? Probably looking after this wife and trying to decode the seal.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Yes, I was totally doing biology work and not writing the introduction for this chapter during biology class.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naruto glanced up at the grey sky exasperatedly, holding a wooden broom with bristly ends in one hand. His eyes were not as bright as usual, and Konohamaru resisted the urge to nail the blond in the back of the head with a rock. The low morale was getting to all of them, though the younger boy tried desperately not to show it, especially in front of Moegi and Udon.

The older boy's lack of enthusiasm was most definitely a combination of bitterness and cabin fever. Disease undoubtedly ran rampant outside, and though no one had gotten extremely sick in the past few weeks, it was better safe than sorry. Not to mention the ongoing patrols of Tsukigakure soldiers marching through the city.

"You missed a spot," Moegi said halfheartedly, pointing at a dusty area. She too was holding a broom, though it seemed to be newer than the one Naruto and Konohamaru possessed. "Better get that, or Iruka-san will be annoyed."

Konohamaru, who was standing closer to the still dirty spot, shuffled over. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen anything beyond the factory, the closed teahouse, and the front courtyard that used to host hundreds of street stands selling exotic spices, foreign fabrics, and delicious skewered meat.

None of them could remember the last time they had bathed or showered, two luxuries that had quickly been swept away during the night of the invasion. Their faces were perpetually caked with dirt, dust, and natural oils. Sometimes, Tenten would find a relatively clean rag lying around and wet it. Then she'd wipe their faces down, starting with the youngest, Chihiro, followed by Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon. She'd do her own face next, then Lee's and Naruto's, though it wouldn't always necessarily be in that order. They would be clean for a few hours before dirtying up again.

Konohamaru's hand twitched around the handle of his broom as he swept, reminded of the fate that had befall Chihiro just days ago. Well, none of them knew what had happened to her, just that she'd been sweeping the courtyard one day before going missing.

Iruka ordered them to do their outside chores in groups of three, now.
"I'm sick of this!"

Moegi nearly dropped her broom at Naruto's outburst; he'd thrown the broom across the courtyard floor.

"Naruto-nii," she said awkwardly, scuttling over to where he stood, his shoulders rising and falling angrily, and picking up his broom for him.

"When is this damn war going to end?!" Naruto shouted to the sky, a glare on his face. The shouting attracted the attention of Lee and Tenten, who poked their heads outside to see what was going on. His teeth were gritted. "I… can't stand this! We can't do anything anymore! We can't even go outside!" Technically, they were outside, but Konohamaru knew what he meant. Naruto waved his arm wildly at the space in front of him. "What happened to basic human rights, huh?!"

Tenten stepped in at that. "Naruto," she said bluntly, her brow furrowed. "Cut it out already. I know things are bad, but we just have to make do with what we have." Inwardly, she agreed thoroughly with the blond boy, but she knew that voicing her agreement would only make him more vehement about the circumstances of their current situation. Naruto glared at her, but she placed a firm hand on his shoulder and met his stare evenly. "This isn't forever. Nothing is eternal. Things are going to get better, just not..." She sighed. "Just not now, okay?"

As the oldest, they all knew that Tenten faced the pressure of looking after all of them, simply because nobody else was around enough to do so. The factory workers still around had their own homes to return to, however broken down, including Iruka. Sometimes, he stayed, but when he wasn't there, everything fell back to Tenten. When they had lost Chihiro, their mourning was forced to be brief, and Tenten had taken it the hardest. Naruto could see the dark circles collecting underneath her eyes, and he faltered.

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," he muttered, his eyes fixed on the ground. He took the broom from Moegi. "You know me, Tenten," he chuckled, the sound sour, "Complaining makes me feel a whole lot better, dattebayo."

It was then Iruka appeared, his face haggard but smiling wearily. "Everyone, come back inside. Lunch is ready."

'Lunch' consisted of a few potatoes and scraps everybody had scrounged up, and a thin, tasteless congee made of water and rice, though the water to rice ratio was extremely unbalanced. The grain was rare, nowadays, and they used their rice rations sparingly. Still, they took what they could get, and the factory stopped for a moment in time as everybody devoured their meager meals.

Naruto ate his congee at breakneck speed compared to everyone else, Lee close behind. The latter boy's hair had grown out in messy, bushy spikes down his back. One time, Tenten saved him from getting his black locks caught in one of the machines.

Konohamaru looked around at the people sitting on the rickety wooden tables. There were about twenty workers left in the factory, but since they were making absolutely nothing, he figured the lack of staff mattered much. He suspected that the Nohara-Uchiha family only kept the place open to keep them busy, and to achieve some sort of normalcy in their lives. He sighed and unenthusiastically ate his congee and the half of a potato that Udon had given him (Konohamaru noticed that the boy, who's eyesight was poor but not that poor, kept the bigger half to himself).

There were so few of them left. There used to be hundreds of people working in that factory. It made them all feel at least a little vulnerable, especially since the last time Obito had shown, it had been with multiple bruises on his face and arms. Rin always looked so worried whenever they saw
her, and, personally, Konohamaru thought that she looked like she had aged fifty years.

A rat scuttled by somewhere, but none of them even reacted to the presence of the rodent. Nor did they see, much less react, the rat's violent death—swallowed whole by a medium-sized snake on the verge of death.

Her hands were cold, even when they were balled up in the long sleeves of her cloak. Her hair—the part not tied up in a high ponytail—fell loosely around her shoulders, curling lightly at the bottom. Only the ends could be seen, as both of them had their hoods up.

Sasori led the way, Deidara close behind and holding Hitomi's hand tightly.

"Danna, left," Deidara murmured, her hand tightening around Hitomi's.

"I know."

Automatically, they slipped to the side and pressed against the walls, just as a small crowd of soldiers rounded the corner they'd been nearing. They were talking in hushed voices, their military boots clicking against the ground in some sort of bastardized goose-march.

Hitomi trembled slightly, nearly knocking over a broken wooden table, but a squeeze from Deidara's hand stopped her from shifting enough to do so.

"Sasori-no-Danna," Deidara breathed out, their shoulders pressed together. "Are you sure you're not out of your mind?"

His brown eyes flickered over to her. Her hood was covering the majority of her face in side profile, but he could feel how tense the muscles in her shoulders were. "I'm fairly sure that I'm sound of mind, yes. Why? Would you prefer to return to your decrepit apartment?"

"We'll eat you out of house and home, un."

The soldiers were gone. Sasori, Deidara, and Hitomi slipped onto the street again, speeding up their pace slightly.

"You told me you brought your own rations," he said calmly, eyes moving left and right to search for any soldiers. They were still in a part of the city that Sasori was not too intimately familiar with, and it was far enough from where Deidara had been living that she didn't know how the patrols worked here, either. It'd been sheer luck that they'd heard the voices and boots of the previous group of militants.

"I did, yeah." She frowned slightly; she had packed everything important—food, some clothes—into a scroll Sasori had provided her with. But still...

For a moment, their gazes met, and Deidara knew that Sasori would be unyielding on this matter. So she accepted defeat with a quiet grace.

"Um, Deidara?" Hitomi voiced hesitantly, looking up at the back of the girl's clothed head with wide, uncertain eyes.

"Later," the woman replied curtly, not even turning around.

Hitomi lowered her gaze, allowing herself to continue to be led by the older girl. "Okay."

Their first meeting since before the war began had been... remarkably less awkward than Deidara
had anticipated, and she supposed that was mostly thanks to Sasori's unflappable personality. He
had changed little—his frame was narrower, obviously, but that was the case for everyone, so that
could be overlooked. She knew that he was older than he looked, and his face had retained the
most of the same youth it had had during times of peace.

She was tentative, at first, to accept his sudden appearance in such a place. He and his grandmother
lived on the opposite side of the city, after all. But he was undoubtedly Sasori, and, reluctantly,
they slipped back into a small, tense fraction of their old dynamic.

Perhaps it was for the sake of old friendship, but he offered her sanctuary in his home. A home that
she had been to only once for utterly unimportant reasons, and, banking on the fact that not much
of their apartment's structure had been altered since the invasion, one that was cleaner and more
homely than the abandoned flat that Deidara had been living in the past two months.

As Deidara briefly recalled their encounter, Hitomi kicked a small pebble at the unmoving body of
a rat. It sat up and hissed, scampering away, but not before giving the girl a mild fright.

Sasori turned his head ever so slightly, his flinty brown eyes sliding to the left to see Hitomi
grimace. To her credit, the girl didn't scream or do anything else that would attract the attention of
enemy soldiers like flies to honey.

Inoichi's youngest, he had concluded a while ago. According to baa-sama's 'informants', he died on
the night of the attack. She would have been a pretty little thing if she didn't look so terribly
malnourished. He had no doubt that food had been tight for them, and he couldn't help but wonder
if Deidara had gone to entertain Uchiha Madara's machinations—the competition was crude and
unstructured—distasteful and artless—and he slowly digested that thought with a healthy dose of
disgust.

Sasori's face was completely blank as he remembered the expression Deidara's eyes had held when
she had found them. It'd been an amalgamation of sheer relief, frustration, and anger. Then she'd
noticed him, and it'd been like all the color had suddenly been sucked out of her, leaving behind a
pale imitation of herself.

Chiyo normally recommended hot thyme tea for shock.

Sasori hated thyme.

Dutifully, they trudged back to his home, dodging patrols and the occasional dusty-gray body that
had yet to be cleaned up or eaten.

She's been out of the loop, Sasori reminded himself. I doubt she knows anything of the
Underground. He hadn't checked up on them in a while, busying himself his and Chiyo's own
survival, as well as the Nohara-Uchiha's. She and Itachi aren't familiar, but I'm willing to bet Izumi
misses her greatly. Her presence would be welcome. He was impatient to inform her of what had
been happening while she was gone, but they couldn't speak now. Not when they were so
vulnerable already, out in the open like this. And they were all feeling it—while she tried to seem
relaxed, Deidara's entire body was a knot of tension, and Hitomi had all but sunk her tiny body
into the folds of Deidara's cloak, as if the fabric would protect her from the dangers in the city.

And, Sasori considered, it probably would. Little girls and women were especially 'at risk', and
Sasori was not unaware of the rapes and beatings that happened outside his home. At least Deidara
could pass off as male well enough, with the cloak and hood concealing her curves and facial
features, but Hitomi was utterly exposed.
He could hear Deidara suck in a breath through her teeth when they finally arrived at Akatsuki Square.

Once upon a time, it'd been the city's beating heart, a hub of noise and entertainment.

Now, things were still, and Sasori could have sworn that the stone flooring had absorbed in more gray.

"Don't look, brat," Sasori advised, allowing just a tinge of concern to seep into his voice—to comfort her, because she'd been with only the company of a \textit{child} less than half her age for the past two months.

"Y-yeah, that's the plan..." Deidara mumbled under her breath, her fringe falling further across her face. She used her free hand to brush it away when it threatened to cover her right eye as well.

Hitomi was staring up at her curiously, but kept quiet, something that both adults were grateful for. Deidara because she wasn't sure \textit{how} she would deal with it when she heard Hitomi's voice bleat nonsensical things again, and Sasori simply because children were simply \textit{tolerable}, and he lacked the patience for them most days.

Chiyo's Chicken Rice, now closed, sat at the bottom level of one of the buildings encompassing the large quadrangle. Sasori's home was two levels above the store.

"Tadaima," Sasori announced tonelessly, opening the door to his and Chiyo's unit. He slipped his nondescript shoes off, Deidara doing the same, albeit with more difficulty. She wore military boots, while Hitomi's footwear were a pair of dusty martial arts slippers that were a little too big for her. \textit{How did she train with those on?} Sasori briefly thought before Chiyo emerged from another room.

The old woman's eyebrows immediately raised past her hairline when she saw just \textit{who} Sasori was in the company of. Her lips curled upward in a mischievous smile, and Sasori inwardly groaned, preparing for a remark jabbing at his status as a single man entering his thirties.

"I must say," Chiyo demurred, setting Sasori on edge. Nobody could quite do that like his grandmother, he begrudgingly admitted. "If I knew that international warfare and a famine would bring you a candidate bride, I would have marched up to Empress Kaguya myself and declared war before she did to Pein."

Sasori sighed; the sound was \textit{always} one of long-suffering. "Baa-sama, \textbf{please}. Your humor is \textit{not} needed in such a time."

Deidara's eyes lit up at the annoyance in his voice. \textit{So,} she mused, \textit{this war hasn't turned him into one of his puppets, after all.} It relieved her, this small bit of irritation he displayed. She knew it wasn't completely rational, but knowing that he was still \textit{human} despite his wooden exterior was comforting. And his old woman, well...

Frankly, Deidara liked her already, even if she did insinuate that they were having some kind of sordid affair. She stifled a snort.

"Forgive me for my rudeness," Chiyo said to Deidara, shuffling past Sasori, who shot her a glance of pure exasperation and holding out her hand in a very informal gesture. "My name is Chiyo."

"You don't sound very sorry, un," Deidara stated, and Chiyo gave her a haughty look. Deidara grinned and shook the woman's offered hand. "I'm Deidara, yeah, and this is..." Hitomi squirmed underneath her blue gaze, and Deidara felt a small prick of pity despite herself. "... My ward,
"Yamanaka, eh?" Chiyo chuffed morbidly. "I heard that your clan has been... downsized by quite a considerable amount."

"Baa-sama," Sasori said sharply, noting the slight narrowing of Deidara's eyes.

"It's an uncomfortable truth. Deal with it." Chiyo's bluntness came down like a hammer on all of them, even Sasori. "Now..." She placed her hands on her hips and looked down her nose at her two house guests. "If you want to stay here, I hope you brought enough food. And don't expect to be waited on hand and foot. I'm looking at you, Yamanaka. You're going to earn your keep. Help around the house, accompany my grandson because he needs lady friends," she looked at Deidara, who twitched in a mixture of amusement and discomfort, "And don't make a mess. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," Deidara answered crisply, straightening. She'd removed her hood when she'd come in, and her blonde hair was a wind-blown mess from earlier this morning. Dirt caked her face. Hitomi was in a similar state, though she looked a bit fresher.

Chiyo wrinkled her nose. "First thing in order—both of you are taking a hot bath. A long one."

Hitomi met her gaze willingly for the first time. "W-with hot water?!" She looked wildly between Sasori and Chiyo. "You have hot water, Chiyo-baa-sama?!"

And the old woman cackled. "No. Why, did you?"

"Well, not exactly..." Hitomi trailed off. They did boil water and carry it outside to splash themselves occasionally, but Deidara wasn't very fond of bathing in general, claiming that they had nothing to dry thick enough to dry themselves off with, and that their wetness would cause fever.

"Then why ask?" Chiyo beckoned them forward, moving aside to another room. "Come. I'll boil up some water; girl, you go first. Deidara-san, you're next. Sasori, no peeking."

"I would never," Sasori deadpanned, his gaze as flat as his tone.

"Stop pretending that you're not a giant mass of hormones and make yourself useful," Chiyo retorted, pointing to the kitchen. "We can have an early lunch."

"Oh, right," Deidara said before Sasori could respond, pulling the scroll containing their rations and clothing out. "Here." As his grandmother was distracted, he grumpily heeded her advice, disappearing into the kitchen.

Chiyo clicked her tongue, accepting the storage scroll. "One of his finer ones."

Intrigued, Deidara echoed, "Finer ones? Does that mean..."

"Mm, yes." Chiyo unsealed the scroll. Miraculously, a bundle of clothing popped out first, then a sack of rice and some old, patchy potatoes and a small slice of boiled meat. Chiyo eyed it hungrily. Meat was extremely hard to come by, even more so than rice. "Sasori is quite proficient with seals, though not to the extent that he can be called a seal master..." She glanced toward the kitchen, where they could see Sasori moving back and forth through the doorway, working. "He didn't study sealing for kicks, or because he liked it. He did it to benefit his art."

"Puppeteering, yeah? I've heard of it. Apparently, it's a foreign speciality from Suna." Not to mention all the art battles we used to have, she added silently, a ghost of a smile appearing on her
lips. She would comment no more on the subject, lest Chiyo be upset. She had a strong feeling that
the art of puppeteering ran in the family. Chiyo's hand had been hard and calloused—she had
callouses that could only be caused by woodwork and hand to hand combat.

A chopping sound reached Deidara's ears. Sasori must have started on the potatoes.

"Oh, it is," Chiyo confirmed. "My son and I came here from Suna seven years ago. Or was it eight?
Alas, my memory ails me..." She gave a mysterious smile. "But he made quite the reputation for
himself, I recall..."

A loud thunk of the knife against the chopping block, then silence.

Chiyo continued to look amused at her own anecdote, while Deidara shifted in her position.

The chopping resumed.

"Well then," Chiyo said cheerfully. "I'd better get that water boiling, before your ward starts
complaining."

"Yes..." Deidara stared after her as she ambled off, her footsteps silent against the tiling. "You
should, un."

Lunch was ready when Deidara emerged from the bathing room, wearing a plain, cotton tomesode
kimono that had once belonged to Chiyo, who had given it to her before she entered. She refused to
acknowledge the meaning behind the garb. *Chiyo may be old, but she knows how to scheme,* Deidara thought wryly, taking a seat beside Chiyo. There were bowls and chopsticks set
out in front of four seats, each with some of the rice that Deidara had brought with her. They really
didn't wait, did they?

Sasori emerged from the kitchen, carrying a small plate of boiled potatoes cut into chunky, uneven
bits. If he saw what Deidara was wearing, he didn't comment on it. Knowing him, it was unlikely
that he hadn't noticed.

"Where's Yamanaka-chan?" Chiyo inquired as Sasori sat down on his grandmother's other side,
having placed the dish in the middle of the round table.

"Doing her hair," Deidara answered distractedly. *More like trying to avoid me, un. Either that, or
she's trying to find a way to talk to me.*

When she didn't appear in the next few minutes, they started without her. As soon as Chiyo
grabbed her chopsticks, Sasori and Deidara followed, picking and grabbing at pieces of potato.

Sasori went straight to the point. "Deidara, have you heard of the Underground?"

*Underground?* Her confused look was enough of an answer for the man, and he chewed and
swallowed a chunk of potato. The vegetable was a bland paste against his tongue, and he washed it
down with a cup of hot water; each of them had one next to their bowls.

For the next hour, they shared stories of their own experiences. Deidara was relieved to hear that
Rin and Izumi, her two closest female friends, were okay, and that their husbands were still
kicking.

"That idiot," Deidara groaned when Sasori told her of Obito's latest 'great idea'—challenging two
Tsukigakure taijutsu users at once to win extra rice. "Hopefully, he's learned his lesson, un. Obito's
good, but he's facing two elites that know not to underestimate him. Any chance of him doing it again?"

"Probably," Sasori replied. "And I'm not sure if I would stop him if he did. It's not my place."

She grunted. "I wouldn't expect you to. He wouldn't let you, to begin with. Obito's not the sharpest tool in the shed, but what he lacks in the brains department, he makes up for with sheer stubbornness, un."

A footfall reached their ears, and Sasori stared past Deidara's head to see Hitomi approaching them, wearing a brown yukata that was a size too big for her. It was one of his own, Sasori realized, from when he was just a bit older than her. Perhaps eight or nine.

"Hello," Hitomi mumbled, hesitating when she noticed that the only empty seat left was the one between Sasori and Deidara. "Sorry for coming so late... that was rude of me."

"Forget it," Chiyo dismissed, "Just eat already, child, you look like the wind could blow you over at any time."

None of them mentioned that there was no ventilation in the room, instead continuing to eat quietly.

Hitomi ate like a fine lady. She took small, meager bites, chewed with her mouth closed, and even held her chopsticks like nobility. She did not sip her tea loudly, and did not leave her chopsticks lying in her rice bowl like sticks of incense.

Even so, the girl was nervous. She did not meet the gaze of anyone, and seemed to be trying her best to become invisible.

Lunch was a quiet affair, in the end.

The breeze brushed against his face, but Sasori didn't look up from his current project: the reconstruction of the puppet that Deidara had destroyed during their first spar.

He had his own workshop—technically, it was Chiyo's, but she had little use for it, nowadays—but it was refreshing to take his work outside every one in a while, and enjoy the night.

The guest room, which was occupied by Deidara and Hitomi, was right next to his workshop as well.

He was on the balcony, a table and chair set up. His toolbox sat on one end of the table, a cup of steaming hot water next to it. The latter item had been left to cool, and Sasori nearly burned himself when he reached for his calligraphy brush, stored in the toolbox in a plastic pack. There were different sizes; the one he needed was the thinnest one with the finest bristles and a pointed toe.

After coating the brush thinly with special chakra-conductive ink, Sasori took a sip from his water, now only moderately hot, as he traced the appropriate characters for an anchor seal tweaked to his own liking. Sealing was a rare art normally passed down from older generations to newer ones, and that was exactly what Chiyo and his parents had done for him.

Placing the brush down, he closed his eyes, sinking into his seat, the heat radiating from the cup warming his cold hands.

Otou-sama, okaa-san. I'm glad they are dead. Sasori took another sip, the perfect picture of
contentedness. *I don't want them to see this. Any of it.* His brow twitched when the sound of a dog barking was abruptly cut off with a loud gunshot, leaving him to his own imagination.

Tomorrow, he had decided, he would take Deidara to the Underground, and Itachi would know what to do from there. Itachi always knew. Itachi, who cared about his family and friends, people like Sasori and Deidara and Rin and Obito. And, most likely, Sasuke, even if the little prick didn't deserve it. Sasori wasn't oblivious to Sasuke's new allegiance—he'd seen the teenage Uchiha heir stomping around the city like he owned it.

He hadn't decided what to do with Hitomi just yet. The girl was an anomaly. By all means, she shouldn't have even been alive. If he remembered correctly, Itachi had told him that Yamanaka Ino had been recovered a few weeks ago.

The sisters deserved to be reunited, sure, but Sasori needed to *wait for it*, and not get too ahead of himself. There could be some unforeseen consequences, and he didn't want to end up doing something that could doom them all, or flip the status quo three-hundred-and-sixty degrees on its head.

The wind blew harshly, and the calligraphy brush rolled off the table.

Sasori caught it before it landed and put it back in its place, turning his head slightly when he heard the sliding door open behind him.

Blearily, Deidara stared at him, the breeze blowing her hair gently around her face.

He turned around in his chair completely, the water in his cup moving along with him. "Wha—"

"Couldn't sleep," she cut him off. "Thought I'd get some fresh air, un." She closed the door behind her, walking forward a few steps and standing close to where he was sitting. "You?" Her blue eyes, brighter than they had been when they had reunited earlier today, drifted to the still, naked puppet in front of him.

"Simply perfecting my art," Sasori answered smoothly, taking another sip of water calmly. "If our positions were reversed, I'm sure you'd be doing the same with your... clay."

"Our positions don't matter," Deidara said haughtily, sticking out a hand-mouth tongue at him, before the sleeve of her sleepwear rolled down to reveal a clay creation clutched in her opposite hand. "You're not the only artist in the house, yeah." She leaned against his chair slightly, and Sasori could feel the natural warmth her proximity was emitting. "And don't talk like that. Like my art is beneath yours because you're blinded with your eternity. Danna, it might be a little difficult for you to comprehend, but art is an explosion." She unfolded her fingers, and the clay creature—it was a spider with six legs instead of eight—crawled onto the table, scuttling around. "It won't explode," she assured him, noticing the wary look he was giving her. "I gave it some of my chakra, but not enough for it to explode. At most..." The spider stilled, then crumbled into a fine powder, blown away by the wind. "Not exactly an explosion, but the meaning is there, un."

Very, *very* grudgingly, Sasori had to admit that there was some beauty in watching that happen, but if he said so, he would never hear the end of it from her. Irritable woman. "There is no meaning to that," he said flippantly, waving a hand dismissively. "There is simply no point to your art." He could have said more on the subject matter, but if he did, they'd be here all night, and Sasori was planning to turn in before the sun rose. So he drank from his rapidly cooling cup, staring out into the black horizon.

"Yare yare..." Deidara rolled her eyes, much to Sasori's amusement. "One day, Danna," she vowed,
"I'll get you to respect my art, even if it kills me. You'll see."

"I doubt that."

"Yeah, I'll let you doubt," she muttered, crossing her arms and staring down at where he was sitting. "It'll be all the more sweeter when my art comes to bite you in the ass, un." Deidara passed her hand through her untied hair, pushing a few stray strands back from the right side of her face. "I think I'm going to turn in now. I'm pretty sure your grandmother likes me, but I'm also sure that she's an absolute slave driver, un."

Sasori smirked. "That's Chiyo-baa-sama for you. She's like that to everyone."

"Hmm, I noticed." She took a step backward, turning. "Goodnight—"

The door slid open, and Hitomi blinked at them, her face illuminated by the half-moon.

Deidara faltered. "Or not. Need something?"

"I...!" Hitomi swallowed. "I didn't realize that... he would be here, too. I, um..."

Sasori drained the last of his water, placing the cup down on the table with a tap.

"I'm sorry!" Hitomi predictably blurted, bowing at the waist for a moment. She lifted her head, eyes shining. "I just—I just..."

"Alright, I get it, yeah," Deidara said gruffly. "Ino. I got it."

"Yes... I didn't think I'd run into anyone—"

"Then you're a fool."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Please don't..."

Sasori had a feeling that he'd faded into the background for Hitomi, who was no longer so averse to speaking up in his presence. He knew that he intimidated her. Most young kids had that reaction. What irked him most was the fact that she'd probably be taller than him when she was fully grown. Yes; he'd relish in their fear while he still could.

"Don't... leave me alone," Hitomi finished awkwardly, shuffling her feet. "I'm not sure... if I would know what to do if you did."

There was a silence as the two females stared at each other. One awkward and earnest, the other pending.

Then Deidara huffed a resigned sigh, lifting her arms. "Come here, kid."

Hitomi jumped into her arms with a small oomph, wrapping her thin arms around the older woman's waist.

"Don't ever run away from me again," Deidara said bluntly, narrowing her eyes. "Or I'll shank you, un."

"What does 'shank' mean?"

"You're a bad influence," Sasori opined, reminding them of his presence.
"Stop ruining the moment, Danna." Deidara unwrapped her arms from Hitomi and grimaced. "You can let go now, yeah. Kid. Kid. I said you can let go—"

A tiny snore sounded, and Sasori scoffed, amused.

"Oh, no, you're not pulling that fake sleeping shit on me—"

For the first time in a while, watching Deidara irritably palm Hitomi's head and push, Sasori felt genuine content overcome him, and he relaxed in his chair, turning around again to work on his puppet. The girls were gone after two minutes, leaving Sasori to enjoy the solitude.

It was nice to know, he thought absently, that despite everything, there was still something that was there. Not a memory, but something that would last for all posterity.

And it just so happened that Sasori considered that to be art.

... And I have Udon and Tenten working over there," Iruka finished, Obito nodding along.

"Everything's in order," Obito said with a grin, giving Iruka a thumbs-up. "Great job. I knew I made a right choice when I hired you." He was still sporting a black eye, and there were multiple bruises decorating his naturally pale skin. He looked around, his face falling slightly. "I really ran this place to the ground, didn't I?" He let out a deep breath. "Maa, I guess it can't be helped."

"It's the war," Iruka told him. "The economy is in shambles." It was nothing Obito didn't already know, and the boss hummed. "Sir..."

"No," Obito said with faux cheer. "I'm not keeping this open for the money anymore. We all know that doesn't mean anything." Obito clasped Iruka's shoulder. "But look around, Umino-san. Look how..." His smile grew more strained. "Normal this is... Everyone has something to do, including me. So don't try to take that from me, you hear?" He slapped Iruka on the back good-naturedly, making the younger man choke on his saliva and cough harshly. "Now get back to work, you slacker!"

"Right, sir." Iruka cleared his throat. Something caught his hawk's eye, and he frowned. "Naruto, get down from there!"

"Come and get me then, dattebayo!"

"Naruto!" another sharp voice interjected. Tenten was glaring at Naruto, who was lackadaisically sitting on top of a humming generator, cotton flying in the air as Konohamaru and Moegi cranked the cotton spinner. "Stop slacking off and get down. Now."

Naruto grimaced. "Okay, okay... Sheesh, I'm coming..." Reluctantly, he slid off the squat machine and ambled over to Tenten. "You guys need help?"

Udon shook his head. "Nah, but I think," he sniffed, rubbing his nose, "Lee might."

The boy in question was vigorously cranking two machines at once with both arms, heaving. "This is great training!" Lee protested when they all shot him a look. "If I am to become good enough for Maito Gai-sama to notice me!"

"Oh god," Obito said with a chuckle. "It's a mini-Gai in the making." He shook his head. "How did
he not notice this kid? He's pretty youthful, in the words of Gai."

"Naruto, go and help Lee," Iruka said sternly, pointing at the black-haired teenager. "If he throws out his back, it'll help no one."

Naruto gave him a mock salute. "On it! Hey, Bushy-Brows, slow down for a bit..."

As the orphans and the other nondescript workers spread themselves thin, Obito pitching in to help as well. Rin was here, too, but working on the other side of the room.

*Lee was right*, Obito mused as he spun cotton. *This is pretty good training.* It wasn't the first time he had helped do the hard-labor part of his business since the war broke out, but there was something oddly humbling about it each time. He wasn't so far above them anymore—no longer a king in his own empire. Now, he was just one of the little people.

Kids being kids, Konohamaru couldn't help but get a little bored spinning the same machine over and over again. So, grinning, he snatched a particularly large, fluffy cotton ball from the air.

"Eh?" Moegi stopped whirling the machine. "What'cha doing?"

Konohamaru lifted a finger to his lips, grinning. "Watch." He closed one eye and stuck out his tongue, holding the cotton ball in front of him. Then he threw it at Udon, who was scrubbing an oil stain off the floor with a dirty rag.

Of course, physics would decree that the cotton ball not make it far, but, miraculously, a breeze that blew through carried it over to Udon. The cotton ball smothered his face, and the bespectacled boy spluttered, glaring at Konohamaru, who whistled innocently, Moegi giggling beside him.

Iruka hadn't noticed yet, so Udon threw his rag at Konohamaru, who yelped quietly before snatching said rag out of the air. Triumphant, Konohamaru threw the rag at Udon, but it soared far over his head, and to the edge of the room, right next to a part of the metal wall that had been torn down by *something* during the night of the invasion.

Iruka was not as blind as they had thought, unfortunately. "Boys," he reprimanded, making them wilt.

Udon mumbled an apology as Naruto got a good laugh out of their scolding (before getting scolded himself by Tenten, who he had nearly elbowed), moseying over to where the rag had landed.

*Stupid Konohamaru*, Udon thought irritably, squatting down and grabbing the cloth. *The next time he asks me how to long divide again, I ain't tellin' him.* Debris moved and Udon lifted his head. *Huh? What was that? Must be the wind...* When he had been startled, he had dropped the cloth, and, sighing, he bent over once more.

A shadow loomed over him.

Eyes wide behind his glasses, Udon shakily looked up, hoping to the gods that it was just Konohamaru or Naruto playing a prank on him.

"Ahhh... ahhh...!" Udon trembled at long black hair and yellow slit eyes.

And Orochimaru smiled, a long tongue sliding out of his mouth. "Hello, little boy."

Udon screamed shrilly.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Here you go; another unbeta'd chapter because I'm an antisocial shit. RIP, I know I have a lot of typos in this story... but I can't be bothered to fix them right now.
As soon as Udon screamed, heads snapped upward. Udon fell back on his butt, chest heaving as Orochimaru stood over him with a look in his eyes. More shady characters fanned out behind Orochimaru—five teenagers carrying with them the same menace as the long-haired man. Udon's mouth closed and open in terror, and he scrambled backward, completely forgetting about the rag he had been retrieving.

Orochimaru stepped forward, his shoe squashing the cloth.

"Ooh, nice place," the only girl in the group said, grinning viciously. Her eyes gleamed in anticipation, and she cocked her hip to one side. "A lot of people together like this... means that there's probably food and money around here, right?"

"Man, get that greedy look off your face, Tayuya," one of her teammates said, holding his arms behind his head. He licked his lips. "Look at how thin they are. Forget the food, let alone the cash. I'd give their difficulty level a solid..." He smirked. "One."

"Fuck off, Kidomaru," Tayuya replied calmly, flicking a lock of messy red hair to the side. "Once we get out of this shithole, we're gonna need the ryo, and Orochimaru-sama brought us here, so take it up with him. I'm sure that he's right about this place; it is one of the only factories still open. Right, Orochimaru-sama?"

"Correct, Tayuya," Orochimaru purred, and the girl preened. Compliments and agreements must have been rare with the snake-like man. "Now." He looked around the room, staring at gaunt, fearful faces. "Obito-kun... why don't you come out? I know you've been itching to hit me."

There was an uncomfortable shuffling, then Obito appeared, arms seemingly relaxed by his sides. His expression was one of false warmth, and anybody who looked closely enough could see the cold fire burning in his onyx eyes.

"Orochimaru," Obito said levelly, the usual -sama that accompanied his name forgone. He scowled, shifting his weight on his right foot. "What the hell do you want?"

It was a pointless question. Obito knew what they were here for. Food and money. And they're more than willing to fight for it, Obito thought grimly. Still, if he could get Orochimaru to monologue a little, perhaps he might be able to use it to his advantage...

"Oh, it's a funny little story, actually..." Orochimaru chuckled, causing the rest of his crew to snicker along. A bead of nervous sweat dropped down Obito's forehead as Orochimaru strode up to him slowly, his hair curtaining his face. Then the snake tilted his chin upward, and their gazes met.

Obito resisted the urge to shudder. Feral. Desperate. These were the only words adequate for the Hidden Snake's grandmaster. Orochimaru had been narrow to begin with, Obito remembered, but the older male looked almost shrivelled. His cronies looked slightly better, but their physical conditions were also poor for t'aijutsu users. At least, that's what he assumed they were. Orochimaru didn't seem like the type to waste his time on civilians. I don't even know what this bastard did to his last team... He did not remember their names, so he tried not to dwell on their fates.

"Your business is one of the only in the city that is still open," Orochimaru stated. "And the only one lucky enough to own a truck for transporting your goods."
Obito's blood chilled. *He knows.* Nobody was supposed to *know.* That truck... it was one he had bought two months before the war started and he distinctly remembered bragging relentlessly about it to whoever was willing to listen. Kakashi, mostly. It was because he would have had the honor of being the first vehicle-owner in the city. And Kakashi had listened.

His heart still ached for his friend.

But that truck. It had arrived not even a *week* before the night of the invasion, and the subsequent enemy occupation. He normally kept it in a garage in the back of the factory. Nobody but he, his family, and some of his workers should have known about it. Think, Obito, he urged himself. *The last time you saw this truck was about five days ago, when you were drunk and delirious and alone and needed something to do. You sent it on a cotton run... I think... yeah, yeah that's right. And it never came back until—*

"You didn't," Obito spat hatefully, suddenly straightening.

Orochimaru scoffed at the insinuation. "Don't be ridiculous. That truck and its occupants were my only lead to you. To a place with food and money, and all things *essential* for living." He smiled, and Obito could have sworn the man had *fangs.* "If you don't believe me... Sakon." He snapped his fingers, the sound reverberating in the mostly silent room.

"Right, boss." There were a pair of twins in Orochimaru's group. One of them slipped through the hole in the wall and brought something back out. *A prisoner,* was Obito's first thought. *No... it's...*

Sakon threw the bruised man at Obito's feet, Orochimaru stepping back a bit to allow the Uchiha some space.

"Sorry, boss," the man apologized, groaning in pain and curling into himself.

... *A friend.*

The man was young. Not even in his twenties yet. Dark-haired, like the majority of the population in the Rain, with skin as pale as an Uchiha's. He could have passed as an Uchiha, definitely, and he...

*God,* Obito thought numbly, *He almost looks like Daichi.* No, the man—the pitiful, skinny worker, was *not* his son, because Daichi was at home with Hikari *but—*

He *could* have been. If circumstances were different, and Daichi was older, and—

Obito knelt down, the upper half of his face shadowed as his hair—which had grown longer than he would have liked—fell over his eyes. "Maa," he murmured. "What are you apologizing for? You did nothing wrong." He helped him up, and together, they hobbled over to a woman that had been quite plump before the war. She still had some fat on her now, and she held the wounded man —*boy,* Obito reminded himself, *boy*—in her thick arms.

"Be thankful that I spared your workers," Orochimaru told him, taking satisfaction in the fact that Obito stood with his head hung. "In times like this, I could have easily slaughtered them for... other purposes."

This man was not *human.* He *couldn't* be.

"I have a deal for you," Orochimaru went on. "The goods that I have in my possession—*your* goods—for all the money you're keeping around here, as well as all the food. What do you say, Obito-kun? If you don't accept... I might have to take extreme measures..."
It was a deal with only one winner, and they both knew that. What was the point of it—what was the point of losing your money and your food for goods that weren't even going to bring in income? Goods that they had gotten from another local business at the other end of the city, where it was a little more rural. Goods that no one could afford, even if they needed it.

Obito almost laughed at the absurdity of it all, and was about to decline with all the politeness of a raging chimera when somebody else beat him to it.

"Oi!" Naruto, who was at the front of the crowd of workers encircling them. If Obito's back hadn't been to him the whole time, he would have seen the pure anger and rage slowly contort his face into a snarl that made him almost unrecognizable. "WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?! How dare you..." Naruto's voice quietened for a second, but he was trembling now. "HOW DARE YOU COME HERE AND THREATEN US!" Spittle flew from Naruto's mouth and landed at Orochimaru's feet. "TALK DOWN TO US LIKE WE'RE NOTHING, HUH?!

Oh boy, Obito barely managed to comprehend, he was really angry. Furious, even, at the injustice that was happening right before his eyes, filled with wrathful tears.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH THIS?! YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES SUFFERING, YOU BASTARDS!" Naruto roared. "You don't even care about other people... people who are suffering like you are..." Tears spilled out of his eyes, and he gritted his teeth. "It's people like you... It's people like you that MAKE ME SICK! So don't you dare..." he growled. "Think you can come here and threaten us like that...! This is all what we have left; we've lost things, too, y'know... You're not coming here and taking it away from us, dammit!"

"Oi, shut your mouth!" Kidomaru shouted. "Don't you dare talk to Orochimaru-sama like he's beneath you, peasant! You know nothing of our struggles!" A vein popped near his eyes, and he grinned manically. "You have no idea how hard or frustrating it is, trying to advance from one level to another. You have food and a home! You do not know suffering."

"Look," Tayuya said, scowling. "I frankly don't give a shit about your painful circumstances, kid. We didn't come here for your fucking angst. Right, Orochimaru-sama?" She looked to him again for approval, but Orochimaru did not acknowledge her this time.

"Obito," Orochimaru said softly. Dangerously. Obito tensed. "Will you accept my offer?"

"... No." Obito steeled himself for the lie. Or, rather, half-truth. "I have no money."

And Orochimaru slammed him into a steel post before Obito could even comprehend what was happening. "Do not lie to me!" he hissed. "I'm in no mood for your games. I'm here for resources, and you will provide them for me!"

His head snapped back against the steel post, and Obito winced from the chokehold Orochimaru had on him. "It... not a lie. I really... have no money." Dammit, I'm too weak! Sasori's words of caution came back to haunt him, and he cursed himself for his carelessness. He was still recovering and too damn fragile, while Orochimaru was as healthy as he could possibly be.

"You Uchiha," Obito cringed when Orochimaru spat in his face, squeezing his neck. "I despise the lot of you. I met my defeat by the hands of an Uchiha, and I trained on the outskirts of the city to better him. It was your wretched family that led to stay in this accursed city and be caged like a bird! Led to my downfall! I was revered by Konoha! What am I now, Uchiha Obito, but a shadow of my former self?! Answer me!"

But Obito could not. Not when Orochimaru had that hold on him. But if he could...
"Go to hell," Obito cursed the man silently, blackness dotting his clouding vision.

"Don't, Naruto!" Obito vaguely heard Iruka's voice in the background, trying to keep a riot from happening. "You can't!"

"Let me go, Iruka! I have to help the boss! I HAVE TO!"

And, Obito thought dizzily, wasn't it too much of a coincidence that Chihiro had disappeared just days before Orochimaru showed up? Perhaps they met... perhaps... Is that Rin?

"LET GO OF HIM!"

Rin shoved Orochimaru off her husband, heaving. "Just take it and leave us!" She threw a half-empty bag of rice—the same rice that Obito had won from Madara, Jashin curse that man—at Orochimaru's feet. "This is all we have, I swear it."

Rin, you liar, Obito fondly thought, rubbing at his neck. That would bruise.

"Is that so?" Orochimaru snatched the bag up. "This would last us all a week, at most. How pitiful..."

"Deal with it," Rin said spitefully, narrowing her eyes. "I'm sure a grandmaster like you has other means of survival than stealing from others. Others who are trying just as hard as you to survive."

"Boss!" one of Orochimaru's cronies squawked. "Are you really going to take this?"

The snake ignored him. "A week, then."

Rin's gaze grew wary. "What?"

"I'll be back in a week." Orochimaru smiled wickedly. "And if you do not surrender the rest of your food and money by then, I will forcibly remove them from you." He licked his lips. "And perhaps take a few lives while I'm at it... After all, I have my own people to satisfy..."

"I don't care for the scum you've picked up," Rin hissed hatefully. "Just leave. We've already given you what you want! So take it and go!"

"Very well. You're lucky I have a soft spot for you, Rin-chan. We'll just have to see how soft that spot is when I return... Until then, Uchiha. If you choose to run like cowards, I will not hold it against you. After all, whether you are here or not makes no difference to me." Orochimaru turned. "Come. We'll keep the goods with us for now."

And then they were gone, and so was the truck. The original occupants, formerly hostages, stumble into the factory, dazed.

Rin let herself shudder. "That bastard," she whispered. "He'll... he'll actually do it, won't he? He'll come back here and destroy us..." She looked desperately at Obito. "We cannot let that happen. We can't."

"Yeah, Rin-sama is right!" Naruto voiced, the first to recover. His eyes still burned. "Obito-sama... we're not gonna let that happen, y'hear?! If we all fight together, we can take 'em!"

Obito shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not that easy..." He sighed, sounding like the weight of the world was upon his shoulders. And, in a way, it was. "I'll do everything I can to protect all of you."

"What?!" Surprisingly, it was Tenten who shouted indignantly this time. She had her arms akimbo,
and was frowning disapprovingly at Obito's defeated form. "With all due respect, we can't let you do that, sir!"

"I'm with her!" Konohamaru added. "No offense, but you're no match for that creepy guy! You'll be killed, and we can't let that happen! We have to fight!"

Obito blinked slowly as voices all around him chimed in grim agreement. "Everyone..." He turned to Rin for help, but she shook her head.

"They're right," she admitted. "You won't stand a chance against him. But..." Rin was torn, Obito could see as much. She grimaced. "It's been a while, but I'll fight with you."

"Rin—!"

"Obito, you're not going to change my mind," Rin said calmly, holding up a hand. "What kind of person would that make me, if I just let you do all the fighting for us? No, I'm staying with you and I'm going to fight."

"Ma'am," Lee said politely, raising his hand as if he were in a schoolroom and not in a dusty factory full of irate individuals. "You can't expect the two of you to defend all of us. If I am to ever be worth of notice by Gai-sama, then I will fight. The fire of youth... burns within me, and all of us!" He said it so solemnly that Obito almost did a double take.

"Bushy-brows is right!" Naruto declared. "We're all in this together. Boss, we all know you're good, and that the rest of us we'll probably never be as good as you..." He swallowed. "But train us! Train us so we can fight against that dirty snake bastard, y'hear?!"

"Train you?" Obito repeated, flabbergasted at the many nods he got. It's been so long... so long since I've trained students. Everyone from my school is either dead, in hiding, or unwilling to learn due to fear of persecution... If he agreed to train them, it would have to be in secret, or Madara might start to fear a revolt and exterminate all of them. The wild-haired man only let the rice competition run because there were few enough martial artists to not pose a huge threat. Hmm... There was this rather large private courtyard at the back of the factory, surrounded by stone walls. It was how Naruto normally escaped from doing work without anybody noticing (or so the boy had thought). Soldiers would never find them there; they only patrolled the streets. They only poked their noses into private establishments when something raised their suspicion. A lot of civilians still went out every day, because they were non-threats. That was probably how Orochimaru got by, despite the loudness of the truck. A non-military vehicle, despite how strange, meant civilians, and civilians equated to non-threatening.

"Yeah!" Naruto nodded vigorously.

Rin and Obito exchanged glances. They had nothing to lose, anyway. If they fled, their workers would most likely be slaughtered vindictively. And if they chose to flee as a single, large group... they'd never make it far enough.

No, they would have to stay. And if they stayed, everybody would stay.

And fight.

Obito took a good look at all of their earnest faces, caked with dirt, soot, and sweat. Some of them angry, most of them scared, but all of them determined. And those looks on their faces... It lit a fire in his belly.

"Alright," Obito relented, grinning as he watched all of them perk up. Konohamaru and Udon even
exchanged a high-five, and Naruto whooped loudly enough for the world to hear his joy. "All of you... follow me."

There were yells of excitement as everybody followed Obito and Rin to the private courtyard.

Their hands brushed together, and Rin grabbed Obito's hand, intertwining their fingers.

"We're lucky," she murmured. "Luckier than a lot of people."

Obito had to agree.

"Naruto-nii, we did it! We're going to be trained!" Moegi exclaimed. She was one of those who paled a little at the thought of fighting the Sennin, but she got over it as quickly as a child her age would. "I swear I'll put everything into it!"

"I won't let another child go again," was Tenten's muttered promise. "Not like Chihiro."

"I'm not going to let him scare me again," was Udon's promise.

"I will make Gai-sama proud!" Lee threw his fist into the air, burning with the fiery passion of youth.

"You guys are like my family!" Naruto proclaimed to the orphans, giving them a thumbs-up. "No way I'll let any of you die, dattebayo!"

If these kids didn't make it out alive, Obito wasn't sure what he would do.

"Have you heard?" Chiyo said to Sasori that afternoon, over lunch. "Obito's factory was attacked by that Orochimaru from the north this morning."

Sasori, who had been reaching for a sliced bit of potato at the center of the dinner table, paused. "Is that so? Is everything fine?"

"Obito?" Deidara butted in. She and Hitomi were sitting beside each other today. "That knucklehead... He's okay, yeah?"

"That's Daichi-san's otou-san," Hitomi muttered to herself.

"Aa," Chiyo nodded, "He is fine. I heard from Miwa-san, who is friends with Torako-san, who works there..."

_Obito_. Sasori continued to eat at a leisurely pace. _With his injuries, there was no way he could have escaped Orochimaru without help. I wonder what happened? And now he's training his workers?

"It's been a while since I've seen Obito," Deidara said wistfully, chewing thoughtfully on her chopsticks. "We should go see him, un." She said this to Sasori, looking at him expectantly.

Well, it _had_ been a while since he had checked up on Obito, Sasori thought. "We can, after lunch." He glanced over to Chiyo, but since she showed no disagreement, it was decided.

A Nara was naturally lazy, but they more than made up for it with their natural superior intelligence. Shikamaru was no exception, but his emotional intelligence sometimes left things to be desired for.
So, Shikamaru was thankful that it was not he that had to handle a furious Ino. A week ago, she had come out of her stupor for the seemingly the sole purpose of lecturing all of them.

"I can't believe you!" she had shouted at Sakura and Itachi and Izumi. The former had winced slightly, but the Uchiha couple were able to keep their calm. "Why the hell didn't you stop her?!"

There really had been no excuses. The Underground Nation had just begun to form back then, and were still trying to get things running when Hitomi had left.

Now, Shikamaru exhaled, knocking on the surface of the small hut he knew Ino was staying in. It was right next to Sakura's. "Ino... It's me. Are you in there?" He hadn't dared peeked it, lest he get something thrown at his face. But when he received no reply, he took his chances. It was empty.

"Shikamaru?"

Annddd... she and Hanabi had just walked in on him standing awkwardly outside Ino's hut.

This is such a huge drag... but I need to see if she's okay. He didn't think he would be able to forgive himself if she did something drastic. He'd already been absent enough from her recovery. It was mostly Sakura and Hanabi that'd been there for her when she needed it.

Ino looked... different, to say the least. Her blonde hair, which she normally kept in a high ponytail, had been cut. She still wore a ponytail, only a much shorter one.

"Ino," he greeted as nonchalantly as he could. "I just wanted to check up on you."

"I'm not going to go berserk, if that's what you mean," Ino scoffed, Hanabi giving her an uncomfortable glance. "I've been training my ass off with Hanabi-chan—she can testify that." She paused, biting her lip. "Sorry, I... You didn't deserve that."

Actually, he thought that he kind of did, considering he'd been too scared to make her recovery time worse for her and had hardly visited her, but he kept his mouth shut.

"How's the sealing going?" Hanabi questioned in an attempt to break the ice. Pretty much everyone had heard of the seal on the steel iron doors by now, and the efforts of Itachi, Kisame, Shikaku and Shikamaru to try and unseal it.

"We're about halfway there," Shikamaru replied. "Hopefully, we'll be able to decode everything by next week, and have the ability to get the hell out of here whenever we want to."

"You really are geniuses," Ino commented, sounding envious. "Ne, Shikamaru... Do you think, that once everything's over, you'll have time to spar with me? I mean, I haven't seen you for a while..."

Goddamn, some things would never change, would they? Shikamaru had walked right into this without even realizing. He let out an exasperated groan, and Ino smirked triumphantly. "Fine, fine..." Choji's not going to be happy, but I won't get out unscathed if it's just me and her. He'd have to get the chubbier teenager to join, somehow.

When Sasori and Deidara arrived (Hitomi staying at home) at Obito's factory, it came as no surprise to them to find it void of any people. Yet, they could hear the familiar kiais coming from the back...

"Ha!"
It was like a scene from a movie. Deidara blinked slowly at the sight of Obito standing in front of rows of workers, each one of them looking an odd combination of dead serious and nervously excited as they did their best to copy the basic katas that Obito was demonstrating to them.

"Again!" Obito ordered, going through the same series of stances and moves.

There were a variety of characters in the crowd, including a woman that had once been extremely plump, a thin man with a hunched back, a skinny teenager with an almost comical receding hairline, and many more.

"Hey, Obito!" Deidara called out, announcing their presence. "It's not polite to just keep us waiting here, un."

"Deidara?!" Obito instantly fell out of his stance and whipped around, eyes wide.

"DEIDARA!" Rin broke out of the rows with a wide grin on her face, sidling up next to her husband. She'd been far back enough not to notice Deidara and Sasori's almost silent arrival.

Immediately, Rin tackled Deidara into a strong hug that was more like a chokehold than anything else. Chuckling, Obito invited himself into their hug as well, wrapping his arms around both of them. All the while, Sasori stood at the side, looking faintly amused at Deidara's pleading expression. But then it dissolved into a grin and Deidara barked a laugh, pushing back toward Rin and returning the embrace.

"It's good to see you, too," Deidara said sincerely, grinning widely. "Ne, Obito, I didn't realize you took on some new disciples... when did this happen?"

"Honestly? Literally an hour ago." Obito pulled away from his wife and good friend. "Hey, Sasori, my man!" He waved at the puppeteer. "It's been a while. Why didn't you join in?"

Sasori's withering stare was enough of an answer, and Obito sniggered and reached toward him.

"Don't—" Sasori hissed before Obito brought him into the group hug. He sighed in defeat. "I hope you're happy."

"Of course I am! Two of my best friends—including one that I haven't seen in a looong time—just came to see lil' ol' me! Why wouldn't I be happy? I know you are, too, you know, you don't have to hide it!"

The four of them were pressed tightly against each other, and Sasori had to admit that he found some solace in their touch, slowly relaxing.

Obito's disciples had enough respect to simply keep practicing the katas, though they did look noticeably happier. Obito's smiles were truly infectious.

Eventually, they let go of one another.

"What's the story behind this?" Sasori wanted to know, gesturing with one arm at the mass of people gathered and training.

"Ah, well..." Obito rubbed the back of his head, frowning. "Remember that Orochimaru guy? The one that got his ass kicked by Itachi?"
Obito gave them a short summary of the events that had transpired. "And that's it. Now I've got about twenty people learning the Uchiha Style under me."

"You bet!" Naruto, who was in the front row of people, called. "I can't wait to beat Sasuke-teme with the Uchiha Style the next time I see him! His face'll be priceless, dattebayo!"

"What about you two?" Rin asked, looking at Deidara and Sasori. "How did you find each other?"

"It was pure luck," Deidara answered. "I'm staying with him now, and," she dropped her voice to a whisper, "he's taking me to the Underground tonight, to see Itachi and the others." She turned to Obito. "Got any idea where the rest of the Big 4 went?"

"Well," Obito hesitated, "I'm not sure where Gai is. He just kind of... fell off the face of the earth, almost. And for Shisui, well..." His gaze flattened. "I'm almost one hundred percent sure that he's with them."

"You..." Deidara faltered. Shisui? With the enemy? "You're kidding."

He wasn't.

Deidara let out a huff. "I can't believe...! No, there has to be a reason for this. Shisui wouldn't betray us like that, un."

"I've seen him in passing," Obito stated. "He's in Sasuke's patrol group." He eyed his disciples. "I have to get back to teaching now. I'll see you tomorrow? Maybe you can even help."

"I doubt that we'd be much help," Sasori cut in, and Deidara had to agree. After all, they were learning Uchiha taijutsu, while Sasori and Deidara had almost completely different fighting styles that they had developed on their own or with a sensei from a different country. Sasori had spent most of his childhood in Sunagakure, learning the puppet arts and the fighting style that came with it. Deidara, an Iwa orphan that had travelled to Ame a few years ago, had mostly trained by herself and had an entirely personal fighting style, much like Itachi and his Amaterasu.

Obito shrugged. "Leaving me out to hang like this? Maa, you're so cruel, Sasori. Deidara, how can you stand him?"

Deidara smirked. "Practice?" She looked around the courtyard. "You know, we don't have much space in Chiyo-baa-sama's apartment. Mind if we come here to spar, Obito?" She didn't want to dwell on Shisui's possible defection right now; training would be good for her.

"Of course we don't mind," Rin answered for her husband, Obito nodding along. "You guys are welcome here anytime."

"Well, Danna?" Deidara grinned at him. "How about it? Taijutsu only."

Sasori popped his neck, the sound satisfying to his ears. "You're on, brat." As much as he hated to admit it, he hadn't been training as much as he would have liked, busying himself with other things. "Deidara... here's to a good fight."

The rest of the afternoon went by in a flurry of blows and kiais.

Dinner was had before the sun set at the factory, and it was much louder and joyous than usual. They all sat down at rows of wooden tables, chatting excitedly, but also hurriedly eating their thin, watery congee. They all had to return home before dark; before the curfew was in play.
The sun was in the middle of setting when Sasori and Deidara took their leave.

"The Underground, huh," Obito said with a small smile. "I wish I could go, but..." He had family he cared deeply for above ground, and he could not leave them alone at night. He wasn't like Hanabi, who had an agenda other than survival.

"We understand," Sasori assured him. "As do they. Goodbye, friend. Don't do anything rash while I'm gone."

"Hah! I'll try not to. See ya, Deidara."

"Later, yeah." She gave him a mock salute. "Don't drive Rin crazy from anything that's not love."

Obito scoffed. "Just go."

Laughing, Deidara did, letting Sasori lead the way to the beer hall. It was time for Obito to leave, too. He could trust Iruka to lock up later in the night. The man actually lived in an apartment that was connected to the factory, as did a few of the workers. Unfortunately, it wasn't big enough to house the orphans as well, and, as such, they slept in the factory.

Rin left earlier before him to spend time with the children, as well as cook them dinner. It had mostly potatoes and the remaining amount of rice Obito had gotten from fighting two Tsukigakure taijutsu masters in Madara's competition.

When he returned home, the cupboards were utterly bare.

Shit.

He'd have to go out again very soon. His body was almost done recovering in his opinion, and that was enough for him. He wasn't a total fool—he'd only be fighting one this time, not two. He swore it.

"Otou-san?"

Obito nearly hit his head on the inside of the cupboard as he pulled his head out. "Itai... Daichi, is that you? Why aren't you in bed?"

Daichi shook his head in the dark room. "Couldn't sleep, that's all." He chuckled a little sheepishly. "I'm... kinda hungry? But there's nothing there, so whatever. I'll go back to sleep."

Obito's eyes grew sad, and he was glad that it was dark. "Sorry. I'll make sure that you'll be able to eat next time."

"Eh?" Daichi frowned. "Does that mean... you're gonna fight again?"

"Yes." He palmed his son's head after some fumbling around, ruffling his hair. "There's no other way. I promise I'll be careful—I won't fight two this time, or I'll never hear the end of it from your mother."

"Heh, yeah." Obito pulled Daichi into a hug, and the boy nuzzled against his shoulder sleepily. "Otou-san, you have to win, okay?"

"Don't worry. I will. Those taijutsu masters won't stand a chance against me!" Obito would not allow himself to be killed or beaten by those brutes—he was too good for that, and he knew it. This wouldn't be the first time he'd gone there. Everything would be fine—he'd win, bring back the rice,
and they would all eat well.

"Good," Daichi said with finality in his voice. "Don't come back all beaten up again, 'cause that'd be really uncool, okay?"

"Ouch, kid!" Obito hugged him one last time. "Back to bed, you go. I don't want to see you until the sun is up."

"Fine, fine. Night, otou-san. Love you."

Obito couldn't help but smile. "Love you too, Daichi. I'll see you in the morning."

He'd leave at dawn, he decided, then he'd come back triumphant with a bag of precious rice before afternoon. Then he'd train his disciples, take a break to draw some pictures with his young daughter, Hikari, go back to the factory to train some more, and kick Orochimaru's ass at the end of the week with Deidara and Sasori.

That night, Daichi couldn't sleep, staring up at the ceiling and the sword that Sasuke had given him —the one that hung on his wall.

_A/N: Unbeta'd as always. We die like men._
Part II: Hydrangea

Chapter Summary

The first major character death. It's dramatic. Idk.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Pffwaaaaahhh, this is so dramatic. Hopefully not too dramatic. Perhaps I'll do a rewrite in the future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She died silently, on a cold winter's night. There'd been no fanfare. No tears, because there was nobody left to cry them. There was a wet crunch of rainwater and pebbles, and a boot landed beside her head, squashing the halo of brown hair fanned out around her pale head. Her eyes had been closed when she died, he knew; he doubted that anyone would have come by and shut them for her in death. It was eerie, actually, how she actually looked like she was asleep. Perhaps she had been asleep when she died. There was no blood on her body.

Sasuke was glad that she had died that way. It was a most peaceful death.

"Yoohoo? Sasuke?" Shisui waved a hand in front of his face, and Sasuke blinked, trying not to let his surprise show. "Earth to Sasuke." Only Shisui would keep that humorous lilt in his voice during times like this. He wasn't smiling, however. Not today. Ashikaga, Yano, and Kagami were absent this morning, having other duties to perform, so Shisui and Sasuke had taken on morning patrol by themselves like champions. Shisui hummed softly, breathing out a small sigh through his nose as he looked upon the woman's pallid, wan face.

"Do you want to bury her?"

If he hadn't surprised Sasuke before, he most definitely did now with that... nonsensical question.

_Bury her?_ Sasuke thought, almost incredulously. _What would be the point?_ It wasn't as if she'd been the first corpse he had stumbled cross in the streets. Many people had been rendered homeless as a result of Tsukigakure's occupation, and many more had starved to death. Some in their own homes, most out in the cold, under the cover of the dark.

Shisui seemed to sense his unease, and squatted, peering more closely at the dead woman's face. His expression was almost completely unreadable, but Sasuke could feel his chakra moving around in distaste and... sorrow.

"Hn. Why should we?" Sasuke eventually answered, his voice flat. _Why her?_ He hadn't even known her. She'd just been another face in the crowd—she'd been young when she died, and Sasuke could imagine her awestruck countenance as he swaggered down the streets in his police
uniform, on top of the world. When she'd been alive, and healthy, and worry-free; without the lines on her face, or the puffiness beneath her eyes.

Sasuke paused before adding another fact to his checklist, *She died not long ago. Likely a few hours before the sun came out. Classic starvation case.* Gods, since when had there even been such a thing like a classic starvation case?

Shisui merely shrugged. "You've seemed a little lost lately. Maybe something like this can put your mind at ease."

He was basing this off a *maybe*? Sasuke squared his shoulders, about to make a cutting remark, when Shisui continued.

"She was beautiful, wasn't she?" He observed her, not a hint of lust or love in his eyes. More like... a doleful admiration for the young woman who had survived this long in the cold. "Probably had a family." Shisui tilted his head to one side. "Maybe a son or daughter."

"You're looking way too much into this," Sasuke reprimanded sharply. "We're wasting time. We have to make another round in this entire section of the city before we get a break."

"Then lead the way, Sasuke." Shisui stood back up again, brushing off his pants. "You're probably right." His cheerful mask was back up again, and Sasuke internally squirmed.

He and Shisui had been close when they were kids, courtesy of Itachi's connections with the both of them. Itachi had been sixteen when he'd been disowned, leaving behind a surly, confused little brother, and a reluctantly understanding best friend. Before the war, Sasuke knew that Itachi and Shisui had met whenever they could. But Sasuke...

Had thrown himself into training, fueled by bitterness and the crushing weight of responsibility.

Sasuke didn't *hate* Itachi. No, he wouldn't ever truly hate the man, even if he wanted to. As desperately as he denied it sometimes, at the end of the day, Itachi was still family. Even if Sasuke thought he was too kind. Too weak-willed and spineless to ever have a proper place among the Uchiha.

As for Shisui... they'd been close, but not *too* close, and Sasuke wasn't entirely sure what to make of him anymore. On one hand, the Uchiha elders viewed Shisui as someone to be grudgingly respected for his prowess as a martial artist, much like Itachi, but, much like the disowned Uchiha heir, Shisui was also someone to never be *admired*. He was *irresponsible, uncaring*, and *selfish*. Those were the same words that they had hand-picked for Itachi as well, coincidentally. At one point, Fugaku, Sasuke's father, had spoken highly of his wild, perpetually smiling cousin, who had walked around the compound with his hands tucked behind his head, and a hearty chuckle ready to escape from his throat. Somewhere along the way... Shisui had strayed from his path—or, at least, the one the Uchiha had expected him to take. Become a police officer under the Clan Head. Earn money. Become a productive member of society. Start a family to continue the Uchiha's honorable line. Retire just shy of seventy, living the rest of his days drinking tea and playing mahjong and shogi and other old man games with other members of his generation. Shisui was strange to Sasuke.

"Can't do it, can you?"

Sasuke scowled. "What are you insinuating? I'm not some weak fool—"

"Never said you were," Shisui interrupted swiftly. "I just didn't think that you were heartless as
well."

Heartless? This, coming from Shisui, who still smiled and chuckled like nothing was amiss? Sasuke almost wanted to laugh at the irony of it all. "Tch, you have a lot of gall, Shisui. I never pegged you for a hypocrite."

"Hypocrite? I'm glad you think that of me." Shisui's smile was noticeably more strained, but he kept his head cool.

Perhaps, Shisui was not irresponsible, uncaring, or selfish. Perhaps, he was simply insane.

Sasuke was tensed as Shisui lowered himself again, picking up the woman's body and holding her like a bride. A dead bride, Sasuke thought morbidly. Because that was what she was, in the end. Dead. Her legs folded neatly over Shisui's right arm, and her head lolled to the side.

"There's an abandoned patch of land not too far from here. We can bury her there."

"I never agreed to this, you know. I'm your captain, Shisui."

"Yeah, and you're my baby cousin. I've changed you before." Shisui shook his head, an exasperated smile on his face. "Come on. Didn't you say that we're wasting daylight?"

And so, Sasuke begrudgingly followed him to an abandoned cabbage patch. At least, Sasuke remembered it being a cabbage patch, once upon a time. It could have been some sort of other vegetable. Maybe a radish patch.

It took longer than he would have liked, but her body ended up underground, ready to be recycled and turned into nutrients. To nurture the land, and give back to the earth what she had taken.

"That was completely pointless," Sasuke deadpanned when Shisui simply stared at the lump of dirt in front of him.

"Doesn't it make you sad?"

The question made him pause. "She is dead," he answered in the end, enunciating each word.

"Yes, but she didn't need to die, did she? Not like this. It wasn't even her fight." wasn't even ours."

"She was a stranger."

"She was human."

"Enough," Sasuke said sharply. "I don't want to hear any of your preaching, Shisui. You accepted everything with that idiotic grin on your face. You've done nothing to save these people, so you should have nothing to say about them."

"You know," Shisui said when they were back on route. "You've done nothing to save them either. All you've wanted to do... is keep yourself alive."

Hypocrite, Sasuke thought immediately. But what kind of hypocrite had such a damn condemning stare? Shisui was either a marvelously good actor, or he truly didn't recognize the fact that he was also in the wrong. "Then you and I are the same, aren't we?"

Shisui slipped. Or, rather, his mask did. "You want my honest opinion, Sasuke? You want to know what I think? I think," he said slowly, "that you and I couldn't be anymore different."
"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you really going to take the moral high ground, Shisui, when you joined for the same reasons as me?" What was his problem? What? What? "That woman... you did that to give yourself closure, not me. You're a coward, Shisui."

"Maybe I am," his voice lowered, "for not doing more."

Not doing more? Sasuke wanted to demand a proper answer from the older male. But they were about to reach Obito's old mansion—and the Tsukigakure soldier's personal 'battle arena'—and it would not be wise to provoke each other in front of their... comrades. As two of the only Uchiha in the forces, they had to stick together.

They were about to keep going on their way when one of the soldiers called them over.

"Hey! Uchiha! Apparently, there's one of your own here today."

"Oh?" Shisui raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah! Why don't you come watch? You always come to see the Uchiha fights."

'Uchiha fights'. Sasuke nearly rolled his eyes. Only one Uchiha had ever come to fight, because Madara seemed to have some sense of loyalty to his family in Akatsuki, and had left their food and rations intact when storming the compound. Only one Uchiha, because...

Sasuke's breath hitched in his throat. Only one Uchiha had an excuse to fight. Only one Uchiha—one that lived away from the compound, one that was independent, and one that was certainly not Itachi because Sasuke couldn't wrap his head around his brother fighting for food.

Sasuke cursed. "Obito again?" What's that idiot doing back here?! His heart started to thrum, and he swallowed a lump in his throat. Didn't he learn his lesson the last time he came?

"Oh, is that his name?" The soldier shrugged. "You can finish your patrol after watching the fight. I'm sure Madara-sama won't mind."

And so the Uchiha entered Obito's old home, and stood upon the peanut gallery, looking down at the fighters in the ring. The ring was always surrounded by ten martial artists sitting in a seiza. Nine when there were people fighting. Ten again when the opponent—almost always a civilian man desperate to feed himself and his family—had been defeated.

With a grimace, Sasuke watched as another civilian got pummeled. Where the hell was Obito? Was he still waiting? Paranoia crept up on him again, and he turned to Shisui.

"Let's go downstairs," Sasuke said, curt. "I want a better view."

Shisui nodded, looking grim as well. They went to the lower level, where the contestants were waiting behind metal bars, faces gaunt and ashed. Mizuki's eyes followed their retreating forms. The man was always there, even when Madara wasn't. And it just so happened their general was absent today, in a meeting with other officers.

"I can't see him," Sasuke stressed, trying to discretely peer over the mass of men still waiting.

"He'll come out soon," Shisui reasoned.

So they waited.
Sure enough, Obito did come out.

The iron gate snapped shut behind him, and Sasuke almost choked when he saw a tiny body pressed against the bars, eyes wide with apprehension. Daichi. Oh God, it was Daichi. Why was he here? Did Obito even know that his son had followed him to this hellhole? A string of curse words found themselves at the tip of Sasuke's tongue, but he swallowed them back. No. No, he couldn't bring attention to himself and the boy.

Obito glanced over to Shisui and Sasuke as he went up to the arena. Uncomprehending. Uncomprehending of why his beloved relatives were on the other side of the war. Sasuke kept his face stoic, Shisui's presence beside him a small comfort.

The fight unfolded right before their eyes, Obito and the Tsukigakure taijutsu user clashing fiercely. Obito fought with all his heart, never hesitating to strike unfair blows or pressure points.

Every time his opponent threw him on the ground, Sasuke's heart would jump to his throat in disquiet, even when Obito got back up. His eyes flicked to the side, trying to gauge Daichi's reaction. But the boy only had half his attention committed to the fight. The other half...

Was focused on him.

What was that look in his eyes? Sasuke wondered, his fingers curling and uncurling around his sword. The very same one he used to spar Daichi with, under the watchful eye of his parents. It was like the look that Obito had given them. As if he didn't understand why Sasuke was standing with the enemy. There was so much bewilderment, and even... a mild betrayal.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes, gaze flinty. A small price to pay for survival, he told himself. He refused to convince himself otherwise. Daichi was just another ryo in the bundle he had offered to his Taishō in exchange for a life worth living.

"He's going to win," Shisui opined when Obito punched his opponent square in the nose, making the other man grunt and flip backward. A relieved smile reached his face. Sasuke thought that it was the most genuine one he had seen from him—or anyone—in a while.

Obito would win. Because Obito had something to fight for. A family. Friends. Heck, even the workers at his decrepit factory if the city's fractured gossip network was anything to go by. Obito would not lose this match; he would not lose this battle.

It was a blow to the temple that knocked his opponent out. Obito stood, a lone figure in the ring, surrounded by three-quarters of a dozen of Tsukigakure martial artists. They were formidable, no doubt, but Obito had pulled through.

A small, relieved noise made its way up Sasuke's throat.

Everything was going to be okay. Obito would leave with a bruised face and limbs, but there would be a bag of rice in his arms, and he would smile at Rin's worried exasperation, and hug Hikari when he got home, and scold Daichi fiercely when he found out what he had done—

Click.

The sound was intimately familiar. It was the whisper of a past and present lover, one that had enticed him in the past and would continue to do so in the future. It came with an artful explosion, and was a tool of apathetic precision. It was so many things at once, and Sasuke felt time itself freeze for one brief moment.
He barely had time to even move when—

_Bang!_

Obito slumped forward, his eyes wide and filled with the sort of bewilderment that made Sasuke's wretched heart twist painfully.

"Geez," Mizuki drawled, the muzzle of his pistol smoking. "I really hate arrogant bastards like you."

Obito choked on the blood rapidly filling his lungs and rising in his throat, collapsing front-first onto the mat. The nine conscious Tsukigakure warriors looked on impassively, not even twitching in their seiza.

"O... Otou-san?"

Sasuke had never felt so helpless in his life. Had never felt so helpless when he whipped his head around to see Daichi with one faltering arm reaching through the iron bars. The boy was staring at something that was far away.

Desperately, he looked toward Shisui. The older Uchiha's face was completely pale, and continued to whiten further, as if it was he who was bleeding out in the ring and not Obito. Sasuke absently wondered if he looked the same.

The men behind the iron bars had been stunned into silence.

"OTOU-SAN!"

He was screaming now. Why was he screaming? Sasuke stared off into the distance, unable to fully process everything that was happening around him. The boy was shaking the bars now, as if that would let him through. Tears peeked out at the corner of his eyes as the child screamed for his father.

His father—Obito.

Obito.

Without saying anything to Shisui, Sasuke leaped forward, landing in front of Obito. He did not draw his sword and point it at the Tsukigakure martial artists. He did not remove his gun and aim it at Mizuki. He did not shout. He did not scream. He felt... like he'd been submerged underwater. Noise reached his ears, but he did not comprehend.

"S-Sasuke..." Obito weakly lifted his head, one hand clutching the wound that had shattered his ribs and pierced his lung. He was bleeding out rapidly.

What had Sakura called it? _Hemorrhage_.

"Sasuke?"

"Sasuke..."

"SENSEI!"

"Sorry, cousin," Obito wheezed when he hacked up blood on Sasuke's uniform.

"Don't speak," Sasuke heard himself say, putting Obito up in a more comfortable position. His
cousin's eyes were slowly glazing over—he was dying—dying—dying—and there was so much noise. Yet, Sasuke could only hear one voice clearly through the haze.

Obito wanted to say something. Sasuke really wish he didn't. "Sasuke... Rin... I..."

"You love her," Sasuke rushed him along, his voice breaking slightly. "You love her, I got it. I'll tell her. Shut up, Obito. Obito-dobe." His eyes burned with a sensation that was familiar but not familiar, and he squeezed them shut, tears sprouting beneath his eyelids and clinging to his eyelashes.

Obito choked out a sound, and Sasuke knew that he had wanted to laugh. Obito was like Shisui in that respect. They found humor in the strangest, most dire things. "Daichi..."

Sasuke's eyes snapped open again, and the world was so much clearer. He could see every detail; every aspect. He could see the way the corners of Obito's eyes crinkled as he smiled through the pain; he could see how his eyes were clouded in agony and, perhaps, delusion. He could see the small, bloody hole the bullet had left in the fabric of his cousin's clothing.

"Look..." Sasuke could see the muscles in Obito's eyelids twitch as his eyes drooped shut.

"Please shut up," Sasuke whispered, breathing rapidly. "Obito-dobe, shut the fuck up. Please."

"No." For a dying man, Obito's voice was surprisingly sharp. Then again, Obito had never taken to being silenced well. "This... is a huge m-mess... But, Sasuke..." He coughed again, and panted heavily. "Look after him, y-yeah?"

Sasuke wished he hadn't looked. He really, really wish he hadn't looked. But his eyes traveled to the side to see Daichi's face contorted with grief, snot and tears flowing down and past his cheeks and lips. His shoulders shook with every sob—every breath.

Sasuke had almost forgotten what pain felt like, but his Sharingan—was it? His father would have been so proud—made sure that he would never, ever forget what pain was. He would know pain, and pain would know him.

"Now kill me."

"W-what?" He hated how he stammered. Uchiha weren't supposed to stammer. They weren't—they just weren't—

But Obito's eyes—he had his Sharingan turned on as well. Sasuke failed to see any poetic justice behind this—bore into his. Desperate (wasn't everyone desperate these days) and pleading. Kill me, he mouthed. Make it quick.

With trembling arms—Uchiha weren't supposed to tremble either—Sasuke held Obito's head up, loosely cradling the taller Uchiha, who was still very much sprawled on the floor and bleeding—

Gun or sword? Gun or sword? Gunsword?

Sasuke reached down.

And Obito choked on his final breath as the slender blade of Sasuke's katana slipped through his heart and nicked his spine.

Obito had never quite taken to guns.
"Excellent work, Sasuke, though surprisingly merciful of you," Mizuki hummed. "I would have liked him to bleed more."

Sasuke almost flinched. He'd all but forgotten about the adviser's presence. He looked over to Daichi, his gaze detached. There was a newly born fury on his face. One that did not belong on any eight year old. It was type of fury that was so overwhelming, Sasuke doubted that the boy had even noticed that he was trembling. It was the kind of fury that was disbelieving, but very much real. And it came from grief that hadn't quite caught up with him yet.

His head ached. His head ached so, so much. Was this a side effect of the Sharingan? Or was it something else?

Shisui helped him up. At least, he thought it was Shisui.

When Sasuke glanced to the gathering of men behind the iron bars again, Daichi was gone.

"Oh, there you are," Chiyo said when Sasori and Deidara returned, the latter looking more solemn than Chiyo had seen her so far. "Stayed the night at the Underground, did you? Was it filthy?"

"Quite," Sasori said shortly, obviously not in the mood for small talk. "Baa-sama, is Hitomi around?"

At that, Chiyo snorted. "Locked herself up in the guest room. She said that she was 'training'. I took a peek in and she's reading a medicine textbook from one of my shelves. Mind you, it didn't seem like she was absorbing anything." Chiyo pointed to her crinkled eyes. "Eyes were glazed over. Unfocused."

Deidara elbowed Sasori discretely, and the man rolled his eyes, a bead of sweat falling from his temple. Chiyo raised an eyebrow when Deidara all but dragged the old woman's grandson into the next room—his room. "Well," she muttered, smirking. "I'm not exactly complaining."

"We have to tell her, un." Deidara closed the bedroom door behind her, turning around to face Sasori, who was standing with his arms crossed. "You know how many times she's nearly gotten herself killed for Ino?"

"That's exactly why I don't want her to know," Sasori refuted stubbornly. "She'll beg us to bring her to her, and if we refuse, she'll take off again. The Yamanaka—Ino—isn't ready. She's practically functioning full-time on adrenaline and self-righteous anger—"

"Self-righteous?!!" Deidara hissed, bringing their faces closer together as she leaned in. "She was raped, you insensitive prick!!" Nobody in the Underground had ever explicitly mentioned it, but Deidara could connect the scattered dots well enough to make a full picture. "She needs Hitomi. They need each other. Why can't you see that?"

"She'll crash sooner or later," Sasori stated solemnly. "Brat, don't fight me for once. We'll reintroduce them when Ino appears to be more... mentally stable."

"Danna...!"

"Brat."

Their gazes burned as they stared down each other, both of them unrelenting. But, eventually, one broke.
"We should focus on one thing at a time for now," Sasori told her, reluctantly, "We'll take her to see Ino at the end of the week. Right now, we should prepare for Orochimaru's assault."

"Fine," Deidara grudgingly agreed. "Speaking of, Obito should be training them soon. They start in the morning, an hour or two before noon." She breathed out, leaning against the door. "We should start on lunch, un. What's on the menu? Boiled potatoes or steamed potatoes?" Her voice was dry when she listed the options.

Sasori allowed a little smirk to reach his lips. "Which do you prefer?"

"Tch!" Deidara made a face, scrunching up her nose. "I don't have a preference. They're both equally disgusting." They exited the room, and Deidara cast a furtive glance at the closed door of the guest room. "If—when all of this is over, I don't think I'll be eating any spuds for a while..."

For once, Sasori had to agree with her, nodding. "Boiled, then. Personally, I find them a little more tolerable than steamed ones."

Chiyo was nowhere to be seen, and they suspected that she had gone to the guest room to accompany Hitomi. Perhaps help her understand some of the complex medical jargon.

So Deidara and Sasori took to the kitchen, each of them doing their own thing and working in almost perfect tandem. Sasori sliced the potatoes deftly while Deidara prepared the rice, sorting out the appropriate portions for each person.

She put the rice on the kamado stove as Sasori washed the chopped up slices of potato in the low sink with practiced ease.

"Need any help?" she offered.

Sasori paused. "You could cut the rest."

"On it, un."

Silence prevailed as Deidara leisurely chopped the potatoes, passing them to Sasori to wash and put in a pot on the ground.

"Deidara."

Deidara didn't stop cutting, and Sasori didn't stop washing.

"Yeah?"

"When you were living alone..." Sasori hesitated, wracking his brain for what to say. "You weren't assaulted, were you?"

"Assault—? As if," Deidara scoffed, but there was no malice or scorn in it. "Why?"

The potato slice nearly slipped out of Sasori's grip, and he scowled. What an uncomfortable question... "When you yelled at me before about the older Yamanaka's... You know what." He closed his eyes, breathing out silently. Then he opened them again, staring sternly at Deidara, who was openly gazing at him, the knife raised above the chopping board slightly.

Then she smiled. It was a very small one, and more reminiscent of a grimace, but it was a smile nevertheless. "You can relax, then. Nothing like that happened to me, un."

He nodded, tearing his gaze away from her and once again focusing on the potato slices in front of
him. "Good. As a general consensus, females are irritating—"

"Danna, I have a knife."

"—but I would never wish that kind of thing upon any woman," he finished levelly, as if Deidara had never spoken.

She didn't know why, but she felt a sudden surge of appreciation for him. Despite the casual misogyny, it was his own way of letting her know that he cared. "Well, that's good, yeah. Because if you did," she slammed the knife down, grinning wildly at him, "I'd have to put your grandmother's beloved blade to good use."

Sasori was unfazed, though there was a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "You wouldn't be the first." He gestured to multiple slits in the kitchen walls. "Sometimes, baa-sama enjoys playing games."

"Hmm," Deidara hummed. "Do you enjoy them? These games?"

"It's a surprisingly good way to unwind," he answered honestly.

"Ah, that's good, un."

An easy silence fell between them again, and lunch was complete before they knew it. The smell of boiled potatoes and rice brought Hitomi and Chiyo out of the guest room.

Chiyo made a dry remark about their bland meal before they all sat down at the dining table. Hitomi was looking noticeably perkier, a content smile on her face as she devoured her food with all the finesse of a noble lady.

"Just use your hands," Deidara told her after watching the child try and fail to pick up a slice of particularly slippery potato.

"My hands?" Perhaps, once upon a time, Hitomi would have scoffed at the idea and flounced on her way. But now, she paused, considering the thought. Hesitantly, she put down her chopsticks and pinched the vegetable between her thumb and her pointer finger. Then she placed it in her mouth, blinking at the wetness on her fingers. "That wasn't... so bad, I guess. But wouldn't wanna do that if I didn't have to."

"Tsk, you priss," Deidara commented, quirking her lips upward. "Once we kick Orochimaru's ass, I might have to start beating some more sense into you, un."

To her surprise, Hitomi grinned widely. "Bring it on, sensei!"

"Aaah," Deidara yawned, stretching as she and Sasori walked to the Nohara-Uchiha factory. "That was a good meal. You know, you're not a bad chef, Danna."

They arrived at the factory an hour before noon, but, to their surprise everybody was still working and not training.

"The hell?" muttered Deidara, glancing around. "We should find Rin..."

"Um, excuse me?" a brown-haired teenager hesitantly approached them. "Neither Rin-sama nor Obito-sama are here today." She dipped her head hastily. "Sorry about the inconvenience."

"Not here today?" Sasori echoed, suspicion crawling at the back of his mind. Has Orochimaru
already struck? No, that can't be it. This was only the first day since Orochimaru's warning, and if he really had changed his mind, it would have been a massacre. The teenage girl standing in front of him would be nothing but a corpse, not a living, breathing creature.

The brown-haired girl—she wore her hair in twin buns—was holding some sort of pole that was used for beating cotton. "I thought you would know where they went," she said slowly, unease evident in her eyes. "But apparently not, huh?"

Just then, the sliding door opened, letting in more sunlight than the hole in the wall did. Rin stood at the doorway, looking haunted. She held both of her children by each hand, both of them looking equally as worn as their mother, and Deidara started toward her.

"There you are! Where's Obito, un?" Deidara stopped in front of her, frowning when Rin seemingly didn't hear her. "Rin...? I—"

"He's dead." Her voice was so soft that Deidara almost didn't hear her.

"Rin, what are you—"

Rin lifted her chin, and Deidara thought that she had never seen her friend look so utterly helpless before. "D-Deidara... Obito's dead. They killed him."

There was silence. Nothing but a shocked silence.

Then Hikari began to cry, loudly sobbing.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Just imagine the kitchen as one from the Taisho era because... that's what it is, basically.
Part II: Eremurus

Chapter Summary

Sasori and Deidara pick up from where Obito left off in the face of Orochimaru's oncoming assault. There is some crying, but the grieving needs to be pushed aside for now. Tenten gets some light shed on her. Itachi finds out Obito is dead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Obito's dead," Rin spoke, her voice hollow with grief and disbelief. "They killed him."

For Deidara, the world stopped for a second, then started again. That's absurd, she wanted to say, because of course Obito wasn't dead and Rin was just mistaken and—

A small hiccup escaped from Hikari's quivering lips, and the girl began to sob. Loudly. The noise carried a bone-deep ache to it, and Deidara's heart twisted painfully as she watched a little girl mourn her father. The air was heavy with hopelessness, and Deidara swallowed, throat parched.

She couldn't see him, but Deidara knew that Sasori was shocked as well. The distress in his chakra spoke what words or actions couldn't, even when he struggled to level it, knowing that those with adequate enough training could feel it. Like her. It snapped her out of a daze, and the reality of the situation slowly began to seep into her blood and her veins, like a disease.

Hikari continued to cry, even when Rin scooped her up and cradled her in her arms, the woman's narrow face ashen.

Daichi simply stood at his mother's side, unmoving. His eyes weren't focused on Deidara, who he hadn't seen a very long time. They weren't focused at all, actually. But when Hikari's voice reached a new high, his eyes flickered red, and Deidara recoiled, hissing through her teeth.

Behind her, Sasori exhaled harshly.

There was a muffled sob from Rin, and tears dripped down her cheeks as she buried her face into the back of Hikari's shirt, wetting the fabric as her frame shook.

"D-dead?" the girl with the twin buns echoed Deidara's thoughts. For one brief moment, Deidara turned around, just in time to see a myriad of emotions pass through her expression.

The noise of the factory had died down, the only sound being Hikari'a loud wailing and Rin trying to hold it together for her children.

The back of her eyeballs stung with a sensation that she hadn't felt in a while, and Deidara took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart. Quickly, so Rin wouldn't see her own tears, Deidara closed the distance between them, embracing Rin—and Hikari—tightly.

Now that the little girl was pressed between them, Rin freed one hand and used it to grab the fabric on Deidara's back, twisting her fingers in the material frantically as if her friend would be torn away at any moment.
"L-let it out," Deidara mumbled, a twin trail of tears cutting through the slight layer of dust on her cheeks. *I'm sorry, Rin.*

Sasori watched them for a little longer before turning his brown gaze to Daichi, who hadn't spoken a word or made a sound since they'd arrived. "Child," he said slowly, and Daichi lifted his head, Sharingan spinning. Sasori paused, before amending, "Daichi. How did this happen?"

He tried not to look too shocked when Daichi's face contorted in anger. "They shot him," he whispered hatefully, stepping closer to Sasori. "He won and they shot him!"

From the way his voice fluctuated, Sasori couldn't even begin to imagine what the worst part was, because Daichi obviously hadn't gotten to that part yet.

"But he was still alive." Daichi's voice cracked, and he furiously rubbed at his eyes. "M-maybe he would have lived if—if—!" He bared his teeth at Sasori. "Sasuke killed him, okay?! He killed him! He killed my dad."

Sasori's blank mask cracked ever so slightly when the anger faded from Daichi's eyes, leaving behind a broken, lost boy. *He's only eight.* The image of Obito proudly presenting his shy, curious son to him had his entire body numb, save for a prickly sensation crawling beneath his skin. It was almost like what Itachi had said. Like he was burning, and he didn't even feel it. *An eight-year-old isn't supposed to know what losing a parent feels like.* That just wasn't... right. It was a feeling that many of them knew—him and Deidara included—and Daichi had just been the latest name added to the ever growing list.

"Why would he do that?" Daichi demanded, his eyes desperate and searching.

"Do what?"

Sasori had to curse Uzumaki Naruto's timing. Thankfully, the boy didn't seem as loud or overbearing as he normally did, instead having a small, confused frown on his face.

"What happened?" Naruto was asking. "I went to the bathroom and now, suddenly, everyone's crying..." He looked around uncomfortably.

"Obito-sama passed away," Tenten said lowly.

Naruto's eyes widened. "What?! But, how?!!"

Sasori was about to tell the boy to *please shut the hell up because you're not helping with anything here* but Daichi beat him to it, his Sharingan whirling faster than ever.

"It was Sasuke!" he cried vehemently. "He could have saved him, but he didn't!"

"Sasuke-teme?" Naruto reeled back, shocked. *No way. Sasuke's a bastard but he... he'd never kill anyone!* He was sorely tempted to tell Daichi that, but something about the boy stopped the words from ever coming out.

Deidara pulled back from Rin, trying to calm down. As much as she regretted it, they didn't have time to grieve. This factory was next on Orochimaru's hit list, and now that Obito was gone... Her stomach flipped. These barely trained civilians would be slaughtered like sheep if something wasn't done. *Shit, Obito,* she thought frustratedly. *Do you have any idea what kind of mess you've made?* It wasn't fair to be angry at a dead man, she knew, but an outlet was needed, and Obito provided one. Even in death, Obito had earned Deidara's ire for massively screwing up.
Hikari's sobbing and died down to a quiet sniffling, and Rin was taking deep breaths, trying to recompose herself. Deidara knew that Rin had come to the same conclusion as her: they didn't have time. Tears could be shed later—right now, they needed to pick up immediately where Obito had left off.

So Deidara dried her tears and turned determinedly to Sasori. "Danna," she said bluntly, "there's no way we're leaving them here to fend for themselves, un. She paused. "I remember you told me once that you'd never take on disciples. And maybe that was fine, yeah, when there was still peace." Her eyes hardened. "But this is a war now, and we can't just sit around anymore. We need to do something, un."

Disciples. Yes, that would be the next course of action, wouldn't it? Sasori resisted the urge to bite down. That would only cause him headaches, and this entire affair was already headache-worthy enough. It was all because of this war. It was forcing him to come out of his shell again and... he didn't like having his hand forced. But his duty as a martial artist called, and if he didn't answer, these innocent civilians—his friend's, Obito's, workers—would be at the mercy of Orochimaru. So he reined in his reluctance and met Deidara's gaze. "Aa. We can't afford to waste anymore time," he looked around, taking each and every one of their faces, "All of you, to the back. Now."

The moment relief passed through her cobalt eyes, he knew he had made the right decision, even if he would curse himself during the night, when he was alone.

They led the way, proud and strong and refusing to let this get the better of them. Maybe, when they were in solitude, they would grieve, but for now...

Rin swallowed when she realized just what they looked like.

Soldiers marching off to war.

Tenten felt like she was spiralling in a tizzy, if she were to be honest. Just this morning, she had scrubbed the faces of her fellow orphans clean and had gotten to work, sorting and beating cotton alongside other workers.

Everything had been fine. Naruto had been being obnoxious (as usual), Lee had been raving on about how majestic Maito Gai was (as usual), and Tenten had been the one to reel them in and get them to work (as usual).

Orochimaru had threatened them yesterday, but with Obito leading them, she had thought that they might have stood a chance. But now he was dead and... Tenten shook her head. Everything would still be fine.

Now, Tenten stood performing katas, sandwiched between two workers that she had exchanged words with on some occasions. They were different from the ones that Obito had taught them, but that was to be expected. It had never been explicitly stated by anyone—or perhaps nobody vocal enough had caught on—but Tenten knew that the plan was to completely overwrite Obito's training with their own.

Before the war, the gossip mill had been going full-force, and Tenten had worked in a place where it was busy almost every hour of the day. According to the grapevine, Deidara of the Big 4 and the grandson of the chicken rice store owner, Sasori, had found a kindred spirit, a rival, and a training partner in each other. Which meant that they were familiar, which, in turn, meant that they could find a way to mix and match aspects of their style to suit them.
The Uchiha focused more on offense, Tenten thought absently as she threw a clawed hand in front of her, a few inches away from the back of the man in front of her. I can see a bit of the Uchiha Style in their movements, mainly from Deidara, but other than that, their styles are almost completely based on defense. It probably came with being largely reliant on long-range attacks, Tenten deduced.

About two rows from her row, Tenten could see Lee struggling to grasp the taijutsu styles of the two artists. He was a rough, unpolished fighter, even if he tried so hard to develop his own personal taijutsu style. Being who they were, they'd never had opportunity to seek out guidance, not when they spent nearly every waking moment of their lives working. She'd had a feeling that once Lee saved up enough money to survive by himself, he would have left the factory to pursue Maito Gai's teachings. But that'd been a long time ago, and the war was draining his spirit away.

It was early evening when Sasori and Deidara finally stopped. But before they could go, Sasori spoke up.

"Keep training," he told them, and if Tenten hadn't known any better—if she hadn't seen the low flame in his brown eyes and the firm determination in his jaw—she would have thought that he had reached complete ataraxy. "Even when you're working—surprise yourselves; practice with your friends and comrades and never stop. Your hard work will not betray you, and neither will we."

"Danna's right." Tenten found her to be a little more relaxed than Sasori, but still tense. "Don't get complacent, un." Her lips quirked upward in a small, tired smile. "We'll see you all tomorrow."

And they were dismissed, all of them chattering amicably, if a little nervously, among themselves. Most of them planned to eat dinner and go home straight away. Tenten saw Daichi and a sleeping Hikari be taken home by Rin after the latter female exchanged words with Sasori and Deidara, voices low.

"Tenten?"

It was Iruka.

Tenten nodded. "Yes? Did you need something, Iruka-san?"

He gave her a sheepish, apologetic grin and held up a broom with a bamboo handle and grass like strands. "Just that it's your turn to be sweeping up the precinct. I'll save you some dinner."

"Will just congee do?"

"Sure. I'm not that hungry anyway."

She thanked Iruka before taking the broom from him and moving methodically around the courtyard, humming a tune that only she could hear as she swept. At one point, a huge cloud of dust came up and made her cough and cover her mouth, momentarily lifting the broom up vertically. It was then she paused, gauging the weight of the cleaning instrument.

"Tenten! Look what your father and I got you!"

"What is it, okaa-san? Is it more shuriken?! Is it, is it?!"

"Haha, not this time. We thought that you might like to try something different, princess."

"That's it!"
"Huh? What? Oh my gosh, is this a bo staff?! Thank you so much! I love you! Wow, this is so cool; my very own bo staff!"

Tenten blinked, memories falling out of her eyes. Letting out a small breath, she used her free hand to wipe her eyes, muttering about how the dust lying around was a hazard.

She started humming again, absently whirling the broom in her hands. Eventually, she gave in to the temptation.

"Screw it," she muttered, spreading her feet wide and going through a series of movements with the broom. Sometimes, the bristly end would whack her in the face—that was what she got for practicing with a broom of all things—but she made it work. The clouds turned blue and indigo as the sun set behind the clouds, going to bed behind a horizon that Tenten would never be able to see.

Tenten whirled through her katas comfortably, despite having not trained in a while. Her parents had both been martial artists in their prime, and had, upon retiring, had made weapons for a living, up until their death. Sometimes, Tenten found herself joining Lee and giving him a few pointers (though she stopped once she found out that he was not suited for the motions of the style she used). She always felt awkward and unbalanced when she practiced without some sort of weapon in her hand, which was pretty much all the time. It'd been hard to find someone that would sell a sixteen-year-old girl a nice weapon for a low price. It was even harder now, considering everything that had happened.

She had just finished and was going to continue with her yard work when a voice sounded from behind her, startling her.

"That was pretty good. I didn't know that you had martial arts training, un."

Deidara.

Tenten turned around, trying to seem nonchalant. "It's not really something I like to advertise. Besides, I'm not that good."

"Certainly not good enough to fend off that snake-man at any rate."

"I'll be the judge of that." Grinning, Deidara crossed her arms. "Why don't we have a spar, right here and now?"

Tenten did a double-take. "With m-me?"

"Well, obviously." Deidara took a look around before spotting an abandoned broom sprawled precariously between two buckets. It was one that Naruto had left without ever picking up, distracted by the notion of lunch. She picked it up and examined it briefly before spinning it around in her fingers. "Just a warning, when you have Shisui as a friend, you tend to branch out a lot in weaponry, if only for a little bit. So no holding back, yeah. If you're really as bad as you say, then you shouldn't need to be going easy anyway." She lazily twirled the broom a few more times before pointing the non-bristly end at Tenten. "Do you accept my challenge?"

Tenten swallowed a lump in her throat. Before she knew what she was saying, she agreed, "Fine. But just a quick spar, like you said. Winner has to land three debilitating mock blows on the other before they do."

The two teenagers—it was a strange notion; Deidara was only a few years older than her, but she was so much stronger and respected—faced off against each other, blue eyes meeting chocolate brown.
The evening winter breeze blew, sweeping up some more dust, and Deidara launched toward her. Eyes widening, Tenten blocked Deidara's blow with her own broom, the bamboo handle shaking under the immense strain that Deidara was putting on it. Teeth gritting, Tenten pushed back and moved the broom in such a way that it forced Deidara to shift her weight and skid back.

With a guttural cry, Tenten took the opportunity to attack, lashing out at Deidara with a whip-like strike. Deidara barely had time to block it, but she did, and their foreheads nearly bashed together. They continued like this, with one of them attacking and defending then vice versa. Their brooms knocked together constantly until Deidara huffed lightly—Tenten had pressed the handle end of her broom above Deidara's sternum.

"One," Tenten counted.

"Tsk, don't get cocky, yeah."

Tenten spluttered when Deidara struck at her ankle with her foot, causing her to buckle. When she finally gathered her bearings, Deidara had her broom hanging just above the younger girl's skull.

"One," Deidara mocked, and Tenten pushed herself up with a grunt, glaring. "What? You never specified the battle to be weapons only, un. An oversight like that is going to get your ass knocked." She smirked. "Kinda like what just happened."

"Are you done?" Tenten bit out, annoyed at having been had. "Enough talk—let's fight!" Her blood was boiling in her veins now, and she was eager to land another 'hit' on the older girl.

"If you like," Deidara mock-demurred, coming her way again.

As they engaged in battle once again, Tenten noticed that Deidara's prowess with a staff—broom, whatever—was not as good as she had thought. Now that she had gotten a good, proper look, she could spy many holes in the blonde's attacks. Inwardly smirking, she immediately took advantage of the gaps.

Deidara blinked in surprise when she felt the cold bamboo of Tenten's broom pressed against the side of her neck. Had this been a real fight, Tenten could have snapped her neck right then and there with the right amount of force. *Not bad,* she thought, a little in awe at the girl's ability.

"Two." Tenten's tone was decidedly smug.

"Yeah, yeah," Deidara grunted, no longer looking so haughty. "Again."

In the end, Tenten took the third point when she 'split the skin' on Deidara's shin. They were both panting slightly, Tenten looking more worn than Deidara. Why had they fought again? She'd completely forgotten.

"Tenten—right?"

Tenten straightened. "Yeah."

"I take it back," Deidara said solemnly. "You're not good, un."

Well, Tenten thought indignantly. *I just beat you three to one, so you don't have any room to talk!* She was going to say just that, when Deidara smirked.

"You're damn good. I almost feel sorry for Orochimaru and his cronies."
Tenten relaxed at that, then tensed up again. Was she seriously implying that Tenten could take on Orochimaru and survive? Yeah, right; she'd seen what that thing had done to Obito—she didn't stand a chance.

"It was a nice fight," Deidara said, propping her broom up against the stone walls. "I wish I could help you improve, but I don't have anything to teach you." Her voice took on a dry tone. "Which I'm sure you've noticed, yeah, considering how thoroughly you crushed me. The only hit I got on you was because of a cheap shot." She paused, her the light in her eyes dying a bit. For the first time, Tenten saw her as what she truly was: a tired nearly-adult who, along with her red-haired partner, held the lives of others in her hands. "I hope you live, un. I really... hope you do."

"Yeah, well," Tenten sucked in a breath, "I've made it this far." It was the best she could offer, especially how she had been made aware of her own mortality just yesterday by Orochimaru. It was one of the few times where she had thought that she was actually going to die.

"Un." Stretching her arms, Deidara yawned. "Well, I've got somewhere to be, and Danna doesn't like to be kept waiting." She mock-saluted her. "We should do this again sometime."

"If you're that keen about losing, then bring it on." Tenten couldn't help but grin, forgetting all about the grimness of today and the world for one brief moment.

Deidara's eyes flashed. "Hmph. We'll see, Tenten."

Sakura looked decidedly unimpressed when Deidara flopped across the bar counter while Shikamaru locked up, grumbling about how troublesome it was to have such a complicated series of locks on the door, especially since those idiot soldiers never seemed to notice who came in and out, even past curfew.

"Okay," Sakura lifted her gaze to meet Sasori's mildly exasperated one, "what's up with this one?" She jerked her thumb at a groaning Deidara, who seemed to be hungover despite not having touched any alcohol at all.

"'This one'!" Deidara sneered at her.

"This one," Sasori answered, ignoring Deidara's protests, "just got her ass handed to her by a girl three years her junior. And now she's moping."

"Dansan!" The blonde flashed an accusing gaze at the puppeteer, who was completely unconcerned. "I shouldn't have ever told you, un!"

"This is a happy reunion and all, even though we saw you guys last night," Shikamaru said as he slid over to them. "But mind taking it downstairs?"

They didn't mind, and allowed Shikamaru and Sakura to lead them to the cellar and even further below, where the Underground lay. They must have remembered their reason for visiting, because their faces slowly fell and they set their mouths into hard lines.

A shiver ran down Shikamaru's spine. Bad news. This was extremely troublesome. Like that seal on the wall and pretty much everything else wasn't already bad enough news—these two just had to bring more? But Shikamaru had never been a fan of shooting the messenger, so he kept his mouth shut.

The first face they saw in camp was Kisame's, slowly eating out of a can of something that he had scrounged up from somewhere. His bandaged sword, Samehada, was by his side, as usual.
"Yo," Shikamaru greeted, lifting his hand lazily. "Look who's here."

"Sasori!" Kisame smirked at the sight of the red-haired man and his blonde companion. "And, hey, I've seen you around, too. Last night and before all the shit happened. Deidara, right?"

"Mm. And you're Hoshigaki Kisame." Deidara returned the smirk. "Geez, you're a lot less uptight than before, master."

The shark-man shrugged. "The club I opened is long gone now, so what's the point? And I'm not a master of anyone anymore, so don't call me that."

"Don't be a sad old man," Deidara scoffed. "That doesn't suit you."

"We bring news," Sasori interrupted before Kisame could retort. "Do you know where Itachi is, Kisame?"

"With his wife," Kisame said, "Seriously, what else is new? She's looking like she's going to pop any day now, so he almost never leaves her side."

They left Kisame to dine, and Shikamaru went off somewhere else—probably to check on the information they had on the seal one more time before hitting the hay—Sakura accompanying Sasori and Deidara to Itachi's quarters.

The two artists had grown somber again, Sakura noticed with no small amount of unease. Gods, Deidara almost looked like she was going to start screaming and tearing her hair out at any moment, and Sasori, frankly, seemed to be extremely constipated. His entire frame was tense and stiff, as opposed to Deidara, who tapped her fingers against the outside of her thigh a lot.

"Could you go first?" Deidara muttered to her companion. "I don't think..."

And so, Sasori was the first face that Itachi saw when they entered. Izumi immediately peered over his soldier to search for Deidara's face, and perked up immensely when she saw her.

"Deidara! Come to see me again, have you?" Izumi joked, putting a hand on her extremely round belly. Kisame hadn't been joking—she really did appear to be on the verge of popping. Personally, Deidara thought that she looked absolutely miserable in her condition.

Weakly, Deidara raised a hand in greeting. "Hey, Izumi..."

"Itachi." Sasori's voice was firm. "Something happened today and that you'd ought to know about."

The Uchiha shifted in his seat, stroking lazy circles on his wife's pale knuckles. He was listening, Sasori knew, and the puppet master took a deep breath.

"Obito's dead." It was sharp, concise, and straight to the point. The way that Sasori felt like it should be delivered.

The sight of the blood draining from Itachi's face and going straight to his Sharingan eyes was a sight that Sasori wished to never see again. Itachi... so pale, so bewildered.

His voice was strained. "Who was it, Sasori?"

Sasori did not answer, and a muscle in Itachi's jaw twitched in agitation.

"I asked you, who was it?"
Sasuke, was the first reply, one that was on the verge of leaving his tongue. But Daichi's account was obviously biased and muddled. It didn't make any sense to him—why would Sasuke murder Obito, who'd been shot—perhaps grievously so? No, he would not murder his cousin, but he would...

It all clicked together.

Of course. Sasori almost sighed in relief. There was only one thing it could have been, and Daichi just happened to see the world from only one perspective. It was a mercy kill. There was likely more to it, but Sasori couldn't connect the dots to form a more comprehensive picture if there weren't enough dots to connect in the first place.

Sasori closed his eyes before opening them again, his gaze hard. "Tsukigakure."

"Itachi—" Izumi was cut off when Itachi suddenly stood.

"Madara?" His voice was a soft, deadly whisper. His fury was suffocating—they could all feel it rolling off of him in gigantic, tsunami-worthy waves.

Sasori hesitated. "I'm not sure, but I'm certain that he knows about it at the very least."

Itachi's lip curled.

"You're not going to do anything rash, are you?" Sakura suddenly spoke up, reminding everyone of her presence.

Rash? Deidara stared at Itachi, gauging his reaction. Uchiha don't do rash. Not normally, anyway, but given the right incentive... Her fists clenched.

"Tomorrow," Itachi intoned firmly, gazing at all of them. "We will not go hungry."

Izumi's breath hitched, and Deidara felt a surge of pity of her dear friend.

I hope, she said silently, watching as Izumi stared down at her hands in mild shock, as Sakura tightened her lips and gave a firm nod, as Sasori resigned himself to Itachi's next course of action, That Obito is the last one.

She closed her eyes, and, behind her eyelids, Obito smiled one last time and waved before turning his back to her and walking into the darkness, disappearing forever.

"Ne, Danna?"

"What is it, brat?"

"What do we do now?"

A pause.

"Now?"

"Now, we wait."

"Thanks to Sasori's help, we've nearly figured out the seal. Tsk, it would have saved us a lot of trouble if we knew that he was proficient in seals..."
"Maa, what's done is done. We have one quadrant left. Then... we can finally leave this place."

"Otou-san..."

"Hm?"

"What do we do then?"

A pause.

"Then?"

"We'll go to our allies."

"Okaa-chan."

"Yes, my little light?"

"What are we gonna do... without otou-san? What?"

"What? We... we'll survive."

"Just like he would want us to."

"I want her back, Hanabi."

"I know."

"I want her back, too."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know the plot is kind of slow at the moment, but hopefully it'll pick up some pace once Part II ends and *spoilers* they leave the city.

Since there's a lot of characters (pretty much the whole ensemble tbh), I feel like a lot of them aren't getting fleshed out enough, especially Naruto (ironic, considering he's the main character of the actual series), Ino, Hanabi, Chouji etc., who have been sidelined quite a lot. Even Sasuke and Shisui. Some of them will die before entering Part III, and those who make it will probably be given some more focus, or remain mostly a side character. Idk just yet.

Next chapter will feature Itachi getting back into action and *cough* kicking some major ass.
Part II: Bluebell

Chapter Summary

Kagami and Shisui have a small talk. But what the heck are they talking about? Are they just drunk? Pfft.

Itachi fights 10 highly trained warriors but makes them seem like absolute noobs. Mizuki is a little bitch. Madara is surprisingly fair. Sasuke is conflicted. Izumi is a good Chinese wife.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were quarters reserved only for Uchiha in Itachi's (former) mansion, and Sasuke's team was granted permission to stay there by Madara himself. He had heard Mizuki muttering jealously in the hallways about favoritism, but the sadistic man-child's upturned nose was promptly turned downward by a few loyal soldiers that had experienced the general's strength for themselves. Unless Mizuki went crying to his influential father (and wouldn't the soldiers look down upon him if he did), the only five Uchiha turncoats would be keeping their accommodation.

The quarters weren't very big; Sasuke, as the highest ranking officer among their squad, had his own room, while Shisui, Ashikaga, Yano, and Kagami barracked in the other, larger sleeping quarters. Between the two rooms was a small lounge—a common room for discussion and relaxation, if you will.

It was where Shisui found himself right now, looking a sorry sight sprawled across the couch, a half-empty bottle of sake on the table in front. The lights were off as it was late at night, and Sasuke was out patrolling with Ashikaga and Yano. His cousin barely slept nowadays—Shisui knew; he could tell from the dark circles that had accumulated underneath his eyes—and his working hours definitely had some part to play in Sasuke's recent insomnia. Outside of his normal schedule, he volunteered for more patrols than he could keep up with—probably trying to keep himself running on the asphalt road; trying to keep himself from taking a breather and looking around at the pain and the suffering—

Muttering, Shisui reached for the bottle, heaving himself up in a sitting position after failing to do so. He was so, so glad that no one could see him now—Uchiha Shisui, spending his lonely nights with only alcohol and the moon behind the clouds for company. Even Itachi had never seen Shisui tipsy, and they had been thick as thieves back in the day.

"Maa, what a sorry sight you are..."

Instantly, Shisui straightened, awkwardly drawing out his tanto from the holster on his hip. Then he relaxed. "Oh, it's just you."

"Tsk." Kagami clicked their tongue, voice muffled by the mask as usual. "You say my name with such loathing. I can't believe you started without me."

Shisui snorted, the sound wet. "You weren't invited. This pity party is for my, myself, and I."
"Don't look so put out." Kagami closed the door behind them and flopped on the couch next to Shisui. "Everybody has their own coping mechanisms, especially when faced with times like these..." They adjusted their mask—it was a purple one with lollipop swirls where the cheeks would be on a normal face. It had a single eye hole on the left side of the face for them to peer through. "Everybody's slowly dying and losing faith—we haven't done any business for weeks now. But the hardasses don't mind; they have more time to give that stick adequate training."

Shisui glanced curiously at the man—woman? He wasn't sure; nobody was, really—as they tilted their mask upward slightly to reveal a pink, surprisingly normal mouth. Their lips wrapped around the bottle before chugging down the rest of Shisui's sake.

"I bet you're thinking that you're not doing enough again. But you're wrong," Kagami stated confidently. "You, eyepatch, and the spaz are all doing your bit. Ain't your fault that civilians aren't equipped to survive in the woods."

He chortled. "Eyepatch'? 'Spaz'? You're a hoot, aren't 'cha?"

They shrugged. "If that is a jab at my creativity, I will ignore it like the respectable soldier I am."

What kind of respectable soldiers do what we're doing? Then again...

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Sasuke," Shisui groaned, as if his cousin's name explained everything.

Regardless, it was enough for Kagami to get the gist of it. "Ooohh... did he not react well to..." They quietened for a moment before continuing, "I never talked to him, you know? He lived far away enough for me to never bother. But a man who could run a business that good is a man worth respecting. I think this is the part where I toast to Obito, but we just drank the last of the sake."

"Sasuke never reacts well to anything," Shisui said, pushing past the grief that threatened to prick at his heart. Now wasn't the time, even if Obito had once accused him of being a sad drunk despite never even seeing him beyond buzzed before.

"True."

They sat in companionable silence.

"So, Mangekyou? That makes him, Itachi, and you the only Mangekyou wielders since the times of the Warring Clans. And all in the same generation, too. How would you, Shisui, describe the experience as? A reward that's worth all the sacrifices? Or no?"

"It's like..." Shisui's gaze flattened. "The gift that keeps on taking."

"Gotcha. Like children it is."

He spluttered. "What?! I didn't—pfft!"

Behind the mask Kagami smiled. "I made you laugh... for real, this time. You're awfully good at hiding behind a mask, you know. And this is coming from someone wearing a literal one."

"Then I think I might be drunk."

"You're a sad drunk."

Obito was right. "These are sad times."
"Not as sad as the sight of you looking like a hen left out in the rain. Now up you get, you're on dawn patrol tomorrow. You can wallow some other time. And don't forget, my curly-haired relative, that you are not alone in our brilliant crusade for freedom."

Shisui laughed weakly as Kagami grabbed his arm and put it around their shoulder, heaving him upward with a small grunt. "It's hardly a crusade. More like... quiet rebellion."

"Hmm. It's the quiet ones you always have to look out for."

Madara was watching the fights today, which automatically put Sasuke on edge. After completing all his current patrols, Sasuke stood on the balcony looking down at the ring. As usual, around it sat ten formidable Tsukigakure warriors in seiza, not even twitching as their first opponent for this afternoon got on stage. Whenever Madara was watching, Mizuki and Sasuke would be, too. Mizuki because he was a sick bastard that was here almost every day when he wasn't doing his 'adviser duties', and Sasuke because Madara needed a translator. Tsukigakure came from across the Eastern Sea, on a lone island that was once Uzushiogakure before a disease wiped them all out a little past the Warring Clans era. As such, they spoke different languages; though there were gaping similarities in some of the characters (so gaping, in fact, that a man with half a brain could trace their mainland origins just by using common sense), their lexicons were pronounced differently. Sasuke, who was naturally talented at languages, had picked it up with relative ease.

"Arrgghhh!" The man below screamed as his opponent, a lean but muscular Tsukigakure warrior, snapped his leg.

Sasuke almost winced. Such a debilitating injury all but ensured death within the next week or so.

"Someone carry him off," Mizuki ordered, side-eyeing the general for any counter-commands. He received none, and nodded in self-affirmation. An officer dragged the man off the stage, opened the iron gates barring the other men from entering, and practically threw the grievously injured man into the mass. He was caught by some of the others standing at the front.

"Shit, are you okay?!" someone yelled out, the bars jostling as they threatened to snap close from all the movement.

"Your leg!"

"Hey, one of you come out already!" Mizuki sneered, and Sasuke resisted the urge to punch his face in. "We've got so many bags of rice to give away, and you're all just standing there!"

They looked to him, confused, and Mizuki glanced expectantly at Sasuke.

He suppressed a sigh, and said curtly, "Whoever's up next, come up."

Mizuki frowned. "Is it really that short in your tongue...?"

"I delivered the message," Sasuke dodged calmly, coal eyes following the trembling man who was shuffling forward.

Mizuki curled his lip, but the fight had begun.

It was the same lean-muscular man who had broken his previous opponent's leg, and Sasuke could tell that the Tsukigakure man was ready to fall asleep from dodging the civilian's weak punches.

After a bit of playing around, the lean-muscular warrior punched the shaking man straight in the
nose, making him scream and fall backwards, knocking the back of his skull against the mat.

Sasuke closed his eyes, his stomach lurching. He had a feeling that this would be one of those 'accidents', again. And he couldn't do a damn thing about it. He was valuable, yes, for his translating services, but that did not mean that he was infallible. A translator could be replaced. Sasuke was simply found convenient—and, gods forbid, amusing—by Madara.

If Naruto were here—the dobe—he could put it in a much cruder way. It would probably sound something like, "Sasuke, what the hell are you doing, you bastard?! Just standing there?! The Sasuke I know isn't a coward like you, dattebayo!" But their amity had been brief, anyway, so it really didn't matter in the end. Their friendship had always been compromised by their clashing personalities. There'd never been any glue to hold them together—even Sakura and Kakashi hadn't been good enough, and the four of them had all drifted away from one another. Or, at least, Sasuke and Sakura had. He was pretty sure that Naruto and Kakashi had been on pretty good terms the last time he saw them at Obito's tea house.

The Sasuke Naruto had known wasn't really Sasuke at all, in the end. In the end, he was just another coward who abandoned his love ones when they needed him most—a weak, spineless coward just like his brother, the one who had abandoned his family for a girl who was common by Uchiha standards.

"That's enough."

Sasuke was a coward, just like his brother before him—

"I said—"

Crash!

"—that's enough."

Everybody whipped their heads to the man who had ripped the wrought gate open with his bare hands, his slender frame trembling slightly from the exertion of such a feat. The gate had been weak, but no civilian could have possibly—

Sasuke couldn't hold in the sharp inhale when he saw him walk out to the ring. Raven hair, tied in a low ponytail. A slender, almost feminine body dressed in traditional martial art garb. It was the one that Sasuke had always seen him in—the one that Obito had custom made for him to suit his Amaterasu Style.

"Quick!" Mizuki urged Sasuke. "What's he saying?!!"

Sasuke could only gape at the appearance of the brother that he hadn't seen since the war began, his teeth clenching when Itachi knelt beside the man. Groaning, the man reached for the sack of rice an officer at the bottom had thrown toward him in a taunt.

His hand closed around it as Itachi rose—

Click.

Sasuke nearly screamed

Bang!

Itachi flinched.
Thump.

The rice in the sack was undoubtedly stained with blood. The trembling man's body had flopped forward as soon as the bullet entered his brain, face-planting into the bag of rice.

Someone dragged him away as the men behind the iron bars roared.

"WHY DID THEY OPEN FIRE?!"

"KAZUKI, NO!"

"KAZUKI!"

"Why did you shoot him?" Itachi lifted his head, looking directly at Madara, Mizuki, and Sasuke. The youngest Uchiha felt his blood freeze in his veins as his brother searched for an answer. "Answer me, otouto." Now he was just looking at Sasuke. "Why did they open fire?!"

Itachi had raised his voice.

Sasuke almost fell onto his knees.

Mizuki opened his mouth, undoubtedly about to demand Sasuke for a translation when Madara spoke up for the first time since they had all entered the room.

"Who told you to shoot?" Madara demanded frostily, glaring at Mizuki. His eyes glowed red momentarily, and Mizuki faltered, though he did not lower his gun, which was pointed at Itachi.

If Itachi's display of strength had shocked them into silence, Madara's words made sure the atmosphere had dropped to absolute zero.

"He," Mizuki stumbled over his words, "took the rice even though he lost. I... wanted to teach him a lesson." Impressively, Mizuki kept his voice quite level, though it did waver in uncertainty a few times.

Madara's scowl deepened. Mizuki lowered his gun to the side as Itachi drilled holes into his head with spinning Sharingan eyes. "This place," Madara said lowly as he peered past the railing, staring intently at the bloodstained sack of rice, "is for tournaments only." Slowly, Madara turned around, stepping closer to Mizuki. Sasuke shuffled backward slightly as Madara wrapped his hand around the handle of Mizuki's gun, the other man's hand still attached to it.

Sasuke activated the first stage of his Sharingan, watching closely as Madara forcefully lifted the gun until the muzzle was pressed to the soft underside of Mizuki's chin. The older Uchiha's finger played with the trigger, staring his adviser in the eye. "Never open fire in here ever again. Not even your father will save you from me if you do."

Mizuki's eyes flashed with fear. "G-got it. Sir."

Madara released his hand, turning away in a remarkably displeased manner.

"A-ah, do not be too angry... I will arrange another match right away..." Mizuki turned to Sasuke. "Continue! Go down there and tell them to continue!"

Sasuke gave him a shallow bow before making his way down to the lower level. He purposefully swept his gaze past Itachi, instead focusing on the men behind the gate. "Who else wants to fight?" he asked in the Amegakure tongue.
No one did. No one except—

"Me. I will fight."

Sasuke's heart wrenched. Why was his brother trying so hard to get himself killed?! He wanted to scream in frustration, but all he could do was stiffly turn around. "Brother," he hissed, before getting cut off. "You—"

"Tell me," Itachi interrupted coldly. "Was that man beaten to death?"

"... Aniki." He cursed his weakness.

"I'm here, anyway. I will fight."

Defeated, Sasuke stepped back, turning his head upward to declare, "It's him. He will do it."

"Excellent," Mizuki said hurriedly, just wanting to get this over and done with.

Itachi glanced around at the ten taijutsu masters sitting around the ring. Then he lifted his chin, staring Madara in the eye. "I want to fight all ten of them."

Sasuke's eyes widened before he went over to Itachi, hissing his displeasure, "Are you insane?! Don't—"

"I want to fight all ten of them," Itachi repeated firmly, not even looking at his brother.

His mind was made up. Sasuke could do no more to save him from them. He turned again, looking up at the general and his adviser. "He says he wants to fight all of them."

Madara blinked, about as much surprise as he would show. He stepped closer to the railing, staring Itachi straight in the eye, scrutinizing every detail of his person. He saw the worn lines in his face, his unwashed hands, and dirt-patched cheeks. "Ten?" he murmured.

Sasuke nodded. "Yes."

Mizuki immediately smirked, apparently having forgotten about Madara's ire toward him just a few moments ago. "Hah! Let's see just how good he is." He raised his voice so that it carried over to the other side of the room. "Attention! All of you! Unit One, Unit Two! Begin!"

"Yes!" chorused the warriors, all of them simultaneously getting up from seiza.

Sasuke bowed one last time to Madara before turning to his side to walk away. He paused. "Be careful... brother."

Itachi rolled up his sleeves. "... Aa."

From the corner of his eye, Itachi saw Sasuke leave and join the other observers in their ranks. He fit in so... seamlessly. It did not sit well with him. So this is what Sasori had been keeping from me. I'm surprised that neither Hanabi, Sakura, or the others sent out ever caught wind of him. Or maybe they had, and had decided not to tell him in order to spare his feelings. His heart dropped to his stomach in disappointment. Sasuke... Letting the thought leave his head, Itachi fell into a mentality that he hadn't exposed himself to in a while. A taijutsu battle.

The fighters surrounded him. A few of the younger ones looked smug. Most of them were stone-faced. All of them had their hair in a militaristic buzz cut. As if they were one single entity—and Itachi knew he would be in trouble if they fought like one—they entered into their stances with a
fierce kiai. All were the exact same.

Behind him, Itachi could practically feel Sasuke's Sharingan gaze burning into the back of his clothes, and he had no delusions about Madara and Mizuki either. They were watching just as closely as Sasuke, if not more.

Steadily, Itachi lifted his hands up in a closed fist, firmly acknowledging his ten opponents.

It had begun.

"Haa!"

That was the young one's first big mistake. Broadcasting his movements in an attempt to look flashy in front of the general and his most trusted adviser. The martial artist spun around in the air and launched a kick from the side at Itachi, who stepped backward to avoid it. As the young male's leg flashed past him, Itachi grabbed the limb and threw him painfully into the ground. Then, mercilessly, he kicked his head, snapping his neck backward. He was immediately unconscious. All the while, the nine others circled around him like hawks. Their integrity as martial artists dictated that they would not attack Itachi all at once, and that was their biggest mistake.

The next one attacked with his fists first, aiming for the Uchiha's face. They traded blows before Itachi harshly slapped him away with a force he almost never exerted on his opponents. Not on Hoshigaki, who had invaded his home for a fight all those months ago. Not even on Orochimaru, who had threatened Akatsuki's entire pride as well as broken one of Itachi's precious vases plus their dinner table. The man he had slapped collapsed onto the ground and disappeared in a mass of feet and moving bodies.

The third man tried something similar, though he tried to take out Itachi's shoulders instead. Itachi dodged the punches, then grabbed the man's arm and held him in place with a nigh unbreakable grip.

He could not kill Mizuki. But these man...

Were not Mizuki.

The man cried out as Itachi punched him in the jaw repeatedly, one blow after another until his jaw bone and his cheekbone was clearly fractured or otherwise damaged. Then he kicked his legs out from under him and pushed him belly-first into the floor. It was at this moment that someone else decided to attack, and Itachi pressed himself onto the last man and rolled out of the way. From behind, a bulky man kicked out at him.

Itachi caught it—

—and snapped it backwards with a sickening crack.

To his credit, the man's strangled scream was muffled extremely well.

A shorter fighter jumped at him and Itachi skirted to the side, allowing the man to fly past him safely.

There was so much noise, and Itachi nearly got hit by a punch coming in from the side. Growling, Itachi kneed his new attacker in the ribs and shoved him to the mat. Winded, he tried to get up again, but Itachi would not have it.

For a moment, the man's pained face turned into Mizuki's.
A moment was all Itachi needed.

Sasuke had never seen his brother fight so viciously before. He had only ever seen him fight halfheartedly in peace. This... beast was not his brother. It couldn’t be. Yet, it undeniably was. He wasn’t sure if reality could get any clearer for him, and he could only blink, stunned as he watched Itachi bombard a series of brutal punches all over the fallen fighter’s torso and chest before moving onto his face. He did not last long.

Another one came at him. Of course he did. He was honey, and they were the flies. Except, honey wasn’t supposed to fight back, something that this man learned the hard away. Itachi twisted his arm behind his back until the bone snapped, palmed the side of his face, and rotated his entire body in a spin. The man spun in the air before landing roughly on the ground. He did not get up, having fallen unconscious from the pain.

Itachi exhaled jarringly. The man attacking him this time had his ankle caught and broken before being flipped onto the ground and having his tailbone stomped on. Deftly Itachi climbed on top of his back and sent his elbow digging into trapezius, causing the man to have a guttural scream erupting from his throat.

Now there were only four fighters standing. The others were either unconscious, writhing on the ground in pain, or...

Sasuke swallowed.

Dead.

They seemed to have clued in on Itachi’s unforgiving disposition. This time, the remaining four fighters attacked him at once, but he expertly evaded or parried all of their kicks and punches.

One fell when Itachi punched him in the neck after exchanging fierce blows.

Itachi felt someone’s arm brush past his side, almost burning his skin through his clothes with sheer speed. He was fast, but Itachi was faster. He yanked the man’s wrist, pulling him forward, stumbling. The only noise was the pattering of his other opponents’ feet as they composed themselves, and the sharp sound of flesh bruising flesh. He chopped the man’s neck as he spun, making his eyes roll to the back of his head. Itachi then grabbed his gi and turned him around, so that he could see his face.

The man’s neck was snapped with another chop.

Itachi moved his hand back, and the man collapsed onto the floor, completely still.

Two more, he coached himself, catching a man approaching him from behind as he turned.

Itachi blocked his punches and set himself on hammering the man’s chest until his ribs or chest caved in—whichever came first. The man was pushed to the ground by Itachi’s attacks, but the Uchiha kept on going. When he finished, the man was twitching.

All of these people. All of them nameless, faceless. Itachi slowly turned around to face the last fighter. Now, there is only one.

It was one of the young ones, Itachi noticed. One of the men that had exchanged smirks with another young friend in the ring. Now he was no longer sneering or smirking or doing anything of the sort. Instead, he held his fists up defensively, his entire form trembling slightly as Itachi focused his attention entirely on him. Almost lackadaisically, Itachi approached him.
At first, the young fighter shuffled backwards. But then he stopped, and when Itachi got close enough, the man immediately launched a kick at his neck. Itachi dodged it, and sent a hand flying into his stomach, causing spittle to spray from his gaping mouth. The man all but folded inward on himself, and Itachi caught his head and twisted so that his entire person was sent spinning into the mat, groaning and moaning.

Impassively, Itachi punched him in the skull. Once. Twice. Hard enough to lobotomize him. The man's eyes were squeezed shut in pain, blood dribbling from his nose as he took the brunt of Itachi's assault. Then he stilled, just as Itachi lifted his arm up for one more shot.

The Uchiha slowly straightened, his eyes—still coal, no sight of a Sharingan—burning with a vengeance. His fists were clenched at his sides, his knuckles split and bloodied. He unfurled them.

Immediately, more men dressed in the white uniforms of Itachi's ten opponents emerged from the shadows, circling around Itachi as they got into their stances.

Itachi tensed.

"Stay back!"

Surprisingly, it was Madara that had spoken, he and his adviser having descended during the fight and now heading toward the ring. Madara stopped at the side, as did Mizuki, who looked incredibly disgruntled.

At his command, they all stood back, leaving Itachi to stand alone in the center of the ring. Madara approached him, arms by his side, his wild mane falling over his shoulders and half of his face as he circled Itachi.

Unblinking, Itachi merely lifted his locked fists again before letting his arms fall to his side. Nine rice bags were thrown at his feet by a few officers.

"You..." Madara stared at him. "Come back again."

"He wants you to come back," Sasuke translated, standing behind the two of them outside of the ring.

Itachi stared the general down, and Sasuke could literally feel the electricity in the air. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple and disappeared down the collar of his uniform. Itachi, you... What are you going to do now?

"I'm not here," Itachi answered evenly, "for you."

Sasuke hesitated. No. No, this absolutely would not do. Nobody treated the general with blatant disrespect. If he didn't do something, his brother—the man who he had believed had caused him suffering—would... "He said... he will come back."

Itachi turned from the general, picking up all nine sacks of rice. The tenth one. Where is the... His eyes landed on the bloody sack that the dead man from the previous round had fought. He walked toward it and picked it up as well, adding it to the pile he was cradling to his chest with one arm.

"Oi."

Itachi slowed to a stop.

"What's your name?" Madara asked.
Sasuke, who was now standing by the iron gates, said to his brother, "He wants to know your name."

Itachi turned around again, meeting Madara's gaze. "I'm just... a man from Ame."

Closing his eyes, Sasuke exhaled sharply. "His name is Uchiha Itachi." _And he is my brother._

"Hmph." Madara crossed his arms as he watched Itachi's figure disappear past the iron gates and through the throng of men, who were too shocked to even hound him. "Uchiha..."

The women were crying as Itachi set down the bloody bag of rice on their table. Kazuki had been their son and their brother. Silently, he left their single-room house, only to run into Sasuke.

"Itachi!"

_Ah._ He stopped in front of his younger brother, the one he hadn't seen in months.

"You need to be more careful," Sasuke warned, and perhaps, if the circumstances were different, Itachi's heart would have been melted at the obvious concern in his brother's voice.

But the women were still crying inside.

"I don't know what Madara might do," Sasuke finished.

Itachi stared at his brother. Then slapped him across the face.

"Kkhh...! Itachi?!

"Madara?" Itachi repeated. "It's Madara-sama to you, isn't it, foolish little brother? Or Madara-taisho? Isn't that who you are—the general's dog?"

"Dog?" Sasuke glared at him, palming the red mark on his face. "What dog? His death had nothing to do with me! I'm just an interpreter and the most I ever do is patrol the goddamn streets. You think I don't have to survive, too?"

"Survive?" Itachi echoed, sounding incredulous. "You watch your countrymen get beaten to death. You have no right to talk about survival. You don't even have the guts to survive." Their gazes held for one more moment before Itachi swept past him, not even looking back.

"You're right." Sasuke chuckled darkly. "I don't have any. But you do. You have lots of it. If you have the guts, go beat them up!" he shouted after Itachi's retreating figure. "Beat all of them! Beat as many as you can!" He barked out a harsh laugh. "I was supposed to just be an interpreter, not a lackey. _I am a man from Ame!_" In his fury, he had slipped into Tsukigakure's tongue.

A sigh escaped Itachi as he walked down the street, back to the beer hall. Sakura ushered him into the cellar as discretely as possible. Hardly any of the soldiers paid attention to him.

_Otoute, I cannot deny that you make mistakes; I do, too. But no matter what..._ 

Sakura shut the lid above him.

... _I will love you forever, and forgive you every time._

"I'm back," Itachi announced softly, stepping into the building block he shared with his wife.
"Itachi," Izumi greeted warmly, a hint of sadness and relief in her eyes.

Smiling tiredly, Itachi knelt down and cradled her belly, pressing his ear to the fabric. "I hope you've been good to your mother."

Izumi returned the smile, rubbing Itachi's red knuckles. "He has been," she told him. "Ah, anata..."

"Don't bother Sakura," Itachi said swiftly. "It's not worth it."

"Then let me."

Itachi sat in silence as his wife cleaned his knuckles with a wet cloth. She wished it were warm, but this would have to suffice for now. She then spread a disinfecting oil she had gotten from Sakura a few days ago onto the cloth and rubbed the ointment into Itachi's wounds.

He watched her press the cloth gently. "You are good to me," he murmured. What had he ever done to deserve such a loving wife? "I realized today that I'm useless."

Izumi eyed him curiously.

"I've practiced martial arts. Spent most of my life perfecting the Amaterasu." Itachi let out a small chuckle. "But so what? This world... is minuscule. I can't do anything."

"I don't care what the world is like," Izumi stated bluntly, looking up at him resolve in her eyes. "I only know that I'm very happy right now. As long as we all stay together, everything will be okay." Perhaps it was naive of her, but...

"Aa," he agreed, pulling her closer and running his fingers through her hair. "It's essential... for a family to stay together."

She smiled. "Not just us. I mean the people we care about. They're family, too. Deidara, Sasori, Sakura, even Kisame."

_and Sasuke_, Itachi added silently.

"Hyaah!"

Tomorrow was Orochimaru's promised assault, and Deidara and Sasori were having the workers partner up and spar with one another. In fact, they practiced their taijutsu everywhere. Even beating cotton had become an exercise for improving their physiology, much to their delight.

The workplace became almost a playground, and Naruto and some of the younger kids enjoyed the rather relaxed atmosphere.

But none of that could last for long.

Today, Orochimaru came.
I have exams coming up soon, so goodbye frequent update schedule probably. Knowing me, I'll still write this even tho I'm supposed to be studying. There's probably only 2 more chapters left of Part II, and then we'll go into Part III.
Chapter Summary

More Orochimaru, Deidara, and Sasori, plus some Sasuke and Itachi.
Itachi plays hide-and-seek with children. Sasuke breaks Mizuki's leg.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"AARRGGGHHH!"

The scream of a man in agony did not even faze Sasuke anymore. Screaming was normal. Silence... was what he was really wary of.

Beside him, Mizuki's beady little eyes were gleaming in satisfaction and cruelty, while Madara was almost entirely unmoved. Personally, Sasuke thought that he looked bored.

Mizuki attempted to lull his superior into conversation, babbling eagerly about how Taro had crushed his opponent and so on.

Madara turned to Sasuke. "Why hasn't Uchiha Itachi returned?"

"I..." Sasuke hesitated, stepping a bit closer to the general. "I don't know, sir."

"Hn. Find him."

Dammit. "I don't know where he is." It wasn't a lie. He truly didn't know. "I don't know how to find him."

Madara stared straight ahead. "How big is Akatsuki? How," he whirled around, eyes flashing in irritation, "hard can it be to find him?!"

A bead of sweat dripped down Sasuke's cheek as he inwardly cursed. "Akatsuki is indeed very big..."

Smack! Sasuke's eyes widened in shock as he was hit across the face with a baton, then kicked in the stomach. As he fell on his back, he saw Madara still in his original place, a pissed off Mizuki towering over the teenager. Anger boiled in his chest, but there was nothing he could do against the adviser. By everything except strength and skill, Mizuki was more powerful than him.

Mizuki slashed upward with his leg, nailing Sasuke on the soft underside of his chin and sending him sprawling, hissing in pain.

"Useless thing!" Mizuki berated. "What do you mean you don't know where he is?! Tell us, you Ame dog!"

Sasuke defiantly stared him down, refusing to make another sound. Infuriated, Mizuki continued to kick him—and Sasuke, for all his Uchiha pride, let him.
"Enough."

Mizuki's leg stilled at Madara's command, and he straightened before returning to his place beside the general.

Sasuke gritted his teeth, his cheek pressed against the floor as the new bruises on his ribs and torso ached. "Asshole...!"

Itachi was right. Itachi was always right.

He really was the general's dog.

And he didn't like it at all.

_If this is surviving, then I might as well be dead._

"And this, sir, is syrup for okaa-chan," a boy with missing front teeth told Itachi. "It's really sweet and tasty, but okaa-chan doesn't let me have any."

Kazuki's sister, Asagi, was pregnant—about five months along—with her second child. Her eldest son, Shogo, was currently showing him what kind of home-made supplements Asagi used.

"I'm sure it's for good reason," Itachi answered. He was waiting for Asagi to finish hanging their clothes on metal wire that stretched across the interior of the Shimizu residence.

"Since oji-san isn't coming back for a long time," Shogo said, "Can you stay with us so you can protect okaa-san and soba? You're nice, mister. Just like oji-san is."

Itachi's gaze saddened. "I'm sorry, but I can't." Hesitantly, he poked Shogo in the forehead with his fingers. "This is your family, not mine. One day, you'll grow up strong, and you won't need me to protect them."

He pouted. "Then why did you come?"

"Your mother is pregnant," Itachi explained. "I'm here to pass on some vitamins and supplements to her. All of them were created by a good friend of mine and approved by an extraordinary healer. This will help your mother."

It was at that moment that Asagi finished with the laundry and overheard. "Oh, you really didn't have to." She smiled wearily. "You've already done so much for us already. I'm sure your own wife must be missing you."

"I'm not staying long," Itachi told her as he passed on the bottled concoctions to her. "I wish your family well, Asagi-san."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "Th-thank you, Uchiha-sama."

"Wait!" Shogo ran after Itachi as he exited the door of their single-room residence. "Why don't you stay for a bit? Just for a game of hide and seek with me and my friends? Please?"

At that, a few dirty-faced little boys appeared from nearby houses and shelters, their eyes wide with innocence.

Itachi stilled as Shogo tugged on his sleeve and continued to plead, more young voices joining in. Asagi shot him an apologetic look, and he sighed.
"One game," Itachi conceded.
"Yay! You're it, okay?"

Itachi nodded, taking each and every one of the children's curious faces as they tentatively crowded him.

"Close your eyes and count from ten!" one particularly bold child ordered, and Itachi smiled slightly.

"Aa." Turning around, Itachi lifted his hands to cover his eyes. "Ten..."

There was the sound of scurrying feet and smothered giggling.

Unbeknownst to Itachi, Shogo was desperately looking around for a spot. He glanced over to his mother, who was observing from the doorway, for help, and Asagi mouthed something and pointed to a sheltered area. Shogo beamed and ran to hide.

"Three... two... one..." Itachi turned back around and uncovered his eyes. "Ready or not, I'm coming." His face immediately hardened when he saw who was approaching him.

Sasuke.

His brother looked a bit scuffed up. "Itachi. I thought I'd find you here."

Itachi met his gaze evenly. "Why are you here, otouto?"

Sasuke used a second to compose himself before replying, "Madara wants you to go back and fight him."

"... Leave."

His little brother grimaced. "I... can't."

"Bang!"

Itachi peered around Sasuke's shoulder, narrowing his eyes. *That was Shogo.*

Shogo emerged from behind a building, grinning his gummy smile as he walked backwards, his fingers formed in a 'gun' sign. Gleefully, he exclaimed childishly, "Bang! Bang, bang! Bang!"

"Bang!" an older voice chorused, and Itachi's blood chilled. "Bang, bang!" As he feared, Mizuki appeared right after Shogo, looking incredibly amused as he aimed his pistol at the boy's head and made mock firing motions with it. Two other soldiers appeared behind him.

Itachi rushed at Shogo, whisking him to the side and holding him protectively. "What the hell are you doing?!"

Asagi lunged for her son in terror, only for her foot to hit a metal bucket noisily. Mizuki's eyes flitted over to her.

"Huh," Mizuki said appreciatively, moving toward her. "How pretty."

Asagi stepped backward into her house, eyes wide with fear. "St-stay back!"

When Mizuki made no move to stop, Itachi blurred in front of him, drinking in the shock in his
gaze before kicking his legs out from underneath him. Mizuki collapsed on the front step after falling forward. He hadn't even stilled before Itachi grabbed him by the back of his collar and twisted him around, palming him in a vertical motion that had his head snapping upward. With a fluid grace only he could ever achieve, Itachi knocked him into his fellow soldier, causing the soldier to stumble and crash against a stone wall.

The other soldier, crying out in surprise, made to hit Itachi with the butt of his rifle, only to be quickly disarmed and kicked in the face. He landed unconscious on the ground.

Leaving the fighting to his brother, Sasuke grabbed a confused, wary Shogo and pulled the child toward him, muttering curses under his breath.

Itachi had the soldiers taken care of in no time, and the worst damage he had received was dusty clothing. He patted down his garb as Sasuke slowly approached him from behind, having ushered Shogo back to his mother.

"Bastards," Sasuke uttered, coldly gazing at the unconscious form of Mizuki. "BASTARDS!" He stepped once on the adviser's booted leg, then twice. Thrice. Another time. He kept going until the bone cracked. Exhaling, he turned to Itachi. "You should go. It's not safe here."

Itachi raised an eyebrow at him.

"What?" Sasuke growled. "Grab the kid and the mother and go."

Itachi did, leading Asagi, Shogo, and Shogo's grandmother out of the decrepit home. They never even picked up their laundry.

"What about you?" Itachi asked, turning back one last time.

Sasuke grimaced. "I'll be fine. Just take them somewhere safe and go back to wherever you live. Don't... don't come out if you want to live." When Itachi continued to stare at him, he nudged his brother gruffly. "What the hell are you waiting for? That useless woman and her son over there need you. Go to them."

"Otouto." Slowly, Itachi reached up and poked his brother in the forehead, causing him to flinch. "Be safe."

"... Hn."

Blood sprayed from Sasuke's mouth in an arc as he flew backward onto the ground from a harsh kick. His entire body was battered with bruises, and there was a cut on his head, half-dried blood dripping out of it.

He tried to scramble up, but the man beating him pressed the end of his baton into his throat, causing him to gag and be still.

"YOU PIECE OF SHIT!" the man, a higher-ranking official, bellowed. "How could you let Uchiha escape?!"

"Sorry," Sasuke ground out, spitting out a wad of mucus and blood as he resisted the urge to smirk in the face of pain. "Even Mizuki with the aid of two armed soldiers could not stop him..."

His tormentor's face contorted in a fury. "Shut up!" He whacked Sasuke with his baton, and the wounded teenager instinctively curled up in a tight ball. "Useless! Utterly useless!"
"Tell them..." The man immediately stopped beating Sasuke to pay attention to Madara, who was seated in a couch that Shisui had helped choose for Itachi when the latter had just moved in with Izumi. "To dig him out. That's an order."

"Yes, sir." He aimed one last kick at the fallen Sasuke. "Tch. Scumbag. You're lucky the general is generous to his family."

Sasuke's steps were wobbly as he trudged toward the Uchiha compound, carrying with him miscellaneous food items he had poached from dinner. His face was now clean of blood, though the collar of his shirt was still slightly red.

The Uchiha in the compound tensed when they saw him, all of them either giving him the evil eye or hurrying away with their children in tow. It was as if a demon or a monster from witch's tales had come to life.


"He was so eager to jump on the bandwagon... serves him right."

"The Uchiha will not recognize a traitor as their heir..."

No, they wouldn't, would they? Sasuke grasped his head with his free hand, his head aching from having been slammed into the ground several times today. That didn't matter anymore. Nothing did, except...

Fugaku stood up as soon as Sasuke slid the door open.

The two men stared at each other.

"I was wrong," Sasuke said simply, placing the food down on the table. "And I'm paying for it."

Fugaku gazed at him stonily. "It's time like these where I am glad your mother is dead. I wouldn't want her to suffer from seeing you in such a disgraceful state."

His son chuckled grimly. "Like I said, I'm paying for my mistakes. I helped a nameless mother and her son escape today."

"If you expect praise, I am not the right person to come to," Fugaku said tartly, his eyes flitting from the bags of food to Sasuke. "Even with a peace offering."

Sasuke shook his head. "Praise? What's the point of that?" He answered his own question. "There isn't any. I just... wanted to let you know, I suppose. Enjoy the food. It's traditional Tsukigakure cuisine," he added as an afterthought, oily vindictiveness coating his heart.

Fugaku's lip curled. "Get out of my house."

"Work's for me. I was just about to anyway."

He could feel Fugaku's gaze burning into his back and decided to stop at the door. Without turning around, he said, "If I wanted to be praised by you... I could have just showed you."

"... Who was it?"

"Obito."
"Hn. I'd heard."

Sasuke did turn back this time, Mangekyou Sharingan spinning in his eyes. Fugaku stiffened, and Sasuke smiled cruelly.

"Goodbye, otou-sama."

Deidara could feel the hairs at the back of her neck rise every time someone brushed past her, which was often. She and Sasori had trained Obito's workers to the best of their ability within the span of a week, but she was not as deluded as to think that Orochimaru wouldn't be able to take out all of them.

It'd already been wordlessly decided that she and Sasori would be the ones fighting the snake-man, while the rest of the civilians would defend themselves from the other bandits when they undoubtedly attacked.

"Deidara?" Tenten was beating the cotton pile next to her. "You're flattening your bundle."

Ah. So she was. A small blush appeared on her cheeks and Deidara closed her eyes, frowning. "Shut up, un. I knew that."

Tenten barked a laugh. "Yeah, right!" Her gaze softened. "Are you worried? Don't be—you and Sasori-sama trained us. We're not going to let it go to waste that easily."

Despite herself, Deidara gave her an annoyed look. "Why does he get a -sama but I don't even have an honorific attached to my name?"

"Ehh? Is that what you're worried about?" Tenten nudged her with her shoulder playfully. "Just focus on getting this bundle done." She turned to Udon, Moegi, and Konohamaru, who just seemed to be loitering around. "Hey, you three, why don't you go outside and dry those bundles over there?"

"Sure thing!" Moegi answered. "Come on, guys, let's go!"

The three younger kids scurried to grab the small baskets of cotton and went out through the hole in the wall, which everyone had accepted as a new entry way.

There buzz of the workers lulled Deidara to a state of serenity for a moment before it was broken by shouting and running.

"Everyone!" Konohamaru yelled as he and his friends returned. "They're back again! They've come back!" Just as he said the words, Orochimaru followed them in with his group behind him, looking smug. This time, he had collected even more people than before—there were at least twelve more men. Tayuya still remained the only female in the group.

Just like they had practiced, everybody moved into a defensive position in the building so that they would surround the attackers. They all stood silently as Orochimaru stopped in his tracks, looking around the room.

Deidara knew what he saw, even if she wasn't at the front of the crowd. Sheep for slaughter. That's all he sees us as. And that was good.

"Is the money ready?" Orochimaru inquired, still glancing around before stopping at the sight of a familiar blond. Naruto.
"We won't give you any dough!" Naruto shot him down immediately, pointing threateningly at the man. Behind him, the workers started to roll up their sleeves in preparation. The workers standing unnoticed by Orochimaru on his right started doing the same. But Orochimaru's focus was entirely on Naruto, and so was his group's attention.

Orochimaru tilted his head, his eyes curving in a combination of irritation and amusement. "What did you just say?"

"I'm not afraid of you," Naruto declared, sliding into the most basic stance that Sasori and Deidara had taught all of them. "You can't bully us anymore, dattebayo!"

"Seriously?" one of the twins—Ukon—drawled, pushing past Tayuya and Kidomaru to approach the blond in a menacing manner. "You want me to beat you up, kid?" When Naruto didn't respond to the jibe, blue eyes burning with determination, Ukon grew annoyed and struck at him lazily.

Swiftly, Naruto pushed his hand away and punched him straight in the face, causing him to stumble backwards, clutching his nose. "You...!" A flicker of fear passed through Ukon's eyes as every single worker standing behind Naruto adopted the same stance with practiced ease, their faces stony.

Orochimaru narrowed his eyes, perceiving the threat for the first time. "Well, then. I suppose I don't have to play nice anymore. Destroy all of them!"

Shouting followed as his followers dived into the fray, exchanging blows with Obito's workers left and right.

Naruto growled when one man leaped at him, his instincts and training kicking in as he jabbed his attacker in the gut. Yeowch! Grimacing, he shook out his hand, not use to inflicting serious blows on his opponents. This was much more different from the sparring he had done with his fellow workers and friends.

A man with a rat's nest for hair went for a chubby woman, exchanging blows with her. She surprised him with her tenacity, but he quickly got the upper hand, slapping her across the face. The woman squeezed her eyes shut and frantically started to attack back, pushing him toward a bucket of cotton.

An old man was cowering behind one of the cotton buckets, and flinched when the gangster went crashing past him. "Good job, Son!"

Son, the chubby woman, nodded, smiling. But the smile on her face quickly fell when another gangster jumped at her, swinging his arms around. He fought more viciously than the previous man, and was quickly pushing her back.

Another woman got punched in the nose and winced, holding one hand above the injury as she retreated from her opponent.

"THIS IS FOR THREATENING MY HUSBAND!" Rin snapped a man's arm and threw him against hard machinery, stomping after him to finish the fight.

Tenten was knocking a teenager on his ass with a broom. She spun the broom around in the air before jabbing the blunt end of the handle into his shoulder. The teenager screamed and rolled on his side, clutching the wound.

Rock Lee, Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon worked together to bring down a single, beefy opponent. He was incredibly large, and it was incredibly satisfying when Lee managed to kick him
across the temple and knock him out.

Within the writhing mass of fighters, Sasori took down men left and right with a cold efficiency, his chakra threads whipping left and right as he fought. There was no time or space to release his puppets here, but he didn't need them to win against cannon fodder.

A man lashed out at the red-haired puppeteer with a knife, only to be punched into the wall by Deidara. They exchanged a brief glance, nodding before parting ways to help their one-week disciples.

Sasori came face-to-face with the red-haired girl with the foul mouth. His lip curled in displeasure as they engaged, furiously exchanging blows. Tayuya was better than most of the others he had fought, but she was still nothing compared to him. "Think fast, brat."

"Wha—" Tayuya swore when Sasori threw a spider puppet he had been keeping hidden in his sleeve on her face. Little spikes in its legs drilled into her soft eyeballs, and the girl screamed shrilly, blinded for life. "YOU BASTARD!" she sobbed, half-delirious in pain. "YOU FUCKING BASTARD!" She punched at him, but he evaded her with ease. "FUCK YOU! I'LL KILL YOU!"

"Stop yapping," Sasori snapped, kneeling her in the sternum. Spittle flew from her mouth, nearly landing on his shoes. "Hmph." He grabbed her by the hair and brought his other knee into her face with a great force, shattering her nose and cheeks. What a miserable waste of space she was.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Deidara launch a man half-way across the room. He landed in a bucket of cotton, the lucky bastard, but then an old man that'd been hiding nailed him in the head with a piece of metal. The gangster was out like a light.

Forming chakra neko-tes, Sasori whisked through them, cutting them in places that they probably thought he wouldn't be able to reach. Men fell as their tendons and ligaments were severed, bashing their heads on the concrete ground. When the others saw him, they ran back to Orochimaru, who'd mostly been standing around as his followers fought.

"Enough fighting!" Sasori shouted over the nose, making his way to the front to face Orochimaru. The workers behind him had stilled, allowing the remaining gangsters to flee back to Orochimaru. Ukon jabbed at Sasori, only for the puppeteer to kick him away, sending him sprawling at his leader's feet.

"The chicken rice man?" Orochimaru said, incredulous at what had just transpired.

Sasori deadpanned. After all that had happened, this was what Orochimaru remembered about him? Though, it wasn't surprising. Orochimaru was quite a tasteless, artless, uncultured swine, in Sasori's opinion.

"Chicken rice man?" Deidara pushed through the crowd and sauntered up to them, stopping beside Deidara with her arms crossed. "If you think chopping chicken is all he can do, you're in for a surprise, un."

"Were'n't you pregnant?" someone asked. It was a member of Orochimaru's old group, part of the people that had been there the day Orochimaru arrived in Akatsuki.

It was Deidara's turn to be wholly unimpressed. "Do I look pregnant?" I can't believe that bastard mixed me up with Izumi. For goodness sake; Deidara had light hair, while Izumi's hair was dark.

He wisely did not reply. Rin, who was standing at the front, some ways behind Deidara and Sasori, narrowed her eyes hatefully at Orochimaru.
"No wonder they dare to resist," Orochimaru hissed at Sasori, gaze flickering between him and the blonde woman by his side. "They've found a bodyguard, it seems. You indirectly spurned me the day I arrived in Akatsuki, and now you want to mess with me again? Trying to chase me away?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to do, yes," Sasori said dryly. "Do you want a medal?"

Orochimaru twitched. If Tayuya hadn't passed out from pain, she would have shrieked something at Sasori, no doubt. "Have you ever been hungry every day?"

"Everybody is hungry nowadays, un," Deidara answered evenly. "Don't try to present yourself as some sort of victim, you bastard."

"The first day I came to Akatsuki, I told myself that I would never be hungry again," said Orochimaru, staring at the woman. "I will never be hungry again! All of you," he whipped around, "kill them."

There was a wordless flurry of activity from both sides. The workers hastily got into defensive positions, while Orochimaru's lackeys got into wobbly stances. Most of them hadn't had any formal training.

"I told you to kill them!" Orochimaru snapped when none of his followers made a move.

Hurriedly, the remaining men pushed their coats back, revealing axes hanging precariously on their belts. They removed their axes and waved them around threateningly, causing the workers to gasp and huddle back.

"You're not touching them," Deidara said coldly. "Not until we're dead, un."

It suited Orochimaru just fine, and he stood back and allowed his axe-wielding henchmen to charge at Sasori and Deidara.

"I have your back," she whispered to him as they got closer.

"And I have yours," he returned, his brown eyes fixed on the men in front of him.

The men yelled and slashed their weapons at them, but they never hit their mark. Deidara and Sasori avoided all of their attempts at hurting them, working in tandem to take down each and every one of the men. They sufficiently covered each others' blind spots as well—Deidara caught the wrist of a man trying to bring down his axe on Sasori's shoulder; Sasori returned the favor by slicing the neck of a man trying to kill her open.

Sasori kicked the knee of a man, causing him to buckle. A white clay spider flew out of seemingly nowhere, landing on the man's face and promptly exploding. It wasn't a large one—it didn't even have a radius of five inches—but the stench of charred flesh and brain matter filled their noses.

Was that her first kill? he absently wondered. He doubted it.

They had taken down the last of the axe-men when Orochimaru picked up a bamboo fork hoe, glaring furiously at them.

Sasori rolled up his sleeves to match Deidara's, holding up his hands in a traditional Suna stance.

Orochimaru slashed at them with rake end of the hoe, which they dodged, jumping to opposite sides. Deidara grabbed her own makeshift weapon—a bamboo pole—while Sasori was content to simply elongate and coagulate his chakra neko-tes.
She struck at Orochimaru with the pole, only for him to deflect it and jab the blunt end of his hoe at Deidara's stomach. Deidara jumped backward, using the pole to vault herself onto the side. It was then Sasori entered the battle again with his neko-tes, slashing and parrying Orochimaru's hoe with the chakra constructs.

The metal screeched when it clashed with his neko-tes, causing everyone observing to wince and cover their ears. Sasori's gaze was fixed on Orochimaru's enraged face, not a hint of warmth in his brown eyes.

A *whoosh!* sounded, and Deidara's pole came down on Orochimaru's shoulder with whip-like force. He grunted and turned one eye to her while trying to avoid being cut by Sasori's scalpels.

Cornered, Orochimaru looked around, only to see all of his followers down for the count, Deidara with her staff pointed at him, and Sasori with his chakra claws at the ready.

Deidara struck, becoming a blur——

She scowled when Orochimaru lifted his hoe up to deflect her blow, carefully dodging Sasori's scalpels at the same time. Twisting in the air, Deidara landed back on the ground, bringing the pole down to land on his foot. He jumped out of the way just in time for the pole to land on the ground with a slap and for Sasori's claws to miss his eyes by a hair.

"Deidara!" Sasori barked out.

"Right!"

Sasori landed on the end of Deidara's pole and she used momentum to vault him upward and forward, his arms stretched out to slice Orochimaru into ribbons. The two men were now falling in midair. Orochimaru veered to the side and Sasori's claws cut his right side from shoulder to hip, blood flying through the air.

He could not match the two of them. He was weaker than before, having not fed or slept well in a long while.

Deidara slammed the butt of her pole into the concrete. "Let's finish this, un."

"I was thinking the same," Sasori said, his neko-tas twitching in anticipation.

They charged at him one more time, working like clockwork. Orochimaru's block was easily penetrated, and Deidara slammed the side of the pole against his head.

Orochimaru howled in rage and agony, clutching his ear, which had begun to bleed.

He never saw Sasori coming.

The man slashed his throat open with vengeance in his eyes.

"Don't feel too bad," Sasori said woodenly, watching Orochimaru flop to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. "Be glad that it was not Obito who killed you. You threatened his family, and it's something he would have never forgiven you for."

He died a moment later without any fanfare or dramatic last words. A cut throat generally took away the ability to do either of those things.

"Well," Rin's voice echoed after a few more seconds of shocked silence, "let's start the clean up."
The bodies had been cleaned away nicely when their entire street was suddenly stormed by Tsukigakure soldiers.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Everything just kinda goes to shit next chapter, which should be the last chapter of Part II if things go well for me in the writing process. It's the final battle, the escape, and everybody comes out of hiding just to watch the damn battle.
Part II: Cyclamen

Chapter Summary

Shit happens.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hope this isn't too terrible. I'm not good at writing fight scenes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hanabi whirled around in confusion as civilians ran past her, carrying all their valuables in their arms.

What the hell is going on? Her mind started to race, and, before she knew it, she had grabbed the shoulder of one woman and spun her around. "Madam," Hanabi said hastily. "What's happening? Why is everyone running away?"

"Don't you know?" The woman was itching to get away. "There are soldiers marching toward the Uchiha-Nohara factory with vehicles and guns! Unless you want to be caught in the crossfire, you'd better come with us!"

"What?!" Hanabi yanked her wrist from the woman's grip. "No—no, you go ahead. Don't worry about me—I can take care of myself."

From all the time she had spent talking to Ino, she knew that the blonde girl had friends there. What was going to happen to them? Hanabi swallowed a lump in her throat and sprinted down the streets, dodging men and women running the opposite direction.

She turned a corner just in time to see the street flood with Tsukigakure soldiers. It was just like the woman had described—the enemy had the factory workers cornered. Terrified workers were roughly escorted out of the building and into a space surrounded by armed soldiers.

Hanabi slunk back into the shadows, heart pounding. This was even worse than she had imagined. She had to do something... but what?

Get Itachi, a small voice in her mind advised. Itachi would know what to do. But Itachi had gone out today to deliver supplements to a family living above ground, and she had no idea where he was. The city was big—there was no way she'd be able to find him in time. Sakura, was her next thought, and the second-best choice. With no time to waste, Hanabi dashed off to the direction of the beer hall. Find Sakura and tell her what's going on.

She was nearly there when someone grabbed her arm. "Now what do we have here?"

Hanabi jerked to a stop, turning her head around to see a man—an off duty soldier—who was
obviously under the influence of alcohol. "Let me go!" she spat, lifting her leg and nailing him across the face. He groaned before falling backward with a thud.

She ran through the narrow alleyway that led to the beer hall, skirting around a corner to see a sight for sore eyes.

"Itachi!" Hanabi didn't even bother with honorifics anymore.

He turned, blinking in surprise. "Hanabi-san?" The Uchiha was with a small family made up of an old woman, her pregnant daughter, and a young boy.

"Uchiha-sama," the pregnant woman said worriedly. "What's going on? Is she part of the Underground village you spoke of?"

Oh, so they were new recruits. Hanabi shook her head. She didn't have time to be distracted. "It's Obito's factory! It's being stormed by soldiers—the entire street is flooded with the enemy!"

Itachi cursed—it was one of the rare times and she knew nothing good could come out of this situation. Urgently, he gave the pregnant woman and her mother a gentle nudge forward. "Keep going straight until you see a building with the Tsukigakure flag draped over the overhead sign. It should be on your left. Go immediately to the black-haired woman at the bar—she is called Sakura, she'll know what to do."

"Uchiha-sama—" The woman bit her lip, cutting herself off. "Okay. Okay, thank you. Please be safe!"

"Okaa-chan?" Her son glanced up at her. "What's going on? Where's he going?"

The woman didn't answer, simply leading him and her mother in the direction Itachi had provided.

Itachi swept past Hanabi, his garb fluttering behind him somewhat. "Stay behind me."

Hanabi nodded affirmatively, and the two set off toward Obito's factory at top speed.

"Scram! Hurry up!" a soldier barked as he smacked the sides of the civilian workers in an attempt to get them to move out of the building faster. He scowled when a red-haired man about a head shorter than him didn't even flinch, instead walking ahead with a neutral stare.

Women cried out in fear as the enemy moved their rifles in the air, doing an awkward jog-run to catch up with the rest of the now prisoners. They were herded into a space surrounded by soldiers, like cattle.

"All of you!" Mizuki, on a crutch, roared. "Shut up!"

Deidara, who was squished between a chubby woman and Sasori, stiffened, despite not knowing just what the man had blurted out.

Sasuke was pushed forward by a few officers, and, scowling, he translated, "All of you, don't say a word! Got it?"

They quietened.

Shit. Deidara couldn't really see past the men standing in front of her, but things were quickly going to shit. Why did these soldiers have the worst timing? They had just defeated Orochimaru and his henchmen and now they were in the face of another, deadlier enemy.
"You," Mizuki pointed at Rin, who was at the front of the group. "Come here."

A rifle poked into her back and Rin reluctantly stepped forward, grimacing.

Something about her demeanor must have pissed off Mizuki even more than he already was, as he kneed her in the stomach. When she curled into herself, wheezing, he slammed the baton on her shoulder and arm repeatedly. "Where is Uchiha Itachi?! Tell me!"

"RIN!" Deidara shouted, pushing her way through the barrier of workers. "DAMMIT, GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

A hand caught hers, and she looked back furiously at Sasori.

"Don't," he hissed. "They won't kill her—don't attract attention to yourself."

"You expect me to stand here and just—!

Sasuke was suddenly leaning over Rin, saying, "He's asking you!" Then he crouched down and hefted her up by the arm. "Are Daichi and Hikari at home? Please, hang in there. I'll figure out something."

"Sas—Sasuke?" Rin, disoriented, muttered. "Y-you traitor..."

Mizuki shoved Sasuke aside and started hitting her with the baton again. "Out of the way, fool! Speak, you useless woman! Speak up, you wretch!" He lifted the baton up, preparing for a debilitating blow.

"Deidara—!"

The woman leaped forward, catching the baton with one hand. "Don't touch her, you fucker!"

Sasori was by her side immediately, pulling her back and subconsciously wrapping his body around hers to shield her from a rain of bullets. I swear, if she gets the both of us killed—

Mizuki looked like he was going to explode with anger and order the soldiers to do whatever the hell they wanted when a black blur whooshed through the two guarding soldiers on the left, skidding to a stop with his arms raised up when more soldiers aimed their rifles at him.

"I'm here!" Itachi rarely raised his voice, surprising Sasori and Deidara. At once, he saw Rin's fallen form, Sasori and Deidara being held back from reaching her by rifles pressing into their sides. "Rin—"

Someone slammed the butt of their gun against his head and he stumbled, allowing more soldiers to push him forward to his knees. One pressed the muzzle of their rifle against the back of his skull, preparing to shoot at the given order.

"WAIT!" Sasuke was there again, standing protectively over Itachi. "Please wait!" Gritting his teeth, he crouched down and prepared to swap languages to speak to his brother, but Itachi spoke first.

"Otouto," Itachi said, his voice filled with an urgency that both terrified and exhilarated the younger Uchiha, "tell Madara that the workers are innocent. Ask him to release them."

"I told you not to come back!"

And I told you to be safe, but I'm not so blind as to miss the bruises on your face. "Tell him!" Itachi
"You piece of shit!" Mizuki kicked at Sasuke with his good leg, causing him to roll out of the way. He then turned his baton on Itachi, preparing to whack him senseless. He got a few blows in before pulling out his favorite Nambu pistol, the one that had killed another Uchiha before Itachi.

"Hold it." Madara, previously content to watch his adviser rip into the citizens, emerged from the vehicle he had arrived in. He pushed Mizuki's arm down and stared down at Itachi.

Mizuki was stunned. "He dare to push me out of the way to get to that bitch. Can't we put him to death? The blonde and the red-head can be next."

"I know what I'm doing. Sasuke."

Sasuke sat up, tensing. "Yes, sir."

Madara didn't even spare him a glance, his eyes still fixated on Itachi's form. "Since the day you resisted the Tsukigakure army, you've already been a dead man." He chuckled lowly. "But you are talented. You can be useful to us. So I'll give you one chance to be loyal to Empress Kaguya. Teach our army Ame martial arts. That way, we might still spare your life."

Slowly, as to not have his own comrades pull the trigger on him, Sasuke crawled forward to Itachi. "He wants you to teach the Tsukigakure people taijutsu, or he will execute you."

Itachi stared up at Madara defiantly, giving no indication that he had even heard the consequences Sasuke had relayed to him. "I refuse. I will not teach the Tsukigakure army anything." His eyes flickered red for a second, causing Madara to narrow his own and return the gesture. "You want to see me fight so badly? Then I'll fight with you tomorrow, in the morning."

Sasuke froze. Aniki... you can't be serious! His eyes were faraway as he gradually got to his feet.

"Fight?" Sasori murmured. "With the general?" He could feel Deidara, pressed against him, tense even more. He smirked. "I always knew Uchiha were insane."

"He said..." Sasuke rose up to his full height. "He would think about it."

"Liar," Deidara immediately pinned. But it was the good kind of lie—if he had told the whole truth, Itachi would probably already be dead. Seeing as the soldiers were distracted by what was happening, she carefully crouched down and reached her hand out toward Rin, who took it. Rifles were crossed over their heads, but she knew they wouldn't care too much.

"He wants to have a duel with Madara-taisho," Sasuke added, eyebrows furrowed. "Tomorrow morning."

Madara stepped back and turned in a dismissive gesture. "Take him away."

Sasuke's chakra was stricken, Itachi could tell, and he allowed his brother to pull him up. Almost instantly, the closest Tsukigakure men had their rifles pressed to his back, forcing him to walk to a vehicle.

He had to do one last thing.

"Sasori!" Itachi called. "Take the people of the Underground away from Akatsuki! Take them to —!" The workers, seemingly empowered by his words, started to murmur and shout, raising their hands up in open defiance.
"Uchiha-sama!" they shouted, their souls carrying across with their words. "UCHIHA-SAMA!" They pushed against the soldiers, but they didn't get any further until a warning shot was fired into the air, silencing them.

The soldiers disappeared with their vehicles and guns, leaving the street void of any Uchiha. The stunned silence was deafening.

Sasori stared into the night, watching the last vehicle vanish behind a winding street.

"Danna?" Deidara, who was supporting Rin, blinked at him tiredly. "What do we do now?"

Yes, what **would** they do? Even if the soldiers had left them alone for now, they weren't safe here anymore. The only safe haven was—

"We're going to the Underground," Sasori decided, raising his voice. "All of you, follow us. We'll take you somewhere safe."

"Somewhere safe?" A hysteric young man echoed. "Where's 'safe' anymore, huh?! Unless you plan to shoot us off into the sky, there's nowhere safe!"

A clamor began at his words, people starting to doubt the prospect of safety.

"Who are you, anyway?" one woman demanded. "Before all this, you were just the man at the chicken rice shop! We didn't even know you could fight! Why should we believe you?"

*Oh my god, how dumb are these people?* Deidara fumed. It was Sasori (and her) who had saved their hides from Orochimaru. They had trusted their own bodies and lives with them, so why—

"They're spooked," Rin muttered, as if hearing her thoughts. "Just little over an hour ago, they beat Orochimaru, a grandmaster. They thought they were unstoppable... But now, they've seen our true enemy. Orochimaru was a victim, just like the rest of us."

"I don't care, un," Deidara said lowly. "They're still idiots."

"Hey!" Naruto shouted. "Shut up, all of you! Without him, we'd be snakeskin, dattebayo!"

Even with his loud voice, Naruto's support was drowned out by doubtful noises, and Sasori was growing increasingly frustrated. They were wasting time! The longer they stood out here debating on trivial matters, the more time the soldiers had to turn around and capture or kill them all.

"What is wrong with you people?!" Tenten's voice carried across clearly, and she pushed her way to the front of the crowd and turned to face them. "Naruto's right—we'd ought to be more grateful."

"I agree with Tenten!" Rock Lee swiftly added. "Sasori-sama has not failed us yet!"

"Yet!" someone mimicked. "But he will! Nowhere's safe! I'd rather die here than in a dank sewer somewhere."

"You'd sit here and wait for death?" Deidara mocked. "You're such a coward, un! I'd rather die alone knowing that I at least **tried** to survive rather than rolling over and accepting my fate!"

The squabbling grew to new heights, and Sasori's patience had been worn thin.

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed. "I'm tired of waiting for all of you *idiots* to shut the hell up! I don't care if you're coming or not; I'm not forcing anyone to come." He turned around, the wind chilling his flushed cheeks. "Stay here and die like fodder, if you want. Like I said, I don't care. Those who
want to live, hurry the \textit{fuck} up. I don't want to be kept waiting any longer." He'd helped them before because he felt like he owed Obito, who had been one of his only friends, something. But now, it was do or die. He would not be dragged down.

He stalked off, not even waiting for Deidara or Rin. He would fulfill Itachi's request by having the Underground leave the city, then return to fetch his grandmother and the Yamanaka girl.

"My friends," Rin said, just loud enough for them all to hear. "I have my utmost trust in Sasori, but I can't expect you all to feel the same way. Those who want to stay, stay. I won't begrudge you for it. But..." She straightened without Deidara's help, wincing at the pain that wracked her body in waves. That damned white-haired asshole had done a number on her. "I'm going. The least I owe my children," which reminded her—she needed to go fetch them before she left for the Underground, "is a chance of survival."

"I'll come with you," Deidara immediately offered, looking back once to see Sasori becoming a small figure in the dark. "Anyone who's going with him, hurry up before you lose sight of him."

The group split. It was quite a heartbreaking thing, if one looked at it the right way. The ones who wanted to stay were mostly old and couldn't travel far, or young and foolish. Tenten, Lee, and Naruto all went after Sasori, along with a few others. Konohamaru, Udon, and Moegi followed a heartbeat later, albeit more reluctantly.

Twelve of them chose to stay behind.

Rin glanced at them one last time before she and Deidara set off in the opposite direction. She hoped that Daichi and Hikari wouldn't be too stricken when they saw the forming bruises on the right side of her face.

"Madara-taisho, do you really want to fight with Uchiha Itachi?" Mizuki questioned as he and the general walked down a dimly lit corridor in their headquarters.

"Of course," Madara answered shortly. "He is an expert, but he doesn't seem like he wants to teach the Imperial Army.

"He must have other motives trying to fight with you." Mizuki hobbled after his superior, his crutch clicking on the floor. "Taisho... don't fight with him. Let me simply shoot him dead."

Madara stopped in his tracks, and Mizuki nearly slammed into his back. Instead, he managed to catch himself just in time, and awkwardly maneuvered himself to stand next to the general.

"He challenged me to a fight," the general said haltingly. "Because he thinks he's better than me. If I refuse the challenge..." Madara mockingly lifted his finger to his head and made a firing motion. "... And shoot him instead... isn't that the same as admitting defeat? Hm?"

"But...!" Mizuki grimaced. "Fighting with an Ame man... is not just a matter of personal honor to you. It has to do with the national honor of our empire—"

"Are you saying that I will lose?"

Mizuki looked down. "I... only fear for the worst."

"I will win," Madara growled. "And the whole of Ame will know that I won."

"Yes. I understand."
The prison door opened with a metallic squeal, and Itachi turned his head ever so slightly. A gradual footfall reached his ears, and Itachi saw the toe of Madara's boots appear before the man himself.

Madara stood at the doorway for a few heartbeats before walking into the room, the prison door closing behind him.

Itachi's eyes followed the slow-moving figure, lingering on the tray of food he held in his hands. The general stood with his back straight, his wild mane falling partway across his face. He narrowed his eyes when Madara lowered himself into a seiza, placing the tray on the ground before Itachi and pushing it forward.

Their gazes met, and the general spoke. "Instead of killing you, I want you to teach us." Itachi lowered his gaze, staring at the concrete floor in front of him. "This is because I appreciate your talent. However, I do not think that Ame martial arts are better than Tsuki's. We will fight in front of everybody. We need a fair tournament."

Itachi's eyes darkened as he deliberated his response, his brain working to comprehend the sounds he had heard before. "You invaded our country and killed our people." He still answered in his own tongue. Still sitting in his cross-legged position, the muscles in his shoulder rippled as he leaned forward and pushed the tray away from him, as if the food was disease-ridden. "Don't be a hypocrite."

Another staring contest ensued before Madara stood and left the room, leaving Itachi with only himself for company.

She hadn't always supported her husband in his taijutsu pursuits. For both of them, taijutsu was supposed to have been just a hobby and a means to defend themselves and their future children. But she knew... Izumi knew that Itachi had a love for martial arts that could not be quelled or contained by anyone, not even her. Mostly, she'd ignored it. They were both still young—Itachi would have had plenty of time to grow out of it. So she had dealt with it with a genial smile, despite spiting the art for monopolizing her husband's time.

She could not believe that she had ever been so naive.

Especially when Hanabi, on the verge of hysterics, her normally stoic mask completely shattered, burst into the clearing that announced that Itachi had been captured by the enemy, and that he would duel General Madara tomorrow morning. Her heart had jumped, and then completely dropped to her stomach when Sasori returned with new, worn faces, supporting Hanabi's story. Deidara, Rin, and the latter's two children came next.

"They came after us because they knew that Itachi had connections to Obito," Rin said frustratedly as Sakura treated her wounds with chakra, ointment and gauze. The brown-haired woman was clearly in pain, but other things took precedence.

"His last wish was for all of us to escape the city," Sasori told them. "Shikaku, how is the seal looking?"

"We've nearly cracked it," Shikaku, who, along with this son, had been summoned from his accommodations by the noise, reported. "Give us until the morn, and we'll have it unsealed."

Sasori nodded approvingly. "Good. Then we leave as soon as that happens."
Everything seemed to be in order to Sasori, but—

"What about Itachi?" Hanabi voiced the question everybody was wondering. "He'll be fighting tomorrow morning. We... can't just leave."

"Exactly," Izumi added, her voice hard. She swallowed a lump in my throat. "I don't think any of you have any idea about what kind of disservice I've done my husband. Sasori, this," her voice cracked, "this could be his last battle. You can't whisk me away without letting me see it." Her beautiful, kind husband who had been captured in order to grant innocent people freedom. "I won't stop anyone else from leaving, but I'm staying here until..." She shook her head, the low, loose bun she wore her hair in loosening even further.

"Pardon me," a pregnant woman said softly. Her name was Asagi, and she'd been brought here by Itachi before he was captured. "I know all of you are probably more acquainted with Uchiha-sama than I, but my family owe him our lives. We should not abandon him."

"I say that we leave!" a man cried. "If we can get away with our lives, why shouldn't we?"

There were cries of outrage at that, especially from Izumi.

Oh, gods. Sasori nearly groaned. If this kept going any longer, it would just be a repeat of what had happened before. "Look," Sasori said flatly. "I can't force anyone to leave. Anyone who wants to watch tomorrow's battle will be free to do so." It was almost exactly the same thing he had offered Obito's people. "I'm not going anywhere until the seal is finished. After that... just try not to keep me waiting."

They dispersed after that, most of them turning in for the night. Sasori, Kisame, Shikaku, and Shikamaru, dubbed the 'Sealing Team' by a few uncreative people, left camp for the sealed iron wall.

Deidara, Rin (and her children), and Izumi settled into the small building that Izumi and Itachi normally stayed in, and were joined by Sakura and Ino not long after.

"I suppose none of you are going to be leaving?" Sakura asked, taking in their stoic faces.

Deidara lazily raised her right hand. "Itachi saved my ass but got his own captured. If I can help it, he'll be leaving the ring alive tomorrow."

"Actually," Rin, who was absentely stroking her daughter's hair (the little girl was asleep on her lap and using her shoulder as a pillow—Daichi was sitting between Deidara and his mother, his head propped on Deidara's left shoulder as he slept) corrected Sakura, "I'll be staying; my children... they need me, miss..."

"Oh!" Sakura straightened. "Sorry about that. I'm Haruno Sakura, and this is Yamanaka Ino. We're... not really acquainted, are we? This must seem really rude—sorry."

"Stop rambling, forehead," Ino joked in an attempt to act as a foil to Sakura's flustered disposition. "Maybe Sennin Tsunade does it differently, but this isn't how you're supposed to make friends." She bowed her head slightly. "Hi, I'm Yamanaka Ino. Please excuse my socially stunted best friend."

Sakura was scandalized. "Socially stunted! I'll have you know, I was very popular at Konoha's hospital when I was still an intern—"

"You're only proving my point, forehead."
Sakura made a frustrated noise, causing Deidara to bark out a laugh and Izumi to stretch her lips in a grin. Even Rin, after all she had gone through today, managed a tired, amused smile.

"Don't sweat it, yeah," Deidara assured them. "We're all sitting in the same boat here. Might as well get friendly. Besides, we've all met each other at least once, even if it's just passing each other in the streets, un."

"Once we leave Akatsuki," added Rin, playing with a lock of her daughter's hair, "we're probably going to need to support each other."

They made small talk before Sakura finally addressed Izumi with a solemn look. "Izumi, as your medic, I strongly advise you not to attend tomorrow's battle, even as a spectator. You're going to give birth any day now. Normally, I'd forbid you, but that'd get me nowhere with you."

"Damn right." Izumi scowled.

"You know," Rin suddenly spoke up. "She's right. I know you want to be there for him, but the baby... Honestly, I think that's really selfish of you, Izumi."

There was a pregnant pause.

"Sorry," Izumi apologized. "I guess I'm just that kind of person."

"You stupid hard-head," Deidara muttered, elbowing her. "Stay by me at all times, okay? And Sakura, if you can be there—"

"Oh, trust me," Sakura growled. "Don't even think of getting rid of me. And if you aren't pregnant and therefore a perpetual patient, I would have smacked you a long time ago."

"Wow, um." Ino sweatdropped. "I guess this is what happens when you study under Tsunade-sama, huh...?"

"I still can't believe that this is happening," Rin said after a few moments. "It... went by so quickly."

She got a few nods from the others.

"I'm going to steal a line from Shikamaru here," Ino quipped. "This is such a drag."

"Hah." Deidara snorted. "Drag doesn't even begin to cover it, un. She sat up straighter, leaning against the wall. "You're Hitomi's sister, aren't you?"

Ino startled. "Y-yeah. Why?"

And Deidara smiled. Widely. Finally, she'd been waiting for this moment. How mad was Hitomi going to be when she found out that Deidara found Ino before she did, despite her daring escape attempt? "Good, because I just want to let you know that Hitomi’s alive and doing pretty well, un."

"Really?" Ino gasped, not even fazed when Rin shushed her (Hikari had stirred). "T-that..." She looked down at her hands, shocked. Her eyes were still wide even when tears collected at the corner of her eyes. "Where is she?"

"She's been staying with me," Deidara answered. Then she winced guiltily. "I left her at Chiyo-baa-sama's place, but they should both be fine. They aren't under any scrutiny from the army, even if
Danna—Sasori—is." Everything had happened so fast that she had almost entirely forgotten about Chiyo and Hitomi. No matter—they would be fetched and brought down here tomorrow.

Ino's face puckered. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. I don't really want to kick the crap out of the person who saved my sister, after all." Inwardly, she was jumping with joy. Hitomi was alive!

"Maa," Rin placated. "We should all get some sleep. Big day tomorrow and all," she added awkwardly, not looking at Izumi, whose face had gone blank.

They agreed. The candle in the middle of the girl's circle was blown out, and darkness enveloped them all.

The truck hummed.

"Just a routine run!"

The soldier was unfazed. "Yeah, go ahead. I got you."

They drove off before parking the truck behind shrubbery.

"What now?"

"We wait."

"... I can't believe those idiots didn't even realize that there was another group in the sewers until recently. Dense assholes."

"You can't blame them too much. There's only two of them working down there, and they've got two little girls to look after."

"Hmph. I'll blame whoever I want. They were too late—now shit's gone down. At least now, they're ready, right?"

"Honestly? We can only hope."

The Tsukigakure flags waved lazily in the wind. Underneath the great, gray morning sky, men and women gathered, speaking excitedly—all of them were heading toward what was once the heart of the city: Akatsuki Square.

"I heard the Tsuki people are fighting the Ame people!" one man said to another. Even in its reduced state, the grapevine was still functioning as well as it possibly could.

"Who's fighting?" his friend asked.

"Uchiha Itachi!"

"Uchiha Itachi?! The master of Amaterasu?!"

"Yes! Look—the entire square is sealed up. But look at the soldiers—I think they're preparing to let us all in soon."

Akatsuki Square was indeed sealed, and on the top level of Chiyo's Chicken Rice, the shop's namesake and a young Yamanaka girl were watching proceedings from below, the former's eyes
narrowed.

*What are these dogs up to now?* Chiyo thought angrily. *Defiling Akatsuki's heart...!* She had woken up this morning to find an absent grandson and future daughter-in-law. Needless to say, she was not pleased.

They seemed to be setting up an arena of some sort. A fight was going to take place here. Of that, Chiyo had no doubt. But who would be fighting? She supposed that she would just have to wait and see.

"What's happening, baa-sama?" Hitomi whispered, as if she feared the Tsukigakure soldiers down below would hear them.

"I don't know," Chiyo admitted. "We'll just have to see..."

"Dammit!" Kisame roared. "There's only eight symbols left and it's not cooperating!"

It was already morning, and the Sealing Team hadn't slept at all. People who had decided to stay—which included all of the orphans, Rin and her children, and Asagi's family (Sakura had persuaded at least one pregnant woman last night)—were already gathered in front of the sealed iron wall.

"What's taking so long?" a woman asked worriedly, clutching her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

"Calm down," Rin soothed. "They're working as quickly as possible. Sealing is very delicate—we can't rush them."

"Okaa-san, where's Deidara-nee?" Daichi asked, a sullen look on his face. "Why isn't she here?"

"She'll be back soon," Rin told him. "She just has something to do outside."

"I bet she's going to save Itach-oji!" Shogo piped up, breaking free of his mother's grasp and sidling next to Daichi. The boy was just five years old; Daichi had three years on him. "Right, okaa-chan?"

Asagi smiled wearily down at her son, taking his hand again. "Sure, Sho-kun."

Daichi turned away. "Yeah, whatever..." *He's such a little kid... He doesn't know anything about losing people. Of course he's not worried about Deidara-nee.* His onyx gaze flickered over to Shogo's young, unmarred face, and his scorn only grew.

"Where's Ino?" Shikamaru, looking worse for wear, turned around to ask Choji.

Choji quickly explained the situation with Hitomi and Ino, and the Nara sighed.

"Typical Ino, rushing in like that. Might as well hurry up before she gets back and starts nagging us..."

Chiyo was right—Akatsuki Square was eventually unsealed once appropriate wooden barricades were put up around the raised makeshift stage. People poured in from every direction, stopping in front of the barricades and the soldiers guarding them.

In the crowd, Sakura was glued by a worried Izumi's side, the latter's belly bulging against the fabric of her loose clothes. Deidara came in after them, talking in low voices with Ino.
"She's in that apartment up there. Above the sign that says 'Chiyo's Chicken Rice'," Deidara told her. From the apartment window, Hitomi brightened and waved down at the two girls. "Ah. She's probably coming down."

"I'll go get her," Ino said excitedly, her eyes gleaming in anticipation. "Stay here and do whatever you need to do."

"Un."

As Ino manoeuvred around the constantly shuffling crowd, careful to avoid the guards on standby, their rifles in hand, Madara got up on stage and moved himself into a seiza position. It was clear that he was waiting for Itachi's arrival, and Deidara's sleeve fell over her hands as she readied herself.

Izumi and Sakura were both craning their necks to search for any sign of Itachi. It was only when Sasuke appeared on a raised wooden construct on the north end of the stage that they stopped to pay attention.

Even Ino halted in her tracks, and Deidara cast a flinty glance in his direction.

The people quietened when the soldiers ordered silence, and Sasuke began to speak, "General Madara says, that in order to strengthen the Ame-Tsuki cultural exchange..." Sasuke looked as if speaking the very words were hurting him. "He and Itachi-sama will be fighting here today in a fair tournament. It will be an exchange of ideas in a friendly manner, and to realize peace between the two countries."

"Fair tournament?" one man scoffed to another. "That sounds too good to be true..."

His friend sneered at Sasuke. "Look at that traitor's face! There's bruises everywhere. Sooner or later, the Tsuki army will kill him like the dog he is."

His words inspired uproar, and Sakura stood in front of Izumi to protect the woman and the unborn child from all the jostling. Ino was not as lucky as to have a meat shield – she was swept away from Chiyo's apartment, much to her annoyance.

In response, the Tsukigakure soldiers pointed their guns and began to shout back, forcing the people of Akatsuki to step backward submissively, quietening their hollers into displeased mutters.

Itachi had four soldiers surrounding him in a seemingly foolproof formation. Two flanked his sides while the other two separated themselves to guarding his front and back. They escorted him into Akatsuki Square, and his presence immediately stirred the people.

"It's him! He's here!"

"Itachi-sama!"

"Itachi-sama has come!"

Next to Sasuke, Mizuki smirked, as if the very notion of the people shouting the master's name was amusing to him. And, to him, it probably was.

Itachi exhaled deeply.
Itachi didn't flinch when Mizuki stormed into his prison cell and tipped the tray Madara had brought him with his good leg, spilling the contents all over the floor.

How bold, **Itachi thought**. The General left not even five minutes ago.

**When Itachi simply kept staring at the wall opposite him, Mizuki saw red.**

"What did Madara-taisho talk to you about?" Mizuki demanded. "Was it about the fight?!" Mizuki bared his teeth at the silent Uchiha. "Whatever it is, I really don't care. Listen carefully to me, Uchiha Itachi." He lifted his crutch to wag it at Itachi's face. "If you win the fight, I will kill you immediately with my gun."

Itachi saw Sasuke enter the room before Mizuki did. His younger brother grasped the cane with both hands and pushed it down.

"Remember!" Mizuki bellowed.

Sasuke held up a hand. "He knows!" He took a deep breath, then muttered to Itachi, "Please, don't win the fight with Madara. If you win, he will kill you. Are you listening? Be careful for your life."

Itachi nodded shortly, a small smile adorning his features as he stared down at his hands.

"Otouto… martial arts may be a form of brute strength…"

---

Itachi let himself be led to the stage, where Madara, watching the younger Uchiha carefully, was waiting.

"... But in our Ame taijutsu system, it embodies our ideals and philosophies. The virtue of our martial arts is benevolence."

Itachi walked up the stage.

"This is what Tsuki will never understand, because they abuse military power and turn it into violence to oppress others."

He turned to face the general. Madara rose from his seiza, the bones in his feet making a satisfying cracking noise.

"This is why they do not deserve to learn Ame martial arts."

---

"Hanabi?! Why are you here?!" Ino stared at her friend, who was dodging people left and right. "I... I don't think you're going to find her here!"

Hanabi scowled at the blonde. "You think I don't know that?! Ino... I've been searching for Hinata-nee for months now. And everyone's going to be leaving, and maybe it's selfish of me, but I can't stay here! My father has all but entirely given up on everything, and so has my clan! This will be the last place I'll ever look. And if I don't find her..." She let out a sharp puff of breath. "Then it was a lost cause to begin with. Don't try to stop me—I know that here isn't the safest place to be, and I'll get out of here if it gets to dangerous. That being said, what about you, huh?"

"Hitomi's up there," Ino pointed at the designated spot, "I'm going to find her and the old lady inside and get the hell out of here. The seal should nearly be cracked by then."

Hanabi nodded. "Okay. Good luck with that."
"You too."

On the stage, Itachi intertwined his fingers and held both of his hands up in acknowledgement to Madara. He was completely silent, the tear troughs on his face more pronounced than usual. Deidara guessed it was because he probably hadn't gotten any sleep last night. Staying with the enemy tended to have that kind of effect on a person.

To her left, Deidara could see Izumi with Sakura hovering her protectively in a position that would allow the medic to shield the pregnant woman's stomach if need be.

"Anata!" Izumi's voice was nearly drowned out by the noise the people were producing. "Kick his ass!"

"Is that Izumi-chan?" Deidara whipped her head around at the deep baritone that had been produced by the speaker. She blinked in surprise.

The Uchiha Clan. Indeed, Uchiha Fugaku and his brethren had come to see what could be Itachi's final duel, despite Deidara's silent promise to get him out of this situation alive. She had her bombs at the ready, and was prepared to let loose if things went badly. Only the men had came, Deidara noticed, which wasn't surprising as the Uchiha were a patriarchal clan, though they did have a few female warriors here and there.

Fugaku emerged from the crowd of Uchiha, coal gaze fixated on his son. His face seemed to be etched into a permanent scowl, but even so, Deidara found him hard to read. What was he feeling? she wondered. Angry? He certainly looks it. Sad? Disappointed? The list was endless, and she didn't have the time to consider all the options.

Sasuke seemed to have seen his father's entrance as well, and stiffened like a deer in headlights before pointedly focusing his entire attention on the fight that was about to unfold before him. Mizuki noticed his discomfort and immediately sneered. It was likely a reflex reaction.

"How rare," an Uchiha commented, "to see the two would-be heirs willingly sharing the same breathing space."

"Some heirs they turned out to be," another muttered.

"Quiet," barked Fugaku, making them both jump and promptly shut up. "Times have changed, and the Uchiha along with it." He caught Izumi's eye just then, and nodded, leaving the woman dumbfounded. She could only return the gesture, numbly.

Madara returned Itachi's acknowledgement, and they both slid into stances that they had practiced for a good portion of their lives. Madara, more heavily built than Itachi, had his shoulders squared, one leg positioned in front of the other. One fisted hand was held out; the other arm tucked slightly near his armpit.

It was almost a completely foreign stance, even for those who had fought against the Tsukigakure warriors at Obito's mansion, including Deidara. She suspected that his form wasn't even of Tsuki origin. Considering that many of the clans had originated from Konohagakure, in the north, it would make sense that Madara was one of the few Uchiha that had stayed there during the Great Migration, a point in history that almost everyone studied at some stage of their lives.

The two warriors in the ring stared each other down. Everybody held their breath and shuffled along to get the best view. Deidara could see Ino reach Chiyo's apartment and be let in by the old woman. Hitomi wasn't with her – she was likely trying to pack everything she owned into one of Sasori's storage scrolls.
Madara blurred forward, and the audience burst into shocked gasps, the general having disappeared to the untrained eye.

Itachi's eyes widened marginally, his Sharingan activating as he narrowly avoided Madara's kick by bending to the side like a willow branch. He flipped once and landed on his hands before pushing himself back to his feet just in time to dodge another attack from the Tsuki general.

One of Madara's punches came too fast for him to dodge, and Itachi caught his fist, feeling the bones in his arm creak. Incredible... He jumped backward, landing on his toes. Not even Hoshigaki Kisame could hit that hard. He ignored the throbbing in his hand and focused on attacking Madara, the image of the general alternating between Mizuki's sneering figure and the outline of Itachi's favorite training post—one that Obito had gifted to him long ago.

The general was no pushover, and met him blow for blow. To the enraptured audience, it seemed like neither of them were able to hurt one another. In reality, however, it was an entirely different story.

Itachi's had not developed his Amaterasu to be a heavy-hitting form, and the disadvantage of fighting with such an art was now seeping through the cracks in his stoic facade. Madara was not taking as much damage as Itachi would have liked, and they both knew that.

A gutteral growl rose in his throat, and Madara broke through Itachi's defences. Lips pulling back into a grimace, Itachi flipped his weight to one side, and Madara's fist clipped his cheek, sending him spinning into the air.

"ITACHI!" he heard someone scream, terrified. His Mangekyou Sharingan was able to capture Izumi's horrified expression as the people's faces whirled around and around in a swirl of dull colors and distorted limbs. He saw the tension in his father's jaw, and the anticipation boiling in Deidara's disposition.

It chilled his blood and froze the marrow in his bones. Adjusting himself in midair, Itachi landed softly far away from Madara, chest rising and falling more quickly than usual.

"It's impressive," Madara said. His voice was softer than Itachi had ever heard it, yet it still retained its grating quality. "You're impressive."

Itachi did not respond, simply gazing at the man with hard, crimson eyes. At some point during the fight, Madara had activated his own Sharingan. Itachi didn't know what trauma the older Uchiha had gone through to receive such a curse, but, somehow, he was not surprised.

He blinked slowly, knowing Madara was still gauging him and would not attack. Behind his eyelids, Madara's face was no longer Mizuki's. Instead, the general had grown extra limbs, and resembled Itachi's training post.


"Aniki!"

Itachi, ten and the heir to the Uchiha Clan, grabbed one of the arms of his wooden training post to stop it from bashing into the side of his head. Then he turned, an amused smile on his face.

"Sasuke. Are you done with your homework already?"

Sasuke nodded vigorously, his side bangs swishing along with the movement. "Hai! Okaa-san made me work on my character writing." His face scrunched up, and Itachi had to chuckle and
ruffle his hair.

"Maa, I know how much you hate calligraphy, but you'll thank our mother in the future. She just wants the best for us." His brother was an odd duck, and Itachi wasn't just thinking that because of his unfortunately shaped hair (it would grow out to be tamer in the future, he knew). Sasuke had a love for language, but only the speaking aspect of it. He could imitate accents, and Itachi would recount all the times he had to stop Sasuke from speaking in front of foreign officials, for he knew that Sasuke would try to mimic their brogue.

"I know," Sasuke's voice raised in a whine. "But since I'm done, can you and Shisui-nii come play with me?"

Itachi's face heated slightly as he thought of the plans he had made this afternoon. "Ah... sorry, Sasuke, but I'm meeting with someone today. We just played yesterday. Maybe next time..."

"Huh?! Who?! Your girlfriend?!"

This time, Itachi full-on blushed, turning away from his little brother. "No," he said firmly, hoping there was conviction in his voice. "And you already know her. Izumi-chan from the next street down."

"Ohh. She's nice; she gives me tomatoes from her garden patch. I really like her."

"I'm glad you do." Itachi poked his little brother in the forehead, making him pout. "Because I like her a lot, too."

He walked away then, needing to shower, and Sasuke called after him, "What's that supposed to mean? Aniki, don't be so vague! At least come and show me some cool moves!"

At that, Itachi halted. Well, he did have a bit of time. "Okay, five minutes," Itachi agreed, returning to his training post. "See this, Sasuke? Our clan uses it to practice our family style—the Uchiha Style. Every Uchiha knows this. Once you turn five, otou-sama will begin teaching you the basics." In actuality, Itachi had started at three, but that was only because he was the eldest, and therefore the heir. Itachi gestured to various points on the post. "This is where the opponents eyes are. These are his arms, and these are his legs..."

Five minutes later, Sasuke looked up at him as solemnly as a four-year-old could. "That sounds very painful, Aniki."

"The Uchiha Style is... brutal," Itachi said carefully.

"I don't really like it then..."

Itachi couldn't help it. A smile tugged at his lips, and he ruffled his beloved brother's hair for the second time that day. "That's okay. I don't really like it either. It's unspoken in Ame that the principle of our taigiatsu is benevolence, but the Uchiha Clan have been practicing this style since their days in Konoha." He paused. "Our clan doesn't really like change. But I think that our clan will never survive if we do not have change, which is why..."

Sasuke blinked up at him. "Why what?"

"This style doesn't really suit me," the older Uchiha said in the end. "I've actually started working on a new one, but it's still very much a work in progress."

"Wow! Aniki is so cool!" Sasuke frowned. "But what if your style doesn't work?"
"I'll always have our clan's arts to fall back upon, if the Amaterasu should fail."

Sasuke was content with that answer. "Hehe, Aniki is really kind."

Sasuke's mouth grew dry as he observed Itachi gather his bearings and swap his stance for one that was an amalgamation of the traditional Uchiha Style and Itachi's very own Amaterasu. It threw him back to the day that he had defeated the ten Tsuki warriors in Obito's name—the brutal animal he'd become was slowly surfacing once more.

"Geez, look at you," Mizuki muttered into his ear, his fingers tapping on the holster of his pistol. "So scared for him."

Madara and Itachi begun to fight again, moving faster than ever. At one point, Madara nearly had Itachi falling off the stage, but the man saved himself by twisting his leg around Madara's and flipping back to the center of the stage.

A barrage of blows were exchanged, and they seemed to be evenly matched until something happened.

Sasuke nearly bit his tongue when Itachi struck Madara across the face suddenly, sending him flying backward.

"He did it!" Sakura shouted, jade green eyes wide. "Come on, Itachi!"

Itachi didn't allow his opponent any respite, launching right after him and slamming his knee into his gut.

"Khhh...!" Spittle flew from Madara's mouth, and Itachi used this moment to push his back into one of the four wooden posts on each corner of the stage. And then, he began to beat him.

Itachi was a machine, never wavering. Head. This part represents the head, Sasuke. The back of Madara's skull bashed against the wooden post, causing it to shake intensely. Chest. Arms. Disable his arms; then he can't hit back. Do you see, Sasuke? This is what I really hate most because this is what I will inevitably become.

Itachi's arms twisted around the wooden arms of the pole, striking at an impossibly fast pace.

Blood dribbled from the general's nose and mouth. Mizuki's hand hovered over his gun contemplatively.

His palm almost destroyed the top of the pole.

Itachi struck Madara in the center of his forehead, snapping his head back before hanging forward. Itachi held out his hand in a knife position near the general's throat, as if waiting to strike him down should he fall over.

He didn't.

Itachi stepped back, his hand closing into a fist. His knuckles were red.

Huffing weakly, Madara slid down the pole. He lifted his chin, Mangekyou Sharingan flashing and reflecting Itachi's own Mangekyou.

"Who was it?" Itachi inquired suddenly, back facing Sasuke and Mizuki.
"... He was my brother." Madara's eyes closed. "His name was Izuna."

"Hn."

Chiyo, Ino, and Hitomi emerged from Chiyo's Chicken Rice, the latter two with tears in their eyes.

Hanabi's face fell when she circled the square for the umpteenth time without sighting pale lilac eyes among brown, black, and blue.

"Yours?"

"I didn't lose him. But it was enough."

"Lucky bastard."

Itachi turned away from the fallen general, searching for Izumi's face in the crowd.

It was so quiet, one could hear a pin drop.

Then the crowd erupted in cheers, roaring as loud as they could and thrusting their fists up in the air. Among them were Sakura, Izumi, and Deidara, shouting at the top of their lungs. The Uchiha Clan were silent at first, but when Fugaku shockingly followed the public's example, they did the same. They didn't even stop when the Tsuki soldiers pointed their guns at them and barked for silence.

"ITACHI-SAMA!" someone shouted.

His name was repeated by almost every man and woman.

"ITACHI-SAMA!"

"ITACHI-SAMA!"

Deidara breathed out a small sigh, feeling pride well up in her chest. After all the death, all the destruction... the feeling of hopelessness, this almost feels... She craned her neck upward to see Itachi, his face turned away from hers. Like a small victory... Watching the people cheer for Akatsuki's pride—a dead man, a bruised, beaten girl, a crying woman—This is the kind of thing that makes me happy to be alive to witness, un.

To him, it was just a buzz of noise. Itachi finally found Izumi's face in the crowd. Her expression was one of pure relief, joy, and exhaustion. There were lines on her face that hadn't been there before, but she was beautiful. He took a step toward her—

"NO!"

BANG!

White, hot, blinding pain—

Sasuke wrestled Mizuki to the ground, screaming.

Izumi's face changed from relief to unadulterated horror. The effect was instantaneous and pervasive. Arms which had been lifted into the air in celebration slowly fell back down. Eyes were wide, unable to be torn away from Itachi for entirely different reasons.

The Tsukigakure soldiers stilled considerably, though they still held the Ame people at gunpoint.
Itachi gazed at the hole between his shoulder and his collarbone.

Then he slumped sideways, the distance between him and the ground decreasing dangerously quickly.

Itachi blinked numbly, his entire world tipping to the side. Izumi's disbelieving visage tilted as well. As he fell, the clouds in the sky parted enough for the rising sun to be seen. The light blurred Izumi's face as Itachi, having fallen, allowed for it to shine upon her.

Her lips moved. Itachi couldn't hear anything, but he didn't need to.

'Anata'.

His head hit the ground, and the sky shook.

Everything after that happened at once.

"ITACHI!" Izumi screamed as the crowd surged forward against the barricades, pushing the wooden barriers out of the way. Men wrestled the rifles out of soldiers as everybody fought their way to the front, shouting and screaming from all sides.

"OUT OF THE WAY!" shouted Sakura, shouldering her way through the crowd, her fingers intertwined with Izumi's. "MOVE!"

Hitomi looked up at Ino, scared. "W-what's happening?! Did he die?!"

"This way!" rasped Chiyo, Ino's hand and leading her away from the mayhem. "We must find Deidara."

"Nee-san!" Hitomi wailed.

"I'm here, imouto!" Ino hollered. She tightened her grip on the little girl's hand. In her other hand, she could feel callouses and knots on Chiyo's palms.

"I'm slipping!" cried Hitomi, slowly losing sight of Ino and Chiyo as people moved everywhere. Their hands were still connected, but—

"HITOMI!" Her sister's touch disappeared and Ino whipped around frantically before settling her gaze on Chiyo. "Baa-sama, please find Deidara and get to safety! I'm going to find my imouto!"

Chiyo was torn. "Yamanaka—"

But Ino had already vanished into another onslaught of people leaving Chiyo to curse like a drunken sailor and shove her way through the crowd to find salvation. "I'm getting too old for this! Is that Deidara over there? A flash of golden blonde caught her eye before dissipating.

Standing higher than everyone else, Sasuke was quickly overpowering Mizuki. "Nothing matters anymore! A fury burned in his eyes and Mizuki trembled as he stared into the Mangekyou Sharingan. Sasuke tore the Nambu pistol he loved from his hand and all but stabbed the muzzle into the soft underside of the adviser's chin. Mizuki flailed, helpless.

"Die, you piece of shit," Sasuke spat hatefully, firing. The chakra-enhanced bullet liquefied Mizuki's brain, and his body fell off the wooden construct to be trampled by the rioting citizens of Akatsuki. He dropped the gun and stepped on it with the heel of his boot, destroying the small machinery. By now, the Tsuki soldiers had begun to open fire. Sasuke no longer had a reason to
restrain himself; he removed the twin Mauser C96 pistols he had in his holsters and fired at the enemy—Tsuki—with deadly precision honed from years of training. If he hit any civilians, no one but him would ever know.

The barrier in front of Izumi was sent flying into the air and onto a nearby roof, courtesy of a kick executed by Deidara. Their gazes met for a second before the blonde and the raven-haired woman reached Itachi. There was already a pool of blood forming beneath the wound and soaking into his clothes.

"Anata!" Izumi looked desperately to Sakura. "Can you help him? Please!"

"Not here," Sakura stressed, whipping her head around. "If he stays here, it'll be a death sentence!"

"More soldiers are coming!" a woman near the back of the crowd screeched.

They came in swarms. Unarmed civilians would not stand a chance against them, even with outrage running through their veins.

Deidara leaped on stage. "Stand back, un!" Her sleeve whipped upward momentarily, revealing her mouth-palms frantically chewing something. Before anyone knew it, a gigantic explosion detonated at the nearest soldier swarm, vaporizing all of them instantly. It was her biggest explosion—C3—and if anyone innocent got caught in the crossfire, only she would ever know.

In one moment, her's and Sasuke's eyes met. Then they were back to having their own agendas, Sasuke taking his vengeance against Tsukigakure soldiers left and right and Deidara trying to clear a path for Itachi to be carried somewhere safe. The civilians had enough brains behind their ears to move out of the way for Sakura and Izumi. The black-haired (formerly pink-haired) medic lifted Itachi in her arms like he was nothing, testimony to her time spent with Sennin Tsunade. She was careful not to increase the amount of blood flowing from his wound. Itachi blearily opened his eyes almost every time she took a step, the pain keeping him awake.

Which was good, Sakura thought, because she suspected he might have a concussion.

"Katsu!" Deidara exploded another C3 that she had unleashed upon a group of more unsuspecting soldiers. She couldn't see anymore coming. Her cloak flapping around her petite figure from the wind, she sprinted after Sakura and Izumi.

Hanabi suddenly appeared beside her, hardly acknowledging her as they ran side by side to the beer hall.

_Danna should have finished the seal by now, _Deidara thought frantically. _After Itachi is healed, we can—_

**BANG! BANG!**

Something fast whizzed past her cheek, and Deidara felt her own blood dripping down her face.

_Shit! _she inwardly screamed. _They're shooting at us! _She threw a C2 at them, hoping that it would be enough to ward them off. _"KATSU!"

Suddenly, Izumi keeled over, heaving. 

"Izumi!" Deidara helped her up, letting out a small "oof" before continuing to run as fast as she could, bullets whizzing by her.
"Con..." Izumi choked on her words, squeezing her eyes shut in pain.

"CONTRACTIONS?!!" Sakura all but screamed. "DAMMIT, WE HAVE TO HURRY! Hanabi, where the hell is Ino?!"

Hanabi closed her eyes momentarily before shouting, "Byakugan!" Veins appeared in her eyes, and a look of deep concentration befell her. She became stricken. "She's still in the crowd!"

"NO!" Sakura let out a frustrated noise.

"We'll go back," Deidara decided immediately, "Come on, Hanabi."

The soldiers chasing them startled when the Hyuuga and the blonde suddenly turned back, screaming when Deidara hurled another one of her clay bombs at them, shouting, "Katsu!"

"Your left!" Hanabi shouted.

"Got it, un!"

It was gross, but Deidara jabbed her fingers into a nearby man's eyes, curling them and essentially pulling the soft organs out. Through her hand-mouth, she felt blood on the tongue, but now wasn't the time to be squeamish.

The two girls dove back into the crowd. There were more bodies than there had been before, and the ground was blood-stained. Akatsuki Square had been completely defiled. Sasuke was shooting in a terrifyingly accurate frenzy, felling soldiers left and right. He was shot at as well, but with his Mangekyou Sharingan, he was able to just dodge the bullets.

It occurred to Deidara that Sasuke would not be safe in Akatsuki once this entire fiasco was over. There were over a hundred people that could testify as witnesses to his outright betrayal (if anyone was left alive).

So she called out to him, "Hey, asshat!"

He turned, funnily enough.

And Deidara gave him a mocking wave. "If you don't want your head on a pike, follow us, un!"

Sasuke scowled but Deidara turned away before he could answer.

"Chiyo-baa-sama!" Deidara grabbed the old woman's arm. "Come with us."

"Have you seen the Yamanakas?!" Chiyo yelled, people surging all around them in panic.

Hanabi answered her inquiry. "She's over there!"

The world of Byakugan would only ever be experienced by the Hyuuga. It was one of the things that made being a Hyuuga so special, but right now...

Ino ran to a shaking Hitomi, who had a gun pointed at her chest, the man holding the rifle prepared to shoot out the heart that beat fearfully beneath her breast.

Hanabi started toward them, eyes wide. "Wait—"

A strangled scream echoed through the square.
... Hanabi wished that she hadn't been born a Hyuuga.

Numb with shock, the young Hyuuga lifted her hands to her mouth. This was not the first time she had encountered death, despite her young age. Her mother had died shortly after her birth, and she had killed a few men after the war started, but they had deserved it and they had been strangers.

Hitomi blinked, uncomprehending as Ino slumped to the side, dead. Her heart had been destroyed, having been shot from point-blank range. The bullet had ripped through her chest and...

Oh.

"What is it?!" Deidara demanded, grabbing the Hyuuga by the shoulders and shaking her.

Oh.

Oh.

Hanabi could see bits of shrapnel embedded in Hitomi's heart. The bullet itself had lodged somewhere in her spine.

Hitomi fell backward, mouth wide open in a surprised 'o'. Her eyes stared blankly at the sky, not quite dead yet.

"See..." Hanabi swallowed. "... For yourself."

Moments later, Sasuke shot Ino's killer in the head. It was his last bullet, and he threw his guns away and drew out his katana.

As if some deity in the sky was mocking them, the crowd parted just enough for Deidara to glimpse Ino and Hitomi. She shouted something incomprehensible, dashing toward them. Chiyo went after her, taking a paler-than-usual Hanabi by the hand. Which was good, because Hanabi was certain that she couldn't even walk straight.

"Calm down," Chiyo soothed, squeezing her hand. "Breathe."

Hanabi took a deep breath, feeling her entire frame trembling at the small feat.

Deidara skidded to a stop right next to Hitomi, kneeling beside her. "No... This can't be happening. Oh, but the cruel fact was that it was happening, and there was nothing she could do but watch her charge bleed to death in Akatsuki's war-torn heart. Hadn't she thought that Hitomi would never last? That she would one day be killed by her own foolishness? How ironic, that the reason for her death would be on the count of Deidara's own carelessness. I should have never left her there.

Hitomi's mouth began to move. "Am I... going to die? I can't... move anything. My... hands..."

She was six. Deidara wanted to scream at the sky as tears gathered in the corner of her eyes, ready to fall at any moment. She was six, dammit! Six-year-olds weren't supposed to be shot in the heart, or watch their sisters die in front of them!

Hitomi began to weep, tears flowing out of her eyes and dripping down the side of her head. "P-please, I don't wanna die... I don't wanna..." She sobbed. "P-please, I don't wanna die, Ino-nee."

Ino. She thought she was Ino. Somehow, it hit her harder than she thought it would. Her heart twisted in agony, and she let out a low moan, covering her hand with her mouth as tears trailed
down her face.

"Get up." Chiyo's voice brought Deidara out of her stupor. "You have to get up, Deidara, it's not safe here. There will be time to grieve later, but we must go!"

The sound of gunshots filled her ears again, and Deidara got off her knees.

"Yeah." Deidara's voice was hoarse. "Yeah, okay."

Sasuke landed beside them, katana bloody. "Deidara-san, where are we going?"

Hanabi and Chiyo would have scowled at his presence, but both were distracted by other matters. Frankly, getting out of the Square alive took priority.

"Just follow us, un." Deidara wiped the last of her tears away with her dusty sleeve, setting her face into a stoic mask.

The group of four merged into the crowd.

Hitomi blinked up at the sky one last time before closing her eyes forever.

The last of the Yamanaka Clan was no more, and she took with her the legacy of the clan.

A pained groan filled the chambers, urging Sasori to work even faster. Izumi had arrived being helped along by Sakura, who was also carrying Itachi. Asagi and Rin, both having experience in the matter, immediately tended to her, telling her to keep count of her contractions and breathe.

"Wait, I have it!" Bless Nara Shikamaru, Sasori thought, his mind already past the point of working on overdrive. He'd probably sleep for the next twenty-four hours if it could be helped.

They were finally done. They had deciphered the seal to be an extremely complicated, rarely seen, and ancient amalgamation. Now just came the part of unlocking it so they could finally leave the city. All their rations and supplies had been packed. It wouldn't be enough to last them a long time in the wilderness, but there would be game to hunt along the way, as well as edible berries and herbs that bloomed during winter.

Sasori was vaguely aware of Deidara arriving along with Hanabi, Chiyo, and Sasuke of all people. Whatever, he would question it later.

The Sealing Team stood back, exchanging nods.

Then—

"Kaifu no jutsu!" they shouted simultaneously.

There was a puff of smoke as the iron wall was unsealed. Then it slid to the side, and everyone who had been waiting for the past forty minutes cheered.

Sasori's shoulders slumped. Finally. Finally, finally. Now they could relax, and—

He stiffened when two figures emerged from the other side of the cavern.

Just like that, the tension returned to their shoulders and many of them took battle stances. Sasori could name some of them, like Mitarashi Anko, and a pair of best friends simply known as Izumo and Kotetsu.
There was a dim light on the other end of the tunnel-like cavern, and one of the figures stepped forward.

Sasori never relaxed, even when he saw his face.

Hatake Kakashi lifted one hand, his eye curving upward as he smiled behind his mask. "Yo!"

Gai came next, and two small girls followed behind him.

"Maito Gai?!

"Chihiro!"

"Hinata-nee!"

"... You have a lot of explaining to do," Naruto, staring at Kakashi, deadpanned from the back.

They exited the city swiftly and silently, or as silently as a group of sixty or so people—the majority of them being civilians—could. They left the walled city behind them, not even looking back once. Or, well, Deidara didn't, anyway, and neither did Sasori. She knew this because they stayed by each other's side the whole time.

"Did something happen?" Sasori eventually asked, turning his head to look her in the eye.

"Hitomi and Ino are dead." She lowered her gaze. "I'll fill you in later, un." Ahead of them, Shikamaru and Choji walked side by side, oblivious to her words. That bridge would be crossed later.

A particularly painful contraction struck Izumi, and she cried out in pain. Itachi, who Sakura forced to be conscious, was talking her through it. His wound was not completely healed as Sakura hadn't had the time, but Kakashi and Gai (the other figure) had told them that there would be a place safe enough for her to give birth.

"When is it going to come out?!" Izumi's voice rose in panic.

Sakura kept her lips zipped about just how long it could take for the child to be born, focusing instead on soothing her patient's shot nerves.

"Stay strong," Rin told her, rubbing circles on her hand. "It'll all be worth it in the end."

Eventually, they reached the 'safe haven'.

"Shisui?!" Deidara and Sasuke blurted at the same time, Rin not far behind.

Smiling apologetically, Shisui waved to them.

"And Kagami?" Sasuke added, muttering this under his breath.

Naruto glared at Kakashi. "Now you really have a lot of explaining to do!"

Kakashi eye-smiled again. "I suppose I do, don't I?"

Another keening cry from Izumi had all sixty of them scrambling into the large truck that Shisui and Kagami had hidden behind shrubbery.
Shisui entered the driver's seat with Kagami in the passenger seat. The rest all sat in the back of the vehicle, where goods being transported were usually kept.

The skies had been grey when the Tsuki-Ame war had caught up to them. Now, they were still grey when they left the fighting behind.

Someone started to sob with relief.

Many others found themselves joining them.

Deidara's head slumped against Sasori's shoulder. "I'm so tired..."

He closed his eyes, using the position of her head to rest his own. "... I am, too."

They fell asleep right there and then, and only woke when Izumi's baby was born.

The child was a boy, and the very spitting image of his father.

"Where are we going?" Sasuke suddenly asked during the night, speaking to Kakashi.

"Where?" Kakashi echoed before answering, "Maa, where else but Konoha?"

They had a long journey ahead of them.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Oh, gosh. Over 11,000 words and now Part II has come to a close. I'm frankly exhausted. It's 11:35pm and I'm ready to sleep.

Hitomi was always going to die, and so was Ino.

The next part, there will be new perspective from the OC Chihiro. Deidara and Sasori are still the main characters, though. She won't occupy all of the screen time just some. Every OC in this fic is just a supporting character, not a main one.

EDIT: Deidara's explosions are significantly nerfed in this AU. Otherwise, it'd be too OP.
"Geez, that thing really gives me the creeps."

"Don't stare at it, then, dummy."

"You're so mean to me, Kawai-san..."

"Don't disrespect Kabuto's creation. It's a very advanced form of biological warfare."

"Oh, shut up, Souma. No one gives a shit. This damn war is just a waste of time. I really wish Kaguya would hurry the fuck up and win."

Four scientists were currently behind a window separating them and a body strapped to an operating table.

"Why isn't it waking up?" the only woman, Kawai, said, frowning and pushing up her glasses. "According to Kabuto's data, the spores released in that room should have stimulated it enough for it to become conscious."

"Maybe we should crank it up a bit," Souma recommended, peering over his clipboard.

"No way," said another male scientist. "Bad idea. Abort. Seriously, Souma, don't touch."

"Would you relax?" Takashi scoffed. "It's no big deal."

Kawai's frown deepened. "Hold on..."

"Come on! Get your life together, you fucking plant man!"

"TAKASHI, DON'T! GRR! Look what you've done, idiot!"

"Shut up, Kawai! Don't blame me for trying to get things done!" Takashi glared at the body through the window. "After all that, and it's still not fucking responding. Kabuto was fucking wrong. We should just destroy it."

Suddenly, a vine smashed through the window, wrapping around Takashi's head. It squeezed and squeezed and—

Three scientists screamed as Takashi's head exploded in brain matter and gore, the mess splattering all over them.

Kawai shrieked. "OH MY GOD!"

More vines shot through the now broken window, one impaling Souma in the heart and the other entering the other male scientist's mouth, making him choke on his own screams.

Kawai scurried back, pressing herself against the wall in fear as her colleague writhed in agony before his body was bent in unnatural ways. He finally died when the single vine split into several more, destroying his brain.

Kawai's bladder loosened. The vines reached closer toward her...

And stabbed her in both eyes.
Half of its body was black. The other was white. The creature stared down at itself, examining its—no, his—hands.

*Monster.*

"No. Zetsu.

"*Everything will be Zetsu.*"
Part III: Zinnia

Chapter Summary

Part III officially begins, and the fantasy part appears. Our heroes *pfft, I feel like the Pokemon narrator saying this* may have escaped Akatsuki city, but they're not out of danger yet. A new threat is about to make itself known, and they'll have to work together and fight for survival once more.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Unbeta'd as usual... we die like wOMAN

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shikamaru was not blind or stupid, though he did have his moments at times. Shikamaru, by his own words, was also a yellow-bellied coward who knew when to quit. And if a problem should arise, he would usually ignore until it was on the verge of spiralling out of control.

So when he didn't see Ino leave the Underground with them, he ignored the swirling whirlpool of dread gathering in his belly.

Perhaps Choji felt the same way, or perhaps he was too preoccupied with newfound freedom.

Shikamaru couldn't bear to look at him for too long, lest his silence finally break. As such, it surprised him when Choji was the one who brought it up when everybody got out of the vehicle to take a small break, sitting or standing in the grass.

"Hey, Shika?"

"Hm?"

"Ino… she's not here, is she?"

"… No."

Choji lowered his gaze. "Why didn't we wait for her?"

Shikamaru knew why. He knew that Sakura, Izumi, Hanabi, and Deidara had returned with only one female that certainly wasn't Ino. Hanabi and Deidara had been the last ones to come back, but they would have never deserted her, especially Hanabi, which meant…

"You're crying." Choji's voice wavered.

Was he? Shikamaru blinked, bewildered, lifting up the sleeve of his plain garb to wipe his face. "Huh. So I am."

"Is this what war is?" Choji had never sounded so timid before, not even when the other kids had
picked on him for being overweight.

Somehow, Shikamaru felt like it was only the beginning. He closed his eyes, tears clinging to his dark eyelashes.

When Choji began to cry, his large frame shaking, Shikamaru decided, with no small amount of grief, that war was the most troublesome thing ever and he would have preferred his late mother's angry shouts in the morning.

At least that had been normal.

"Why did we bring that traitor along?"

"Calm down, Masami, it's not like we had a choice. He just tagged along and now we can't do anything about it. Especially since Uchiha Itachi is his brother."

"Itachi-sama is a hero. Don't even compare him and that thing."

"Maa, maa, I wasn't, Masami."

Daichi glowered at a nearby tree as disgruntled voices filled his ears. Names hadn't been dropped, but who else could it have been? Uchiha Sasuke was the only traitor among them. He would not blame their ire—Sasuke could not be trusted. He turned on his family far too easily, and was fickle about taking sides.

Seeing Sasuke sitting on a rock and leaning back, cleaning his bloody katana, was a blow to him. A hand landed on his head, ruffling his hair, and Daichi startled. He tilted his head backward to stare into Deidara's visible eye.

"Hey," she said. "We haven't really talked much, have we?"

Daichi frowned. "What's there to talk about?" he muttered, bitterness seeping into his voice. "It's not like you were there to save otou-san—"

"Don't give me that crap, un."

Daichi recoiled, eyes wide before he glared at her. "You—"

"Stop stewing in your own misery," Deidara ordered sharply. "Have you even seen what people like you become?" She pointed at Sasuke, who was either ignoring them or hadn't noticed. "That guy."

Daichi glared at her for a little longer before his anger crumbled away, replaced by a hollow, searching grief. He slumped against the tree he was leaning on, sliding down. He was lucky the bark was smooth, or it would have torn his shirt.

Sighing, Deidara sat down next to him, tucking a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

"You're not the only one who's lost a parent, yeah. Look around you, Daichi…"

He did, scanning each and every one of their faces.

"They're all grieving for something lost, un," she stated somberly. "Whether it be family members or their old lives."
Daichi pressed his forehead into his knees, his small body shaking as he tried to rein in a sob. He would not cry. He was supposed to be strong with his bitterness and hate, he wasn't supposed to—

Deidara pulled him into a side hug and his entire resolve crumbled. He cried and cried until it felt like he had exhausted all of his tears.

A little girl with wispy brown hair walked up to them, eyes sleepy. "Why is aniki crying?" She had clearly just woken up from a nap. In the distance, Rin was shooting them concerned looks. But she could trust Deidara—she knew that.

"It's nothing," Daichi mumbled, sniffling. "Sorry, imouto."

"Is it because of otou-chan?"

Deidara had to give the girl credit where it was due—children were a lot more perceptive than people thought.

Hikari hugged her brother. "It's okay. I miss him, too. Okaa-chan says he's here," she touched Daichi's chest, feeling his beating heart, "and that he's never going to leave us as long as we remember him."

Daichi's face was completely stricken now, and he began to cry again, embracing his sister tightly. When Hikari started to sniffle, Deidara glanced over at Rin, who had gotten up and was walking toward them.

"Thank you," Rin whispered to her before sitting beside her children, pulling them onto her lap.

Deidara gave her a crooked smile. "It's no problem, un. No kid… should have to go through this alone." She side-eyed Sasuke discretely, but Rin caught it anyway.

"Of course not," the brown-haired woman agreed. Her eyes hardened with determination. "I'll make sure that they'll always be surrounded by people who love them."

Deidara opened her mouth to reply but a shout rang through the air first.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN SHE'S DEAD?!"

Naruto refused to believe it, glaring harshly at Shikamaru, whose own temper was clearly also being tested. He took a deep breath, lowering this voice. "You..."

"It's true." Shikamaru's voice was tight. "Why else wouldn't she be here?"

Naruto couldn't think of a plausible reason why. So he settled for staring blankly at the grass. No...

"Dobe." Sasuke marched up to him.

"Sasuke-teme. What do you want?"

"He's not lying," Sasuke glanced at Shikamaru, "I saw the man that shot her… and her sister."

"Hitomi, too?" Naruto stared disbelievingly at him, baffled by the tragedy. He felt tears beginning to well up in his eyes, but he bravely held them back. He didn't want to show weakness in front of him.

"Did you kill him?" Shikamaru said suddenly, turning sharply to Sasuke.
A bitter smirk twisted his lips. "I did."

"Good." It didn't come from Shikamaru, but from Naruto. "At least you're good for something, Sasuke-teme."

Sasuke nearly did a double take at that. "Hn." He had a scathing remark at the tip of his tongue, but something about Naruto's words stopped it from escaping. 'At least you're good for something'.

"Hey, brat," Sasori suddenly called to Naruto from the side. "Help me gather firewood."

Naruto hesitated before bounding over to where he was standing with Lee, Tenten, and a beefy man, all of whom had also been recruited for firewood duty.

As the group set off, Sasuke broke away from Shikamaru, returning to the rock where he had been resting earlier. *Is that really what all I'm good for? Killing?* He scoffed. *Naruto doesn't know what he's talking about…*

He paused, watching Naruto's blonde head disappear into the trees.

*Right?*

---

*What a mess.* Sasori stepped over a large branch that had fallen, dead wood twisted. *Everything would have been easier if we could just go around.*

He remembered with a scowl the map that Shikaku had produced. The pathway to Konoha was a dangerous one, what, with the war going on and all. There was a mountain pass smackdab in the middle of the road, and it was one that had to cross. It was too dangerous to go around, through the woods, as there were undoubtedly enemy camps and posts littered in that path.

There wasn't enough fuel in the truck for it to travel all the way to Konoha. Not that it would have mattered, since the truck wasn't made for crossing a mountain, even if it was covered with forest and nice grass. It would become a death trap if they were to attempt it.

So here they were now, a group of sixty—mostly composed of civilians—preparing for their first night out in the woods. They were currently at the base of the mountain. Their rations were dwindling fast. Those civilians ate more than they were worth, Sasori thought with no small amount of disdain. *Artless pigs.*

"Tenten and Lee, go search west from here, but don't go too far," Sasori ordered them, getting affirmative nods. "Naruto, Hitoshi, you're coming with me. We'll be looking east. When you've gathered enough wood, go straight back to camp."

Hitoshi was a civilian man that just happened to have a larger frame than most martial artists did. Sasori normally wouldn't have minded the fact that Hitoshi was almost two heads taller than him (as well broader), but his personality was… abrasive.

"What are you looking at, tiny?" Hitoshi gruffly demanded when he caught Naruto staring his way.

"Nothing!" Naruto immediately defended himself, scowling. "I thought I saw a bird or something, but it was just a lame vine."

Hitoshi opened his mouth to retort but screamed when something wet and slimy stroked the back of his neck. Whipping around, he caught sight of a wet leaf waving in the breeze. "Did you do that?" he shouted at Naruto. "That was fucking disgusting. It felt like drool."
"Huh?! No way! I was standing right here." Naruto glared fiercely at him. "Look, you bastard, I'm really not in the mood—"

"Quiet," Sasori suddenly said, staring at the leaf. The two males muttered angrily at each other but Sasori ignored them, stepping up to the tree where the leaf was attached to. It was wet, yes, but already drying and crinkled. Unless Hitoshi was exaggerating—

A vine snapped around his wrist and Naruto and Hitoshi both yelled in surprise, nearly falling over themselves. Sasori recoiled, the vine tightening its hold. What the hell is this? Sasori narrowed his eyes and tried breaking its grip by yanking, but it only tightened.

"D-dude!" Naruto stuttered out, face pale. "Y-you think it's some kind of tree ghost?"

"Don't be stupid, brat!" Hitoshi berated, just as pale as Naruto was. "H-hey, Sasori, why won't you say something? Aren't you scared?"

"Shut up," Sasori hissed. "And don't move." He had seen what they hadn't from the corner of his eye. Whatever this was, it had its slimy appendages everywhere. Sure enough, vines began to wrap around the trees surrounding them.

Naruto let out a small whimper before schooling himself.

Discretely, Sasori formed chakra neko-tes around the fingers of his free hand. This might get messy. His body was tense as he prepared for battle against these mysterious vines.

"Walk back to camp," Sasori commanded. "Slowly." Hitoshi stepped on a crunchy leaf and the vines twitched. "I said slowly." Meathead. He forced his voice to remain calm. He suspected that these things reacted to noise and movement, and he wasn't going to become plant food if he could help it.

"Are... you th... ere?"

Sasori turned his head around slowly to face Hitoshi and Naruto. Then he brought his claw-tipped fingers close to his lips in a shushing motion. He would have mock-sliced his own neck to emphasize his point, but whatever these things were attached to, it was coming.

He knew... because the dim cloud of chakra heading toward them from just a few feet away was absolutely foul and suffocating.

"I... feel... you. Feels... good."

Hitoshi and Naruto were still slowly backing away from the vicinity, keeping their footfalls as silent as possible.

A creature emerged from the trees. It was humanoid in shape, with a hunched back a disproportionately large head. The thing was wearing what seemed to be remnants of a pair of army pants. Strangely enough, it lacked genitals. Its arms were more translucent—they were thick, purple, ropy vines for biceps, and those vines writhed on the ground. They were the same vines that were wrapped around the trees.

Naruto had to clap a hand over his mouth to keep himself from squealing in terror. It was the stuff of nightmares to him, who had always irrationally feared ghosts and monsters. Hitoshi wasn't faring much better, but to his credit, he put one meaty hand on Naruto's shoulder and proceeded to guide them both away, occasionally looking backward for anything that would produce noise if stepped on.
The monster—gods, it had only half of its head; it had a nose, a mouth, half an ear, but the top half of the head was gone—neared Sasori, its tongue hanging out slightly. Its breath was even fouler than its chakra, smelling like rot and death. Inwardly, Sasori gagged, but for the most part, he stayed still. A bead of sweat was dripping down his temple.

"I... can... smell you..." It turned its head, the bones in its neck cracking.

Sasori's eyes widened marginally. *Shit.* "RUN! IT KNOWS YOU'RE HERE!" They stared at him in bewilderment and fear. "DON'T JUST STAND THERE! RUN!" Faster than they could follow, Sasori cut himself free and proceeded to cut down the sharp vines that lunged at them.

"B-b-bwaagghh!" Screaming, Naruto ran for his life, and equally terrified Hitoshi at his heels.

"Hey, you artless fuck," Sasori swiped the vines going after them in half, "your opponent is me."

The monster's tongue lengthened until it was lying in a disgusting pile on the floor. "I hear... you..." It screeched, vines coming from all directions flying at Sasori. He swore, deflecting or cutting the sharp ends with his neko-tes. Two ripped through his shirt and nicked his side, causing blood to splatter and drip down his pants.

"Tch." Sasori dissipated his chakra neko-tes, forming chakra around wrists and hands so that it shaped a blade. "What the fuck are you even supposed to be?" He cut more vines before lunging at the creature, slashing down at its half of a head. "Some kind of," the scalpel sliced down its groin, effectively splitting it in half, "freak experiment?"

Both halves of its lower face were moving in an attempt to speak, but no words ever came out.

*It's still not dead?* Then again, considering the top half of its head was missing, ordinary things weren't going to put it down for good. He dissipated the chakra blade on one arm, then lifted the other over his head. Then, methodically, he began slicing and stabbing in places that would kill a normal human. The monster screeched and writhed in pain when the blade pierced its heart.

Sasori raised an eyebrow when some kind of juice began to gush out from every pore in its body, emitting a repugnant stench. The vines wrapped around the trees drooped and began to shrivel up, liquid leaking all over the forest floor.

Eventually, the chakra of the beast disappeared completely, and Sasori knew it was dead. He kicked one half of the body. "Hmph."

"What the heck happened here?!" Tenten and Lee burst from the trees, both carrying firewood. "We saw Naruto and Hitoshi-san run back to camp, and they were terrified!" She recoiled at the sight of the wrinkled, prune-like corpse.

"Sasori-sama, are you okay?" Lee asked, eyes a little rounder than usual. "Tenten said she could feel your chakra fluctuating."

"Aa." Sasori wiped plant juice—the monster had certainly been plant-like—off the sleeve of his shirt before rolling them up, exposing his forearms. "I'm fine, but we have to warn the others immediately." He shot the disgusting thing a wary glance. "We don't know how many more of these things are wandering around."

"Monster!" Uzumaki Naruto cried as he burst into the clearing, his face seemingly drained of blood. Everybody was on instant alert.
"Monster?" someone echoed.

Hitoshi nodded. "It was some weird... plant thing. Sasori bought us time to escape, but..."

"You just left him there?" a woman gasped, outraged.

"Hey, lady!" Hitoshi snapped. "It was either him or me, and I chose the obvious route! So did the kid—why don't you go harp on his ass instead of mine?"

Naruto looked down, ashamed. Dammit! This asshole's right. I just ran like a coward! I should have stayed and fought. He cast a regretful look at the woods behind him.

The crowd murmured worriedly for their safety before Itachi finally took charge.

"Everyone, stay calm." The Itachi's voice was unavering. "Kisame, Gai, and Kakashi, I want you all to gather everyone back into the truck for the time being. Deidara, Shisui, you and I will head out to search for them." He'd been leader last time, and while he was not the most charismatic person around, everyone deferred to him, even Kakashi and Gai, who acted as pseudo-leaders. Gai was too... youthful to lead efficiently, and Kakashi... well, people hadn't been around him enough to fully trust him.

But, of course, there were always those who defied authority, even an unofficial one.

"You expect to sit here on our asses and wait to be eaten?" Mitarashi Anko stared at him. "Because if I'm going down, I'm going down fighting."

"Maa, Anko," Kakashi piped up. "Itachi doesn't expect us to do that. That would be silly, hm?" He eye-smiled at Anko, who twitched in irritation. "Obviously, we have our own brains, which means we can make our own decisions when given broad, omitting orders like Itachi's. Isn't that right?"

Itachi gave him a short nod. "Anko-san, if you and anyone else who is able can protect those incapable of self-defense, that would be best."

"Hmph." Anko crossed her arms. "Fine, then."

"Can we go now?" Deidara demanded impatiently, stepping forward and giving Shisui an expectant stare. "Danna's strong, un, but if this 'monster' is as terrifying as Uzumaki made it sound..."

As if she had summoned him, Sasori emerged from the trees with Tenten and Lee in tow, the latter two holding firewood in their arms. They all looked a little disturbed, even Sasori.

"No need," the red-haired man said, and almost everybody sighed in relief. Him in one piece meant that whatever monster Hitoshi and Naruto had been describing was now dead or severely incapacitated. Most likely the former, considering his pragmatic personality.

"Well?" Chiyo strode up to her grandson, gazing at him. "What happened out there, brat?"

Sasori clicked his tongue. "This is something that everyone should hear, so pay attention." Tenten and Lee moved around him and set down their firewood near Sasuke's rock. He recounted to them his encounter with the beast, and his subsequent fight and elimination of the creature.

"They were right!" a brown-haired woman wailed, shivering by the end of the tale. "There really was a monster...!"
"Sasori-sama must be really strong to defeat it," said one man, nodding in appreciation of the red-haired man's supposed strength. A few people voiced their agreement.

Sasori completely ignored their praise, brows furrowed. "There is... one detail that I failed to mention."

_He looks like he just had a nightmare_, Deidara thought with a frown that matched her Danna's. _What kind of detail does he mean...?_ Sasori was normally so unflappable that it irritated her. To see him so unsettled, like he had been the night before Itachi's battle with Madara, unsettled _her_ in turn.

"Which is?" Itachi prompted.

"... It was wearing pants. Or, at least, what used to be pants," Sasori amended. "Which makes me suspect..." He trailed off, waiting for all of them to make the connection.

Horror passed through Kakashi's single visible eye as realization struck him. "You don't mean..."

"Could it possible?" Gai wondered, looking equally disturbed.

"It was human," Itachi stated.

"H-hey," a teenage girl said, fingering her greasy black hair nervously. "Are you sure? I mean, it could have just been a trick of the light. O-or, maybe it was a shape-shifting monster?!" She sounded hopeful.

Sasori had no qualms in crushing that hope right away. If she deluded herself like that, she would be killed. "Unlikely," he said in a tone that left no room for argument. "During my fight, it demonstrated zero shape-shifting ability other than the ability to turn its arms into vines."

"You mentioned that it only died when you stabbed it through the heart, yeah?" Deidara said. "Hypothetically, if there are more of these..." She was met with horrified gasps and pale faces. "Would they all be that easy to beat? After all, the one you fought did only have half of its head... It could have more abilities that you didn't see."

"Well," Shisui drawled. "While I'd want to disbelieve that, there's a high possibility of that being true. Things like that are unnatural. Which means..."

Rin, who was standing at the front of the crowd, holding both of her children's hands with either hand, spoke up gravely, "They were created by human beings."

"Meaning that we really can't discount the idea that there are more out there," Sasuke added, every head turning to him when he spoke. Most of them glared at him. He met their accusing stares evenly.

"Of course, otouto," Itachi agreed. "We should all be on guard from now on."

Sasuke looked away. "Hn..."

"We're losing daylight," Kakashi said, looking up at the sky and its waning light. "If we want to have our bellies fed, we should have a small group go hunting right now with at least one high-caliber fighter with them."

"Shogo, have you seen that little orphan girl?" A slightly tubby boy with a dirty face and equally
dirty blond hair nudged Asagi's son. "The one over there."

"Eh?" Shogo turned his head to the left to see a brown-haired girl seemingly drift through the grass, holding three kunai. "What about her, huh, Itsuki?"

"She's uber weird. Okaa-chan says not to talk to her, because she carries those sharp-thingies around." Itsuki nodded at his own words, as if affirming them. "Does she even know how to use 'em? I don't think so."

"I guess..." Shogo stared after the girl, watching her disappear into the woods. "Um, should she be going there? She looks pretty cool with those knives, though..."

"Who cares?" said Itsuki. He shifted uncomfortably. "Okaa-chan said that the monsters aren't real, anyway, and the strong adults are just making it up to scare the weaker ones. She won't be fooled, though. Okaa-chan's real smart."

The boys' conversation drifted into the night.

Chihiro hadn't gone very far into the forest. Camp could still be seen from where she was standing, and she had chosen to stay in a small clearing with shorter grass that gave her a wide berth for movement. Taking in a deep breath, she threw her kunai at a nearby tree trunk, listening to them land with a satisfying thud. Quietly, she went over to retrieve them before repeating the whole process all over again.

"Don't hold them like that. You'll cut a finger off."

Chihiro jumped. "W-what? Who's there?" She turned on her feet, but she couldn't find anyone.

"Up here, kid."

She glanced skyward to see a blue man lounging on a low branch like some kind of jungle cat. Oh. I've seen him before. He was kind of hard to miss. She remembered Itsuki's—was that his name?—mother steering her chubby son away from him when they first caught sight of him. They called him a monster, too. She'd been right next to them when the woman had told her son that. He certainly looked like a monster, after all, and not many people had the insight to see underneath the underneath. Even Chihiro. Kakashi had said it was mostly a samurai motto. He looks like a monster but... Curiously, she stepped closer to the tree, her neck still craned to stare him in the eye. He doesn't seem like one... He reminds me of Iruka-san. He used to give me extra congee, before I was kidnapped by that drunk man.

"I know that," Chihiro eventually said, and amusement lit up the shark-like man's gaze. "Kakashi-sensei taught me how. I'm just..." Her cheeks flushed. "Lazy?"

"Lazy?" Kisame scoffed, sitting up. "A Nara is lazy, kid. You're just unmotivated."

"Eh? What's the difference?" She looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Yours can be easily fixed, a Nara's is a life condition." Kisame grinned at her, baring all of his teeth. "You said the scarecrow taught you, right? But now that he's busy with making sure we all don't die, I bet you've probably been feeling pretty ignored..."

She wilted. "N-no, that's not it..."

"Isn't it?"
She didn't answer, staring at the grass at her feet.

Seeing her sorry appearance, Kisame softened. He slid off the branch, landing with a soft thump. "Tell you what, kid, why don't you show me what you can do? Then we can make some improvements to your skill set."

Gosh, her eyes were so wide. Maybe he should have never revealed himself. But when she had stopped underneath his tree and started throwing her kunai, his interest had been piqued. He should have been over his martial arts club and his old students by now, but...

"Um, what should I do first?" Chihiro asked hesitantly.

He shrugged. "Hey, if I knew what you could do, I wouldn't have asked for a demonstration."

"I know!" Chihiro blurted, her cheeks going pink. Promptly, she flung her kunai at the tree trunk, each landing beneath the other. "I can do this, I guess." She hurriedly grabbed her kunai again and, this time, she threw all three at once. This time, it landed all over the place. "Ah, oops... I can't really do much else. But I know a bit of hand to hand?"

Kisame rested his Samehada by the base of the tree. "Scarecrow style, sure... but have you ever heard of Hoshigaki style?"

"No..."

He barked a laugh. "Makes sense—we're all dead, except me, of course."

Chihiro recoiled, mortified. "I-I'm so sorry—"

"Don't sweat it. Now come at me—show me what you can do."

"Right... sensei!"

"Isn't that a bit soon?"

"Sorry, sensei!"

"Now you're just being a brat..."

Chihiro smiled up at him, feeling a little surer of herself. No, she thought, he might look funny, but he's not a monster. Itsuki's okaa-chan is wrong.

He swore that he was in awe every time he laid eyes upon him. Carefully, as if fearing that he would break if handled too roughly, Itachi touched his son's tiny fingers. Izuna. Izumi's large brown eyes opened to stare at him. She was holding Izuna to her chest, a small blanket wrapped around him. It was cold even at the base of the mountain, and it was still very much winter.

"Do you want to hold him?" Izumi asked, looking faintly amused. "Or are you comfortable wallowing in your own indecision and reluctance?"

"I..." Itachi's cheeks colored, and he swore it was from the cold and not his delighted wife. "Yes." He held out his arms, and Izumi gently passed the bundle to him.

Obito... Itachi poked Izuna's forehead softly, the baby continuing to snore. Strangely enough, you always told me that you wanted a boy named Izuna for a third son. But Rin told you that two was enough, and to wait until Hikari-chan was a bit older. Even stranger, Izuna happened to be...
Madara's resigned expression was seared into his brain, courtesy of the Mangekyou Sharingan.

"I'm worried," Izumi confided after a few minutes of silence between them. Chatter still buzzed around them—all of them were seated on rocks and the occasional boulder around a large campfire and eating venison. Shikaku had taught them how to cook the game meat to perfection, claiming with a bit of sadness that Yoshino—his late wife—had cooked a venison meal for them every third day, and that she had passed on the recipes to him and cooking techniques to him. "He's so small, and out here..." She bowed her head.

He was worried, too, he admitted to her. But Izuna was his son, and if anyone or anything (like that monster Sasori so vividly described to them all) dared to harm the babe...

Itachi would hate to imagine what kind of fate they'd be suffering at his hands.

"Yo." Kakashi appeared behind them, squatting. "So... this is Izuna, huh?" He leaned in, blinking slowly at the sleeping child. "Cute," he said woodenly.

Izumi snorted. "Don't try to force yourself—we all know that young children aren't really your style."

"Kakashi-san, please refrain from imprinting on my child," Itachi requested, voice bland.

"Ouch, Itachi..." Kakashi propped his head on his hand. "No lie, though, he's cute. All babies are, I suppose." He lifted his eyes from Izuna, gazing at the half-moon hidden by the tonight's clouds. "I'm sure you already know this, but Obito wanted a son called Izuna. I was going to be the weird uncle and everything. Teach him my ways, and how to appreciate fine literature... I tried with Daichi-kun, but Rin scared me off as soon as she heard."

"No surprise there," Izumi said dryly. "And don't get any ideas in your head. If I see one of those orange books within a five feet radius of Izuna, I'm burning it."

Underneath his shirt-mask, Kakashi pouted. "Hmph. Obito was a lot more open-minded than you ladies..." He let out a small breath. "I bet he's up there in the moon, laughing at me." Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Rin popping a piece of venison in Hikari's gaping mouth. The little girl chewed happily. Beside her, Daichi ate slowly, savoring the taste. The boy even cracked a smile once in a while.

"You should go to her," Itachi said abruptly. "And no, this is not me trying to get rid of you, Kakashi-san. You're friends with her, aren't you? Stop ignoring her."

Kakashi lowered his eye. "Maa... when you actually talk, you talk too much, Itachi..." Regardless, he stood. "But thanks."

"He's feeling guilty, isn't he?" Izumi said when he was out of earshot, striking up a conversation with Rin. "Typical Kakashi... I wish he would stop thinking that everything bad that happens to people he loves is his fault. It's not."

Itachi nodded, silently chewing on his venison. Kakashi had many faults, but at the end of the day, he was a good man who didn't deserve to suffer as much as he had. They'd found out that Kakashi and Gai, with the help of inside agents Shisui and Kagami, had been sneaking people who wanted out outside the walls of Akatsuki. They'd been silent rebels, helping wherever and whenever they could. In fact, it was actually Shisui who had found Chihiro being assaulted by a drunken man, and the Uchiha had taken her to stay with Kakashi and Gai. Hyuuga Hinata, Itachi remembered, had been in a similar situation to Chihiro. She'd been taken in by Kakashi's (silent) rebel group early on.
in the occupation, which explained why Hanabi could never find her.

Speaking of Hanabi, the young Hyuuga was talking to her sister, looking much happier than she had been before. There was still this... looming emptiness in her eyes—from losing Ino, he guessed—but she was recovering. Hinata was doing wonders to her mental health, and vice versa.

Naruto plopped down next to Hinata, and the oldest Hyuuga immediately blushed, pointedly turning away from him. The Uzumaki was confused, and a little hurt, but merely shrugged and started to eat his share of food.

Izuna stirred in Itachi's arms, and he looked down at the baby, alarmed. What did he need? Was he hungry? Did he need to do a number two? A number one? When the baby simply fell back into sleep's embrace, Itachi breathed a sigh of relief, though he was slightly discouraged from his... uselessness at parenting.

"Hey, don't look like that," Izumi chided, pressing up next to him. "Anata, we're both new parents. I'm just as confused as you are, trust me. It's only thanks to Sakura, Shizune, and Rin that I've managed this far..." She smiled wearily. "And it's only been three days. We'll get through this without any explosions," nearby, Deidara perked up slightly, "so... don't worry too much. Because we're lucky enough to have people supporting us."

Well. She wasn't wrong. So Itachi relaxed, bringing the baby up closer to his chest. A smile graced his features.

"Sakura, are you coming?" Shizune called. Today, the group would officially be hiking through the mountain pass and walking the rest of the way to Konoha. Everything was packed, the fire was extinguished, and pretty much everyone was ready to go. It was only a few of the children that were still a bit groggy.

"Oh, um," Sakura flailed, "just a minute. I have... something to do."

She hurried into the forest, not realizing that Shikamaru and Choji were staring after her.

Not wanting to keep them waiting for too long, Sakura plucked a few white-lavender winter zinnias and placed them at the foot of a boulder. "Sorry... Ino." A few people glanced at her curiously, but they didn't say a word. They recognized that look on her face. It was one they all saw when peering into the river for a drink.

Sakura felt a presence behind her and turned, not surprised to see Shikamaru and Choji.

"Hey." Shikamaru wasn't talking to her, but to Ino. "You just had to get yourself killed, didn't you, you troublesome woman?" His voice was thick with grief, and he crouched down, patting the smooth surface of the stone. A few tears escaped his eyes, but he didn't bother wiping them away. "When I see you again, I just know you're going to nag me to make up for lost years. Which means I'm planning to live a long life to prolong my fate in the afterlife."

"Same here," murmured Choji. "You always tried to put me on a diet. I told you I really hated that, but you kept doing it, swapping my chips with healthy foods." His eyes drooped. "But if I really hated it, then why do I miss it? When we see each other again, I'll let you this time. Sakura got you flowers, and I'm sure there's a meaning behind them besides looking good, but I'm not smart enough to figure that out." Choji picked up a smooth stone. "No offence to Sakura, but I've always liked stones a lot better. They last. Endure. They're like... a constant presence, even when nature is constantly changing around it." He placed the stone beside the flowers.
After a few moments, Shikamaru put a stone next to Choji’s, pinning the flower stems to the boulder, so that it wouldn't be blown away by the wind.

"Alright," Sakura said eventually. "We can go now. Sorry for the delay."

She was met with silence.

Then, Deidara walked over, picking up a stone. She set it next to Shikamaru's. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, un. I've done your family the worst kind of disservice. I got both of you killed." She took a deep breath in. "Hitomi, Ino... I've made the worst kinds of decisions with you two."

Silently, Sasori moved to the boulder, placing his own stone next to Deidara's. The cut on his side was fully healed, though there was a bandage wrapped around it to prevent the skin from tearing. Then he stepped back.

It sparked a flurry of movement. Soon, the remaining sixty-odd people were scurrying about in the grassy clearing, looking for rocks. Even Sasuke was taking part in the impromptu search.

"Kisame-sensei, look!" Chihiro held up an oval pebble to the shark-like man. "Is this good?"

Kisame groaned, though there was no real ire in it. "Didn't I tell you that it was too soon? And yeah, sure, kid, it's good." He stared at the lump in his hands, which was just a little bit bulkier and misshapen than Chihiro's. "Better than mine, at any rate."

Sakura, Shikamaru, and Choji stepped back, shocked by their actions. Once they'd found adequate stones, they all lined up to place it at the boulder.

"Good luck, nee-san that I never knew," Shogo said innocently, clapping his hands together in a prayer after placing his stone down. "If you see my oji-san up there, please tell him that soba and okaa-chan are doing okay!"

"Um, here," Itsuki muttered when he put his stone down. "I didn't really know you, nee-san, but here..."

"Your life was too short," Rin said solemnly, when it was her turn. "And for that, I'm sorry."

"Thank you for being Naruto's friend." Kakashi.

"Rest in peace, young one. May youth be bestowed upon you in your next life, lotus." Gai.

"H-hey, Ino. Why did you have to go, huh?" Naruto cried when it was his turn. "Who's gonna eat ramen with me, now, huh?! Or scold me for not eating enough vegetables?"

"Ino-neesan, I really liked your visits to the factory," Moegi confessed. "And I really wanted to be like you. You were strong and confident. Thank you for being an inspiration to me."

"I'm sorry I couldn't save you. You'd been through so much. You... you should be here, with us. We could have trained more, and—and..." Hanabi sniffled, unable to finish.

"Thank you being my sister's friend," Hinata said softly, placing a stone at the makeshift shrine. "Rest in peace... Ino-san."

"I-I... I didn't know you. I had a crush on Hitomi, but I didn't really know you... or her, really." Daichi. "But you didn't deserve to die. Neither did she. I... it's not fair."

Hikari bowed at her grave. "Rest in peace, onee-san."
When a woman called Masami put her stone down and backed away, there was only one person left.

Uchiha Sasuke ignored all the pointed stares he was getting, crouch down and placing a particularly smooth stone in the front-center. It was one he had grind with his katana in a fit of boredom last night. *You were a Fangirl of mine and my brother's, weren't you? Normally, that would mean that I don't like you, but... how could I, when I never knew you in the first place? Maybe if I hadn't been such a coward, you'd still be alive.*

"That's a pretty one, mister," Shogo piped, staring at the stone he had put down. "It's the prettiest one, I think."

Sasuke shot him a side glance. "Hn..."

The sun was just rising over the horizon when the group headed off.

In the breeze, the Ino's winter zinnias fluttered lazily, and contentedly.

There was a little makeshift shrine in front of the empty Yamanaka compound. It was small enough to go unnoticed by the soldiers, and a fragile little thing that had been knocked over by the wind many times over.

Uchiha Fugaku crouched in front of it. "Inoichi. My sons made a grand escape from his hellhole a few nights ago." He closed his eyes. "Your daughters... I know they're with you now. You're finally together again. I wonder..." He opened his eyes. "How long do I have to wait until I see my sons again?"

"Sasuke." Itachi placed a hand on Sasuke's shoulder, startling him.

"What...?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

Itachi walked ahead before turning slightly. "For saving my life, even if no one acknowledges it."

Sasuke stared after him before his lips twisted into a sad smirk. *After all that I've done... you would still forgive me, wouldn't you, even when everyone else condemns me? You... really are too kind.*

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A/N: Double update today~

Winter zinnias don't exist, I don't think. Zinnias bloom in the summer. I just used it for the symbolism.

Zinnia—Thoughts of absent friends
Also, there may be sixty people now, but there's gonna be a lot of death.

This is where the "fantasy" in "historical fantasy" comes in. Zetsu monsters and monsterization.
Lee was practically vibrating with anticipation as he stared at the muscles rippling on Maito Gai's back as the latter walked, said muscles clearly visible beneath his green spandex suit. Lee himself was wearing a plain white, short-sleeved kimono-shirt with a martial arts belt and dark pants—oh, how he probably wished he could emulate his revered Gai-sama by wearing the exact same clothes.

Or, at least, that was what Tenten supposed. And considering Lee was an open book and then some, she was pretty sure that she was right. Lee's eyes moved upward to the back of Gai's bowl cut, and Tenten could have sworn that his round eyes shone brighter than ever. It made her smile—it was nice to see her friend in such a good mood again.

"Like what you see?" she whispered to him, teasing.

"It's... so youthful!" Lee gasped, drawing some looks from nearby civilians. Frantically, he grabbed the messy, straw-like braid he kept his hair in, frowning. "Tenten, when we stop for the night, could you please give me a haircut just like Gai-sama's?"

She groaned, even though she was more than happy to give him that haircut. "Are you sure you really want to look like... that?"

Lee nodded vigorously. "Yes! It is my greatest wish at the moment, Tenten!"

He thanked her profusely before vowing to himself that he would get Gai to notice him. It was then Tenten inquired, "Why don't you just talk to him? We've been so close to him this whole time and you haven't even spoken to him once."

Lee's face drooped slightly. "Well... what if Gai-sama doesn't think I'm worthy enough?"

"Lee!" Tenten admonished. "You can't expect him to notice you if you just ignore him. And who says you aren't worthy enough? That's for Gai-san to judge, not you. And, personally, I think you're plenty worthy."

Tears sparkled in Lee's eyes. "T-Tenten...! Thank you! You are a true friend!"

At the front of the group, Shikaku and Itachi walked side by the side, the former holding the map. He had marked it last night, after dinner had passed. The Nara had travelled through this mountain before, and was able to name some old bunkers that had been in use in a previous war. If they were lucky, there would be rations there, even if they were expired.

"We're here," Shikaku was telling Itachi, motioning to a place on the map. "At the rate we're going, we'll be able to make it to the bunker a few hours before sunset."
That was good news, and those who were close enough to hear the exchange murmured their approval.

Kakashi tilted his head skyward. "It looks like it's going to rain soon. It's no good travelling in that kind of weather. We should pick up the pace."

"Agreed," Hitoshi the civilian said, scowling up at the looming clouds. "Frankly, I don't want to be soaked to the bone and have this fucking wind blowing up my ass at the same time."

Someone snorted at that, and Shimizu Asagi shot him a dirty look, her son having been in earshot.

Chihiro was practically glued to Kisame's side. It seemed that the small kindness that he had showed her by taking interest in her training had earned him her loyalty. She was a little shy and withdrawn, Kisame knew, and never talked with the other children. It was shame, actually, that she was nine years old and therefore didn't fit in with any of the general age groups. Shogo, Itsuki, and Hikari were too young, all of them five or six; Moegi, Konohamaru, and Udon were twelve and too old, while Daichi, at eight years old, was still grieving over the death of his father and almost never left his mother's or sister's side. And, of course, Izuna was not even a week old yet.

As they traveled, Deidara tried to make herself familiar with most of their faces. She knew some of them from before the war, but the majority were almost an entirely new species to her. She wasn't sure how she hadn't heard of Mitarashi Anko before, considering how brash, rude, and loud the purple-haired woman was. Perhaps the woman had been living on the other side of the city. Kotetsu and Izumo, a pair of best friends who were always seen with one another, were also unfamiliar, but they had distinguishable features.

A strange huffing noise broke her out of her thoughts, and she narrowed her eyes at the woman wheezing in front of her. Her black hair fell limply over her face, and her back was slouched.

Steeling herself, Deidara sidled up to her and tentatively wrapped an arm around her shoulders, helping her forward this particularly steep slope.

"Is that you, dear?" the woman murmured. "My beautiful daughter... Ami..."

Deidara nearly choked. She... what the hell do I say?

"Ami, you don't need help mama... you're so young. Go have fun with your boyfriend instead... I'll still be here when you come back." Suddenly, the woman collapsed in a dead faint, Deidara sweating bullets as she carefully lowered her to the grass.

Sasori was there almost instantly. "What happened, brat?"

"I-I don't know, she just fainted, un. She thought..." Deidara lowered her eyes, puffing out a small sigh. "She thought that I was her daughter. Before she fainted, that is."

Sasori clicked his tongue, placing the back of his hand on the woman's sweating forehead. "Fever. She's delirious. This wind's not doing us any good either. You," Sasori turned his head to a random civilian, "go get get Sakura or Shizune."

"Y-yes, Sasori-sama..."

The entire group was forced to stop for her as Shizune knelt over her, and there were a few people that didn't appreciate having their journey stopped. Mitarashi Anko looked disgruntled, but she wasn't so heartless as to simply suggest abandoning the woman.
"Why can't we just leave her?" Hitoshi inquired loudly. "She's just dead weight anyway."

"Why, you...!" Naruto had never quite taken to Hitoshi, and the latter's cruel words were just wicked enough to rouse Naruto's ire. "You take that back! I'm sure she's a lot more helpful than you are, dattebayo!"

"Shut up, both of you," Sasori said bluntly, and then obliged, albeit reluctantly. They hadn't forgotten who had saved their asses from the vine monster yesterday.

"She'll need to be carried and kept warm," Shizune said after a few moments, standing back up. "Is anyone up to the task?" Her onyx eyes glinted as she shifted her gaze to the surly Hitoshi. "What about you, Hitoshi-san? You're as big as an ox. I'm sure a tiny woman like her won't give you any trouble."

Despite herself, Deidara couldn't help but grin at Shizune's sharp words. "Of course," she chimed, keeping her voice demure, "Hitoshi-san looks very strong—I'm sure he could show some of the men here a thing or two, un. I mean, unless..." Deidara shrugged, smirking. "All those muscles are just for show."

Even Sasori looked faintly amused. He was no fonder of Hitoshi than Deidara and Naruto.

Flushing, Hitoshi glared at all of them before grudgingly stomping over to the unconscious woman (Sakura had wrapped a spare blanket around her and was currently trying to bring down her fever using medical chakra; she stepped back when he got closer) and picked her up in an awkward bridal style. "What?" Hitoshi barked when he caught a few people ogling at him. "What're you looking at, you assholes?" They quickly turned away.

As the journey continued, Chihiro's brow furrowed in a worried frown. "Ne, Kisame-sensei, what's wrong with her? Why did she think that Deidara-san was her daughter?"

Kisame deliberated on the question. "That woman was in the Underground; I remember seeing her a couple of times. According to what I've heard, her daughter was raped and killed by enemy soldiers right in front of her eyes, the day right before she was due to get married..."

Chihiro became stricken. "T-that's horrible... Why would they do that?" Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring her vision, but she kept them back. "Why do such bad people exist?"

They were talking loud enough for a few surrounding people to hear—including Deidara and Daichi, who she was walking with.

"You ask the most difficult questions, don't you?" Kisame mused. "It's a terrible thing to consider, Chi-chan, but have you ever considered that they might view us as the bad guys?"

Her frown deepened as she thought about it. "But... we're not. Aren't we the good guys? We're not bad guys."

"Aa, I know. A cute kid like you could never be a bad guy." Kisame chuckled. "But those men were conditioned to fight for their cause, and to destroy the enemy because they stand in their way. In their eyes, we are the bad guys, and they're the so-called good guys. It's one of those realities of wars—it isn't good versus evil like you've probably been led to believe. At the end of the day, they're just people like you and me, fighting for a cause they believe in."

Chihiro was silent.

"What nonsense!" Itsuki's mother sneered. "Don't listen to anything that monster says, Itsuki-kun."
Before anyone could reprimand her, she moved to the front of the travel pack, taking her son with her.

"Bitch," Deidara said loudly, relishing at the sight of the woman's back stiffening in anger, having not fled fast enough to avoid hearing the insult.

Chihiro knew that it was a bad word, but she couldn't help but add, "Yeah! Kisame's not a monster!"

Itsuki's mother's face soured even further as she turned around. "Maybe not to you two. But aren't you both equally as bad—one is almost too old to not be married, and the other is a dirty orphan."

She turned her nose up at them, Deidara's cheeks coloring with rage, and Chihiro's face growing white; a muscle in Kisame's jaw twitched. "My poor Itsuki has to put up with people like you—"

"Hey, woman." A cold voice interrupted her tirade. Sasori stared at her with flinty eyes. "Do you want to be attacked and possibly eaten?"

She startled. "W-well, no, Sasori-sama, I would think not—"

"Then stop bitching and start hauling ass."

Nearby, Chiyo snorted, pleased. At least her grandson was doing well in securing a wife.

Successfully cowed, the witch hurried off, still dragging her son behind her. Anyone who had witnessed the exchange immediately pitied the tubby little boy.

Sasori glanced expectantly at Deidara, who huffed angrily and turned away. "I didn't need you to interfere."

"Please, brat," their shoulders brushed as he moved past her, "her guts would have been splattered all over the place if I hadn't interfered. And that would be detrimental to our progress."

She gave him a withering look. "Ever the pragmatic one, un..." Deidara noticed Kisame and Chihiro coming up behind her. "Don't listen to her, yeah, not when the only thing she seems to talk about other than you is her dead husband."

Kisame snorted wryly. "I don't need a pep talk from you, blondie. But thanks for the thought." He looked down at Chihiro, who was still silent. "Hey, kid, don't pout."

"... She called you a monster. Doesn't that make you sad?" Chihiro finally looked up from the ground, blinking at him.

"People have been calling me that my whole life. I'm used to it." Kisame's gaze softened ever so slightly. "So save your sympathy for someone else, okay? Someone else who's had it harder than me."

"She's going to self destruct," Deidara stated, drawing their attention. "People like her always do."

And she could name a few more who were walking a similar path to Itsuki's mother. Funnily enough, it was the Uchiha that she had thought of who finally snapped.

Sasuke had had enough of Itsuki's mother running her mouth about her dead husband. "Can you shut the hell up?"

Gasping, the woman covered Itsuki's ears. "How dare you speak to me that way, you traitor!"
"Dumbass," Sasuke sneered, completely ignoring her words, "this is life. Your husband is dead, so get over it. No one wants to hear about him."

That shut her up for the rest of the trip, even when her friend, Masami, patted her back and whispered sweet, soothing words.

The journey continued. It was two hours to sunset when they finally found the bunker. Most of them cried in joyous relief, while others instantly entered the bunker without even considering what might lie inside. Fortunately, it was empty, safe, and had a supply of canned foods that were still edible (despite being past their time). There were even beds (which were unmade; they tried not to dwell on the fact that the previous occupants had likely not returned from the battlefield alive), but not enough for all of them. It was decided that the extremely tired, pregnant, nursing, or elderly would have the beds, while the rest of them slept on the floor, huddling close with their limited supply of blankets to keep each other warm.

It was too late to go hunting for fresh meat now, so they all settled for a cold, wet meal of luncheon meat, nuts, and other processed canned or dry foods. As they ate, it started to rain outside. It disturbed Izuna from his sleep, and he began to wail, forcing Izumi to take him over to the beds, Rin by her side.

Sometime during dinner, the topic of self-defense came up.

"Not all of us are able to use our fists," a girl no more than fourteen pointed out. Oddly enough, the back of her hair stood up on end like Sasuke's, though his was much flatter's. Her name was Yukari, and she had a twin called Sawako. "Do you have any weapons that we might be able to use?"

There were some murmurs of agreement (Tenten was especially vehement), a few more reluctant than others, and it was Kakashi who answered.

"We do, actually," he said, eye-smiling. Almost faster than they could blink, he had a storage scroll stretched out in front of him. With a small puff of smoke, a neat pile of weapons appeared. "Don't touch," he warned when Shogo reached for a kunai handle sticking out of the pile. Asagi pulled her son backward, and he landed lightly on the bump on her belly. "It's not much—"

"There's, like, eight," someone deadpanned.

"—but I'm sure we can put them to good use." Kakashi picked up a tanto. "Anyone good with these? Besides Shisui, because he's a wiseass who already has two."

Shisui snorted in amusement.

"Is that a bow and arrow?" Deidara pointed at something in the weapon stack. "I haven't seen one of those in a while, un."

"You don't really need it," Sasori pointed out, and the blonde shrugged.

"Let Sawako-san have it." All heads turned to Sasuke. Some glared at him. He glared right back. "She's been staring at it ever since it poofed into existence."

"Sawako-san?" Itachi prompted, breaking the ice that had suddenly gathered in the atmosphere.

"Well," Sawako started, hesitating.

"Why should she get it?" a middle-aged man demanded. "Why should we listen to this traitor?"
"You might all label him a traitor, but he is correct." Surprisingly, it was Sasori who vouched for Sasuke, his eyes never leaving the middle-aged man's face.

Yukari joined in, saying fiercely, "My sister is a great shot! In my very humble opinion, she may be the greatest markswoman of our time! So there."

"Calm down," Anko drawled, "No one said that she wasn't."

Tenten suddenly reached forward and grabbed the iron bamboo staff she had been eyeing. When everybody stared at her boldness, she lifted her chin defiantly. "What? Don't you know this is Grade-A *Ferrocalamus*?"

No one pretended to know what that was.

"Iron bamboo," she amended, looking disgruntled at the fact that these people didn't have any appreciation for good weapons.

Deidara lazily lifted her hand. "I can vouch for her. She's an absolute badass with that thing. You won't believe the amount of ass she'll be able to kick with that, un."

A sly smirk made its way onto Sasori's face. "If I recall, she also kicked your ass."

"Hrr, Danna!"

The rain poured even harder above the bunker as the weapons were sorted out. Tenten got to keep her iron bamboo staff ("You're saying it wrong, Naruto! It's *Ferrocalamus*, not—ugh, whatever, you're not even listening."). Sawako was given the bow and arrows after constant reassurances from her sister that no one had the energy to oppose, and the tanto was claimed by Kagami, who, in their own words, wanted to match Shisui. The rest of the weapons, all blades of some sort (most of them were kunai), were distributed evenly to those who wished for one. Naruto was very pleased with the three-pronged kunai he received; it was the only one of its kind.

Sasuke remained content with his katana, refusing the chokuto he had been offered.

Anko took the chokuto instead. The blade was named Kusanagi, apparently, and had been recovered from Obito's truck by Shisui and Kagami prior to them driving it outside the city.

When the weapons pile was diminished to two unwanted kunai, Kisame noticed something odd about the storage scroll stretched beneath the blades. *Those symbols...* "Kakashi-san, were you the one who sealed the wall?"

A shocked silence fell over them.

"It was indeed my Eternal Rival!" Gai answered with his usual enthusiasm, teeth flashing as he smiled. Not even the steady beat of the rain could dampen his youthful spirit, it seemed. "Combining ancient samurai techniques with his hip and modern mindset, my Eternal Rival Kakashi was able to create a seal that would have even the most brilliant Naras scratching their heads!"

There was a pause.

"Well," Shikamaru said, "he's not wrong." Nearly three months was a long time for a Nara to figure something out, testament to Kakashi's sealing expertise.

"Mou, you're making me blush," Kakashi said lightly.
"Why didn't you tell us?" Sakura demanded.

He eye-smiled irritatingly. "I was never asked, Sakura-chan."

Sakura held up her fist threateningly. "Hrr, Kakashi—"

"It makes sense."

Sasori's voice was so quiet that, had the rain been any louder, he surely wouldn't have been heard. He fixed his brown gaze on the side of Kakashi's head. If the silver-haired man noticed, he didn't say anything. "Your father was the White Fang, was he not?" There was a thinly veiled disdain in the question.

Kakashi didn't look at him. "He was, Sasori-san. I'm not surprised that you made the connection, considering your history..."

The puppeteer's eyes narrowed, something that Deidara didn't miss. She noticed that he had his hands fisted around the cloth of his Akatsuki cloak as well. "Kakashi-san." Sasori's voice was deceptively calm. There was a blur and a whine, and a kunai whizzed past the Hatake's ear and embedded itself into a non-metal patch of the wall. "There is no one else who knows my history better than I."

"And do you regret it—"

"Will you shut up?" Deidara snapped irritably. "You two are killing the mood here, un. I don't know what happened, but sort it out in private. You're making everyone uncomfortable."

Sasori and Kakashi held each others' gazes evenly before the former turned away. Discretely, Deidara kept her eye on him. Sasori was always taciturn, but usually he attempted to make some sort of conversation with her when they were together. Silence seemed to drag out—not just between them, but for all of them.

When it was time to sleep, the women and men (save for the few couples) naturally separated. Women and children slept closest to the bed, while the men kind of just shifted to the wall. One by one, they drifted off to dreamland, lulled to sleep by the steady rain.

Deidara found herself sleeping between Rin and and Izumi. Both of her friends were already asleep. Hikari was snoring lightly in Rin's arms, her brother flopped awkwardly over the two of them. He must have been very tired not to wake up from Hikari's elbow jabbing his ribs. Before she knew it, her eyes were drooping shut as well.

Sasori couldn't sleep. He wasn't an insomniac by any means, but he was used to late nights. He was standing far away from where the men stepped, closer to the woman's side than anything else. He contemplated pulling out his puppets from their storage scroll for some tweaking. But, being who he was, he doubted that there were going to be any flaws to fix. His eyes wandered around the dark room before finally landing on Kakashi's form. There was a lamp near where he was slumped (against Gai of all people), and Sasori could make out his sharp features beneath his mask.

Hatake Kakashi, huh? Sasori turned away. I hope for both of our sakes, you are nothing like your father. A breeze from the entrance of the bunker swept down the halls and into the room. His skin crawled in response.

There was so much blood and the White Fang stood over him, him, the cocky smirk wiped off his face as he considered how many he had fell for the last time, oh, but then his parents were there and even more unnecessary, innocent blood was spilled all over his front—
The wind died down. Sasori slumped against the wall, sliding down as he pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd been travelling for so long—he needed to sleep, or he would be dead on his feet tomorrow. Mentally, he made sure that they had gotten everything from the bunker already. The supply closets had been cleaned out, but there were drawers that still hadn't...

Sasori stood, taking his leave quietly.

Absently, he searched the bunker until he came across those drawers. He opened them, discovering fresh scrolls inside. He fingered the material, lips pursing when he realized that they weren't chakra conductive. Essentially useless, then.

He closed the drawers and returned to the bedroom with the scrolls.

Everyone's chakra levels were stable, which meant Sasori was free to do whatever he wanted with the paper—they wouldn't be stopping him anytime soon. So he took out an ink pot and a calligraphy brush from a storage scroll.

Then he began to write. It was meaningless words, really. It was like Deidara's art—utterly meaningless. His hand stilled, creating a blotch on the paper. Well, maybe her art wasn't the worst—the nonsense he was writing down right now definitely took the cake.

Nevertheless, he continued, eyes at half-mast. He wrote:

To be helpless is to suffocate in doubt
As child would in the untamed sea
Limbs sore—beaten by black waves
He cannot cry for help; the tears and noise are washed away
He can only swim further down in ease of pain

In unforgiving waters, child is alone
To bear the burdens of his exhaustion
And to throw them away in sight of surrender
In rolling, sweeping swells he slowly drowns
Passing on without a sound

"Why are you even up?" Sasori turned his head to see Kisame looming over him, eyes gleaming in the dark. The shark-like man held a canteen of water in his hands, and Sasori suspected that his lips were probably wet.

"Couldn't sleep." Sasori rolled up the remaining paper scrolls. Over his shoulder, Kisame read the poem at lightning speed.

"Huh." Kisame took a swig of water. "Depressing, but I see the point."

Point? It was just rambling. Sasori hadn't put thought into the words at all—he'd simply put down whatever felt or sounded right.
"It's those moments, you know?" Kisame said wistfully, closing his water canteen. "When you feel that you're in so deep, it feels easier to just swim down and drown, no? I have a feeling that you're familiar with what I'm saying. Well, goodnight. Not that it's going to do me much good, but I need my beauty sleep."

First, he was burning. Now, he was drowning. Sasori looked over his neat, pretty words. The urge to tear it apart was devilishly tempting, but he resisted. Instead, like the other, blank scrolls, he rolled it up. Then he placed all of them in one mass storage scroll, one he had uniquely designed, and one that also happened to carry pretty much everything, including other storage scrolls.

_Fire and water._ Sasori made his way to the edge of the men's sleeping group. _How... awfully poetic._

Guards. They'd posted guards outside the bunker to keep watch for any enemy soldiers, dangerous animals, or...

Monsters. Not the Kisame kind, but the... plant kind, if Sasori's description was apt.

Izumo felt goosebumps crawl across his skin as a particularly strong wind blew against him. The rain had stopped a little while ago.

It would be dawn in perhaps and hour or two, and Izumo couldn't wait to return to bed for an extra hour of sleep. He was sure Kotetsu felt the same way. The relieving watchdogs (Izumo had to face it—that was all they were right now) were to be Iruka and Kakashi.

Kotetsu narrowed his eyes when several black lumps appeared at the edge of the trees. "Hey, hey, Izumo. Do you see that?" He nudged his best friend, who seemed on the verge of falling asleep. "Man, wake up!"

Izumo startled. "Wha? Oh, sorry, I must have just dozed off on my feet a little..."

Kotetsu pressed a finger to his lips, hissing, "Shh!" He had started to break into a cold sweat, and, with one trembling finger, he pointed at the black shapes that seemed to be emerging from the tree line.

There were white, glowing orbs in the midst of the darkness, unblinking. They were unmistakably eyes.

"Wolves?" Izumo sounded hopeful.

The shapes moved forward, a foul chakra filling the air.

Kotetsu swore. "Shit!" He ran back into the bunker, stepping on a pile of hair. "We're under attack! I think it's those monsters that Sasori ran into!"

The fighters in the group were immediately up, sleep seeping out of their eyes as they prepared for battle.

The civilians woke more slowly, rubbing their eyes, yawning, and muttering questioningly about the disturbance.

"I left Izumo back there!" Kotetsu cried, hysterical. "We have to hurry!"

It was a rush outside. Kakashi and Gai led the way, Kotetsu running after them. They were joined
by people with weapons or fighting expertise.

Under the cover of the night, they charged.

They were damn ugly, that was for sure. Samehada, now unbanded, shredded and tore at retractable monster limbs, but no chakra was ever absorbed by the sword. It was almost as if it were rejecting the chakra—Kisame had never once met anyone or anything whose chakra was so foul that even Samehada, born from less than savoury origins, refused to consume it.

With a war cry, Kisame sliced a monster's head off. It was different from Sasori's description. Were the monsters not all exactly the same? While it was certainly humanoid, this one had poison tipped spikes sticking out of its spine. At least he was right about one thing, though—even in its decapitated state, the monster was still thrashing on the ground. Without wasting anymore time, Kisame ripped its heart out with Samehada, shredding into black little bits of flesh. He leaped backward when a sort of greenish black juice began to gush out from the body, causing it to shrivel up.

Kisame took a second to observe his surroundings before stabbing Samehada through the chest of a monster, destroying its heart. He noticed that the chest of the beast was harder than any other part of its body. *But not hard enough for Samehada.*

Suddenly, blood splattered all over his front, and his eyes shot downwards. Less than three feet away, a civilian man who'd been fighting with a blade had just been murdered violently. His mangled remains hung in the monster's mouth before dropping to the grass.

Kisame readied Samehada.

On the other side of the battlefield, Anko was wielding Kusanagi as if it were a second limb. Her eyes widened when she saw a monster grabbing for a man that she knew—his name was Taro. "Taro, look out!"

The monster's elongated claws swiped across his chest, leaving bloody scratch marks. Taro had recoiled backward just in time. With a shout, he plunged his blade into the beast's heart, and it immediately began to die, splashing its revolting juices everywhere.

"You okay?" Anko demanded.

Taro nodded, grimacing in pain. "I'll live."

"You haven't fought for years," she reminded him. "Go see Sakura after we're done here."

He was agreeable, and they continued to fight their way through the monsters. They weren't easy to kill, but it wasn't tremendously hard. The most dangerous thing was their speed—it took a lot of energy to keep up with them.

Blood sprayed across the grass.

Sasori wondered if these abominations were evolving, or if the one that he had fought yesterday was just weak. He certainly hoped that it was the latter, even when his puppet, Karasu, sliced a monster with a mushroom growing out of its forehead into ribbons. Its heart was definitely not spared in that devastating attack.

*There are so many of them.* Sasori flicked his wrist, sending Karasu flying in another direction to aid a woman that had just bitten on the shoulder by a monster. And not enough of them. But they
were strong. They would persevere, just like the philosophy behind his art.

A "Katsu!" drew his attention. Deidara, surrounded by three monsters, threw the explosive at her feet before jumping through a gap in the formation, allowing the clay creature to explode. It charred the monsters, causing them to shriek in pain and rage, and Deidara was able to thrust a kunai into one's heart.

Another swiped at her, and she ducked the blow just in time. Sasori joined her, using Karasu to cut down another assailant.

Once Deidara had killed the last one (plant juice sprayed all over her front but she didn't even flinch once; even so, Sasori could see the disturbed look in her eyes), Sasori spoke urgently to her, "Have my back. There's too many—I need to unseal another puppet."

As he hastily unrolled a storage scroll, Deidara killed another monster that got too close. She could smell its rotten breath as it slumped forward. She shoved it away before it could start leaking all over the place.

Kuroari appeared then, relieving Deidara of her duties. When somebody screamed, she glanced at Sasori expectantly.

"Go," he urged her, and she nodded, jumping away to help.

"Okaa-chan," Itsuki whined, sweating bullets as he squatted with his mother in the cramped bunker. Strange. It hadn't seen so cramped before. Fear had filled the empty spaces. "I'm scared..."

"Don't worried," his mother cooed. "Big, strong Takeda-san over there will protect us."

Takeda was a man in his late twenties holding a tanto, one that Shisui had randomly tossed him before rushing out to battle with Kagami by his side. He obviously had no idea how to use the weapon, if the way he was holding it was any indication.

Chihiro was on the verge of tearing the tanto out of his hand and using it herself to protect whatever might get in.

Almost seventy people held their breaths in a silence that made their insides twist in painful anticipation. Besides Itsuki's disturbance, nobody else spoke.

A crash sounded and all their hearts dropped at once.

One woman panicked. "RUN!"

It was pandemonium. Chihiro was nearly trampled as the people scattered, heading to different rooms in the bunker that they thought was safer. The bedroom was closest to the entrance, after all.

Takeda had abandoned them, too, the damn coward, even leaving Shisui's tanto behind. Chihiro picked it up. There were so few people left now—just her, a pale-faced Daichi, a wide-eyed Hikari, their mother, and the newest mother and her baby in the group: Izumi and Izumi.

Sweat accumulated on her hand, and Chihiro nearly dropped the weapon.

"Pass it here." Izumi's voice left no room for argument, and Chihiro almost had a hard time following what happened next. Izumi took the tanto from her and gave Izuna to Rin. The baby was thankfully still sleeping soundly.
Chihiro backed into the corner with Daichi and Hikari. She'd never been formerly introduced to either of her previous boss' students, though she had seen them walking around the cotton factory sometimes. They normally helped their mother at the dango shop.

There was another rush of footsteps and they saw the group that had just fled the room fly toward the entrance of the bunker, delirious with fear.

Outside, Anko swore loudly when a group of civilians charged onto the field, their brains obviously addled in their terror. They ran right toward a group of monsters that the fighters were trying to fend off, and, suddenly, Anko could see nothing as blood rained down upon the earth.

In the chaos, a monster wandered into the bunker unnoticed.

In the bedroom, Izumi tensed as the door was pushed open. A monster with black, soulless eyes stood in the entrance, saliva hanging from its curled lips.

Then, to everyone's horror, it smiled. "What pretty specimen. I shall enjoy feeding on your remains. Perhaps, I'll even let you become one of us."

Sweat beaded on Rin's forehead. 'One of us'?! What does that mean? It sounded so ominous that Rin didn't even want to dwell on the possibilities. She pulled Hikari and Daichi closer to her with her free arm, not complaining when Chihiro also pressed against her side in search of warmth and protection.

"Intelligent, huh?" Izumi lifted her tanto, eyes hard even though her entire form was trembling. She reeked of fear. "I don't care how smart you are, you monster. Unless you want me to run this through you, you better get the hell out of here."

It didn't budge. Izumi continued to stare it down, even when it was clear that she'd rather be looking at anything else. This... thing was truly the stuff of nightmares. Such things should not have even existed, but they did anyway.

The monster lashed out and Izumi barely blocked it with her tanto. For the first time in a very long time, she cursed not having a Sharingan to rely on. It just made things so much harder for her. She yelled over her shoulder to Rin, "RUN! TAKE IZUNA AND RUN!"

Rin was torn. Eventually, she nodded, rushing for the door as the monster's claws clanged against Izumi's weapon.

Tears pricked the Uchiha's eyes. Would this really be the last time she saw her child? It was a looming possibility, and one that she had not even considered before. And what about Itachi?

Rin stopped in her tracks, pupils dilating in horror as a clawed hand reached around the doorway, and another monster entered. She scurried backward with the children, up against the wall once more.

Izumi cursed herself for her weakness. "Just die!" She tried to slam the sword into its heart, but the monster easily sidestepped.

Suddenly, Rin screamed.

Izumi rushed to her, but was knocked to the ground by the monster, the tanto spinning away to the other side of the room, where it was unreachable. Her head slammed against concrete, agony bursting in the back of her skull. It was over. They were all going to die, and there was nothing she could do about it—
She squeezed her eyes shut.

Something wet and warm splattered on her face, and she knew that it had to be her blood. But why wasn't it hurting?

Slowly, she cracked her eyes open.

The monster that had just been about to kill her had been reduced to a bloodless corpse on the ground. Sasuke, katana drawn and covered in plant juice, stared down at the body with a cold vengeance.

Izumi blinked incredulously. Was this really the same boy who she had given tomatoes to? She would have shaken her head if she wasn't feeling so dizzy. Now wasn't the time to dwell on such things. There was still the monster attacking Rin and the children, and—

It was dead, too. Sasuke had taken care of it before killing the one that had been standing over Izumi.

"Why?" Izumi finally uttered.

Sasuke blinked, and Izumi could have sworn he looked surprised. "You're my family. All of you."

Izumi stood up shakily. "Thank you," she managed to choke out before rushing over to Rin.

They couldn't stay in the bedroom any longer. At this rate, it was probably safer outside than inside.

Sasuke seemed to agree, leading them to a bloody battlefield. The fight between martial artists and monsters was nearly over. There was only one monster left. Kakashi killed it before they couldn't even call it out.

Miraculously, most of them hasn't even gotten injured. The only injured warriors were Taro and a woman who wore her hair in a ponytail.

Tiredly, a head count was done.

There were forty-nine of them.

Out of sixty-something odd people, only forty-nine had survived.

Nobody could even cry. The numbers were... staggering.

Somebody threw up all over the bloody field.

And then Taro and the woman both collapsed.

Shizune and Sakura were instantly by their sides, breaking out of their shocked stupor.

"This..." Deidara trailed off. This was—

"A massacre," Shisui finished.

It was over, however, for now. They would never rest easy again, but for now—

Taro jumped upward and lunged at Sakura's neck, maw opened unnaturally wide and teeth sharpened to points.
The medic didn't even get to flinch when Itachi was there, slicing Taro's head off. The head toppled to the ground, still snapping its mouth.


"That's what I'd like to know!" Anko shouted as well, distress pitching her voice. She had known Taro.

When Itachi stabbed what was once Taro in the heart, it answered all of their questions.

"My god," Gai said, stunned to point where he wasn't even talking at top volume. "He's been..."

"Turned," Sasori concluded, his tone grim.

Deidara whipped her head over to where Shizune was standing over the woman. "Does that mean—"

The woman let out a low moan as her skin started to change, flecking away.

A blanket of stifling silence fell over them.

Then, his steps heavy with remorse, Kakashi stepped forward. "... Sorry." He plunged a blade into her heart, and she stilled.

As the sun peered over the horizon, the blood of the fallen dripped into the sky, highlighting the clouds shades of pink and red.

Silently, Anko picked up Taro's blade and plunged it into grass. Then she turned to face the sun, just like everyone else.

The wine of the living, the bane of the dead
It is the blood of the fallen that stains our skies red
When everything is said and done
What else is there to do, but watch the sun?

Sasori promptly snapped the scroll shut.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I took a lot of elements from this awesome AOT fanfiction called The Western Passage. It's too good for this site, and I based almost the entirety of Part III off it. I don't remember all the details. Rest assured, it is most definitely not the same.

The other source of inspiration is a Webtoon called Sweet Home. Poems were made by me with inspiration from things I like (think: Hamilton).

Sorry for any typos or spelling errors.
Part III: Statice

Chapter Summary

London Bridge is falling

Chapter Notes

A/N: Omfg, this is long for a normal chapter and I don't even have an appropriate place to split it. Nearly as long as chapter 17, my goodness \:H. Hopefully, this doesn't become the paradigm, because I don't want to have to write this much for a chapter each time. There's lots of SasoDei interaction in this one, for those feeling like they're missing out on it.

I want someone to buy me an otamatone-

Medical genius, they called her. Tsunade's most likely successor but also pretty much guaranteed to inherit a place in Konoha City's civilian council from her mother, Haruno Mebuki.

For those things alone, and despite Tsunade's fearsome reputation, Sakura found herself on the receiving end on many marriage proposals. And when she turned them all down, the council pushed for a union with a suitor of their choosing.

But Tsunade, good old Tsunade pushed back even harder, sending her and Shizune (who was in a similar situation) to Ame to share their medical talents and strengthen their alliance. She was to come back every three months and report to Tsunade (and the country leaders and city council) on their progress. Akatsuki was the first place she stopped, and she found herself staying there with Shizune for almost the whole year.

Sakura was a well known face, even outside of Konohagakure, so when she accidentally knocked a blond boy flat on his ass, she expected him to expose her identity right there in the middle of the street.

Instead...

They had stared at each other. She had been about to apologize and maybe help him up when he pushed off his hands and landed on his feet.
"I'm Naruto."

It'd been so refreshing.

"Haruno Sakura."

He had then smiled deviously. "Hey, for knocking me over, you've gotta treat me to ramen, 'kay?"

"I... No way. I'm not spending my funds on ramen, Naruto-san."

"Ehh?! I'll report you to the police if you don't!"

"What?! No way are they going to listen to you!"

Naruto had pointed at an uncomfortable looking Sasuke, trailing behind a group of officers. He had been a mere trainee. "Teme! Arrest her!"

Sasuke had sent a withering glare their way, obviously reading the situation for what it was.

"A political shitstain" had been his exact words.

Sakura had smiled.

As they walked in a much more hurried pace than yesterday, Sakura stared numbly at her hands.

She could have died yesterday if not for Itachi's quick thinking. She owed him her life, but other things were currently on her mind.

_I'm not supposed to be so... useless. Maybe I can't fight as well as the others even with my training with Tsunade-shishou, but..._ Sakura was supposed to be a medical prodigy. And she couldn't even save poor Taro before he turned into one of those monsters. The wound she had seen on his chest had been black and festering, but she hadn't had any chance to take a closer look. In fact, if she had been any closer to him at all, he would have tore her throat out.

"Hey, Sakura-chan?"

The medic tucked a strand of black hair (if they ever made it to Konoha, the first thing she would do was remove the horrendous dye) behind her ear as she turned. Uzumaki Naruto stared back at her awkwardly, as if he didn't really know what to say. It was unusual for most people who had met the boy, but Sakura was an exception. She knew Naruto had had a major crush on her before they drifted apart.

Sakura smiled, the action worn. "Naruto, hi." She hesitated before adding, "Walk with me?"

He did, and silence stretched between the two before he finally spoke up again.

"You're okay, right? He didn't do nothin', did he?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"Taro isn't," Anko, passing her on her right, muttered under her breath, just low enough for only Sakura to hear. The words were crushing. Sakura never really knew where Anko stood, but it was clear that the purple-haired woman held... resentment toward her.

If Tsunade were here, she would have exploded, no doubt. They both knew that there
was nothing Sakura could have done to save Taro from turning. The poison had already been running strong in his veins before she even got to his side.

"Look," Naruto said bluntly. "It wasn't your fault that he died, okay? It was just a stroke of really bad luck." He kicked a stone with his shoe. "I'm really glad you're alive, Sakura-chan. I don't... want to lose another friend, y'know?"


"I mean, uh, you're still my friend. Doesn't mean I'm yours, but I'll still be here. I ain't going anywhere, 'ttbayo." He rubbed the back of his head awkwardly, his brows knitted in a slightly embarrassed frown.

Sakura placed a hand on his shoulder, a small smile tugging on her lips as warmth bloomed in her chest. "Thank you... Naruto. I'd love to be friends with you again."

Because in times like these, people were too precious to lose.

"We should stop here," Deidara suddenly proclaimed when they reached a babbling brook. "It's easily defensible, and they can't go on for much longer." She jabbed her thumb at stragglers near the back of the group being ushered by Shisui, who was guarding them.

"A most bold declaration, Deidara!" Gai flashed his teeth at her and proceeded to further approve her idea by giving her a thumbs up. "The youth flowing in our veins will be restored, should we take this opportunity to rest our bodies!"

Hitoshi, now free of Ami's mother—she had died during last night's attack—voiced vehement agreement, as did most of the civilians.

Rations were torn open and devoured by exhausted travelers, while a party was sent out to stalk the riverbanks for fish. The hunting party consisted of Sasori, Deidara, Anko, and fourteen-year-old Yukari, whose hair had been significantly shortened. Unlike Lee, who was now sporting a bowl cut like Gai's thanks to Tenten's efforts, Yukari's hair had been slashed off by a long-clawed monster.

"There's literally nothing here," Yukari complained after ten minutes of walking up and down the riverbank. "Can't we go further up?"

"We could," Sasori answered, contemplating. "You and Anko go ahead, then, and see what you can find."

"Yes!" Yukari grabbed Anko by the hand and dragged her upstream. "Come on, senpai."

"Don't call me that, I hardly know you," Anko managed to bite out before the two females became two specks on the horizon.

Sasori turned to Deidara. "Let's get to work." He rolled up his pant legs and sleeves before stepping into the cold water, a shiver running up his spine. Deidara did the same, and, soon, they were slowly walking down the stream. In the distance, their group could be seen sitting or standing in a grassy clearing next to the stream.

Both artists removed their shoes and stepped into the stream, the cold biting at their ankles.

The sun was hitting its peak behind the clouds when Deidara let out a small yawn, eyes at half mast as she stretched, her back curving. "Ne, Danna, are there actually any fish here?" She tried to
sound nonchalant, but there was a small waver in her voice that normally wasn't there.

He gave her a long stare before answering, languidly, "I don't know. I don't know enough about fish to answer that." Something tickled the skin of his ankle, and he looked down, seeing a fat fish squeezing between his feet. "Does that answer your question?"

She merely grunted, standing back as Sasori plunged his arm into the water and snatched the fish up by the tail. In his stone-tight grip, the aquatic creature flailed, mouth opening and closing as it struggled for life.

Something lurched in Deidara's stomach. It was dying. Dying so _slowly_ and the way it was _thrashing_ so longingly... She squeezed her eyes shut, massaging her temples. It was just the sun. Even if it was a cloudy day, it was just the sun. Behind her eyelids, Hitomi stared back at her, pale eyes hollow in death. A sharp gasp escaped her lips, causing Sasori to turn his head slightly.

"Brat?" When she didn't respond, he stepped toward her. "Deidara."

"I'm fine," she ground out, blinking her eyes open. The fish in Sasori's hand flapped one last time before stilling. "Can I just lie down for a second?" Without waiting for a response, she stepped out of the brook and lay back on the grassy riverbank.

Sasori stared at her for a moment longer before continuing on his hunt. A loud, triumphant shouting from further up the river caught his attention briefly—it seemed that Anko and Yukari had been successful. When he laid eyes on Deidara again, he saw that she had pulled out some clay and was molding a rough shape in her hands. Her fingers moved idly around the clay, fingertips leaving shallow indents on the surface. An eternity later, when he accepted that there would be no more fish other than the fat one he had caught earlier, he got out of the brook. By then, Deidara was nearly finished with her creation, and was looking notably more relaxed than she had been before.

He had felt the waves and waves of distress rolling off her form like a foul odor. It had made him pause. It hadn't even been a week since they had escaped Akatsuki's oppressive confines, and now a stranger, more imminent threat had made itself known.

"A butterfly?" Sasori drawled out when her fingers unfurled to reveal a Lepidoptera sitting on her palm. She had smoothed out its edges extremely well, he had to admit, and had even implemented minute details on the wings and antennae. The dead fish felt heavy and awkward in his hand as he sat cross-legged beside her. She was still lying on her back, staring up at the clouds. When she finally registered him, her cobalt eyes flitted over to his diminutive form.

"No," she said, "it's a moth, un."

Interesting.

"So you prefer moths to butterflies?" he wondered.

"Not really," Deidara confessed, holding up her creation and admiring it. Sasori watched as she channeled a bit of her chakra into the construct, and as its wings began to flap. It took off into the skies, fluttering about as it enjoyed its newfound freedom. "But I knew someone who did." She was straight-faced, but Sasori could see the sadness in her eyes. He looked away.

A fine powder tickled his nose and he almost sneezed. Sasori glanced skyward to see the moth slowly disintegrating into a fine dust. Before long, it had completely disappeared, swept away by the wind.
"Nineteen dead," Deidara said abruptly, sitting up and wiping her damp palms on the knees of her pants. "That's... surreal, un." She stared out into the copse of trees across the babbling brook, tension filling her gaze, as if she expected a creature from the depths of hell to emerge from the twisted trunks. The canary's wing fringe on the left side of her face dropped to the right slightly as she hugged her knees to her chest. When the hair started to tickle her nose, she brushed it aside.

"More will follow," Sasori stated without preamble, feeling the sudden urge to get out some paper and pour his pent up frustration into words again. "You understand that, right, brat?" His tone was tinged with a grim, tired acceptance.

He was right, Deidara knew, and it terrified her. When had they become so... so intimate with death? They were constantly dancing around danger on their toes, and quiet, tranquil moments like this were hard to come by. Prior to the whole war fiasco, Deidara had never killed before, even while traveling on the road to Ame from Iwa. Now there was blood on her hands—more blood than she could have ever anticipated, and not only from the men and monsters (the lines were blurred in that regard, truly) she had killed in battle. It dribbled between her fingers and stained the teeth on her hand-mouths. She swallowed a lump in her throat, feeling her chest constrict a little. "Yeah," she admitted, loathing the words that emerged so easily from her mouth. "I do know, Sasori-no-Danna, and I hate it."

That made two of them.

Eventually, she stood, brushing grass off from the back of her pants; she had forgone her cloak. "We should head back, un." Her eyes moved to the dead fish still in Sasori's grip. "Sorry for not helping."

"It doesn't matter." He got up as well, the fish slapping against his thigh. "There was nothing else, anyway."

Their timing was perfect, it seemed, as Yukari and Anko were on their way back from up the stream. They had caught a fish even fatter than Sasori's fish—one that had had enough muscle to swim upstream.

Anko seemed to be in a broody mood, a scowl etched on her face. Neither Sasori or Deidara blamed her. The purple-haired woman had just gone through hell. Taro had been someone that she'd known before leaving Akatsuki, and he'd been a man that she had respected.

As they neared the group, not bothering to make conversation with one another, raised voices reached their ears.

Sasori raised an eyebrow. They hadn't even been gone for half an hour and they'd already started fighting? At this rate, they'd all be doomed.

"What's going on?" Yukari asked no one in particular, trying to peer over Sasori's shoulder to catch a glimpse of the conflict participants. "Sawako!" she called for her sister, jogging over to the mass of moving bodies. "Sawako!"

"We're all going to die out here, anyway!" a man with thinning hair was shouting hysterically at a white-faced Naruto, whose face was contorted in a deep, disapproving scowl. "What's the point, huh, kid?! Why won't you just let us go back?! I'd rather be in Akatsuki than out here!"

"Mori-san," Itachi got his attention, "if we go back, we we surely die. Don't be a fool."

Izuna, fussing in his mother's arms, startled when Mori raised his voice up even further.
"I'd rather be shot than... than be ripped into pieces!"

Deidara couldn't blame him. Not entirely. The prospect of dying in such a manner was confronting.

"Even so," Kakashi piped up, crossing his arms, "Death is death. Isn't a slim chance better than no chance at all?"

"Kakashi's right," Kagami put in. "I didn't stick my neck out just for you cowards to turn back."

Shisui side-eyed the masked Uchiha, sweatdropping slightly. "You could have put it more delicately..." Still, Kagami, Kakashi, and Itachi were right. They'd come too far, and going back was not an option that any of them had, not even harmless civilians like Mori.

Mori opened his mouth to argue again, but an animalistic screech in the distance had his teeth clattering shut.

Itachi looked at the direction that they had come from. "We have to move. According to Shikaku, there should be a more fortified bunker north from here."

Anguished murmurs rippled through the group as they hastily complied and started hauling ass. A red-haired girl with glasses was noticeably fidgeting as she walked in the middle of the pack, her face white as bone and her breathing heavy. Sakura noticed immediately.

A combination of fear and the high altitude, was Sakura's first guess. But, taking a closer look at the girl—she was around their age, she was guessing—she could see that it was something else. Sakura narrowed her eyes and thought about consulting Shizune.

When the red-haired girl keeled over, Kisame caught her, looking a little lost as to what to do. Chihiro, startled, held the teenager's arm up, blinking in confusion.

"Karin?" A woman's voice broke through the crowd. "Karin, what's wrong?!"

"Stay back," Shizune warned, appearing next to Sakura, who was already by Karin's side. "Calm down, sweetie," she soothed when Karin began to heave.

"The monsters!" Karin gasped, causing everyone to flinch back.

Sasori sent chakra to his fingers, preparing to form chakra blades around them. If this nobody civilian—Karin, was it?—was turning, they would have no choice but to put her down. He pushed any reluctance he may have had aside, preparing to kill. Kakashi's single working eye slid to his form. If the puppeteer noticed it, he didn't react.

Instinctively, Sakura and Shizune stepped backward, knowing firsthand just how far gone patients that were in the midst of turning were. But Sakura was still close enough to notice.

There was clarity in her eyes.

"It's okay, everyone," Sakura said, raising her voice above the panicked sea of voices. "She's clear."

"I'm not a monster!" Clearly, Karin had picked up on their terror and disgust. "But...! I can feel them. It... It was like that on the night of the attack as well." Woozily, Karin tried to stand, Shizune helping her up when her knees trembled and threatened to buckle. She shuddered, nauseous. "I was the one who panicked first." Her glasses slipped down her nose as she began to cry. "I'm sorry! I'M SORRY! I couldn't control myself...!"
"Are you serious?!" Hitoshi snarled, a vein popping in his neck as he regarded the sobbing girl with loathing in his black, beady little eyes. "You could have killed ALL of us! And what about those poor bastards that did die, huh?!"

"Shut up, you're not helping!" Rin snapped at him, whirling around and baring her teeth. She was so sick of that man and his constant complaining. It'd been her, Izumi, and her children that had nearly died that night, not him. They would have died if not for Sasuke's intervention.

"She's a sensor. Hypersensitive to chakra." Sakura's words cut off any retort Hitoshi might have had. "It's an extremely rare kekkei genkai that manifests naturally every few generations." She could have launched into a whole lecture about genetics and their relation to kekkei genkais, but now wasn't the time.

Karin nodded numbly, tears drying quickly from the wind blowing against her face. "I've been called that before, yes. They... feel so horrible. They really are monsters."

"How close are they?" Sasori inquired, trying to keep his voice calm for her sake.

"I-I can't tell... but I don't think they're that close... it definitely wasn't as heavy as last night's." Karin hung her head. "Can we please just go?"

"That would be best," Kakashi agreed, and they set off again, Karin's unique ability lingering in their thoughts. "Itachi, want me to scout ahead? It'd be safer if we know what's coming."

"Bring someone with you," Itachi recommended. "And don't get caught."

Kakashi turned to Shisui. "You up for it?"

He was, and the two martial artists zipped ahead, no longer needing to travel at the standard civilian pace.

Kisame couldn't help but feel a pang of pity for Chihiro as she watched Shogo and Itsuki chase each other, weaving around random people. Her eyes were even wider than usual. One of the twins—Yukari, the more outspoken one—scolded them when one of them bumped into her, tone snippish.

"Do you want to join them, kid?" he asked eventually.

"Eh? Could I...?" Chihiro tilted her head as she looked up at him. Biting her lip, she turned away. "But I'm older, and a stranger."

Kisame shrugged. "Fine then. Keep wallowing."

Chihiro stared at him. Then she marched right over to Itsuki and Shogo, causing Kisame to chuckle.

"Is she your protégée now?" Kisame turned his head to see Itachi slowing down to walk beside him. The Uchiha master was looking as serene as one possibly could in these conditions. The rest of them looked like they'd just gone through hell while Itachi, unfairly, seemed to only have ruffled feathers. Damn tengu.

"Hardly." Kisame rolled his right shoulder, feeling the muscles in his back stretch with a pleasant ache. "But she's a good kid. A lot better than that Uzumaki brat." Now that he got a closer look at Itachi, he'd have to review his judgement. The younger man most definitely wasn't merely ruffled.
The lines on his face were incredibly pronounced—more so than when they'd first met, on that fateful day when Kisame had been arrogant and swaggering and hadn't known the hardship that war brought—and he looked like he hadn't slept in a decade. No longer was he clean-cut, his garb splattered with dry blood, plant juice, and mud from when a monster had sent him flying into the dirt with a right hook. Briefly, Kisame threw his attention back to Chihiro, who was talking animatedly with the younger boys, looking a little out of place. Itsuki, easily led along by his mother's conventions, seemed to turn his nose up at her, but Shogo was more open into accepting her into whatever childish game they were playing. In the end, Itsuki relented, loudly stating that she could only play if she wasn't a "prissy girl". Kisame had to smirk at that, especially when Chihiro hotly accepted his terms and proceeded to tag them both in record time. Kisame was glad. She deserved a chance to just be a kid, even out here in these woods.

"By the way things are looking, she will be, soon," Itachi remarked, noticing the fond gleam Kisame failed to suppress in his gaze. His lips quirked upward in a smile that was hardly there. "I'm glad you're happy, Hoshigaki-sama."

"Kisame."

Itachi's eyebrows rose slightly in surprise, as if to say, are you sure?

Kisame grinned, displaying his sharper-than-normal set of teeth. "What's the point of honorifics? Especially out here, when we have to rely on each other, Itachi?" Itachi stared so long at him that Kisame almost blushed at the attention he was receiving.

Itachi caved after a few more moments, his eyes closing as he smiled. "Of course, Kisame. Also," he turned his head to one of the black-haired medics—the one with pink emerging slightly from the roots; that dye must not have been as permanent as she'd thought—walking in front of them momentarily, "Sakura wishes to speak to you tonight. She is very interested in your fast healing ability. If you really mean what you said about relying on one another, you would allow her to examine you, wouldn't you?"

Kisame tried not to gape. Damn! This manipulative Uchiha bastard was playing him like a fiddle. But then again, Itachi did have a point, even if he was using Kisame's own words against him. Almost as if she sensed they were discussing her, Sakura turned back, large green eyes blinking in blatant curiosity. "Fine," he relented, a hint of bite in his words, "If I can prevent anymore deaths from happening, then I'll let her probe me. ' He wasn't as thick-headed as to think that wasn't what Itachi—and by extent, Sakura—was after. His healing factor could be studied and save a lot of lives if it were to be recreated.

"I've spoken to Shikaku," continued Itachi. "There should be a medical bunker not far away from the one we're heading to right now, and a mission to replenish our medical supplies will be held once we reach the fortified bunker in the north."

"Let me guess—you want me to join the party?"

He nodded.

"Alright then. Who else is coming?"

"Sakura, Kagami, Kakashi, and Sasori." That left Deidara, Gai, Kakashi, Shisui, and Itachi himself as the top fighters in their ragtag group—three quarters of the former Big 4, a pacifist prodigy, and another genius with a penchant for not dying within the ranks of the enemy. And Anko was particularly ruthless with Orochimaru's old blade, and Sawako could hit a monster's beady black eye from quite the distance with her bow and arrows. That was acceptable. Sasuke and Tenten were
formidable fighters with weapons as well, and Izumi could hold her own.

Having heard his name, Sasori angled his head toward them before facing the front again, his entire body on alert for any incoming monsters, even though Karin hadn't piped up since her small breakdown earlier. The red-haired man was walking with Deidara and Chiyo, all of them engaging in some talk every once in a while.

"If we're lucky, we won't need them," Kisame answered in the end, after some deliberation.

Unfortunately, luck was not something they could rely on. Itachi and Kisame knew that very well.

Shisui tried not to gag when Kakashi stepped around the third dead animal they had spotted during their scouting expedition. It was some kind of snowshoe hare, its stomach ripped open like double-doors. A greenish-black fluid decorated its remains, oozing from the massive hole in its guts. The whole area was rotten with death, and Shisui had more than once advised Kakashi to turn back. The stench made Shisui cough, though Kakashi seemed unfazed. Possibly because of the shirt-mask he wore, which really brought out the patch over his left eye, in Shisui's opinion.

"We're close," Kakashi said, his voice low. "To whatever nest they're living in."

Shisui looked around the area, spotting a few more half-eaten animals sprawled promiscuously on the forest floor. "No kidding," he muttered under his breath, waving his hand past his nose to dispel the horrid stench invading his senses. "We should start scouting from the trees."

"Good idea."

They continued their scouting mission in the trees, blending into the shadows. Eventually, they came upon a gully, and a decimated camp. Half-decayed bodies littered the deserted camp in the ravine, and both men felt their stomachs lurch at the sight. Shisui thought that it was a miracle he didn't fall out of his tree.

"A massacre," the Uchiha whispered. Not unlike our own. But those men down there had been enemies, if the ripped flag flapping tiredly in the wind was any indication. The mountain route was still undoubtedly the safest path, but there had still been enemy camps around. Never in his life had Shisui seen so many dead Tsukigakure soldiers.

Suddenly, a hunched figure emerged from one of the caves in the side of the ravine. Drooling jaws snapped at the air as one of the most grotesque monsters to date made itself known to the world. It let out an otherworldly screech, and stepped into the center of the camp. In their safety above, Kakashi and Shisui watched with stiff spines.

Shisui could see its brain. Suddenly, those dead animals in the forest didn't seem so horrible anymore. The cap of the monster's skull had been removed, leaving only a jelly-like substance to protect the delicate organ.

It opened its mouth and Kakashi leaned forward, eyes narrowing.

"Has he stopped fighting it?" the beast rumbled as more monsters appeared in their line of vision. "The man who sees all, but nothing at all?"

"We have him contained, sir," another monster replied. "He will succumb shortly."

Oh, gods, they were sentient. They had ranks. And order. A hierarchy.
"Good." A terrible grin stretched across the lead monster's visage, stretching it menacingly. "Leader-sama will be pleased with our progress. An entire camp of human trash either dead or added to our ranks."

It was then Shisui noticed that the smaller, barely-clothed monsters were just loitering around, not paying their utmost attention to their leader. Their eyes were foggy. They were mindless. The Uchiha genius quickly made notes in his head, and he knew Kakashi was doing the same. So not all of them manifested sentience. That was good to know. But then, how did sentience manifest in some of them? He had a number of theories already whirling around in his mind like a maelstrom, but, obviously, none of them could be confirmed.

"What of the humans travelling through the mountains?"

"We'll add the useful ones to our ranks. I have already picked some out from last night's assault. As for the rest, kill them, and feed on them if you wish."

There were a few approving moans from the lower ranked monsters. And Shisui remembered the broken sticks in the path that they had come through—this was likely their stronghold, meaning that they had come in and out through that path.

"They're heading north," said the leader's second-in-command (or, at least, that was what Shisui assumed it—he?—was). "To Konohagakure, most likely. Once they cross to the other side of the mountain, they'll be in Konoha Country." The leader smiled again, and a shiver ran down Shisui's spine. "We'll cut them off before nightfall."

There was a shift in the wind, and Kakashi grabbed Shisui by the collar and jumped backwards. "We have to go," the Hatake said, urgency clear in his low voice. "Or they'll smell us. They might already have." He let go of the Uchiha and Shisui balanced himself and continued to leap through the trees with Kakashi. "If we die now..."

The others would be doomed, too.

Shisui pushed himself to even faster speeds. No! I won't let them die. I'll defend them with my life if I have to. It's my duty... as a warrior of Ame!

Karin's paleness and shaking framing only further convinced them that the information Kakashi and Shisui brought back with them was correct. The sky was an odd mixture of color as the sun set in the distance, behind heavy storm clouds.

"Another attack so soon?" someone blurted. "H-how merciless... Am I dreaming?"

Dreaming or not, Sasori strongly suggested waking the fuck up because this was their reality now. It was cold, twisted, and left a bitter taste in his mouth, but closing your eyes at this point would only lead to more unnecessary death.

"Are you fucking serious?!" Deidara suddenly shouted, pupils dilating and fists clenching. Dammit! We can't even catch a break! But at least they had forewarning this time—surely, that had to count for something? It means nothing if we don't know what to do with it. The non-fighters in the group were simply standing around, knees knocking in terror as visions of their own deaths plagued them. I... I can't take this anymore. She swallowed a lump in her throat, leaning against Rin's shoulder.

The brown-haired widow could feel her friend trembling. It wasn't with her usual anticipation—it
was fear. It ripped through all of their veins with a cold fire, freezing and burning at the same time.

"The bridge!" Shikaku's voice snapped through the air. "There should be a bridge a mile from here that we can cross to safety—we'll cut it down once everyone's across."

Right, the bridge. Sasori vaguely recalled it being mentioned by the Nara just hours ago. He shook himself out of his stupor. No more daydreaming, he told himself, he could dream plenty when he was cold and dead and six feet underground.

Itachi was speaking hurriedly with Izumi, who looked torn at his words, her eyes growing wide and stricken when he mentioned something. She held Izuna tightly in her arms, as if she feared that the wind—it was picking up vigorously—would tear their son away from her warm hold. The low bun she wore her hair in had come loose again, and wisps of dark brown—nearly black—locks framed her face in a disorderly mess. Then Izumi's eyes hardened, and she nodded grimly. Itachi kissed her forehead before pulling back and getting everyone else into order.

Sasori turned away as Itachi’s words fell upon his ears. It made sense, and was probably the best plan they had. Get all the civilians to safety. Anyone who is able and willing will fight on the frontlines, while the rest fall back and defend those who can't defend themselves. Sasori had seen more than his fair share of blood in the past, and he was prepared to rip apart more skin and muscle when Itachi opened his mouth again.

"Sasori, Deidara, Gai, Sasuke, I want you to leave with the rest." By now, the fighters had separated themselves from the non-fighters, the civilians clumped together to the side, looking uncertain. Unsurprisingly, few actually wanted to fight the incoming monsters head-on.

"What?" Sasori said cuttingly, Sasuke echoing his disbelief near the back of the 'fighting' group. "Itachi—what is the meaning of this?" He waited for Deidara to protest as well, but her voice never sounded. "You know I can fight those things. They won't be a problem for me."

"I know you can, but," Itachi’s eyes flashed as the first drops of rain began to fall, "I don't want you to shed anymore blood today, Sasori. Instead, use your abilities to save as many lives as you can. Deidara, this goes for you, too. You two work well together and are largely defensive fighters—you're skills will be more useful in defending than attacking. Gai?"

"Yosh!" Gai gave an affirmative nod, eyes like steel. "You have my word that I will defend them until I take my last breath. Those unyouthful beasts will not get past our solid defense."

"Good."

"And what about me?" Sasuke angrily demanded. His gray shirt was splattered with monster blood, as were his pants. "You've never been an idiot—you know that my skill lies in offense!"

"Sasuke," Sakura started hesitantly, but he talked right over her.

"What are you trying to pull? You're not looking down on me, are you?"

"Sasuke..." Naruto frowned. Hasn't it ever occurred to the bastard that his brother might be trying to protect him? He could see it practically bleeding out of Itachi's stoic expression—he knew it because he'd felt that toward Konohamaru and his little gang before. Currently, the Sarutobi boy, Moegi, and Udon were standing a little behind Naruto on the non-fighting side.

"You tried to save me from Madara," Itachi stated, and Sasuke stiffened for a moment, halting his verbal barrage. "Please allow me to save you as well, otouto."
A silence stretched between them before someone—Naruto—called out, "Come on! We have to hurry up, Sasuke!" Perhaps it was the lack of -teme, but Sasuke turned around with a surly expression on his face, stalking over to where the non-fighters (some voluntary and some not) were standing.

"They're coming! So—so close...!" Karin's teeth were practically chattering at his point, and it wasn't from the incoming storm. An older woman had her hands on her shoulders to try and stabilize her. Sasuke, standing next to her, shot her a brief glance as he felt her vibrate.

"We've wasted enough time," Kagami cut in, Sharingan flaring behind the single eye-hole in their purple mask. "Even I can feel them from here."

Itachi turned his attention to the remaining members of their group of forty-nine. He could feel a dark force pressing against his ribs, slowly suffocating him. Any minute now. He drew out two blunt kunai from his mostly-empty weapons pouch—one he had pillaged from the previous bunker.

Kakashi, Kisame, Shisui, Kagami, Anko, and a few more nondescript fighters stood alongside him, each of them tensely regarding their surroundings. When the first monster emerged from the tree line, giant claws sinking into the dirt, an arrow flew into its eye, and it howled.

Itachi whipped around, Sharingan blazing as he caught sight of the perpetrator. One of the twins, Sawako, was standing on the grassy hill above them. She gave them a quick salute before vanishing over the mound. The Uchiha smirked grimly as more of those unearthly creatures appeared, not even pausing to help the screaming, wounded one. Shisui had been right—they truly were mindless. It was the sentient ones they had to look out for.

Vines shot out at them, and Anko and Kisame cut through the first wave of them.

The battle had begun.

They ran downhill through copses of trees, panting hard and pumping their leg muscles as fast as they could. Hitoshi, the big, bull-like man, was running close to Gai, as if he expected the spandex-clad taijutsu master to defend him if a monster got close. And, to his credit, Gai probably would have.

Deidara squinted through the rain, dew clinging to her long, dark eyelashes. Her entire world was blurry, and she had nearly tripped a couple of times. Only her instinct had saved her, and she wondered when someone would trip up.

A roar bellowed behind them, far too close for comfort.

A warm body was flung into Deidara's side and her breath hitched as the small figure corrected herself and continued to run, stumbling over a root. Chihiro, Deidara matched a name to the round face of the little girl, Kisame's shadow. She was much tinier than Deidara had thought. She was supposed to be nine years old, but she looked more like she was—
Hitomi’s face—her blood trickling out of her mouth and her dead eyes facing the sky—flashed through her mind, and she nearly choked. *No! I can’t…!* Chihiro overtook her and the hold on her throat gradually faded away.

"Brat!" Sasori's voice sounded next to her ear. "Stop dreaming!"

"Alright!" she snapped, her voice pitching up.

Sasori gave the side profile of her face a long, hard look. *Deidara, you fool...* If she died, he wouldn't forgive her, even if he could see those tell-tale signs of a scar on her heart that had never quite healed. Sticks snapped behind them, and Sasori's pupils dilated. *Shit, they're onto us.* Dammit, how could Itachi let them escape?! It wasn't as if he hadn't saw this coming, but this just made things a thousand times harder than it needed to be and Sasori wasn't sure if had the patience to deal with such a thing.

"I got it, yeah." Deidara turned her body around, her blonde hair whipping past her face as she slowed down. The sleeves of her torn cloak fell down her arm, revealing her hand-months, which were already chewing. A dark shape lumbered toward them at a terrifying fast pace, obscured by the fog that was a consequence of the downpour they were experiencing. Clay shapes spewed out of her hands, blurring in the air as they flew toward the shape. *It's not as effective in the rain, but it'll have to do!* "Katsu!"

A huge explosion sounded, Sasori's ears ringing from the blast as the wind generated battered against his back. "Couldn't you have picked a quieter art?"

"Not on your life, un." The smoke began to clear and a strained smile reached Deidara's lips. "There's no way it could have survived that—that was C2 level—*what?!*

The fog had cleared in the explosion, allowing them to see just what had happened to the beast. Thick, sturdy, and extremely charred vines were wrapped around its body, the shape reminiscent of a flower bud. Slowly, the vines unwrapped and sunk back into the center of its back.

"You damn, persistent bastard!" Deidara screamed at it, her lips pulled back in a frustrated snarl. Faster than Sasori had ever seen her move, she hurled more bombs at the thing, these ones larger and more humanoid. They were also attached to her hand-months, the white clay string disappearing behind the tongues. It was almost like—

"Have you been taking notes?" Sasori mused, a puff of smoke concealing him momentarily before being blown away. A puppet now floated in front of him, and he directed his wooden soldier at the monster.

"You wish," she ground out. "It's because of your smug face that I don't use this often, un... I developed it before I even came to Ame!"

The monster screeched and immediately began attacking their constructs, two clay and one wooden. It was a disadvantage for the two artists—the heavy rain was hindering their sight as well as the endurance of their puppets.

Eventually, though, Sasori managed to get his puppet to stab it through the heart while Deidara's clay humanoids melted against the monster's back, arms, and legs. The corpse spewed juice, and a muscle in Sasori's face twitched in disgust. He would never get used to that. At least humans had the decency to die normally.

The clay eroded in the rain, while Sasori placed his puppet back into his storage scroll, ready to
whip it out again should another monster attack them. By now, the rest of the fleeing group was already far away. Looking up a little more, they could see a tiny wooden bridge in the distance, swaying in the gale.

They quickly caught up to their group and slowed down, forcing to travel at a civilian's running pace.

"We're almost there!" Gai roared over the noise of the wind.

Suddenly, there was a squeal, and a mousy-haired woman fell forward, picking herself up with her dirty hands. She winced when she tried to get up. "My ankle!" she wailed, her pain bleeding into her voice.

Collective caterwauls echoed in the distance as approaching demons bayed for their blood. Unsure, some people began to back away from the injured woman.

"Fuck it!" Hitoshi abruptly blurted, his tone grating. "We can't afford to be slowed down, let's leave her!" He ran forward, pausing when nobody else immediately followed. "Well?!"

"Are you insane?!" Tenten yelled at him, barely keeping her emotions in check as her voice grew shrill. She bent down to help the woman up. "I've got you." Lee bent down to help her, hoisting her up.

"I'll carry her," Sakura offered, and the two shot her skeptical looks. She sighed. "Look, we're on a time schedule and I've carried both Itachi and Izumi when she was pregnant before. At the same time. I can take it."

"You damn asshole!" Naruto shouted at Hitoshi as they ran, eyes burning with fury. "How could you abandon her like that?!"

"It was her or us, you dumb brat!"

"Hah! More like her or you."

"Shut up, Naruto," Sasuke suddenly cut in, quietly.

Naruto shot him a confused glance. "Huh?"

"Just... shut up." Sasuke turned away from him, eyes burning into Hitoshi's back. The bulky man clearly wasn't grateful for a traitor's intervention, but Sasuke understood exactly how he felt. Because he had felt the same way as well, back in Akatsuki. The need to survive at all costs. He had thrown away his pride, his honor as an Uchiha, and had twisted the words of his dying mother into deluding himself that ignoring the suffering of others around him was right. It was funny, really, how Hitoshi would have probably followed a path similar to Sasuke's if their roles were reversed. And yet, no one was accusing Hitoshi of being a traitor to his country. Then again, what-ifs and hypothetical situations would never be a good enough reason to condemn someone.

The Uchiha could feel Naruto's sad blue gaze linger on him for a little longer before he sped up to catch up with Sakura, who was impressively carrying a grown woman in her arms as she ran. The black-haired medic had one hand hovering over the woman's ankle, and before long, the mousy-haired woman was gingerly jogging beside her, helped along by both Shizune and Sakura.

They were nearly to the bridge when they heard the first of three following explosions. The monsters were frightfully close to them, and Deidara had let loose her bombs, pumping more chakra into them than she ever had during her time in a peaceful Akatsuki, where there had been no
"Stop!" Sasori ordered sharply when she went to make a fourth explosive. "Conserve your chakra before you faint from exhaustion."

"They're getting closer...!" Deidara's voice reached the upper end of her vocal range. "Danna!"

The blade of a puppet sliced through one of the monster's vines before cutting its heart in half. It shrieked, collapsing, its juices draining out of its pores.

"GO!" Sasori shouted, making a few loitering people jump.

"This way, everyone," Gai instructed them as he led the group down the wooden bridge. It was worn and secured only by rope, but looked to still be able to support their weight if distributed evenly. "One at a time. Careful!" The gale picked up and the bridge swayed, a few people screaming. Sawako, who still wasn't on the bridge, desperately shot one of the few remaining arrows she had at the closest monster. It landed between its eyes and sank into its brain. It howled in pain but was hardly deterred, and lashed its long claws out at Sawako, who was trembling.

"NO! GET OUT OF THE WAY!" Deidara launched herself at the teenager. Sawako's twin, Yukari, was already on the bridge, and turned her head around just as Deidara screamed, urgency betraying her fear. Sasori killed another monster and bought himself just enough time to whip around and see what happened next.

His brown eyes widened as blood sprayed through the air. No...! No, Deidara! The blonde woman was knocked backward by the force of the swipe, coughing as she picked herself up. Warm blood was splattered on her face, dripping between her eyes, but it wasn't her own.

There was an anguished sob-shouting as Yukari halted movement on the bridge, arm stretched outward and tears pouring down her face.

Sawako hadn't even had time to scream when the monster had cleaved her in half—from groin to the top of her skull—with one easy motion before using its other arm to smack Deidara aside. Redness had misted outward as one half of her twitching body tumbled off the side of the ravine, hitting a single branch protruding from the side of the cliff before disappearing into fog.

Hyuuga Hanabi and Hinata, at the back of the line, both put their hands to their mouths in horror. Hinata vomited off the side of the bridge as warm tears pricked her eyes, sobbing from the great heave.

Seeing that she was dazed, Sasori killed the final monster in the wave and lifted Deidara up by the arm. That could have been her who had been sliced in half, and not poor Sawako. And Sasori wouldn't have been able to do anything about it. "Are you insane?!" he yelled at her, staring intently into her wide blue eyes. "What were you thinking...?!!"

"But I—"

"Look at me, Deidara. You couldn't have saved her." Tears appeared in her eyes but she pretended like they weren't there, so he did, too. "Don't be so foolish next time, you damn idiotic brat." He released his hold on her shoulders and rubbed his face with his hands. "It wasn't your fault so don't dwell on it."

She flared. "Don't say that so easily!" she spat hatefully. "Sawako is dead because I didn't make it to her on time!" She was so young! Deidara wanted to pull her hair out. Why were they dying? The ones that have so much to live for!
"If you had made it to her on time, it would be you in her place!" Sasori hissed, grabbing her wrists. "Deidara!"

"What?!"

"Stop blaming yourself for their deaths." His brow pinched and he looked to the other side of the bridge, where most of them had gotten across. To his relief, his grandmother was one of them.

Deidara said nothing, Their. He said 'their'. Why... does he know me like that? She kept her silence even when he took her by the hand and led her across the rickety bridge. When they were halfway across she had regained their bearings. "I'm okay now, un." She breathed out, and Sasori noted that her breath smelled like bile. She had vomited in her mouth. Trying to keep his emotions in check, he turned away.

Suddenly, the bridge swayed intensely, and the pair grabbed at the ropes. On the other side, a particularly large monster was standing at the end of the bridge. It smiled, revealing black, curved teeth that were much too big for its mouth. It was so much bigger than the rest that had attacked them that the only thing they could do was assume that it was sentient.

It jumped forward and closed half the distance between them, causing the bridge to sway. The five or so civilians left on the bridge screamed, clutching onto the side ropes for dear life. Gai rushed forward, helping two of them to the other side. "Sasori, Deidara!" the warrior dressed in green called. "Hurry!"

Suddenly, Hyuuga Hinata tipped and fell off the side of the bridge, screaming.

"NEE-CHAN!" Hanabi shrieked, grabbing at her sister.

"HINATA!" Naruto bellowed at the same time from safety, reaching down the cliff, as if it would save her.

Sasori swore as the monster stepped closer.

"Almost all of my comrades are dead, and your surviving comrades are coming this way," the monster declared, sharpening its claws on the rope that held the bridge together. "This will be my end, and yours, but there will always be more of us."

Hanabi had caught Hinata by the wrist. "H-hold on...!"

Sasori would have rushed forward, but it would be too late. Gritting his teeth, he ran to safety with Deidara, both of them heaving up the Hyuuga sisters as they dashed for the others. As if time had slowed, he felt the surface beneath his feet gradually disappearing. Deidara, behind him, reached out her hand, and he took it holding it tightly. There was blood dripping down her head. A head injury or Sawako's blood? he wondered briefly as he felt his stomach lift and fall.

"Danna!" she shouted, and he felt like was underwater, his face aimed at the weeping skies. Then a force exerted on his right wrist jerked him back to the reality he hated. Hanabi grunted with effort as her little muscles worked to support both his and Deidara's weight. Her left hand was wrapped around a piece of rope dangling down the length of her arm. Hinata was already on the other side, trying to reach for her younger sister. But they were too far down—not even Gai would be able to reach them, though he was certainly trying, grabbing the wooden post that had secured the bridge and trying to shimmy down the cliff side.

"Hanabi!" Hinata was crying. "Hanabi!"
Sasori looked down and saw that Deidara was dangling in the air, the only thing keeping her suspended in the air Sasori's grip on her hand. He couldn't properly see her face with her hair falling down around it. He couldn't use his chakra strings either, because both of his hands were occupied, and he wasn't sure if his strings could even handle their combined weight.

"Nnngghhh!" Hanabi grunted with exertion as she slipped down the rope. She could see her sister's tear-stained face upon looking upward. "Hinata-nee..."

By now, Gai was trying to climb down the ropes himself, his heels barely sitting on a ledge on the cliff and his arm outstretched. But Hanabi wouldn't be able to reach it as she still had Sasori and Deidara dangling from her arm.

"Let go." Sasori's eyes flitted downward to Deidara, who had spoken. "If you don't let go, Hanabi, we'll all die, un."

Sasori stared at her, speechless. "Brat—"

"I know what I'm doing," Deidara cut him off, tilting her chin so he could look her in the eye. "Sasori, I need you to trust me. I'm not going to let us die when we've come this far, un."

"What are you up to?" he muttered, but she didn't hear. "Fine," he said, louder this time. "I trust you, Deidara." With my life, it occurred to him, and perhaps to her as well.

A small, relieved, and apologetic smile reached her lips. "Thank you... Hanabi, let go."

"What?!" the little Hyuuga clamored. "B-but—"

"Dammit, Hanabi, just let go! Before the rope breaks for you, too! Hanabi!"

"Listen to her, Hanabi!" Hinata hated herself for saying those words, but if her little sister could be saved, she'd say them aloud. "Hanabi, please!"

"Hanabi!" Deidara was shouting. "Let. Go."

It was then Sasori's patience thinned out. "Get ready, brat." He looked down at her. Then, without waiting for verbal confirmation, he slackened and Hanabi's grip around his wrist came loose.

They plummeted down the ravine. Wind was beating painfully against them and Sasori could barely manage to keep his eyes open. "WELL?!!" he bellowed at Deidara. "What's your plan?!"

Deidara, the tears in her eyes carried upward and away by the wind, spread her palms beneath them. "This. You think I'd die here, Danna? If I'm going to die... it'll be with a bang!"

FOOSH!

Gai helped a shaking Hanabi up, rubbing soothing circles on her back when she promptly threw up her lunch over the cliff. Hinata hugged her sister close to her once she was done, whispering soothing words.

"Oh my god," Hanabi croaked. "Oh my god..." She vomited again, this time onto the grass. Frantically, she scrambled to the edge of the ravine, looking downward. Where are they? WHERE ARE THEY?! Had she really killed them? Maybe if she'd been stronger—

A flapping noise reached her ears, and she did a double take. Was it just the wind, or was something really happening down there? On the other side of the gully, Itachi and the fighters
emerged from the trees, their numbers not as great as before. All of them were covered in blood. Itachi stared at the broken bridge, then at his wife and child on the other side, safe.

"Deidara!" Izumi was hysterical—had been when her friend had finally fallen. Izuna was crying from all the disturbance and noise, and Izumi was desperately bouncing him up and down a little to try and halt the crying. She was standing near the cliff edge, just a little behind Hanabi. Daichi's face was white with shock, matching his mother's complexion.

Deidara... The woman he had looked up to so much back then was gone. First otou-san, now Deidara-nee?!

Tears welled up in his eyes and fell from his lashes as he tilted his head down, teeth gritted in a pain that ran deep. His spiky curls had gotten long in the months, and now fell around his face, stopping at his cheek. He was vaguely aware of his mother crying as well, and he could hear traces of her anger at the world for taking another person away from her.

Chiyo did not weep. Not yet. Sasori, my foolish grandson... She walked up behind where Naruto and Hanabi were crouching, looking down at the seemingly endless drop. Her eyes narrowed. Could it be...?

A strange shape was rising quickly behind the fog. Then—

FWOOM!

Chiyo and those standing near the front were nearly blown away by the sheer intensity of the wind. She looked up, seeing a great white bird among the clouds, its wings beating. Fog trailed behind it before disappearing into the clouds. As it descended, she could pick out the red hair of her grandson, sitting on his ankles on the behemoth's back, an unconscious Deidara in his arms. He held her close to his chest, so that the wind wouldn't blow her away.

Stunned, everybody could only step back when the bird landed on their side, and Sasori jumped off, still carrying Deidara. He noticed Sakura moving toward him, and, exchanging nods with her, he passed Deidara to her. Sakura immediately began a diagnostic test, hands glowing a minty green. "Chakra exhaustion," Chiyo heard Sakura mutter.

Then Sasori got on the bird again—it was a clay one, upon closer inspection—and Chiyo noticed that he was using his famed chakra strings to control it, since Deidara was out of the game. He directed it to the other side, where Itachi and the other fighters were stranded. Sasori carried them across two at a time, not wanting to put too much weight on a construct that he was unfamiliar with.

Eventually, all of them were safe as they could be, and the clay bird was starting to erode from the rain, since Deidara wasn't actively channeling her chakra through it for obvious reasons.

Sasori looked around but none of them said anything.

There was nothing to say.

By now, Sakura had already finished examining Deidara, and declared her clear of any fatal injuries, and said that she would need a lot of rest, having exhausted her chakra supply. She hoisted Deidara up in her arms with ease.

But then Sasori stepped forward. "Wait. Let me."

"Sasori—" Sakura cut herself off, knowing that they were close. "Alright, but be careful with her. Keep her head up. Kisame, I need to speak to you..." As Sasori adjusted his hold on Deidara, who seemed a lot smaller unconscious than awake, Sakura drifted over to where Kisame was standing.
Chihiro had attached herself to his leg, pleased that he was alive and well.

In the end, everybody who came back alive was clear, checked over by Sakura, Shizune, and even Chiyo, who had been an adept medic in the past (and probably still was if given the right opportunity). There were forty-five of them now, and their absence in their ranks was like a gaping hole that all of them tried to ignore.

The one who broke down first was Yukari, when Itachi handed her Sawako's bow and arrows, which had been strewn in the grass when he had reached the bridge. The girl sobbed wretchedly, sinking into her knees and clutching the weaponry close to her chest. She screamed, and screamed, and not even Karin's perpetual nervous fidgeting could get anyone to move. It was with a great horror and realization that they watched her mind be torn apart at the seams. No one said anything, not even Hitoshi or Anko.

"Okaa-chan, what happened?" Shogo asked his mother sometime later, voice quieter than usual. "Why was she crying? Was it because of that girl... the one who... died?"

"Yes," Asagi whispered to him, kissing his forehead as she hugged him close in their bed in the bunker. Dinner had been had about an hour ago.

"Am I... gonna die?"

"Not if I can help it." Her voice was steel.

"... Okay. Goodnight, okaa-chan."

Deidara woke up in the night with a pounding headache. She winced when she shifted her head on her pillow. Damn! What the fuck? Her eyes widened. She was in pain. She was alive. She would have laughed had she not realized that everybody around her was probably sleeping. Unable to help herself, she did a head count, and the results were disheartening.

Forty-five, she thought tiredly, rubbing her eyes as she slowly sat up in her bed. Her throat was parched, and she longed for water. She knew that Sasori had a canteen somewhere, and since she couldn't see him in the sleeping room, she assumed that he was awake. He's always been a bit of an insomniac, yeah, especially recently...

Quietly, she stepped around the sleeping bodies on the floor, and went out. This bunker—it was supposed to be more new and fortified—had a kitchen, to her relief. Sasori was there as well, his canteen conveniently open and in front of him as he sat at the kitchen counter, scribbling something on parchment. A lamp was sitting on the kitchen counter, giving him enough light to write whatever it was he was writing.

Deidara cleared her throat and immediately regretted it when she remembered just how dry it was. Wincing, she rubbed her neck. "Hey, Danna," she rasped, walking over to where he was sitting. There were two other seats, and she took the one on his right, peering over his shoulder. Not bothering to ask permission, she grabbed his canteen and gulped down the remainder of the water, breathing out a small, content sigh when the prickly feeling in her throat disappeared. "You couldn't sleep again? What are you even...? Danna, is this poetry?"

"No," he said snappishly, shooting her an annoyed glare. "It's just bullshit."

"It's so flowery, un." Deidara shamelessly read it with an amused grin.

Snorting, Sasori put it away. "What do you want?"
"I just wanted to talk, yeah. Just..." Her smile grew more world-weary, and Sasori schooled his face so he wouldn't say something he would regret. "Thanks, I guess, for trusting me enough to let go. Actually, to be honest, I wasn't sure if it would work. I'd never made anything so complex that size before. I was relying on the updraft to bring it up high enough for us to jump to safety, un."

"I figured," Sasori replied, though he didn't sound angry. "I suspected it was one of your spur of the moment plans... when you dropped from chakra exhaustion, it was pretty obvious."

"Un. I'm guessing Sakura had to lug me all the way here?" Deidara could imagine the black-haired medic's annoyed yet concerned visage as she carried Deidara through the forest on her back.

His eyes went blank for a moment before he answered, "No, I did."

"Eh?!" Deidara's chair nearly tipped over when she suddenly lurched. "Why?"

He didn't really have an answer for that. 'Because I wanted to' wasn't adequate enough, and 'because I felt obligated' was even worse.

"You didn't have to, you know," Deidara continued, taking in his silence with ease. "But I'm glad, I guess."

It was his turn to ask why this time.

"Why? Because I feel like I've gotten through to you, yeah, especially after everything. You always seemed so closed off, even compared to Itachi. Sometimes, it's like I hardly know you."

"That's a little unfair," Sasori pointed out lightly, "considering I hardly know you." She scrunched up her nose in displeasure, and a smile that was barely there had his lips quirking upward. "Maybe I'll tell you about myself someday, brat. About what I used to do in Suna and my family. About... Hatake."

"Kakashi?"

"No, not that one."

"Hm."

"Until then, you'll just have to wait."

"Ironic," she said, her chest rumbling in amusement, "considering how you hate keeping people waiting. You're a walking contradiction, un. Well, if you want to withhold so badly, fine. But that won't stop me from telling you about me, yeah. Hope you don't mind, Danna, because I'm going to do it whether you like it or not."

"Deidara?"

"What?"

"I don't mind."

Deidara blinked in surprise, a slight blush appearing on her cheeks as she lowered her chin, her hair falling over her face. "Good. Then let's get started, un. I was born in a small village in Iwagakure..."

They talked long into the night, and Sasori found immersed himself into her past. At last, when it was getting late, they had to retire to bed, expecting an early morning. For the first time in a long
while, both of them slept soundly.

*Crunch.*

*Crunch.*

*Crack.*

In the night, a half-transformed monster hauled itself over the cliff, panting heavily, breath rotten with the stench of death. It stood, long claws moving about as it cracked it joints.

"*Hanabi!*"

It squeezed its eyes shut.

"*Hyuuga... Hyuuga...*"

Its eyes opened.

"*HYUUGA!*"
Part III: Peony

Chapter Summary

There's a clinic in the woods...

Chapter Notes

A/N: Edited the number of people still alive. That's a major plot hole in itself as there's no way there could have been 60+ people to begin with but I seriously cannot be bothered to go and rewrite whole paragraphs right now. I'm very tired and this chapter took a long time to push out. So, sorry?

Really hate plot holes, so this broke me a little inside.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cracka-boom!

Daichi winced, feeling the thunder box his ears as he shifted on one of the few beds provided in the bunker. Beside him, Rin slept soundly, the stress that had engulfed her since the death of Obito erased from her features, the muscles on her face slackened. Hikari was squeezed between her big brother and her mother, snoring softly with her rosebud lips parted. The Uchiha boy craned his neck to try and stop his nose from burying into Hikari's dark brown locks—he would sneeze, and he didn't want to disturb everybody from well-needed rest.

Feeling thirsty, Daichi quietly slid off the side of the bed, shivering at the feel of the cold floor on the bottom of his feet. Sneaking around sleeping bodies—there weren't enough beds to provide for everyone, so most slept on futons or simply hard concrete—Daichi exited the bedroom and went over to the only other room in the bunker: the kitchen. It was where they kept all their supplies, including the water canteens (the water collected from the mountain's pure rivers). He chose a random one and drank just enough to quench his thirst.

Thunder rumbled above him, and Daichi's shoulders tensed, his fingers pressing into the skin of the canteen painfully. He hated thunder. He hated the rain. Most of all, he hated how Obito wasn't here to comfort him anymore.

Don't be a baby, he scolded himself, screwing the cap back on the canteen again and putting it back where he had found it. The crack of lightning sounded again, and Daichi found himself jumping. It wasn't just the thunder—he jumped at almost every little noise now, and he wasn't the only one. The need for constant vigilance was greater than ever, even in perceived safe environments. It was so dark in the kitchen—dark enough that Daichi wouldn't have seen a clever monster hiding in the shadows upon entering. Paranoia creeping up his spine, Daichi tossed a wary glance over his shoulder, expecting an otherworldly thing to emerge from the darkness and lash out and him with its long claws. He had not seen the brutal way which Sawako had been murdered,
having closed his eyes as soon as Deidara screamed and the monster lunged with death permeating its entire body, but the... knowledge of her gruesome, undeserved death sat at the back of his mind, whispering harshly about how the same fate could befall him.

When Daichi returned to the sleeping quarters, he was surprised to find everyone up, wariness glinting in their eyes. Multiple lamps had been turned on in his absence, and he was able to see the relief fill his mother's eyes as she spotted him. Guilt pricked at his heart, and he returned to her side, wrapping his arms around her lithe frame.

Hikari, blinking sleepily, looked up at their mother, having just woken up from a deep sleep. "What's going on? Why is everyone awake, aniki?"

Before Daichi could answer, a wet, hacking noise filled the room and chilled him to the core.

Izumi worriedly crouched over him, Itachi coughed his lungs out, and Sakura and Shizune didn't even need to use a diagnostic medical jutsu to tell that he had a serious lung infection. Izuna lay asleep on the futon a bit behind his mother, completely unaware to what was happening in this dark world.

Itachi took a deep, rasping breath, chest heaving, before five others joined him in his discordant coughing. Mori—the man with the thinning hair who had argued with Naruto yesterday—hacked away, choking on his own mucus at times. Young Udon, Shogo's grandmother, Yukari, and little Itsuki seemed to be ill with the same disease that had suddenly befallen Itachi, seemingly manifesting especially strongly in the young ones—particularly Udon, who had always had a weak constitution.

"Oh," Izumi's stricken gaze landed on her sleeping child, "Deidara, could you please—?"

Deidara hastily picked up Izuna, looking a little distressed as she stepped far outside of her comfort zone. "I got it, un."

"Sounds like a terrible case of bronchitis," Chiyo commented at the edge of the room. She had refused the bed offered to her as an elderly woman, trading the mattress for a futon on the floor with someone who needed it more. "Do you have any medical supplies to treat it?"

They didn't. They had bandages, basic painkillers, and maybe a splint or two, but nothing beyond what could be found in a basic clinic. A group was supposed to have been sent out to a nearby medical bunker tonight, but the recent attack and the pouring rain had forced that little expedition to be postponed until tomorrow.

"We could use our chakra to thin the mucus," Shizune said with a slow nod of the head. She bit her lip. "It would ease their breathing and altogether make things more comfortable, but it won't be enough to kill the bacteria."

"Bacteria still exist in such a cold environment?" Hanabi questioned, hair mussed on one side.

"Yes. Some strains survive better in the cold than others, and that makes them especially dangerous," Sakura informed, passing one hand through her hair. "Okay, okay... I won't lie, this is potentially life-threatening. Itachi, if we want any chance of curing this, we'll need those supplies now. Considering how quickly and out-of-the-blue they manifested, I'm guessing the bacteria lay dormant until certain conditions were achieved, and reproduces at an incredible rate."

"Please!" Itsuki's mother blurted, rubbing her ill son on the back as he coughed painfully. "You must go and save my son! He's the only one I have left!"
Everyone exchanged nervous glances, before Kisame walked forward. "I'm down. If it means keeping more people from dying, then I don't see why not."

"Not that I disagree," Anko said, crossing her arms and eyeing all of them, her piercing viper-like gaze lingering on Sakura for a moment. "But do you know that it's a storm out there, right? This mission could potentially end up disastrous." Even in the chilly bedroom, a nervous bead of sweat was trickling down the side of her head. "And is it really safe, even without the rain? Just because we haven't seen any monsters doesn't mean there aren't any."

Discussion was thrown back and forth, Anko's concerns validated by a few more people. In the end, however, it was decided when the heavy rain lessened to a gentle pour. Sakura, along with Kakashi, Kisame, Kagami, and Sasori for protection, headed off to the medical bunker with Shikaku's map memorized.

"Be safe," people murmured as they exited, crowding at the only entrance.

Sasori, at the back of the group, was the only one who glanced backward as he stepped out into the rain. His gaze fell on Deidara, who seemed barely rested from her chakra exhaustion. She had Izuna tucked in her arms, the babe burying his face into her shirt, which was sporting a new tear on the shoulder area. He tore her gaze away from her when Izumi clutched her shoulder to have Izuna returned to her. The Uchiha woman looked even more tired than Deidara, her Uchiha genes the only thing keeping her from aging too rapidly.

On their way to the medical bunker, Kisame spat and spluttered when a cluster of leaves and twigs blew into his face. Kagami cackled in wicked delight, ducking when Kisame threw a particularly large twig at them.

"Boys," Sakura said sharply, and Kagami and Kisame both turned to her. "Honestly, Sasori, I feel like you're the only mature one here in this bunch..." Her lips quirked upward in grim amusement. "Still, as long as we all don't die, I guess I shouldn't complain."

The rest of their trek was uneventful, the most dangerous thing they encountered being a famished snow leopard with particularly deadly claws. Mostly, they walked in silence, words only being exchanged to give a direction. The wind and water was on their backs as they walked, and lingered even when they reached the bunker.

Sakura's heart sank when she saw the grim looking state of it, and even Sasori frowned disapprovingly when he saw it, said frown deepening when Kakashi nonchalantly strolled ahead of them. The masked man turned back slightly, expecting them to follow. They did, proceeding with an exercised caution.

It smelled like rot, and Sasori resisted the urge to pinch his nose. Someone had died here, and by the smell of it, it was recent. That alone set off alarm bells in his head, and he warned the others, though he suspected they already knew. The bunker was run-down, but bigger than they had expected—there was even a set of stairs leading further underground.

There was a funky sort of stench coming down from there, and Sasori wrinkled his nose. It was a scent he had familiarized himself with, and one he hated to sniff. The upstairs level only stocked the most basic of supplies (Sakura cleanly swept everything she could into a storage scroll), and it was likely that it was downstairs that the more helpful medicine was kept.

They gathered at the top of the stairs, exchanging questioning glances in the darkness.

"Well," Kakashi said eventually, "Shall we?"
Kisame led the way, unsheathing Samehada, and Sasori brought up the back. Their most valuable member, Sakura, was smack bang in the middle, flanked by Kagami and Kakashi. The former's Sharingan eye was spinning in the darkness, and Sasori was glad that he didn't have to look at it. As they descended, it grew colder and colder, the air becoming uncomfortably damp. The smell of death—yes, thought Sasori, death—was even stronger when he stepped off the last step, his shoe stepping on something too soft to be comfortable. By the stiff shoulders of his party members, he knew they were having a similar reaction.

"What," Sakura breathed out, "the hell." The others couldn't see it, but her face had grown incredibly pale, and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep herself from vomiting all over herself and making things messier than they already were.

"My god," Kakashi muttered, holding a hand up to his nose, trying to block out the nauseating stench of decayed flesh that was assaulting his nostrils. He squinted at Sakura in the darkness, wondering if she was going to cry, or worse. But to her credit, Sakura stepped over the bodies of Tsukigakure soldiers.

"We should get masks," Sasori said abruptly, Kagami's facial attire giving him an idea. "If we can find any." It probably wouldn't help much, but he was willing to take whatever he got.

"Good idea," mumbled Sakura, placing one cold hand on her forehead. "Let's do that. I don't think there's anything down here, but let's stick together. Just in case."

"One person should guard the entrance. Want me to?" offered Kisame. "I'm probably the most durable one here, so if I get attacked..."

"Can we not entertain that option?" Sakura grimaced. "It's a good idea, though... Hoshigaki-san—"

"Kisame."

"—Kisame, you go stand guard then. We... We'll search."

As everyone—minus Kisame, who had left with their only lamp in tow—wandered down the corridor, checking each room, Sasori stared long and hard at the bodies at the bottom of the stairs. They'd been there for weeks, by the smell of it, and he couldn't help but feel a morbid fascination toward the corpses. So this was the consequence of death. It wasn't like he hadn't known such a thing would occur, but having it unfold before him was... Gutwrenching. He did not pity them—no, not in the least; after what they'd done to his home—but their deaths had not been pretty.

He breathed out, trying to calm his beating heart to a healthier pace. "What a world..." He popped three more lamps from the storage scroll he had brought along, giving two of them to Kakashi and Sakura. He needed the third one for himself, so Sasori could only pray that Kagami's Sharingan gave them more of an advantage when it came to searching in the dark.

"I don't think anyone's here," Sakura's voice sounded in the darkness a few minutes into the search. "We've checked every room right?" She sounded a lot more timid than usual. Afraid.

"Yep." Kakashi popped his head around the doorway of the room he had been occupying, nearly hitting Sasori. "Oh, sorry... I got a bit lost and thought this door led to a closet."

Sasori side-eyed him. "Hmph, whatever. Let's just hurry up so we can get the fuck out of here. This place..." He would never admit it to Kakashi, but it scared him more than any monster ever would.
Kakashi's light-hearted facade dropped for a moment, allowing Sasori to see what he was just as solemn as him. Then the silver-haired man disappeared back into his room, Sakura hurrying in right after him. She paused for a moment to regard Sasori. "Find anything useful?"

"Yeah, but you should probably check the room I searched to see if I missed out on anything important." He was sure he hadn't, as his knowledge of medicine wasn't too shabby thanks to his grandmother's tutoring, but it would be better for Sakura to check anyway. She was the trained medic here, not him.

She nodded, head twitching slightly when she caught sight of the dim, barely-there outline of the corpse pile behind Sasori's shoulder. The black-haired medic couldn't help but feel like one of those corpses would jump up and attack them at any given moment. "I will. You've been a great help." She touched his shoulder briefly in appreciation before joining Kakashi.

When it took longer than five minutes before Sakura got to inspect Sasori's already searched room, he began to grow antsy, and he knew he wasn't the only one. Kakashi kept shifting his weight from his left foot to his right, and the small pulse of chakra he felt probing at the back of his head told him that Kagami was turning their Sharingan on and off in anticipation.

It's not a coincidence that those bodies are here. It was recent, meaning that the bunker was in use before... that happened. Despite his gut screaming at him not to approach, Sasori crouched next to a half-rotten corpse and held the lamp at its face before hovering the light source along its crooked, broken body. They hadn't managed to find any masks after all, and Sasori's iron stomach and... prior experience was the only thing that saved him from making a complete mess of himself as the nauseating smell of decay burned the inside of his nostrils and contaminated the delicate creases and folds in his lungs. He held the back of his palm to his nose, recoiling slightly.

The wounds... only one thing up in these mountains could produce these kinds of injuries. Memories of Sawako being cleaved in half swam to the forefront of his mind, and his world almost swayed for one moment before righting itself. It would also explain why the outside is ruined. If it was a big one, it wouldn't be able to get in without causing any structural damage. The thoughts processed in his head at a million miles per hour, and it was only the sound of footfall behind him that got him to slowly stand back up, as if he hadn't just gotten more up close and personal with a corpse than he would have liked.

"Making new friends?" Kagami taunted, but Sasori could sense no malice in their voice, so he simply ignored them. It was probably just Kagami's twisted way of trying to break the ice.

When they stepped over the corpses again to make for the stairs, Sakura let out a small whimper, tightening her grip around the storage scroll she held. It was dangerous to haphazardly store all the supplies into one single scroll, but the danger only lay in opening the container so that it wouldn't all spill out, which she was sure Sasori or Kakashi could help her with.

Sakura pulled away from them when they got outside, not even heading to where Kisame was waiting. Kagami glanced at Kakashi and Sasori. "Can one of you hug her or something?"

"Hatake will," Sasori volunteered his enemy's son immediately.

"I—tsk. Of course." Kakashi didn't sound annoyed at the prospect of being the medic's source of comfort, but rather vexed at the fact that Sasori had gotten a word in before him. Kagami raised an eyebrow behind their mask. Perhaps it was a man thing they were unaware about. Nevertheless, they made their amusement known with a small chuffing noise.

Sasori and Kagami slowed their pace a bit, not wanting to catch up to Kakashi and Sakura too quickly. The Hatake and Haruno exchanged a few words; at one point, Kakashi actually grabbed
her face and told her sternly, "It's not your fault. You're the one who's saving lives, not destroying them."

She was crying now. "I couldn't even save Ino! T-there was a corpse by one of the cabinets and she looked just like... like her!

Sasori let out a small sigh, even when a noticeable chill ran down his spine from the way her voice pitched in blatant distress. "She needs to keep her emotions in check... It's too dangerous out here. We can't stop because she's having a breakdown. We have to keep going. Even as he said those words and thought those thoughts, there was a... rawness in her voice that he couldn't ignore, especially when he reminded himself of how much Ino had resembled Deidara. He couldn't just brush this off and declare it just another casualty in a world where it was eat or be eaten; he couldn't just wipe the blood off of his gloves or burn everything away. It was there: a huge black, festering stain that he couldn't look past.

Kakashi, however, was just as good as ignoring his emotions as Sasori, and he said something that made Sakura bravely wipe away her tears and say, "Sorry about that. Let's go back."

"Oh, I agree," Kagami said suddenly, when they and Sasori were still catching up to the other three members of their group. "She does, but isn't there something beautiful about that? Artful, even?"

Sasori barely spared them a glance. "There is nothing beautiful or artful about hell. Shut up, Kagami."

"You're missing the point. I know you're not dumb, so it's not ignorance. Perhaps... you are afraid to identify it's beauty?" By now, they had caught up, so all conversation ceased there.

There was a river between the medical bunker and the one they were staying in, and it had grown swollen with rain when they reached it for the second time that night. Morning. Night. They had no problems crossing it, though, simply jumping across the body of water. Kisame helped Sakura across.

When they got back, everybody was still loitering at the entrance for some strange reason, only they were noticeably panicked this time. The majority of the group were pressed against the bunker entrance or trying to scramble inside but were rooted to the ground with morbid fascination. A distance away from them, the civilian Mori was crouched on the ground, holding out his right arm in a pained, pleading manner. Near him, the wrinkled corpse of a small monster flopped on the grass.

"I'M NOT INFECTED!" Mori screamed, waving his bleeding right arm in the air. Crimson liquid arced through the air, and people recoiled when it threatened to splatter on their skin. Spittle flew from Mori's mouth as he tried to convince them of his innocence, or, rather, Shisui and Gai. "I'M NOT! SEE?! I'M FINE! I'M FINE!"

Gai seemed rather unsure about the whole thing, but Shisui had his tanto drawn and was pointing it at the civilian in a defensive fashion.

"Liar!" Hitoshi accused from the front of the crowd. "You're a damn liar, old man! I saw it claw you! Saw it claw you with my very own eyes!" He was almost hysterical, pointing at Mori wildly like a cornered animal. "Are you two insane?! We have to kill it before it kills us."

"What the hell is happening here?" Kakashi demanded as their medical expedition party rejoined the group. "Gai?"
"We had an attack," Gai reported gravely. "It was only one small monster, so it was dealt with quickly, but not before causing a panic. Hitoshi-san claimed that Mori-san was wounded in the commotion, but Mori-san denies it. He claims that the wound is from scraping his arm on the side of the entrance."

"No," Sasuke was saying now, glancing at Hitoshi. "I saw it, too. Not all of it, but enough. It was standing over Mori and managed to lash out one more time before Tenten thrust her staff through its heart."

"See?! He agrees!" Apparently, Hitoshi had abandoned his disdainful view on Sasuke for now, only caring about rallying support. "Look, I know I'm an asshole, but you have to believe me! I wouldn't lie about this kind of shit!"

"Where's Itachi? Shouldn't he be dealing with this?" Kagami mused before answering their own question. "Maa, he's probably resting... Missed everything, didn't he, the damn bastard..."

"Please," Mori pleaded, moaning. "Please, please, please..." He clawed at his cheeks, blood mixing with tears. "PLEASE! SAVE ME! MEDIC! MEDIC!"

Personally, Sasori thought it was best to just declare him infected, kill him, and deal with the backlash later. His behavior was frankly not natural, and—

Mori leaped at Shisui, salivating with madness. Most could only catch the flash of the metal when lightning split the sky, and were blinded in the moment that Shisui lopped Mori's head off, his blade slashing through flesh and bone with terrifying ease. Considering how blunt the tanto was, anyone with an ounce of sense knew that it had taken a mighty effort for him to decapitate a half-transformed Mori. But perhaps he wasn't as monstrous as they'd thought, because the detached body twitched once before going motionless. There was no effort made to stand up, and no vines started soaring at gathered crowd.

Still, Shisui stabbed Mori's heart for extra measure. The heart bled crimson, not seaweed black and green.

Someone—a child?—let out a startled, terrified sob before going silent.

"Okaa-chan?!" Itsuki looked up at his mother, horrified. "Why did they kill that poor uncle?!" But Itsuki's mother was too frozen in shock to answer, the sight of Mori's head face-down in the grass knocking all the wind out of her.

Daichi, standing close by to the younger boy, swallowed a lump in his throat, trembling. "Because he was infected... he was infected. He was gonna die anyway. They're... not humans anymore."

Itsuki started to wail, hammering his little fist on his mother's thigh when she refused to hug him, rubbing her hands up and down her own arms as she tried to calm herself down. He yelped when another woman—Deidara—scooped him into her arms. The child's fingers tangled painfully in the tips of her hair as he wriggled, but her face remained a mask of grimness.

"Why don't we head back inside?" Deidara suggested eventually, trying to diffuse the situation. "No point in standing out in the cold, un."

The bunker was undeniably small and not built for more than twenty people, so, in the morning, a few of the braver ones trickled outside in a steady stream, still skittish and tense. It had stopped raining by the time the sun was up, but with the sick people, they wouldn't be able to travel until they got at least a little better. The now-patients remained inside the bedroom in futons, asleep.
Itachi had slept through the entire fiasco last night, and had awoken for only a few minutes before the sun woke up before falling back asleep. Their conditions had worsened during the night, and Itachi's coughing was surprisingly much more violent than the others.

Sakura, with the help of Shizune and Chiyo, occupied the kitchen in their production of a cure. A swab had been taken from the patients, which they used as the foundation of their knowledge about the bacteria. Sakura had stolen a single microscope from the medical bunker, painstakingly holding a lamp close to the stage to try and illuminate the bacteria. Without proper, working equipment, it was the best they could do.

Deidara woke up to something poking her lower back. Languidly turning her head, she spotted young Itsuki curled in a tight ball, the crown of his head digging into the curve of her back. Right... his mother sleeps near me, so that makes sense...

She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes as she sat up, briefly wondering if the bags beneath her eyes had cleared up any. She doubted it, considering the nightmare of a day that had been yesterday. Yesterday's chakra exhaustion had her entire body feeling heavy and achy, but she was feeling too restless to stay in bed all day. Even if Sakura said otherwise, a little exercise would do her good. She'd be fine as long as she didn't strain herself.

In a sea of futons, bodies, and blankets, there was movement, and little Shogo—Asagi's son—crawled over to where Itsuki was folded. He prodded his sleeping friend, a look of childish annoyance on his face. "Hey, lazybones, wake up!" When he realized that he had accidentally jostled Deidara, his demeanor shifted. "Sorry."

"Hm." Deidara stood, grabbing her Akatsuki cloak which was strewn on her futon. She used it as a blanket during the nights. Throwing it across her shoulders, she looked down at the boy. "Your grandmother's sick, isn't she?"

Shogo's eyes widened slightly. "Y-yeah, that's what okaa-chan said..."

Perhaps she would have offered a genuine sympathy for the child, but she couldn't find it within her. She had never been soft, but never this hard either—slowly, she was changing, and she knew. "Hope she gets better, yeah." The words were heavy on her tongue, and as bland as the canned goods they had discovered in the kitchens.

She left him then, and Shogo turned his attention back to waking up Itsuki, who was beginning to stir. There was no natural light penetrating this far into the bunker, meaning that it was harder than usual to wake up.

What time is it? Deidara wondered as she stepped into the kitchens. She didn't dwell on it, however, as she found Izumi, Chiyo, Sakura, and Shizune there. The latter three were occupying a section further from the entrance, trying to procure a panacea. Knowing that they were busy at work, Deidara ignored them, focusing on Izumi instead.

"Deidara!" Izumi startled. "I was just making some herbal tea for Itachi and the others." She tried to smile, and Deidara faltered when she saw crow's feet appear on the corners of her eyes. "You'd be surprised about the number of winter herbs growing up here..."

She looks... even worse than me. Deidara pulled some of her hair up in a ponytail. "Did you sleep last night, Izumi?"

"No, and I didn't try to either. I wouldn't have been able to. I could hear him coughing from across the room..." The ill ones had been moved to a more isolated corner of the room in order to try to minimize infection. Izumi glared at the wall, the lines beneath her eyes becoming more pronounced.
Deidara sat down on the opposite outer side of the kitchen counter. The tea was still brewing.
"Where's Izuna, hm?"

"With Asagi. She feels indebted to our family, and I normally wouldn't do this kind of thing, but—"

"I get it, yeah," Deidara interrupted her rant, holding up a hand. She smiled wearily at Izumi. "To be brutally honest, Izuna was born at the worst possible time. Nobody blames you if you have to hand him off to someone else from time to time. Just... make sure not to stretch yourself too much, hm?"

"I... Yes, thank you."

A comfortable silence stretched between them, the only noise being the mutterings of the doctors on the other side of the room. Once the tea finished brewing, Izumi went over to the medics to get some kind of confirmation before hurrying into the room.

The entire kitchen smelted like herbs to Deidara, and it was beginning to get suffocating. After a quick drink of water, she left the premises, narrowing her eyes as she emerged from the entrance. It was yet another gray day today.

At least it isn't raining, she thought sardonically. As she took her first step outside, the grass crunched beneath the sole of her boot, and she looked down. The grass was crisp and dewy from last night's rain. Subconsciously, she searched for any sign of last night's incident, but could find none. The storm had washed Mori's blood away. The body had been cleaned up after everyone went in. Probably by Shisui.

Taking in a deep breath, she lifted her arms up and arched her back in a bone-popping stretch, the sleeves of her cloak falling down her arms and revealing still-healing bruises that hadn't been severe enough to warrant immediate medical attention.

"Hey, look who's awake!" Shisui, crouched opposite Gai, straightened and waved to her. "Morning, sunshine."

"Morning, you guys. What are you doing...?" She made her way to them, head tilted slightly. "Sparring?" Deidara perked up, looking more alive than she had been in the past few days.

"Correct!" Gai boomed. "In times like this, it is important for us to hone our skills to deadly precision." Sometimes, it was hard for Deidara to remember that Gai could was as much of a warrior as her or Sasori. With his borderline goofy behavior (who was she kidding—he was definitely goofy), Gai was often overlooked. "You should join us, Deidara—afterward, we can do a thousand push-ups using only the tips of our fingers. And if cannot do those one thousand push-ups—"

"Whoa, there," Shisui cut in, sweatdropping. "I appreciate the enthusiasm, Gai, but we're training, not looking for ways to kill ourselves." With that, he jabbed at Deidara, who quickly dodged to the side. A three-way half-hearted battle was initiated then, and some of the other people outside started paying attention.

Hanabi and Hinata were sitting in the grass with Tenten, having some small talk when they saw Shikamaru and Choji walking past, close knit as ever. "Taijutsu battle," Choji said shortly, a hint of excitement in his voice.

"Oh, really?" Hinata straightened at that, curiosity piqued. "W-we should go watch—I haven't seen one in a long time... D-do you girls mind?"
Tenten and Hanabi shook their heads, and the three of them followed Shikamaru and Choji to the hub of excitement. Sasuke, who was sitting on a nearby rock and sharpening his sword, glanced toward where the fighters were dancing around each other. Little Chihiro trotted out of the bunker, summoned by the buzz.

"A Big 4 battle," Tenten said aloud before she could help herself. "Everyone back home would have killed just to see one..." Sadness eased into the creases of her heart. *The only one missing is Obito...*

"Is it really a Big 4 battle with only three people?" Hanabi said, sounding surprisingly bitter.

No one had an answer to her question, not even Shikamaru.

It was then Tenten felt a tug on her sleeve, and she looked down to see Chihiro gazing up at her. Her heart melted. "Oh, Chihiro..." She remembered hugging the girl tightly when they had reunited, but with all the excitement going on, they hadn't much talked. "What is it?"

"You should join in," Chihiro told her, and Tenten felt her heart jump.

"Wh-what?"

"It's not really Big 4 without a fourth person."

"Chihiro, you don't understand. I can't just intrude like that. That... It wouldn't be right, and—"

"Are you worried about disrespecting my husband's memory?" Tenten almost jumped into the air at the sound of Rin's voice behind the row of teenagers (and pre-teens, too). The older woman was holding the hands of both of her children, though Daichi broke off and stood next to Shikamaru to get a better look of the spar.

"R-Rin-sama—!" Tenten stammered, blushing when she realized how much like Hinata she sounded. *Get a grip!*

Rin looked faintly amused. "I'm not your boss anymore, Tenten. Just Rin is fine. Or if you really want to, Rin-san."

Hikari lifted one hand to wave at her mother's former employee. "Hi, Tenten-san," she murmured sleepily.

Tenten smiled, softening. "Hey, Hii-chan."

"Obito wouldn't mind," Rin said lightly, palming Tenten's shoulder. "I don't either. We never really were ones to stick too much to tradition."

Tenten's gaze shifted downward. "Are... Are you sure?"

Rin nodded. "Go get your staff if you want."

Remembering that she had left it in the grassy spot where she had been sitting before, Tenten hastily went to get it, only to bump into Sasuke, who had removed himself from his rock. He was holding her staff in one hand.

"Here," the Uchiha said, handing it to her. "You shouldn't leave your weapons lying around like that." He sounded decidedly disinterested and not the least malicious, but Tenten's ears burned anyway.
"Thanks," she muttered, a little more snippishly than she meant to. Swiftly, she tried to amend, "You're not that bad."

Deidara was in for a surprise when she found that she had to dodge Shisui's tanto and Tenten's staff. "What—when did you get here, hm?!"

"Aw, don't complain, Deidara~!" Shisui sing-songed, grinning wildly when her expression darkened with promised vengeance. "The more the merrier, right?"

Tenten laughed apologetically. "Hope you don't mind."

"Oh, I do mind—I mind the fact that I don't have a weapon while you two do, un!"

Gai shot out his arm and nearly grabbed the bun-haired girl's staff then, forcing Tenten to back away and regather her bearings. "No use in mourning that now, Deidara!" Gai proclaimed. "Do not forget that I too lack a weapon!"

The battle ended just as a hunting party that Deidara hadn't known got sent out returned. She eased up when she saw that Sasori was in the front, leading Naruto, Karin, and Rock Lee. The bespectacled redhead seemed to be as jumpy as ever, her eyes flicking to Naruto when his elbow got too close to her shoulder. She didn't know when Yukari had let go of her dead sister's bow and arrows, because the last time Deidara had even registered her was when she had broken down after the bridge attack, but Sasori possessed them now, the quiver loosely strapped around his person. Arrows always were more effective for covering long distances than kunai and other blades. In one hand, Sasori held the bow; the other hand was bloody, and he clutched the ears of a dead rabbit. They'd found a nest, apparently, as both Naruto and Lee had rabbits of similar size to the red-haired man. Karin was empty-handed, and Deidara guessed that she had only tagged along because of her sensory abilities.

There were gasps of excitement as breakfast was finally noticed. The last fresh food they'd eaten was the venison that Shikaku had cooked up. Faces became a little more hopeful, and bodies stood a little bit taller.

"Don't just stand there," Sasori groused, eyebrow twitching in annoyance as he watched them salivate. "We can't cook these without a fire, you brats, so start hauling ass a little quicker." That sent them into a flurry of motion, and Sasori turned to Shisui. "Help me gut the rabbits. And Gai..." His brown gaze flicked over to where Rock Lee was having a discussion with Naruto about the size of their catches. "I think you should start paying a bit of attention to that one."

Deidara watched, amused, as Gai adhered to his orders and approached Lee with a determined curiosity. Gai's mini-me was instantly delighted. *Danna's snapping out orders like a drill sergeant...* She wasn't exempt, however, as he stalked right up to her and stared at her, deadpanning.

"Why aren't you in bed, brat?"

"Ehh? I'm feeling fine now, hm, so no need to worry. I'm not going to keel over anytime soon."

"Really?" Sasori wasn't convinced. "Because I remember succumbing to chakra exhaustion once and it took a week for me to fully recover, even with one of Suna's best healers at my bedside."

She shrugged, sticking out all three of her tongues at him in a decidedly smug manner. "Fast healing...?"

He exhaled sharply, glaring at her. "Whatever happens next isn't my problem, then..." The way he
turned away from her was almost childish, and Deidara had to muffle a snort behind her palm. "At least have Shizune or Sakura check you over." Then he was sitting with Shisui, a blade drawn and ready to get his hands bloody with rabbit.

It touched her, honestly, that concern of his. And it wasn't like it was unwarranted either—how she had recovered so quickly was still a mystery to Deidara. She had vague memories of someone bending over her sleeping form during the night, but the face was too fuzzy to put a name to. He's right, I should probably get checked over. She took one last moment to observe all the flurry before heading back inside. Like the lack of natural light had triggered something in her, her shoulders sagged, her exhaustion finally catching up to her. She would have fallen in the corridor had Chiyo not popped her head out of the kitchen doorway and seen her swaying on her feet. The old woman was by her side almost instantly.

"By the stars!" Chiyo exclaimed. "Are you some kind of idiot, girl?" Deidara winced at the sharpness of her voice. "That tea I fed you last night wasn't supposed to be a bypass for you to abuse yourself like this!"

"It was... only a bit of exercise. I needed it, hm." Righting herself, Deidara clutched her head. So that's the story behind it. She recalled something about Chiyo keeping medical textbooks in her home, and Sasori mentioning something about herbal teas in a dark and dirty street in Akatsuki. It was her who helped me. Chiyo led her to the shared bedroom, where the isolated patients were all lined up in the furthest corner of the room, tucked in their futons. Izumi was crouched over Itachi, eyes at half-mast.

"Exercise? Pah! And you!" Chiyo snapped at Izumi, who startled. "Why are you still here? Didn't I tell you to get some fresh air? We've finally found a cure adequate enough for killing this strain but it's limited. No use in getting yourself sick, fussing over him." Her eyes were stern as she beheld Izumi, who twitched slightly under her burning gaze. "Well?"

Izumi let out a resigned sigh. "Where did Asagi go? I left Izuna with her."

"She's entertaining him outside, probably close to the entrance," said Chiyo. Deidara recalled seeing the woman sitting down on a rock with Izuna on her lap.

When Izumi was gone, Chiyo checked her over, her hands glowing mint green. "As I suspected," the old woman muttered. "Good lord, my grandson sure knows how to pick them..."

It's not really like that. The words were on the tip of Deidara's tongue, but she didn't bother correcting her. Yes, they'd gotten closer over the month, and yes, she had entertained the idea more than once, but...

Chiyo's voice drew her from her musings. "Back to bed you go. You're going to be resting up for at least another week."

"A week?! We can't just stay here for a week because of me—"

"It's not just you." Itachi had woken and sat up just in time to hear the last bit of their conversation. He looked to his left and right, and Deidara followed his gaze, looking at all the sick people with no small amount of guilt. Shit, they were battling a potentially fatal disease, and here she was, complaining about chakra exhaustion. Grudgingly, she calmed herself, lying back on her futon.

"Ah, the Uchiha has finally awoken," Chiyo said, her dry humor present as ever. "You missed quite the drama last night."
"You really were out of it, hm." Deidara shifted her head to look at him. He blinked back at her. "There was an attack. Mori died."

Itachi's eyes dropped to the floor. He wondered if he should be grateful that they had only suffered one casualty, or embittered because they had suffered one casualty.

A coughing gained their attention. Udon continued to hack away before his coughing ceased, and he rolled in his bedding. Just then, Sakura and Shizune arrived with the medicine, and began to dose everyone ill with the appropriate amount.

Ituski blearily bleated when Shizune tried to feed him the medicine. "Where's okaa-chan? I want my okaa-chan..."

"Shh." Shizune stroked his hair. "She'll be back soon." Back soon from gossiping with Masami outside. I hate that woman. "Drink up, and you'll feel all better."

"O-okay..."

"Will they really be alright?" Deidara asked Chiyo when the patients had fallen back to a delirious sleep, including Itachi.

"Who am I to know?" was the old woman's reply. "I'm not God."

Sasori was used to blood. He was used to spilling it, and having it spilled from him. He was used to washing it from his hands with soap that made his skin rough, and having it dry on the front of his garment when things got especially messy. But coming from Suna, where rainfall was rare, he was not used to having blood swept away from his body by a sudden downpour.

It was especially annoying, because almost everyone was outside for breakfast.

"Everybody back inside!" Kakashi took the reins with Gai, and everybody fled back inside before they could get soaked.

Sasori was one of the last ones in, and he took one final look at the treeline before retreating.

A pair of white eyes stared back. Then they disappeared, fading into black.

He felt his skin crawl. Monster.

Daichi blinked down at the baby he was carrying in his arms. Izuna stared right back at him with wide eyes, his thumb in his mouth. He was not sucking it, however, merely holding the digit between his lips in what seemed to be contemplation. With how much he looked like his father in general, it was almost as if he was the second coming of Itachi. When Izuna reached up one chubby hand and grabbed Daichi's curls, he winced, laughing uncomfortably.

He remembered how much he had worshiped Itachi's prowess before the war, and wondered if this was how Itachi felt to have a younger boy focusing all of his attention on him.

It was a cold environment up here in the mountains, and Daichi made sure to hold Izuna very close to his chest, so that the baby wouldn't freeze.

Izuna yanked Daichi's hair harder, forcing the boy to tilt his head downward.

"Can I hold him next?" Hikari demanded, tugging on her brother's sleeve. When he was too busy
trying to gently pry Izuna's hand from his hair, Hikari twisted her legs around his leg and wrapped her arms around his torso. "Aniki?"

"U-um, hold on, imouto—"

Oh, how Izumi and Rin both wished they could take a picture of their children. Days had passed since they had arrived, waiting for the ill people (and Deidara) to recover enough to travel. Itachi, Udon, and Itsuki seemed to be doing well now, but Yukari and Shogo's grandmother were still iffy. Nevertheless, it'd been nearly a week, and it was time to continue whether everyone was completely able to or not.

"That's enough, you two," Rin admonished when Hikari's tugging nearly caused Daichi to drop Izuna. "Why don't you go play with Chihiro instead? She's looking a little lonely without Kisame."

"The knife girl?" Hikari asked.

"Kunai," corrected Izumi. "She's getting pretty good at using them, too. Why don't you ask her to teach you? It's always good to know how to defend yourself, especially... out here." Izumi herself had basic training with weapons and taijutsu, and Rin studied in a dojo before meeting Obito.

Daichi handed Izuna back to his mother, took Hikari's hand, and led her to where Chihiro was sitting in the room, looking a little lost. At the same time, Tenten approached, and they all ended up going outside with the supervision of Gai, who encouraged all sorts of training. By his side was Lee, who was now basically attached to the man after he showed him some attention. Anyone with a brain between their ears and a functioning pair of eyes could tell that Gai genuinely liked the boy, and they grew closer every passing day.

"Where is Kisame?" Rin wondered after a little while, letting Izuna play with her pointer finger.

"With Sakura," Izumi informed her. "Last time I talked to her, she said she was trying to make something to reverse the effects of monsterization."

She was—and she was using Kisame's odd healing factor and Mori's body as a foundation for her findings. There was an excited shriek from the kitchen, and they knew that she had made great progress.

The next day, they all prepared to leave the bunker, packing up everything. From all the weapons lying around, they all figured that Tenten's weapon training had really taken off with some of the younger ones. Naruto could now wield that three-pronged kunai of his more effectively than ever, and Konohamaru, Moegi, and Daichi had the basics of kunai throwing down. Shikamaru and Choji had both received basic taijutsu training from their fathers, and had sparred frequently with Tenten.

"There's a cave system over here," Shikaku pointed to the map, Kakashi, Gai, Itachi, and Sasori all looking over his shoulder, "that we can travel through. It'd be a better option than travelling out in the rain, where more of us could get sick, and it's high enough to avoid flooding."

"It's also an enclosed space," Sasori noted, frowning. "With limited sight."

Shikaku grimaced. "Yes—which is why I have to consult with all of you. Is the risk worth it?" His genius mind was telling him that it was, mostly because he had traveled through these caverns himself once, as a very young boy toward the end of the Great Migration, and it had been almost generously spacious. If they had to fight any monsters, they would still be able to do so. And the prospect of anymore monsters appearing was slim, even with Sasori reporting that he had spotted another one a few days ago, considering that their base camp was now cut off, and a
majority of their forces had been wiped out. The ones that they had seen since then were very likely stragglers that had crossed prior to the bridge incident.

There was debate, but in the end, it was decided that they would travel through the caves. The cold and wind would only make them sick—fatally so for some of them.

That was their first mistake.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: There is plot point that I want to reach next chapter, involving Sasori, Deidara, and probably a few others. Hopefully, it turns out well for me. There will be Hanabi and Hinata helping out with their Byakugans as well (we haven’t seen much of them, so ye).
Part III: Daffodil

Chapter Summary

It was like a nightmare, that could make you scream,

'Cause nobody wants to die too fast--

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rebirth, huh? In a different world, perhaps I would be able to further my understanding of it, though my grasp of it is adequate enough. Maybe I would name a technique after it. Creation Rebirth. It would be the pinnacle of medical jutsu. Humans are hairless, overgrown apes, but for all of our deficiencies and limitations, our higher-order thinking more than makes up for it, and the idea of rebirth—of a brand new start, of erasing the past and building the future—appeals to me. I think that's why I wanted to spare him that day. The man they called a monster.

— Excerpt from 'The Legendary Hokages and Other Important Political Figures of Konohagakure, Fifth Edition': Lady Senju Tsunade's interview

"Goodness, Arisa-san, who might this be?" an old woman inched her neck downward and forward to try and further glimpse the red-haired child hiding behind his mother's legs.

Arisa smiled at the elderly lady, who had been her neighbor for more than five years. The old thing was rather fond of gossip and cheating her relatives at mahjong, but Arisa was fond of her.

"Why haven't I seen him before?" demanded the woman. "We’ve known each other for so long—it's unlike you to keep such a thing from me. Why, I didn't even know that you have a child! Now how did that happen?"

"You were holidaying with your brother on the other side of Sunagakure, Rio-san. You were gone for almost the whole year," Arisa patiently explained, absently palming her child's hair and ruffling it affectionately. The little boy squeezed his eyes shut, a little blush appearing on his round face.

"Hm, I see, I see. Well, little one, care to tell me your name?"

Under his mother's encouragement, the little boy allowed his elderly neighbor to finally see him properly. "Sasori." His voice trembled a bit, but he was fighting hard to wrestle it to neutrality.

Rio was kind to him, and soon, Arisa sent her son off to play in the backyard while she and Rio discussed everyday matters. The conversation was looking to wrap up peacefully when Rio made a statement that had Arisa swerving hard.

"You know," the wily old woman said, "Chiyo told me over mahjong last week that several of the royal male concubines were murdered by a jealous acolyte, who committed suicide immediately
after his killing spree. The Empress and Emperor are both very displeased, and are sending guards and messengers into the cities to scout for more. To be frank, your son’s beauty is also his curse. The guards will undoubtedly take him away for a lifetime of servitude as a palace whore."

Almost frantically, Arisa turned her entire body toward the house, relieved to find that Sasori had migrated to the front yard to play with his wooden toy puppets, which were very expensive gifts from his grandmother, Chiyo.

"What do you suggest I do?" Arisa inquired fretfully, trying to wipe down her sweaty hands on her apron.

Rio eyed the street discreetly. "Chiyo will take him away." Clearly, she had already known about Sasori before today.

"Where?"

"To the Royal Puppet Corps, where she is a trusted commander and healer."

Arisa froze. Such a life promised assassinations and bloodshed. How could she ever condemn her son to such a life?

"Would a life of being someone's personal puppet be any better?" Rio reminded her sharply.

She must have said it out loud. Arisa swallowed, tucking her hands into her apron pocket, where the pentadactyl limbs continued to perspire rapidly. "I... I'll have to talk to my husband. He'll be back next week—"

"No time. The guards are coming to this part of the city in two days. Take your pick, Arisa—assassin or whore? At least as the former, he will have guidance from a trusted family member. The latter promises a cruel madam." Rio pulled at the collar of her garment, revealing a small tattoo on her shoulder, sadness clouding her eyes as she did so. "I'm past my expiry date. I live only to cheat my own flesh and blood from parting from their money. I have lost an entire lifetime—and he will, too, if you allow this... atrocity to happen."

Rio knew that Arisa had made her decision when she burst into tears, muttering something unintelligible about Chiyo looking out for the boy. In the front yard, Sasori had sat up straight, a curious gleam in his normally droopy brown eyes.

Arisa spent the rest of the day with her child, cooking with him and perhaps subtly teaching him the art of slipping poison into food at the same time. When he went to bed, stuffed full from chicken and ginger rice, she wept in her own room, yearning for the presence of her husband more than ever.

The next night, Sasori was whisked away to the secretive Puppet Corps, where he would learn how to quarter men more than twice his adult size with chakra scalpels, and how to control multiple killing machines at once with only his fingers. If the royal family ever ventured there—and they rarely did—they would see nothing but what they wanted to see.

So Sasori trained and faded into the dark, and only returned to the living world when his expertise was requested by the Royal Family, who were to appoint a new Royal Assassin.

"Here. Your first victim as my personal tool. Make sure the world knows who you are, and why you should be feared."

"Hai, Tennō Heika."
The cave was dark. The lamps they possessed were shared around, each person with a light source spreading out so that the light could touch as many people as possible.

"Watch your step," Sakura warned, grabbing Udon's arm with her free hand (the other held a lamp) and guiding him around the dip in the floor that would have surely caused him to twist his ankle and fall.

Udon sniffled. "Thanks, Sakura-san. Sorry about that."

"Slowpoke-Udon!" Konohamaru berated to try and lift the mood. His bespectacled friend looked absolutely miserable, and aside from the sickness, it was not difficult to tell why. They had seen more death than most ever did in their lifetime, and morale could only ever go up from here. Moegi gave him a disapproving glance, but Konohamaru ignored her.

"I said sorry!"

"You guys," Moegi growled, planting her fist softly down on both of their heads. "Stop fooling around. And don't be so loud."

"Huh?" Konohamaru was confused. "Why's that?" Then realization struck him and he lowered his chin, fearful. "Is... Is it 'cause of the monsters? I-I thought they were none left..."

Naruto, overhearing the conversation, sidled up next to the Sarutobi boy, fiddling with his three-pronged kunai. "You know how your voice echoes in here? It might cause a rockfall or somethin'."

"Really? Wow, you sure know a lot, Naruto."

"Isn't that avalanches?" Sakura muttered to herself, and even then she was skeptical. If she ever made it to Konohagakure, she would be sure to do some research on the matter. It would be a nice distraction.

At the front of the group, Hyuuga Hanabi had her Byakugan activated, and was beside Itachi, who was nodding slightly to whatever she was saying. She lifted her arm up, pointing ahead of them. Then Itachi lifted his hand up, and almost everyone halted at once. Naruto bumped into Sasuke's back, and the Uchiha shot him an irate glance.

"Fork in the road," Itachi announced, just loud enough for the people in the back to hear. "Shikaku?"

"Left," Shikaku said after some consideration. "If we were to go backwards, it'd be the left path."

"Are we seriously trusting this man?" Masami whispered to Asagi. "His memory could be shoddy for all we know!"

Asagi agreed quietly, but was inwardly unsure. Nara Shikaku was a genius, and she liked to think that someone with his brain would be able to pull up old memories from the past crystal clear. Her mother coughed and lurched then, and Asagi supported her, rubbing circles on her back.

Shogo looked up at his grandmother worriedly. "Are you okay, obaa-chan? Do you want some more cough medicine? I-I can get some from the medics!" He dashed toward Shizune, who was standing next to a lamp-holding Kisame, but Asagi pulled him back at the behest of her mother.

"Thank you, little one, but I'm already much better," the old woman reassured. Shogo, for all his child-muddled naivety, didn't look entirely convinced, but he left the matter alone anyway,
deciding that the next-best thing to do was to stick himself to his grandmother's side. Eventually, though, his grandmother needed some space, and Shoog was forced to stay a few steps away from her. He looked to Itsuki for company, but the tubby boy—he had lost a lot of weight, actually, but he still held some chub around his frame—was busy trying to get the attention of his mother, who was walking with Karin, thinking that she would be the first to know if a monster approached, and therefore the safest.

So Shogo turned to the only other boy around his age in the group: eight-year-old Daichi. He had his Sharingan turned on, two tomoe in his left eye; one tomoe in the other. He was looking around warily, and he kept it on until Hikari said that looking at the redness was hurting her eyes. Daichi noticed Shogo staring at him, and narrowed his eyes slightly. "Yes?"

Shogo wasn't very sure how to talk to the older boy. He seemed so much bigger—so much more intimidating and world-weary than an eight-year-old was supposed to be. There'd been other eight-year-olds in his old neighborhood, and none of them seemed nearly as intense as him. Then again, he had never seen any eight-year-old Uchiha children before.

Luckily, Hikari saved him from having to answer to the slightly scary boy. "Aniki, be nicer." She broke away from her mother's side—Rin looked vaguely amused, and perhaps a little sad, too, but Shogo couldn't really tell—and walked over to Shogo. She held his hand, holding their entwined fingers up for Daichi to see. "Like this, see?"

Daichi frowned, but his demeanor was slowly melting thanks to Hikari. "Yeah," he said gruffly. "But I'm not holding this hand. Hn."

"Did you just hn?" Deidara's incredulous voice came from behind them. "Not even Obito hn'ed without doing it ironically, hm."

"Actually, he did it plenty of times," Rin amended, and Deidara blinked at her, surprised. "When he was moody, or when a business choice didn't go right." She smiled softly, her eyes creasing a little at the corners. She was in her early thirties, Deidara was suddenly reminded, seeing those early signs of crow's feet. The age difference between them had never stopped them from being friends, but Deidara had never really acknowledged it like this. And come to think of it, wasn't her Danna well into his thirties as well?

"Huh. Glad he never did it around me, un, otherwise I would have—"

Sensing she was about to swear, Sasuke kicked the back of her ankle. She turned, shocked. "The hell, bastard?"

"Don't swear in front of my cousin."

Deidara stared at him in outrage and disbelief. This guy...! "After everything you did... After everything you put him through—!"

"Stop it, please!" Rin admonished, clenching her jaw. "This isn't the time or place. Sasuke, just..." She rubbed her temple, brows furrowed. "Stop talking, please. Stop talking."

Daichi had been silent throughout the whole exchange. He didn't break it, simply walking ahead. Hikari, shooting Shogo an apologetic look, untangled their fingers and trotted after her brother loyally. Rin picked up the pace as well to catch up to her children, leaving Sasuke and Deidara to each other.

"Don't ever talk to him again," Deidara seethed. "He doesn't need someone like you in his life."
Roughly, she shoved past him, wanting to be with just about anyone else but that piece of shit. Forget betraying the country—she didn't care about that too much in comparison; she wasn't of Ame origin—but betraying his friends and family? People who doubled as her friends and family? And Daichi—he had trusted Sasuke and looked up to him, throwing away his hero-worship of Itachi for him and spending almost all of his free time with him. They'd bonded during their training sessions, and Sasuke's betrayal had cut him deeper than the stupid emo-duck-haired-brat could ever possibly imagine—

She would have walked straight into Sasori had he not sensed her coming and moved out of the way in time. Deidara glared at him as if she had walked into him and it had been his fault. Then she turned her head away, facing the front and huffily crossing her arms. If a growl sounded from the back of her throat, both of them ignored it.

They walked side by side, enjoying each other's company without the need for words. If they wanted to converse (or, more accurately, if Deidara wanted to vent), they would wait until they weren't completed surrounded by others.

Everyone else seemed to share the general idea; if any of them talked, it was with low voices, as if they didn't want to disturb whatever entity resided in the earth. Their footsteps were muffled as well—those trained properly walked almost perfectly silently, their feet almost gliding against the smooth stone floor, but even the civilian members of the group had grown used to walking on the balls of their feet or going down heel first to avoid making as much noise as possible. It was a new habit instilled by their close and ever whispering friend, fear—a powerful motivator that could bring even entire countries to their knees.

They did not like fear. Because fear could just as easily guarantee their deaths as well as their survivals.

_Drip._

_Drip._

Udon sneezed just as a drop of water landed on Moegi's nose, causing the girl to blink and scrunch up her face. She flicked the water droplet away, it being a mere annoyance to her.

Then she glanced upward. Her eyes went wide. "Whoa..."

"What is it, Moegi-chan?" Sakura tilted her head up, lifting the lamp with her. But she soon found that she didn't need to do such a thing. In their path, bio-luminescent fungi started to grow in bunches along the cave walls, climbing up until they was wedged between stalactites that dripped with water from the recent rain. The glow reflected off the dew collecting on the stalactite tips, allowing the light to be reflected throughout the cave ceiling at random angles.

"Beautiful," Rin whispered in awe, also looking skyward. She smiled gently, only one corner of her lips quirkling upward.

"It really is," Asagi's mother concurred, her cough having disappeared for the meantime. "I'm glad I lived long enough to see this. I'm so glad."

"Kagami?" Shisui had noticed a pulse of chakra coming from the gender-ambiguous Uchiha. *Sharingan?*

"Just making some memories. Nice ones. I really need them." Kagami said in that usual drawl of theirs. They turned to him, Sharingan spinning contentedly. "You should, too, Shisui."
"You Uchihas," Kakashi said to Itachi, light jest in his tone. "Using your Sharingans as photographs."

The gray, suffocating cloud around the group morale lifted ever so slightly, many of them practically plunging for the opportunity to simply forget about reality for a little well, and entertain and awe themselves with one of nature's most magnificent sights—a beauty that most of them would only ever see once in their lifetime.

Deidara wondered how the light would look if she detonated one of her bombs there. It'd probably scatter all around the place in a frenzy, but that was the beauty of it. Trying to be everywhere all at once because such a state was fleeting. She noticed that her Danna seemed to be quite engrossed with the mushrooms as well, more than she had expected him to be. He looked so curious, so _innocent_ and untouched that she just had to smile, her ire with Sasuke slowly seeping away from her heart. _He's from Suna. He's probably never seen anything like this before._

Izuna had awoken from his nap—thankfully, the child was asleep most of the time—and was slowly gaining awareness, sluggishly turning his head left and right. His eyes were big, but they seemed bigger than ever, as if he was trying to absorb as much as possible. Infantile memory loss would likely ensure that he wouldn't remember any of this, though—all the better, truly, for these beautiful memories came with most monstrous ones. Nevertheless, Izumi adjusted her hold on him so that he would get a better view of the mushroom bloom. A drop of water fell from a stalactite and landed on Izuna's cheek, nearly getting his nose. The baby flinched, looking adorably and utterly confused as to what had just happened to him. Izumi laughed, kissing his forehead and brushing the cold liquid away with the pad of her thumb. She didn't realize that some of the travelers were giving her incredulous looks, nor did she notice that Itachi had looked back and was looking at them with the most loving expression that an Uchiha could ever produce.

Deidara had learned to read his eyes a while ago. He never said much, not that she minded, but his eyes conveyed more than words ever could. It was said that the Uchiha could love very intensely, capable of loving, and considering that most Uchiha seemed to have constant sticks up their behinds, she had never quite believed the myth.

Itachi completed erased any doubts she had in a split second.

All around her, people marveled, some quietly, others loudly (but not _too_ loudly). It was exhilarating for her—how such a fleeting moment of wonder and intrigue could exist completely knocked the breath out of her, and she could not speak for many moments, not even when Gai addressed her, pointing to a mushroom that was shaped like Konoha's symbol.

"It's amazing, isn't it? How long has this been here? An eternity?" Sasori had finally spoken, breaking the string of silence between them. Deidara turned to him, not entirely sure how to respond. She surprised both of them when she expressed something other than repulsion or dubiousness toward the idea of posterity.

"Maybe," she stated, a little awe in her tone as she tucked her canary's wing behind her ear to allow herself a full view of the glowing fungi. "I guess we'll never know, hm?"

Shikaku answered the question, turning around. "I have some vague memories of this particular tunnel, haha. It's a lot brighter than I remember, but I can tell you that they've been here since the end of the Great Migration at the very least."

Sasori made a noncommittal sound, tilting his head heavenward to appreciate the glowing fungi again. It was such a marvelous, stunning thing—a culmination of nature's finest, one that could have only been produced by the toils of time. It moved him, and it showed in the way he admired
it, as if he were gazing at the finest diamonds in the world.

Deidara had learned to read his eyes, too, even more so than Itachi’s, and a passing moment of contentedness washed over her, leaving her feeling light. At that very moment, it was like he had shed his chains and taken flight; he looked so—so—

Artless.

She thought she would have died without her art.

He caught her staring, but she didn't look away—had no reason to, especially when he didn't frown, a guileless expression on his face.

"Come on," Shikaku said in the end, addressing all of them. "We can't stay here, even if we want to. Our supplies will last us another two, three weeks at the most, so let's make the most of it."

"Yeah, let's!" Caught up in her own exhilaration, Anko cheered, managing to sound vicious and inspiring at the same time. "To Konoha we go—those rich bastards won't even know what hit them!" She got a few chuckles, and the gray cloud of oppression had almost completely dispersed.

There wasn't any battle cry caterwauled before they continued, but they needed none. They pushed forward, determined. The last two, three months had been absolute hell for all of them, and it was time to finally walk up the staircase the heaven—

Karin jumped when she felt something cold brush against her neck, breathing a sigh of relief when she realized it was only a slime of some sort, having been backed into the wall by the crowd. She rubbed the back of her neck, shivering from the cold draft that blew through the cave.

Why did it suddenly get so cold? It almost feels like...

Something's wrong.

Heavy breaths. Lolling tongues that stretched to the floor and piled in a disgusting twirl of black snakes.

They gathered around it, waiting to move off, their necks twitching impatiently from time to time. Dumb creatures. It was better than them all. It was growing faster, stronger, and more sentient by each passing hour, while they remained in their mindless states.

It paused, looking at a scar on its hand that had never healed for some reason. "Ha... Hanabi." A long-haired child, slashing at his hand—

One of its comrades twisted its neck in confusion. "Mrrgh? Haaaanaabeee, comrade?"

"Nooo..." It clutched his head, as if it were having a battle with its mind. "No, don't touch—Hyuuga. Kill. Eat. We will feast on the bodies of the worthless, and assimilate the useful. Zetsu commands it."

"Zetsu." Its comrades murmured the name in reverence. "Zetsu, Zetsu."

Don't march. Don't march. Don't—

"March."
They bayed like mad animals, and took off at top speed toward the Crystal Caves of Mount Fire. He had learned so in his studies—

"Worthless!"

"Gouge out his eyes!"

"He doesn't deserve the name of—"

Dirty, dripping jaws snapped, and it broke out of its reverie.

Karin suddenly dropped to her knees, screaming as a dark presence invaded the sensitive parts of her brain. It was like learning a new language for her—a language of teeth, corners, and angles—

"Oh my god!" Masami shrieked. "You scared the life out of me—!"

Karin's head snapped up and she stared straight at Masami, but it was like she wasn't even looking at her. Masami looked vaguely disturbed, and stepped away from her, but the red-haired teenager wasn't even seeing her anymore.

Sasuke, the closest to her, grabbed her arm and hauled her up roughly. "Are they coming?"

A weak nod.

"Turn on your Byakugan!" Sasuke suddenly snapped at Hinata, who was travelling near the back of the group.

"Wh-What—"

"Do it, Hinata," Kakashi said firmly, knowing that had little time to waste. "Tell us how far away they are, if you can see them. Your range is longer than Hanabi's."

Hinata looked terrified, but she pushed down her fear and cried out, "Byakygan!" Veins appeared around her eyes, and she reluctantly walked a few steps back so that her range of vision was longer.

Without really realizing it, the people began to huddle together, their minds telling them that there was safety in numbers.

"Oh my god," Hinata suddenly burst out, tears beginning to form in her eyes. "There—there...!" She shuddered, trying to compose herself for the sake of everyone. "At least thirty. And the one leading them... has a Byakugan, likely m-more p-powerful than m-mine!"

Overhearing this, Hanabi's eyes widened. More powerful than her's?! Hinata-nee has nearly a ten-mile range on her Byakugan, from all the times that our father pushed her, thinking that a powerful Byakugan would make up for her ineptness at taijutsu! I might be stronger than her, but my own Byakugan is only just shy of eight miles. Who—what kind of monster could exceed that range?

Everything was crashing down all around them. The wonder and awe that they had all experienced in the bio-luminescent mushroom tunnel rapidly changed into fear and anticipation.

"Shikaku!" Itachi sharply said. "Where next?"

Shikaku traced out a twisting path on a blank part of the map, which Itachi quickly committed to memory without even using his Sharingan.
They had little time to get themselves into proper formation, so the plan was simple: run.

If that beast had an extremely powerful Byakugan lodged in its head, then there was little doubt that it could see them perfectly. He wasn't sure if monsters could feel fear the same ways humans did, but Itachi switched on his Mangekyo Sharingan, a display of power.

Naturally, those who were able to fend the monsters off lingered near the back, so when the monsters caught up—they traveled at a much faster pace than the survivor group—they would be able to protect the others better.

Hanabi was in the middle of the pack, furiously debating with herself whether to keep running like a chicken with her head cut off, or to make herself useful by joining the fighters at the back of the fleeing group. Hinata was right behind her, thinking the same thing. But with the power of their Byakugans, they would easily be able to see the battle, so they remained where they were.

Their frantic footsteps echoed in the cave, and were soon joined by thumping, heavier ones.

*How could I have miscalculated so gravely?!* Shikaku was absolutely kicking himself, though he really couldn't have known. Sasori had sent out hunting parties day after, and none of his party members had ever been confronted by a single monster, let alone a whole pack.

"There they are, the ugly fuckers!" Anko spat when the Byakugan Monster appeared in her vision. She grinned wildly, looking unhinged and fearful at the same time. More appeared behind it, sporting all sorts of features. Each monster was unique, taking on traits that they had once possessed as human beings. Some had hair, others too-large teeth, and birthmarks blown completely out of proportion. The monster right behind the Byakugan Monster had quite a lovely mop of ginger hair on top of its bulging head, short, but sharp horns poking through the hairs. "DIE!"

A particularly eager monster that had ran past the Byakugan Monster had gotten to close for comfort, and was rewarded by Anko slicing off its arm with Orochimaru's old Kusanagi. Black-green liquid splattered across her front, but it only made her deranged grin stretch even wider. If she didn't fear being infected, she would have lapped up the spot of blood near the corner of her lip.

The Byakugan Monster eyed its writhing comrade with thinly veiled disdain, the type that Sasori only saw in the most refined aristocrats.

"Who were you? A Hyuuga, I assume, but... How did you get out of the city? A rogue? Chakra claws wrapped around his fingertips, his pensive frown deepening when he realized that they wouldn't be able to get out of this without a good bloodletting.

Well.

He was used to blood. Old blood, new blood, man's blood, monster's blood—in the end, didn't it all start out the same?

In a warm, living body.

So Sasori slashed mercilessly with his neko-tes, knowing his puppets would be little more than a hindrance in such a tight environment. Deidara was the same, forced to use a tanto she had borrowed from Shisui just minutes after Karin raised the alarm. It was a weapon that she was practiced in, more so than the bo staff that Tenten seemed to favor. The same bo staff which the bun-haired girl was now holding up defensively as she ran, her body angled sideways so she could jump into the fray if a monster got too close.
They couldn't fight like this anymore.

Kakashi, the furthest back from the frontlines, actually pulled down his mask and shouted in a voice louder than anyone had ever heard him use, "KEEP GOING!" He planted his foot in the dirt, skidding to a stop. "Everyone..." He put his mask back on again.

"Aa." Itachi narrowed his eyes at the monsters, which had slowed to a walk when they realized that the martial artists had stopped running. The civilians looked back once—Sakura looked especially torn—before they kept going.

Izumi looked at the sleeping babe in her arms. My darling... I'm sorry. She kissed the baby on the forehead one last time before passing the drowsy babe on to Asagi, the closest woman to her.

"Izumi-san, what are you—"

"Look after him," Izumi commanded, her eyes desperate. "Please. There are so many of them. I can't stand by idly anymore."

Asagi was horrified. "Oh, Izumi-san, you mustn't!"

"Asagi!" Izumi wiped her tears away with the back of her palm. "You owe my family, don't you? If you ever want to repay your debt to Itachi, let it be this!" She could see that there were over thirty of those things now, and they were hopelessly outnumbered. "You'll be his godmother. Rin has too much on her plate, and I trust you."

"Izumi!" Asagi screamed as the Uchiha woman disappeared, worming through the crowd, completely forgetting about the honorific. "IZUMI!" She wept, but her legs kept going and going until she reached where Sakura was ushering her mother and her son along. Her mother ended up clambering on a pale Hitoshi's back, while Shizune picked up Shogo and held him close in her arms, seeing as Asagi was clutching Izuna. The baby was awake by now, and, as if sensing something was wrong, began to cry. "Shh, shh," Asagi hushed, squeezing her eyes shut momentarily. "Dear boy... Oh, Izumi, please come back safe. Please."

Meanwhile, thunder was pounding in Deidara's ears as she sliced limbs off her opponents, unable to get close enough to safely skewer their hearts. Vines slammed against the cave walls with wild abandon, sending crumbles of rock and dust everywhere. It was like her entire mind had switched to a mode where she could not fully comprehend everything anymore—there was only one thing that needed to be done and that was to kill. These monsters had murdered her comrades, and done far worse to others. They deserved to die. Death was the only option for them. Blood nearly sprayed in her eyes when she managed to slice through some thinner vines with her chakra-laced short blade, nicking the face of the Ginger Monster. Those vines were strong enough to survive a C2 bomb, and that level of explosion had only charred the surface.

The Ginger Monster shrieked, outstretching its hands. Without warning, its already elongated nails grew at an exponential rate, nearly piercing Deidara in the heart. She managed to quickly skirt to the side, but the monster used this opportunity to smash her against the cavern wall with one mighty swing of the arm. But before she was finished, Shisui leaped in front of her, blocking the killing blow with his tanto.

She quickly scrambled up, stabbing the Ginger Monster in the heart through the back, while Shisui had it distracted. It deflated almost comically, becoming nothing more than a heap of skin on the floor.

A large stalactite fell from the ceiling, dividing Deidara and Shisui.
"Thanks," Deidara managed to gasp out, adrenaline still coursing through her veins as she desperately tried to refill her lungs with air. *Who's next?* she thought almost mechanically, swerving around to see Itachi actually stab his arm through a monster's chest, taking out its heart.

"Don't mention it, sunshine." With that, he was off, assisting Kagami with a particularly big beast.

'Sunshine'. She could have snorted at that, but there were other, more pressing matters currently at hand. Even though her body shifted into autopilot again, she wasn't completely blind to her surroundings. From all the vines being thrashed around, chunks of stone and rock were falling dangerously from the ceiling, and sharp stalactites cracked at the seams of the base.

*Cave-in,* her mind screamed at her. *Cave-in!*

It was precisely for this reason that Deidara wasn't able to use even the most minor of explosives in this battle. Not only was there a lack of space, but if she set off even a C1, she would probably bring everyone else down by causing the roof to collapse on them.

She didn't know how long she'd been fighting for, but, eventually, there were only nine left. Itachi had taken out most of them, which was impressive, as he wielded only a blunt kunai, Kakashi's amount of kills almost reaching the Uchiha prodigy's number. Kisame's sword, Samehada, was also quite effective at shredding monster hearts and flesh into bloody pieces.

But then she saw something that made her freeze. Somewhere along the way, *Izumi* had joined the battle. She was covered head to toe in blood and panting heavily, the Amaterasu she had learned from Itachi the only thing keeping her alive. She dodged left and right, carrying only a short sword. Near her, Sasuke was attempting to cut through a monster with thick skin with his slick-with-blood katana, clearly trying to make a monster-less path to Izumi, so he could protect her.

Deidara forced her tanto through a small monster's chest with a newfound energy, her focus shifting almost entirely to Izumi. Rocks were falling left and right now, and she could have sworn that the cave was actually *shaking*. She prayed that the civilian group had already exited by now, or at the very least far away enough to avoid getting caught up in the inevitable cave-in.

"KAKASHI!" Shisui suddenly screamed, the sound coming from the very back of his throat.

Kakashi was in the middle of getting himself untangled from a monster's vines, not noticing the gigantic stalactite that was falling toward him end-first. The vines hadn't even finished falling off of his body before Shisui was suddenly there.

Not even Itachi had the time to blink before the stalactite pierced through the torso and chest of the man that had once been his best friend, Kakashi righting himself from being pushed out of the way.

The silver-haired man's eye widened in shock. "No..."

For all his loudness, Shisui was surprisingly quiet in his dying. His eyes were glazed over, and he couldn't even speak as his soul slowly slipped away from his bruised and battered body. Then their gazes met: Itachi's and Shisui's.

A flurry of emotions—shock, disbelief, the telling silver linings of immense grief—were passing through the former's eyes at a rapid rate, as his genius mind attempted to process just *what* was happening before his very eyes.

A monster bayed.
"Itachiiiiiii!

A bead of sweat rolled down Itachi's neck as he stepped to the side, a flying blur whooshing past him at the speed of light. The blur skidded to a stop, sending a cloud of dust flying into the air.

"Shisui," Itachi sighed out. At four years old, his mother had decided that he needed more friends, and had set up a play-date with his cousin, Shisui, just one week ago. He was a few years older than Itachi, but his enthusiasm and instant attachment made his hackles rise. Itachi had never met such a person before, most Uchiha preferring to keep a stoic, unflinching mask on their faces. Itachi was one such example.

"Where're you going, Itachi?" Shisui asked, patting down his front to remove excess dust.

Itachi pointed to a nearby dessert shop, run by two perfectly polite Uchiha. "I wanted some dango."

"Wanted?"

"You're here now, so I don't see the point of going anymore. You'll just ruin it." It was rude, yes, but Itachi had just come out of training with his father in their private courtyard, and he could feel the welts his father had given him grating painfully against the back of his shirt. It'd been bamboo practice poles today. A similar, smaller type was used as a tool to cane undisciplined children. Humiliating.

Shisui wilted, feelings obviously hurt. But then he schooled his hurt into a mask, grinning broadly at Itachi. The gesture shocked him into silence. "Why don't I treat you then? Then old Fugaki won't have the pleasure of knowing he made you cry during training!"

Itachi stiffened. 'Fugaki'? The nerve! Speaking so derisively of his own clan head! "Uchiha do not cry." Strangely enough, he didn't feel the urge to reprimand Shisui, despite knowing how wrong it was.

"Did your dad tell you that?"

Yes. Yes he had, and Itachi had to admit he didn't really believe him. Though he was at the tender age of four, Itachi was smart enough to comprehend the vast range of human emotions—emotions that Uchiha were not exempt from exhibiting. But, still, he hadn't cried. Maybe a tear or two had slipped out because he was unused to the pain, but Shisui made it sound like he'd been wailing.

Watching Itachi zone out, a pensive frown on his face, Shisui rolled his eyes and walked around his cousin until he was standing behind him. Then he began to push Itachi toward the dessert shop, the younger boy's heels digging into the dirt. "Come on, Boy Wonder, let's get you your candy."

"Don't call me that."

"Itachin, then."

"No."

"Whyyyyy?"

God, this boy could whine and it wasn't even funny. But when Itachi found himself sitting at a table and eating delicious dango, his vexation slowly melted away. He'd been unkind to Shisui, he realized. His cousin had done nothing to deserve such treatment, other than being a little too overbearing in his displays of kindness and eagerness. Guilt flooded his heart, and he peered sadly down at his plate.
"What's wrong?" Shisui asked, concern in his gaze.

Nobody had ever been so nice to him before, other than mother.

"Do you..." Itachi hesitated. "Still want to be friends?"

Shisui's eyes lit up.

They were inseparable for a time after that. When Itachi discovered that Izumi existed and had a most wonderful garden patch, he had put Shisui aside for a while, immediately feeling bad afterward. He tried to include both of them in his circle as much as possible, and eventually succeeded.

But then Shisui grew discontent with the ways of clan, Itachi sharing his sentiments. But the difference was that Shisui had acted. Deep down, Itachi knew that the sort of change Shisui wanted to bring around was good, but his methods were questionable. How was openly challenging the clan and acting carefree any helpful? Before they knew it, they'd drifted apart, Shisui discovering new friends in Maito Gai and Uchiha Obito, a pariah in the Uchiha clan.

They still talked from time to time, but the something that had been there in their childhood had long but disappeared. With wistful smiles, they cut their losses, mostly going their own separate ways. Eventually, Itachi came to find the clan ways unbearable when the elders protested against him marrying the love of his life, Izumi, stating her too common for the likes of the heir. So Itachi denounced his position, and estranged himself from the clan, for good. Izumi's childhood home was burned down after the death of her parents, and her garden patch destroyed. She'd wept immensely that day, and had been almost inconsolable. She'd cultivated that garden since the age of five.

It hadn't been a happy parting, him and Shisui, but it hadn't been a sad one, either.

But—

He wished they hadn't parted at all.

Itachi froze, and Sasori noticed a monster—the Byakugan Monster—charging toward the Uchiha at unnatural speeds. It bellowed, but it was like Itachi was rooted to the ground.

"ITACHI!" Sasuke was nearly sliced in half by his opponent, forgetting about Izumi and trying to reach his brother. But he'd bee too late. "ITACHI! GET OUT OF THERE!"

Itachi... His body was moving before he even knew it, his pupils dilated and focused on only the rapidly closing distance between Itachi and the Byakugan Monster. He was one of the few that welcomed me when I came to Ame. I don't... Sasori lashed out, ignoring the anguished shriek of Deidara telling them both to get the fuck out of here and—

The Byakugan Monster bit down on Sasori's arm, fangs tearing through flesh and piercing the bone until the white ivory teeth appeared on the other side. The Byakugan Monster howled, continuing to rip at already torn flesh, and Sasori couldn't even scream, his brain completely disconnected from the pain.

But if he was going down, this motherfucking bastard was going down with him.
Itachi had finally snapped out of it, it seemed, and was horrified to find that Sasori had taken the blow for him, his mangled right arm still between the jaws of the monster as his chakra fluctuated dangerously, a chakra scalpel forming around his left arm. He stabbed the monster in the chest repeatedly, clumsily so that the wounds were ragged, and it screeched, vines flooding out of its back and wrapping around the Suna man, lifting him up until the lower half of his arm was almost detached from the rest of his body. The stabbing stuttered, Sasori’s face going white from shock, not even registering the blonde blur flying towards them.

Even in pain, the monster managed to avoid Deidara's blade—instead of plunging into its heart, the metal ended up in its intestines. Screaming in grief and fury, she grabbed the handle and twisted, dragging it through the monster's flesh diagonally. "DIE! YOU DAMN FUCKER!"

Silver and green had joined gold, Kakashi and Gai jumping into the fray as the cave fell apart.

"KILL IT ALREADY!" Kagami yelled, a Mangekyo Sharingan spinning in their eye. "This place is about to collapse!" The Byakugan Monster was the only one left, and the remaining fighters were hesitant to join in. They would certainly all perish if they didn't run now.

"Fuck it," Kisame muttered. "Anko, throw me your sword! Now!" The purple-haired woman complied, and Kisame dashed toward where the others were, dodging falling stalactites. "HAAAA!" Expertly, he sliced through the vines holding Sasori, and cut off the red-haired man's arm while he was at it. There was no way that the limb could have been saved. Not even Sennin Tsunade could put it back together.

Sasori was barely conscious at this point, the white-hot pain he was feeling from the stump of his arm just keeping him awake. Kisame picked him up and ran down the cave, shouting for Deidara, Kakashi, and Gai to leave it and run while they still could.

They did, looking back desperately at Shisui's pulverized body. Considering his torso was split open and his intestines were mush, he looked surprisingly peaceful in death. The rock was still on him, and too heavy for them to move off in adequate time.

We'll have to leave him, Deidara thought numbly, a heavy aching in her chest. Her stomach was flipping and her entire body was heaving from a combination of terror, grief, and sheer anger, but her mind felt calm. Run. Run, run, run. Just run. That's all you can do... Alongside her, her comrades kept the pace. That's all we can do. Shisui, Danna—Sasori—his arm—he'll turn—! A furious sob escaped her throat, and more threatened to sound but she pushed it back down. Fuck! This situation was so fucking hopeless—

Itachi was covered head to toe in blood. Deidara didn't know how he had gotten so messy in so little time, but she didn't care. She didn't care anymore. Nothing mattered. Nothing.

Danna—Sasori. Izumi. Izumi, you're alive. Thank god. Thank god. Gai's okay. Gai's still okay. I can still count the number of people I care about on two hands, not one—it made her want to laugh at the sheer absurdity of it—her eyes snapped toward a figure behind them.

The Byakugan Monster was chasing them. Well, not chasing them, but limping after them. It had undergone a strange metamorphosis, half of its bulky, gray body swapped for a more humanoid shape, a pentadactyl limb emerging from the end of its right arm. The skin was melting away at the face as well, revealing an almost delicate human face.

Monster. Rage bubbled in her stomach. This—this thing that had murdered and pillaged dared to take on a human form? She'd kill it. She didn't care about lives anymore—she'd fucking cut its head off and quarter it—
There was a resounding boom! as the cave collapsed behind them, leaving behind a mountain of rubble that blocked the entrance.

They met up with the group, their footsteps slowing down as they saw their wide-eyed comrades, huddled in fear. They'd thought they were monsters, covered in all that black blood and gore.

"Everyone's back!" Naruto blurted as he did a head count in his head. His heart sank. We're missing one. Who?

"Shisui's dead," Kakashi reported blandly, his voice devoid of any emotion. He stared straight ahead, as if he wasn't even seeing the people in front of him.

"Shisui?" Rin echoed in disbelief, her hands lifting to her mouth. "Oh my god..."

"Wait—who's that? Is he dead, too?" Hitoshi pointed at the bloody lump of human in Kisame's arms. Sasori's breath rose shallowly as he struggled to breathe properly. He looked so small and defenseless—as if he were a child rather than a man who could kill almost all of them if given the opportunity. His face was contorted in agony as he fought the disease of the Zetsu valiantly.

"His arm!" Shizune walked forward, her face tear-stained. "What—?"

"A monster bit him. I cut it off," Kisame stated, a haunted quality in his voice that hadn't been there before.

"You brought him back?!!" Masami cried.

Shikamaru grimaced at the sight of him. "It's obvious he's turned. I... I don't want to say this, but—"

He stopped abruptly.

"His chakra is changing," Karin said lowly. "It's changing..."

Hinata grabbed her sister's hand and squeezed it, fear evident on her face as she regarded Sasori. That poor man. They would have to kill him now, wouldn't they? None of them said the words out loud, but they hung in the air.

But then Sakura was there, and there was a syringe in Sasori's jugular. Whatever she had injected in him was like liquid fire, and he shouted, lurching upward and struggling in Kisame's grip.

"He's turning!" Karin screamed in fear, feeling the chakra turning even darker.

"KILL HIM!" Masami said the words first. "I KNOW HE'S VALUABLE, BUT WE HAVE TO KILL HIM!"

No. Nononono—Deidara's entire frame shook, the fury that had encompassed her body just minutes ago returning with a force that nearly swept her off her feet. Gai tried to grab her shoulder to calm her down, but she slapped his hand away. These... bastards! They're really going to kill him! The turmoil that had been building up in the pit of her stomach exploded, and she stormed forward and slapped Masami across the face, chakra laced throughout her hand.

A tooth flew out of the woman's mouth as her head snapped to the side. The area was already beginning to redden and swell, and tears brimmed in Masami's eyes. "Wh-wha—"

Suddenly, something changed, and the wretched, hissing scream that Sasori couldn't keep down ripped Deidara's heart in half, and she was certain the sound would haunt her for the rest of her life—for all eternity, for all posterity. A white, plant-like substance started to emerge from the stump
of his arm, and everyone looked on with fascinated horror as it formed an arm—completely with a hand, fingers and all. There was a slick sheen on the newly grown limb, similar to the liquid one would find on a newly born baby.

The screaming died down soon after that, and Karin shuddered once more before relaxing. The dark chakra was gone from his body. Shizune looked in awe to Sakura. "You did it. The cure worked."

Sakura burst into excited, hopeful, blubbering tears, laughing and crying at it all.

"Life is already so short," Choji suddenly said. "No one should have to die too fast."

Numbly, Deidara walked toward Kisame, peering down at Sasori, who was now asleep, his timeless face looking more worn and weary than she had ever seen it.

Wake up soon, Danna.

Everything was just starting to calm down when the footfall of an unknown reached their ears.

"What now?" Anko hissed, whirling around. "If it's that Byakugan bastard—"

A man—no, a teenager—with long, unkempt hair appeared, walking toward them in a daze, as if they weren't all roughing it in a cave and instead having an afternoon at the park. He opened his mouth, but closed it when he was met with hostile stares.

Deidara was prepared to kill him and be over and done with it when Hinata's trembling voice carried through the cave.

"N-Neji-nii-san?"

"What's your name?"

She blinked at the casual, outstretched hand belonging to the Uchiha. "Deidara. No family name, hm. Have I met you before...?"

He scratched his head. "No, I don't think so? It might have been one of my relatives. There're a lot of them wandering around these parts. But never mind that, welcome to Akatsuki, Deidara!"

A wry smile had her lips quirking upward. "Thanks...?"

"Shisui."

She shook his hand. It was so warm, just like his smile and heart. "Thanks, Shisui."

In real life, he'd treated her to dango and introduced her to Gai. But this time, painfully, he turned his back on her and walked away with a sad smile, disappearing into the Akatsuki crowd.

Deidara simply stood there, helpless to watch her first friend in Akatsuki vanish from her life forever. She tried to chase after him, but her feet were bound to the cobblestone and her voice was restricted to a whisper that would never reach his ears.

His dreams were haunted by gnashing teeth and baying howls. It was like Karin had said—they hid in the corners, and he could always find them at the angles. Waiting. Always waiting.

Monster, monster. A man screamed in the distance as his chakra neko-tes eviscerated him. All of his past victims were burned to the back of his eyeballs, and he would forever see himself, the
person he'd once been and still was—Akasuna no Sasori—repeating the acts over and over again.

His parents were the final victims. Even if he hadn't struck the finishing blow, the blood was still on his hands.

"Maybe I'll tell you about myself someday, brat. About what I used to do in Suna and my family. About... Hatake."

Why, though?

He had controlled everything. He was a puppet master. He had controlled how the people perceived him, and made sure that they would only ever know him as Sasori, a normal, working-class man with a taijutsu and puppet-making hobby.

I thought I could control her, too. Contain her. And I could have.

But...

She had proven herself to him over and over again—she was an emotional brat, but she was also a loyal comrade and someone who he wouldn't mind spending the rest of his life with. Even if he didn't deserve her.

His parents faded away into dust, and so did Akasuna no Sasori.

Wondering why they hadn't killed him when they'd had the chance, Sasori awoke.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: My mother's blender turned on by itself and I got so terrified; I thought the blender was haunted or something. Turned out she (mom) just preset it to blend at a certain time. Gosh. And if you're wondering what the contents were, it was almond malted milk. I think, anyway.
Part III: Primrose

Chapter Summary

Monsters don't appreciate art, Danna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Life is already so short." Why did Shikamaru feel like those words were directed to him—or, more accurately, the words he'd been unable to suppress when it looked bleak for Sasori and all of them. "No one should have to die too fast."

Shikamaru tossed Choji a sideways glance, a heavy feeling settling uncomfortably in his heart. There were no tears from his friend, but there was a looming sadness in his eyes that spoke a thousand words. He looked away.

Because, you see, Shikamaru reacted to situations by not reacting at all. It was building up slowly and eating him away on the inside—had been ever since Ino died. He didn't like to show it, but her absence affected him more than anyone would ever know.

There was a sudden coldness in the air, and Shikamaru didn't have any more time to dwell on his thoughts.

A man—actually, no, teenager; he didn't look like he was much older than Shikamaru himself—approached them, managing to look haunted and surprised at the same time. The surprise doubled when his gaze landed on the Hyuuga sisters, Hinata and Hanabi.

Then Hinata spoke, and Shikamaru realized that he recognized the newcomer.

"N-Neji-nii-san?"

Dazed by his appearance, Hinata stumbled forward, only for Hanabi to yank her back by the arm.

"No, Hinata-nee!" the younger Hyuuga cried. "We don't know if it's actually him or not! He could be a monster!" She spat out the word with a hatred that Shikamaru could relate to. Her voice grew hysterical. "There was a monster with a Byakugan, wasn't there? I bet that's him!"

"Obviously." Anko unsheathed Kusanagi.

"Wait!" Neji, clearly realizing that he was going to be dismembered, beheaded, or both, held his hands up in a surrender, shakily getting down on his knees. Then he fixed the position of his arms behind his head. Anko approached anyway, holding Kusanagi and looking very much like an executioner. "I—"

"Monsters don't get last words," Anko stated coldly.

"Hold on, Anko." The words slipped out of Shikamaru's mouth before he could even register them. The leaders were shaken up right now—Kakashi stared hauntingly at Neji, Gai was eerily silent, and Itachi was covered head to toe in blood and was lost in his own, silent grief. The others weren't
But Choji's words—they were intended for him, he was certain—struck a chord in him.

"Excuse me?" Anko didn't turn around. "I would love to hear you justify this, kid, but why don't we talk about this later, hm?!"

"Kill him already." Deidara's voice was dangerously soft. "Do it, Anko, before I do."

Shikamaru wracked his brain, eventually coming up with in record time, "He's a Hyuuga, isn't he? Doesn't this make this a clan matter? We have the two heiresses here with us. His fate is within their jurisdiction." At least then, Hanabi aside, Neji would have a fighting chance with pleading to Hinata.

"Are you fucking shitting me right now?!" Anko did whirl on him this time, confident that Neji wouldn't be attacking anytime soon. "We are not in Ame or Konoha! Fuck your jurisdiction—none of that matters out here, you hear me?! His kind killed Taro and so many more!"

"WAIT!" Hinata shouted. She pushed forward, placing herself between the kneeling Neji and Anko and shielding him with her body.

Hanabi was dreadfully confused and infuriated. "What are you doing?"

"Don't kill him. Please." For once, Hinata did not stutter, even if she swallow a lump in her throat before continuing. "I don't think he even k-knows what he did. I-I can see it…"

"Bullshit!" snapped Deidara, and Shikamaru stepped aside for her. "Don't be an idiot, hm!" Hinata hadn't seen what her precious relative had done to Sasori, how that kneeling monster in human skin tore his body apart like a ragdoll. "He's not human, anymore, he's a demon!" Her cheeks were flushed in anger, and she looked ready to explode at any moment.

"He isn't!" Hinata argued. "Karin-san didn't sense anything bad, did she? If anything happens, I-I'll take full responsibility for it."

"Oh? I don't see how you can, seeing as you'll be the one he kills first, hm." Deidara stepped forward, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Anko, who was looking approving for the first time since all this started. "And even if that wasn't the case, that will just mean you'll be responsible for someone else's demise. Can your conscious handle that, Hinata-chan? Hm?"

Hinata steeled herself for what she would say next, closing her eyes. "Y-You really are a hypocrite, Deidara-san. 'How dare they kill him'. That was what you were thinking w-when Sasori was on the verge of d-death, wasn't it?" Deidara's furious chakra was permeating the air, and Hinata struggled to continue, feeling choked, "How… is this any different? In the end, they're b-both human."

"Kid," Anko began in warning, but Deidara talked over her.

"Is that what you really think? You must be delusional. This is entirely different situation—your nii-san lived as a monster. He still is. Sasori has never been a monster, hm." Her words seemed to breathe some life into Kakashi again, who stiffened. "You wouldn't be saying these things if he wasn't a Hyuuga!"

"You're right!" Hinata straightened like a ramrod after being berated, shocking all of them, who
had only ever registered her as a weak-willed wallflower. And perhaps she was, but there was more to her than that. "But that's the c-case for you, too, isn't it, Deidara-san? I'm defending Neji because he's my family—because I love him. I'm the same as you; you defended Sasori-san because he is someone you love and care about!"

Hanabi looked down to the floor. "Hinata..."

Deidara was stunned into silence for a moment. "That—"

In the distance, they could hear the cave crumble, sending vibrations down the system.

"We need to go!" Rin voiced what they were all thinking, grimacing up at the ceiling as she protectively held her children close to her. "It isn't safe here."

She was right; they all knew that. In the dark, they didn't know what time it was, and their only resolve was to simply keep going.

When they emerged from the cave, it was nearly sundown. It was almost as if the world had changed, actually. Behind them, the clouds had been grey, and it had rained almost perpetually. On this side of the mountain, the sun could be seen, and the skies were a splash of oranges and pinks.

Izumi, Izuna now back in her arms, took a deep breath of fresh air, cleansing her lungs of the stale cave air.

There wasn't another bunker for miles, so they set up camp on the rocky landing just outside of the cave. They had a high view, and would be able to see any monsters coming from far away. Not to mention, they had the Hyuugas' Byakugan eyes on their side, as well as Karin's hypersensitivity to chakra (but considering her violent reactions to monster chakra, there was definitely a drawback). When the malevolent chakra wasn't overpowering her senses, however, she could sense even the smallest creature in the forest. She described their chakras as if they were a separate language to their own, like music attuned to the melody of the natural world. It was something she heard all the time, and got used to.

They were too exhausted, too shaken to hunt, and Sasori was obviously out of commission. So they settled for devouring some of their rations, which were carefully removed from a storage scroll that Kakashi held on to. He did it without complaint, without even eye-smiling obnoxiously at Hitoshi, who was the first to decide that they needed to eat.

A fire was soon up and burning, the people sitting around it to warm themselves. Beneath them, the cold stone sucked the heat from their bodies, so they kept close to the bonfire. It was almost like their early days out here again, when the war had only tilted the earth a little way around and there had been no monsters lurking around at every corner. But there was a gaping abyss among them, where living bodies had once been, threatening to swallow them whole; the coldness chilled them, as if they were standing alone in an empty space, and not their upside-down world.

Their distrust for Neji was blatantly obvious. They spoke not a word about him, or to him; but, rather, they sat as far away from as possible, sneaking glances toward his eerily still form from time to time. Even Sasuke was more well-received, Izumi have no objections to having her husband's little brother seated to her left.

Sasuke had just finished eating when he discovered Izuna tilting his head backward over his mother's bicep, staring up at him. He almost shivered. His nephew had the exact same eyes as his father, shape and all. Nonetheless, he was drawn to him, but refrained from touching him.
Naruto, seated on Sasuke's other side, was chewing his food when he leaned forward to see Sasuke's too-blank expression. A knowing glint came into his eye. "Ne, teme, why don't you just ask, 'ttebayo? If you can hold him, that is."

Sasuke's default scowl deepened, but his expression softened as he looked toward his baby nephew. Izuna reached chubby one arm out and stretched it behind him. Very hesitantly, Sasuke lifted his own calloused hand.

Of course, someone just had to open their mouth.

"What are you doing?" Tenten inquired suspiciously, spotting the subtle movement. Sasuke opened his mouth to make a cutting retort, but Izumi spoke up first.

"It's okay, Tenten." She'd noticed Sasuke's fidgeting long ago. Izumi shifted her body so that she was facing Sasuke. She held Izuna a little out, and Sasuke almost recoiled. He looked so breakable from this angle. He was smaller than the average baby—of that, Sasuke was sure. Was it just genetics, or had the environmental conditions of this godforsaken place taken more of a toll on Izumi than he'd first thought? Still, his being on the small side didn't stop Izuna from trying to grab Sasuke. But this time, Sasuke didn't reach out again, suddenly conscious of the blood he had on his hands. No—no, he didn't want to dirty him. Sasuke dug his nails into his palms, causing little half-moon indents to appear on the skin.

_This shouldn't be me_, he thought desperately. _I shouldn't be the one sitting here with my family, it should be—_

Deidara got up abruptly from her spot and walked away, announcing shortly that she would be going off for a little bit.

—_Shisui_. Kind, clever Shisui, who seemed to be friends with everyone. He was uncle material, not Sasuke. Not Sasuke, who had abandoned his family in their greatest time of need to serve a rogue relative.

Izumi glanced worriedly after Deidara. She saw Rin looking like she was about to get up and go after her, and made up her mind. Rin had Daichi and Hikari to look after—both children were a little shaken after the last attack. Sasuke grew paler than she'd thought he could get when she passed him the blanket-swathed Izuna. "Look after him for me, Sasuke-kun." Then she arose, lifting her arms up in a stretch. "If he gives you any trouble, ask Itachi." A small smile graced her features as she padded off toward the direction Deidara had gone.

Sasuke and Itachi exchanged a look, the former holding Izuna more awkwardly than he would have liked.

"Itachi," Sasuke began awkwardly.

"Sasuke, here." Reluctantly, Sasuke gave Izuna to Itachi, the baby bewildered from their parting. That would probably be the last time Sasuke ever got to hold him. It disheartened him, but he would understand. But then Itachi mirrored Sasuke's previous positioning of Izuna and fixed his mistake. "Hold him like this, so his neck is supported."

"I-I see." Uchiha _weren't_ supposed to stutter, but Sasuke felt almost giddy as Izuna was returned to his arms. Remembering what his brother had showed him, Sasuke amended his hold. "Like this?" He had a bead of sweat dripping down the side of his cheek, and his eyebrows were furrowed in deep concentration.
Itachi, face darkened slightly by the monster blood that had stained his skin before he'd wiped it off, smiled wearily. "Aa."

"Are you sure about this?" Sasuke muttered. "Why are you—?" Whatever he'd been about to say next turned into a splutter when Itachi poked his forehead.

"Foolish little brother," Itachi said affectionately. "Why would I ever deny you from him? You're his uncle." Despite the light teasing, his eyes were somber, something that Sasuke didn't miss. I have enough regrets, otouto. Don't make me die with even more.

Swallowing the annoying lump in his throat, Sasuke forgot all about the stain on his soul, and touched Izuna's tiny, breakable finger with his own. It was like they were meeting for the first time. The tension in Sasuke's shoulder heightened for a split second before he relaxed. "Hey... Izuna-kun."

Deidara sat on the part of the hilltop where rocks and pebbles gradually turned into grass. Beyond her was a field of long grass, blowing gently in the night. Beyond even that were a stretch of trees that still kept their leaves, even in the winter. Perhaps if one stared at her from the distance, she would look to be the pinnacle of serenity, but in every cubic centimeter of her body, she waged a war with herself.

She knew, slowly, that she was being disassembled. Almost nothing was going right, and her own mind was just as much of an enemy as Tsukigakure or the monsters. She would not succumb to it, but it was as if she was slowly being pulled down, the only thing keeping her afloat intense fury and the small, minuscule hope that she wouldn't have to lose any of them.

Her fingers twitched, urging for something to do. She was never really the one to keep still.

A particularly cold wind crept down the back of her neck, and she pulled her legs toward her chest. Beneath her tatty Akatsuki cloak, the green gi she'd been wearing was even dirtier, fabric scraping almost painfully against her oily, blood-covered skin. She'd wiped most of it off, but she could still feel it there, sealing a layer of dust in between skin and bloodstains.

The ground crunched behind her, but she didn't turn around. Another figure crouched beside her for a moment before sitting down cross-legged.

Then she spoke, choking on her own tears, "I'm so sorry."

Deidara's eyes reached half-mast. "What for, hm?" Izumi's arms wrapped around her, but she still felt cold. The other woman began to shake as she cried, Shisui's name on her lips, but the blonde's eyes remained dry. The whirlpool continued to thrash inside her, but nothing escaped from her body—it was almost as if she was no longer in touch with reality, simply staring out into the distance unmovingly.

Shisui was dead and Sasori's life hung on the thinnest thread.

And she could do nothing about those two things.

Eventually, Izumi's sobs stifled, and she merely laid her head on Deidara's shoulder.

"Are we ever going to make it?"

Izumi's eyes shifted upward as Deidara spoke, her voice hoarse with the most terrible grief that the Uchiha woman had ever heard. Her own heart twisted in agony, and she had to take a deep breath
to keep herself calm. "That's a really unfair question to ask me, you know."

A bitter feeling encased her heart. Of course it was. Izumi was not the right person to ask this question. None of them were.

Izumi's fingers entwined with Deidara's. "Hey, we'll get through this. We'll stay strong. Survive." Her voice was wavering with uncertainty, but she ploughed on. "And then we'll mourn everyone. Give them a proper funeral. We'll remember them forever."

A noisy bug chirped in the grass by Deidara's feet. She looked down, bangs falling further past her chin. Her hair had always been long, but it'd grown out to a point where it would be more difficult to manage properly. If Izumi's words ever came to fruition, she would trim it.

"He's going to be okay."

At that, Deidara straightened, giving Izumi a look. "What?"

There was a ghost of a smile on her face. "Sasori, of course. Deidara, you're one of my closest friends—did you really think I wouldn't notice? Not to mention, you don't hide it very well. Masami-san is still nursing her cheek."

"She deserved it, hm!" Deidara said sharply, her brewing anger lashing out like a whip for a split second. Sometimes, she felt as if she were burning, and it wasn't from the outrage she felt from today's incident. It was as if ghost-like hands were pressing against her chest, setting her lungs on fire and making her heart ache, condemning her for allowing them to die—Hitomi, Ino, Sawako, Shisui...

"Of course," Izumi said agreeably. "But we digressed—the point is, I understand. If that were Itachi in Kisame's arms, I... I wouldn't even know what to do." Her voice quietened to a small whisper in the night. "I'd be beside myself. I'd shut down. He and Izuna... they mean the world to me."

Her voice was so sincere. It almost made her shiver. At least out here, if gave in to the impulse, she could blame it on the cold. "I'm terrified," she admitted. "I don't want him to die. I don't want anyone to die, hm."

But never, ever him. Not my Danna.

They say in silence for a bit, enjoying the evening as much as they could.

"So," Deidara started, desperate to lighten the weight on her shoulders, "I hear that Asagi's Izuna's godmother now?"

Izumi smiled sheepishly. "Already? Word travels fast. Who did you hear from?"

"The scar-nose guy. Iruka, un."

"It was a spur of the moment thing," Izumi explained. "But I don't regret it at all. I could have made it you, but you're a bit young, haha..."

"I'm nineteen," Deidara sniffed, cracking a small smile. "You've got five years on me, tops."

"Still. Izumi winked at her. "Don't want to saddle you with too much responsibility."

The small talk went on for a little longer before Deidara stopped trying to establish any sort of normalcy. "How is he doing? Sasori-no-Danna, that is, un."
"You'd be better off asking Sakura that," answered Izumi. She rubbed her arms as the mountain breeze kissed her skin through her clothes easily. "We should go back, or we'll freeze out here."

"Yeah," Deidara stood, helping her up, "you're right." Going back to camp meant facing Neji again, but she'd just have to deal with it and count on her sanity. Snapping at him wouldn't do them any good, even if the Hyuuga made Sasuke seem more forgivable.

Chihiro could have sworn she heard an owl hooting in the distance. It fascinated her to no end. Growing up in the city, she'd never seen or heard an owl before. The first half of their journey to Konohagakure was something she would like to erase from her memory forever, but she recalled that there'd been very few animals around.

Kisame passed her a can of goop. She looked down at it. She'd eaten worse. At least the fire was warm. Greedily, she slurped it up, thanking the shark-man between wet mouthfuls. It tasted completely unnatural, but food was food.

She hadn't seen the fighting, but there'd been a heavy atmosphere ever since the martial artists rejoined the civilians. The child could feel grief and sorrow permeating the air, and she wondered if she could ever comprehend it to the same extent as the adults.

"What's wrong kid?" Kisame noticed her glumness.

"Everything," Chihiro whispered. "Everyone is so... How many more, Kisame-sensei?"

"I don't know, kid." Kisame heaved a great sigh, nearly unbalancing the bandaged sword strapped on his back. "Hey, don't ask so depressing questions, okay?" He ruffled her hair, and she looked up at gloomily. "Chihiro-chan, don't think about them."

"How can I not?" She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, licking the sauce that had transferred from the corners of her mouth to her skin. Chihiro's voice dropped to a whisper as she raised her eyes slightly to observe Neji, who wasn't eating. The Hyuuga boy was merely sitting with his head down, surrounded by people with deadly talents, yet seeming so alone. Everyone is looking at him like he's a...

"Monster," Chihiro heard Masami mutter from close by, and she thought the woman was talking about Kisame at first. She had her mouth opened, ready to defend the shark-man, when she realized something.

Tenten stood up and grabbed Chihiro's arm when the little girl started toward Neji. "Chihiro! What are you...?" The bun-haired girl eyed Neji distrustfully, her grip on Chihiro's wrist tightening. "Don't."

"But he hasn't eaten anything," Chihiro protested.

"Oh, trust me, I'm sure he's eaten plenty," muttered Tenten, pulling Chihiro back to her place.

While Chihiro glanced at her confusedly, Hinata tensed up. She knew her friend only had the best for all of them in mind, but a part of her wanted to jump to Neji's defense. It was foolish of her, she knew, but—

"Listen." Tenten's voice sounded next to Chihiro's ear. "He isn't like Kisame, who only looks misleadingly scary. Chihiro, promise me you'll stay away from him."

She didn't want to promise, but Tenten's voice was stern and pleading at the same time. "Okay,"
she agreed quietly, "I will."

Tenten let out a breath of relief. "Thank you." She picked at her food for a little before saying, "I was fighting, too, you know. I didn't do much, mostly assisting the others. But I saw the Hyuuga in his true form."

"How can you tell which is which? Hinata-san seems to trust him enough."

"That's because she's biased," Tenten tried to explain as objectively as possible. "They're family, remember?"

"I guess it makes sense. It's like how you're like a sister to me, Tenten." Chihiro snuggled into the crook of her armpit.

Tenten faltered. "I suppose—"

"I'd still love you even if you became a monster."

"Oh." Tenten's voice was soft, more uncertain. Gently, she put her hand on Chihiro's head, ruffling her hair, not knowing really what to say to that.

"Hey, Sasuke, can I hold 'im?" Naruto asked, peering curiously down at a quiet Izuna. Quiet didn't mean asleep, though, and the baby was very much awake and trying to pull at Sasuke's bangs. He looked up at Itachi. "Uh, I mean, if you don't mind, 'ttebayo."

Itachi smiled. "Of course not, Naruto."

"Tch!" Sasuke glared at Naruto. "You'd better not drop him, dobe."

"Geez, teme! Have a little more faith in me, will ya?" He stuck his tongue out at Sasuke as he received the baby from the younger Uchiha brother. Eyes growing wide, he broke out into a grin almost instantly. "Aww, hey little guy! You can call me Naruto-nii if you want. Can you say Naruto-nii?"

Sasuke scoffed. "He's three weeks old, Naruto."

"Then I'd better start making sure that his first word is, 'Naruto-nii', dattebayo! I'll be the fun uncle and everything—y'know," Naruto rolled his eyes at Sasuke, "since you can't, with that giant stick up your—"

"Naruto," Itachi interjected sternly, noticing that Izuna seemed enraptured by the blond.

"—fun-zone!" Naruto amended at the last second.

Daichi choked on his food, shooting them an incredulous look. "'Fun-zone'?"

"Daichi." Rin gave her son a suspicious narrowing of the eyes. "You'd better not know what that means, ne?" Daichi resembled a deer in headlights for a moment, and Rin chuckled.

"O-Of course not! Hn!" Red-faced, Daichi turned away.

Hikari blinked lazily at her brother. "Aniki's being weird again."

"Hmph. Well, he is prepubescent," Chiyo's ancient voice came from the left. "It's only natural."
Meanwhile, Sasuke and Naruto were butting heads over the most minute of things. Sasuke fussed every time he found a mistake in Naruto's hold, from the head not being supported to the neck being too constricted or the blankets not being tight enough, he found something to complain about every twenty seconds. From the side, Itachi watched them with some amusement, the fire reflecting in his coal eyes.

"Boys." Both Uchiha and Naruto glanced upward to see Sakura standing over them with her hands on her hips. She took Izuna from Naruto, the blond giving little resistance. Then she proceeded to tuck him close to her breast, the baby gurgling contentedly. "Like this, Naruto. See?"

"That's what I was trying to tell him all this time," grumbled Sasuke. "But how do you know, Sakura? You hold it exactly like my brother, actually."

Sakura smiled. "Who do you think taught it to him in the first place?"

Naruto and Sasuke both whipped their heads to the side to see a very small blush on Itachi's cheeks. Funnily enough, Itachi remained completely straight-faced.

"I never got to thank you for that," Itachi said.

"It's no problem." Sakura gave him a thumbs-up. "I'm just doing my duty."

"Stop that." Sakura almost jumped when Sasuke suddenly spoke up. "It's not just your duty."

"Besides," Naruto added, "you saved Sasori-sama's life today, and thanks to you, we have Byakugan-guy under control. You're a hero, Sakura-chan."

Sakura swallowed, looking slightly frazzled as she fought back tears. "Guys..."

"Thank you." Itachi cut off any protest that might have come from her. "For saving my friend."

Sakura closed her eyes and tried to breathe steadily as she handed Izuna back to Itachi. "I... I really want to hug you guys right now."

"What's stopping ya?" Naruto retorted, grinning widely as he stood and opened up his arms. Returning the smile, Sakura embraced him tightly, and the blond blushed slightly. Then Sakura extended her hand down to the still-sitting Sasuke.

"Sasuke?" she prompted hopefully.

"Yeah, come on, teme, it'll help fight off the cold, 'ttebayo."

"Hn." Grunting, Sasuke stood without taking Sakura's hand and awkwardly shoved himself against the two. Naruto was right, he had to admit. It was warm. He couldn't remember the last time he had been in such close proximity to others.

As they hugged it out, Naruto and Sakura forcefully trapping a grumbling Sasuke in their hug and not allowing him to escape, Gai poked at the fire with a cold stick, round eyes flicking to the man beside him every few seconds. There were tears in Gai's eyes, and it wasn't just from the smoke. Kakashi was so silent next to him, and it hurt every fiber of his being. The loss of Shisui made him ache even more, to the point where if one looked closely, they could notice him shuddering.

"Kakashi-kun," Rin, sitting on the other side of Kakashi, touched his shoulder lightly, "Hey, turn around." Kakashi did, and Rin's face fell at the tell-tale shadow of grief in his lone eye.
The silver-haired man reached to her for a second, wanting to pull her close and never let her go, lest she fade away. But he faltered, arm dropping to his side. "Yes?" he asked lightly, as if that hadn't just happened.

Narrowing her eyes at him, she grabbed his hand. "Don't push me away. Please." Her eyes dropped. "I can't lose another person I love." It wasn't just her either, and Kakashi didn't protest when she drew him into a hug.

Slowly, he melted into her touch. "I'm sorry, Rin. I couldn't save him."

"Shisui?" Her voice was tinged with sadness. "Kakashi—"

"Not just him." He pulled back a little, and Rin was able to glimpse that bare grief in his eye again. *Obito.* The name of the man they had both loved and cherished hung in the air.

"Don't." Rin murmured. "Don't, please. Never. I've never blamed you for it. You are not accountable for anybody's death."

Oh, but if he had been faster, been more aware—

Kakashi squeezed his eye shut, sinking into his what-ifs.

"Um, Kakashi-oji?"

He opened his eye to see Hikari looking up at him. "Yes?"

"What okaa-chan said is true. I miss otou-san very much, but I'm glad you're still here to comfort okaa-chan. Thank you, Kakashi-oji-san."

"Yeah," Daichi put in, looking a little less friendly than his sister, but earnest nonetheless. "Look after our mom, okay? You're supposed to be friends."

Kakashi froze up, staring at the children. For an instant, he saw Obito standing behind them, grinning as he patted their heads affectionately. Then he tore his gaze away from them, turning to Rin. Seeing his own sorrow reflected in her world-weary brown eyes knocked the breath out of his lungs, and he dug his nails into his palms once before relaxing. Eye-smiling ever so slightly, he said, "Hai."

"Hey, Kakashi!" Gai tapped his shoulder. "You should probably turn around. Your kids over there are having a youthful moment!"

Kakashi turned, and Kakashi saw. It made his heavy heart lighter, and his eye-smile grew more curved. "They haven't been my kids for a long time now." He watched in delight as Sasuke finally managed to yank himself out of Sakura's iron grip, and hassled Itachi for possession of Izuna (for he knew that Sakura wouldn't dare try to grab him again when he was holding a baby).

"It is true, Gai-sensei!" Tenten almost groaned when Lee joined in, tears in his eyes. "In the midst of tragedy, a truly youthful moment is blooming under the heavens." He put his arm over his face, sniffing. "Tenten... if only I could experience such a thing, then I would be truly joyous."

"Well," Tenten said awkwardly, "you have Chihiro and I over here if you want?"

"You mean it?" Tenten squawked when Lee clung on to her and Chihiro. "Gai-sensei! Look over here, we too are having a most youthful moment!"
Gai's eyes bloomed with even more tears. "Ah, excellent, Lee!" Though his voice was rather goofy by default, Tenten couldn't help but notice the sorrowful inflection to it. "Do you see, my Eternal Rival? My kids are just as youthful as yours, if not more!"

Chihiro yawned. "I'm tired..."

Chihiro wasn't the only one, and soon, everybody was popping futons out and laying them across the flat stone ground. There weren't enough for everyone, so they decided that two people would occupy each futon. Three, if they were small enough. It would provide body warmth, and everyone would be getting approximately the same amount of comfort.

Deidara and Izumi returned just in time to claim a futon each. Izumi, Itachi, and Izuna were a family unit, obviously, so Deidara shared with Rin, Daichi, and Hikari. All four of them were on the small side, so it wasn't too tight of a fit.

Anko and Kakashi volunteered to stand guard as well as keep the fire burning. They would be relieved by Izumo and Kotetsu in a few hours.

Sasori's singular futon was guarded by Sakura, Shizune, and Chiyo. The old woman hadn't left his side once, snapping at whoever had hostile sentiments when they got too close. She had given Masami a severe tongue lashing, and had sniped at a regretful Shikamaru as well.

Neji didn't get a futon. He slept far away from everyone else, but close enough within striking distance when it came to Deidara's bombs.

Not all of them went to sleep right away, or even got into their futons. Tenten and Shikamaru were one of the last ones up.

"Are you okay?" she asked him. They'd never really talked, but he had this odd look in his eye.

"Fine, just..." Shikamaru glanced at where Neji was lying down, cold and alone. "Troubled," he settled for. He didn't regard him with hatred, surprisingly enough. Not like Deidara or Anko or Hanabi or—

Tenten cleared her throat. "Are you afraid of him? That he'll snap and go on a rampage?"

Shikamaru gave her a dubious once-over. "Not exactly." For all his genius, he'd never been very good at explaining feelings.

"You stood up for him back there," Tenten remembered. "Why?"

Before Shikamaru could answer, a noise was heard. They both tensed, whipping around to find—

"Izuna?" Tenten stared at the baby that had rolled out of his futon, somehow managing not to wake up Itachi and Izumi, both of whom he had been sandwiched inbetween. "He's moving already?" True, the baby wasn't crawling or doing any amazing toddler feats, but the fact that he could manoeuvre himself at three weeks was pretty impressive. He didn't get far, only managing two flips on the floor before squirming in discomfort. Almost frantically, she rushed over as silently as she could and picked up the child before it could begin to squall. Izuna was generally a pretty quiet baby, but he was still a baby. Which meant he could cry like hell.

"Um." Shikamaru sidled up to her, a bead of sweat trailing down his cheek as he peered down at the little bundle in Tenten's arms. "Should we put him back?"

"No, no, not yet. I don't want to wake them after they just fell asleep. They both fought today, and
they're really tired."

Shikamaru was skeptical. "How is time going to make any difference? In the end, they're both trained masters of the Amaterasu. You'll just delay them waking up."

"Funny how a baby could sneak past them." Tenten's lips tugged upward in a smile. "Trust me, Shikamaru-san—"

"Just Shikamaru. 'Shikamaru-san' is what the teachers called me whenever I got a failing grade back at the academy."

"They're really tired, Shikamaru."

Izuna was tired, but not quite tired enough to fall asleep right away. He was a hair-grabber for sure, but Tenten's bangs were too short for him to grasp. Annoyed, Izuna tried to stretch his arm even further.

"Cute," Shikamaru mumbled woodenly. "Are all babies like this, or is it just the Uchiha ones? But to answer your question..." He looked heavenward, up at the stars. "It was something that Choji said, spur of the moment. He has the tendency to bottle everything up and spill it all in a few short words of an outburst. It's stupid how such a thing had such a huge effect on me..." Sighing deeply, he pinched his nose, and Izuna stopped fussing with Tenten's hair to pay attention to him.

"Oh. Don't worry about it. I... I kind of know where you're coming from. Chihiro said something that I can't get out of my head. She said she'd love me even if I were a monster. Is... no, that's how Hinata feels, right?"

"Probably. It's really troublesome, isn't it?"

"Definitely. I mean, on one hand, my head is telling me to just stab him in the heart and be over with it. On the other, my heart says that I should give him a chance."

"I would say that this isn't the right place to use your heart," Shikamaru said, "But to not use it... Somehow, I think that would be even worse."

Tenten silently agreed, rocking Izuna in her arms. "Okay, you were right before. We should put him back."

"Yes, you should." Sasuke's voice reached their ears as he marched up to them. How long had he been listening? "Thank you for looking after him."

"Ah... It's no big deal..." Tenten handed the child back to his uncle with slight discomfort. Beside her, Shikamaru's pupils had narrowed slightly.

They watched as Sasuke tucked Izuna back between his two tired parents with surprising tenderness. His default scowl was no longer there, and it was as clear as day that he felt a strong love for the baby.

"I wonder what Sasuke thinks," Shikamaru hummed as Itachi stirred, murmuring something to Sasuke. "Before Neji came along, and Sasori got turned, he was the pariah."

"... Yeah." Tenten's voice was barely above a whisper. "He was, wasn't he?" Sasuke, traitor to his family and country.

But what kind of traitor could love so intensely?
As soon as Sasori awoke, he was greeted by the sight of the moon floating high above the sky. Panting slightly and his forehead slicked with sweat, he glanced around, trying to pinpoint his location. Surrounding him were the sleeping bodies of Sakura, Shizune, and Chiyo.

They hadn't killed him.

Why?

Numbly, he looked down at his new arm. It was a hard gray-white, ropey substance, and the area where his normal skin and the new limb met felt sticky and wet. Shoulders shaking lightly, he clenched and unclenched his right fist. Then he let his chakra flow into it. The arm ached and contracted before begrudgingly accepting the flow.

So, what was he now? Human? Monster? Halfway inbetween? Sasori held up his new hand to the moon, the light producing a silvery sheen on the murky white skin. It looked almost like clay, he realized a jolt, and he quickly scouted out Deidara's chakra signal.

Sasori's breath loosened. She was asleep and well, beside Rin. As far as he could tell, everyone was asleep at this time of night. Even Anko and Kakashi were swaying on their feet, and he knew that they would be preparing to swap soon.

They split before they did though, Anko deciding that she needed to take a piss in the bushes while Kakashi seemed like he was going to keel over from boredom and exhaustion at any moment.

Like a ghost in the night, Sasori shot silently out of his bed and went down the hillside, until he stood at the border of a meadow of long grass. The part where the dirt and stones turned into grass appeared to have been sat upon recently. He needed his. He needed to feel the wind on his face, to feel alive again. The futon he'd woken up in had been too constricting. Perhaps it was a trick of the mind, but that did not matter.

*I've never seen the moon up this close before.* Sasori admired the ethereal body, even if its crescent form was what the enemy's flag bore. Such an eternal, everlasting thing, it was. It occurred to him that he'd never fashioned a puppet after the moon before, or any of the planets, even in his days back in Suna.

A phantom pain panged in his arm, and for a moment, it felt like there was nothing beyond the several cubic centimetres from his shoulder down. The arm he now sported felt weightless and hollow, and it threw his whole balance off.

Still, a new limb was better than no limb at all, wasn't it? Especially since he often made use of his hands in almost everything he did. Whether it be working on his art, practicing taijutsu, or just doing every day things—he was not ashamed to admit that his rather active lifestyle relied heavily on the use of one or both hands.

A breeze swept through the field, sweeping Sasori's hair from his face and cooling his skin. His Akatsuki cloak was back at camp, so he was only dressed in a long-sleeved shirt with its sleeves rolled up and pants from Suna.

He was set on enjoying the night while it lasted when a blip on his chakra radar appeared.

It was an eerily familiar blip, even if it seemed much more docile than before.

Neji hardly got within five feet of him before he turned around, the fingers on his new arm twitching as he tried to form chakra neko-tes around the digits to match his left hand. It put up
some resistance, as if it were still getting used to his chakra, but it obeyed in the end.

"You're the Byakugan Monster." It was a statement, not a question. And he wasn't nothing more than a brat, perhaps even younger than Deidara. But while he appeared young and almost like a fine lady, Sasori knew first-hand just how dangerous he could be. "Did you come to finish me off?"

He hadn't noticed Neji anywhere. The man was good at suppressing his chakra, indicating exceptional chakra control. It was practically coded for in his Hyuuga genes.

"Is that what your group called me?" Neji said, frowning slightly in contemplation.

A sneer pulled Sasori's lips back. "Why? Does it upset you, brat? To know that we don't speak of you as highly as your fellow monsters do?" What was he, anyway? What had happened while he was out? He'd been a full-on monster, but now he looked more human than Sasori. Did Sakura have something to do with that?

_Had they accepted the Hyuuga into the group?

If that were the case, Sasori would bet his entire fortune of blood money in the Suna Emperor's vault that Hyuuga Hinata had something to do with it.

Neji stepped forward. At the same time, Sasori stepped back.

"Are you afraid of me?" Neji questioned.

"Any sensible, sane man would fear you." Sasori subtracted his step, now closer to the Hyuuga. His pupils dilated as he smiled mirthlessly. "However, I am neither of those things right now."

Neji's white eyes flicked to Sasori's Zetsu arm. "Are you a man? Or a monster?"

Sasori dipped his chin, his expression darkening. "What's the difference? Should you really be asking these questions, Hyuuga? After all..." They were almost nose to nose now. "You're the one who made me like this."

Neji narrowed his eyes. "You—" The Hyuuga managed to put up his arm at the last second and grasp Sasori's wrist. Even so, his chakra claws had caused a major gash to open up on his forearm, and Neji hissed.

"What? Do you have something to say to me, you worthless sack of shit?" Sasori broke his grip, slashing at his face. Neji managed to evade at the last second, hopping backwards with a grimace on his lips. "Why did you even come here?"

"Listen!" Neji snapped. "They can't afford you to run off, so I went. Hatake-san will be here soon, undoubtedly, so—"

"You thought I was running away?" Sasori chuckled darkly, raising his hand so that Neji's blood trickled down his Zetsu arm with agonizing slowness. "You are sorely mistaken, you insolent brat. But now that you're here, why don't I save them the trouble and kill you myself? Maybe I'll even take your arm." Neji got into a defensive stance, and Sasori's expression soured. "Why don't you fight as your true self? Stop hiding under than worthless skin, you worm!"

In the night, the two men exchanged blows, Sasori forcing Neji to defend at rapid speeds. Without his monster reflexes, it was harder for him to keep up, but he still managed.
"What do you want me to say?!" Neji gritted his teeth when Sasori sliced his shoulder open. "That I'm sorry?! I have my regrets, and I know not many things of my time as a Zetsu. But I have a feeling that an apology's not going to work on you."

Such contempt, he spoke his name with. Sasori was unimpressed. Was his maker really that weak? He was so fragile, so human. Sasori could kill him any second from now, and he'd be powerless to stop it.

"How pathetic. To think that someone like you could have done this to me..." Sasori looked down at his arm, allowing Neji a small breather. The Hyuuga was bleeding from multiple cuts and lacerations all over his arms and legs. "Somehow... I feel as if a redemption is in order. Unfortunately for you, it is not yours."

Before Neji could retort, they were joined by a silver-haired man with a single eye.

"So," Kakashi said, "I guess this is Suna's Royal Assassin talking."

"Hatake," Sasori mocked. "Truly, why are you here? Do you really think you can defeat two monsters on your own? Your arrogance is astounding."

"Two monsters? No. But if two humans work together, they can take down a monster." Kakashi glanced warily at Neji, who gave him a disarmingly sincere nod.

A rage he had locked away a long time ago came flooding out, and his morbidly amused features twisted into pure hatred. "You look just like your old man. Always blindly sticking your nose into where it doesn't belong. Honestly, Kakashi, when will you ever learn?" He was going to carve his insignia's into Hatake's face—make sure that he would dishonor his father's memory by bearing the mark of the fiend who had driven him to suicide. And that cowardly Sakumo, taking himself out before Sasori could do the job himself. It infuriated him to no end. Kakashi would pay for the sins of his father, and he would only have Sakumo to blame for his death. "You think that I'm the only monster that walks among you? You have men who would abandon mothers to save themselves," Hitoshi's broad face flashed in his mind, "men who have betrayed everything they stood for," Sasuke's coal gaze stared back in his inner eye, "and beasts who disguise themselves in the skins of your comrades' family to gain favor."

Neji recoiled when Sasori turned his condemning stare on him. "The rest all liars, murderers, and thieves. I'm not the only monster. Humans can't kill monsters, Hatake, only other monsters can."

A coldness slid over his gaze, and Sasori watched with wicked glee as Kakashi tossed his humanity aside, ready to put the red-haired man down. Sasori flicked blood from his claw tips. "I suppose this is now a family feud. Hyuuga, you might want to stay out of this."

Neji stared at him silence.

"What, no monologue?" Kakashi quipped when Sasori kept the quiet. He rushed forward, suddenly palming two blades he had kept hidden somewhere on his person. He slashed with frightening brutality and the puppet master, who deflected his blows with his chakra claws. The one on his right hand flickered, almost dissipating, and Sasori frowned in displeasure.

"A leg obscured Sasori's vision for a moment, and he bent himself backward to avoid Neji's kick coming in from the side, twisting his body and carefully glancing off Kakashi's twin blades, metal screeching."

As the battle went on, there was a growing pressure in his Zetsu hand, Sasori noticed. It felt like it was going to explode at any minute. Then something did happen, and Sasori could only glimpse
Kakashi’s eye widening in shock before his arm disassembled and burst forth. It was an action he had seen performed multiple times by multiple monsters, and—

Under the moonlight, two bodies dangled in the air, completely immobilized. Blood dripped into the grass, trailing down stalks like morning dew.

Kakashi clawed at the white, unbreakable vine wrapped around his neck, slowly squeezing. His blades were in the grass, totally unreachable. "Krrhh—!"

Neji was quite possibly in an even worse position, thinner vines digging through parts of his body and out the other side, keeping him suspended in the blood-misted air.

Something inside him folded and snapped, and Sasori jolted, stepping backward. The vines moved along with him, and Kakashi tried to grab his blades off the floor, but to no avail.

Monster. That's what I am now, isn't it? He glanced down at his arm. It's a part of me. It always had been, but he never thought he would live to see that day it became a physical manifestation.

All those people he had killed, all those men, women, and children—their souls squirmed desperately in his new, boneless arm.

In that instance, he figured that eternal life, if he were ever able to obtain it, would be more of a curse than a blessing.

"You're burning. You're on fire but you don't even know it."

"When you feel like you're in so deep, it feels easier to just swim down and drown, no? I have a feeling you're familiar with what I'm saying."

It was like that day in the bridge again, when he'd felt like he was weightless and submerged in the blackest ocean as he fell, Deidara's hand coming loose from his grip and the wind sucking the remaining warmth away.

Fire. Water. You hardly see either of those in the desert. Nobody ever burns, or drowns, or suffocates in smoke or water.

The visible part of Kakashi’s face was growing blue, but Sasori hardly registered it. He only saw the looming shadow of the White Fang, and Neji had somehow changed into his beautiful, brown-haired mother, hair falling in front of her face as she became a bloody, unrecognizable mess pinned on the geometric-patterned wall of his bedroom chambers.

Family feud? What family feud? If you want to have a family feud, make sure that the wronged are still alive.

But everybody was dead.

Kakashi gasped for air, and Neji coughed up a gob of blood as the vines released them, sliding painfully out of the latter's body. Kakashi's entire neck area was bruised purple underneath his shirt-mask, and Neji's clothes, lent to him by Itachi, were soaked through with his own fluids.

His mother faded away. So did the White Fang. Only Kakashi and Neji were left. Sasori no Akasuna disappeared, too, this time for the rest of eternity.

Kakashi picked up his blades, but Neji weakly held an arm out in front of him. "Wait." But he could say no more, promptly falling to the ground in a bleeding, unconscious heap.
Warily, Kakashi got off his knees and stalked forward, watching Sasori's white arm reassemble itself until it resembled a limb again. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"I am not him."

"Hmph. I know that."

"Are you a monster?"

"... Yes."

"Do you want to be?"

There were very few people alive that he cared about enough to embrace his remaining humanity. Chiyo-baa-sama. Friend, comrade, and stoic Itachi. Rin, who was the wife of a man he had come to see as a friend, and, perhaps, her children. Who else? They only made up one hand. He could learn to love Izumi and Izuna. It would not be difficult. And...

_Deidara makes two._ She was someone he cared for, like Chiyo-baa-sama, and Friend Itachi, and Wife and Children of Obito. He loved none of them—how could he, when he had never really known Obito's family, when Itachi spent as much of his time as he could with his family, because the Uchiha man knew that they might not have enough time; how could he, when Chiyo-baa-sama had taught him how to kill men in a thousand different ways without even batting an eyelash.

But Deidara—

Was someone he had come to respect, not unlike Chiyo-baa-sama, and Itachi, and Rin, as well as love and appreciate, even if their perspectives on art clashed; even if she could be loud, hard, and unforgiving, she knew how to be kind, loyal, and expressed a whole spectrum of human emotions and actions that had been slashed out of him during his time in the Puppet Corps—she spoke to him with little thought, both disparaged and admired him for his art, and he realized, he had learned—

"Do you want to be?" Kakashi repeated.

"No."

He had learned to love her.

Kakashi didn't drop his weapons. "Do I have to kill you?"

"You couldn't kill me even if you tried." There was a gleam in the moonlight, and Kakashi blinked when Sasori pulled out a hidden blade from his still-intact left sleeve.

He turned it on his heart.

Kakashi stilled.

_Only monsters can kill monsters._ He loved her, but it wasn't enough. Deidara was more human than he would ever be. They'd never addressed it between them—he had never told her about his true nature, but they both knew that deep down, he would never be able to emulate the same humanity she did. "Kakashi-san. You are not your father."

The masked man stepped forward.
"You are human."

*He was, too,* Kakashi wanted to say as a light rain started—one that would disappear soon—but Sasori would never believe a word of it. "Wait—"

The dagger plunged down—

The air around Kakashi whipped past him as somebody moved—

Sasori didn't move when a blonde blur punched him in the face, flying backward with his back skidding into the dirt. Then a fist grabbed his shirt and held him down, and Deidara stared down at him, exhaling sharply.

"What the fuck," she breathed, "are you doing? Are you even hearing yourself, hm?!" She slammed her forehead into his, as if the pain would shock him out of his stupor. The blade he had held before had clattered somewhere, lost in the long grass. "What a load of bullshit!"

Sasori gazed back at her in disbelief, the pain in his head becoming nothing more than a negligible ache. The rain was plastering her hair to her face, and her chest rose and fell visibly as she glared at him with a ferocity he had only witnessed her displaying toward her enemies. "Deidara—"

"You're not a monster, you damn bastard!" Her head dropped, and he wondered briefly if she was going to headbutt him again. But she merely touched her forehead to his, looking him straight in the eye. Water slid down her nose and dropped on his own as the rain continued to pour. Some distance away, Kakashi was tending to Neji, but Sasori couldn't see him.

All of a sudden, the only world he was capable of seeing was Deidara's will burning desperately in her blue eyes. Mechanically, he reached up, pushing her hair away from her face.

"What kind of monster," she said slowly, her voice wavering ever so slightly, "is anything like you, hm? *Monsters don't appreciate art.*" The next droplet of water that fell on his face was warm, and upon touching his lips, was salty.

*I made her cry,* he thought numbly. She had already lost Shisui today, Obito before that, and her barely audible sobs were tinged with a hopeless grief. She did not want to have to mourn him, too. A chill enveloped his entire body, and it wasn't just from the cold, compact dirt underneath him, or the equally cold rain. Gradually, fragments of humanity realigned themselves within him, and he closed his eyes, a ghost of a smile on his face.

"Sorry—Deidara."

He allowed her to cry in silent frustration and relief without saying another word, because it was an imperfect, human thing to cry.

To the side, Kakashi continued to stem Neji's bleeding as best he could.

The grass rustled.

And that was the sight that Anko, Itachi, and Gai arrived to.

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Back at camp, Sasuke sat next to an exhausted Izumi, holding a sleeping Izuna.

His ears pricked at the sound of someone kicking back their futon.

Hesitantly, Asagi approached him. "May I hold him?"
Eyes watched them from all sides, expecting him to snap at her, and prepared to denounce him as an unrepentant traitor.

But, instead, he held out the child to her, much to her surprise. "Of course."

Asagi smiled. "Thank you... Sasuke-san."

There was a shocked silence around him.

Then Chihiro moved, and with her, a bridge slowly formed over the ravine. "Can I hold him next?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: KINGDOM OF ASH WAS RELEASED ON THE 23RD OF OCTOBER AND I CANNOT WAIT TO START READING IT. I HAVE MY COPY SITTING ON MY BED JUST WAITING FOR ME TO THUMB THROUGH IT AND RE-READ UNTIL IT BECOMES DOG-EARED FROM USE.
Part III: Petunia

Chapter Summary

There's more trouble afoot.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Technically, I've been a HSC student since year 11, but year 12 makes no allowance, hence the delay. Sorry if this doesn't hit the mark.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The steam from the cup in front of him rose, caressing his face. Herbal essence flooded the creases of his lungs, and Sasori breathed outward, clutching his left hand around the cup to steal some warmth from the hot drink. He recognized the blue porcelain of the cup he clutched—it belonged to his grandmother, who sat opposite him, eyelids drooped. She must have packed them into a storage scroll prior to leaving their apartment in Akatsuki.

Chiyo-baa-sama... Sasori closed his eyes, taking a sip. The tea was scalding hot, but he still managed to toss it around in his mouth for almost a minute before swallowing.

She wasn't saying anything.

Are you ashamed of me? Sasori couldn't tear his gaze away from the swirling brew in his cup. Idly, he made a mental list of the ingredients he could smell and taste in the concoction.

In a sky that seemed eons away, the sun slowly rose, and the clouds melted from grey to blue. The fire was still burning, miraculously, though on the verge of dying out.

He had not slept all night.

"Grandson." Sasori snapped to attention, and Chiyo grimaced at the visible bags underneath his eyes. "What happened last night? Why... Why did you attack our comrades? Turn the blade to yourself?" Straight to the point as always, his grandmother.

His grip tightened around his cup. His right arm—the grayish-white Zetsu one—hung uselessly by his side. "Why?" he repeated. It cut a blade through him, to admit to the woman in front of him his greatest failings. "Because I deserved it." One out of two was enough.

"Your arm—"

"Was a catalyst," Sasori cut in, his gaze growing colder.

Chiyo drank her own tea slowly. "You are not a monster. No grandson of mine is anything except human."

In the distance, a bird of the morning began to sing.

"I had no choice."

Sasori smirked grimly. "I know." In a way, he was grateful to her—grateful to her for molding him from a would-be victim to the one who inflicted the abuse. There was a silence, Chiyo's lips thinning as she contemplated. He ignored the pensive look on her face, opting instead to have one ear tuned into the songs of the morning birds. Now that the steam from his tea wasn't in his face, he could smell the crisp mountain air, devoid of any kind of pollution. It was strange, for on the other side, enemy soldiers and monsters lurked.

"I saw them," Sasori said when Chiyo still didn't say anything, an odd combination of sorrow and remorse seeping into his prickly tone. "Hatake Sakumo and my mother. My father was dead straight away, as you surely know—"

Chiyo flinched, and a dark part of Sasori enjoyed her pain.

"—but my mother managed to survive having a kunai in her neck." A pause. "Initially."

"Sasori—"

"He wanted to punish me. So he beat her. Made me watch." Calmly, Sasori sipped his tea, as if he wasn't discussing the torture and subsequent murder of the woman who had given birth to him. His heart twisted with every word, but he kept going. "He was crying the whole time. I can see why our Hatake would think that that man could be capable of humanity. I think..." Another sip. "He was disgusted with himself, even as he committed the act. It was watching humanity struggle against a monster; a monster's foot stamping on a human face. He couldn't live with what he had done."

"Last night..." Sasori paused again, unsure of how to really continue. "It was like seeing the second coming of the White Fang. Unfortunately, the Hyuuga happened to have hair that share almost the exact shade of brown as my mother's." He forced the bitter, icy rage into his voice, relishing as Chiyo crumpled under his words, a shock in her eyes that he despised. Quietly, he added, "It won't happen again."

"I didn't know." The words were weak and they both knew it. Sasori had never truly told her of the events that had unfolded that day, and she hadn't been part of the crew that cleaned up the bodies, but so what?

Deep down, he knew that his grandmother wasn't to shoulder the full blame. But he would not regret his sharp tongue right now. Never.

She was not blameless. Never had been.

And he made sure to let her know.

In the end, it was a combination of unfortunate factors. The acolyte who had slaughtered the Empress' male concubines, the threat of being conscripted into a harem of courtesans, Chiyo's meddling, Hatake's fractured mind—

Chiyo stood abruptly, knocking over her tea on the rock. It stained the stone a darker hue. Her eyes were an endless pool of sorrow, and she breathed out and lowered herself again. Then she bowed her head slightly. "I'm sorry. For everything you've ever had to endure."
"... Baa-sama."

The birds continued their songs as the sun peaked.

Sasori stared at her hunched form, a flicker of regret in his eyes. "Get up, baa-sama," he said gruffly, his voice heavy with an old bereavement. As she rose, wavering, Sasori turned his gaze to the rising sun.

*A new dawn, to wash away last night's horrors.*

Deidara awoke to a gentle hand shaking her. Izumi was kneeling over her, a half-smile on her face that barely reached her eyes. But she was looking noticeably less tired, which was what drove Deidara to blink to the sleep from her eyes.

"Morning, sunshine," Izumi said wryly, and Deidara's heart ached. She smiled anyway. Or tried to.

But it was not Izumi's fault—not her fault that she could never perfect the same tone as Shisui when she said the words. "Ready to greet the day? We're leaving soon." The half-smile disappeared. "It was a long night for you. I wish you could rest more, but Konohagakure is just days away."

Groggily, Deidara sat up. "How long have we been out here, hm?" It felt like an eternity since that had left Akatsuki. It occurred to her, suddenly, that they were approaching the borders of Amegakure as well. Her body felt dirty, but there was no river or lake around. Even if there was, it'd be too cold to bathe in, anyway, so the point was moot. She looked around. *Where's Danna?* Relief entered her chest when she spotted his unmistakable red head on the other side of the fire, which had been reduced to a pile of ashes on stone.

"Nearly a month," answered Izumi.

*A month, huh?* Her bones felt old and weary as she stood, rolling up her futon. She'd been feeling like the Shinigami had sliced part of her soul out of her body for a while. There was a gaping hole in her spirit, one that grew larger every time it tried to heal. First, Obito, then Hitomi and Ino—she'd realized long ago that she was partially responsible for the extinction of the Yamanaka Clan; perhaps they had distant cousins in Konoha, but that didn't matter—and then Shisui. She wasn't unaware of the wispy, waif-like frame she now had, compared to the toned, muscular body she had had before the war. It felt more prominent than ever to her; her mind and body had been shaken to the extreme, and she wasn't sure what she would do if she lost anyone else.

As she went over to Hitoshi and Gai, who were both talking in muted tones as the latter sealed away bedroll after bedroll, Deidara discretely beheld Izumi's side profile. She didn't want her to die. She was sure she'd go to hell for even thinking of it, but if she had to choose between Rin and Izumi, both of whom were her most trusted female companions, she would always choose the Uchiha-born woman.

And to hell she would go, because there was yet another person who she would choose above all.

"You're looking much better today," Izumi remarked to Hitoshi after acknowledging Gai, who sealed away Deidara's futon.

Deidara wasn't sure what she missed, but she didn't particular care for Hitoshi. "Not cowering behind someone shorter than you, for once, un," Deidara said disparagingly. She expected him to snap some insult at her like a mutt, but he merely rolled his eyes.

"Deidara!" admonished Izumi, though there was no real reprimand in her voice.
"I get it, I'm a cowardly asshole," Hitoshi said with a scowl that could match Sasuke's. "That doesn't mean I'm that much of a useless sack of shit." It was true, if only to the most minimal extent. With his big muscles, Hitoshi could carry the tired and the elderly, and he had some experience in hunting. What he'd been prior to all of these events, Deidara didn't know. But she didn't need to ask, as Hitoshi went on, "Before Tsuki invaded, I was a shoemaker in my ma's shop. The best of the best, I dare say, but that doesn't mean I didn't pick up some skills in my downtime. Ma's dead now, but I don't really care."

Deidara raised her eyebrows. "Really, now?"

Hitoshi seemed to reconsider his words for a second before shaking his head with conviction. "No. If she weren't my mother, I would have forgotten her by now." A hunched figure approached them, and the big man recoiled. "I thought I told you to rest! Everything's still getting packed, we're not going straight away."

Deidara and Izumi turned their heads, and the former's eyes widened slightly. *Is... Is that Yukari?* The teenage girl, formerly bright and domineering even in the face of death and destruction, now looked like death warmed over. Her eyes had that sunken appearance, her brow and cheekbones protruding from her skin. It was clear she hadn't eaten in a long while. *Did... nobody care?* She glanced over to where Shizune was checking up on Asagi's mother's cough, and it dawned on her. No, of course not. Yukari was still ill, yes, but she simply wasn't a priority. She was an orphan, had been even before the war, just like Naruto; but the difference between them was that Yukari had no personal connections to *anyone* here. Deidara had even forgotten about her existence prior to this moment. It filled her with shame, but she pushed it away. *She only had Sawako. And now Sawako was dead, because Deidara hadn't gotten to her fast enough, but if she had to be honest with herself, she was glad, in the most horrible way, that it'd been Sawako and not her. Without her quiet twin, however, Yukari had nobody left. Hitoshi did, however, behold the girl with some sort of gruff, impatient kindness.*

Yukari muttered something under her breath, and Deidara knew it wasn't for her ears, or Izumi's. So, leaving Gai and Hitoshi behind, the former in the midst of finishing up the seal, she took Izumi away.

A wailing sounded. Izuna. Izumi sighed. "I think Itachi needs some help. I'll see you later, Deidara?" She backpedaled, and Deidara halfheartedly raised a hand.

"Yeah, see you."

Around her was the pinnacle of an organized chaos. Shikamaru, and Itachi were studying the map over Shikaku's shoulder, the Nara head pointing to the north with a hopeful yet grim smile on his sharp features. Itsuki, Shogo, and Chihiro appeared to be playing a short game of tag to entertain themselves before they had to leave. Deidara floated about, looking for something to do. Sasori sat at the forefront of her mind, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to approach him yet. Not after last night's happenings. She'd have to—

"Deidara-nee!" Daichi skidded up to her, the heels of his worn shoes chafing the stone. "Have you seen Hikari?!" The boy was frantic, eyes wide and perhaps a little tear-filled. "I can't find her anywhere. Okaa-chan went to look for her, but she hasn't come back either!"

While initially dismissive of his concerns, Deidara straightened at the mention of Rin. "Are you serious?" She took a breath. "Stay here, Daichi. I'm sure they're fine. Where did you see Rin go, hm?" Daichi pointed toward the treeline to the west. "Tell Itachi where I'm going."

"Okay. Please find them!"
To her relief, Deidara had barely left the confines of their camp before spotting Rin appearing over a small hill, holding Hikari's hand. Behind her trailed Itsuki, Shogo, and Chihiro. They must have run off while Deidara wasn't looking.

"Is anyone hurt?" Deidara demanded as she stalked up to them.

Rin shook her head. "Hikari seems a little shaken, but fine."

Chihiro and Shogo looked vaguely confused, while Itsuki, paler than Deidara had ever seen him, had the most sour expression on his face. His tubby arms were crossed across his reduced belly, and the short, wispy hairs that made up his fringe stuck to his forehead with sweat.

"Did anything happen?" Rin asked Hikari firmly. Deidara suspected that it wasn't the first time that she had asked that. "Hikari-chan?"

"It's nothing, okaa-chan," she mumbled, not meeting her mother's gaze.

Rin frowned. "Hikari..." She sighed. "Honey, if something happened, you need to tell me. I can tell you're upset about something."

Hikari closed her eyes. "It's nothing, okaa-chan," she repeated.

As the group of children and women walked back to the heart of the camp, where everyone was about to leave, Daichi caught sight of them and ran to Hikari and his mother. As Rin led her children away, Deidara turned to Chihiro.

"What's up with her, hm?" the blonde asked the little orphan. "I've never seen Hikari behave like that before. And she's not one to keep secrets either. "Chihiro?"

"Why can't you just leave her alone?" Itsuki said hotly before storming off.

Deidara stared after him, bemused. The hell is his problem?

Chihiro gave Deidara an apologetic glance. "Sorry about him. We were playing tag, and we got a little ahead of ourselves..." Flushing, she scuffed her foot on the ground, and Deidara gave her a wry grin. "Itsuki disappeared somewhere and Hikari-chan chased after him." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "He said he accidentally scratched himself on a stick and made Hikari-chan not tell anyone who wasn't his friend. Itsuki likes to act tough, I think."

"Boys." Deidara rolled her eyes. "I swear, it's always an inflated ego with them, hm." Not that she had any room to talk, but Chihiro wouldn't call her out for being a hypocrite.

Everything seemed to be going well, until Hanabi yanked Hinata away from Neji after the male Hyuuga got too close. Hinata's little sister pulled her lips back into a snarl, an animalistic growl rising in the back of her throat. Neji had been healed last night, but the majority of his body was covered in bandages. Sakura had healed most of the damage, but a lot of her chakra had been drained thanks to her having to carefully disinfect and sew up each laceration, so his new skin wasn't as thick as it should be. "Don't come near her." Hanabi's voice trembled with rage and paranoia. "You think that I don't remember how you treated her? And then you disappear for months and come back like that!"

People cringed at the reminder of Neji, and the Hyuuga was soon on the receiving end of suspicious glares.

"What do you suggest we do?" Gai asked Itachi. "Should we leave him, or bring him along?"
"Or kill him," Deidara added silently, her hands clenching at her sides.

"That wouldn't be wise," Shikaku answered instead, frowning contemplatively. "Do you have any idea how big of a breakthrough his existence is? If we bring him to Konoha, their scientists and medics might be able to find an effective cure for the monsterization process." He dipped his chin to Sakura in acknowledgement, and she nodded back.

"I disagree," Anko said flatly. "We'd be risking the safety of the people if we don't kill him now. You want to set him loose in society? Trust me, Shikaku, bad idea. If Sakura's medicine is capable of stopping Sasori from going off the deep end, then she'll be able to find another one with better technology. Without the monster."

"He'd be restrained," Kakashi pointed out.

"Why don't we take a vote?" Chiyo suggested.

And so a vote was cast, those for exiling or killing Neji separating themselves from those who were against.

Deidara found herself nestled between Kisame and Masami, watching as the younger members of their group deliberated. What was taking so long? She'd already debated the pros and cons of prolonging Neji's livelihood, and had come to the same conclusion as Anko, though not with as much resolve as she would have liked. Shikaku had a good point—if Neji were to be studied, a cure for the monster disease could be cured.

Her eyes narrowed when the youths finally sorted themselves out, and did a head count.

Who's 'against'? Hinata, unsurprisingly. Tenten. I didn't expect that. Shikamaru, Shikaku, and Sakura and Shizune. Naruto and his gang of twelve year olds. Should they be allowed to vote? Hanabi's 'against', but she doesn't look happy about it. Asagi, her mother, Shogo... She removed the children from her head. Even so, there were more people than she had expected on the 'against' side.

But even then, 'for' won out.

Neji watched them carry out their affairs with silence, his moon-like eyes observing each and every one of them carefully. There was a crease in his brow, and he was clearly upset, but he did not voice his distress. As if he knew that would denounce any credibility he had.

"So, I guess we're leaving him," Chihiro said, a little sadly.

_I hope he starves_, Deidara thought bitterly. "Let's just go, hm. If he follows us... we'll kill him."

A silent, morbid agreement hung heavily in the air.

"No," Hinata protested. "Please, don't do this. Please r-reconsider."

"Nope, too late!" Anko grinned maliciously. "If you want to keep defending him, then fine, but don't drag the rest of us into it. Some of us actually want to get to Konoha in one piece."

"He did help Kakashi wrangle Sasori back under control," Shikamaru stated, and Deidara stiffened.

"Yes, that was... unfortunate," Itachi said, treading delicately over his words, noticing Deidara's reaction. He tried not to let his facade crumble away more than it already had, and only Izumi taking his bloodstained hand and squeezing kept him from shattering. "But that doesn't mean
anything, in the end." Shisui's death was fresh in his mind, and his Sharingan made sure that he would never forget what had happened.

Biting her lip, Hinata looked at Neji, who was standing with his head slightly bowed. "Neji-nii," she said, more serious than ever, "you have to tell them what you told me!"

Eyebrows were raised, and Neji's default frown deepened.

"Tell us what, exactly?" drawled Sasori, and if tensions hadn't been running high before, they certainly were now. Sasori pushed past the people in front of him, stepping up to Neji and looking him straight in the eye. The Hyuuga boy had straightened by now, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he regarded Sasori with an equally cold stare.

Hanabi made an unpleasant noise from the back of her throat. "Come clean already!" she barked at Neji, her lips pulling back into a snarl. "I would have told them anyway, so it doesn't matter."

Neji took a deep breath, and Sasori drew back a little, eyes narrowing. "We are not alone in these woods."

"Yeah, no shit," Deidara thought sardonically. But she waited for him to continue anyway, and he didn't let her down.

"Between Konoha and where we are now," Neji went on, enunciating each word clearly. "There lies a camp of over one hundred strong." Ignoring gasps and sharp intakes of breaths, he added, "I've only heard rumors from my... commander. My... group was to head there and add to their ranks once we..." He looked around, trailing off.

"What." Anko stared at him, brows raised and looking outraged. "Is... Is this your idea of a joke?" A muscle in her face twitched, making her look almost manical. "Don't fuck around with us. I'll—"

They never got to find out what Anko would do, as at that moment, a group of birds burst out of the tree, wriggling in the air before falling out of the sky in one grotesque, feathery heap. They were bleeding black pus from all of their orifices, and everyone instinctively stepped away. The smell of rotting infection instantly flooded their nostrils.

Deidara swore. When she tore her gaze away from the birds, she found herself looking into Neji's pale, milky eyes.

"Do you believe me now?" said the Hyuuga boy. He looked north-west. "They know we're here. If you want any hope of getting to Konoha's walls in one piece... you'll need to strike first."

They made good time, and had traveled almost half the distance to Konohagakure from the mountain, before Neji recommended they stop. Immediately after setting up a small camp in a discreet area, their swiftest members, Kakashi and Itachi, set off to the west with Neji to search for the elusive monsters' base. No—Zetsu—that was what they were called. It meant nothing to them, yet everything at the same time.

"We'll have to tough it out with rations tonight," Izumi was saying to Gai. A few metres away, Rin was clutching a calm Izuna to her breast. Izumi's plain cheongsam, once whole, was dirty and worn, and she had her sleeves rolled up to reveal too-skinny forearms.

"Right," said Gai, "We can't afford to send anyone out looking for food, especially..." He glanced to the right, past the flowing brook and to a copse of trees. "Lee!" He whipped around to his mini-me. "You and Tenten start handing out the rations! Give the largest portions to..." Gai, in a moment
of unusual solemnness, listed off the people who needed to eat the most, and Lee dutifully recruited Tenten to carry out Gai's orders.

A fire was promptly made as well. Warmth was needed, and whether they made one or not made no difference to the monsters lurking in the west—they would be able to smell them out with or without smoke and light.

None of them even considered the possibility of there being any enemy soldiers around. They were too close to Konoha, and an even deadlier foe was ever present.

Around the crackle of the fire, Deidara sat cross-legged with her back against the thick, knotted trunk of an alder tree. She leaned into the wood with her arms folded across her chest, trying to collect as much warmth as possible from her position. A particularly cold breeze caressed her cheek, and she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she saw Sasuke across the fire, holding up Izuna with a contemplative frown on his face. He didn't seem to be hearing Rin's explanation on changing diapers until the brown-haired woman smacked him across the back of the head. It would have been comical, Deidara mused, had Rin's expression not been genuinely vexed. She spoke to him without kindness, without the gentleness that Deidara had known her for. She spoke to him only for Izuna's benefit.

"Deidara-nee..." Deidara had seen her coming from the right. Hikari scuffed her feet for a while before plopping down in Deidara's lap, her back pressing into the blonde's chest.

"Hey, Hikari-chan." Deidara undid her hair so that brown locks cascaded down her back. "Good grief, your hair's grown so long, hm. What a pain."

"But your hair's even longer," Hikari replied smartly.

Above them, the clouds parted to reveal the moon as Deidara chuckled. "Yeah, and it's an absolute mess." She passed her hand through her hair, grimacing at the dirty, oily feeling. Hikari hummed as Deidara left her own hair alone and started to finger-brush hers.

"Can you make it like yours?" the little girl asked.

"Sure, but you have to tell me what happened today while I do it." Placing the hair-tie between her lips, Deidara continued to groom Hikari's hair, parting the top layer from the bottom layer.

"Oh... You mean with Itsuki-kun?"

"Oh, was that his name?" The hair-tie somehow managed to stay in her mouth.

"Deidara-nee! That's rude!" After some huffing on Hikari's part, which Deidara strongly suspected was meant to stall, the girl reluctantly began to recount the events of that morning. "Everybody was packing up and telling us not to get in the way, so Itsuki-kun said it would be more fun to play in the nearby trees."

Deidara made a noncommittal noise. "Uh huh. Keep going..." She gathered up the top layer of Hikari's hair in a ponytail and held it in place with one hand, using the other to grab the hair-tie.

Hikari quietened, unsure of how to continue. "Aniki didn't want me to go but I managed to lose him. Chihiro-chan came with us, so I thought it was okay, since she knows how to fight a little." The best Chihiro could do was throw kunai, but Deidara held her tongue. "Shogo-kun became 'it', and we all ran in different directions." She bit her lip. "That's all."

Deidara frowned. "Are you sure?" In her lap, Hikari stilled eerily, and Deidara was sure that if she
could see the girl's face, it would be white with fear. "Hikari-chan, what did he say to you, hm?"
She was vaguely aware of another figure leaning against the side of the tree, just out of Deidara's
periphery, and the smell of food wafted up her nostrils.

"Nothing. He didn't say anything," Hikari stressed, shaking her head. Deidara waited for her to
continue, finishing up the ponytail. She divided half of her attention to the loose bottom layer of
her hair, untangling knots with deft fingers. "When I found him, he..." She faltered in time with
Deidara's working hands. "He looked at me. He was so mad. I knew he didn't want me to tell
anyone what happened. That he fell over and got scratched."

"By a stick," Deidara said, admiring her handiwork. She'd been careful not to let her mouth-tongues
touch any air.

"A stick?" Hikari looked confused. "Well, that's what Chihiro-chan thought, but Itsuki-kun only
mumbled something, so we don't really know if it was a stick or not."

Deidara blinked slowly before frowning. "Then what do you think it was, hm?"

Hikari's shoulders went up, then down, in a small shrug. "It could have been anything. Does it
really matter? But he was really scared about not letting people know. It's okay to be scared, but
Itsuki always likes to be brave..."

"Huh." Deidara leaned into the alder tree. "Okay, I'm done. Why don't you go show your mother?"

In the firelight, her eyes glowed in pleasure, but there was a lingering darkness that Deidara
couldn't quite place. When Hikari was gone, Deidara tilted her chin upward, feeling her ponytail
get squashed between her head and the tree trunk. "You can come out now."

Sasori melted from the shadows, standing close to Deidara. He was holding a can of... something.

"Was it really just a stick?" Sasori mused as Deidara took the can, her dirt-covered fingers
scooping up some meat. She held his stare, hardly wavering, before looking forward instead.

"Doubt it. But he's still alive, right? His skin isn't peeling away or anything."

He nodded shortly, using his left arm to reach across for the can. Wasn't that inconvenient?
Deidara wondered briefly. He'd be better off using his right arm—

Her eyes landed on the white Zetsu arm, long, monstrous fingers clinging to the grass as he ate.

"Sorry," Sasori said dryly, not sounding sorry at all. "Last night would have been a shock to you."

Deidara's hands clenched, and her throat was dry as she enunciated, "Why?" The rest of the
question hung in the air.

He exhaled. "There's a lot of things you don't know."

"Maybe, but there's one thing I do know." Underneath the moon's watchful gaze, Deidara whipped
her head around to look him in the eye, the firelight flickering in his brown pupils. "You're a lot of
things, Danna, but you aren't a monster."

"A lot of people would say otherwise."
Her lips quirked upward, almost sadly. "They don't know what they're talking about, hm... Yeah, so what if I don't know what kinds of moles you have in weird places?"

Sasori almost smiled. Almost. "That's not what I—"

"Bad analogy aside, I know you, Danna. Even if it's not all of you, the part that I do know, no matter how minuscule..." Her eyes lowered before she closed them, a crease appearing in her brow as she frowned. "It's enough to assure me that you aren't a bad person."

For a few seconds, Sasori didn't say anything, merely stared at her side profile. The wind blew through the trees, whispering their sorrows and regrets for all to be heard. Across the bonfire, Sasuke gave them a quick glance. "You know, brat," Sasori eventually said, "You're awfully optimistic about me." She opened her mouth to retort, but he went on, "That's not so bad."

"That's it?" she demanded after giving him an incredulous glance. "You're not gonna say something disparaging?"

"Hmph. Look at me." Sasori held out his arm. "Do you really think I have any room to judge?" He turned away, making eye contact with Chiyo, who was sitting some distance behind Sasuke. "We all have our faults, Deidara. I think mine are a lot worse than yours."

The only noise that could be heard then besides the backdrop of crackling fire and murmuring voices was the wet slide of Deidara's oil-smeared finger against the bottom of the can. The label of the can was faded, but if one looked close enough, they would be able to tell that it was luncheon meat.

"We do, don't we?" she said finally. "But I don't really care about that, yeah." She slid down the tree trunk, putting her hands behind her head and gazing up at the night sky. There was looming sadness in her eyes, and Sasori let out a small, barely audible sigh as he turned his eyes up at the heavens as well. Her eyes were fluttering open and shut, and if the dark circles around her eyes were any indication, she was about to doze off any moment. Her breathing evened out as she slumped against him, her head propped on his shoulder. Her warm body was a welcome feeling, and the crown of her head fit snugly in the crook of his neck. There was no uncertainty on the lines of her silhouette, and he said nothing of it, allowing the intimate silence speak for itself.

The warmth soon enveloped his body, and he found himself drifting off, too, but he quickly snapped himself out of his sleep induced stupor when the trees rustled, and Kakashi, Itachi, and Neji reappeared, all of them looking grim.

Beside him, Deidara stirred. "Danna?"

"Get up, Deidara." He had a feeling that he wasn't going to like what the scouts were about to say. She awoke fully almost instantly, a consequence that had arisen from recent events. Her blue eyes were alert, almost glowing in the dark. "What? They're back?" Deidara got up and stretched just as Sasori patted down the back of his garb to brush off any grass and dirt.

Everybody seemed to be gravitating naturally toward where the three men stood, and Sasori and Deidara were no exception. A noticeably wider berth was given to the pair—or, rather, Sasori—but neither of them cared enough to address it. Whatever animosity and trust issues that were still present among the group would have to be abolished soon, but now wasn't the time.

"How many?" Hitoshi asked, sweat beading on his temple despite the evening chill. He clenched and unclenched his large, meaty hands periodically.
And Itachi, looking more world-weary than ever, coughed abruptly and replied, "Over three hundred strong."

It wasn't just a rock in their stomachs now.

It was a ball of ice.

"That can't be right," whispered Hinata, almost like she was trying to convince herself. She probably was.

"I'm sorry, Hinata-sama," said Neji, but she dismissed his apology, telling him that it was all right.

"The camp is large," reported Kakashi, drawing a map in the dirt with a stick he had acquired from nearby. "Located in a gully, here," he used his stick to mark the camp with a triangular symbol, "and stretches up until here."

"Wait," Anko interrupted, eyes widening in disbelief. "That puts them almost directly in between us and Konoha." For the first time, she allowed herself to be almost completely vulnerable. "Oh, are you serious?" She clutched the bridge of her nose. "This is bullshit..."

"What else did you find?" Shikaku inquired, his mind leaping ahead to hypothetical situations and solutions.

"Yes, a Tsukigakure supply post not far from here, but it seems to be freshly occupied," answered Kakashi.


"I mean that there are still fresh bodies outside, and you could smell the blood from miles away. There were at least ten monsters in the surrounding perimeter."

"Zetsu," Neji put in helpfully, "They are called Zetsu, named after their progenitor."

"That was very likely the last enemy post between Ame and Konoha," Itachi put in softly. "Tell me, Shikaku, what is the latest form of weaponry that was developed between the last war and the one being waged right now?"

"Explosives," Deidara answered out of turn. She crossed her arms, and everybody paid attention, for she was an expert in this subject. "The most effective are ones that use chakra to detonate. My clay is one such material, and the other is..." She glanced knowingly at Shikaku, almost as if she were apologizing for stealing the spotlight.

The elder Nara surmised, "TNT. Itachi, you think that they have TNT stores in that supply post?"

"It was very well hidden," Kakashi said abruptly. "We wouldn't have found it if it wasn't for the blood, and the high density of Zetsu monsters outside of the camp. I wouldn't be surprised if we came across something as deadly as explosives. And this close to Konoha as well?"

Shikaku nodded in agreement. "Yes, it does seem like too much of a coincidence..."

"Let's not forget that this is just an assumption," Sasuke intoned, the default frown on his face more pronounced than ever. "Are we really going to risk our lives for supplies that we don't even know are there or not? And, hypothetically, if we do pull through and get our hands on TNT, what exactly are we going to do with it?" The narrowing of his eyes showed that he already had some idea.
"It's simple," Itachi said. His chin lowered, and the fire crackling in front of him was reflected in his dark orbs, sending shivers down spines. "We're going to make their world burn."

No one could sleep well that night. Plotting, planning, arguing—under the stars was a flurry of excitement, hot tempers, and stubbornness, traits that had helped them all survive this far.

First and foremost, it was an adult thing. Which left the kids relatively in the dark, left to their own devices.

In the early morning, in their own little corner around the steadily burning fire, those kids were entertaining themselves, talking quietly. Of course, they couldn't be allowed to be completely left alone, so Masami, Itsuki's mother, Shogo's grandmother, and Yukari sat with them, staying mostly quiet. Shogo's grandmother was almost completely silent as she was sleeping in her family's shared futon, her breathing ragged. Sakura had checked her over an hour ago. The sickness was still prevalent in the old woman, as it was with Itachi, and Yukari. The latter's cough was undoubtedly worse.

All Yukari had were the clothes on her back and a blanket that was far too thin to fight the cold away. She was almost all skin-and-bones now, unable to keep down much food. Her face was gaunt, and her eyeballs had practically receded into the bony sockets. She was murmuring quietly to herself, and Masami was trying her best not to look uncomfortable, making small talk with Itsuki's mother, Mikoko.

Then Yukari coughed, and Itsuki shirked away, clutching his hand.

"Cover your mouth!" Mikoko whirled on the girl almost instantly. "I don't want you infecting my son again when he's just recovering." She tried to draw him into a hug, but Itsuki managed to get away. "Son?"

"Can we go play?" Itsuki said loudly, standing up. "I'm bored."

Yukari's head snapped upward, her eyes haunted, but Mikoko talked over whatever she'd been about to say. "Don't go far, sweetie. Make sure that you can still see the smoke and the river."

"I'll look after them," Chihiro promised, helping Shogo up.

"Um, are you sure, lady?" Moegi asked Mikoko. "Isn't it dangerous?"

Udon placed a finger on his chin. "I'm not gonna play, but I doubt there are any Zetsu close by. And even if there were, we have people to defend us. And they're pretty good at their job."

"Tell that to all the people that died," Daichi said bitterly.

"None of that!" Mikoko glared at Daichi, though she checked around the perimeter for Rin before scolding him. She was with Deidara, talking seriously about something. Nearby, Asagi was scrubbing her hands clean in the river to help Shizune with something.

"I want to go," Hikari said, her voice barely a whisper. The hairstyle that Deidara had put her hair into last night had been changed back to her original short ponytail.

"What?!" Daichi shouted, moving so that he was halfway between standing and sitting. "No way, imouto! In fact, none of you should be going."

"Mikoko said it was fine," Masami said, her voice slightly muffled by her swollen cheek. "If you
want, I can come with you?"

"Oh, Masami, do stay," Mikoko insisted, but Masami was a bit more careful about leaving the kids by themselves than her, and declined.

Having an adult there did little to convince Daichi of Hikari's safety, but he would have to physically restrain his little sister to keep her from going. So, sighing, he agreed to accompany them, ready to whisk his sister away at the first sign of danger.

So off they went, Masami the only adult with a group of children: Chihiro, Shogo, Daichi and Hikari, and, of course, Itsuki. Konohamaru had wanted to attend, but Moegi and Udon both convinced him to stay, taking him by either arm and dragging him down. He pouted, but quickly started a game with his pals to pass the time.

In spite of the cold, crisp morning air, Daichi felt like something was wrong about the environment.

"We should go back," he told them as they stepped over a fallen tree. "Masami-san!"

"No!" barked Itsuki, his eyes wide and he whirled around. "I said I want to play!"

Daichi recoiled at the sheer panic and desperation in his tone. "Dude, what's your problem?" He marched right up to the younger boy and shoved him in the chest, Hikari's protests falling on deaf ears.

"Don't fight," reprimanded Masami. "Why don't we do something that we can all agree on?"

No, you airhead! Daichi wanted to shout. Can't you see anything wrong about this?! His fingers twitched, and he grabbed Hikari. "Come on, we're leaving."

"No!" Hikari snapped. "Itsuki-kun...! He...!"

"Itsuki?" Chihiro's uncertain voice broke the argument. The boy in question had their back facing to them, and he seemed to be trembling from the cold.

"W-What?" Even his voice shook.

"What game do you wanna play?" Shogo didn't really know what else to say.

"What about we just explore?" Masami tried to smile. "Come on, let's walk."

"I'm not going back," Hikari whispered harshly to her brother. The fact that she sounded wide awake chilled Daichi to the bone, and he tightened his grip on his sister's wrist. "Aniki, please."

"Why do we need to be here, huh?" Daichi hissed back, ducking his head when he saw Masami's cat-like gaze slide over to him.

"I think there's something wrong with Itsuki-kun, and I have to be there with him."

"No you don't."

"Yes! I do!"

They got to a huge log that was far too large to scale, and that was the end of their expedition. Masami addressed them all, "Alright, children, we should all go back now, so please—"
Itsuki suddenly smashed his face into the log, bone crunching against bark, and Masami shrieked. Chihiro's eyes widened as blood began to trickle from the space between his face and the bark. Slowly, she reached her hand out to tap his shoulder. "Itsuki?"

A low moan echoed through the forest, as if the very trees were creaking around them.

Hikari had gone completely white, and while her mouth moved up and down, sound was barely coming out. "No... I thought... was... wrong... It wasn't a stick after all... I thought I dreamed it up..."

"Imouto?" Daichi demanded. "What's going on?!"

Birds burst through the trees, cawing a discordant song just as Masami pulled Chihiro out of Itsuki's range, the boy having turned around and snapped—literally snapped his jaws—at where Chihiro's nose had been. The woman and the girl tumbled backward, sending grass flying up in tufts.

Itsuki let loose a growl deep in his throat, black bleeding into his eyes. Spittle flew from between his growing teeth, and his hair was plastered to his face in sweat.

"Wait!" Hikari had thrown herself between the hunched-over Itsuki and the fallen Chihiro and Masami. "Itsuki, it's me..." She swallowed a lump in her throat. There was a bruise already starting to form on her wrist from when she had broken free of her brother's iron grip. "It's me, Hikari-chan. You... Do you remember me?"

Itsuki fixed his beady black eyes on the little girl's form.

"IMOUTO!" Daichi screamed, lunging forward. "GET BACK!"

Itsuki snarled, clutching his head, and suddenly the blackness bled out of one eye and the corresponding side of his face drooped. "Hikari-chan? Am I..." Tears flowed out of his human eye. "Am I gonna die?" His voice darkened then, and Hikari took one step back, walking straight back into Masami and Chihiro, who were now standing, before Daichi pulled her backward even further. "Please," Itsuki's voice trembled, "I don't wanna die. I don't wanna. If I go back, they'll kill me. They'll kill me. Shogo!"

The boy jumped at his name being called.

"Shogo, you're gonna save me, right?" Itsuki's eye started to blacken again, blood continuing to trickle from his misshapen nose. He hid the top half of his face behind his hands and smiled; it was a horrible thing, lined with fear and desperation. Then his fingers parted to reveal fully darkened scleras. "Right?"

The young boy balked, too shocked to even cry at the sight of his best friend in such a state. "It-Itsuki..."

Daichi grabbed Hikari's hand then, yelling at the top of his lungs, "RUN!"

Masami didn't need to be told twice, completely forgetting about the kids as she sprinted back the way they came from. The children were close behind, Daichi dragging Hikari along, and Chihiro doing the same for Shogo, who was still trying to regain his bearings after going into shock.

Roaring, Itsuki lunged after them, not even wincing as his shoulder thudded painfully against a particularly hard tree after turning a sharp corner.
"Chihiro," Daichi panted as he let Hikari pull in front of him, the girl sobbing. "He's gaining on us. Do you have any kunai?!

"Y-Yeah, three!"

"Give one to me!"

The girl fumbled, but managed to pass one to him, gripping the other two tightly. "Daichi... what are you doing?" Chihiro gasped as Daichi skidded a stop, turning around with that kunai in his hand just as Itsuki jumped over a fallen tree. The others had vanished into the trees, not even looking back. "Daichi! What—"

"Am I doing?" Daichi finished. He shifted his stance into one that hadn't used in a very, very long time, holding out the kunai in front of him. Itsuki howled as he crouched on the log, fully gone. He tried to smirk reassuringly, but his false confidence was detracted by the chronic trembling of his entire form. *It's the same reason as why I started learning kenjutsu under that man... I'm going to protect my imouto. Even if it kills me.*

A flock of birds flew past, and Rin glanced skyward, a niggling feeling in the back of her mind. When Mikoko, with her shifty, conniving eyes, had told her that Masami had taken some of the kids to go collect water a bit further down the river, that feeling had began to make itself known.

Deidara eyed her. "Rin? What's wrong?"

"I..." She stepped backward.

Suddenly, there was a piercing scream from the foliage.

*Hikari?!

Her veins were ice, but her body felt as light as a feather in that moment.

*I have to go!"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *collapses from exhaustion*

Guh.
"You're not a bad man, Kisame-sensei. Everybody keeps calling you a monster, but you're not."

A large palm descended on her head, and she squeezed her eyes shut as the shark-man ruffled her hair, making it messier than it already was. "You're gonna make me cry, kiddo. There's a part of me that never wants you to change."

"I don't want to change either," Chihiro admitted.

"But you will." He sounded resigned, and it made Chihiro's heart explode with love. She almost threw her arms around his large frame. "You are already. You've seen how shitty this world is, kid. It's inevitable... that you're going to have to do nasty things to keep yourself alive."

"Like...?" She knew the answer already.

"You know what I'm talking about, kid."

Yes, she did.

"Now let's stop wasting time. Kunai aren't only for throwing, you know. When you slash someone with it, it'll hurt like a bitch."

"I'm going to protect my imouto, even if it kills me."

Chihiro did a double-take. "Daichi...!" What can I do? I can't leave him to face a monster by himself. She took a deep breath. "Then I guess I'm gonna make sure that you return to see her." Think of everything Kisame-sensei's taught me. The two kunai shifted in her hand, metal clinking as she trembled uncontrollably. She'd seen monsters before. She'd seen what they could do to human beings, to adults, let alone children.

Itsuki leaped off his perch, snarling viciously.
Daichi's grip on his sword tightened.

"Kill... tear..." Itsuki howled, and Chihiro unintentionally took a step backward. "I'm going to rip you apart!" The words were barely out of the Zetsu's mouth before he reverted back to emitting animalistic noises. Blood still dripped from where he had smashed his face into sturdy wood, pooling at his chin.

"DODGE!" shrieked Chihiro, and Daichi rolled out of the way, spinning his kunai so that it nicked the monster during the motion.

Daichi was panting heavily. Not from exhaustion, but from sheer terror. Chihiro was barely coherent herself, the world buzzing like a white sea of noise around her, its constancy a spike of fear in her heart.

Itsuki leaped for Daichi again, jaws salivating, and the boy barely skirted aside, his lips pressed in a thin line and his face pallid. Then Chihiro moved, the twin kunai in her hand slashing in a dance of blades. An x-shaped wound was inscribed on Itsuki's face, and the beast howled terribly, shaking his head and sending droplets of blood flying everywhere.

"NOW!" Chihiro shouted pleadingly.

"RARRRGGGHHH!" Charging, Daichi screamed in terror and fury, swinging his kunai.

Itsuki shrieked when it cut through his arm, the limb promptly falling into the grass with a wet, sickening plop.

The kunai dropped to the ground.

"Daichi?!" Chihiro frantically cried.

"Oh god." Daichi, hands covered with blood from where it had sprayed, heaved, throwing up chunks of last night's dinner. "I can't do this, I can't. I CAN'T KILL ANOTHER HUMAN!" Just like that, his resolve was broken, the wetness on his palms an awakening of reality's true horrors.

Suddenly, a scream arose. Hikari.

"He's not human," Chihiro croaked. Numbly, she stepped forward. "Not anymore." Her arm shaking, she readied her kunai at the writhing form of Itsuki. The boy-turned-monster was slowly regaining his bearings, weakened from Daichi's attack. "I'm sorry." She sniffled. "I'm so sorry..." Before tears could completely blur her vision, she threw her kunai, knowing that her aim was true.

She closed her eyes, only hearing wet thuds. When she opened them again, a kunai was embedded through one of his eyes, the other his shoulder. The monster slumped. Chihiro turned to Daichi, who was on all fours on the grass, his hair falling over his face. "Daichi. Daichi, you can get up now. He's... gone."

A sob wracked his shoulders, and Chihiro tensed. He was just a kid, even younger than her. He tried to act brave, but in the end, there was nothing he could do to disguise his fear.

"Useless," he whispered to himself. "I'm so... useless. I couldn't save my father, I couldn't even save my sister—that was you."

Hauling him up, Chihiro made for the river which they had passed earlier when Masami led them away. They broke through the foliage, discovering the rest of their expedition group (minus Itsuki) huddling by the bank, Deidara and Rin standing over them. Rin was holding her daughter tightly as
Masami recounted what had happened with chattering teeth.

"We have to find Daichi!" Hikari was sobbing. "I turned around and he wasn't there—aniki!"

"Oh, Daichi!" Rin scooped him up into a hug as well, tears trailing down her cheeks. "You're okay. Gods, you're both okay." Her tears tasted salty on Daichi's tongue, but he didn't complain, merely clutching his mother's torso as he shared the warm space in her arms with his little sister. It was like he had reverted back to newborn again, desperate for the touch of his mother; not caring if he made bloody hand-prints all over her front. "I'm so sorry for leaving you."

Chihiro, on the other hand, had no such comforts. She awkwardly stood to the side, staring at the grass as she willed her racing heart to slow itself.

The commotion attracted another person, Asagi, Shogo's mother.

"What happened?" Asagi gasped, horrified at the sight of her traumatized son.

"Shogo! Shogo, come here, I'm here for you..." Her son jumped into her arms, sniffling and rubbing snot on her collar. "My son..."

Deidara turned to Chihiro. "Was it you, hm?"

Something in her tone told the orphan girl that she wished that it had been her who killed Itsuki. She did not fault her for it—she, too, did not wish for Daichi to have blood on his hands.

"Was it you who stabbed him in the heart?" Deidara repeated her question, stepping forward. She wasn't angry, but she continued to press as Rin put down her children. Daichi was clutching a bloody kunai. He must have picked it up from the grass when Chihiro hadn't been looking.

"Chihiro?"

Wait, the heart?

"No," Chihiro's eyes widened, "neither of us did—"

Itsuki tore through the foliage, leaves slick with black blood thrown into the air as he howled with rage and hunger. With terrifying strength, he bowled into Chihiro, who barreled straight into Deidara, knocking the wind out of both of them as they slammed into a tree. His skin began to fleck away, and it almost seemed like his blackened eyes were melting from their sockets as he rushed at the shell-shocked Uchiha family with deadly speed.

There was wet sound of metal piercing flesh and a black shroud in the wind.

Deidara's eyes widened as that black shroud obscured her view. "...Rin?" Pushing Chihiro off, she scrambled to her feet, almost tripping over herself when she abruptly halted, staring down at the gruesome sight before her. Somehow, it didn't really faze her. When had she stopped caring? Well—it didn't matter now, not when—

Hikari slumped in her mother's arm, eyes rolling back as she lost consciousness. Her face was paper white, and the dark stain on her pants indicated that her bladder had loosened.

Tears welling up in her eyes, Rin clutched her daughter, her free hand covering her mouth as she struggled not to vomit at the sight of Itsuki's severed head on the grass. Itsuki's heart, already run through and bleeding sin like a punctured water balloon, remained in the other section of the corpse.
Daichi simply looked up at Sasuke blankly, looked up at the man who dared do what he wouldn't.

Sasuke's katana was blackened and slick with blood, and only a dancing shadow in his eyes gave away any the presence of humanity left in the Uchiha. Other than that, he remained hard and stoic. His hand was trembling slightly, but no one could tell if it was from adrenaline or remorse.

Deidara found herself breathing a sigh of relief, callously stepping over the boy's body to reach the Uchiha huddle. Without hesitating, she wrapped her arms around the remaining members of Obito's family, biting the insides of her cheeks until they stung.

Sasuke had dipped his katana in the river, black blood washing off the sword and down the mountain. He sheathed it just before multiple approaching footsteps sounded, and a group of people appeared from the foliage separating the river from the camp, led by a fretting Mikoko.

"There they are!" Mikoko splashed into the river as she waded across, not even giving the stepping stones a glance. She clumsily maneuvered herself across the water body, and her garment and person was sopping wet as she took her first step onto the grass on the other side.

The others, Deidara noticed, were Sasori and Chiyo. *Itachi left with Kakashi earlier to scout the area.* It was something that had to be done before sending their own in; Deidara was to be part of the collecting explosives squad. *Neji's being guarded by Kisame and Anko; one levelheaded enough to balance the other's hotheadedness."

"What happened?" Chiyo demanded as she and her grandson caught up. She glanced at Deidara, then to Mikoko, who had gone stock still at the sight of Itsuki's bisected body.

"It was horrible," Asagi said hoarsely. Perhaps she did not register the tears on her face, for she made no attempt to brush them away from her cheeks, ruddy from the mountain chill. Shogo had his head buried into her bosom and was shuddering relentlessly—as soon as Itsuki had exploded from the bush, Asagi had formed a protective ball around her son.

Deidara glanced at Itsuki's sprawled lower half, then at his head, the barest feeling of pity welling in her heart. "See for yourself, hm." She turned away at that, bile rising in her throat at the sight, which had burned itself into her brain. He'd only been a boy.

"ITSUKI!" Mikoko screamed.

*Reality's finally caught up to her,* Deidara noted. It left a bitter taste in her mouth.

The woman fell to her knees, her hair untwisting itself from the bun she kept it in. Her mouth trembled, but no words came out as she reached out for Itsuki's head before faltering.

Mikoko did not receive her son's death with the sort of agonizing silence most women did. No, the first thing she did—*the first thing she would do*—

She twisted around to glare at all of them, a sort of crazed fury burning in her eyes. Her husband had been lost in Akatsuki, and her mother-in-law before that. Her son had been the only thing that she'd had left, a physical proof of the cushy life she had once lived in what she had once believed to be a safe haven.

"*WHO KILLED HIM?! WHO KILLED MY SON?!*"

—*was to find someone to blame.*

"It was you, wasn't it?!" Mikoko pointed at Chihiro, who had been watching everything unfold
with a horrified quiet. "You're a monster! You've practically been raised by one; it was you, wasn't it?"

"Mikoko," Chiyo began sharply, but the woman was mad with grief.

"I'VE LOST EVERYTHING!" Mikoko screamed, pointing an accusing finger at her before her gave shifted to Sasuke. Somehow, right away, she knew that he'd been the one to murder her child. "MY HUSBAND! MY MONEY! MY LIFE! And now... now I've lost my son!" Tears streamed down her face as her windblown hair lashed about wildly, and she lunged at Sasuke with wild abandon, only to change course and go for Rin and her children instead. In her mind, she rationalized her actions; it was only right that she hurt the man who had killed her son—but if she could not harm him, she would have to strike his family instead.

Deidara saw it coming before anyone else did.

Sasori, having been silent throughout the whole exchange, suddenly appeared in front of Mikoko. A vine twisted from his Zetsu arm and whipped through the air like lightning, slicing through flesh and bone, sharp as any of Shisui's tantos. He was fast and efficient, as if he'd been killing his whole life. Then he landed softly on the grass, staring at his new arm pensively, as if he hadn't just decapitated a civilian woman.

Mikoko's grief had been forever silenced, her head rolling to a stop next to her son's. Tears continued to trickle from the corners of her lifeless eyes, dribbling down her nose and into her mouth, still contorted in a silent scream.

"We..." Deidara had to swipe her tongue around the insides of her mouth to get rid of the dryness. "We should throw them in the river, hm." Burying them would be too much time wasted, and too much energy expended when had more pressing matters to attend to.

"The blood might attract monsters," Rin added quietly, not looking up. Her clothes almost slipped off her shoulder from the way her children were clutching the fabric.

Chiyo gave a bitter smirk. "Like we need any more."

Asagi and Rin returned to camp with the children, Deidara and Chiyo accompanying them. Sasuke and Sasori exchanged a glance.

"No use standing around," Sasori said dryly. "Come on, brat, we'll throw the heads in first, then cut up the body."

Surprisingly, Sasuke did not complain, and they set to work, disposing of the corpses in quiet tandem. Deidara cast them one last look from across the river before disappearing behind the trees.

What was that? Deidara leaned against the tree trunk, the sun climbing to its peak behind the clouds above her. Her stomach growled, but she could not afford to consume any more of their rations. They were running dangerously low, and everything had to be conserved. *I've seen him kill before, so why am I surprised?* She breathed out slowly, her eyebrows creasing in a frown. *No, that's not right...* She sat up. *The only things I've ever seen him kill before are monsters. In spite of everything, Mikoko was still a human.*

It bothered her, this new side of him she had seen, especially after she'd told him that she was certain about his goodness. Of course, everything had a light and a dark side, of that, Deidara was sure, but seeing the light waver was almost... frightening.
I'm not scared of him. It was true, she assured herself. After witnessing that, she would still be willing to spend nights under the stars with him, as they had last night, in that intimate silence which she craved. No, I'm not scared. I'm... curious. What kind of skeletons was Sasori hiding in his closet to make him speak so bitterly of himself—art aside—to drive him to attempting suicide; to allow him to murder someone without even batting an eyelash? The latter could, of course, be attributed to circumstances, but the rest had her pensive.

The sun was momentarily blocked out by a murder of crows cawing and flapping overhead. It prompted her to think of Itachi and Kakashi, both of whom had yet to return from their scouting mission.

"Deidara?" Izumi came up to her. "Mind if I sit?"

The blonde shrugged. "It's not my tree, hm."

So Izumi sat, letting out a sigh. "Okay, I'm about to tell you something, and I don't want you to be mad." Her tone was sobering, and Deidara immediately paid close attention. Izumi folded her hands in her lap, trying to decide how she would go about revealing whatever information she had to Deidara. In the end, she decided for blunt and straight to the point. "I'm joining you on the expedition to the TNT base."

"What?!" Deidara lurched away from Izumi as if she'd been burned. "Tell me you're joking, hm!" Why? What about Izuna? Why the hell is Itachi letting you? How could he? A million questions raced through her mind, but she spoke none of them. Instead, she waited for Izumi to explain.

"We're short on people who could actually pull this off," Izumi said, smiling hollowly at the distance. "It can't just be you, Itachi, and Kakashi."

"And why not?" Deidara said sharply. "We're masters. We can do this, yeah."

"So am I. I haven't trained for a long while, but I, too, am a martial artist. And to be honest..." Izumi closed her eyes regretfully. "There are stronger people who could take my place, but this camp needs to be defended, too. But me? I'd pull my own weight better out on the field, where I at least have some control of what's happening. And... I can't let my husband go out on the battlefield again without knowing what's happening to him. I handled myself last time—this time will be no different."

Deidara stared at her. "You're an idiot."

"Deidara—"

"No!" she snapped, standing up. "You're only going because of Itachi! I understand that he's your husband, but haven't you ever considered that he might prefer you staying behind?! And what about Izuna? You don't have to try and prove yourself to anyone, hm!" Her raised voice turned some heads, and Izumi balked at her tone.

Then she stood up, a fire burning in her eyes. "No, you don't understand! You never will, Deidara. I love Itachi too much to let him go to war one more time. You don't understand, because you've never seen the world in my eyes. I think..." She laughed harshly, burying her face in her palms. "I would rather die than let him go."

"Then Izuna—"

"Might not have either of his parents?" Izumi finished, staring blankly at her. Her eye twitched, as
if she knew that she wouldn't be able to keep it in any longer. "Would it kill me, would it send me to hell if I told you that I don't care? I wish I could, I've been trying so hard!" She exhaled sharply, grabbing Deidara by the shoulders and trying to keep a straight face as her broken mind fell from her eyes. "I've fed him, kissed him, held him, but it still feels foreign. Like he isn't my child. One time—one time, I even thought about leaving him behind in our previous camp." She sobbed, her fingers curling into the fabric of Deidara's green shirt, still unchanged from the day she left Akatsuki. "I'm terrible. I can't even feed him properly anymore because I haven't been sleeping or eating and it's like I don't even care because I think I might not. I love him, I tell him I love him, but do I really? Did I really give birth to him? Do you know where he is now? With Sakura, because she loves and cares for him more than I ever—"

"What..." Deidara was tense as Izumi cried out her sorrows. What's wrong? What went wrong? Why? "Izumi, focus. Izumi! I'm here, shh, I'm here, yeah..." She was faintly aware of another being approaching her, and out of her periphery, she could see Shizune coming.

"Izumi, breathe," Shizune coached, her voice steady. "Everything's okay. You're not the first woman to feel this way. You're not alone." Eventually, her sobs stifled, and Izumi backed away from Deidara and let Shizune lead her away.

"I've seen this before," a voice commented to her left, and she almost jumped when she saw Chiyo. How had she not sensed her? The old woman ambled toward her, and Deidara subconsciously backed into her tree, pressing her back against the bark. Chiyo stopped beside her, glancing once to where Shizune was bringing Izumi to Rin and Asagi. "Women who've recently given birth becoming shells of their former selves. Difficulties eating, sleeping, bonding with their newborn..." Chiyo frowned. "It is a terrible thing. I knew someone like that, once."

Idly, Deidara asked, "Who?"

"She was beautiful woman, caring and kind. She eventually recovered from her darkness. Her name was Arisa. Sand. I think you would have liked her."

"... If you think so, hm..." She had really nothing else to say. She had other thoughts in her mind. Izumi is broken. I've just been too busy with my own damn feelings to notice. How could I do this to her? She's so stubborn, she'll never listen to what I have to say about this mission. She'll go anyway. Whatever gods were watching over them, she prayed that they would keep Izumi safe.

"Now's not the time to fall into your own darkness," Chiyo warned, voice grave. The foliage cracked for a moment, and Sasuke and Sasori entered the camp. "Remember that, and hopefully you won't live only to take your own life." And like a breeze in the air, she drifted away, leaving Deidara by her lonesome.

But her thoughts were muddled, and she could not use her solitude to think properly. Frustration nipped at her skin in the form of biting winds, and she stood straighter, crossing the clearing to meet with Sasori.

He gave her a questioning look.

"We should talk," Deidara said, strained.

Sasuke left them alone, thankfully, going off to who-knew-where. Sasori hesitated for a split second before nodding, expression grim. "Is it about the Mikoko woman?" There was scorn in his voice, and Deidara twitched slightly.

"Don't talk about her like that," she said, surprised at how calm her voice sounded. They went to a
more secluded area, where the backdrop noise was reduced to a faint buzz. Not that the people among them talked very loudly anyway. "Earlier this morning, when you killed her, yeah... It was like seeing another side of you."

His expression grew harshly frustrated. "I already warned you—"

"I know that!" She didn't mean to snap, but this morning and Izumi's depression had her temper flaring. "And I still stand by what I said, hm. But, Danna, I want to know—"

"A killer."

"What?"

"That's who I was, and who I still am," Sasori explained, his face completely straight. His voice, however he tried to control it, betrayed more than he would have liked. "A hired killer. I've killed more people than you could possibly imagine, and I did it all with the same likeness as I did with Mikoko-san today."

*He's not kidding. He's not kidding.* But that was okay, wasn't it? She'd seen it herself, the side that people seemed to either completely ignore or take for granted. *Each person has a light and a dark side, and I just happened to glimpse the latter today. It's nothing. It means nothing.* "Do you regret it?" She just had to know this, to solidify what she thought she'd already known.

Sasori shifted his arms slightly, and Deidara cursed herself for instinctively tensing when she saw his Zetsu arm in full view. Sasori noticed, but forced himself to keep his pokerface. Such longing and *optimism* in her voice, he thought bitterly. *She's only setting herself up for disappointment. The only person who I thought had faith in me is beginning to doubt. How... fitting. So what if I regret anything at all? How would she react?"

"I—" He halted. "Most of it. I regret most of it. There are some that I don't regret."

"That's..."

"Relieving to hear?" he cut across her, his tone chilly, defensive. "Would you still see me the same way if I had said no?" He took a step forward, and it was a small relief to see that she didn't not recoil from him. "Tell me," a leaf fell between them, momentarily obscuring his view of her delicately emaciated face, *would you?"

There was a beat.

*Did you really think*, a small, barely audible voice in his head told him, *that she would tell you that everything was okay? That she would still accept you? That's what you want, isn't it—to be reintegrated into humanity? To shed the skin of a killer? Her silence speaks volumes—*

"I told you that I don't care." If he had just a little less self control, he would have sucked in a breath at the feeling of her hand grabbing his wide, disproportionate Zetsu one. "We all have our faults, yeah, that's what you said."

"You..." Sasori glared at her, yanking his hand away. "You're *insane*, brat. How can you care so little about the blood on my hands—the lives which I've taken? If you really didn't care, then why are we even having this conversation? *Hm?*" he added mockingly, the implication loud and clear. He truly thought that she was afraid of him, somehow. Disgusted by him.

"I didn't come here to talk with you because I *feared* you, *hm!*" she said fiercely, glaring back at him; she stepped even closer so that they were almost nose-to-nose.
"Then what did you fear, Deidara?"

"I—"

A voice cut through the air, a loud protrusion through the gentle buzz. "Itachi's back! And Kakashi, too!"

More voices became raised. "Thank the gods they're still alive!"

Sasori brushed past her. "We should go." When she didn't immediately follow, he still kept going, uncertain of what kind of expression he would see on her face if he turned back.

"What did I fear?" Deidara repeated the question to him before forcing herself to move to where the flurry was. "I thought that I was going to lose you." At least now... I know that I was worrying about the wrong thing.

He stopped then, but didn't turn, waiting for her to catch up. "Why? Why don't you care about what really matters?"

She contemplated the question. Why did she? The words were on the tip of her tongue, but she had never known such a simplistic answer, especially when everything else seemed to have such a winding and convoluted solution. But like the wind calling to the bird, a natural instinct permeated her being, and she said, "Because you're not supposed to care about someone's past like that when you love them." Deidara didn't stumble on her words, didn't immediately try to retract them or amend them. Instead, she simply let it hang between them, knowing that whatever happened next was out of her hands. She didn't like it, of course—there was a part of her that was disquieted by the lack of control she had over the situation—but she had forced her own hand. "I..." She cleared her throat, heat creeping up the back of her neck and rising to her cheeks. "I underestimated you, hm. The degree of self-loathing you feel... But it's not something you have to face alone, yeah. What you were doesn't matter to me—what matters is who you choose to be now."

Sasori took in her solemn gaze, the sincerity pervading her words. He could almost envision her reaching her hand out to him as he crouched in a shroud of darkness, shadows and ghosts sliding up and over her arm as she willingly tainted herself for his sake. His breath almost caught in his throat, and his gut wrenched in mourning of her losses as he chose to take the hand which offered so much at her own expense. He knew then that he would only ever tell the truth to her if lies were avoidable. "I wish I deserved you." Then, taking her by surprise, he drew her in, the thinness of her frame painfully obvious. Brushing her hair away, his lips ghosted her forehead, and a shiver ran down her spine, her heart twisting for the lie he believed. "We should go," he repeated, not letting her protest his belief. "They're waiting for us."

Whatever feelings they had, it would have to be pushed aside for now. Especially when both of them knew there was the very high possibility that one or both of them wouldn't live to see the next dawn.

Tenten had to actively try to keep her heart beating at a steady, acceptable pace. Upon Itachi and Kakashi's return, everyone gathered around them, waiting to know what kind of fate awaited them.

"First off," Kakashi said. "If anyone has any grievances or concerns, we should address them right here. We don't need any unnecessary drama."

There was a bout of silence at first, then someone piped up, "Why is the Hyuuga still here?" It was Hitoshi, but he was sounding more uncomfortable than aggressive. "I'm talking about the long-
haired boy," he added, in case someone was stupid enough to mistake his referral to the eldest Hyuuga. He had no problem with Hanabi or Hinata, after all. "How is his being here going to help us? And does anyone know where Yukari's gone?"

Tenten was curious about that, too, and she shot Sakura, who was next to her, a questioning glance. But the pink-haired medic shook her head, unsure of the other girl's whereabouts. She could have sworn her heart started racing again when she spotted Chihiro in the crowd, nearby Neji. She'd comforted the girl after the mess that had been early this morning, but she'd slipped away from her during the confusion that had arisen when Itachi and Kakashi reappeared.

"Hyuuga Neji is an ally and an asset," Itachi answered Hitoshi's concerns, in a tone that suggested no argument. "I know many of you feel nothing but hostility toward him, but I ask you—no, I implore all of you to put aside your personal feelings. He's someone we have to put our trust in, or else we might all die."

It was true. Neji had knowledge of how Zetsu camps were run, even if it was only a little. After all, he had regained his humanity before assimilating himself fully into monsterhood, and thus had never entered the monsters' largest headquarters, where Zetsu himself was rumored to be found in. And not long ago, in the absence of the children, he'd demonstrated his ability to willingly shift into a monster without the bloodthirsty disposition and mindlessness.

"Fine, but where's Yukari?" When nobody answered, he swore in frustration. "Fuck, I don't have time for this. She's ill. Physically and mentally."

"They don't know!" Hanabi didn't meant to lose her patience, but the heavy atmosphere was wearing her thin. She whirled to meet Hitoshi's gaze, adding regretfully, "None of us do."

Hitoshi didn't respond. He simply stood there, face hard. Then he lowered his chin, no more difficult questions shooting from his mouth.

Tenten stared up at Itachi's tired, lined face. He was still handsome, despite everything, and she had to admit that Izumi was a very lucky woman. Still, he seemed so far away from them—so isolated. She pitied him, much like the way she pitied almost all of them, but he incited an even stronger pity from her. She hoped to never see him cry, or scream, or break, because she wasn't sure if their perpetually low morale could survive such a devastating thing.

Under everyone's watchful gaze, Itachi couldn't help but have his feathers ruffled by a mild wind of anxiety. They depended on him. He couldn't let them down. He wasn't one for public speeches or dramatic goodbyes, but today, Itachi did a very un-Itachi-like thing. "Everyone." Just by uttering one word, their fixation on him had seemingly tripled. He was not a god, nor did he wish to be, but some would always look for someone to listen to, to bring them purpose and meaning. He took in each and every one of their dirty, tired faces, cheeks ruddy from the cold. This included Kakashi, whom Itachi observed from his peripheral. The silver-haired man's countenance was calm, but this was only because he had the very special gift of pausing his grieving process until an appropriate time. "We've made it this far. Konoha is just a few days travel away, and only one thing stands between us and salvation." He did his utmost to keep his face safe as he stated, "Not all of us will live." And perhaps Itachi was feeling more un-Itachi-like than they had first suspected, because he went on, "But to hell with it if we aren't going to try. You might not have faith in yourselves." His eyes gleamed, and suddenly, the Sharingan was spinning, a symbol of the decaying power he carried. "But have faith in me, in the people around you."

There was no applause, no cheers. It was so far away from the time that he had inspired a fighting spirit in all of them at Akatsuki Square, and Tenten's heart clenched, a dull ache making itself known in her chest. There was no sun visible—it was hidden behind the clouds—and they had
seen enough death to last for a lifetime. It felt like they were in a constant downward spiral, unable to break from the centripetal force, doomed to keep accelerating toward the bottomless centre.

For a moment, Tenten thought no one would say. Maybe they would walk away with their heads hung low, preparing themselves for the inevitable.

But then—

"I'm with you." Tenten turned to see Kisame holding his head up high. He chuckled grimly. "Words I'd never thought I'd be saying, especially considering our first meeting."

Itachi nodded, and the lines on his face softened, the only indication that he was grateful for Kisame's support. And in a way, Tenten realised with a jolt, Kisame had been a stable source of comfort for all of them. He was strong, solid, and supported them without much complaint, even when they would whisper about blue monsters and tiptoe around him. Chihiro trusted him, as well as Anko, and Sakura, Itachi, Kakashi, and Sasori all held respect for him, respect that was solidified on the night of the hospital expedition.

"I'm with you, too." The next words were spoken by a voice so dark and gravelly and full of hate that Tenten nearly drew out the blade hidden in her sleeve. She had heard that voice before—only it had been light and lilting.

She pinpointed the speaker soon enough, as did everyone else, and the people standing around Kagami gave the Uchiha a wide berth. Then, slowly, Kagami lifted a hand to their face, clutching the purple mask and unhooking it.

Sasuke drew in a sharp breath.

It seemed like an eternity and a half, but then the mask was off Kagami's face and tucked into the Uchiha's palm.

"It is because of them that Shisui is dead," Kagami said, their—no, her—voice no longer muffled and mechanical, instead raw with grief. Tears were gathered in the corners of her Mangekyo eyes, and threatened to fall, but she held them back bravely. She pulled her hood down, revealing long black hair that disappeared into the rest of her garment and a clear view of her slim, delicate face.

She said no more, letting the few words she had spoken shake them to the core. She had stared at Sasuke the most while saying it, as if willing him to share her vengeance.

"It doesn't matter if we die." This came from Naruto, not Sasuke. "I'm sick of running away like some coward! If it means I can be useful, then I'll do whatever you want me to, Itachi!" He looked around, as if daring anyone to oppose him.

"Kid's got spunk," Hitoshi commented, nodding in acknowledgment. "I'm in, too, I guess." He was more reluctant, but that didn't matter.

"Aw, what the heck." Anko lifted a clenched fist. "Let's make those bastards pay!" she bellowed, and several people echoed the sentiment, including Deidara and Tenten, the latter absolutely swept away by how fast everything was happening.

Awed, Itachi could only blink as, one by one, they offered their support, offered to stand alongside him in this battle. It did not come as a roaring tidal wave, but rather a subtle, yet forceful, shove of wind. He turned to Kakashi, unsure of his reaction.

"Don't look at me," Kakashi said mildly. "This is your doing, not mine. These people will die for you, not me."
"No," Itachi amended, suddenly feeling more certain of himself. "They would die for you, too, and each other."

Kakashi gave him a surprised, but nevertheless grateful glance.

"Well, then," Deidara spoke over the dying down noise, exhilarated. "Mind telling us what the hell all of us are going to have to do?"

The plan was simple. Or as simple as it could possibly be, considering all the risk factors and variables involved. But risks, of course, had to be taken, and two of the group's most notorious members had it the worst.

"What?" Hanabi glanced up at her sister in a mixture of pity and sadness as Hinata uttered the words, outraged. She had all but lost her stutter; the constant presence of Hanabi and the blond boy, Naruto, had seen to it. There were still traces, of course, but the elder Hyuuga sister wouldn't let it ail her at this moment. "You... You want to send Neji-nii-san and Sasori-san into the camp?!"

"That's basically a death sentence!" Tenten exclaimed. She was not fond of the Hyuuga boy, but Sasori's actions in Akatsuki had earned him her loyalty. Even so, Tenten could see merit in the plan, and so could everyone else.

"The explosives have to be planted somehow," Kakashi said. "With their abilities, Neji and Sasori have the best chances of infiltrating the camp, and they won't be alone." Itachi had told them how all of them who were able would be participating in this next battle. Well, he hadn't ordered it, but he hadn't needed to. For all their fear and all their cowering, these people were tired, and a fire was burning in their bellies. They hungered for safety and survival, and they knew that if they didn't give their all into it, their chances would be greatly reduced.

In order for Neji and Sasori to plant all the bombs in the ravine, a distraction would have to be made, and Itachi would be leading the squad who would provide that. It composed of the majority of them. Their numbers had been cut down greatly since the beginning of the journey—those with martial arts training, no matter how minuscule, now outnumbered those without.

Those who could not fight—children, the sick, the elderly—would be observing the battle from the shelter in the trees, not far from the battleground. They could afford to leave them here, at such a distance away from the future war grounds.

"It's okay, Hinata-sama," Neji told her. His eyes became hooded with gratitude and regret. "I owe you a great debt, but the case goes for everyone else. This is the least I can do. Don't worry—I'll be safe."

Hinata looked pained. "Neji-nii..."

"It's okay, Hinata," Naruto comforted her. "We'll just have to raise hell as best as we can so Neji will be safe!"

"Y-Yes!" Hinata's eyes steeled from the support she was receiving from Naruto. "You can count on me!" She said this not only to Naruto and Neji, but to everyone else as well. Hanabi smiled at her, pleased.

Before that could happen, however, the TNT had to be retrieved first, and a special team of strong warriors were going to do that. The cell composed of Itachi, Deidara, and Kakashi, but from the way Izumi was staring up at her husband, her arms still absent of their child, it would probably change soon.
After more discussion, they dispersed, and Izumi and Itachi found each other, taking their conversation under a shady tree.

"I've heard," Itachi began softly.

"From who?" Izumi forced her voice to remain steady, but the underlying anger could still be heard. "Deidara?"

"No, Chiyo."

What? Then...

"I can't allow you to go."

"Anata—"

"Don't go, Izumi." His eyes were pleading with her. "Izuna needs you."

"No. No he doesn't. He needs you, not me. He doesn't need me, Itachi." Izumi stepped right up to him, kissing him chastely on the lips once before drawing back. "Don't ask me why I feel this way because I don't know. I'll only tell you that this feeling hasn't once left me ever since his birth. Why do you think I gave Asagi the honor of being his godmother? A woman I hardly know. It was a spur of the moment decision, but I trust her." She narrowed her eyes at him. "I will go. I'll bring more to the table than I will staying behind. You didn't see how many of those things I killed back in the cave, Itachi. I can do this. My body won't betray me. You won't be able to stop me, short of knocking me out. Can you do that, Itachi? Even if you can, I won't let you." Her voice wavered slightly, but she kept a brave face.

I know I can't. How weak, he chastened himself, how pathetic that you cannot stop her from doing this. He knew—he knew—that she was emotionally manipulating him to get her way. She had done so before, but never this boldly. She was getting desperate to stay by his side, to protect him from the open arms of death. She loved him more than their child, and he could never harm her, even if it was for her own good. Itachi cursed his weakness. His love for Izumi—something that kept him strong—was becoming his downfall.

"Selfish," he uttered.

"I know. I know I am." She lifted a hand to his face solemnly. "But if I lose you without even having the chance to stop it from happening, it will destroy me. I'm sorry, Itachi, I really am. I've been told that I am a good wife, but I'm afraid I cannot be the mother Izuna deserves."

"You don't have to be. But do not stop me from being a father to Izuna," Itachi said sharply, the words sticking to his throat like flies to honey. "What kind of father would I be, if I knowingly took his mother away?"

"I'm not going anywhere," she promised, the conviction in her voice powerful, persuasive. "I'm going, Itachi. And we'll go to Konoha together, with Izuna. I... Shizune explained to me what this was, and she told me that I wouldn't be alone in the recovery process. When we get there, I'll get better. We both will."

Had his self-control been any weaker, he would have undoubtedly flinched at the implication.

"You are not well, Itachi, and I'm not talking about your cough," Izumi stated, eyes growing mournful. "We're damaged. We both are, and everyone else around us, too. Three is not enough to take on multiple Zetsu, and there is no one else more suited to infiltration than I am amongst our
group. Perhaps Sasori could, but we can't risk him."

Itachi merely stared blankly at her. Then he embraced her. "Stay."

"I won't. I think I'll go mad if I do," she whispered.

"Don't be foolish. Better mad than dead."

"... I'm going. And you cannot stop me."

It was then Itachi saw her in a new light. Desperate. Unhinged, almost. A liability. A liability that needed to be controlled, and he did not trust anyone with her assured safety. She needed him, and...

Perhaps he needed her, too.

"Stay by me at all times. Do not engage without permission." His tone became almost soldier-like and she shivered. She was now his weapon, one that he would wield to utmost efficiency. He was like that, sometimes, disassociating with his normal, pacifist persona.

"I guess that's all I can ask for."

"TNT can't be carried in a storage scroll, hm," Deidara told Itachi bluntly. "Storage scrolls require chakra to be channelled through a seal to activate, and we all know what that could end up doing."

"Chakra is quite the volatile thing, isn't it?" Kakashi hummed thoughtfully. "Any ideas, Itachi? Izumi?"

They were setting out to leave soon, and the rest they left behind would just have to sit tight and wait.

Itachi answered, "There is one..."

He told them his idea, and they all turned to the many eyes on them at once, as if they were one entity.

It looked like they wouldn't be sitting tight after all.

The trees were a blur of greens and some yellows as Deidara whisked through the treetops, Itachi, Izumi, and Kakashi alongside her. They had become three of her most trusted people, and she felt as at ease as she could possibly be. Her blood still thrummed with anticipation, and she was not ashamed that she fantasized about leaving explosives to detonate the surrounding area around the base after they left. It would be glorious, turning everything into ashes, including those dark, immoral beings.

The wind hurt her face, but she had learned to accept physical pain, and tune it out until it became nothing but a barely noticeable bite on her flushed cheeks.

Itachi landed lightly on a branch, Izumi landing beside him. Deidara found her place in an opposite tree branch with Kakashi nearby.

"Coast is most definitely not clear," Kakashi muttered, eyeing the lumbering Zetsu around the outpost with distaste. "We'll have to kill. Make it quick and efficient as possible. No drawing it out
"Roger that," Deidara said wryly. She caught Izumi’s gaze then, saw the seriousness in her eyes. The Uchiha woman gave her a nod, and Deidara lowered her chin slightly in return. Then the four were ghosts in the wind, merely apparitions to any watching eyes.

The monsters were large. Almost twice as tall as Kakashi, the tallest among them, but for supposedly apex predators, their large bulk made it so that they had extremely poor peripheral vision. They made up for it with their powerful sense of smell and hearing, extreme endurance, and deadliness—which was just overkill—so they had to strike as many down as possible while they still had the element of surprise.

Izumi was surprisingly good at exploiting weaknesses, Deidara found. She’d notice before, as they had sparred frequently before Izumi entered pregnancy, but only in passing, and had never really focused on that strength. Izumi’s keen eye was exactly that—keen—and made up for her lack of Sharingan.

They managed to kill seven—a good number, considering everything—before they were forced to throw away their sneakiness in order to directly engage the remaining Zetsu soldiers. All of them were splattered with black, seaweed-colored blood by that time. They all carried weapons, and all of their blades were ones that used to belong to Shisui.

He’d been something to all of them. Whether it'd been a brother-in-arms and a fellow rebel, a beloved relative, or the first friend in an unfamiliar country.

The final body fell at Itachi’s hand, the man's entire length of arm plunged through the black flesh of the Zetsu, its heart pierced by Shisui’s tanto. He removed his limb from the monster's chest cavity with a slimy flourish, the rolled-up long sleeve of his shirt plastered to his skin with unholy fluid.

Deidara couldn't help it. She smiled, baring all of her teeth. All of this violence... she found that it didn't even phase her at this point, as if that part of her had been burned out completely, replaced with a mentality that was forged by fire. To have a hand in slaughtering the animals who had killed so many of her beloved people—it was exhilarating; it gave her the same feeling as unleashing some of her hand-crafted explosives.

The door of the seemingly small bunker was kicked down by Kakashi, and the smell of death and rot pervaded the air even more so than it already was. Behind the mask, he wrinkled his nose. It led deep underground, this one, and all of them had at least a vague idea of what lay in the darkness.

Itachi turned on his Sharingan before entering. "Kakashi, be prepared." He didn't see the affirming nod of the man behind him, but he didn't need to. The Hatake disappeared into the treetops surrounding the area. "Izumi, stand guard. Deidara, you're with me."

Itachi and Deidara left Kakashi and Izumi behind to venture further into the bunker, callously stepping over mangled, mutilated bodies. Itachi, with his Sharingan spinning, led the way, and they found the explosives after a few minutes of poking around. As expected, they were stored in crates, with black powder scattered all over the floor. They made sure to keep their chakra flowing steadily, not allowing any of it to leak from their bodies, as chakra was sometimes prone to do when one got emotional.

They could each carry four crates each before handling them started to take a toll on their muscles. Izumi’s gaze followed them from her shadowed position on a nearby tree as her husband and friend
exited the bunker with eight crates of TNT between them. They reached a knotted tree with yellow leaves, tapping once on the wood to summon Kakashi. He hung upside down as he collected the crates one at a time, setting them on a thick branch. Then he was a shadow, carrying two crates at a time as he flitted through the trees.

Hanabi was not surprised to see Kakashi land on her tree, which was a bit further away from the outpost. "You can carry these, right?" he inquired.

She nodded, taking the crates from Kakashi and jumping away. She gave them to Sasuke, who was partially hidden on the high branches of a mighty oak tree, who passed them to Kisame, who passed them to Anko and so on. They didn't reach Gai until the very end of the makeshift delivery line, who they were counting on to deliver the TNT steadfastly to their new storage spot—close to the Zetsu ravine, but not too close—which were the medium-high branches of a sycamore with many recesses and indents. There, Gai would be greeted by the pallid but hopeful faces of those who weren't able or strong enough to help—young children, the old, and the pregnant. Their old camp had long been abandoned, the fire put out by a grinning Konohamaru with a stream of yellow water that made Moegi roll her eyes behind her hand and Udon cough exasperatedly. Iruka had given an indignant shout, still clutching comically to the bucket of river water he had painstakingly collected for the purpose of offing the flame.

They worked in tandem, warriors and civilians alike. The middle of the chain had the weakest strength-wise, composing of Hinata, Shikamaru, Masami, and so on. Their trees were closer together, to make the process more efficient.

"Careful!" Tenten hissed when Naruto nearly dropped a crate of TNT on the ground.

"Sorry!" Naruto stage-whispered back, the apology delivered through clenched teeth.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru muttered from the tree next to Tenten's. "Pass it here already, before my arms become too tired to lift."

At the outpost, Itachi and Deidara were churning out crates and crates of TNT as fast as they could, knowing that they could not afford to dally. Izumi cupped her hands and twittered like a bird, the signal that they had decided on. They were coming. The twittering grew more hasty. Deidara gritted her teeth. They had collected a little more than half of the TNT supply, but it still wasn't enough to decimate the entire camp. They could not rely on a rockfall to destroy the beasts. They needed to be purged with fire. Otherwise everything she loved would be torn apart.

"Be safe," Sasori had said before they'd left, going separate ways.

"Worry about yourself, yeah," she had replied with a grim smile. She'd almost kissed him. But she hadn't. Had refrained from doing so. Other things had taken precedence.

"Deidara!" Itachi's voice sounded close to her ear as they ducked into the bunker. "This is the last run. We'll have to go after that. Kakashi is already evacuating the others."

She grunted in affirmation, nearly tripping over a body without a face. Her arms were burning fiercely from carrying the crates, not allowing chakra to assist her in the great heave, lest she blow them all up sky high.

She picked up one crate this time, unable and unwilling to carry more than that, while Itachi picked up two.

She could already feel the repressing chakra of the Zetsu soldiers diffusing around the
surroundings, like a dark haze of fog or something else equally effusive. Faster, she coached herself, she needed to be faster.

They burst into the sunlight rapidly, leaving the darkness and death behind them. Probably for good. Unless they had a death wish, they would not be returning here soon.

Kakashi had gone and escorted the others away. She could barely feel their suppressed chakra signatures hopping further and further away until she could no longer sense them. She knew the monsters would not be able to smell them. The wind blew in only one direction due to the mountain's formations, and their group's location was decidedly downwind.

"LOOK OUT!" Izumi's warning came like a crash of thunder that was suddenly silenced, and then Deidara's box of TNT was flying out of her hands and through the air, where it made contact with Itachi's.

What?!

The boxes, upon colliding at such a high speed, shattered and splintered, and black powder rained upon them.

Vines were wrapped around her waist and neck, nearly suffocating her. Itachi was in a similar predicament, and she was unable to turn her head to see how Izumi was faring.

The monsters were still a while away, from what she could sense. So how? Where had these come from?

"Excellent. You truly are a scientific wonder, my dear. Of course, I have my previous children to thank."

And of all the—

Yukari stumbled out, missing an eye, her nose, and part of her ear. Beside her, a grey-haired man with a pale, cracked mask of a face, emerged. He wore round-rimmed glasses, and a black tongue swiped around his lips once.

More vines. Deidara was completely restrained now, as was Itachi. She still could not see Izumi, and she could not speak either. She could not scream when vine penetrated her shoulder, then her leg, purposefully missing the important arteries. Eyes shifting to the side, she saw Itachi suffering a similar fate, his eyes nearly closed shut with pain as the Sharingan flickered out.

"She came to me willingly," the grey-haired man mused, a vine stroking his chin in thought. "Sick and weak. I improved her then, in only the span of a few hours. I wonder... how could I improve you?"

Kakashi jumped from tree branch to tree branch, his heart pounding relentlessly. Finally, in what seemed to him like an eternity and a half, he burst through the foliage and landed in the most leafy tree closest to the outpost, almost overshooting and making his presence known to the monsters that had replaced their fallen comrades.

No sign of Itachi.

Or Deidara.

Or Izumi.
Only the red of human blood amongst the black of the monsters.

Kakashi’s heart fell into his stomach.

*I... Where... Where am I?*

Deidara’s eyes cracked open slowly, and her spine straightened at the dryness of the corner of her lids.

*It’s so dark in here,* she mused deliriously. And the air was dank and vile with piss, shit, and blood. Her entire body was wracked with pain. Some stung, while others were aching and stiff. Her neck, in particular, ached fiercely no matter how she positioned her head.

She tried to lift her arm, but found that she could not. But she hardly registered it, continuing to pull at the chakra chains which bound her wrists to the damp floor of her cell. It clanked. The noise hurt her ears, sending a sharp bolt of lightning running down her brain and lingering at the back of her teeth and the base of her neck. So she ceased, her breathing growing shallower.

The last thing she saw before falling into an almost death-like sleep was the man’s cracked, bespectacled face, his grin promising horrors yet to come.

Deidara smiled back, as if such a futile thing would defeat him. She smiled even as the woman in the next cell screamed and screamed, separated only from her by a few metal bars.

And then she slept.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, but chibi Kabuto is actually really cute. And i really like him. he looks like a cute nerd who belongs in Xiao Ding Dang.

We’re kinda nearing the end of Part III. Next chapter should be more focus on other characters; I want to write in Rin and Daichi’s relationship with Sasuke, as well as some Chihiro and Tenten and Neji etc. as the first half of the chapter, with happenings with Deidara, Itachi, Izumi, and maybe some Yukari in the second half. The chapter after that will likely be the final battle, explosions, art, dismemberment, disabilities, fire. You know, that stuff. A chapter 17 amount will likely be saved for the chapter after this one. perhaps it will exceed it, or fall short. who knows.

Also, another character death.
Part III: Scabious

Chapter Summary

The chapter where things kind of go to shit but don't worry everything will get better... eventually... ha... hahaha... ha... __.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter probably deserves a warning. So, uh, warning for the following: Blood, language, gore, psychological torture, physical torture, nudity (no, that THAT is not happening), beheading, body horror, body modification (without consent) and general (strong) violence. Fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snap!

Sasori glanced upward as Rock Lee jumped off a branch with a thick vine in one calloused hand and a kunai in the other, landing gracefully on his feet on the landing of the sycamore tree. The tree was huge, extraordinarily so, able to fit all thirty-something of them in its heart, where branches separated from the unbreakable vertical trunk, each branch boasting incredible thickness and stability. A shady, thick canopy protected them from the weather.

Lee acknowledged Sasori with a two-fingered salute. "Will this be enough to secure the crates?"

"Maybe two, three at most," the red-haired man informed him, sound faraway. The Uchiha and Deidara have yet to report. Where the hell are they? He tapped his foot impatiently, disliking their tardiness and doing his best to ignore the worm of worry wiggling its way through his heart. But the sycamore hadn't yet become completely occupied, people still streaming in from Hatake's orders. He would give them a small while longer.

Lee took Sasori's words to heart, passing the vines over to Shikamaru before scaling up the trunk and to the neighboring tree to collect more vines. The Nara passed the makeshift ropes to Gai, who stacked two crates on top of each other and bound them tightly before pushing them into a random cavity in the trunk. There were multiple crates already secured like this with rope, but they had run out of the material.

"Troubled?" Chiyo said as she appeared from god-knew-where. He hardly spared her a glance. She was not the woman that he wanted to see right now, but she was acceptable company.

"They should be back by now," Sasori stated, biting down on his teeth in the most minuscule show of frustration. In his periphery, he could see Sasuke help Hanabi get up a particularly steep side of the tree. Good thing, too, as they were so high up the ground, it would have meant certain death if she had fallen from this height. "Those two," he jerked his head toward the pair, "were stationed at the very front of the line. Why are they here, and not Deidara?"
Chiyo, noticing that he'd left out the Uchiha couple, couldn't help but smirk slightly. "I'm sure they'll show up soon, my worried grandson. Stop fretting." She patted his shoulder, but from the pinched expression on his face, he didn't seem to be any less tense. She sighed. "I'm serious, Sasori. Go make yourself useful." Then she left.

It was sound advice, Sasori had to admit, but a more petulant side of him simply wanted to keep standing around, not wanting to bow his head to his grandmother's whims. In the end, he forced himself to move, lifting his rift arm up. Vines burst forth as his white Zetsu appendage disassembled itself, wrapping around a sturdy branch near the very top of the sycamore. Ignoring any surprised gasps around him, he willed the arm to retract, pulling himself up like a bucket in a well. The new limb was surprisingly obedient, but he was sure that there were more abilities that he'd yet to witness and command. As he skipped across to the next tree with little trouble, snatching moss-covered vines, he recalled the day he had put his utmost faith into Deidara.

She'd held his life in her tongued-hands that day, and it was sheer, impossible luck that her crazy plan had worked. But before Neji had cut the bridge (he remembered, with no small amount of disdain, that it'd been the Hyuuga boy and not some random), before Sawako had been bisected...

Deidara screaming in rage and disbelief as the smoke cleared, revealing that the monster chasing them had shielded itself from the blast by summoning vines from the ground (or it could have been its body, he wasn't sure) to encircle it tightly.

"Thanks for your help!" said a sweaty Lee, interrupting Sasori's train of thought. "Really appreciate it. Our youthful effort will not go to waste!" As if to verify his proclamation, Lee karate-chopped more vines with a newfound vigor, and Sasori was not surprised to hear Gai echoing his mini-me's rallying cries from somewhere down below.

"Hmph. Don't get too ahead of yourself," Sasori advised, turning to Lee with a bland, yet ominous expression. "After all, this might all go to waste in the end."

At first, Lee seemed unsure of what to make of Sasori's cynicism. But then Sasori could practically see an epiphany strike him as his eyes sparkled unnaturally brightly. Then, cupping one hand around his mouth, he called down to his larger counterpart, "Gai-sensei, is this what you would call a hip attitude?!" Then, to Sasori's horror, the boy mimicked his words, even trying to impersonate his tone and expression.

"How modern!" Gai shouted back, sounding scandalized. "You can't let yourself lose to the wiles of nihilism, Lee!" He said something about the power of youth that Sasori didn't really care to listen to, ending with, "In many ways, he is like my eternal rival!"

Eternal rival? Who was that again? He was sure that Gai had mentioned this elusive rival once before, back in Akatsuki, but—

Sasori's eyes widened ever so slightly. "Oh, hell no," he deadpanned, incredibly unamused. It was one thing to call him out on his bleak view of the world, but to compare him to the likes of Hatake? When this was all over, he was going to strangle Gai with those obnoxious, ostentatious orange leg warmers of his.

By the time the boxes and boxes of TNT were safely secured, everyone was already back.

Well. Almost.

Sasori searched for a certain blonde head of hair in the crowd, even when he couldn't feel her chakra signature among them. He would never admit it to anyone, not even himself, but anxiety
was gnawing away at his heart, and he wanted nothing more than to shake Hatake and demand the whereabouts of Deidara (and the Uchiha; they, too, were good friends of his and valuable comrades) before going off on his own to search for them.

He wasn't the only one full of questions, it seemed, as the younger Uchiha brat, Sasuke, got right up in Hatake's face and asked, "Where is my brother? And Izumi?" He left out Deidara, but her name was practically hanging in the air.

"Kakashi-kun?" Rin prompted hesitantly. "What did you find?"

So the Hatake had gone out already? And they still weren't here? Chopping vines had been a good distraction, but Sasori could no longer ignore what was directly in front of him. His gut and brain told him the same thing, that the missing were either dead or just that: missing and unable to be located.

Kakashi hesitated for a moment more before answering, "Gone." It was such a simple word, but it left Sasori raring for more answers, even as he felt the heaviness of Hatake's words.

"That is not an answer," Sasori said cuttingly, his voice a cold fire. He wasn't in the mood for Kakashi's vague bullshit, and he made it very clear. "Where is Deidara?"

Kakashi took in a deep breath. Then he told them of what he had found. Of the puddles of blood in the grass, the decimated TNT boxes and the scattered powder nearby. "I can't say for certain if they are dead or alive," he concluded. "But the lack of... severed parts and amount of blood spilled tells me that they were probably incapacitated and captured."

Well, of course. Sasori had been able to glean about as much from Kakashi's recount. But so what? They might have been alive maybe minutes ago, but they could easily be dead now.

Sasori did nothing as Sasuke grabbed Kakashi by the collar and slammed him into the tree trunk, only holding out an arm to stop some boxes from tipping out.

"You were there!" Sasuke bellowed, his Sharingan practically pulsing in his eyes in rage. "How did you not see anything?!"

"Sasuke!" Rin shouted. "That's enough! Release him at once!" Her daughter was hiding behind her leg, cowering in fear at the raised, angry voices that seemed to be echoing through the forest. Her son, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen, but Sasori did not care for his whereabouts at the moment.

"Sasuke, please!" Sakura echoed. "Just let him go and we can talk this out."

Their words fell on deaf ears. Sasuke only tightened his grip of Kakashi's collar, his knuckles pressing into the soft flesh of his throat, leaving just enough space to let him talk. "How could you fail him like that?" Sasuke's lip trembled, and for a second, Sasori thought that he was about to cry. "You were there. So why didn't you save them?"

"Your brother's... orders..." Kakashi grabbed Sasuke's hand and pushed him away. He massaged his threat. "They were closing in. My orders were to evacuate the rest of you." The words sounded pathetic, even to himself, but he did not wilt.

Sasori didn't need to see him physically bend. He knew that Hatake was breaking slowly inside, scrambling to reassemble his parts. Just days ago, he would have been happy to see Sakumo's legacy crumbling, but he remained ambivalent now. Instead of rage, he felt only... a hollow pity.
"Kakashi?" This time, it was Naruto who uttered his name, worriedly.

"I'm sorry." The Hatake's apology was delivered mechanically, but they could all hear the raw pain in his voice. So raw that some actually turned away to hide their tears. "I'm so sorry. There is nothing I hate more than abandoning my comrades."

"Then why did you do it?!" Tears were gathering at the corners of Sasuke's eyes, threatening to fall. "This isn't the first time you've failed us!" His words were barbed, meant to hurt as much as possible.

"Oi, teme, shut up!" Naruto's own temper flared, unwilling to see Kakashi, already down, be kicked any longer. "This has nothing to do with the past!"

But everything to do with the present, Sasori thought. He didn't begrudge Sasuke. In fact, he felt that their feelings on this matter were aligned. Because of Kakashi's decision, three people who he considered his closest familiars—one more so than the others—had been captured by unholy abominations of nature, and were now likely dead. Eaten alive. His fists clenched, and it took every ounce of his self-control and reasoning to not flay Hatake alive. He had, of course, protected the rest of them by making this decision. And Itachi had ordered it. Sasori could point fingers all day, but that wouldn't help matters.

There was more shouting that Sasori didn't catch. Rin got involved at one point, as did most of them. Gai, Anko, Hitoshi... Eventually, they tired themselves out. It was a little past afternoon, and because of the winter, the sun was setting prematurely. It was going to be completely dark soon.

A fire was not set. There were a million reasons why this would be a bad idea. Sasori couldn't eat or sleep as he sat far away from the others, who were downing rations, watching the stars.

From so high up, Sasori could actually see the remnants of their old camp from here. It looked trashed, as if wild animals had stomped through the area and poked through every nook and cranny. But the wind was still in their favor, and by some miracle, the Zetsu had not heard their argument; while the Zetsu army scoped the area, the group of survivors remained undiscovered. Humans weren't supposed to climb trees, after all. Not trees like this, anyway. They would never think to look up.

Feeling a little claustrophobic despite everything, Sasori hauled himself up to the canopy of the tree, sitting down on the uppermost branch to admire the stars. His entire being ached from a perceived loss, and he longed to leave them all behind to search for his missing partner.

But he couldn't. Logic and rationality dictated his actions, and he could not let such a raw emotion like love move him to act impulsively. He was a man of precision and careful thought and planning, and those qualities kept him alive after all these years. Right now, his best option was to wait for the long night to be over. They hadn't yet discussed what would happen now that key members of their group were gone. Presumed dead. He'd heard that term being tossed around by more than one. Discussion would happen tonight, Sasori presumed. It would have to. They were all living on borrowed time. Sooner or later, the Zetsu would find them and slaughter them all, so they had to act first. But right now, they were all grieving.

Most of them grieved the loss of their leader, Itachi, who had been their beacon of light during this shitstorm.

Others were less fortunate.
Rin had lost two members of the family she had married into, the family which she loved so dearly. Not only that, she had also lost a close friend in Deidara, who she had spent her days with in Akatsuki. Who she had grown to love and appreciate, and who her children had admired. The last he had seen of her, she'd been catatonic, and Hikari had cried herself to sleep in her arms. He wasn't sure how to comfort her. He'd left that up to Kakashi instead.

Deidara had been Kakashi's friend, too, he recalled. *Had been.* He never hated his nihilistic nature more than now. Bitterness enveloped him, and he found that he could no longer enjoy the stars on such a beautiful night, when there was absolutely nothing beautiful about his thoughts. When there was no one to enjoy it with.

He was familiar with bitterness. It usually encompassed most of his feelings, made up more than half of the brewing storm of emotion swirling in his traitorous heart.

Sasori glanced down at his hands, only to find that they were covered by leaves that did not fall in the winter. How strange, as sycamores were known to be deciduous. But he paid it no heed. If anyone were to observe him, they would be greeted with a funny sight: Sasori protruding from the treetop like a parasitic growth, only some of the upper half of his body visible to the world.

He was about to return to where everyone else was and perhaps whip out his calligraphy brush and paper of poetry (he'd come to accept it as such) when rustling caught his attention. Sasori retreated to below the canopy, brown eyes blinking as he adjusted to the darkness that came with the absence of the moon's light.

Standing on a wide branch below him were Sasuke and Daichi. From the looks of it, Sasuke had surprised Daichi with his sudden appearance. So that was where Rin's son had been hiding out all day. Sasori wouldn't have seen him, as he had ascended the great sycamore from the opposite side, and the boy only emitted a detectable chakra signature when he had his Sharingan activated.

Wearily, Daichi stepped backward before turning away, slumping against the centre tree trunk and sliding down. Sasuke watched him for a bit before he spoke.

"What do you want?" Daichi's voice was tired. Much too tired from a child his age. Then again, he'd seen things that no child should ever have to see.

Sasuke didn't immediately reply. In fact, he stayed still for so long that Sasori half-wondered if he'd fallen asleep. In actuality, he was debating on just what to start with. So he started with the most obvious one, "I'm sorry."

"For—for what?"

"A lot of things. My actions during the war, especially." Sasuke let out a frustrated huff, passing his hand through his hair. "I betrayed the Uchiha."

"Yeah. You did." There was no inflection in Daichi's voice, and he simply kept staring into the dark, at leaves he could not see.

"For—for what?"

"I killed your father."

Daichi did react more aggressively then, nearly knocking his head against the tree trunk as he turned quickly. "What do you want?!" he hissed. "What are you trying to achieve?!!" He gritted his teeth. "Besides... I don't even care about that anymore."

Sasuke voiced what Sasori was thinking, "You clearly do, you brat." He stood closer to Daichi, his cloak rippling in the evening breeze. "Are you afraid, Daichi, that you're becoming like me?"
"You're not a monster. You're just a kid," Sasuke stated bluntly.

Daichi inhaled sharply. "I cut his arm off. I could have killed him. I wish I had. I'm like you, now. A monster."

"No!" Sasuke was more forceful this time. "It means that you're human, which is a fuck-lot better than what I am." He sneered in the direction Daichi was facing. "I'm a traitor and a kinslayer. You—you are a boy."

So are you, Sasori thought, pressing his abdomen against the branch he was observing them from. They were both boys who had bloomed too early after having their lives torn apart by war and death, who had the potential to break out from their self-imposed prisons and start anew.

He wondered, suddenly, if this was what Deidara was trying to tell him. Starting fresh. Breaking away from the darkness cast by your own shadow. Reshaping your life into something more worthwhile. He'd been so convinced that he would need an eternity—one that he didn't have—to ever forgive himself. Sasori narrowed his eyes in contemplation. Maybe all he needed to do was simply try.

None of them said anything. Then Daichi shivered from the cold, and Sasuke didn't protest when the boy shuffled closer to him for warmth.

They clearly weren't going to move for a while so Sasori let them be, slinking to the other side of the tree to descend. As he disappeared into the night, Sasuke turned his head to his direction once, catching only the black hem of an Akatsuki cloak.

Tenten didn't know what she was eating. Only that it was stale, cold, slimy, and tasted like cardboard. Still, food was food, and she wasn't exactly in a position to be picky.

"Pass the salt," Shikamaru, seated next to her, said to Choji, who had ended up on the opposite side of him in their little circle.

"Oh, I don't have it," replied Choji through a mouthful of wet-cardboard-in-a-can. He thumbed to the person sitting next to him. "Neji does."

And he was probably why Tenten had kept her eyes down the whole time. It was no secret that she wasn't exactly fond of Neji, but... She also wasn't entirely sure what to make of him. Hinata seemed to trust him, and Hanabi was... coming around faster than Tenten would have thought. Both Hyuuga sisters were sleeping right now, curled up against one another against the tree trunk. They weren't the only ones fast asleep either.

"Ah," said Shikamaru. "Pass the salt, Neji." The indifference in his voice astounded Tenten, who knew for a fact that he was just as confused about Neji as she was. The bun-haired girl frowned. Of course, that conversation had been a few nights ago, and his mind could have changed at any time between then and now. Shikamaru was kind of a fickle guy.

"Where's Lee?" Choji asked Tenten in an attempt to make conversation that extended beyond asking for the little plastic bag of precious salt, which Neji was handing to Shikamaru, looking for the world like a normal teenage boy.

Tenten almost groaned at that. "Don't even get me started. He's convinced that he needs to get to Gai-san's level as quickly as possible and he's," she paused, unsure of how to say the next words,
"climbing up at down the tree with Gai-san using only his legs." As she spoke the very words, they could feel Lee's head bump against the main landing which almost everyone was occupying, he and Gai doing their exercises somewhere closer to the bottom of the sycamore.

Shikamaru snorted, almost choking on his food. Choji did choke, and ended up in a coughing fit that was solved when he downed some water from his canteen. Neji actually chuckled quietly in amusement, which surprised Tenten. So he was capable of feeling actual human emotions and had a sense of humor. Duly noted.

Tenten smiled weakly. She was still wary of the Hyuuga, naturally, but so far, he was surprising... docile, if not a little high-strung at times.

At that point, Choji declared that he needed to take a tinkle off the side of the tree, and Shikamaru said he was going to talk to his father. Both boys got up at the same time and split up, leaving Tenten alone with Neji.

Tenten internally cringed at the silence that stretched between them after the other boys left. Awkward. She was uncertain of what exactly to say to him, so she focused on eating instead.

At first, nothing happened, for which she was glad for. But then, the boy spoke.

"You're Tenten." A statement, not a question. She had a feeling that he normally talked without question marks. His voice had this... posh quality to it, as if he wasn't a Hyuuga-monster but a Hyuuga-royal.

"Yeah," Tenten said. "And you're Neji." Wonderful. Now could he please stop trying to force conversation? An irk mark appeared on her cheek as she scraped the inside of her tin can to collect as much wet-cardboard-mush as possible on the blunt kunai she used for eating. "Nice to meet you." Hopefully, that would be that.

"You don't like me much. It's unsurprising." Neji had already finished his salted-cardboard, so his mouth wasn't obstructed by food. He scoffed irritably, "I suppose I sealed my own fate." Half of his face became obscured by leafy shadow as he slumped forward, balancing his elbows on his knees.

"You didn't seal any fate." Tenten surprised herself by even opening her mouth. "It was just bad luck, that's all," she added gruffly, setting down her can. "You didn't ask to be turned into a monster, did you?" If he had, she wouldn't be even remotely ashamed of taking it all back.

"Of course not," Neji said scathingly, his brow creasing into a more pronounced frown. Tenten had reason to believe that this boy in front of her never had much reason to smile. "But if I hadn't ran away from my problems like a coward, then this would have never happened. Your comrades... would still be alive."

Silence.

Tenten wiped the back of her mouth with one gloved hand. "There's no guarantee," she told him evenly. "Even if things were different, that wouldn't mean that they'd still be around. I mean, yeah, don't get me wrong—what you did was unforgivable," she ignored his deepening scowl, "but at the same time... you're just another victim. It was out of your control." She thought of Orochimaru, with his frightening hiss and tenacity, who, in the end, had just been another hapless individual facing the consequences of the Ame-Tsuki war.

Thoughts of the war had her sitting up straighter, grasping her empty can again to fiddle with it. With everything happening around her, she had completely forgotten about what was going on
outside of the wilderness. *Is the war still going on?* she wondered. And if it was, then who was winning? Who had died? Who was still suffering? Was Akatsuki city still in one piece? Or had the city fallen?

"Unforgivable, yet I'm not the one at fault," Neji surmised, looking thoroughly stumped. "You make no sense, Tenten-san."

Seriously, *where* were Choji and Shikamaru? She was going to give them a talking to when they got back for leaving her to deal with this asshole alone.

"It's unforgivable," she seethed, crushing the can in her hand, "because no matter what, it still doesn't change the fact that you murdered so many people. It just means that you're a little more sympathetic." Though she wasn't feeling much sympathy for him at the moment. *Goodnight, Hyuuga-san.* With that, she got up and stalked away, not caring where she ended up as long as it was far away from him.

In an overhanging branch, Shikamaru sighed, leaning against the tree trunk, "Well, that was a drag."

Karin, holding an assortment of cans and rubbish, deposited them in an adequate recess in a tree branch, her legs wobbling from the sheer height. *Geez! Of all the jobs I get, it's this one. I only accepted it because it meant that I might be able to find Sasuke...*

She didn't know when or how, but she was certain that she had fallen in love with Sasuke somewhere along the way. But he was nowhere to be found right now, and she needed an excuse to traverse around the tree.

At least the forest was calm, although she could feel a high concentration of malicious, unnatural chakra some miles away. It made her belly churn, but she had already vomited three times today, so there was really nothing to upchuck. Karin forced herself to focus on the tranquility of the mountain instead, rather than the looming threat of the Zetsu army.

She craned her neck, looking for any sign of Sasuke, but she couldn't see anything. Karin was about to give up on her fruitless search and head back—maybe catch a few winks; they might be her last—when leaves rustled and a figure landed behind her, shaking the branch. Karin screeched, abruptly cutting it off by clamping one hand over her mouth. She nearly toppled over, but managed to keep her footing.

"Sasuke?" She turned around hopefully.

Sasori stared back at her, eyes glowing faintly in the dark. "No," he said flatly, almost mockingly, "Not Sasuke."

Clearly not. Embarrassed, Karin allowed him to pass, the hem of his Akatsuki cloak flapping gently in the wind. He'd had all the clouds removed on his cloak, she noticed. Why? She suspected for obscurity.

She followed Sasori down, feeling much safer behind him than she would have in front of him. That man had a powerful, dampening presence, and she didn't really want to get in his way too much. She was just lucky that he was on their side.

Her previous spot had been taken, Karin discovered with a twinge of annoyance, so she found herself a new one. It was next to a sleeping woman with purple markings on her face. *Rin,* her mind supplied for her.
She pitied the woman who had lost so much. She knew that she'd lost her husband in Akatsuki to those Tsuki dogs—they all knew. And now, her next immediate family had been killed. Or, at least, Karin assumed so. It was very unlikely that they were still alive.

Her daughter was sleeping in her arms, her eyes red-rimmed. Occasionally, she sniffled.

A cold wind blew through the trees, and Karin shivered, hugging her legs close to her chest. *I wonder what she's going through... How bad it is...*

"Are you going to keep staring at her?"

"Ack!" Karin tilted her head up to see Neji looking down at her. "Me? Staring?" She scoffed. "No."

Then she realized just who exactly she was talking to and paled. "Ahh... Neji-kun, right?!" she said demurely, playing up her feminine charm. Maybe then she'd be more likely to live. "What brings you... here?" She winced at how lame her own words sounded to her.

It was Neji's turn to wince. "There—"

"My eternal rival Neji!" Karin was almost knocked over by the rush of air that accompanied Rock Lee's arrival. "I challenge you to a tree-climbing competition, only we are not allowed to use our hands or feet!"

There was a faint, "That's the spirit, Lee!" in the background. Karin gawked as Lee attempted to grab Neji and drag him to the dreaded competition.

"Lee, what are you doing?!” came a shriek, and Tenten came into view. "Lee, let go of him! Now!"

The brown-haired weapons mistress proceeded to separate them, scolding Lee all the while. Karin could only stare.

Eventually, Neji and Lee were on their way, and Tenten sighed. "Sorry about that, Karin. Can I sit?"

And Karin offered a smile. "Sure... Tenten."

Finding Sasuke could wait.

Kakashi took in a deep breath, taking in the beauty of the night sky through a hole in the canopy.

*I failed you again, Obito. I'm sorry.*

He'd held Rin for hours, and his shirt was still soaked with her tears, and Hikari's as well.

Why did he keep failing his best friend? He was supposed to protect his family now that he was gone, not... condemn them to their deaths. Full of self-loathing and regret, Kakashi buried his face in his hands.

"Kakashi?" The branch trembled, then Gai was seated beside him. "Ah, there you are." His thick eyebrows were drawn in a sorrowful frown that made Kakashi's heart clench. Of course, Gai had lost many as well. With his youthful attitude, Gai wasn't the type to dwell on things, but it had been a tough few months.

The entire Big 4, some of Gai's closest friends, were all dead except for Gai himself. It hadn't really struck Kakashi until now, until Gai pressed one hand to his face to cover his eyes, tears falling from behind his fingers.
"It's been hard," Gai chuckled through tears, abruptly choking on a sob. "I'm sorry for everything, Kakashi."

"Yeah," Kakashi said hoarsely. "Me too." He patted Gai's back heavily before his arm fell to his side. "Hey," he said awkwardly, "you still have Lee, you know." That boy and Kakashi himself were all Gai had left now.

"I'll protect him with my life," Gai promised. "His youthful spirit empowers my own."

Kakashi nodded.

"In these few weeks, he's become almost like a son to me," Gai told him. "It makes me happy to see him with his friends." At first, Kakashi thought that he was talking about Tenten and maybe Naruto, but Gai went on to say that Lee had become buddies with Neji as well. Or, well, he was trying to. Neji wasn't exactly being mean about it, so Lee took it as a good sign. Tenten served as a mediator of some sort between the boys, and she seemed to be including Karin as well.

Strangely, it reminded him of his own kids, for lack of a better term. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. Too bad Sasuke seemed hellbent on hating him now, and Sakura and Naruto were left in a limbo between their supporting their friend or Kakashi.

"How's Rin?" asked Gai.

"Heartbroken," Kakashi answered honestly. "She's asleep right now. I... I don't know what to do."

Gai contemplated his response. "I think all she would want from you is for you to be true."

"What's that supposed to mean?" But Gai had gone all starry-eyed from staring at the sky, and there would be no answer to that anytime soon.

Another sigh drew from his lips, and Kakashi tilted his head upward to join Gai in his stargazing, knowing that this might be the last lovely thing he'd witness in his lifetime. If Gai ever became choked up, Kakashi ignored it with an indifferent ease, and the normally energetic man was grateful for it.

It was only later in the night that they all gathered to discuss what would be happening next.

Sasori pretended that their little war council wasn't in complete shambles as he took a seat beside his grandmother. The wood was uncomfortable but he just had to deal with it.

Not all of them were here. Some were asleep, or simply didn't want to participate in this discussion. But they were few and in between so the meeting proceeded.

Kakashi opened up discussion with, "We should proceed with the current plan."

And then it all went to shit from there, Sasori opined, already feeling a headache incoming. Many tried to come up with alternatives, losing faith in themselves now that Itachi was gone. That damn Uchiha had carried a lot of their weight on his shoulders. How had he survived without losing his mind?

Or maybe he had, and Sasori was just none the wiser.

"Three-hundred strong!" Shikaku reminded them. "And not even a hundred of us. It will be a slaughter. Itachi was worth a hundred men. Without him, we'll have to proceed in a more careful
"Not all of them will be there!" argued Anko, who preferred direct confrontation. "We just need to get enough of them out of the camp long enough for Sasori and Neji to plant the explosives. Both of them are fast as fuck, so we'll have a fighting chance."

It went back and forth, with Sasori interjecting at random times to give stupid suggestion givers a good tongue lashing or to input improvements to ideas. In the end, they combined Nara Shikaku's strategy with Itachi's original plan.

A diversion would be created, but they would be sacrificing some of their explosives for that. With the remaining TNT, they wouldn't be able to decimate the whole camp, but they would take out a good chunk of it, as well as the Zetsu forces. It would be just enough for them to hurry all the way to Konoha, where they would be taken in as refugees, and warn them of the growing threat in the mountains. The Zetsu were not invincible to military power; with the amount that Konoha had, they would have more than enough to destroy them. The scattering of the TNT would still be left up to Sasori and Neji.

When it was all over, Sasori was left feeling drained. All he wanted was for everything to be over. Maybe see Deidara again. She was out there somewhere, a hopeful part of him he hated said. He clung on to that hope, ironically, without even realizing it. Without her, he would enter that horribly mundane, meaningless life again.

As frustratingly dependent as it sounded, he'd come to rely on her in a way during these past months, and he knew that she felt the same. It was a rapport they'd subconsciously constructed, and it had lifted him from the dark world he'd stood upon into a space of endless possibilities.

She was alive, he told himself as he curled up into a shallow recess in the tree trunk, setting paper on his thighs and putting down a lantern next to him, she had to be.

If she weren't, he would know.

Sasori began to write for the first time since he had lost half of his right arm, the text coming out a little wobbly at first. He'd trained himself to be ambidextrous during his time as Suna's Royal Assassin, but had mostly used the skill to develop better control of his puppets and other weapons.

The night delved deeper and deeper, and Sasori was on the verge of falling asleep. He'd written half a page's worth of useless, worthless words and sentences. His left hand moved on its own, the bottom calligraphy strokes of kanji trailing downward and spirally and curving into a shape.

With his eyelids at half-mast, Sasori continued to draw, a form of art that he had not practiced in years. Between now and when he started, he'd taken a break to fix his puppets into the best condition they could possibly be in for tomorrow's confrontation. He wasn't sure if he needed them, as he would undoubtedly be in close range with Zetsu monsters, and his puppets were designed for long range battles.

*We're running out of time.*

Frustrated, he lifted his brush and prepared to slash downward to erase the ink drawing from existence.

Then he paused, his breath catching in his throat as he noticed for the first time what his wicked hand had been producing.

*Deidara.* It looked just like her. Either he was better than he'd first assumed or he was losing
himself in his own sleepy delirium. Her absence was suddenly prominent again, and he felt like he'd been punched in the gut. Grimacing, Sasori tucked his calligraphy brush back into its kit.

A wave of calm—one that he recognized as the state of serenity that enveloped him before a storm of anger—washed over him, and his long, curved Zetsu fingers traced over the dry ink that made up the slope of Deidara's cheek.

It would never replace the real one. And then that anger surged, and he shredded the paper, his brown eyes hard as he watched the wind carry the tiny bits of paper away, towards the ravine which housed the Zetsu camp.

There are only a few places she can be, Sasori rationalized, the cold, calculating side of his personality taking over, in a monster's stomach, lying dead in the forest, or...

His eyes narrowed hatefully, he got out of his makeshift bed and walked over to a section of the sycamore landing that provided him a view of the ravine. For a second, the entire valley exploded into flame, then he blinked and the world returned to normal.

He was going to find her in that camp, dead or alive.

It felt like days had passed.

In reality, it'd been mere hours. Woozily, Deidara turned on her side, the chains connecting her wrists to the floor clanking noisily.

The woman in the next cell had stopped screaming. In the incredibly dim lighting, Deidara couldn't see her.

She was certain that she was underground. She could smell the water in the ground, and fresh earth and minerals mingled with the scent of rot and death.

What happened to me? The last thing she remembered was Kabuto leering at her before she passed out from fatigue and her injuries. She couldn't feel her wounds anymore. It was like they weren't even there. All she could feel was the stiffness in her bones, her knotted muscles, and...

A sharp pain bit into her neck and Deidara hissed, chains following her arm and she lifted her hand to palm her nape.

What the hell?

There was some sort of crusted... ink running across her skin.

A tattoo?

The beginnings of panic welled in her throat, and she put her other hand to her mouth, biting her fingernails. With the hand on her neck, she used a finger to trace the lines printed onto her skin.

She nearly choked. It was a number. She was sure it was a number.

"Did you like my present... 72?" Kabuto's disembodied voice came from the front of her cell.

72.

72.
She wanted nothing more than to claw the dehumanizing number off her skin, but then the door of her prison opened and Kabuto strode in, wheeling something covered behind him.

Deidara sat up, glaring at him with pure hatred. But before she could speak, Kabuto uncovered whatever he had with him, revealing it to be a mirror. Vines snaked out from underneath his dull brown cloak. The tip of the pointed appendages unlocked her manacles so that the chains fell off, but said manacles were still strapped tightly to her bony wrist. Her chakra was still suppressed, and her legs still chained to the ground.

She regarded him warily as Kabuto aligned the mirror toward her, smiling widely. "Strip, 72."

"What?" There was a lifetime worth of outraged venom in that very word alone. "No, fuck no, you sick bastard!"

"You are in no position to be refusing me." A vine snaked around her neck, squeezing slightly. The pointed end kissed her ashen skin, drawing out a droplet of blood.

Trembling with barely contained fury that made her forget about the number on her neck, she began to remove her garb as Kabuto's grip on her throat tightened. She untied the obi that doubled as a belt that had all of her clay attached to it. The obi and clay were tossed to the corner of the cell, as if it were unimportant.

Deidara shivered as her shirt slipped off her shoulders, her front becoming exposed to the cold air. Her pants went next, soiled with dirt, blood, and other substances she didn't care for.

"Look in the mirror."

Deidara didn't move, staring at the wall instead.

"Look in the mirror, 72. That's an order," Kabuto hissed, giving Deidara a full view of his jagged black teeth.

She faced the mirror, but kept her eyes glued to her feet.

Irritated, another vine shot out of Kabuto's cloak, forcing itself under Deidara's chin and pushing up so that she was forced to see herself in the smudged glass.

She exhaled sharply.

"What do you see, 72?" Kabuto whispered, his voice suddenly sounding right next to her ear. She must have zoned out a little, for she suddenly felt his hands pressing into her back and making her walk forward, closer to the mirror.

Deidara didn't answer, merely bringing a hand to her mouth and biting her finger to stop from crying out in miserable frustration. She knew that she'd been malnourished for some time now, but this...

She could count each of her ribs, and her pelvic bone was clearly visible against her grey skin. Her thighs were less than half as thick and strong as they once were. As for her face, her eyes were dull and sunken, and her cheeks had lost all color.

"Chakra is an amazing thing," Kabuto narrated in the background, amused by her reaction. "You have not been eating regularly, or enough to keep your body from shutting down. Instead, your body has been using your chakra to sustain itself. Once that's locked away... your body has no more energy to feed off of."
"Fuck you," Deidara said lowly.

"Do you want to know what I see, 72? I see a lost and broken doll, worn down by the harsh reality of this cruel world. A doll that can be repaired and improved."

"Fuck you!" she screamed, throwing her arm back in a punch. Tears burned the back of her eyeballs, and she bit down a sob.

Kabuto merely watched as she shattered the mirror with her knuckles, the punch landing exactly where his head had appeared in the reflection. Shards of glass were embedded in her hand, and blood dripped languidly down her arm as she panted, the simple action enough to drain her of all her energy.

"Shall we get started?" Kabuto's cold, clammy hands landed on her thin shoulders. "Come, 72."

"I'm not going anywhere with you—"

Kabuto knocked her out by having a vine tap the back of her neck, where her designated number was printed. "Your consent would have made things easier for you." She was already breaking. Before long, she would be an empty slate for Kabuto to fill.

The woman in the next cell was repeatedly bashing her skull into the stone wall in a slow, almost languid pace. Itachi could hear the tell-tale thumps despite having his back turned toward her prison.

More than once, she ceased her mindless self-harm and crawled toward him, wrapping her hands around metal bars that sucked the chakra from her system until there was just enough left to keep her alive. The bars maybe absorbed a drop or two of energy before reaching the limit.

Blearily, Itachi glanced over his shoulder, a difficult task considering that he was lying on his side. She was staring at him, dull brown eyes peaking out between long, unkempt strands of hair.

The woman reminded him of a living skeleton. She was all skin and bones, not an ounce of muscle or fat visible on her body. Her cheeks were sunken in, making her jaw protrude grotesquely, and lack of exposure to sunlight assured that her skin was almost colorless.

She pressed herself against the bars. "Hhhh..." she rasped, panting heavily. "Hhhh..."

Help?

As if she were frustrated immensely, she started to hit her forehead against the metal. Itachi sat up. The motion itself was unbelievably exhausting as the chakra-absorbing chains wrapped around his legs and wrists did their job. She had no confines, he noted, other than the cell.

Whoever was running this place, they obviously didn't consider her a threat to anyone or anything. Except, perhaps, herself.

He blinked slowly at her, wondering what exactly to make of this broken, mindless doll. The scars on her body suggested a violent medical history, one of syringes and scalpels and tubes.

Am I going to become like her?

He smiled, an unexpected feeling of content washing over him, a stark contrast to the bleak disgust he'd been experiencing just seconds ago. I already am. I'm an animal. This was my destiny.
No, he wasn't an animal. No, maybe he was, but he was also a soldier and an effective killing machine. He couldn't exactly remember what he was fighting for, but he was sure it was a cause worthy of great sacrifice.

Somewhere in his muddled mind, Itachi, husband and father, was lost. He did not reemerge, even as the animal and the soldier grappled for dominance.

Itachi faded in and out, the only company he had being the woman, who he largely ignored.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed before he came. He'd had no food, no water, for what seemed like days.

"Hello? Are you awake in there, 73-san?" The woman moaned, opening her mouth to reveal black, broken teeth. There were shards of enamel embedded in her gums that would have surely hurt. Then she began biting the bars, pushing the shrapnel of teeth further into the flesh of her mouth. "45-chan, stop." 45 did not stop. "I said, stop."

There was a cold, ominous wind that accompanied his tone, and Itachi was suddenly more coherent. Even the woman ceased her actions, staring hollowly at the grey-haired man.

He was the same man who had apprehended them at the outpost. Itachi narrowed his eyes, a flame of loathing burning in his belly. There was nothing more than he would have liked at this moment than to punch him right in his pale, cracked face. It would be a glorious thing—to feel his nose cave in, his eyes rolling backwards behind those scratched lenses as shards of bone penetrated his soft brain.

"You must have so many questions," remarked the man. "In the end, it won't matter. You are nothing, 73, except a tool for me to prolong my own survival. If you are polite, I'm sure 45 will be nice enough to give you some insight into your situation. Assuming that she miraculously comes out of her near-vegetative state."

"She's useless," Itachi said callously. "Why do you keep her around?"

"A delightfully simple question with an equally simple answer." He smiled, and Itachi was instantly reminded of a snake. "Because I enjoy taking in the fruits of my efforts, even if they are rotten and inedible. They are failures, but also reminders of my success. You cannot have one without the other, you see." He paused. "I suppose you could, but wouldn't that be utterly meaningless? One cannot enjoy the taste of success without first knowing failure. Enjoy your stay, 73, and your sense of being, because I assure you, it will not last for long." An annoyed scowl. "You're lucky that 72 is stubborn." Then he was gone, the tail end of his brown garment sweeping behind him.

The words chilled him to the bone, and he actually shuddered, vibrations shaking his shoulders. 72 is stubborn. 72 is stubborn.

Who is 72?

Was it Izumi?

He almost vomited. It anything that the man had said was true, and if 45's horrible scarring was any indication, then—

He did vomit then. He was lucky that he was still upright, otherwise he might have choked on his own vomit. The prisons were sloped, he realised, as he watched his vomit slowly trickle toward the wall end of his cell, where a drain ran along said wall.
A more sinister reason took root in his mind and his fists clenched, nails digging into his palms.

"Izumi..." he muttered, uttering the very name a blow to his sanity.

"It's not her."

Itachi turned around so quickly that he almost gave himself whiplash. The worst he got for it, however, was a migraine that bit into his skull. He made note not to move so deftly and suddenly again until he was certain of his limits again.

There was another person in the cell to his right. But they were huddled in the corner, shrouded in shadow, so he hadn't spotted them.

The person slowly opened their eyes, and green orbs stared at him. "Your... wife. It's not her. 72 is the other one."

Relief and sheer horror pounced upon him both at once, and his head spun again. He almost collapsed from sheer fatigue, and he couldn't help but be shocked by how weak the chains and lack of nutrition had rendered him.

"How long has it been?" Itachi asked no one in particular.

"Since you arrived?" The eyes in the dark became half-lidded. "Barely a day. It always seems longer. This place eats away your energy. It's hell, 73."

"Itachi. Not 73."

"I'm 54," said the person. "But you can call me Hajime. I think that's what my mother used to call me." The eyes closed. "I don't remember. I can't remember. It's hard to think."

Sometime later, a half-mutated beast entered the corridor of cells, and removed Hajime from his prison. He was but a small boy, probably only Daichi's age, perhaps a little older. The way Hajime's eyes practically lit up had alarm bells ringing in Itachi's head.

"Thank you, God," Hajime said hoarsely. He turned to Itachi, no longer languid, but excited. "It's finally over. I can go now. No more pain. No more Kabuto-san." He smiled. It was watery. "I can go home. My mother's waiting. Maybe my father's back from fighting in the war!"

Itachi couldn't quite place it, but there was a... dread building up inside him. Whatever illusions Hajime had of his freedom, he wasn't very sure if it would even remotely coincide with what reality had in store.

Fixated on Hajime, Itachi watched him be escorted out of the prison. The heavy iron door closed behind them with a resounding boom.

Itachi didn't think he was ever going to see Hajime again.

Then a scream echoed from the opposite end of the corridor, and Itachi cringed, curling up within himself. His heart thudded rapidly in his chest, threatening to burst.

The woman, 45, started laughing maniacally in her raspy, hoarse voice, gripping the sides of her head and almost swaying rhythmically from side to side. She sang, "72, 72, from ten fingers to only two!"

Deidara screamed in pain, a red fog of agony suddenly clouding her vision.
It hurt so much.

Everything *hurt so much*.

She wanted to die. Surely, death would be a kinder option. She tried to bite her own tongue off, and maybe bleed to death, but her body would not obey her. She lurched upward from the table in which she was strapped to by cruel binds, her shoulders wracking from the pain.

Tears and snot dribbled down her face, mixing with blood. She wasn't sure where the blood came from. She only knew that her entire head felt like it was on fire, and she was sure that the tips of her ears had been carved to a point. At least her eyes had been touched yet.

Hovering above her, half-hidden in the dark, Kabuto smiled widely, black, lizard-like tongue emerging from between his lips. "Did I hurt you, 72? Did that hurt? I thought I was going slow."

Through the haze of pain was the desire to curse him to hell and back. She sobbed and she thrashed, her chest and torso heaving as she greedily gasped for air. He'd started slow. Very slow. Agonizingly slow.

He had a preference for doing things diagonally, and leaving them unfinished.

Kabuto held something between tweezers in front of her face, and she had to blink away a multitude of fluids before she could get a proper look at it.

It was a tongue. Or, more notably, the tongue from her right hand. He lifted it further from her, eyebrow cocked as he inspected the quality of it. Or something. She couldn't tell. She didn't care.

*Just let me die. Just kill me.*

Those two thoughts repeatedly circled her head, refusing to leave.

The throbbing on her right hand got even worse, and she suspected that she was starting to pluck out the remaining teeth in that tauntingly slow way of his. First, he'd smashed the hand-mouth with a hammer, breaking her fingers while at it, and probably her wrist as well. Then, as she had seen, he'd removed her the tongue from that mouth.

For a moment, something else more innate that her yearning for death struck her. Her art. Her beautiful, fleeting art. How could he—how could this *damn fucking bastard ruin* her like this—ruin her art, what was a very integral part of her identity—!

He wrenched another tooth from its place and Deidara hissed, biting down on the tongue in her mouth.

He was ruining her and she was just accepting it. She was bending to his will. This was what he wanted—to destroy her before finally *utilizing* her. She would become mindless, nothing but a tool to serve her master.

Deidara howled when he skipped a row of teeth and went for one at the far back, an animalistic noise mixed with rage, indignation, and torment. She writhed, fighting against her bonds, but without her chakra, there was no escape.

He slashed out then, scalpel in hand, cutting deeply into Deidara's face. A deep, clean-cut wound appeared beneath her left eye, blood blooming from the new laceration.

"SHUT UP!" Kabuto screeched, his anger holding an underlying layer of paranoia. "BE SILENT,
"He grabbed her face, forcing her to look him in the eye. "I'm the good guy here. I'm the one that's saving us all. From that thing. That monstrosity. He lays dormant above ground in this very camp, waiting to devour us all!"

Deidara spat in his face. Grinning through bloody teeth, she hardly made a sound when a vine burst from his back and wrapped around her neck, squeezing. There would be more bruises in the morning, but the pain was nothing. Not when everything else told her that she was being baptized in fire.

The urge to die, to make herself bleed dry, was still there, but greatly suppressed. First, she wanted to see this son of a bitch suffer for destroying her ability to create art, to make her mark on the world. Nothing else mattered at this point. She had nothing else to live for except for her art, except for—

Her rapid thought process screeched to a halt. More pain settled in, but not before she saw his face again.

"Sasori?"

"Be safe."

She clamped down on her tongue, squeezing her eyes shut as her rage simmered, replaced by the feeling of her entire body skinned and then boiled.

"Finally shutting up," Kabuto spat. "You worthless bitch. I haven't even started the improvements yet... Good grief, this is going to be a tedious process. 71 was so much more well-behaved than you, you damn hellion."

She was barely conscious at this point, but a small, triumphant smile remained on her ragged face. Just to keep herself awake for a little longer, she went over the damage in her head.

She conjured up the image of the missing toes on her left leg, the ribs broken in a zig-zag pattern, her smashed, decimated right hand. Kabuto did indeed like doing things diagonally. Deidara wasn't sure how badly her face was marred, or what exactly her ears looked like now, but it didn't matter.

She continued to smile weakly as she was unchained. Chakra began to fill up her pathways again before being interrupted by Kabuto slamming cuffs on her wrists, then her feet. Her bones feeling like jelly, Deidara slid off the slab of stone that she had been bound to, landing in a messy heap on the floor.

"Danna..."

Something heavy was thrown on her. The thing irritated the wounds on her body even more.

"Get dressed," Kabuto said coldly.

For now, she obliged him, wincing as she struggled to put on the heavy brown gown. It was the same one Kabuto was wearing, complete with a hood and all. Disgusting. Her entire malnourished body was trembling with the effort, the fire still burning strong and hard in her veins, and she felt faint, but she eventually managed.

The urge to stay alive now overpowered the desire to be dead. She would have to live. For her art, for Sasori.

She did not like depending on others. But she wanted him to come for her. But if they wanted to
make an impact, it would have to be a partnership, not just him coming to the rescue.

Deidara would have to do her part.

She noticed, with another guileless smile, that Kabuto had not thought to dispose of the clay pouch she kept strapped around her gi, which was still in her cell. Probably thought it harmless, the fool.

When she got back into her cell, she used her remaining mouths (except for the one on her chest) to chew clay relentlessly. The artist in her turned them all into abstract animals of some sort, all of them tiny enough to not be noticed. They would not move, not with her chakra almost completely drained, but that was fine. As she crafted her art, she distracted herself with visions of glorious explosions, and the man that would be waiting for her at the end of it all.

Deidara, while impatient, would just have to wait. She itched for freedom, after spending what seemed to be an eternity in this hellhole, but what she knew had only been a few hours at best. Certainly, though, she had more patience in one of her broken fingers than Sasori had in every fibre of his being.

Kabuto had fractured her mind, but she'd be damned if she wasn't going to struggle to repair the cracks.

Kabuto was just a variable, Deidara told herself. Her worst enemy here was her own mind.

The woman in the next cell looked over at her curiously with wide, mad eyes. Her matted hair clung to her face with sweat, and she let loose a feverish groan.

Eventually, Deidara collapsed with clay creations scattered all around her like a flower garden from hell. She chuckled hoarsely, brokenly, and finally wept unabashedly as her exhaustion and pain overtook her, passing out only moments later. Her blood pooled beneath some of her harsher wounds, staining her clay animals partly red.

Oh... Itachi. There... There you are.

Izumi reached up to cup her husband's face, her eyes half-lidded in domestic bliss. In the background, she could hear her baby crying for attention. She would tend to Izuna later. For now, all she wanted to do was kiss her husband and hold him in her arms.

"I love you," she whispered as her husband's face melted away into darkness. "What? What... What's going on?!

Then she was falling, falling so fast—

Izumi's eyes snapped open and she took a deep breath in, gasping and choking for air. Tears bloomed in the corners of her eyes, and she began to sob as she dry retched.

Itachi?

The area around her eyes feeling sticky, she rolled her eyes up to see a shadowed face peering down at her. Then the person crouched over her leaned back, and Izumi could hear chains being rankled as they sat clumsily.

"You're awake," a familiar voice sounded croakily. "That's great."

"Yu... Yukari?" Izumi gasped quietly. A flood of memories invaded her mind and she winced,
clutching her head. It was all coming back to her now—the outpost, the trees, Yukari ambushing them—

The girl's head bobbed up and down as Izumi lunged forward and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her violently. "You damn bitch!"

Yukari had sold them out. Had sold herself to... to that grey-haired, pale-faced abomination!

Yukari allowed Izumi to abuse her, not even reacting when the Uchiha woman slapped her across the face in a fit of rage.

"I didn't mean to," Yukari whispered once Izumi had calmed down enough. "But I wasn't strong enough. I needed power." Sadly, a vine snaked out from her brown cloak and flopped onto the floor between the two females. "If I'd been stronger, maybe Sawako wouldn't have died." Izumi startled back when the teenager suddenly erupted in a coughing fit, droplets of black sludge flying from her parted lips.

She's dying, Izumi realized with no small amount of horror.

"I don't know how he found me," continued Yukari, her throat raw from coughing so violently. "Maybe it was me who found him. I don't know." Feverishly, she drew her legs to her chest, resting her forehead on her bony knees. "He said I needed to be improved. I am nothing now. I am 71, and a tool of his." She choked on a sob. "That's what he said. And he's right."

Izumi couldn't bring herself to say anything.

"When I wouldn't listen to him the first time, he made sure to punish me."

Looking at Yukari's nasal cavity, her empty eye socket, and the blood patch of hair around what once was her left ear, Izumi caught the implication.

It stirred her stomach.

Yukari made no comment when the Uchiha woman turned her head to the side and vomited as far as possible from where they were sitting. She had had little food intake, so it was mostly a clear fluid with chunks of something floating around.

"That sick bastard," Izumi wheezed. "What's his game? What's he getting from this?" She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remember good memories. Her tomato garden, her days spent with the man that was now her husband—

"Survival. In the end, he's like the rest of us. He'll do anything to live. To survive the monster that he himself engineered." Yukari sniffled. "He told me all about it, since I'm not gonna live long. "The Zetsu camp is right above where we are right now. This place used to be a research facility belonging to Tsukigakure, and it was where Zetsu was created..."

Kawai's scream was abruptly cut off as Zetsu stabbed her brain through her eyes. Then, hungrily, the creature gripped her head with its jaws, its powerful incisors crushing her skull. It yanked and yanked, feeling the pop of Kawai's vertebrae before her head was completely severed, a good portion of her spine coming out along with the head.

Watching through the security cameras, Kabuto shivered in his wheel-y chair.

Too strong. This... I've made a monster.
He could not let Zetsu escape from this facility. Grabbing a microphone and pulling it toward his mouth, he frantically ordered, "ALL UNITS TO THE BASEMENT! ALL UNITS TO THE BASEMENT! EXPERIMENT 1 HAS BREACHED SECURITY! I REPEAT, EXPERIMENT 1 HAS BREACHED SECURITY!"

Zetsu had been intentionally designed to be able to take down entire armies, guaranteeing Tsuki’s success in the war. But it seemed that somewhere, the coding had went wrong, and Zetsu was undoubtedly hostile to... everything with a pulse.

Soldiers flooded the basement, and Kabuto watched them all be torn apart, no match for Zetsu’s prowess. But then Zetsu started getting less aggressive, turning the soldiers into his own brethren instead of outright killing them.

"No...!" Kabuto hissed. "This can't end like this!"

In a rage, vines snapped out from his body, lashing around the room. He had engineered himself to have the same abilities as Zetsu, but he inherently knew that he would never be a match for the monster. After all, it was his own brilliant mind that designed Zetsu to be the apex predator as well as the ultimate warrior.

But Zetsu did have a weakness.

Biting his lip, Kabuto smashed a button.

In an instant, the entire basement was flooded with the hottest chakra-based flame in the world.

It was not enough.

Zetsu screamed in pain, a plant-like cocoon starting to form about its body. It shot upward into a higher level that was still underground, and the security cameras on that level suddenly fried.

But—

Kabuto gasped as one of Zetsu's little monsters which had narrowly escaped the fire turned the remaining forces into more monsters in Zetsu's image. He slumped in his seat.

One day, Zetsu would undoubtedly awake from its slumber with its injuries fully healed. With the monster's running amok above ground, there was no way he was going to be able to effectively leave and come back with more fire or explosives through the escape holes connecting the base to the outside wilderness. He wasn't even sure if there were any explosives around.

There was only one thing left to do for him.

He had to build an army that would listen to his command.

"But there were!" Izumi exclaimed. "Our mission was to collect the TNT in the outpost. How could Kabuto not have known about it?"

"He probably did..." Yukari lifted her face, staring eerily at Izumi with her single eye. "But with all those monsters surrounding the outpost, he wouldn't dare have tried, even if an escape hole was so nearby. The men that were in that outpost fought tooth and nail against the beasts for weeks, using the bunker as a fortress... It was sheer coincidence that we met you there. Kabuto is first and foremost a scientist... He saw greater value in you guys than the TNT."
For the second time in that hour, Izumi emptied her stomach.

"Turn around," Yukari said softly, when Izumi was done wiping her mouth. "Let me see what number he made you."

Numbly, Izumi did just that, a chill crawling up her spine. She could feel Yukari's frail, cold hand ghost her nape for a moment before her hair, which was still tied up in a bun, was pushed some way up.

There was a confused silence on Yukari's end.

"What is it?" Izumi asked, dreading the answer.

"You... You're not numbered."

This did not ease her. If it was the norm to be numbered, then why—?

Suddenly, Yukari gasped, scrambling away from the front of the cell, where shadowy figures now loomed.

Then the cell door slid open, and two guards marched in. One of them had an odd flower on his back while the other was wholly nondescript other than his white hair and purple eyes.

They hauled Izumi up by the arms, and the woman's legs shook from standing up after a long time.

"No," Yukari whispered, "Don't go."

There was no use fighting, so Izumi let herself be roughly handled by the guards—members of Kabuto's growing army—mindless minions—

"What's your name?" the guard with the flower asked, his voice almost gentle.

The white-haired one snorted. "Don't talk to the prisoner, Juugo." He sighed, the noise exasperated and accepting at the same time. "S'not good to get too attached..."

"It's Izumi," she muttered out of spite. "Uchiha Izumi."

"You look like 73," Juugo said. "We go by 62 and 65, or Juugo and Suigetsu."

"73? Itachi?"

"Sure, why not," said 65, or Suigetsu. "We're taking you to see him right now."

What? This sounded too good to be true. So Izumi set her features in stone, not willing to grow any false hope in her heart.

That heart leaped straight to her throat when she laid eyes on him for the first time since they'd been captured.

Immediately, she tried to run to where he was kneeling, eyes wide.

"ITACHI!"

"Izumi?" Itachi clutched his head, his clouded eyes suddenly becoming clear. "Izumi!"

"Hold her," Kabuto, who was standing over Itachi, drawled lazily.
Izumi cried out when she was grabbed by the shoulders and had her knees slammed into the hard floor. Desperate, she looked up at her handlers, but found that they were completely void of human expression, even Juugo, who had seemed almost compassionate and shy.

"Yes," Kabuto muttered to himself, "perfect." He looked down at Itachi. "You're a tough nut to crack, perhaps even tougher than 72. I can see it in your eyes." He licked his lips, his pupils dilating. "You will not defy me when this is over, 73."

"What are you doing?!" Itachi roared as Kabuto stalked over to where Izumi was knelt, a chakra scalpel similar to the one Sasori used forming around his hand.

"This is for your own good 73. A reminder that you have nothing else in this world but me. Perhaps she could have made a fine 74, but her breeding is worthless. She is worthless to me. But her worth... is wholly subjective."

Screaming, Itachi lunged forward, his exhaustion momentarily forgotten. He was going to kill Kabuto. But the chains held him back, clanking with each movement. Still, he fought, but to no avail. "IZUMI!"

Her face fell with horror as she realized her fate.

Kabuto smiled. "Bye-bye, Izumi-chan."

"Explosions!" Izumi blurted as Kabuto raised his chakra scalpel over her neck, tears freely streaming down her face. For a split second, her eyes bled into the red of the Sharingan for the first time from powerful fear, despite the chakra-suppressing wristbands she had on. "Explosions will kill Zetsu! He's somewhere in the camp—take care of Izuna, I loveyouIloveyouanata—"

Kabuto's blade sliced through her neck neatly, and her head tumbled forward, landing on the floor with a wet thud right in front of Itachi.

A flicker of guilt shadowed Suigetsu's eyes. He and Juugo released Izumi's body, letting it topple in a heap as Itachi wept uncontrollably, crawling forward to wrap his arms around Izumi's severed head and pull it close to his chest. Blood bloomed on the front of his shirt, the stain growing bigger and bigger with each passing second.

Kabuto walked out. "Come, 60s. We're done here."

Suigetsu took one last glance at the sad sight behind him before following Juugo and Kabuto out. The cell door closed shut with a metallic whine behind him, leaving Itachi to grieve on his own.

In Sakura's arms, Izuna began to cry.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: What a happy chapter this is. Next up, we'll have more blood and trauma! And then some comas and courtroom drama...

Note: the outfit Deidara is wearing now is the one in the cover. Basically, what the
Akatsuki wore when they were brought back to life in canon.
Suigetsu was born in Kirigakure, also known as the Bloody Mist for their frequent social unrest which stemmed from having a totalitarian regime.

At age three, his mother had carried him in her arms as she fled from the country, his brother, Mangetsu, running by her side.

At age six, he was accepted into Tsukigakure along with his family as refugees.

At age ten, his mother had died from illness, and Mangetsu never returned from fighting in the Suna-Konoha war, Tsuki being an ally of Suna.

At age sixteen, Suigetsu had watched an innocent woman—a mother and a wife—be beheaded while her husband screamed, pulling so hard against his chains that blood bloomed underneath his manacles.

Juugo only watched in pity as Suigetsu wiped his mouth, bile and chunks of food dripping toward the drain at the end of the cell.

The only other being besides them in the cell was a body slumped against the wall on the far side. The 60s didn't know her very well, only her number: 71. From the looks of it, she had succumbed to whatever illness she had been afflicted with during her miserable life. The bacteria in her wounds would have sped up the dying process.

"You okay?" Juugo murmured as Suigetsu stormed out of the cage.

The white-haired male didn't answer or look back. Sighing, Juugo shut the cell door behind him with a flower-decorated vine that emerged from the large bud on his back.

The 60s returned to their own quarters: a measly room with only a table with a lantern in the centre.

"You couldn't have saved her," Juugo said as he put a plate of stale cheese between them to share.

"Yeah, but I could have done something," snapped Suigetsu, a vine sneaking over the collar of his brown cloak and stabbing the cheese with immense force. It went through the cheese, the plate, as well as the table.
There were already multiple holes in the rickety wood.

"This is so shit," Suigetsu muttered, clutching his head and propping his chin on the table. "Hey, Juugo, you're not a bad guy. How can you deal with this?"

Suigetsu had asked this question many times before.

Juugo breathed out another sigh. "I just tell myself that I'm going to get out of here one day. And once I do, I'll give back what I've taken from the world. Do you remember the little girl who begged us to let her go?"

"... Yeah?"

"We couldn't do anything... but when we leave, we'll be able to make a difference. For one life, we'll help many. It's sad, but..." Juugo shrugged, his shoulders feeling heavy. "It's the best we can do. If we try and help someone now, we'll just send them and ourselves to hell as well."

In his lap, Suigetsu's hands clenched. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Get out of here first chance and then we'll be the good guys." He didn't sound convinced, and Juugo didn't blame him.

Juugo gave him a look. "Go take a walk. Kabuto's operating on one of the kids right now, so he won't bother you."

Suigetsu nodded. "Yeah, okay. Thanks, Juugo." He exited the room, closing the door behind him. It was when he left that Juugo got up and tucked the cheese away with resignation.

The first thing that she was aware of was that everything hurt. In fact, it hurt like hell, and when she tried to lift her head, an overwhelming feeling of nausea hit her like a tidal wave.

She groaned, trying to shift her body. Her wounds were burning, and the particles of dirt from the floor that had infected her open gashes chafed against her flesh. She managed to lift her arm after a good few minutes of struggling, blinking feverishly at the string of sticky redness that connected her forearm to the floor.

Blood...

Deidara was tired of seeing blood.

Eventually, she managed to sit up, breathing heavily, her legs shaking as she fought her bladder. She'd already pissed herself several times on Kabuto's torture table—like hell she'd give him the satisfaction of knowing that she couldn't control herself in the periods without him.

The chains were long enough to give her a bit of range to walk around. Slowly, with gritted blood-stained teeth, she twisted her damaged body and began the humiliating crawl toward the drain at the back of the cell in an awkward hop-shuffle, cradling her right hand uselessly to her chest.

Once she had finished her business, she weakly sank to her knees in the centre of the cell, putting a hand to her head and checking for the inevitable fever.

Her forehead was burning.

Every sound that she heard was muffled and numbed. The woman in the next cell appeared to be shrieking something, clutching her head as she rolled across the floor, but Deidara's fuzzy brain wasn't allowing any of the cacophony to be processed properly.
Lying down awkwardly and feeling a venomous fire lace her wounds as they stretched and strained, her left hand felt around the cell floor on its own. Her fingers brushed against a clay sculpture, and she found herself clutching it moments later.

She tried to summon her chakra, but the manacles on her legs and wrists were doing their job a little too well.

If she had had the energy to hurl the sculpture across the cell in a fit of frustration, she would have.

There was the muffled but unmistakable sound of footsteps, and Deidara's body twitched, her right eye moving up frantically to try and see who was approaching?

Oh, gods, it was Kabuto, wasn't it?

Fear shrouded her entire being, and she heaved herself up, her limbs trembling with strain and paranoia as she tried to get as far away as possible from the sliding door.

No... No, not again!

She wouldn't let him take her again, not without a fight—a fight that she knew she couldn't give, but—

Deidara almost sobbed with relief when a different face showed up. The man's purple eyes were gazing curiously into her cell; his lips were slightly parted in his intrigue, giving her a perfect view of his filed teeth, a less extreme version of what she had seen in the gaping maws of the true Zetsu.

"You're finally up." He pressed himself against the bars, and in the dimness, Deidara could make out that he had white hair. Pity dripped from his entire demeanour, as well as a certain anger that she couldn't quite place. "And—holy crap, how are you still alive?" She could just decipher his words.

She supposed that she looked just as bad as she felt.

"Dammit, that Kabuto—!" The white-haired man abruptly started cursing softly, his hands curling around the bars. "So much blood..."

If you hate him so much, then help me.

Her throat was parched, and even swallowing her own saliva hurt, so no words were able to escape. Instead, she stared at him piercingly, as if she could deliver her desperate message from the sheer force of will.

The man's hands were shaking now, his eyes glazed over as he fought an internal battle with himself.

He won, in the end. She just didn't know what part of him had won.

He walked away slowly from the cell, back the way he came from.

Deidara briefly wondered if she would bother counting the minutes. Would he even come back?

But he did, in the end, with a friend in tow.

The cell was unlocked and they quickly rushed in, the white-haired man's flower-bud friend looking over his shoulder warily.

"Suigetsu—"

"Don't question me! Just—gah, Juugo, just—just help me on this! I can't just sit back any longer!"
"...Alright." Juugo' voice held a quiet determination. "I will."

The smell of alcohol was overwhelming for a few moments, and Deidara bit out a hiss when the disinfecting swab brushed over her skin.

"Idiot!" Suigetsu scolded. "Wash the blood off first!"

"Sorry." Juugo held up a sponge. "Water?"

Deidara stared as Suigetsu poked the sponge with his finger and the thing suddenly began to grow puffy and wet, its pores stretching. Was this fever-induced or was it actually happening?

It was reality, it seemed, as she felt the sponge on her skin seconds later, scrubbing firmly, yet gently. Her eyes followed the bloody water as it dribbled toward the drain like an unholy river. There's so much... No wonder 'Suigetsu' freaked out.

Juugo hefted up her right arm to clean it. She yelped when the sponge jostled her broken wrist and fingers, her throat aching.

"He really did a number on this hand," Juugo murmured, glancing at the unhurt one.

Suigetsu snarled in displeasure.

An eternity seemed to pass by before Juugo and Suigetsu were done with washing her wounds. They patted her dry with a clean cloth (or the cleanest one they could find at any rate; it still had dried-up bloodstains on it), stepping back to observe her condition. Her wounds were now completely visible and throbbing with an angry red.

Next came the cotton swab and disinfectant stage.

"We should get her clothes off," Juugo pointed out.

Deidara didn't protest as Suigetsu and Juugo slowly eased the brown uniform cloak off her skinny frame. It was strange, of course, for two males her age to be essentially washing her and patching her up, but she was beyond caring.

Suigetsu's hand hovered above the stitched up mouth on her chest, unsure.

"Leave it," Deidara croaked, wincing as the inside of her throat chafed.

"Right." He dabbed at a laceration between her breasts instead, his eyes focused on her face, checking for any hidden injuries in her hairline.

Eventually, they finished up with bandaging her bigger wounds with as much gauze as possible. They had a limited supply, so all of lesser her cuts and bruises were left to throb and sting in the open air.

They weren't sure what to do with her hand, so they left it.

Then they helped her back into her clothes, Deidara's shoulders sagging slightly as she felt the familiar weight of the heavy cloth descend upon them once more.

"Shit," she heard Suigetsu swear after feeling his cool, slightly damp palm on her forehead. "She's a fucking furnace. Get me the cloth again."

The rag was nearly soaked through with blood at this point, but it ended up pressed on her
forehead, the two teenagers trying their best to reduce her fever. Suigetsu had soaked the cloth with water, which he seemed to produce naturally from his body.

*A kekkei genkai?*

What an awfully useful one it was. She didn't know when it had happened, but Deidara found herself lying on her back, her body desperately trying to fight off the infection and fever and maintain its constant temperature.

"Suigetsu... Juugo...?" She burst into a coughing fit, her wrist trembling as she wiped the back of her hand across her chapped lips. "Fuck."

"If you're wondering where Kabuto is," Juugo said to her, "He's currently busy with one of his more... receptive soldiers."

*I don't give a flying fuck about where that snake-bastard went.* "Where..." Her throat throbbed painfully then, and she cringed. The next thing she knew, Suigetsu had stuck his finger in her mouth and sweet water trickled down her oesophagus.

"Okay, now talk," said the white-haired man after removing the unwanted appendage.

Deidara glared up at him. "Where's Izumi, hm? And Itachi? *Hm?*"

It could have been the fever, but she saw very clearly how Suigetsu's face slowly turned expressionless. Juugo looked away.

Clapping her good hand against the wet cloth on her head, she sat up with a heave, eyes narrowed at both of them. "*Where are they?*"

"Suigetsu," Juugo began, only to be cut off by Suigetsu holding up a firm hand.

"Don't," he seethed. "Let... Let her see for herself."

Deidara lurched against her chains in anticipation, and both males shot her a wary look. Trusting her to be compliant, Suigetsu undid her chains, leaving just the chakra-suppressing manacles around her ankles and wrists. Her right wrist, he noticed with a small pang of guilt and pity, was completely swollen black and blue, the area where the swelling was especially prominent telling Suigetsu where exactly the worst of the damage was.

*Izumi.* There wasn't a logical explanation, but she couldn't shake off the feeling that something was undeniably wrong. She'd felt it almost immediately after rousing, but had chalked it up to her poor condition. Her heart clenched in dread, her stomach forming a knot in her belly. *No, please... Don't... Please be okay.* Deidara's mouth suddenly felt dry again, despite Suigetsu refreshing her not long ago.

Neither of them had offered, but she knew that they would probably carry her if she asked. Why? She didn't know. They were supposed to be the enemy, but the lines between enemy and fellow victims of circumstance were growing increasingly blurred these days. The world had never been black and white, but there were more shades of grey than she could possibly count now. But, in any case, she would never ask for their help.

Kabuto had taken every shred of sense of being from her and *crushed* it. Deidara, for all her stubborn, hard-headedness, had already been fractured before she'd run into him. But within her was still a small, minuscule sense of pride and dignity—one that would ever allow her to require...
help with such a basic task like walking.

She pretended that she wasn't wobbling on her legs like a newborn fawn as they made the slow walk to the next cell down. The one on the other side of the screaming woman's cell.

Her senses had been recovered some time ago, and she could hear much clearer than she could before. The woman was no longer screaming, but holding her legs to her chest and crying hopelessly, as if she had just witnessed the most horrible atrocity on earth.

The heavy, metallic stench of blood hit her nose, and her arm lashed out to grab Suigetsu's shoulder in order to steady herself from the wave of nausea that suddenly overwhelmed her.

"Easy," the water-affiliated man said unsteadily. "You... Might want to brace yourself," she felt him brush her hair away from her nape, "72."

72! That wretched, horrible number. It would brand her skin for the rest of her life, but she refused to let it consume her. "Deidara!" she snapped, glaring viciously at him. The knot in her stomach tightened, and the world swayed with every fast action, but she ploughed on, "My name isn't fucking 72, hm."

"You're like us then," Juugo murmured. "Numbered with names."

She ignored him. Deidara squinted into the dark cell, able to make out a dark, hunched over shape.

"I..." The name became stuck in her throat. "Itachi?" she whispered, pressing against the bars. "Itachi, is that you?" Her chakra sensing ability had been dulled by her suppressors, but she could feel his signature flickering. Barely. "Itachi, I know you're there." Why aren't you answering me? Was he hurt? Dead? No, no—she could feel his fragmented, distressed chakra, even if it was only barely. It was a mirror of her own.

The door was unlocked, and Deidara took a shaky, tentative step inside, her bare foot immediately landing in something slick and sticky.

Blood.

Now that she was closer, she could see... She could see...

It took all of her willpower not to scream.

Before Itachi was a headless corpse, its limbs splayed in an awkward position. Suigetsu, having acquired a lantern from the outside corridor, brought it inside with him, and Deidara almost fell to her knees when she saw what the body was wearing.

Izumi's clothes. Those are Izumi's clothes.

"No," she choked out in a strangled whisper, her eyes wide and burning with anguish. "No, this can't..."

Was this real?

Her legs gave out then, and she slumped to the ground, the cloak rising and falling behind her.

The universe... It was playing a cruel, sick joke on her.

It didn't feel real. None of this felt real. She could only feel the pain from the physical wounds that Kabuto had carved into her skin—everything else was cold, and numb. It was as if she had been
dunked into a black, empty sea and left to drown.

Almost mechanically, Deidara shuffled forward on her knees, which were beginning to bruise, toward the huddled shape at the very back of the cell.

"Itachi," she called, stopping next to him. He was lying on his side, his face hidden in his chest and his arms wrapped around... something. Gingerly, she got on her side as well, pulling herself up with her left arm until they were face-to-face like lovers on a bed of nails.

Slowly, he lowered his arms, revealing his bloodshot Sharingan eyes, staring right through her. There were tears running down his cheeks, but he didn't seem to be aware of them, or anything, really.

Only that... There was a presence next to him now, at a distance that most would consider incredibly intimate.

There was an awkward shuffle of limbs as he hugged her in a slow, deliberate manner, almost as if he wasn't sure if she was actually there or not. He jostled her arm, and she hissed in pain.

Whatever he'd been holding was now squashed between their chests, and Deidara looked down to see what it was.

Izumi.

Or, rather, her head.

She looked back up, unblinking as the back of her eyeballs started to burn with a familiar sensation.

In the close proximity, she could see that there was blood trickling from both corners of his mouth and staining his lips, and she could hear his shallow, ragged breathing. The conditions of his cell had worsened his illness, and likely accelerated it to a dangerous degree.

Itachi cracked a smile that could barely be called that. It was so hateful. Hopeless. "I couldn't save her."

He was trembling uncontrollably; coughing without opening his mouth, and sobbing so extremely violently that his body didn't even seem to be registering the tremors anymore.

How long had he been like this?

Deidara touched her forehead to his, the feeling of his skin against hers completely foreign and... detached.

Then his tears touched her cheeks and she surfaced the still ocean, gasping desperately for air. Next to Itachi, Deidara's lips pulled back as she was forcefully shoved back into her own upside-down reality, her eyes squeezing shut as she wept for her friends and those she had loved and lost.

A friendly, open smile on her lips that made her trust her right away—

For Izumi.

A sheepish grin as he set his training post on fire for the third time that week—

For Obito.

*Teasing and bantering had always been second-nature thanks to his wit; "Good morning, sunshine
For Shisui.

*Her endless demands that had her exasperated almost all the time, but something that she would have loved to hear again in its absence—*

Hitomi.

*The grateful sheen in her eyes, even when she threatened to kick her sorry ass—*

Ino.

The civilians she hadn't managed to save in her apartment building, the children who had loved to see her explode her clay beasts, children who had had their childhoods torn away from them in one fell swoop, women who had lost their husbands; widows and widowers; sons without fathers, daughters without mothers—

She took in a deep, shuddering breath, her tears pooling at the side of her face. Her left hand clutched Itachi's firmly, desperately.

They mourned together—their own individual losses, and losses that they'd shared together.

*There was a music box, a clay bird, and a woman with long, flowing blonde hair and hands on her mouths—*

"Okaa-san?"

*She pressed her flute to her mouth, smiling into the mouthpiece. "A song passed down from the women in my family—it is called Mirai."

*Future.*

From her position, Deidara stirred.

"Itachi... Itachi, get up. We have to get up now, yeah. Kabuto will probably be coming soon." She swallowed thickly, sitting up. "Itachi, please. Don't... don't stay like this. There's still her child. *Your* child, yeah, goddamnmit—" She abruptly cut herself off with a wretched sob, untangling her left arm from his limbs and using it to wipe her face. Most of her tears on the left side of her face had ended up absorbed into the large white patch on her cheek, where there were numerous lacerations beneath it. The cotton on the outside of the wide bandaid was now puffy and stringy at the same time.

From underneath her damp lashes, Deidara glared at him, grabbing his hand and squeezing it, as if she could incite a desire to live in this broken man in front of her by the sheer force of will.

She didn't know how long they stayed there for, how long she kept holding onto his hand because it was the only thing she could do for him—a semblance of reality that had yet to leave him behind.

He was fighting with himself, Deidara could tell. He was wrestling something—a part of himself, perhaps—back under control. In the end, his breathing evened out and his Sharingan faded to black.

"How did you do that, hm?" she prodded gingerly. "The Sharingan... It requires a lot of chakra to
activate."

Chakra that he wasn't supposed to have. Tentatively, he set Izumi's head to the side, and showed her his hands. The manacles were black and smelled of charred whatever-it-was-made-of, the blood seal on the outside of the material peeling away. Awed, she touched it, merely brushing her fingers against it, and it pretty much turned into powder.

He shook his wrists, free of his chakra confines. "The ones on my feet are in a similar state." Itachi turned to stare unnervingly at Suigetsu and Juugo, who were loitering at the mouth of the cell.

Deidara sniffed, her nose completely blocked. "Have you met? They... They helped me, un."

"We're... acquainted," Suigetsu began hesitantly, only to shout when Itachi dove straight at him, squeezing his hand around his threat and slamming him into the wall. "Khhh...!"

"Release him!" Juugo's vines snapped out, but Itachi practically blurred, dodging out of harm's way. Suigetsu slumped to the ground, rubbing his throat and gagging.

"Itachi," Deidara began, rising to her feet. But Itachi wasn't listening to her, his Sharingan spinning faster than she had ever seen as he regarded the 60s with a dark countenance. They stared back warily, Juugo's tense form shielding Suigetsu's fallen form.

Itachi flicked his hand, and a chakra blade appeared around his forearm. Deidara almost flinched back with recognition.

Sasori's scalpels. He must have copied it with his Sharingan.

He lifted his arm.

Deidara winced slightly, closing her eyes. There was nothing she could do to save them from Itachi's wrath, even if she wished to. From the way Itachi was reacting to them, she briefly questioned if they even deserved to be saved, but banished that thought immediately. They'd helped her at the risk of their own lives, going behind Kabuto's back.

When she opened them again, Suigetsu and Juugo were still standing, and Itachi was right in front of her, the scalpel gone from his arm. It was then that Deidara noticed that the binds on her wrists were much looser. He'd cut the chain connecting her wrists, and the manacles themselves...

They fell off her wrists.

Then he did the ones around her feet, and her ankles were liberated of their confines.

Immediately, chakra began to fill up her body again, gradually, and she released a breath that she hadn't even realized she'd been holding.

"Later." Itachi's voice was cold, and held promise of bodily harm. It was not directed to her, but rather the two fidgety guards behind them. He turned his accusing gaze on them, saying, "You've come this far. That hole you've dug for yourselves isn't going to be filling up anytime soon."

Suigetsu opened his mouth to protest.

And then, with the sound of an accompanying explosion, the whole world lurched.

Hanabi's serious stare never wavered once as she gathered with the other fighters on the tree, preparing to set out soon. The sycamore was abuzz with conversation, and flooded with tears that accompanied heartbreaking farewells and agonizingly optimistic see-you-soon's.
Most of them were going; they needed as many fighters as possible to draw this diversion out.

Hinata-nee... Hanabi glanced backward once at her fretting sister, who was sending her and Neji worried looks. Her sister could not fight, regrettably—not at a level, at least, that would prove even remotely useful to them. She'd only be a burden. Hanabi, on the other hand, was the spare and not the heir, and her father had been training her for military service since young. It was a tradition, in older clans, that if any 'spares' were readily available, they would be expected to pay their dues by serving their country in the military. The Uchiha Clan's Sasuke was an example of this tradition—but since there'd been the whole thing with the Uchiha being local enforcers of the law, Sasuke had joined the police force instead.

Looking back at her trembling sister now, Hanabi was glad that she was the spare. She would never want for Hinata, bless her kind heart, to be thrown on the battlefield. She was too soft for that, and it would utterly ruin her.

One of the mothers—Asagi, the pregnant one—came up from behind Hinata and gently placed her hand on her shoulder, murmuring reassurances. Hiding behind her legs and looking more haunted than Hanabi had ever seen him was Asagi's son, Shogo. Of course he was spooked, she told herself, who wouldn't be after what he had witnessed yesterday? Itsuki had been his best friend, after all.

Then there was Naruto.

"Don't worry, Hinata," the blond said, smiling at her as he spun his three-pronged kunai around his fingers. "Neji and Hanabi will be fine—they're real strong, y'know?"

"Are you going, too, N-Naruto-kun?" Hinata's expression melted into further angst. "Please be careful!"

"Don't worry," Sakura told her, coming up from behind Naruto and dragging him back into position. "I'll be on the field, too, and doing my best to make sure this idiot doesn't get himself killed." She shot Naruto a wry smile, which the blond returned sheepishly.

Then it was time to move out.

Hanabi bade her sister a silent before the muscles in her legs stretched, and she was bounding through the closely-set trees with the wind at her heels. She was vaguely aware of Neji, who'd been next to her, separating from the group with Sasori, the latter's monstrous white hand disappearing into the foliage.

Replacing him was Sasuke. Hanabi gave him a single glance before continuing to focus on what was in front of her. She was leading the front of the pack, her Byakugan turned on.

"High concentration of Zetsu in the east side of the camp," Hanabi reported. In one collective motion, they swerved east. "The ravine gets shallow nearby—we can set up the explosives there and..." She swallowed fearfully. "Engage. It'll draw the largest amount toward us."

"Remember the plan," said Kakashi, acknowledging Hanabi's insight with a grateful nod. "When I say retreat, retreat. We just need to keep them distracted. Use the trees if possible, and stay with another person at all times. Don't let them get you alone."

"Hai!" came a chorus of solemn voices.

Most of them in their squad were civilians, Hanabi realized with a jolt. Some were only civilians by name, like her and the other clan kids (Sasuke, Shikamaru, Choji), but some were genuine goddamn civilians. At some point during their journey, the civilians had been taught how to fight,
Without warrior chakra reserves, they had the highest death rate. It made Hanabi’s skin crawl, thinking about how she might never see Tenten’s unwavering determination, Lee’s youthful spirit, or Naruto’s cheeky smiles again. Sakura’s hot temperament but well-meaning heart, Iruka’s kind, quiet support, Izumo and Kotetsu’s steadfastness; heck, even Hitoshi’s arrogance.

She didn’t want to see anyone die. Nobody here deserved that. All they wanted to do was live.

The treeline entered here, and they all stopped abruptly, some of them nearly falling from their places.

It begun faster than Hanabi could keep up with.

The box that Kakashi was holding was suddenly flying through the air in a perfect arc, the explosive seal on the box side glowing red. In approximately seven seconds, the box would explode.

**BOOM!**

The TNT exploded with the loudest, most ear-shattering noise that Hanabi had ever heard, just before it hit the ground. Monsters that had been caught up in the explosion howled before their screams were cut off, their hearts melting in the sheer intensity of the heat.

"Go, go, go!" someone ordered, and individual chakra signatures spiked more boxes flew through the air, explosions following. While they were distracted by the initial explosions, the ones who had painted the exploding seal on the box with their blood instead of chakra-conductive ink jumped down from the trees, scattering their TNT boxes all over the dirt pathway that led to the camp. Amongst them were Sasuke, Kakashi, Anko, Kisame, and Gai.

"There’s a mass coming our way!" Hanabi shouted over the noise. The diversion had worked almost too well, and Hanabi’s heart plunged into her stomach as she witnessed nearly every monster in the camp coming toward them in a rushed but terrifyingly organized death march.

The front Zetsu were exploded as soon as they reached the dirt path leading up to the trees.

But there were still more than half of them left.

Beside her, Sasuke half-smirked half-grimaced. "Well, shit." He unsheathed his katana, the action creating a metallic whine that reverberated through the chemical-scented air.

Hanabi removed the metal neko-tes from the weapons pouch she kept hidden in her sleeve, the claws something that Hiashi had given her on her tenth birthday. They gleamed in the sunlight, brand new, as she slipped them on, moving her fingers to test the flexibility.

All around her, everybody was removing their weapons and brandishing them, their mouths pressed in a firm line.

Hanabi estimated around two-hundred monsters to be left standing at the moment.

They would make sure that there would be none at the end.

"W-What was that?!" Suigetsu yelled, his ears ringing from the explosion that had sounded directly
above them.

"We're under attack!" someone shouted from down the corridor. Their voice made it sound like they were gargling rocks.

Deidara smirked grimly. "So they came through..." Do they know that we're down here? She clenched her left hand into a fist. Then she blinked, concentrating her chakra. In her cell, bloody pieces of clay bugs and other critters came to life, scuttling out of the prison and making themselves at home in places that even Deidara didn't know. All she could do was project her will onto the creatures.

"Explosions," Juugo suddenly said, looking up cautiously at the ceiling. "Her last words—"

"Explosions will kill Zetsu," uttered Itachi, mulling over the words in his head. What Neji had said also came to mind, "They are called Zetsu, named after their progenitor."

Progenitor.

It took only a few seconds for his genius mind to piece everything together. "You two!" he snapped at Kabuto's experiments. "Do you have any idea about where Zetsu is located?"

There was a distinct ozone-y smell in the air now, and Deidara pinched her nose, her mouth a firm line. "I'll find him," she vowed when both Suigetsu and Juugo revealed that they had little insight on Zetsu's location, just that he was somewhere underground. "Itachi, they'll need you up there, and I have my bombs." She blinked back a few tears before closing her eyes, her brow twitching. "For Izumi."

"Aa." Itachi's voice wavered from his steel resolve for a second. "For—for Izumi. The love of my life. For a brief moment, her grinning, carefree face swam to the forefront of his mind, and he almost keeled over, his heart aching as if he had been physically struck. "Go, Deidara." Suigetsu and Juugo almost jumped into a salute when Itachi turned to them, Deidara fleeing from the cell with a frozen heart. "You're with me. Gather your forces, we're moving out. Not a single Zetsu will live when I am done."

"What about—?"

"Kabuto?" Itachi's flinty gaze went to Suigetsu, who stared back evenly. "He won't matter anymore."

Suigetsu had to look away when Itachi brought Izumi's head to eye level, her cold, dead gaze boring into his red, pulsing Sharingan orbs, eyes that promised life and death.

"I'll see you again." Itachi resisted the urge to cough up black blood from his damaged lungs, simply gazing at her face. Then he brought his bloodied, chapped lips to her forehead. Her skin was ice cold. Soon, Izumi. He did cough then, putting his palm to his mouth, shoulders wracking. With his other hand, he set down the head of his wife, closing her eyelids. The Uchiha removed his hand from his mouth, staring blankly at the black sludge that dirtied his fingers. Soon.

"The rest aren't like us," Juugo explained mildly, once the Uchiha was done with his grieving. "They're like her," he pointed to the woman in the next cell, who was busy torturing herself to notice the chaotic noises coming from above, "completely out of their minds. They used to be like us, until Kabuto pushed them too far. They're broken."

"Then I'll make do with you two."
"W-What exactly are we going to—?"

Chakra scalpels formed around Itachi's hands. "The only thing we can do. Thin the hoard. You two go—I'll be joining you soon." Then he melted into the shadows, leaving Suigetsu and Juugo to stare at each other.

"Well, you heard him," Suigetsu ground out in the end. "If we're gonna start bein' the good guys..."

Juugo nodded. "Come on, this way."

Her robes, once heavy, now felt as light as the wind. Deidara swept through the corridors, surprisingly empty, a large clay centipede crawling across the walls. It kept pace with her easily, its many legs clicking against the stained metal.

Left and right, with a burning vengeance, she killed Kabuto's wretched experiments. Most were strangled, or ripped apart by her centipedes when they struggled. Which wasn't often. It was as if they all wanted to die. They were also extraordinarily weak compared to the true Zetsu, and it made her sneer triumphantly at the thought of Kabuto's furious expression when he realized just how badly he'd failed.

*Where are you, you bastard?*

She'd searched through the entirely facility by now, but there was no sign of Zetsu. Or Kabuto, for that matter. Then a drop of water fell on her nose, and she sneezed, glaring up at the ceiling.

*Wait...* She halted as she considered her location. *How many levels does this hellhole have?* She sacrificed one of her smaller centipedes for the job. "Katsu!" The roar of an explosion, then a cloud of dust that she was used to smelling, one that didn't bother her in the least. When the dust cleared, there was a hole in the roof, revealing two more levels. Without waiting, Deidara hopped up to the next level, relishing in how light on her feet she felt.

There were no experiments or anything resembling Zetsu on this level. It was almost devoid of life.

She was about to move on.

But then she felt it.

It made her pause, made her feel like her feet had turned to stone, and she shuddered as the overwhelming flow of foul chakra washed over her like a tsunami. Involuntarily, she took a step back from where the chakra was coming from—a dark corridor with a sticky slime splattered all over the walls. Even her clay creatures had ceased all movement.

The overpowering fear almost compelled her to run back and never return.

*I can't.*

Deidara swallowed a lump in her throat.

Then she took a step forward. The only thing that reassured her was the scuttling of her centipede guardian.

Deidara broke into a run, summoning an army of clay animals to her. Ones that had hidden in corners now rushed over to where their master was, and Deidara's left palm-mouth was frantically chewing the last of the clay in her pouch. Her heart nearly stopped when her fingers brushed the
bottom of the pouch, and she nearly stumbled on her feet.

This was all she had now. There were remaining clay animals somewhere else, but she didn't need them. When the ground got too sticky for her bare feet, she jumped onto her centipede, letting it take the lead.

"Zetsu, hm?" She bit down on her teeth. "You'll be nothing but dust when I'm through with you." Deidara hated to admit it, but her body was already feeling drained. A side effect from all the abuse she had endured from Kabuto, and the fact that even half of her chakra reserves had returned.

The chakra was getting more concentrated as she got closer, so much so that it was a battle against her constitution to not keel over and throw up. The walls around her were a blur, but she felt as if they were closing in on her. Yet, they never touched the white hide of her centipede.

Finally, she found it.

She grinned almost manically, her heart pounding as she got off her ride. "Finally.

"I've finally found you, you damn asshole."

A thick, slimy pulsing cocoon obstructed the middle of the hallway, though from what she could see behind it, she'd reached the end of the corridor anyway. A disgusting smell permeated the air. It was reminiscent of burnt vegetation rot, and she scrunched her nose up at it.

Holding out a trembling hand, Deidara commanded her clay creations to gather around the giant cocoon. The animals pressed and wrapped themselves around the huge behemoth, squelching sounding as their clay skin sunk into the soft, plant-like flesh of the silky case.

"Survive this, monster."

Of course, if she were to do it now, she would be caught up in the blast. Not to mention, with all the chaos above-ground, she wouldn't be detonating the bombs anytime soon.

So she swerved on her heel and ran as fast as her feet would take her.

Sasori, his expression utterly impassive, sliced open a Zetsu's chest with his chakra scalpel, the tear opening up with a spray of blood that splattered all over his front. Without missing a beat, his Zetsu arm disassembled like a well-oiled machine, thorn, plant-like ropes digging through the monster's open chest cavity and wrapping around its shriveled heart.

Then he squeezed, crushing the vital organ like a grape.

The Zetsu howled, immediately going into death throes, but Sasori paid it no heed.

He cut down two more when Neji landed from beside him, wearing his monster skin. His Byakugan was activated—it was how he kept track of everything going around him, as well as where the best places for planting the explosions were.

"Eight Trigrams: Sixty-four Palms!" In seconds, Zetsu monsters had been reduced to nothing but twitching heaps on the floor. Sasori carved out their hearts with his cruel chakra scalpel, which he occasionally morphed into neko-tes. Neji gave him a look, sensing his unspoken question. "Their chakra pathways aren't exactly the same as ours," he stomped on a monster's head until it exploded, "normally, they'd be completely paralyzed." His clawed fingers stabbed through the Zetsu's heart, and the creature practically exploded into a geyser of plant juice. He grimaced.
"Right." Sasori glanced around him. "This area's nearly clear." Chakra strings suddenly appeared at his fingertips and shot toward the thick, tall trees that towered above them, pulling out crates of TNT from the foliage. It was merely sheer luck that his chakra strings weren't concentrated enough to accidentally explode the black powder.

"You're looking for someone," Neji remarked as they went through the camp, planting explosives everywhere. He gave Sasori a knowing look. "Deidara, I presume?"

"Don't be a wiseass." Sasori's vines took out another Zetsu that was approaching them from behind. "I—" He cut himself off when he noticed the clay spider at his feet, his eyes widening. She's alive. It almost knocked the breath out of him as the spider circled around his feet once, as if acknowledging who he was, before disappearing somewhere. Moments later, more clay bugs and animals crawled out of the mouth of a nearby cave, which led somewhere underground. But he couldn't dwell on that now. "Come, Hyuuga." He broke into a dash, boxes and boxes of TNT flying behind him, attached to his chakra strings. "Don't keep me waiting."

Shaking his head, Neji followed.

Eventually, after a rinse-and-repeat, they agreed to split up. The hoard had somehow thinned considerably faster than they had thought. Across the camp, Uchiha Itachi made his return.

She would never admit it, but Tenten had never been more scared out of her wits in her life. When her parents had trained her in bojutsu and other weapons, she never thought that she would be using her training to fight monsters that looked like they crawled out from hell.

But as she decapitated a Zetsu by using her staff as a club and its head as a ball, it dawned on her—quickly and suddenly—that this was not just a horrible nightmare but reality.

The last few weeks felt like a blur.

She wished that it would be the opposite—that she would be able to see every detail vividly, so that she could relish in the few good memories that she had made before what facing the jaws of death.

She wondered if others felt the same as her—if Kakashi or Lee felt like they'd be chained to a rock and dumped in the ocean, left to drown with nothing to ease the burning in their lungs.

Lee and Gai were fighting beside her with all of their hearts. Both of them were covered with blood and look worse for wear, but they kept on fighting.

"Hanabi, your left!" Tenten heard Sasuke yell over the noise. From her periphery, she could see little Hanabi dodge the monster's swipe with a nimbleness that Tenten—with her broad shoulders and muscular legs—could only ever hope to achieve. Almost as if he were exacting revenge for her near death, Sasuke bisected the monster in half, cutting through its heart while he was at it. His face was completely black with blood, and his only distinguishable feature were his Sharingan eyes. He had to be at least on Manegekyo now, she reckoned as she rolled to the side to avoid what would have been a fatal blow.

Slowly, she could see that they were being pushed back.

Someone grabbed her arm to steady her. Shikamaru.

"Get your head in the game," he said tightly, his eyes focused on the approaching monster in front of them.
Numbly, Tenten nodded. Her head was spinning from the heavy, metallic stench of blood. She held up her bo staff defensively, eyes narrowed to pinpricks as she regarded the enemies around them.

Everything started to mesh into one again as she fought side by side with Shikamaru, having been separated from Gai and Lee. He was using a blade—she was too deep in to even consider what kind—and wielding it with an expert hand. He must have been trained prior to everything, she realized; he'd mentioned something about an academy—

A Zetsu broke through their defense, jaws snapping. Shikamaru flinched backward, but the monster raised its knee and slammed it into Shikamaru's sternum, knocking the wind out of him. He fell, his blade falling into the grass beside him.

"SHIKA!" Tenten fought back the Zetsu with her staff, but she was losing steam quick. Her vision was growing blurry, but barely—just barely, she could see monsters being cut down from behind. No! NO! A sob escaped her throat as her legs wobbled. The Zetsu slapped her staff from her hands and punched her away, stepping over Shikamaru's fallen form.

"NNgggghh... Ten... Tenten!" Shikamaru wheezed, crawling toward her. He was vaguely aware of his father's shining chakra—it was like a beacon to him—approaching them, held back by hordes of Zetsu.

Tenten had fallen to the ground, the Zetsu advancing on her in an eerily predator-like way. It swayed like a willow as it cornered her—she scrambled back, but she was too weak to get to her feet, the blow she'd received still rattling her bones. It was as if she was underwater again, Shikamaru's terrified screams a lifetime away as the monster grabbed her face and slammed it into the tree trunk, toying with her like a cat would a mouse. She felt her nose break sideways, but her squeals of pain were lost halfway up her throat. No sound ever escaped other than a slight wince.

Then it brought her head back up—
—and back down.

Again.

And again.

"TENTEN! TENTEN, NO!"

Lee... is that you? What did you do now? she thought groggily. I'm sorry, Lee... I was always yelling at you. You're so... ridiculous sometimes... But that's just you... She felt her skull crack. By now, her entire face, she felt, was just one massive bruise.

"TENTEN!"

The monster released her, drawing its arm back to pierce her chest.

Tenten, with her torso pressed against the tree, blinked slowly, uncomprehendingly.

There was a sickening squelch.

For a whole second, the world stopped. Stopped, then started again.

Tenten rolled her eyes up, wondering why she was still alive.

Red Sharingan eyes met hers, and Uchiha Itachi tossed the body of the Zetsu aside, its heart—
which he held like a macabre trophy—shriveling up in his hand.

She could feel the outside. It was a minuscule feeling, but it was still there. It was real.

Deidara lifted her chin, taking a deep breath of the outside. There.

After wandering the facility, everything had begun to look the same to her. But now—she'd found it—she'd found the exit.

Her future.

Mirai, her mother whispered in the back of her mind. It was a voice she hadn't heard in eons, but one that was not entirely unwelcome. It wrapped a blanket of security around her.

Be safe, Danna told her.

Clenching her muscles, she began to run toward the exit. Her legs were weak—her entire body was weak—but they were enough. Her right arm dangled uselessly at her side, but she would take care of that later. She would never be able to craft her art properly again, but she almost didn't care at this point.

She'd wanted to die.

But, Deidara told herself, I have a future.

Light.

Light.

Hope blossomed in her heart.

She was nearly there—it was where her clay animals had gone, she was sure—her instinct would not lead her astray—

Shff!

And then her balance was off, and she was falling—

Deidara had the wind knocked out of her as she collapsed to the side, landing on her left side. Panic filled her immediately. Somewhere outside her underwater grave, she could feel the absence of something. She could feel her own blood bloom beneath her fallen form, smothering her—

"You." Kabuto hissed at her with a cold fury as he emerged from the shadows. He looked singed and beaten, and Deidara almost triumphantly crowed at his defeated expression.

"Yeah," she confirmed, "me." Her features twisted into something hateful and horrible. "What have you done to me, hm?!" Something was missing—she could feel it—she could feel it in her very bones. "KABUTO!" she howled, her body feeling like lead.

Oh, how she loathed him. And now he was standing over her, his vines spread out behind him like some perverse version of peacock feathers.

"Merely..." Kabuto grinned manically, showing off his black, forked tongue and jagged teeth. "Made a minor adjustment!" Laughing gleefully, he raised her amputated arm—the limb had been cut off near the shoulder—and wagged it in front of her. "Everything has gone to waste, 72! It's a
wasteland up there!" He stepped toward her, and she cursed herself for being so helpless. "But at least... AT LEAST I STILL HAVE YOU!"

Fear glinted in her eyes and she used her remaining arm to try and drag herself away from him. Each breath was coming out of her mouth raggedly and uneasily. Her feet were suddenly stone, and her legs were jelly.

His vines raised, all of them sharpened at the tip.

Deidara squeezed her eyes shut.

_Mirai? Not everyone has one—_

But _Danna, and mother, and IZUMI, Rin, Shisui, I—I—don't want to die—_

"Be safe."

"Good morning, sunshine!"

_"The future is everything, musume-chan. Remember the past, but never forget what lies in the future. That is the message that we bring—the message the world needs to know—the secret of Mirai."

"72!"

"WHAT?!"

She opened them again to see a tall figure with his back to her, vines stretching out to intercept Kabuto's.

The scientist shook. "No... you are true-blooded. THIS CAN'T BE! THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE! YOU MINDLESS FOOLS HAD YOUR FATES SEALED THE MOMENT HE BIT YOU!"

Hyuuga Neji deadpanned at the shaking man. "Fate?" His vines quickly overpowered Kabuto’s, and the bespectacled man stepped backward fearfully. "What is fate, in the end?" His pupil-less eyes turned to Deidara for a second. "Go," he mouthed.

It was as if the chains of fear had been released. Slowly, she stood, her face almost completely white from the blood loss. She screamed when Neji pressed a chakra-infused vine to the stump of her arm, cauterizing it without even batting an eyelash.

The smell of her own burnt flesh made her want to hurl, but she pushed it back down, instead trying to regain her bearings. Her entire body throbbed, but there was nothing she could do about that.

So she did the only thing that she _could_ do at this moment.

She ran.

The sounds of two monsters fighting echoed in her ears as she crawled out of the tunnel exit and into the light.

Though they weren't with her at this very moment, she could feel her tiny clay monsters _everywhere_. They had, cleverly, found all the best spots to explode. Now it was only a matter of time. Deidara glanced around frantically. The clearing was empty, but she could feel a dark cloud of chakra to her right.
More clay animals emerged from the mouth of the escape hole, and she raised her arm, controlling their paths and their fates, her legs moving on their own.

*Find Danna,* her mind whispered to her. *Find him or find everyone else.* Her eyes fell to a discarded, bent sword that had once belonged to one of the Tsuki soldiers occupying this camp. As she ran past it, she grabbed the hilt and lifted it from the ground, her brown cloak flapping in the wind and a look of sheer determination on her face.

Then she felt him. His glowing chakra. It was slowly becoming smothered.

---

Sasori was tired.

Actually, he'd been tired for a long time now. Fighting these things just made the constant weight on his shoulders seem heavier than ever. Whatever was happening over at the far side, he couldn't tell. The only thing he knew was that...

These things had planned a tactical retreat and he happened to be unlucky enough to be right in their way.

The last crate had left his hand just seconds before they showed up, quickly surrounding him.

"Get out of my way," he said lowly, the fingers of his Zetsu arm twitching.

They only stepped closer.

Sasori's lip curled into a sneer. "Hmph." Then, lightning fast, he threw open two scrolls that he kept hidden on his person, and two puppets appeared in a poof of smoke. He gained control of them instantly with his left hand, and weapons of all kinds shot out from their wooden bodies.

One of them howled as a spinning fan of a shuriken sliced through its body, getting its heart as well.

It was a dance of death—his puppets against the multiple Zetsu that had suddenly cornered him. His agility saved him from death ten times over, with him dodging and rolling and occasionally defending himself with his boneless white arm.

There was a familiar chakra probing at the back of his mind, but he ignored it in favor of slicing a monster from the groin to the head, taking inspiration from Sawako's gruesome demise.

Warm blood splattered against his cheek and his lips quirked into a slight, hesitant smile. There were more coming his way. He was already tired from fighting, and the hordes of Zetsu were endless.

He was going to die.

He was going to die alone, without ever seeing Deidara again or hearing his voice.

Somehow, he felt that such a death was fitting.

Poetic, even.

Sasori had never been fond of poetry, despite everything. The paper scroll of letters detailing his feelings on matters suddenly felt heavy in his shirt pocket. *So this is it, then?* One of the monsters sprung a trap in one of the puppets, getting a blade in the eye, and then the heart. *Going out on the battlefield.* *Tsk, not at all like I would have imagined when I left Suna for good. Disappointing.*
He didn't want to die in the midst of fire.
He didn't want to drown either.
He didn't want to die at all.
He would be more grateful, perhaps, if the universe simply let him be.

Sasori almost scoffed. It'd be foolish to hope that Neji would rescue him now. He was sure that, after that moonlit night, Neji would surely prefer him dead. A surge of anger reached him, and he felt himself get carried away by the undertow as he stabbed his chakra-tipped fingers up the ribs and into the heart of a charcoal-black Zetsu with beady yellow eyes.

They swarmed to him as one black mass.

Sasori closed his eyes, awaiting death.

"DANNA!"

And opened them to see his future in the form of his blade-wielding partner.

Deidara didn't know where she'd gotten the energy from, but, suddenly, she was cutting down monsters like they were stalks of grass.

*Only because I caught them off guard*, she quickly realized, the crooked sword she held bending further against the tough skin of a black-grey Zetsu arm. *But I won't let them get to him!*

He was her partner, her familiar, the one that she loved with every fiber of her being—so much so that she wondered how she had any love left to spare for everything else around her.

She sliced a hole in their formation, her blade already blunt by the time she reached him. She reached her right arm out, only to remember that there was no appendage for her to do so. So she settled for skidding her feet in the dirt and landing so that their backs were pressed together, holding the sword in front of her face defensively.

Deidara could feel his surprise radiating from his countenance, despite his ever stony expression. She smiled crookedly. "So you came, yeah. Funny how I'm the one that's saving your ass..." Suddenly, Izumi was at the front of her mind, and she nearly sobbed. But she shook it off, not waiting for a reply, instead focusing all of her time and energy into making sure that they were both safe.

At the edge of the camp, where the diversion squad were, they'd retreated as soon as the Zetsu made their own retreat, heading for the heart of the camp.

"Itachi, where are you going?!" Naruto demanded when the Uchiha lingered behind while the rest took for the trees. A crying Lee was holding Tenten's bruised body in his arms, promising to her that she was going to be okay. The blond himself was covered in blood. They'd been very careful not to get their skins split by the monsters' teeth or claws, where the transforming poison was contained. Their field medic, Sakura, was looking over everyone was they retreated, administering the remnants of the medicine she had created from Kisame's blood to those who needed it.

Itachi shook his head. "Don't worry. Just go. Now!" he added sharply when Naruto faltered. The blond nodded and hopped away, disappearing into foliage.
"Wait."

Itachi turned again, this time to see Sasuke, all bloodied and ruffled. "Otouto."

Without warning, Sasuke lunged at him. Itachi stiffened when Sasuke wrapped his arms around him before he melted into his brother's embrace. Sasuke...

"Don't die, aniki. I'll be waiting for you. So is Izuna."

"I'll come back." Smiling gently, Itachi poked his brother in the forehead. "This won't be the last time, Sasuke."

Pressing his lips into a hard line, Sasuke gave him a curt nod after withdrawing from the hug. "I'm serious," he warned before disappearing into the woods.

Itachi gazed after him for a bit before turning the carnage that awaited him. "So am I."

"Where are we, Danna?" Deidara bit out as she blocked a fierce blow from a large Zetsu with nothing but a half-broken blade. "If shit were to blow up now, yeah, where would we be, hm?"

"Close to the edge if we're being optimistic," was the clipped answer from her partner.

Deidara frowned. The edge, huh...? Then she breathed out a small sigh, slicing a monster's hand off. "You feel it, too, right...?"

"Deidara," he rebuked sharply.

"I'm serious, Danna. If I'm gonna go out, it'll be with a bang, hm," Deidara promised, her countenance darkening. "You're not an idiot, Sasori, I know you can feel it. It's waking up." She almost grew hysterical then. "If we don't do something soon, we're all fucking dead!"

"You think I don't know that?!" Sasori whipped around to glare at her. "That is an option I'd rather leave as the last!" He was too selfish to ever let go of her that easily, but—

"It's the only option."

Something flickered in his eyes. "Hyuuga and Itachi are down there, somehow. I can feel them. Barely." He was stalling and he knew it. He didn't want their story to end this way.

Sasori wanted to spend an eternity with her, but it was there was anything that she could not give to him, it was time. Ever since the war began, they'd both been living on borrowed time and they knew it.

"Five minutes," Deidara murmured, her voice unusually soft, an eerie contrast from the cold, efficient way she killed and maimed those around them. "I'll give them five minutes and then I'm blowing this place to hell, yeah."

"Head count, head count," muttered Shikamaru, his gut aching at random intervals. They were stopped somewhere in the treetops—he didn't know where; he didn't care—but they seemed to be all here. There were even newcomers—two half-Zetsus that had introduced themselves mid-battle as Suigetsu and Juugo.

No, wait.
"Where are Izumo and Kotetsu? And Anko? Iruka? And... And..."

Father.

"Shika!" Choji appeared next to him. Tears were spilling out of his eyes in fat, watery drops. "Shika—your—your dad, he—" He covered his face with his hands.

Shikamaru could only slump against the tree trunk in a stupor. Otou-san... He looked around him. At their absent group members, at Tenten's grievous injuries, Lee's anguish, the solemn silence that enveloped them—

Choi looked up when Shikamaru thumped his fist against the tree, sending a spray of leaves drifting down. "Shika..." His best friend was crying unabashedly, slamming his fist in aggravation as he wept for his parents—for Ino, Hitomi, and all those who had died around him.

"Goddammit, Choji. Dammit all to hell."

Naruto was shouting, too, now. About Iruka. It just made Shikamaru's tears flow harder and faster, becoming hotter each time Naruto's voice pitched in grief, the blond lost in his own pain.

Choi could do nothing, merely hold on to Shikamaru's trembling shoulders as he grieved, the brown-haired boy's own tears becoming dry stains on his round cheeks.

"He died to save me," Choji confessed in a whisper. "I'm sorry, Shika."

Kabuto spat out a tooth, eyeing Neji with an animal-like wariness. "Why haven't you killed me yet?" He was toying with him. The tables had been switched—now it was time for Kabuto to play the mouse. But this mouse—this rat—had bitten back. Neji was greatly weakened, and covered with enough wounds to make the average man bleed out.

Neji stared at him blankly, his gaze slowly shifting to where an approaching chakra signature was growing bigger and bigger. "I bear no grudge against you." For a moment, Kabuto relaxed. Then he immediately tensed as Neji continued, "But I had a feeling that somebody else might."

Itachi melted from the shadows, his Sharingan eyes Kabuto's glimpse into hell.

Neji was unfazed. "I'm correct, it seems."

"Get out of here," Itachi ordered, not unkindly. "You've done enough, Neji. I take it you've seen the escape passage on the east side." A nod. "Then take it and go. This one's mine."

Death. Destruction. All of those things Uchiha Itachi could promise.

And it was those things that Kabuto feared.

"He's done it," Deidara confirmed with a hollow voice. Both of them had been pushed back to a small mound of dirt and rocks, still actively fighting the Zetsu. Deidara's arm was beginning to
hurt now, her muscles screaming in protest. "It's growing stronger, Danna!" *Shit, I don't want to die.* Terror struck her heart but she pushed it back. At any second, it would come out—Zetsu would burst out of its protective shell to wreak havoc on the world, and they would all die.

"I don't want to die either, brat."

Had she spoken out loud?

There was a rumbling from the ground that Deidara couldn't quite place.

Itachi's chakra signature was heading away from them.

*Why isn't he coming to help us?* she screamed in her head, betrayed.

But, inherently, she knew.

Sasori knew.

Itachi knew, too.

Zetsu was emerging. Itachi would barely be out of the blast zone himself before Deidara forced her own hand. If he helped them, it would merely equate to all of them being dead. Not to mention that he had family to go back to—Sasuke, Izuna, Rin, Daichi, Hikari...

*How selfish of you, Itachi, but how utterly right as well,* Deidara thought bitterly, taking in a deep breath. *I'm ready. I'm ready to die now.* She looked up at her Danna's face—the partner she decided that she'd chosen for life—the one that she would love forever.

The rumbling beneath the ground grew louder than ever.

"Don't cry, Deidara."

*What? Am I really...?* She lifted her hand to her cheeks. One side was still plastered with a bandaid, hiding the crescent moon scar that would inevitably formed if she lived past this day. But there was no future. No *Mirai.*

One of his puppets obscured her view, blanketing the monsters for a second. And in that one precious second, it was as if the world around them didn't exist, and it was only them.

"After all..."

Deidara shakily lifted her fingers up, a "katsu" lost on her lips.

Around them, the blood seals on the crates—all connected to Sasori's blood from when he'd spent the night cutting his arm open and using his blood as paint—began to glow, pulsing red.

*7 seconds until detonation.*

Behind the puppets, the Zetsu were starting to get through, tearing Sasori's creations apart.

It pained him, but he paid it no heed.

Sasori pulled her toward him, her face buried in the crook of his neck. He could feel her tears soaking through his shirt.

6.
"Danna?" He could barely hear her voice over the crowing of the Zetsu, smashing themselves against his puppets.

5.

"Wasn't it you?" he murmured, placing a soft kiss on her forehead.

4.

"Who told me that art—"

3.

"—is a bang?"

2.

Thick sturdy vines emerged from the ground, swirling in a spiral formation as it closed in on them. Around them, the world flashed in colors and light. Her eyes widened, tears spilling down her cheeks. "I—"

1.

He kissed her, mouthing the words into her lips, "I love you."

Then the world was white.

The explosion was deafening. Fire erupted throughout the entire ravine, smoke billowing outward. Itachi landed on a tree branch, looking back behind him. The rest merely watched with open mouths and salty tears. All was quiet.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Finally! It's finally done! The end of Part III!

Sorry if this disappointed you. But, frankly, I'm just glad it's done.

Yes, Deidara, too, has a backstory that will tie in a bit later. It involves her mother and music. Sasori's past will also come back to haunt him, but Sakura's mom is a badass and I hope I can do her due. Go Mebuki! Civilian council needs some love. I mean... I hope so?
Interlude: Deidara

It was a question she'd been asking herself a lot lately.

Where... am I?

In the darkness, she could see a circle of light, but it seemed so far away.

Danna? she asked for him groggily.

Then the wind shifted and she felt as if she were falling into the sky, the world turning around with her.

Deidara found herself on the grass, feeling weightless. She took a step forward, the long strands tickling her ankles. It felt like she was submerged—her body hanging onto life by the smallest thread, waiting to be lifted from the ocean again and into a sea of stars.

Okaa-san? she heard herself asking.

There was a music box, a flute, a woman with the most beautiful hair she'd ever seen—

Her eyes burned with tears and a sob rose from her throat. She lifted her right arm—how? Kabuto made sure to tear me apart—and shielded her eyes with the sleeve of her Akatsuki cloak, the red cloud pattern on the garment fully restored.

Am I dead?

The question swam in her mind before disappearing into nothing.

Musume-chan... Her voice was a ghostly whisper that drew her closer. Deidara, suddenly smaller than she was used to, slumped into her lap. She looked up at her mother's serene face, her eyes half-lidded with love.

Mirai, Deidara wanted to say to her, but no words were coming out. Frustrated, tears spilled out of her eyes and over her cheeks faster and hotter, and she wrapped her arms around her mother's bosom.

Her mother's loving embrace felt so real. So painfully real.

Deep down, she knew it wasn't.

She hadn't thought of her in years.

But now...

Her mother lifted her chin and pushed her hair to one side, gazing into her child's blue eyes. Never forget what's important, but never allow your future to be controlled by the past. It will seem inevitable. But do not be afraid, musume-chan. The life of one is transient, but do not let it scare you. She lifted the flute to her lips. Because there is always the future to look upon.

The first notes of Mirai began to play, and Deidara pressed her face against her mother's chest, where her heart beat strongly beneath her breast. Her tears never reached her mother's skin, but that was okay.
The sound of the flute grew more distant as Deidara found herself lying on the grass, the distance between the earth and the sky slowly closing to meet. Gravity stumbled and so did she, falling upwards for what seemed like the hundredth time.

Voices reached her ears, if only barely.

"Let—go of—you can't do this!"

"Please, she—medical help immediately!"

"Grandson... Release him!"

"Tsunade, she—"

"The war—"

"Sasori!"

Her breath hitched in her chest, her tears falling from her eyes like the stars that surrounded her.

Danna. A warmth filled her frozen heart.

"I love you," he murmured into her lips.

I love you, too.

Mirai, her mother reminded her, look to the future, not the past.

I...

I can't.

Deidara opened her eyes.
Part IV: Aster

Chapter Summary

Sakura takes Deidara to meet her mother?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She awoke with words she couldn't quite place on her lips, her head lifting from her pillow as soon as she opened her eyes. But the world was off, somehow, her perception blurred and... confused.

Her right eye was quickly becoming adjusted to the light in the room, but her left had yet to do the same. Yet, she was not concerned, merely staring wide-eyed at the white wall in front of her. Her head aching from sudden movement, Deidara glanced around warily, her heart pounding in her chest.

The room was decidedly plain, containing nothing but the bed which she laid in and the bedside table on her right. If there was anything on her left, she wasn't able to tell. Moving her hand past the bed told her that there was nothing there but empty space.

*Is this... a hospital?*

It smelled like one.

To her right was a large window, where natural sunlight was streaming in unfiltered. There was a tree partly visible from where she was positioned, completely bare of any leaves or life. There was a slight powdery white dusting on the branches, however.

*Snow.*

She stared out the window before turning her attention onto herself. Her balance had been restored, somehow. Her arm was back. *Did I just dream up everything?* Awed, she pulled down the collar of her loose hospital gown, her breath catching in her throat as she witnessed the thick black stitches embedded in her flesh, connecting her severed limb to the stump. She ran her finger over it, shivering as she felt the bumps in her skin. Deidara stretched her palms, and the mouth on her left palm opened up, teeth gleaming and tongue wagging.

There was a slight discomfort on the other hand as lips tried and failed to pull themselves apart.

Deidara was almost scared about what she would find. Carefully, she peeled back the sleeve of her gown. She almost reeled back at the sight that greeted her. "They..." Her voice was hoarse and she could tell that her breath smelled like rot.

The hand-mouth on her right hand was stitched closed by the same black thread.

*Ah.* Resigned, she let her sleeve fall over part of her hand, her eyes dull. She brought her newly attached hand close to her face, her visual perception still skewed. But she could still see her crooked fingers, permanently bent, the damage Kabuto caused unable to be completely fixed. She almost laughed at the sheer irony behind it all. *I won't be needing it anyway. I'll just... let it be.*
There was something else bothering her. While she could shift her right leg easily enough, her left leg, from the hip down, was almost completely numb. Even so, she couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't quite there. She'd felt it before, when Kabuto had sliced off her arm (and who would she be thanking for stitching her back together like a torn ragdoll?), and her own familiarity with it made her uneasy.

A muscle in her jaw twitched as she pulled off the blankets, revealing a sight that shook her to the very core. "Ha... What the hell... What the hell is this, huh?"

The leg of her pants was tied off into a knot halfway down her thigh. A ball of ice forming in her belly, she simply flopped her head back into the pillow, sinking into feathery softness.

She wanted so badly to laugh at herself, and the absurdity of everything. To cry at the situation she was in.

But she didn't.

"I love you."

She shut her eyes, that familiar prickling feeling forming at the back of her eyeballs again.

*What happened after that, Danna? When am I going to see you again?*

Her train of thought was broken when the door opened, and a bored-looking nurse walked in, staring intently at her clipboard. When she looked up, she startled, eyes widening.

"Oh—oh, goodness, you're awake!" Immediately, the nurse's eyes brightened. "Oh, goodness," she fussed, looking left and right before finally deciding to hurry over to Deidara's bedside and pour her a glass of water from the pitcher sitting on the nightstand, "here, drink up." Her gaze softened. "This must be really overwhelming, and I'm sorry for that. I'll be back. You'll get your answers from your friend and Tsunade-sama."

*Tsunade-sama?* Deidara's astonishment barely showed through but it was there all the same as she watched the nurse close the door behind her in haste.

*"Tsunade, she—"*

Deidara lifted her hand to her head, her eyes at half-mast from the jolt of pain that struck her skull. *Damn voices...*

Not even five minutes later, the door opened again—this time with more zeal than before—and a blonde, big-breasted woman strode in with the same air of confidence that Deidara used to have before the war. Still, there was an underlying fatigue and sorrow in her demeanor, one that wasn't difficult to find nowadays. She was not dressed in the traditional healer's garb, but rather a surprisingly casual ensemble with a green haori. Behind her, Sakura loyally stood, her hair color completely reverted from midnight black to cherry blossom pink. She looked less tired than she had been outside, seeming fully at home in her position.

At the sight of her, Sakura let out a small gasp, her pen tumbling to the ground as she lifted her hand to her mouth. Her eyes brimmed with tears, softening as she met Deidara's gaze. There was no pity in her expression, merely relief.

"So," the blonde woman began, crossing her arms. "I'm guessing that you have a shit ton of
questions, but all of them will have to wait until after I examine you, Deidara-san." She went over to Deidara's bedside, lips quirking upward in a slight smile. "Have to say, I'm glad that you're awake. Faster than I thought, too. My name is Senju Tsunade."

Deidara's gaze met hers evenly, both weary and wary. "You already know mine, Tsunade-sama, hm."

"Smartass," Tsunade remarked before going over rudimentary check-ups.

Deidara let her complete the examination without any fuss, not unaware of how Sakura was squirming in the background, obviously eager to talk to her. The nurse who had come in with them was shooting the pink-haired medic amused looks.

In the end she was given the all-clear.

Tsunade was flipping through some papers as she said, "You're good to go now, but I advise you rest here for a few days." She cocked an eyebrow. "Of course, it's not necessary, merely recommended. Something tells me you want to get out of here as soon as possible, though."

"Yeah." Deidara arched her back and stretched her arms into the air, feeling her joints popping satisfyingly. "I do."

"Then what are you waiting for?" It took a moment for Deidara to realize that Tsunade was speaking to the nameless nurse, and not her. "Get a wheelchair over here, stat."

"Yes, Tsunade-sama!" She hurried out, patting down the front of her dress.

"Was amputation really necessarily?" Deidara asked bluntly. "How the hell did you get my arm back on? And what's up with my vision, hm?"

"Yes, it was," Tsunade answered in a clipped, but not unkind, tone. She heaved a great sigh. "Your leg was completely fried, kid. By the time your friends got you to the gates of Konoha, gangrene was already beginning to set in." The woman grunted, obviously displeased with something. "And then the damn Konoha Council were stupid fools about the whole thing, and your entry to the hospital was delayed. I'm sorry about that. As for your vision, you've lost about seventy percent of your eyesight in your left eye. And about your arm," she added when Deidara opened her mouth to remind her, "Stitching back on cleanly cut severed limbs is a specialty of my colleague's. Part of his kekkai genkai and a bitch to learn. Only he and I have any knowledge in it. He put you back together while I was working on another patient."

"But..." Deidara frowned. "Where did you—?"

"The Hyuuga boy collected it from wherever it fell. He's a keeper if you ask me."

Deidara momentarily faltered. "Yeah, sure." Frankly, she was just glad that it was back. She remembered the way she had treated Neji during the journey. Even now, she wasn't sure if she could completely trust him, but at least he wasn't a total asshole. She almost smiled. Almost. But she didn't care about Neji right now. All she wanted was to know what had happened to the others. To Sasori.

Instead, she had to sit still while Tsunade ran over the details of the damage that couldn't be nicely healed. The tips of ears remained pointed—they forever would, but that didn't matter; her hair hid them anyway—and there were multiple scars—thick and thin alike—now decorating her body. The most prominent one was the crescent-moon-shaped scar beneath her left eye, the trough of the scar
facing her brow. When Kabuto had inflicted that on her, he had scooped out her flesh as well, leaving a small recess of a mark.

It was ugly, but it would stay.

If only she could smooth it away like clay—

The nurse returned with the wheelchair.

"Sakura," Tsunade said knowingly, and the pink-haired girl nodded, taking the wheelchair from the nurse and pushing it to the bedside. Once Deidara was safely seated, Sakura pushed her out of the room. Tsunade didn't follow. Neither did the nurse.

"Everyone's been so worried about you," Sakura said softly. "I'm so glad you're awake." Deidara couldn't see her face, but she suspected that she was crying.

"How..." Deidara grimaced. "How long was I out, hm?"

A hesitant silence. Then, "A week. We were expecting longer, to be honest. It's a miracle that you're awake as it is."

A week. Deidara sank into her wheelchair, nearly sliding out of it. How much had she missed? What had happened to the others? To Sasori? Itachi? Rin? Where were they?

"Everyone's okay," was what Sakura said when Deidara asked just one of the questions flooding her mind. "My mom made sure that they were all comfortable in the refugee centre. We're all shaken, but we'll... We'll be fine." She sounded too uncertain for Deidara's taste. "But about Sasori..."

Her heartbeat stumbled. "What? What happened?" He wasn't dead. No—no, he couldn't be dead. Not when she was still alive.

Sakura sighed in frustration. Frustration at an entity that Deidara didn't know of. "As soon as we got to the gates, he was arrested."

"Arrested? Sakura, you better tell me what the fuck is going on here, yeah?" Her patience was growing thin, a trait from Sasori that had rubbed off on her. Or, rather, further into her. She'd never been very patient to begin with. There was twinge of phantom pain from her missing limb that she ignored in favor for intently listening for Sakura's answer.

"Deidara," Sakura said, "do you know about this past? As... As an—"

"Assassin? Yeah, I did. And I say that it means fuck-all, yeah. I didn't know him back then, but I know him now, and that's all that matters. He's not like that."

At first, there was a pause, and Deidara was expecting Sakura to stop pushing her right there and look at her strangely. But to her surprise, a soft, bell-like laughter escaped the pinkette's lips. "I should have known. I feel the same way, you know."

"What?"

"I'm serious," Sakura insisted, stopping at the lobby to fetch some blankets. She wrapped them around Deidara's small form. "It's cold outside," she explained. They exited the hospital, and Deidara was grateful that Sakura had swaddled her in all of those blankets. The white-grayness of the sky took some getting used to, but she adjusted quickly. She normally had her hair over her left
eye, anyway, so it wouldn't take much getting used to.

It didn't mean that she liked it, though.

"We all know about everything he's done for us," Sakura continued, glancing skyward to admire the cloudy, but beautiful day. The sun was just visible behind the clouds. "We'd be fools to judge him on his past like that. Sasori's done bad deeds, but he's also done good ones. And, personally, I feel that the good outweighs the bad. Tch! But Konoha doesn't feel that way. It makes sense, but it's so... redundant. He's only killed one person from Konoha, anyway—a fishy diplomat. The rest is Suna's business. And if everything we've been told even has a semblance of truth, he was working on behalf of the Emperor. The Royal Assassin is known to be a position that you cannot refuse. A fact that should work in our favor." Deidara twisted her head around questioningly. "He's being trialed next week." She saw no reason to sugarcoat anything. "People are already talking about execution."

A wave of nausea overcame her, and she paled. "You can't be serious."

"I wish I was kidding. Even I have to admit that he's guilty of something pretty serious—but he's changed!"

"He has," Deidara said icily. "They won't go through with it. I won't let them, hm!"

"It's a matter of convincing the Three Councils otherwise," Sakura told her. "It would be unrealistic if he got off scot-free. That won't be happening. But we can try and lessen his punishment."

"To what extent?" She feared the answer, but she had to ask. "Sakura?"

"The best scenario... a decade of imprisonment."

"What?!"

"I don't like it either! But considering everything... I'm sorry, Deidara, but that's the best we can hope for."

Ten years. No—no, things weren't supposed to be like this. After everything they'd gone through, every battle they had fought—it would lead up to this? Deidara couldn't believe it. Couldn't accept it.

"There has to be another way."

Sakura sighed. "I hope so, too. I've spoken to my mom about the matter already. She didn't say whether she agreed or not, just that she'll do what she thinks is right. I have a feeling, though, that she's on our side." She bit her lip. "But it's hard to say."

"Your mother? What does she have to do with this, hm?"

"She's a member of the Civilian Council, one of the Three Councils. A very influential member, I might add. It... gives me a little hope. Is that wrong? To hope?"

Deidara stayed silent, staring at the path ahead of them. "No," she decided in the end. "Hope... that can mean everything."

Around them, people—strangers—cast her pitying looks. She ignored them. She ignored all of them.
Konoha was strange to her. It had been incredibly westernized in the past few years, and most of the buildings were of a pseudo-western design. It had its own charm, and if things had turned out the way she thought it would, she thought that she would have liked to spend the rest of her life here very much.

She never thought that she would be spending it without him.

There was an ache in her chest. Like someone had carved out part of her heart with a cruel knife.

"Where are you taking me, hm?" Deidara eventually asked.

"My house," replied Sakura. "We're going to see my mother for tea. Kakashi should still be there—he doesn't know you're awake yet, but he has something to give you."

Kakashi?

"And before you get any ideas," Sakura went on, her voice growing a little disapproving, "don't mention Sasori to my mother. Not unless she asks or brings it up. If you push her too much, she'll turn a deaf ear."

"Got it."

For now, she simply sat back and tried to relax. A puff of breath escaped her lips, forming a white cloud that quickly dispersed.

Konoha...

It really is beautiful in the winter.

If a few tears of frustration—what did that beauty mean, in the end?—slipped from her eyes, she pretended that they weren't there.

Haruno Mebuki looked up from the soup she was stirring as her front door opened, sending a gust of wind flying through the house. On her couch, a silver-haired man was lazing, an orange book in his hands.

"You could have gotten the door for them, you know," Mebuki reprimanded him. "Kakashi, I'm talking to you!"

"Hm?" Kakashi lifted a hand up in apology. "Ah, sorry... I didn't hear."

"Of course you didn't."

Kakashi's antics didn't annoy her any further, though, as he immediately dropped his facade when he saw Sakura come in with Deidara. Mebuki simply stared as he watched Kakashi's shoulders slump, as he turned into the tired man he was.

"Deidara." His voice was thick with grief. Kakashi got off the couch, going over to where Sakura was closing the door behind them. "You're up." It was a poor choice of words, but she forgave him for it.

Deidara smiled wearily. "Obviously. How are you faring, hm, Kakashi?" He looked so, so tired, it almost physically pained her. A far cry from the man who used to scam Uzumaki because he was bored...
"As well as I can be." His single visible eye was gleaming with unshed tears. "Everything's been a mess."

Deidara watched Sakura go to the kitchen to help Mebuki set the soup on the table before answering, "Yeah, I've been told." Her jaw clenched as she glared at the ground. "They're seriously considering execution." It was a statement, not a question. "Those fucking assholes..." It was selfish of her, but Sasori was hers, and the Three Councils could, frankly, go shove their heads up their asses even further than they already were.

Kakashi remained thoughtfully silent on the matter.

"Soup's ready," Mebuki called halfheartedly. "Come here, Kakashi, help me set up the table."

"Oh, no—it's fine, I've got it." Sakura came to Kakashi's rescue.

"Don't you have to return to the hospital soon, musume-chan?"

"I have half an hour! I told you that I could stay for lunch, and I mean it."

"Hmph, if you insist. Make sure you use the good silver, dear."

Kakashi wheeled Deidara next to the couch, where he sat beside her. With a pained expression, he observed her as she watched the mother-daughter duo interact with each other, occasionally squabbling over the smallest things. There was... longing in her eyes, the same longing that had clouded his gaze when he had lost his father. "Deidara?"

"Hm? Oh—sorry, did you say something?"

Kakashi smiled sadly beneath his mask. "No. No, nothing." He flipped open his book again, only pretending to read. In actuality, he was worried for her. She hid her grief well, but not as well as he. Deidara, despite her walls, was practically an open book to Kakashi.

He did not blame her for it. None of them had had the time to grieve properly, not even after making it to Konoha. After they'd entered, it'd been an entire shitfest from there. Once Neji had been discovered to have a unique transforming ability, they'd taken him and confined him somewhere that he didn't know of. The same could almost be said for Sasori, who'd been arrested almost immediately after setting foot into the city. His face was easily recognizable in such a largely populated city like Konoha, as opposed to a smaller city like Akatsuki. His Zetsu arm was merely something that condemned him even further. Their group had almost rioted at that, and it was only thanks to Itachi that they didn't break out into a scuffle with the Konoha authorities.

And waiting for Deidara to wake up... It had taken a toll on many.

"Kakashi, Deidara! Lunch is ready!" Sakura announced, setting four spoons next to the four bowls of soup on the table. A plate of sandwiches sat in the middle of the table.

"Coming," Kakashi said automatically, wheeling Deidara over to the dining area.

Lunch started in silence—one neither uneasy or comfortable—the only noise being Mebuki's spoon hitting the side of her bowl occasionally, her hand wobbling as she ate.

Underneath her long, looked-after lashes, Deidara could tell that the Haruno woman was watching her like a hawk. Despite her age, her gaze remained sharp and calculating, something that she had to respect.
"You must be his lover."

Deidara nearly choked on her soup.

Well, she wasn't incorrect, but the disdainful implication was loud and clear to her—

"Hahaue!" Sakura interjected. "That was not at all what I told you. You're twisting my words again..." she mumbled into her soup, eyeballing her mother from the side.

Mebuki thoroughly ignored her daughter's protests. "Aren't you ashamed, Deidara, to be connected to that killer in such a way?"

By now, even Kakashi had balked, knowing that nothing good could come out of this. If he had less self-control, Mebuki's silverware would have bent underneath his gloved hand.

Deidara stared at Mebuki, a wave of icy hotness washing over her skin. Her pointed ears burned with the same heat as Mebuki continued relentlessly.

"An estimated total of his victims adds up to one-hundred and thirty-nine. And," Mebuki added pointedly, "that is the number recorded during the time he served as the Emperor's hitman, only. The number could easily be three-hundred. Four-hundred. Do you really think a man who has taken so many lives deserves to be redeemed? I take it that you've heard of the saying 'everyone deserves a second chance'? I will tell you what I think, Deidara-san." Mebuki's tone hardened. "What I quoted was nothing more than foolish ideology. It is, to put it politely, something I thoroughly disagree with."

Underneath the table, Deidara's fists were clenched. Images of the woman in front of her being exploded into a fiery blaze burned the back of her eyeballs, but she held her tongue, formulating a response in her mind. Kakashi and Sakura watched her with bated breath, waiting for the inevitable explosive, fiery outburst that would come.

"I'm glad you think so, Haruno-sama."

Kakashi's spoon almost fell into his soup, and Sakura was faring no better, wondering what had come over the blonde.

Mebuki's eyes gleamed. "And why is that? Do you agree with me?"

"In a way, hm." Deidara's eyes were flinty chips of ice, the same coldness reflected in her voice. "You're right—there are some people out there that don't deserve to be redeemed. And there's one thing that they all have in common." Mebuki inched forward. "None of them are willing to be redeemed. Second chances are given—should be given—not according to the weight of your deeds, hm, but how much you are willing to change. So, no. I'm not ashamed, hm." She paused before tacking on mechanically, "Haruno-sama."

The two women stared at each other with equally hard gazes. Next to Mebuki, Sakura was trying to fight off a smile. The way she defended him bore her feelings for all to see—and if there was anything that Haruno Mebuki wasn't, it was blind.

Mebuki hummed lowly, steepling her fingers. "I see. And you truly believe this?"

There was no hesitation on her part. "Yes. Anyone willing to change—willing to put in the effort to change—deserves to have a future, hm."

It was then Mebuki broke their staring contest. "Kakashi, Sakura, why aren't you eating? Your
soup is going to get cold, and we can't have these sandwiches going soggy and to waste. Eat!

"Hard to when you're having a showdown right there," Kakashi muttered under his breath, proceeding to quickly devour his meal anyway. Miraculously, he managed to avoid having any of them see this face.

Once lunch was finished, Mebuki cleared the table and said very clearly, "I suppose I'll be seeing you at the trial, Deidara-san?"

"Of course."

"Good. It'd be terribly disappointing if you weren't to show up."

If looks could kill, the glare Deidara was sending at her back would have ended her ten times over. But Mebuki remained annoyingly oblivious, transforming back into an unassuming homemaker.

Sakura decided to break the awkward silence that had ensued. "When is chichiue coming home, hahaha?"

"In a few weeks. He's on another business trip."

The conversation melded into the backdrop then, and Deidara turned her attention to Kakashi, who seemed to be waiting for her to do something.

"So," Deidara said, "Sakura told me that you had a surprise for me?"

Kakashi's eye crinkled as he smiled beneath his mask. "I was wondering if you'd ask. Come on— I'm taking you out."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I kinda want to write shorter chapters from now on. Meaning 4000-6000 words. I'll probably go beyond that at times, but writing 7000 word plus chapters are kind of draining.
The first thing that struck Deidara was the fact that Konoha was big. Bigger than Akatsuki was—even bigger than Iwagakure's capital. She tried not to look too astounded as Kakashi pushed her through Konoha's market district.

Before leaving, Sakura had given Deidara a spare set of clothes (hers had been thrown out by the hospital) that hid the burn marks on her arms and leg and the scars across her torso. The blonde was grateful that Sakura had been so considerate (even going as far as to let her keep it)—the cotton white blouse and high-waisted, long green skirt held up better against the cold than the flimsy hospital gown had. Even now, she had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl, and her hands were gloved.

The shopping street was noisy, too, abuzz with the same background sound that Deidara had gotten used to back in Akatsuki. It was strange hearing it again—gossiping old ladies and laughing children—and, somehow, it made her heart clench.

"I used to come here all the time as a kid," Kakashi said abruptly. "It was a lot more crowded back then—what you're seeing now is pretty docile."

Deidara had noticed, under their guise of normalcy and humdrum activities, how subdued they were. Everyone seemed to walk a little too hastily, and looked around a little too cautiously at short intervals.

"So, the war has even reached Konoha, hm?"

"Yes. While you were out, we were told that Konoha joined the war as an ally of Amegakure. It's no surprise—we've always had good relations with Konoha, and there were—"are—"a lot of Konoha immigrants living there."

Kakashi wheeled her over a lengthy wooden bridge, and she peered over the railing to see the river still running despite the cold, water gently splashing over stones and pebbles.

"The Naka," was all Kakashi had to say about it.

They left the market district behind them, entering an area that had more of a... militant feel to it. It wasn't much, but it was there. Weapons shops, bars, official buildings, and—

"Your surprise awaits you over there," Kakashi said, trying to sound more cheerful than he actually was.

"A metalsmith?"
"He prefers the term 'mechanic'."

Deidara turned her head around, giving him a skeptical look, but allowed him to push her into the store. It was warm inside, the building made of sturdy wood. A fire was going in a hearth at the front of the room. She half-expected to see a buff man hammering iron on an anvil, but the place was practically devoid of any life. The only indication that there'd been a person here before them was the still-smoking cigarette in an ashtray.

"Stay here," Kakashi said, ignoring the dry look that Deidara gave him. He went over to a door, pressing his ear against it.

"You don't mix the beer with—!"

"At least take that thing out of your mouth before you start talking at me; you're getting embers on my shirt, dammit!"

"What did you say to me, pal? Wanna say it again? Give me that beer already, you lightweight!"

Kakashi removed his face from the door. "Look's like someone's home after all." He rapped his knuckles on the door once. "Oi, Asuma! Stop trying to get your apprentice drunk and come out already!"

There was a muffled swearing from the other side that even Deidara could hear before the door opened and Kakashi stepped back. A broad man with a scruffy beard and a lit cigarette sitting between his lips came out, another more sullen man—as big, if not bigger, than the bearded man—following him out.

"Jesus, Kakashi, you come at the worst times." 'Asuma' peered around Kakashi's shoulder. "Is this her?"

"Explosion-bitch?" the man behind Asuma blurted out at the same time.

"Explosion-bitch?" Deidara echoed, chuckling in amusement. She'd realized just who the muscular man was as soon as he exited after Asuma. "Nice to see you, too, yeah," she continued wryly, cocking an eyebrow. "Hitoshi-san."

Hitoshi looked half-relieved and half-offended. "So you're Kakashi's secret friend. Damn bastard always keeps unnecessary info from us," Kakashi eye-smiled at him, "but you look pretty good for someone who's been out of it for one week." He scrutinized her. "Just kidding, you look like shit, but so do the rest of us."

Deidara didn't particularly need a reminder of how haggard she looked. "Thanks, asshole. I can't wait to tell everyone about how much of a lightweight you are, yeah. Knew you were compensating for something with that muscle mass..."

He glared at her, and she simply sent him an unimpressed glance before focusing on Asuma and Kakashi instead.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Deidara-san," Asuma said, shaking her hand firmly. "Knowing Kakashi's tendency to withhold important information, you probably have no idea what the hell you're here."

Deidara looked around his workshop, noticing the amount of metal arms and legs he had on display. "I have a pretty good guess, hm." It wasn't even a guess—she'd known as soon as 'mechanic' had come out Kakashi's mouth. She felt a sudden surge of gratitude toward Kakashi that
nearly tipped her off her wheelchair—something that she wouldn't be using anymore if Asuma was as credible as he seemed.

In response, Asuma presented to her a sleek metal prosthetic leg before placing it on his worktable and making some minor adjustments. A soothing harmony of mechanical clicks and whirls eased her soul, the way he probed at the thing reminding her of cogs and clockwork.

"I'm going to need you to stand up," Asuma said, not unkindly. "See if I got it right..."

She did, her cheeks flushing when she wobbled on her single leg, her balance skewed. But still, years of taijutsu training helped her adjust and not fall on her face.

Asuma grinned in satisfaction. "Look's about right. I still got it. Okay, you can sit back down now—I'm going to fit this onto you."

She obeyed, watching curiously as Asuma lined up the prosthetic to the stump of her thigh. He glanced up at her apologetically. "I'm going to numb this area, but you'll still likely feel mild discomfort. Hitoshi, put my tools here while I wash my hands."

"Yes, shishou."

"Shishou?" Deidara shot Kakashi a questioning look.

The silver-haired man shrugged. "What can I say? There's no demand for shoemakers around here. He did all that he could by getting Asuma to tutor him."

"Asuma-oji!" Suddenly the door slammed opened, cold wind blowing through the workshop. Little Konohamaru shoved the door closed, panting. "I got the groceries you wanted—" His jaw dropped when he saw Deidara and Kakashi. "You're awake!"

"And you have a lot of explaining to do," Deidara retorted, bemused. "Aren't you an orphan?"

"Yeah! But when the officials registered my name, I was matched with oji-san, kore!" Konohamaru beamed at her, no longer the scared little boy hiding in the Sycamore tree. He was finally safe now, and he relished in it. The lines underneath his eyes from sleepless nights told her that he had not forgotten, however. He was simply trying to make the best of his situation, and it was turning out rather well for him. "He's my only living relative, so I'm staying with him."

Asuma's hand glowed with ever-familiar medical chakra as he numbed the stump of Deidara's leg, her green skirt scrunched up around her hips. "If only chichiue hadn't died last winter," the bearded man said wistfully. "We clicked immediately, y'know, Konohamaru and I."

As the metal limb was fixed to her thigh with the help of minor surgery, Konohamaru chatted away about what had happened while Deidara was out, the blonde woman listening attentively. To the side, Kakashi was reading his orange book, dedicating half an ear to Konohamaru's mostly one-sided conversation. Asuma listened, too, even when he dabbed blood away and wrapped a bandage around the tender area where the prosthetic met her flesh ("It'll be achy for the next few days," he warned). It fit like a glove, and Deidara felt her chakra pathways connecting with the artificial ones in the new leg.

"And then that stupid military police guy punched Masami-san in the face when we tried to stop them from taking Sasori-sama!" Konohamaru growled. "She was bleeding from it—she might even scar, kore!" Deidara remembered how she had punched Masami in the face, and winced guiltily. She'd knocked out a tooth—personally, she still thought that the woman had deserved to be smacked, but not with a chakra-laden hand. "Masami-san is wearing her hair kinda like yours now,
covering her injury. But it's on the right side of her face."

Hitoshi handed Deidara a hot chocolate. "Here," he said gruffly, "you look like you need it."

"Thanks, yeah." She took it, breathing in the pleasant aroma.

"Feel free to stay here longer," Asuma said, leaning against a tabletop. "It's cold out there."

"Some of us managed to connect with family members, too," Konohamaru went on, now snacking on some bread he'd bought from the baker. "Choji's uncle runs a newspaper, so he went to work and live with him. They're going to be extensively covering Sasori-sama's trial, kore, so you'll see them sitting together. His uncle's real fat. Even bigger than Choji. Sakura's mom lives here, and she's a citizen, too, so she's covered as well." He swallowed the bread. "Shizune owns property here, too."

"Why don't you tell her about Naruto?" Kakashi suggested.

"Uzumaki?" Deidara leaned back in her chair, sipping her drink.

"Try walking on it before it starts hurting," Asuma interjected.

As Deidara tested her new leg, Konohamaru took Kakashi's words to heart.

"Oh yeah!" Konohamaru was practically buzzing with excitement at the mention of his senpai. "It turns out...!" He took a deep breath. "Naruto's mom is alive! Her name's Kushina, and she's arriving by boat tomorrow morning. It turns out that Naruto was separated from his dad while they were together on a trip to Iwagakure. His dad was the Hokage, and he took his son to one of his diplomatic missions! It was peacetime back then, but Iwa waited until they were out of their borders before assassinating them."

Deidara stared at the boy, pausing the loop she was walking in. The leg was strange and totally alien, something that she would have to get used to over time. "You're serious? What happened after, hm?" It was a little embarrassing that it was her country that had committed such an atrocity, but nothing that stopped her curiosity.

"The official report was that both were dead," Kakashi chimed in, taking over from Konohamaru. "But Naruto made it, somehow, and wound up in Akatsuki. It was a pretty traumatic experience for a kid—he was four—so he's likely repressed his memories of the event. Since it happened outside of the country, Iwa couldn't be blamed for it, lest they start a war. Konoha was still recovering from its war with Suna, so another one was a pretty bad idea. But everybody knows who was really responsible—Onoki hated Minato." He sighed. "If any deserves to have a parent back, it's Naruto."

Deidara hummed thoughtfully. "Then besides the ones that you named... the rest—?"

"The refugee centre. It's not as bad as it sounds. I live there myself actually, and they all make sure that we're comfortable."

"Where are they keeping Sasori, hm?"

"He's detained somewhere, but not anywhere where we know about. Likely underground."

"And Neji!" Konohamaru jumped in again. "They took him away to be tested, but Shizune's looking after the progress. She's making sure that they don't hurt him."

_But Sakura said that everyone was okay except Danna. She must have known that I'm not exactly_
fond of Neji, so she omitted... She wasn't really sure how to feel about that. Neji had saved her life, proving his humanity and loyalty to their ragtag group. Deidara chewed on the inside of her cheek, mulling over her view of him. She would always be wary of him, but perhaps a little forgiveness was needed. Neji shouldn't be exempt from having a future. In a way, the Hyuuga boy was much like Sasori—unwillingly (or so she assumed for her Danna's case) put into positions that required them to commit horrible crimes.

"Take me to them," Deidara said in the end, sitting back down in her wheelchair. Asuma had recommended her let the subsequent pain go away before walking. "I want to see everyone again. Especially Rin and Itachi." She downed the rest of the hot chocolate in one gulp, the beverage now cooled enough for her to do so.

"I don't see why not," Kakashi said agreeably. "It's a little past lunch time now, so all of them should be in the centre rather than wandering the streets."

"The military police let them do that?"

"Haruno Mebuki is a powerful woman, Deidara," was all Kakashi had to say on the matter.

"Hm."

The two said their goodbyes, leaving Konohamaru, Hitoshi, and Asuma behind.

"I'm starving," Konohamaru declared. "Hey, Hitoshi, set up the table."

"Oi, don't talk to me like your slave, brat." Hitoshi fixed him with a glare. "Just because you're uncle's my boss, doesn't mean you—"

"Both of you set the table," Asuma ordered, giving them a mock-stern stare.

"Oji-san!"

Konohamaru and Hitoshi went to the back room, bickering all the way. Asuma knew that they weren't fond of each other (Hitoshi was a real prickly bush to deal with), but they'd just have to get used to interacting.

Sighing, Asuma pulled out a small photo he kept in his back pocket. He smiled fondly at the soft faces that greeted him. "Yo, Kurenai. Just a few hundred more sales and I'll be able to live with you full-time." His eyes shifted to the baby that the woman in the photo had in her arms. That picture had been taken four years ago. "Mirai's five this year... isn't she?"

"Kakashi."

"Hm?"

Deidara glanced up at him. "Kakashi, stop, hm."

He ceased pushing the wheelchair, frowning when she unsteadily tried to stand.

They were in the corridor, outside the room which they kept everyone in. With the war, there was a sudden influx of refugees into Konoha, and the officials had been forced to move everyone into one big room with beds.

"I don't want them to see me like this," Deidara explained quietly. "Just let me do this, yeah." She grunted in frustration as she nearly lost balance, hastily righting herself. She stood still, getting a
feel of her new leg. The numbing agent was starting to wear off now, and she could feel a bit of the pain that Asuma had warned her about. She exhaled. "Okay."

Kakashi left the wheelchair in the hallway, placing himself next on Deidara's left as they stood outside the door, ready to catch her if she fell.

She palmed the knob.

And twisted.

The door opened, revealing the faces that she hadn't seen in what felt like an eternity, all of them clean, and fresh; some of them were playing cards on the carpet, others talking, reading, sleeping or enjoying the peace—

She didn't realize that she was crying until she felt her tears pool at her chin, dropping like stars onto her leather shoes.

Daichi noticed her first. "DEIDARA-NEE!" The boy launched himself at her, nearly knocking her over as he wrapped his arms around her forcefully. Deidara could feel tears start to stain her shirt, and, automatically, she palmed the boy's head, curling her fingers through his hair. It'd been cut, she thought absently.

"Daichi," Deidara uttered.

"You're okay," the boy sobbed. "You're okay! I thought you were going to die—I thought that my big sis was gonna—" He hiccuped, hugging her tighter.

Kakashi stood back a little as all of them swarmed toward the blonde, some of them smiling with all their teeth and others struggling not to cry. Not one of them kept a straight face, however. But even those who had not been close to her, even on the journey they had all taken together, rejoiced at her return.

It made him smile, just a little, underneath his mask. You would have liked to see this, Obito.

He watched as Rin embraced her friend, tears freely falling from her chocolate brown eyes. She was crying the hardest out of all of them, her bottom lip trembling as she buried her face in the crook of Deidara's neck, her shoulders shaking with each sob.

"You're alive," Rin kept whispering, "You're alive—thank god—oh, thank god—" Deidara let her whisper, let her cry.

Not all of them are here, she realized once everything had calmed. Who's missing? Itachi, Shikamaru, Karin, Naruto, Tenten, Kagami... She said as much, and it was Sasuke who answered, surprisingly.

"My brother had business to attend to," the younger Uchiha brother said stoically. "I don't know where Kagami went, but Tenten is getting checked at the hospital. Shikamaru's gone to the Leaf Gazette to meet Choji's uncle, and Karin and Naruto..." There was an underlying sorrow in his voice that Deidara didn't miss. "They went to visit the Fourth Hokage's grave. His father's."

"Karin? Why Karin, hm?"

"Karin's an Uzumaki, too," Rin told her. "We didn't know until she had to give the officials her name. As soon as he knew, Naruto latched onto her." Sasuke snorted with dry amusement at that.
"She's going with him tomorrow to the docks to greet his mother as well."

Deidara's lips quirked up, albeit a little sadly. "Lucky kid."

Nobody questioned if she meant Naruto or Karin.

As they included her and Kakashi into their group again (the latter mostly just read his book), she was glad they didn't notice how awkwardly she was walking. If they did, none of them expressed it. Her green skirt was long enough to conceal her entire prosthetic up to the ankle, where her shoes went up to.

She wanted to keep her composure, wanted them to think that she was okay. Deidara wasn't sure if her pride could take it if they all started pitying her right then, knowing that she would never be able to fight again or produce her art to the fullest extent—

It was going well until she saw Asagi nursing a child, the babe suckling on her breast.

Izuna.

Something stabbed her in the heart then, ripping through her soul painfully. Just as she thought she had finished crying for the day, more tears welled up in her eyes and she ducked her head, allowing her unbound hair to fall around her face. *Izumi—oh my god, Izumi, she's—*

"I..." Deidara trailed off before shakily getting to her knees in front of the bed Asagi was sitting on, everyone staring. Suddenly, pride didn't matter anymore. There were things more important than that. Her skirt moved upward a little to reveal the metal that made up her left leg. "Can I hold him? *Please."

Asagi's eyes softened. "Of course," she whispered, choking up. "Of course.

Beside her, Shogo watched with astonishment as the blonde woman gingerly took the baby from his mother's arms. Izuna didn't cry when Asagi's nipple was removed from his gummy mouth, blinking curiously up at the woman that now held him. "Where's she taking my little brother?"

Shogo asked.

His question went unanswered as Deidara carefully hugged the child to her chest, her head bowed as she cried silently. Izuna, bemused, cooed and tugged on Deidara's hair. It only served to make her weep harder, faster. He felt so fragile, so breakable in her arms. In a way, he was just like her.

There was a presence behind her, then Deidara saw Rin kneel beside her from her periphery. Someone else did the same on her blind side, which alarmed her for a moment before she just let it be. It was Gai, from what the chakra signature told, and he was sobbing freely with them.

In seconds, the previously joyful mood had plummeted into a somber one, everyone sobering as Deidara mourned for Izumi and the child she had left behind.

For Ino, for Shisui, for Obito, for Hitomi, for everyone who had died meaninglessly—

Rin swallowed a lump in her throat, wiping her eyes. "We're going to be doing something at the Naka River at sunset. To remember the dead. Shikamaru and Choji—they—they're bringing lanterns back as we speak. Will you come?"

A tear skimmed Izuna's cheek, and he blinked slowly at Deidara's scrunched up expression, still confused.
Deidara took in a deep breath, brushing away her tears with her sleeve. "Yes," she said hoarsely, "I'd like that, yeah."

"Are you ready?" Kakashi asked her.

Deidara didn't look at him, merely staring at the horizon, where half the sun had already disappeared behind the clouds and hills. "As ready as I'll ever be, yeah."

Each of them held sheets of lantern paper in their hands; some were folded while some weren't.

She looked up and down the bridge. There was the lively market district in the west, and the clinical military district in the east. The only thing separating them was stretches of road and the Naka Bridge.

Nobody was coming.

She wouldn't have cared if anyone else showed up or not.

Taking it in, she could see that Itachi had returned, though he was standing beside his brother, far away from her, his hair curtaining his face as he placed a tealight candle in the middle of the flat planks of wood at the bottom of the paper lantern he held.

It wasn't just him who had come back.

Naruto and Karin.

Shikamaru and Choji.

Shizune and Sakura.

Tenten, her nose crooked and her part of her lip scarred.

Even Hitoshi had shown up, bringing with him Asuma and Konohamaru.

All of them had come to honor their departed, and send them off to the next realm.

Strangely, no tears came to her this time. It was as if she'd cried them all already.

The names of many on her lips, she followed Itachi's example, placing her tealight candle in her now-folded lantern.

Deidara leaned over the railing of the low bridge, slipping the lantern in. It bobbed down the river, more following in its wake.

"Izumi," Deidara said quietly.

"Obito."

"Shisui."

"Hitomi."

"Ino."

"Sawako..."
A murmur of voices joined hers, reciting names that were both alien and familiar to her.

"Careful, Udon," she heard Konohamaru say when the bespectacled boy nearly fell over trying to put his lantern into the water.

The names nearly got caught in her throat more than once, but she continued.

In the end, she watched the lanterns float off into the distance with nothing more than a heavy, resigned weight in her chest and the pain in her leg to keep her grounded.

Deidara didn't know how long she stayed there.

They were long gone by the time she got there.

Her footsteps silent in the grassy riverside of the Naka, she stopped to feel the wind blow against the back of her neck.

Then she knelt, slipping a lantern into the river and pushing up her mask.

"Goodbye, Shisui."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This update came a lot sooner than I thought it would. Surprise, I guess?

About Choji's uncle, who was mentioned here a few times... he's going to become quite important a bit later on. But as friend or foe? Hmm...
Part IV: Bittersweet

Chapter Notes

A/N: This is the first time I've ever written a trial scene, please go easy on me. I know things are not necessarily accurate, and I made sure it wasn't because an accurate trial would be pretty boring IMO.

It was a cold, cloudy winter morning when a frenzy of reporters arrived in front of the Konoha City Courthouse in a chaotic, yet organized mass, their feathers ruffled when led to stand behind metal barricades, the barriers forming a path to the entrance.

Shikamaru buried his nose into his scarf, tucking his hands in his pockets. He wore an armband around his right arm with the Leaf Gazette's insignia on it, signifying that he was here on behalf of the newspaper. Well, not exactly—but nobody cared that he was only present in their social circles because of a few strings that Choji's uncle had pulled.

*It's a media madhouse out here*, Shikamaru thought wryly.

Squashed against him was his best friend. "Brr!" Choji shuddered, his wide shoulders trembling. He, too, wore the same armband as Shikamaru. "It's freezing out here." He was quite a tall boy, towering over most of the journalists and reporters here, and this allowed him to have a good view of who was arriving. "I can barely see anyone."

"Not surprising," Shikamaru replied, his voice muffled by his grey scarf. He tapped the armband. "We're just here to make sure nothing happens to our friends. Then we'll be going to the witness stand with everyone else." He spoke quietly, just loud enough for Choji to hear.

Things were already uncertain and uneasy as it was—the last thing Shikamaru wanted was for them to be jumped by too-eager reporters.

"Nephew!" A beefy hand clapped Choji's shoulder and the boy startled, only to smile when he saw who it was.

"Hey, oji-san."

His uncle's plump face, previous holding a jolly countenance, changed into one of worry and solemnness. "Listen, Choji, I know today's going to be rough. For you, Shika," he nodded at the Nara, "and the rest of your survivor group. But you're strong. All of you. You'll get through it. And that Sasori fellow will be okay, too. I doubt they'll execute him, what, with all the witnesses testifying on his behalf."

"Thanks, oji-san."

*It would have been better not to bring up the stakes.* Shikamaru sighed when Choji's mood plummeted. Akimichi Fatso, while well-meaning, wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed when it came to comforting others. He chalked it up to it being that the man hadn't experienced anything
traumatic enough to truly empathize with his nephew—and to Shikamaru, to an extent. Oblivious and jolly, even on this dark day, Fatso said his greetings to others in the same business that he knew, crows feet appearing on the corners of his piggy, beady eyes as he smiled with all of his teeth.

It sickened Shikamaru to know that the media were only showing up exploit the trial and have a field day with writing their next story. After everything they’d been through—the deaths, the tears, the sheer magnitude of the losses they had faced—

Shikamaru didn't even realize he was gritting his teeth until Choji prodded his shoulder.

The chubby boy, having packed on some more fat these past days, smiled at him. "I'm okay, Shika." He shifted, and, at first, Shikamaru tensed, thinking that Choji was going in for a hug.

But he didn't, merely staring over the heads of others to try and spot their group. For a brief moment, the world around him stopped and cracked, and Shikamaru found himself yearning for the touch of his parents—of his mother, who, on her best days, let him off a chore or two; of his father, who'd always loved him from a distance.

Shikamaru shivered, rubbing his arms.

He swore it was from the cold.

But he entertained the thought, *What would my dad have done in this situation?*

He never got the answer from anyone, his train of thought breaking when a single voice rose over the crowd, shouting excitedly, "Here they come!"

Leading the way were men wearing the uniform of the military police, their expressions indifferent as they escorted a certain red-haired man down the path.

Sasori's face was just as impassive as his guards, even when the people around him shot him venomous glares, some vehemently hurling verbal abuse at him. It surprised Shikamaru that nobody heckled the puppeteer for comments or interviews.

It was as if he was so utterly *loathed* that not even the media vultures wanted to peck at his bones.

The thought chilled the Nara to the bone. A surge of anger—anger almost irrational—on Sasori's behalf followed, and the only thing stopping him from lashing out was Choji's steady presence beside him. He settled for aggressively pulling down his scarf, revealing his scowling mouth to the reporters on the opposite barricade. Of course, they paid little attention to him, but that didn't matter.

Scathing words assaulted Sasori, but he merely continued on his path to the courthouse with little reaction.

"There he is—"

"Akasuna no Sasori. A murderer who painted the sands red."

"He looks so small. So young. How... disgustingly misleading."

"I can't imagine what the families of his victims are going through right now."

"Look at his arm! He really is a monster...!"
"It looks like it's from one of those creatures outside the walls, the ones that Konoha are trying to kill now—!"

"Did he kill one of them and take its arm?!"

"Monster."

Fatso had warned them about how the media would attempt to demonize Sasori, to play up his image as a heartless serial killer as much as possible. Shikamaru thought that he'd been ready for it. He'd been wrong.

_How can Sasori stand this?_ the Nara asked silently. He wasn't vain enough to care about every detail of his own reputation, but if he was in Sasori's shoes—facing a possible death sentence, separated from his lover, isolated from society for more than a week, then heckled and hated by strangers that he had never met before—he would have imploded by now.

The fact that Sasori was able to keep a straight face throughout it all, even when the abuse doubled upon the arrival of the general public, was enough for him to have Shikamaru's respect forever.

As Sasori passed Shikamaru, his eyes flicked to over to his direction to meet his stare. Seconds later, Shikamaru could only see the back of his head.

"Who's that guy next to him?" Choji asked no one in particular.

Shikamaru fixed his gaze on the fidgety, dark-haired man walking a little behind Sasori. With all the men surrounding the puppeteer, he'd almost not noticed the little suited man.

"Attorney," he theorized. "Definitely the attorney."

"Huh." Choji was unimpressed. "He doesn't look like he really knows what he's doing... He's looking around the place like it's his first time at a courthouse."

Yes, Shikamaru had noticed, too. It was extremely likely that Sasori's attorney had been appointed by the Three Councils. And if things were as bullshit as Shikamaru thought it smelled like, the nervous man probably wasn't a very good one. A small, yet significant move to lower the chances of a good outcome coming from his shitshow.

Then the witnesses came, and Choji and Shikamaru craned their necks.

"There!" Choji lifted his arm as a red-haired woman wearing an appropriately elegant green frock emerged from one of the many black vehicles parked on the street. She had alluring purple eyes and stood with a straight posture, turning her challenging stare over the gathered people defiantly. "It's Kushina-san!" She was holding the hands of both Naruto and Karin, both of whom looked embarrassed that she was doing so. Naruto was dressed in a formal suit that he kept tugging the collar of, and Karin a black dress. It was quite a funny sight, seeing as Naruto was just a tad taller than Kushina and Karin was shorter than both.

As the Uzumaki family walked down the aisle, Kushina turned to where Shikamaru and Choji were standing, flashing a grin at them. They couldn't help smile back at the woman's inherently pleasant demeanor. Naruto glared when Shikamaru couldn't suppress a snicker at the monkey suit he was wearing.

"Excuse me," one female reporter said hastily, whipping out a pad and pencil. "What is your relation to—"
Kushina halted, scowling frostily at the journalist. "Hey. *Back off, y'hear?*"

Just those words were enough to send the woman scampering back, trying to make herself invisible in the crowd of chattering reporters and civilians.

Shikamaru chuckled despite himself, and Naruto beamed up (or, rather, down) at his mother.

"That was pretty cool, kaa-san!"

Kushina let go of his hand to ruffle his hair. "I try, kiddo. Now let's haul ass before they break down the barriers."

Behind the Uzumakis, a flood of other people were getting out of the cars, all of them dressed formally for the grim occasion.

Immediately, the media leaned over the barricades, shouting all sorts of requests for interviews or comments. Shikamaru and Choji were pushed forward by the crowd, despite the latter being one of the biggest people around.

"Can you give us your opinion on today's trial?"

"Do you believe that Akasuna no Sasori deserves to be executed?"

"Did he ever try to hurt any of you?"

"You—you, with the bun-hair! What happened to your nose? Was it him who—"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Shikamaru snapped, worming his way through the frenetic mass of bodies. "GET BACK FROM THEM!" His outburst, followed by Choji forcefully pushing back against them, allowed the witnesses and others involved to hurry along. Tenten gave him a single nod before continuing on her way, catching up to where Daichi and Hikari were holding either hand of their mother's.

He quickly did a head count, satisfied that pretty much everyone was now nearing the courthouse. But who wasn't here? Who was straggling—

*Ah.*

Shikamaru inwardly fretted as Deidara walked down the lane, facing the front without looking at anyone else. In her pressed white shirt and high-waisted green skirt, she looked completely poised from here, but the bags under her eyes and the barely visible limp told a very different story.

It seemed that the media had picked up on that little detail, too.

No matter how she presented herself, her own body would always betray her. But the body was a reflection of the mind, thought Shikamaru; she had to be a mess.

"Miss! Miss! Over here!"

"Are you Akasuna no Sasori's rumored lover?"

"What is your *true* relation to him?"

"What kind of outcome are you expecting today, miss?"

As she was assaulted with questions, Deidara's expression twitched, her cool, collected facade
slowly cracking to reveal the ugly scars.

Unfortunately, Shikamaru and Choji were too far away to protect her from the barrage. He cursed himself and Deidara's own lateness, fighting his way through the crowd to try and get to her before something bad happened.

"No comment," Deidara ground out, continuing her pace. Her prosthetic had significantly slowed her walking pace, and one particularly ruthless reporter managed blurt out one of the most stupid things that Shikamaru had ever had the displeasure of hearing.

"That scar beneath your face—I can see it just a little behind your hair—did he give it to you?"

Deidara whipped around lightning fast, her face contorting into a furious glare. "No. Comment," she seethed, her fingers reaching for clay pouches that weren't there.

"But—"

Shikamaru didn't have to save her after all.

"Ignore them, Deidara," a velvety voice sounded next to her ear, and an arm looped around hers. "Give them nothing. Watching them squirm in frustration is satisfying, no?"

*Kagami?* Deidara quirked an eyebrow at the Uchiha woman's arrival. This was the first time Kagami had appeared since she'd woken up, and she wasn't used to seeing the woman without a mask. Still, she offered a predatory smile to match Kagami's. "It is, yeah." Kagami's hawk-like gaze met her own, and an understanding passed between them.

Arm-in-arm, the two women went past the media hyenas without even batting an eyelash, their dresses—navy and green—flowing gently as they walked.

"It's time for us to join them," Shikamaru told Choji once the two women had disappeared into the building. "Everyone's accounted for." The two removed their armbands, Fatso leading them out of the crowd and directing them to a path to a side entrance.

The moment she saw Sasori's person seated at the front of the courtroom, her stomach lurched, a wave of nausea hitting her. *I shouldn't have eaten such a big breakfast. Not when my stomach is still so small.* Swallowing, Deidara pushed it down, suddenly aware of how her heart was pounding beneath her chest.

It felt like an eternity had passed since the last time she'd seen him. She wanted to talk to him, hold him, protect him from the accusing stares, the oppressing atmosphere, and the people who would not hesitate to sentence him to death if things went their way. But the only thing she could do was watch him from the witness gallery, which was positioned diagonally to face the back of the courtroom. It gave her a good view of his face, but she could not be satisfied.

Not when the last few days—the last few weeks; the last few months—had been absolute hell.

*I love you."

Her heart twisted painfully.

The urge to scream in frustration, to explode this entire city and erase the smug faces of the council members—it was there, but she quashed it as best as she could. The last thing everyone needed was more death. More blood spilled.
"Deidara."

An aged hand rested upon hers. Deidara tore her gaze away from Sasori's seemingly porcelain features to see Chiyo. The woman was seated on her left; Kagami (and wasn't she beautiful without that silly purple mask?) was on her right.

"Chiyo-baa..."

"Don't let them get to you," Chiyo told her, her eyes dark. "They want you to snap." She breathed out a sigh of frustration. "By now, the entire city knows about you—or, at least, think they do. Do not fulfill their expectations."

Deidara squeezed Chiyo's hand. "What do they say about me, hm?"

Chiyo snorted. "All sorts of ridiculous things. How he seduced you in Akatsuki, how you're nothing but a naive, innocent, abused little girl. And that's only a small part of it. Others think that you're his partner in crime who only got away with it because of your gender, or his mistress. Some even suspect that you're with a child and that it should be terminated as soon as possible."

"Really, now?" Deidara made a disgusted sound at how far-fetched some of those sounded. "Tch. They should just shut up, hm. They don't know the half of it." She gave Chiyo a look. "My public image... it won't affect my testimony, will it?"

"That is hard to say, my dear." Chiyo shook her head sadly. "Unfortunately, reputation can mean everything, but so long as you deliver your statements in a calm, concise manner, it should be fine. Don't let your emotions overwhelm you. I know you're angry, Deidara," she added pointedly when the blonde opened her mouth to protest, "I am, too. There is no shame in admitting it. But those vultures will find anything to fault you on, so don't let them do that. Can you do that? If you can't, you might as well recant your testimony."

Deidara exhaled. "No, I can."

Chiyo smiled wearily. "Have faith, Deidara-shonen."

As the court filled up, Deidara tried her best to relax. *They say justice is blind, don't they?* She observed the hateful gazes of those around her, all of their loathing directed at the red-haired man seated in front of the Hokage's podium at the front of the room, his hands bound together with chakra-suppressing cuffs, one manacle larger than the other. He wore a red jumpsuit, Konoha's prison garb for extremely dangerous criminals. It was difficult not to let her faith in the justice system plummet. This entire thing had been a sham since the beginning, wired to work specifically against Sasori.

Someone powerful wanted him dead.

Deidara's gaze met with one of the Konoha Council members before she turned away.

The Three Councils had their own galleries. By far, the largest council was the Civilian Council assembled on the right hand side of the courtroom, diagonally facing the Hokage's podium in a reflection of the witness gallery. Deidara could see Haruno Mebuki sitting in the front row of the Civilian Council, her face completely neutral.

*Justice is blind? Yeah right. They don't want him to win. They've spent the last week making him into a monster. All the odds are stacked up against him, but...*

The members of the Hokage's Council took their seats in the gallery closest to where the Hokage
would be seated very soon. It was a small council, made up of only three members, including the Fifth Hokage herself—Jiraiya of the Sannin and...

Deidara raised an eyebrow at the man sitting on the further right of the podium. He was wearing a cowl that covered most of his face; she could only make out his glowing green eyes. *Black sclera? Weird.*

"His name is Kakuzu."

She turned to look at Kagami. "What?"

"That's what you wondering, wasn't it? 'Who's that guy?" Kagami smiled, the gesture a little sad. "It's written all over your face."

"Is it really?" Almost self-consciously, she lifted her fingers to her lips. "Damn."

"Try and make yourself a blank canvas when you go up," the Uchiha woman advised. "Everybody will be watching."

Deidara nodded absently. A blank canvas, huh? *Somehow... I don't think it'll be that difficult.* The old Deidara would have probably sworn and loudly declared that there should be nothing to hide. But the old Deidara—she had had art, her loved ones, and special bonds; things that had made her life vivid and colorful. Now she had none of that—her art was ruined forever; she could hardly see in one eye and move her fingers properly, let alone mold her clay into expressive shapes—she'd lost more than she would have ever thought in her short lifetime of nineteen, almost twenty years. Izumi, Shisui, Obito—

She swallowed a growing lump in her throat.

And now, if the general public got their way, Sasori would be gone, too.

Right now... it was as if she were a blank canvas, all the lines and colors washed from the page. Nothing but remnants of hues in the frayed corners where Rin, Itachi, Daichi, and all the precious people she had left were tucked away. Blackened spaces where burn marks and scars adorned her body.

"Where is she?" someone sitting behind Deidara—Sakura?—muttered. "Shishou..."

But Sakura need not have worried. Not even a second later, the Hokage made her entrance, escorted by her trusted guard. Tsunade—*Lady* Tsunade, Deidara corrected herself—was wearing the ever symbolic Hokage's hat and robes, a far cry from the hassled Head of Hospital Deidara had been first introduced to; her presence immediately turned the loud talking into hushed whispers. Without even sparing her citizens a glance, the woman sat down at the podium.

The courtroom doors closed with a resounding bang, shutting out reporters who hadn't gotten inside in time.

"Tsunade," Kakuzu said in lieu of greeting. "You missed your cue."

"Hime," said Jiraiya, grinning. "Exciting case we have today, don't we?"

"Hmph." The Hokage steepled her fingers. "We'll see, Jiraiya."

The final council, the Konoha Council, had their gallery wedged between the Civilian Council and the Hokage's Council. It was made up of three members as well, two old men and an equally aged...
woman. They seemed to be displeased at Tsunade's slight tardiness.

*Probably can't wait to sink their claws into Danna,* Deidara thought sardonically, watching the old woman's fingers tap the table impatiently. Out of all the Councils, she had the least trust in the Konoha Council. Something about them... just didn't sit well with her.

"All rise. The Court of Konoha is now in session, the Honorable Lady Tsunade presiding," the court officer standing beside the Hokage's podium droned. He looked annoyed at something, his eye twitching as he quickly glanced up at the Hokage, as if to make sure she was actually there.

"Normally, the Hokage arrives with notice after he says that," Kagami said quietly. Gleefully. The first sign that this was going to be a circus.

Deidara felt exhausted already, and it hardly begun.

"Case number 4097: Akasuna no Sasori vs. The People," the Hokage began. "The purpose of these proceedings will be to determine the most appropriate action taken against Akasuna no Sasori for his crimes against humanity, specifically the violent assassination of diplomat Agawa Arashi his ten-man ANBU guard. I would like to remind the Three Councils that although the final verdict rests with *me,* you are *all* responsible for Akasuna no Sasori's fate. You are to view all provided evidence and testimonies impartially and make your decisions based upon the facts. Remember that this is very much included as a matter of life or death, so treat it as such."

Despite the Hokage's firm, no-nonsense tone, people in the public gallery still sneered hatefully at the back of Sasori's head—and, to some extent, his attorney's.

Kushina, seated among the general public, glared at the people closest to her, cowing them into a fearful silence.

If Tsunade was aware of this, she easily ignored it, fixing her stare on Sasori. "Akasuna no Sasori. The following charges have been substantiated by evidence and judicially approved: eleven accounts of murder, eleven accounts of torture, and two accounts of unlawful harmful force."

It took all of Deidara's willpower not to stand up and scream bullshit. Just last week, Sasori's known crimes against Konoha tallied to only one man. Now it was *thirteen?*

"Calm yourself," Chiyo muttered without looking at her. "The warriors in this room can feel your fury. Keep at it and the civilians will, too. It will unsettle them."

The tension in her shoulders relaxed. Slightly.

"Charges are distinguished as follows: the murders of Agawa Arashi, Chinen Tomoko, Edogawa Shinji, Enoshima Koushi, Fujimoto Saiki..."

It was here that Sasori finally reacted, his head jerking as he abruptly glanced skyward at Tsunade's imposing figure instead of staring blankly at the middle section of the podium. It him then—the dark, empty sensation swirling in his chest as the names of his Konoha victims were listed; the contemptuous gazes of the all the people who had come to see him condemned to either life imprisonment or death, most hoping for the latter.

It had seemed like so long ago. Like another part of his life which he had left behind an eternity back. Until very recently, there wasn't a day that had gone by without him thinking of the atrocities he had committed in the name of his Emperor—all of which had just been numbers in the most detached way possible. Statistics. A quota fulfilled or a name crossed off the list.
"... Tamura Ryuunosuke, and the assault of two Konoha concubines, Nishi Noriko and Obata Kazue."

Sasori had the vaguest memories of their faces. They'd been pretty—it'd been part of the reason why he had spared them. And they hadn't fought to protect their master like the ANBU guard had, so he'd left them alone. He remembered considering turning them into human puppets to preserve their pretty faces, but he'd never turned to that path in the end. Perhaps, in another world, he might have.

The Three Councils watched him intently, a certain member of the Konoha Council especially. What was that look on his face? she wondered. A monster like him couldn't possibly feel guilty about this. So... sad. Remorseful. The woman gripped the table. It's an act, isn't it? Self-pity, maybe? She lifted her chin to eyeball Deidara, who was sitting in the opposite witness gallery. Koharu Utatane smiled a little to herself. After this was over, she was certain that that woman would never see her lover again. Danzo gave her a strange look that she ignored. She knew that he fully supported her anyway—there was no point in questioning his loyalty at this point. All she wanted was just to see Sasori's head on a platter. *His death means that you will lose the last remaining family member you have as well... Chiyo.*

A heavy hush fell over the courtroom when the charges and their distinguished counterparts had been read. Tsunade ploughed on, "Akasuna no Sasori. You have been made aware of the charges against you. What have you got to say about them? Do you deny them?" She narrowed her eyes when he didn't answer. "Speak! Silence is *not* within your rights, Akasuna no Sasori. You will speak, or the court will hold you in contempt."

Sasori stirred in his seat, his chains clinking quietly. His so-called attorney was practically shaking in his seat, almost reduced to tears by Tsunade's commanding, unforgiving tone. *Pathetic.* "I deny nothing, Your Honor."

Deidara had known this was coming. It didn't make the sinking feeling she'd had since the sun rose over the hills feel any less heavy. She'd already accepted that this would happen; their only chance now was in the sentencing hearing.

Tsunade leaned back in her seat, nodding slowly. "Very well. Seeing as the Accused has denied none of his charges, he is hereby declared guilty of all of them." Her gaze darkened and she inched forward again, seeming to glare at all of them in the room, as if they, too, were guilty of heinous crimes. Many squirmed uncomfortably underneath her glower. "From this moment on, the Accused will be referred to as the Convicted. As the Honorable Hokage, I declare this trial *resolved.*"

There were loud murmurs at that, journalists scribbling away on their notepads, which seemed to have an unlimited supply of paper, or scrolls for the more old-fashioned ones. The only anomaly was Akimichi Fatso, who had his tongue sticking out from between his lips and a pencil tucked behind his ear as he tapped away on a shiny typewriter that sat on his wide lap.

"Now," said Tsunade, and the Three Councils suddenly seemed to grow more menacing, "the sentencing hearing may begin."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Like I said, my first ever trial scene and I'm splitting it into two parts. I took inspiration from two authors: SwanofWar and SnowHawk7, so you may find
similarities between this scene and some of theirs.

Also... have my eyes deceived me, or have we hit 200k words on FF?
Deidara stared intently at Tsunade as she announced, "Now, the sentencing hearing may begin." Almost as if the Hokage's words had a hypnotic effect, everyone in the courtroom sat straighter and leaned forward in anticipation, eager for retribution.

"Here we go," Kagami muttered beside her, sitting back.

_Here we go_, Deidara silently agreed, crossing her arms over her chest, her fingers tapping against her bicep. The sentencing hearing—the very thing she had been dreading and anticipating at the same time.

"The best case scenario... a decade of imprisonment."

She could hear her own heart beat so loudly that she wondered for a moment if anyone could hear the muscle hammering against her chest.

"The prosecution has the floor," Tsunade said. "Both sides will present before the Three Councils individually adjourn to make their final verdicts." There was the sound of paper shuffling as the media hounds hastily opened up new pages to start documenting the sentencing hearing, and then a man wearing dark glasses appeared from the official stands, approaching the front of the courtroom. Tsunade gave him a curt nod. "Prosecutor."

"Thank, you Your Honor. The prosecution calls forth..." Prosecutor Ebisu pushed his glasses up, the spectacles shining under the light. "Nishi Noriko for examination." Deidara turned her head to the left to see a woman wearing a kimono, her face caked with makeup, get up from the witness stand they shared with them, gliding over to the examination stand, where Ebisu proceeded to question her.

"Nishi-san," Ebisu began, "for the sake of this courtroom, please tell me basic information about yourself pertaining to the time where you accompanied diplomat Agawa-san to Sunagakure."

The concubine fidgeted in her seat, her sweaty hands clutching the fabric of her kimono behind the stand. "W—Well, my profession is largely the same as it is now, a high-class concubine. When Agawa-san expressed interest in taking two courtesans with him on his diplomatic mission, my madame offered myself and Obata-san. I had no qualms about this. I only entered the profession to feed my family—I have two little sisters at home, you see. Back then, one of them was about to start school, and the mission offered away for me to pay her education fees. My role in the mission was to merely serve Agawa-san's needs."

"And that was all? You did not attempt to speak with any Suna officials or take part in the negotiating?"
"No. Agawa-san kept me in his room all day."

"So you do not believe that your presence might have jeopardized the negotiations?"

"No, sir."

"Alright, thank you, Nishi-san. Moving on—can you describe to me what you did when you encountered Akasuna no Sasori for the first time?"

The courtesan shivered, reliving the memory again. "I was terrified. Frozen. The amount of killing intent he was leaking was enough to paralyze me. But then one of the ANBU guards—I believe it was Chinen-san, the only female in the guard, who shoved me, breaking the paralysis. She," Nishi swallowed, "told me to run. And I did. I ran and hid with Obata-san."

"Did you witness the killing of Agawa-san and his guard?"

"... Yes. It still haunts me to this very day. There was blood—so, so much blood. From what I remember... I believe I saw him cut every single major artery in one of the ANBU's body, and," a shuddering breath, "used him as a human puppet to attack his teammates while he bled out. W-When he finally became... useless, Akasuna no Sasori... he threw him away like trash. We hadn't chosen a very good hiding place. We were still close enough to hear what he said..."

"Oh?" Ebisu's glasses gleamed. "Is your memory good, Nishi-san? Could you repeat the words for me and the courtroom please?"

"I—certainly." Nishi took a deep breath. "What a waste. The fragility of the human body disgusts me. When you die by my art—he popped out puppets then—let it be known that your maker will be something that exists until the end of time."

"Did he really do that?" Deidara wondered. That... sounds just like him, in a way. A tired smirk played on her lips. Why did you have to be such an asshole back then, Danna? She'd accepted by now that his past deeds were less than present, but to hear them told in detail... It was surreal.

"Would you say that he was mocking them?"

"Oh, yes, very much so. It was a cruel sort of mocking, a very cruel one," Nishi affirmed. "I think that knowing that the thing that killed you will never die... it adds a sort of despair. If I may, it is very hard for me to imagine him to be anything more than a heartless, unfeeling beast."

There was a murmur of agreement rippling through the crowds before one hairy eyeball from Tsunade shut them all up again, and Ebisu cleared his throat.

"Indeed. From what you witnessed, were their deaths prolonged?"

"Yes. I... I don't want to go into detail. But it was horrifying. He tortured them." Her voice wavered, tears threatening to spill from her chocolate brown eyes. "With his knives. His poisons. His bare hands, sometimes. He only killed them... when he lost amusement."

"In the coroner's report, each of the bodies were stated to have been desecrated post-mortem," Ebisu's face twitched slightly, "by Akasuna no Sasori carving his insignia into their backs. How did he behave in this performance of criminal activity?"

Nishi hesitated. Then, she said, "He was smiling the whole time. But," she went on swiftly, when Ebisu opened his mouth to press more questions, "it was not a smile I expected of a cruel man who fully immersed himself in his work. It was... tired."
"Tired of being a monster, I'd say," Koharu Utatane muttered under her breath from the Konoha Council gallery.

As soon as Nishi mentioned the smile, Sasori slowly glanced up at her, his gaze unreadable. Then he looked away.

Ebisu tucked Nishi's comment aside. "And what happened when he finished?"

Nishi grimaced. "He set his sights on Obata-san and myself."

"By set your sights, do you mean that he forced himself on—?"

"No—no, not like that. He..." Nishi bit her lip. "He was disgusted by us. And our weakness. And then... he hurt us."

"Could you please describe the incident in further detail?"

"He hit us. Cut us. Not to the extent that he did the ANBU guards." The woman rubbed her arms uncomfortably, and the courtroom immediately knew that she was hiding some old scars underneath her winter kimono. "But the way he cut us, the way he hit us... he took a very... punishing attitude about it."

"Punishing attitude?" Ebisu pounced. "Could you please elaborate on this 'punishing attitude'?"

"The way he hurt us was as if he were admonishing us. Admonishing us for our weakness," her tone grew bitter, "and our human fragility. Admonishing us—punishing us because we could not oppose him, we could not amuse him for long. In the end, he spared us. We weren't worth killing to him. But not without... a final parting gift. One that I share with Obata-san.

"Your Honor," she deferred to Tsunade, "permission to elaborate by visual demonstration?"

"Permission granted."

Silently, almost as if she were a ghost, she left the examination stand and went back around the witness gallery, where eyes followed her wraith-like form. Then she went over to where Ebisu stood, undoing her kimono.

A parting gift? Deidara's mouth grew dry. There was only one thing she could think of what matched Nishi's vague description—

Nishi dropped her kimono partway, her back faced to the audience. There were gasps of shock and horror as they witnessed the scorpion insignia ruthlessly carved into her back, the mark salmon-pink. Wordlessly, she showed the Three Councils a good view of the scar as well, and Tsunade's gaze darkened. Scars crawling up her biceps could also been seen, leaving only her shoulders a glossy white.

"He used a poison," Nishi said quietly when the whispers died down. "To sear it into my flesh. So that it could never be removed." Scarcely a blush on her beautiful face, she adjusted her kimono again, covering back up the mark and her breasts.

"He gave you the same mark that he did to Agawa's defenders to punish you for your weakness?" Ebisu said after Nishi returned to the stand.

"I think that is an entirely fair statement, yes."
Ebisu smiled. "Examination of Nishi Noriko closed, Your Honor."

"Wait."

There was a shocked silence when Sasori finally spoke, his voice gravelly. The former assassin was only looking up at Tsunade. "Permission to make a statement?" His eyes flashed. "This is my trial, isn't it? Surely, I would be allowed this?"

Disbelief permeated the air.

Koharu rolled her eyes. Surely, Tsunade would never—

"Permission granted."

Excuse me?! Koharu whipped her head toward the Hokage's podium.

What... What are you doing, Tsunade?! This is highly unorthodox!

She grit her teeth, focusing all of her hate on Sasori's disgustingly youthful visage.

Sasori glanced once at where Nishi was now seated in the witness gallery, having to have to tear his gaze away from Deidara, who was watching attentively. He would never draw attention to her, not in a hostile environment like this. Nishi stiffened at this, and Sasori looked away again, back to Tsunade.

"I did not spare Nishi-san and Obata-san because I believed them to be beneath me." Though that was certainly true. "I spared them because I was under no orders to kill them from the Emperor. The man I worked under. Contrary to popular belief, I did not enter the position to sate my 'bloodthirsty monstrous rage.'" His voice became dry at that, and, from his periphery, he could see Deidara smile quickly before it disappeared. "I was given a dilemma, as was every other Royal Assassin before me. And none of you... will ever know the utter humiliation of that. The lives I took were never truly in my hands, or I would have left Suna long ago."

"This dilemma you mentioned..." Tsunade quirked an eyebrow.

Sasori looked at her blandly. "My parents."

More silence.

Then—

"Your statement has been added to record, Akasuna no Sasori." Tsunade glanced at Ebisu. "The prosecution may continue with the witness examination."

Obata Kazue told of a similar tale to Nishi Noriko, their stories and delivery almost uncannily identical up until the marking. She refused to show her scars; a display was unneeded, anyway, as Nishi had already presented the evidence left on their bodies of Sasori's assault.

Of the attack that day, only two witnesses had been left alive.

The man that Ebisu called for examination next had everyone sitting up.

"The prosecution calls forth the Convicted for examination."

The only sign of Sasori's agitation at his mockery of a hearing was the slightest twitch in his brow as he stood, not bothering to move over to the examination stand. He would not need to.

"Akasuna no Sasori," Ebisu said, frostily polite. It was clear that the prosecutor did not share the
supposed impartiality as the Three Councils. "Run by me your experiences with your... parents. Your childhood and how they treated you. Your relationship with them."

"My childhood was nothing significant," Sasori answered evenly. "Up until I was five years old, I played, ate, and slept like every other child did. My parents were nothing but kind and loving to me."

"So you were spoiled?"

Sasori gave him a sharp glance. "Not spoiled. Coddled. My childhood ended in a single night when my grandmother took me to be drafted into the Royal Puppet Corps due to circumstances out of our control."

Ebisu's spectacles gleamed. Behind them, he was eyeing Sasori like a cat would a mouse. "Elaborate on these... circumstances."

From how Sasori's eyebrows creased in frustration, it pained him to reveal the true reasons. It made the press all the more alert, and Deidara all the more antsy. In the end, he bit out, "I'm sure you have noticed by now, prosecutor, that I do not look like my actual age. My... appearance meant that I was viable for being levied into a life... as a palace whore."

Snickering.

Even Ebisu was cruelly amused, judging from the smile on his face.

Nishi, on the other hand, merely blinked in surprise.

And if Deidara had been put into any other circumstance, she would have found this laugh-worthy. But her face was stone in this moment, her quiet rage at the public burning strong. The utter wrongness of the reveal of past humiliations that the court was putting him through, the very vicious dissecting they were performing on him—

Her anger continued to simmer, barely noticeable beneath the blank canvas. She exhaled slowly.

"My family decided that it was better for me to be a killer than to live a life of promised abuse," Sasori continued, ignoring the quiet laughs around him, said laughs quickly sobering. And he would forever be grateful to them for it, even if it meant that he wound up where he was now for every path taken after that.

"So you admit that your family has a track record of sending their children to kill?" Ebisu sneered.

Sasori gritted his teeth. *You bastard.* "That was not at all what I meant—"

"A stupid, thoughtless decision that affected the lives of hundreds during your reign of terror—"

"Prosecutor Ebisu, relevance," Tsunade reminded sharply.

Ebisu's eye twitched beneath his glasses before saying, "I digress. Upon your promotion to Royal Assassin," he said the term viciously mockingly, "would you truthfully say that you'd been desensitized to violence by then?"

"... Yes."

"And you were used to carrying out violent assassinations on behalf of the Emperor?"

"Most of them were clean and efficient. It just happened that day with Agawa-san, that he
happened to insult the Emperor's youngest son, Sabaku no Gaara. My orders were to make it as bloody and painful as possible after they had left the borders of the country."

"You are a smart man, Akasuna no Sasori. You know that these things are inherently wrong, yet you chose to carry them out anyway. You had absolutely no objections to the assassination of Agawa Arashi and his ten-man ANBU guard? Do you even remember what you did that day?"

"Objections, you will find," Sasori said dryly, "are not commonly found when orders are given directly from the highest leader in your country. So, no, there were no objections. And no, I do not remember completely, but I can venture a guess—"

"You do not remember the thirteen lives you violently took that day? The two innocent women that you traumatized? The bodies you desecrated and mutilated? Are their lives so utterly meaningless to you?" Ebisu pressed.

Sasori's mouth pulled into a frustrated scowl. "They had no meaning back then—"

"They clearly have no meaning to you now as you claim that you cannot remember them!"

*He's twisting his words!* Deidara thought furiously, clutching the wooden railing in front of her. She flinched when Kagami grasped her arm.

"You will have a chance to erase the painting they've done of him soon," Kagami promised quietly, squeezing her forearm. "Do not add to the stains on his canvas, for his sake and yours."

Ebisu continued to aggressively assault Sasori with his poisonous words. "Either way, I'm sure you remember enough about that day. You claim that you were avenging the Emperor's son in killing them so vigorously, but the bodies were never retrieved by Suna. No," Ebisu bared his teeth, "you left them for Konoha to discover to carnage. Had you slaughtered them more kindly, the Emperor would have never known. So why did you do what you did, Akasuna no Sasori?"

There was an uncomfortable silence that followed. Even Tsunade had both of her eyebrows raised at the accusation.

"... Because I was scared."

"Could you please repeat that?"

"I said I was scared," Sasori hissed as Ebisu reveled in his embarrassment. "Scared for myself—scared for my parents. The Emperor is powerful, surely you know that, Prosecutor. He had the power to end my life at any time, as well as the lives of my family. My parents, my grandmother."

Ebisu seemed baffled, as if this weren't the answer he was entirely expecting. But he recovered quickly, stating ruthlessly, "So you did it because you were a coward."

"I did it to protect my family," Sasori countered icily. "Do not waste your breath on this." Inwardly, he knew that there was truth in Ebisu's words. He was a coward. A coward who ran from his past, who did nothing to escape his bloodstained misery of a life because he'd been too scared of what he was going to lose. A coward who, eventually, ironically, found himself at the mercy of the people of Konoha of all places. A country that held a grudge against Suna ever since their war over trade.

"You dare speak so insolently? To divert away from the questions? Do you somehow consider yourself above the sanctity of this court? All because you were the Emperor's dog?"
"Relevance, Prosecutor," Tsunade snapped. "We are here to discuss the Convicted's crimes."

The Emperor's dog. Sasori almost laughed at that. Almost laughed and then cut Ebisu's smug face in half.

"So, to sum things up, you tortured and murdered thirteen lives that day, and brutally assaulted two more. All because of your cowardice."

More silence.

"...Pathetic as it sounds..." Sasori sighed softly. "Yes."

Ebisu shook his head mockingly. "The price of your cowardice was thirteen of Konoha's finest... and, I'm sure, hundreds more of Suna's, but that is their business, and not ours." He glanced up at Tsunade. "Examination of the Convicted closed."

After Ebisu had been seated, Tsunade looked up at the clock. "I suggest that we all take an hour for lunch. Court will resume at one in the afternoon, sharp."

Once they were adjourned, everyone got to their feet and began slowly filing out, the double doors opening for them.

"That was absolute shit," was the first thing Deidara said when fresh air hit her face, she and Kagami converging at the side of the courthouse. She covered her face with her hand, her the bottom layer of her hair which wasn't tied up spilling over her shoulders.

"It was," Kagami agreed easily. "But once we present, I guarantee you that the tide will change, if only a little."

Deidara shot the people walking out of the courthouse a dirty look, all of them chattering excitedly about what they had witnessed. "It seems pretty set as it is right now, yeah." Her countenance darkened when Nishi broke away from the crowd, scampering off somewhere. "That goddamn whore—"

"Was absolutely correct about everything," Itachi finished, appearing from behind her. At her outraged look, he sighed, drawing her in close for a moment. She did not object at the touch. Never would after what they'd faced together in Kabuto's prison. "We are not here to spread lies about his past, but rather the truth about his present." There was a gleam in his eyes that she couldn't quite place. "Your lack of faith in the justice system is not misplaced. Almost everyone in that court is after retribution, not justice. But..." Kakuzu walked out, glancing once at the two Uchiha and Deidara before stalking off. "If you can't have faith in justice, then have faith in me, Deidara."

Then he was gone, disappearing into the crowd.

Kagami hummed in contemplation.

Have faith in me? Deidara frowned pensively. What's that supposed to mean? What have you done, Itachi?

As Tsunade had said, the sentencing hearing resumed at one o'clock sharp. There were no more witnesses for the Prosecutor to interrogate, so as the people filed back inside, it was time for Sasori's attorney to—
"Stop trembling," Sasori said irritably, glaring pointedly at his jelly-legs lawyer. "All I ask is for you to do your job properly." And stop humiliating yourself.

The lawyer sniffed, pushing his glasses up. "W—Well, I might as well take this time to inform you that this is only the third case that I've ever taken."

Sasori exhaled sharply. "Wonderful."

He was going to die.

As his lawyer stuttered out excuses, Sasori glanced up at the witness gallery, where Deidara was seated, grim-faced. When she saw him staring, her features softened, and she offered him a tiny smile. He could see her lean forward abruptly before sitting back, as if she remembered that she could not run to him and hold him.

It warmed his heart, even on this cold winter's day.

"... So I'm sorry if a criminal like you ends up with his head on a platter," the attorney finished just as Sasori started paying attention to him again.

"You could be a little more impartial," the red-haired man remarked offhandedly.

The bespectacled lawyer jerked back. "I'm sorry?"

But Sasori didn't get to lash him again with his tongue, as Tsunade was now presiding once more.

"Any opening remarks?" she asked the defense.

"N-No, not really..."

"Very well then. Let us begin."

Now, it was time for the defense attorney to call upon his witnesses.

"Finally!" Deidara muttered.

Shakily, Sasori's attorney stuttered out, "T-The defense calls forth, ah, Haruno Sakura for examination."

Murmurs of shock ripped through the entire assembly.

"H-Haruno Sakura? The Hokage's apprentice?!!"

"Now that I look closely, I can see her sitting with the witnesses!"

"Why would she be defending him?"

"Is this even allowed?"

"How strange..."

"There are actually a lot of witnesses there... And only two of them were called forth by the Prosecutor. Does that mean the rest of them are there for that murderer?"

Koharu Utatane scowled.

"Order!" barked Tsunade, slamming a gavel on her podium that she seemingly procured out of
nowhere. If one looked closely, they would see that she had it hidden up the sleeve of her haori most of the time. "Order in the court!"

The whispers died down, leaving the people squirming.

Sakura approached the examination stand with an air of cool confidence, waiting for the attorney to ask her questions. She looked attentively at only the wriggling man in front of her. Not at her friends in the witness stand, Kushina in the public gallery, or even her mother in the Civilian Council stand.

Meanwhile, Kushina was smiling widely as the idiots around her finally realized a very important fact: the amount of people that Sasori had willing to defend him would not be there unless there had been a very serious change of character since the murder of Agawa.

"Haruno-san," the attorney began slowly, uncertainly, "For how long have you known Akasuna no Sasori?"

"Eight months," Sakura answered promptly.

"And during these eight months, has he ever acted aggressively toward you? Verbally or physically?"

"No." She quirked her eyebrow. "Unless you count friendly banter. But, surely, that would be asinine. The Court of Konoha is above that, I'm sure."

The man blushed. "Y-Yes, of course... What exactly, may I ask, is your relationship with him?"

"I first met him when a mutual friend of ours had me heal him after a spar," Sakura's eyes glazed over with grief for a second as she thought of Obito, before she continued, "Back then, he was strictly my patient. But then the Ame-Tsuki war broke out, as you probably know, and Akatsuki city became occupied by enemy forces."

A sympathetic murmur from the assembly.

"It was then that our relationship changed," Sakura went on confidently. "We were forced into situations that needed us to rely on each other. We became comrades and friends, to the point where I can safely say that I trust him with my life."

The interview dragged on. Sakura omitted no details, telling even the gritty tales of the truth. The Underground, their escape from Akatsuki, the monsters and the constant fight for survival outside the walls, the medicine she had made to prevent him from turning, the night he had gone on a rampage and nearly killed Kakashi and Neji, and, finally, the explosion plot and his pivotal part in it.

"Thank you, Haruno-san," the attorney said eventually. "Examination of Haruno Sakura closed."

Sakura gave him a curt nod before returning to her place. "The defense calls forth Hoshigaki Kisame for examination..."

One by one, Sasori's lawyer went through the witnesses. Until—

"The defense calls forth Uchiha Daichi for examination."

Looking stricken, but knowing that this had been coming for a while now, Daichi got out of his seat and woodenly made his way up to the stand. He was dwarfed by the little podium, and to be given a stool to stand on.
Around the courtroom, the hateful faces of the people were growing confused and questioning. What they had heard... It sounded nothing like the Sasori they’d heard of. So many witnesses—and, now, a child was getting up to speak on his behalf.

Koharu could barely leash in her killing intent. A child?! This cannot be! Akasuna no Sasori is a murderer of children, just like his grandmother before him!

"Uchiha-san, describe your first encounter with the Convicted."

Daichi shuffled awkwardly. "I didn't really know him until my father, U-Uchiha Obito, died." He swallowed a lump in his throat, putting on a brave face. "A bad man named Orochimaru was coming to kill us all at the factory. My father was going to train us, but he was killed by a soldier before he could. Sasori-sama comforted me, even when I wanted to go out and get revenge." His voice was shaking now. "Then Deidara-nee and Sasori-sama... They trained us. Saved us. Without them—without Sasori-sama—we wouldn't be alive. I would be dead. My mother would be dead. My imouto would be dead, too. He saved us, and dozens more."

The attorney seemed taken aback. His features softened, just a bit. "Thank you, Uchiha-san." Perhaps... I was wrong. He glanced over his shoulder at where Sasori was sitting, looking a tad surprised at Daichi's words. He didn't really need anymore than that. Others had already testified about Sasori's actions in the wilderness, when they were up against demons, and an eight-year-old boy was definitely not the most reliable witness for that. His testimony was not needed any further.

The Konoha Council could not hide their shock when Sasori’s lawyer started getting more confident, asking questions to the following witnesses that gave them true, unfathomable insight into Sasori’s character.

"The defense calls forth Namikaze Naruto for examination."

Whispers—whispers everywhere—

"The Fourth Hokage's lost son?!"

Fingers typing, pencils scratching.

"I just wanna say that I know that Sasori's a good man, 'ttbayo! He's saved my life more than once!"

And—

"My father was Hatake Sakumo, the samurai. He and Sasori..."

More writing.

Two hours later, the attorney declared:

"The defense calls forth Uchiha Itachi for examination."

Itachi, stoic, made his way up to the front.

Deidara observed him from her periphery, still wondering what kind of strings he had pulled.

"Uchiha-san..." the lawyer began.

Sometime later, Itachi left the stand.
There was only one more witness now.

The attorney cleared his throat, and Sasori sat up, eyes widening slightly. "The defense calls forth Deidara for examination."

Deidara. His breath nearly caught in his throat as he watched her stand before the courtroom, her shaky confidence barely visible underneath her steel exterior. She was up there. She was up there to defend him. She was there to face the conditioned hatred for him.

And suddenly it didn't matter if he was a coward.

He didn't need to run away anymore.

Even if he died today, Sasori told himself, he would die knowing that he already had everything he needed.

And that...

Koharu narrowed her eyes when the ghost of a smile appeared on his lips.

Deidara began to speak.

Was enough.

"We met when he saved Yamanaka Ino and Yamanaka Hitomi from my exploding spider. It's part of my kekkei genkai. I was messing around, showing off to some kids when one of them accidentally batted the spider toward the girls. I was annoyed that he defended them, because my clay doesn't explode until I want it to, but the thought remains the same. He saved them."

More questions, more answers.

"He and his grandmother, Chiyo, took me in when they discovered Hitomi and I on the streets. It was boiled potatoes everyday..."

Her pain, her sorrows.

"... He trained them with me when Obito died. I could have never done it on my own."

"He held me back from getting myself killed when Mizuki was beating Rin."

"Sasori was the first to alert us of the monsters. You already know from Hitoshi and Naruto's testimony..."

Her heart, her love.

"He never once hurt me. The one who did this to me is dead. In fact, he saved me, even if the explosion cost me my leg. It was unavoidable."

"My relationship with him? Rivals. Friends. Familiars. Partners." She took a deep breath. "The one... I want to spend the rest of my life with, if the court would allow it."

There was an awed silence at the end of it all.

"Thank you, Deidara-san."

Sasori felt himself crumpling up inside. Emotion was something that he thought he had trained out
of himself, but it was a beast that could not be caged forever. Exhaling, he rubbed at his eyes with his hands, unwilling to cry in front of the court. They would not see him break, unable to hold in the ornery storm brewing inside him. He would not allow them to.

Only Deidara would ever see him like this. He'd make sure of it.

It was the least he owed her.

For everything.

"Examination of Deidara closed."

A deep sigh echoed throughout the assembly. It'd been long since they had had their lunch break.

Tsunade took control of the situation from here. "The Three Councils will now adjourn with me separately, and decide their own verdicts. The final judgement belongs to me."

As soon as the Three Councils plus Tsunade were gone, the tense atmosphere relaxed, and conversation broke out. Some reporters were trying to get the attention of the witnesses, but they weren't having it.

Deidara was climbing into the witness gallery, tired but satisfied that she had gotten everything out (and grateful to the attorney, whom she had severely underestimated), when a gentle hand tugged her sleeve.

Nishi stared at her. "Deidara-san."

Deidara quirked an eyebrow. "Nishi-san." What did she want?

"Do you truly believe in him so much?"

"Yes," the blonde said tersely.

"Your faith in him..." Nishi smiled weakly. "It gives me hope. And your love for him... it makes me wonder what kind of journey he's been on since then."

Deidara wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that, her insides growing hot with strange combination of shame, admiration, and understanding. So she settled for, "I'm sorry for what he did to you. I'm sorry that you met him at the wrong time."

"It's the past now. Something I cannot forget. But I suppose... I might be able to forgive before my time passes. I won't keep you here any longer. But trust the Three Councils. They are good people who do the right thing."

Deidara turned away. "Right, hm..."

The doors remained closed longer than anyone expected. When the Three Councils finally returned, the entire room went dead silent, not a peep to be heard from anyone. Even the media had ceased their actions, not a single pencil-against-paper noise to be heard. Akimichi Fatso's fingers were far away from his typewriter.

Once the Hokage was at her podium again, she spoke to the Three Councils. "You have all adjourned and reached a final verdict. Civilian Council, you may begin."

It turned out that Haruno Mebuki was not only a very influential member, but also the acting spokesperson for the Civilian Council, at least for today. "The Civilian Council has decided that
the Convicted deserves to be sentenced to ten years of imprisonment in maximum security."

Deidara's heart sank. She looked over to Sasori. Why was he smiling at her? Like... like he no longer cared about his fate?

"Your judgement has been added to the record. As the Hokage, I will consider it," Tsunade said. "Konoha Council, you may share your final verdict."

The old man with the eye-patch stood. He reminded Deidara of an old and wrinkled and very ugly Kakashi. "The Konoha Council has decided that the the only outcome from this is to have the Convicted sentenced to death, effective immediately."

Sasori and Deidara shared a brief glance, their brows lowering. This did not come as a surprise.

"Your judgement has been added to the record. Jiraiya, Kakuzu, what about you two?"

It was Jiraiya who answered, shooting Kakuzu a slightly puzzled look, "We have decided that the Convicted should be sentenced to ten years of imprisonment, starting in maximum security with parole upon completion of sentence." But you already knew that, hime.

"Very well. Your judgement has been added to the record," Tsunade recited for the final time. "As I have reminded you all time and time again, the final judgement rests with me."

Everyone listened with bated breath.

To Sasori's right, he could hear his attorney... hyperventilating?

"Hey," he murmured to the perpetually nervous man.

"Huh?"

Sasori's lips curled into a regretful smirk, a gesture not meant to deride. "Thank you."

"Ah...!"

"Taking into consideration of all Three Councils," Tsunade said slowly, "I, the Hokage, sentence the Convicted, Akasuna no Sasori—"

Sasori tensed.

Koharu gripped the table.

"—to service in the military ANBU corps for the duration of the Ame-Tsuki war, effective tomorrow."

And Deidara's heart was speared.

The frontlines.

He was going to be fighting on the frontlines.

As the courtroom erupted into noise that even the Hokage had trouble quashing, Nishi smiled at Deidara tiredly, not understanding the connotations of Sasori's sentence. "Congratulations."

Deidara didn't hear her. Didn't see Koharu arguing with Danzo on the opposite side of the room, or Chiyo's face fall in dismay. "This... This can't be."
She was vaguely aware of Kagami's hand grasping hers.

*Out on the frontlines...*

Slashing claws—gnashing teeth—

The sound of the guns; Ino slumping to the ground and Hitomi falling soon after her—

Deidara's stomach lurched dangerously, the dull ache in her leg suddenly burning furiously.

*You're as good as dead.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Here we go...
"Tsunade-sama—can we have a word?"

"Tsunade-sama, why did you decide to spare Akasuna no Sasori?!"

"What are the reasons behind your decision—"

"What does this mean for Akasuna no Sasori? A chance to be redeemed? Reborn, even?"

Just as Tsunade was about to snap at them with the fury of a dragon stirred from its slumber, the last question made her pause, her eyes narrowed into slits as cameras flashed around her. Gruffly, she tugged the person—a male reporter in his twenties—to the side, saying, "Say that again."

He gulped, even though he was surrounded by people. "I-I asked you, Tsunade-sama, what does Akasuna no Sasori's sentence mean for him? Is it a chance to be redeemed and reborn?"

"Hmm..." Tsunade let go of his collar, crossing her arms over her ample chest. "Very well, I'll answer this one question for today." She took a moment to collect herself. The shitshow that had been Sasori's trial and sentencing hearing had drained a lot of energy out of her, and the snapping cameras and cacophony of voices weren't helping much. I seriously need a drink. Jiraiya still owes me one from the time I caught him spying in the women's baths. Again. Outwardly, she maintained a cool mask, musing, "Rebirth, huh? Yeah, I like the sound of that. It's obvious he's not the same man as he was before. He's changed." She started to walk off, but the man kept pace with her, so she added, "Sometimes people shouldn't get what they deserve." She said it very firmly, leaving no room for the reporter to argue or pester her for anymore questions. She wasn't entirely sure what compelled her to add the last bit—out on the frontlines, he was as good as dead, anyway.

The reporter stammered out, "T-Thank you, Tsunade-sama! The readers will..."

Tsunade stalked off, not particularly caring what Konoha's gossipy citizens would have like to see. Mostly hidden from view, her loyal guard followed her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Genma hastily apologize to a civilian for bumping into him before catching up to maintain formation. Where is that Deidara?

How troublesome it was that she had been held up by the press. The witnesses had left almost immediately to avoid being questioned relentlessly by those media hounds, Deidara among them.

I wonder how she's doing? Perhaps she cathartic. A pang of regret speared her heart for a second before she brushed it aside. No. She had made the right decision, combining the judgement of all of her councils to make a final verdict. Conscription had always been an alternative to imprisonment in Konoha's justice system, and being sent out to fight in the frontlines of a war was practically suicide. There. All three of her councils satisfied.
But from the daggers Koharu had been glaring at her earlier, she knew the collective satisfaction of the Three Councils was something that only existed in theory.

Finally, she found Deidara.

"Oi!" Tsunade marched up to the girl. "Deidara-san, you should probably hear this from my mouth before anyone else's. The gossip mill tends to get a lot of things wrong."

Deidara looked at her with a guarded expression. Truly, Tsunade couldn't fault the girl. "What is it, hm?" she said in the end, sounding both weary and wary.

When was the last time she slept? Tsunade briefly wondered before shaking the thought away.

"About your partner, Sasori. He'll be moved to the detainment centre. Isolation ward. But they will allow two visitors before he departs." Then the Hokage spun on her heel, lifting up an arm in farewell. "Just thought you might want to know."

"... Thank you, Tsunade-sama," she heard Deidara mutter before she strolled out of earshot, the bitterness in the younger woman's voice evident. It made Tsunade crave that drink even more.

When she caught up Jiraiya and Kakuzu in the Hokage Tower, the first thing the latter said upon seeing her face was, "Jiraiya's paying."

The white-haired man snorted derisively. "At least you're sounding like your old self. You've been acting weird all day."

Tsunade groaned as she flopped onto the chair in their council's common room. "No talking. Just—sake. Now."

"Oh, no bar then?" Kakuzu got comfortable, too. "Even better. I hate those places."

"I'll get it for you, hime," Jiraiya offered, standing. "And you," he added to Kakuzu, "I'm guessing you got a new payout today? I can't think of any other reason for you to act like the cat that just swallowed the canary."

"Astute as ever, Jiraiya," was Kakuzu's clipped response.

Tsunade eyed him from across the table. "I couldn't picture you going with Jiraiya's idea of imprisonment. Figured you'd be too much of a hardass... What—did the old toad bribe you or something?"

Kakuzu met her stare. "Don't be ridiculous. Like I would even bother taking money from the likes of him. Who knows where it's been..."

Jiraiya returned moments later with four bottles of sake.

Tsunade instantly pulled three out of four bottles toward her, eyeing the two males opposite her. "Drink up boys," she said mockingly, gesturing to the single bottle she had left for them. "Make sure you get to your houses before sunrise."

Kakuzu rolled his eyes while Jiraiya merely laughed, popping the bottle open.

"Deidara!"

Shoulders stiff, Deidara halted for the second time that day at the sound her name. She let Rin catch up to her, sagging slightly when the brown-haired woman's hand landed on her shoulder,
squeezing.

"You left so fast," Rin's voice lowered into a sympathetic murmur. She breathed out a sigh, entwining her fingers with Deidara's and walking them both to the refugee centre. "I'm sorry, Deidara."

"I can't believe it," Deidara said hollowly, staring at the winding road ahead of them. Shaking her head, she turned to face Rin. "Where are the kids?" she asked, almost desperately. Tomorrow, he'd be going off to war.

It all came back to war, didn't it? She wanted to scream at the sky, the only thing stopping her from doing so Rin's firm grip.

"With Kakashi," Rin replied gently, unaware of the way Deidara's insides were folding up. Her eyes softened. Then, abruptly, she pulled Deidara into a hug that almost crushed her bones. "I'm so sorry." Tears welled up in her brown eyes.

They stayed there like that for a while, Deidara standing in silence while Rin tried to ease her sorrow. But the wounds cut deep, and the blood was still running, staining the canvas.

"I..." Deidara swallowed, squirming from Rin's grasp. She pulled back from her friend, getting a good look of her face. The tiredness, the underlying grief—was it a reflection of her own? "I have to go."

"What?" Rin blinked, confused. "Where are you going?"

Deidara backpedaled as she answered, "To Sasori!" *The detention centre, the isolation ward.* She had to see him again. She broke into an awkward run, the organic part of her left leg aching with vengeance as she did. *But wait—*

She skidded to a stop.

Where was the detention centre?

"You seem lost, Deidara-san."

*Who...?* She turned to see a very fat man strolling toward her, his hands in his pants pockets. He had a kind, fatherly face, his expression one of curiosity. "You are...?"

"Ah! Where are my manners? You may call me Fatso."

Deidara deadpanned at him. Was he kidding? She wasn't in the mood for any jokes. 'Fatso' didn't seem to notice her irritation, talking even as she glared daggers at him.

"I was at the trial. I'm a reporter, you see, for the Leaf Gazette." He fished his card out of his pocket, beaming at her. Fatso reached for her hand, intending to tuck the card in her palm.

But she flinched away, her glare growing even more hateful. "*What do you think you're doing, hm?*" *This guy... did he just want to interview me?!* The idea of that sent an unfathomable anger thrumming through veins.

At last, Fatso seemed to understand her. "Ah..." He put the card back into his shirt pocket, raising his arms up in surrender. "I'm sorry. That was too forward of me—I tend to do that to any new people I meet. I have no intentions of interviewing you, Deidara-san. You just..." She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Seemed so lost."
Lost? Her face slackened. Well, yes, she supposed she was lost, considering that she truly had no idea where the detainment centre was. But she was close to Asuma's smithy; she could just go and ask him—

"Do you know where the detainment centre is?" she blurted out.

"Detainment centre?" Fatso stroked his second chin. "Depends which one you mean—there's the juvenile detainment centre, the one for petty criminals..."

"What about criminals who have bodies on their record, hm?" Deidara asked sardonically, her head starting to pound just from hearing his voice.

He caught on. "Ah! I see, I see... It's a bit further out from city central. Do you want me to take you there?" His face was one of genuine concern. "I'm Choji's uncle, by the way."

Oh. She could see the resemblance, though Choji wasn't nearly as fat as Fatso, especially after his time in the wilderness. "It's fine. Just give me the general direction, yeah."

He did, and she was on her way, giving a small wave goodbye before parting.

Fatso watched her go, sighing as he combed his slicked back hair with one large hand. There was something about Deidara—something about her that broke his heart. He couldn't quite place it, but...

His eyes lit up when he realized just what she reminded him of.

A bird with its wings clipped.

Swearing, Fatso ran after her, his huge belly bouncing up and down comically as he sprinted. "Wait, Deidara-san! Let me—" Her arm lashed out, but he caught it with surprising ease, aware of how frail her wrist seemed in his meaty hand. The Akimichi could not contain his surprise. Wasn't she supposed to be a taijutsu master? What had happened—

"Let go," she slurred, her eyes cloudy with pain. "Let go, you damn fatass!"

Ouch.

"I'm trying to help you—" Fatso gasped when he saw blood dripping staining her green skirt, dripping into her shoe. "What the...?! You need a hospital, Deidara-san!" Without waiting a second longer, he lifted her skirt, though not too high as to preserve her modesty, searching for a wound. She'd mentioned losing her real leg in her interview, he remembered, staring at the metal leg. Just where did she lose it up to? She said something nasty that he didn't hear, pulling away from him and stumbling.

How long had she been fighting this injury?

"What are you doing?!"

Fatso fell backward with a thump, catching a glimpse of an outstretched fist as he fell. Shaken and dizzy, he got up to see Shikamaru standing protectively in front of her, panting.

"Shikamaru-shonen!" exclaimed Fatso, getting up. When Shikamaru moved threatening toward him, he raised his hands up. "You have the wrong idea—"

"Leave it, Shikamaru," Deidara said sharply. "Just leave it—both of you are getting in my way—ugh!" She winced as she jostled the tender flesh of her left leg, more blood spilling down the side of her metal limb.
Shikamaru frowned. "Deidara... You haven't been taking care of it, have you?"

She didn't answer.

Sighing, Shikamaru pinched the bridge of his nose. "What a drag. And I supposed Fatso-san stopped you from doing whatever crazy idea you have? Though he could have been less forward about it."

"My apologies, Deidara-san," Fatso said, ashamed. "I wasn't thinking. But you need to get that... that leg seen at once!"

"But Sasori—"

"Can wait," Shikamaru finished. "If you don't let us help you, I'm going to get Itachi. Seriously."

She glared at him through feverish haze. "Fine," she spat. "But not to the hospital—to Asuma's. The hospital will take too long.

Shikamaru conceded after sharing a glance with Fatso. "Fine. Fatso-san, you should go. The Leaf Gazette's bound to be a mess without you bossing them around."

Fatso straightened his tie. "Ahem. Yes. Excellent idea, Shikamaru-shonen. But are you sure you can—?"

"Yes. Tell Choji I'll see him later."

Fatso disappeared down the path, and Shikamaru sighed, keeping Deidara steady by having her lean on him, her arm wrapped around his shoulders. He could feel the shame radiating off her in waves, her cheeks flushed from the cold as well as embarrassment. Embarrassment that she had to rely on some kid four years her junior because she'd been neglecting herself.

It scared him, he had to admit. Before all this, he hadn't known her very well. But she had always seemed so strong—unshakable. One of the pillars in their group, along with Itachi, Gai, Sasori, and Kakashi...

Now she could barely walk, her breathing ragged, her small frame shaking with each step.

Shikamaru had visited Asuma's only once on an errand for Fatso, but he still remembered the way. He knew that it was the bearded man who had fixed the prosthetic onto her leg, but he had his doubts. Surely, a hospital would be better...

He glanced at Deidara's bowed head. She was still coherent enough—and possibly strong enough; certainly stubborn enough—to be rid of him if she knew he changed course to the hospital.

So, with a small exasperated sigh, he decided that it was Asuma's or nothing.

"Shikamaru."

"... Hm?"

"Why are you helping me, hm?"

He pondered the question for a bit. Then, he said, "I guess it's probably because we're friends. Somehow."

She chuckled derisively. "Are we?"
"We could be," he countered. "And even if we weren't, it's the right thing to do."

A silence stretched between them for a while before she piped up again, sounding more solemn this time, which was impressive considering her leg was starting to bleed quite heavily now, making her woozy.

"Your father died, didn't he?"

Shikamaru stiffened. "Yeah. In the final battle."

She made a noise that he couldn't really place. "I suppose... grief is the price we pay for love, hm."

"It is, isn't it?" Shikamaru hummed, as if knives were stabbing his heart at the thought of his father smiling at him again. "He'll come back, you know."

"What?"

"Sasori. He's a supersoldier—or didn't you realize? With his skills, and his arm... It'll be hard for him to die, even out on the frontlines."

Asuma's workshop was right in front of them now. Shikamaru used his free shoulder to push the door open. A gust of wind from the outside sent papers flying, and a hassled Asuma cried out.

"I spent three hours organizing those!"

"Oh, good, you're here," Shikamaru talked over his complaining. "Thanks for not lingering at the courthouse, because that would have been troublesome."

"You damn brat," growled Asuma, pointing an accusing finger at Shikamaru. "You come in here once and think that you own the place—Deidara-san?" Swearing under his breath, Asuma helped Shikamaru hauled the woman over to an old, but clean bed. "Hitoshi's not here right now," Asuma said curtly. "He went out drinking with some others to try and prove himself, that idiot... Konohamaru's with his friends for a celebratory lunch... You!" He snapped a finger at Shikamaru. "You don't look like an utter moron. You'll be my assistant for today, here? Now," he glared at up Deidara, "care to explain why you've clearly been neglecting your leg?"

Deidara breathed out a sigh of frustration. "A lot of things. I swear, it won't happen again, yeah."

Asuma ran his hand through his coarse hair, frowning and walking backward to where the sink and soap were. "Right, the trial..." He turned his back to her to wash his hands. "I get it, kid. Love makes you do crazy things." He toweled his hands off. "But that is not an excuse to forget to take care of yourself. Don't do it again."

She crossed her arms petulantly. "Stop that. You sound like my aunt, hm. And like I said, it won't happen again." An awkward pause. "Sorry for the inconvenience," she added gruffly, turning her gaze downward at her blood-soaked skirt.

"What do you need me to do?" drawled Shikamaru from the background.

"You'll do what I damn well tell you to!" The Nara cringed when Asuma barked at him. "Ugh, sorry. It's been a rough day. I need a smoke. Then a drink. And then probably another smoke."

Shikamaru grimaced. "I know the feeling."

"Lie back," Asuma instructed, Deidara following with some discomfort. His hand glowed with
chakra to numb the area. "This is probably going to be worse than last time."

"Ugh."

"You brought it on yourself, kid."

"I know. It's the part that I hate the most, hm."

If only Sasori could see her now, she mused. He'd be disgusted at her ineptness. Her mind had been so wrapped up on things in the past week that she had completely forgotten to tend to her leg as per Asuma's instructions. The nightmares hadn't helped either—tall, looming monsters, snapping jaws, bodies of her loved ones shredded into ribbons—

Asuma glanced up momentarily when she shivered.

There was an odd feeling as the prosthetic was removed entirely from her leg.

"I've been developing a new type of limb for a while now," Asuma said, his voice more muted than before. "It should be better for you."

"How much?"

He shook his head. "I'm not a heartless bastard. You can pay me back the price I'll mark it as when you get settled and have an income."

"... Thank you, Asuma-san," Deidara mumbled, a pang of guilt striking her heart. Her new leg was of similar design to her bloodied old one. It was completely mechanical in nature, with miniature cogs and gears visible on certain parts of the leg.

"You should have gotten this treated at the hospital," Asuma remarked, observing the raw flesh that was now in his line of sight. Shikamaru was pointedly glancing away from them, Deidara's skirt hiked up far too high for his palate. "I can disinfect it the traditional non-chakra way and bandage it, but it would be easier and less painful for you if you just went to the hospital..."

"You can't heal flesh? I thought you had medical ninjutsu at your disposal, yeah."

"Very limited. The most advanced thing I can do is the numbing agent. If you want healers, then you know where to find them."

"Not here?" Shikamaru sniped for the sake of boredom more than anything else.

"Pass me the bandages and some alcohol and cotton buds," was all Asuma said in response, his eyebrow cocked in mild amusement. Kid was a snarky wisecrack, but he was still better than Hitoshi.

Shikamaru passed the items to him not even thirty seconds later.

"Not bad, Nara. Hitoshi's been with me for more than a week now and he still has trouble locating all my shit."

"I'm not Hitoshi, Asuma-san. I'm affronted that you would even compare me to the likes of him..." Now Shikamaru was pulling Asuma's leg for whatever reason, but the bearded man didn't really mind.

"It's an insult to his higher intelligence, hm," Deidara quipped from the bed, wincing slightly when
she felt a foreign object dab at her torn flesh. She couldn't feel the pain, but she could very much imagine it. It would have felt just like the time Suigetsu and Juugo did the same. **What happened to those two anyway? Nobody's told me anything about them. Did they even follow us to Konoha?** If they had, they would probably be in similar situations to Neji. And if that was so, why hadn't anybody mentioned them? Did anyone outside of her and Itachi even know they existed?

"Good thing is that it won't need stitches. There were just a lot of cuts," Asuma informed her, "I'm going to wrap it up now. This is going to feel weird."

"Got it, yeah."

It did feel weird, and Deidara was glad for Asuma being considerate enough to give her a warning. It was over soon, and Deidara looked down to see that almost her entire thigh had been wrapped with layers of gauze.

"What I'm using won't require any surgery," Asuma said, adjusting the leg. Again, the sounds of clockwork and gears eased her mind and soul. "Hey, Shikamaru—can you guess how it works?"

"Suction technology." Shikamaru only had to glance at it once.

Asuma nodded while Deidara quirked an eyebrow. "Bingo. You really are a genius, aren't you? I should replace Hitoshi's dumb ass with yours."

The boy twitched. "No thanks. And don't say it like that."

The fitting was more uncomfortable than before, despite Asuma's claim of no surgery required, and Deidara actually let out a surprised gasp when the suction cup wrapped around the bandaged stump of her leg. The inside was... soft, giving the wearer more comfort than the previous design.

"Is this removable?" she asked.

"It is. All you have to do is..."

In the backdrop, Shikamaru leaned against a wooden post as Asuma went through the removal and cleaning procedure with Deidara, the blonde nodding every few seconds. He observed her quietly, eyes sharp. He was well aware that she would probably not appreciate him treating her like a bird with a broken wing, but Shikamaru couldn't help when an idea formulated in his mind. If Deidara wanted to get better, what she needed was stability. Right now, her life was practically being tossed around in a particularly cruel washing machine. What she needed first... **is a house and a stable source of income. A job.**

As Shikamaru's brain spewed out all sorts of options, Deidara stood up, eyes rounder than usual as she looked down at her metal foot, tapping it up and down.

"How do you like it?" inquired Asuma.

"It's better than the last one, yeah," she answered truthfully, a small smile appearing on her lips. She slipped her shoe on, astounded by the amount of control she had over the limb. Of course, it was thanks to the chakra pathways running through her system and the new limb, but still... "Thank you. Again, hm," she added awkwardly. Her skirt was still blood-stained, but that wasn't a problem. She didn't care, anyway—it wasn't like she could expect Asuma of all people to provide her with spare clothes.

She wouldn't forget his kindness. The stump of her leg sitting comfortably in the artificial socket, Deidara walked comfortably over to the door before pausing. "I'll pay you back, Asuma-san, as
soon as I get the money, hm. And Shikamaru," she nodded once at the Nara's direction, "thanks."

"Good luck, kid," Asuma called after her.

Once Deidara was gone, Shikamaru straightened, heading for the door as well.

"Wait."

Shikamaru tossed Asuma a questioning glance. "What? This is such a drag... What does he want now?"

Grinning a little sheepishly, Asuma grabbed a dusty worker's apron hanging on a nearby post. "Could you help around a bit? I'll even pay you."

"What." It wasn't a question this time. "No thanks..."

_Dammit! Well, it's not like I ever go there anyway... I'll give you my membership to the Leaf Shogi Club!"

"... Deal."

It turned out that she had to take a taxi to the detainment centre, the building too far from her original location. She used the minimal stipend all refugees got for each week to pay for the ride, exiting the horse-pulled compartment without a single glance back. Vehicles were expensive things, and the public transport of the city still largely relied on animals labor to function.

The receptionist at the lobby glanced up from her notes. "May I help you?"

"Yeah, where's the isolation ward? Specifically the one where Akasuna no Sasori is being kept in." Deidara kept her voice even and polite, even when the receptionist's face twisted into one of obvious disgust.

"Another visitor?" the woman inquired frostily.

"Yeah." A cold wind seemed to blow around them.

"Hmph." With thinly veiled disdain and disapproval, the receptionist gave her the directions to his cell, and Deidara left her as soon as the woman reluctantly handed her a visitor's pass to hand around her neck, the color of the plastic card emergency-red.

When she got to the wing where Sasori was being kept, she was stopped by some guards for inspection.

"Seems legit," one guard said the other. "But you'll have to wait in the hall for a bit. We can't have two visitors at the same time—I'm sure the old lady will be out in a bit."

So Deidara sat, bouncing her leg up and down impatiently. _Another visitor? An old lady?_ There could only be one person who matched those descriptions. _So Chiy-o-baa got here first._ The old lady was certainly efficient with her time, wasn't she? Then again, she probably hadn't needed to stop by at Asuma's to get a replacement leg.

After what seemed like an age, the door in front of her opened, and Chiy-o ambled out, her arms behind her back. The old woman's eyes widened a bit at the sight of her before she smiled. "He's waiting," she said vaguely. "Make use of the time you have with him—they won't let you stay longer than an hour."
Only an hour? She tried not to look too disappointed, lest she seem ungrateful, instead mustering up a smile for Chiyo. "Thank you, Chiyo-baa-sama. I will, hm." Before Chiyo left, Deidara couldn't help but blurt out, as she stared at the imposing metal door in front of her, "How could this happen?" Of course, she knew how, but...

Chiyo caught the underlying question. "I don't know. All I am certain of is that I can't stand this. But what can we do?" Her voice betrayed her weary heart, and Deidara felt the atmosphere plummet to an all-time low.

Yes, what could they do? Nothing would reverse the Hokage's decision, especially considering how much backlash she was sure to get from her citizens for letting him off considerably easy. If they pushed her, Tsunade might just revoke Sasori's punishment out of spite and replace it with a new, even worse one.

"I'm sorry, Deidara."

"...I'm sorry, too."

Deidara wasn't sure how long Chiyo had been gone for when she finally wrapped her hand around the door handle, the cold metal kissing the stitched-up lips of her hand. Then she pushed it down, and the door clicked open.

The room was unsurprisingly blank, with only white walls and a simple bed with a thin blanket and pillow decorating the interior. Sasori sat on the edge of the bed with his back facing her. He had changed into different clothes, a simple black shirt and pants that didn't denote any sort of allegiance. They looked old, she noticed. Hand-me-downs from a charity, she supposed.

Almost timidly, she called out to him, closing the door behind her, "Danna?"

What happened next was a blur to her. He turned around, her name on his lips, and she all but jumped onto the bed and hugged him from behind. He let her hold him, and they stayed there for a while, simply enjoying each other's silent company.

"Deidara." Sasori pushed her arms away, and they both lay down on the bed, sharing the pillow. Again, they stayed, the shallow space between their faces allowing them to regard one another.

He looked mostly the same as she had last seen him, possibly even physically healthier. His skin no longer had a sickly pallor to it, and his muscles were more filled out—the only indication that he had even gone through what he had experienced the past nearly two weeks was his tired countenance. Dark circles had formed around his eyes; he looked as if he hadn't slept properly for a long time.

"I missed you," Deidara murmured, touching her forehead to his and squeezing her eyes shut.

He closed his eyes, too. "It's been too long," he agreed before he scowled. "I was hoping that the first time I'd see you since the explosion wouldn't be in the courtroom." Unfortunately, not even he himself had known where Konoha had kept him before his trial—it had probably been somewhere underground.

"I love you, too, you know." His eyes snapped open at that, pupils dilating in brief surprise. Deidara blinked at him languidly, contentedly, almost. "I—I never got to say it back." Her voice became mock-accusating, trying to draw his attention away from the growing blush that was spreading over her cheeks. "You didn't let me, yeah."

Tranquil amusement rolled off him in waves. "You've said it now, haven't you, brat?" That was
enough for him. Just... knowing that she felt the same way was enough. The bed shifted as he moved to lie flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

"Yeah." A shadow of a smile graced her lips. "I think I could keep saying it forever, hm. 'I love you'." She entwined her fingers with his. "What happened—after I passed out?"

"I carried you back," Sasori started. "I had to take you out of camp to stem the bleeding, and Sakura took over from there. We traveled nonstop to Konoha that day, and made it the next day. I was arrested almost immediately outside the city gates, and a riot practically broke out. Masamisan took the brunt of it."


That was news to him. He raised an eyebrow at her. "Did you really?"

"You didn't know?" She grinned genuinely for the first time in ages. "I guess it makes sense—it was the day that you almost got... turned..." she trailed off, her brow lowering. "I was terrified, hm. And angry. I knocked her tooth out."

No words of cliche concern or sympathy came from him. For that, she was grateful. She didn't want him to try and justify her actions—they'd been unacceptable—and she was glad that he did not try to condemn her either. His simple, pensive silence placated her immensely.

"What happened to the rest of them?" Sasori asked suddenly. "Our friends, comrades. I'm afraid I wasn't exactly in a position to find out," he added caustically, earning an equally scornful snort from Deidara.

"We all got settled into the refugee centre—well, most of us, hm. I've been told Shizune owns several properties here, and Sakura's family is in a similar situation. Konohamaru's living with his uncle, and Hitoshi actually managed to get an apprenticeship under him." Though he might be losing it to Shikamaru soon, if he hasn't careful. She talked idly about the situations of each individual member, only getting a little excited when she brought up Naruto's family situation, which was bizarre, to put it politely. The blond boy had a backstory worthy of a dramatic novel.

"Of course the Uzumaki brat discovered his estranged mother," Sasori remarked. "I think I'd honestly be disappointed if nothing life-changing happened to him upon his arrival to this shitty country."

"Hah! Just months ago, he was picking fights with Kisame." Deidara's chest rumbled in amusement. "You saw how he was yesterday—calm and... inspiring. Every bit the Fourth Hokage's son should be." She breathed out a small sigh. "But I don't want to talk about Naruto, hm. I'm so... tired." Tired was an understatement. She wanted right now nothing more than to nap beside her love, but she knew that she would roused from her slumber before she would get to fully enjoy it. And how could she savor her time with him anyway, if she were asleep? So she sufficed by wrapping her arms around him and pulling him close, burying her face in his chest and listening to his steady heartbeat.

Knowing that she might not ever experience this again... it was killing her. She hated how powerless she felt—how powerless she truly was, despite everything. So what if she could make things explode? So what if she could take down men more than twice her side, even with her new handicap? In the end... it meant nothing.

"I love you," she muttered into the fabric of his shirt, as if it could save them from everything.
And, in a way, it was an escape. Right now, she felt like tomorrow would never come. Deidara felt him move, and how solid he felt was a comfort. She wasn't dreaming anymore—this was real. "I love you so damn much, yeah." The back of her eyes burned with oncoming tears—tears of bitterness, resentment, and... a temporary satisfaction. They continued to burn even as he moved his mouth over hers. He was on top of her now, his hands wrapped around her wrists as he continued to kiss her, as they both lost themselves to euphoria, knowing that they would be parting tomorrow.

She was felt so small, underneath his larger frame. He hadn't noticed the sheer size different between them now—they were about the same height, but she was so... scrawny now. All that hell had taken a toll on her body, one that could only be reversed with care and time. Sasori pulled them up into a sitting position, and she made a satisfied sound, wrapping her legs around his waist, so that she was practically sitting on his lap. She was so light, he thought almost dizzily, unhealthily so. He wanted her to get better—he hoped that she would, even when he was gone.

"Deidara?" he uttered when her mouth finally left his.

"Hm?" Her eyes were half-lidded with contentedness. "Danna... can we...?"

He muttered his consent into her lips, one hand—the Zetsu one—undoing the ribbon that kept the top layer of her hair up, the other placed on her warm back.

Before the hour was up, they had given themselves to one another, tracing each other's scars and listening to the stories those battle wounds had to tell. The lashes on his back, the burn marks on her arms; the black stitches embedded in her arm and hand, the hollowness of his white Zetsu arm—a reflection of the trials they had faced and overcome.

Their allocated time together was burned into the back of their minds. They gave themselves just under a minute to get dressed again, and Deidara had just finished doing the top button of her shirt when knuckles rapped on the door.

"Your hour is up. Come out from there."

Gingerly, Deidara stood, patting down the front of her skirt. "I'll be out." She turned to Sasori, smiling sadly. "Danna? Don't die out there, yeah."

"I won't," he said solemnly. "I'll come back to you, Deidara."

"You'd better..." she trailed off, her back facing him as she wiped the first of her tears away. "I love you." She gasped lightly when she felt him hug her from behind, just like she had done to him when their hour had just been beginning. Deidara relaxed in his arms.

"Thank you."

"Hm?" She tilted her head upward, blinking at him curiously.

He kissed her chastely. "For loving me."

Then Sasori let her go, just moments before the guard knocked again.

She disappeared as quickly as she arrived, the door closing with a loud slam! and leaving the room feeling emptier than ever.

It was always darkest before dawn, and Sasori found that the phrase rang true as he was escorted
through the city, a cloak bearing the symbol of ANBU forces wrapped around his body. His hood was over his head, blocking out the sights of citizens eyeing him warily from their apartments, houses, or front porches, as if they expected him to snap at any moment. They knew who he was—knew what he had done.

He lifted his chin, his view of the gates in the horizon momentarily blurred by the billowing white cloud that escaped from between his frigid lips. There was no snow on this wintry morning, but the chill remained in the air.

His four ANBU escorts—soon to be fellow comrades—did their jobs without even speaking a word to him, or to each other. He supposed that silence was something ingrained into Konoha's esteemed military. It was something that he wouldn't be complaining about, at any rate.

They approached the gate, Sasori's horse snorting and shaking its mane as Konoha began to awaken, people peering out from their windows to see what was happening outside.

Behind the hills, the sun began to rise, painting the sky pink and blue.

The people manning the gates opened it, the two metal barriers in the walls rolling upward at the same time. Beyond Sasori was a tunnel through the concrete walls of Konoha, a passage to the outside world.

He could only hoped that all the monsters had been purged by now.

At the thought of them, his boneless Zetsu arm twitched in anticipation.

Only when the gates had fully risen did they continue onward, slowly. It was then that Sasori became aware of a gathering, large presence behind them, their chakra levels spiking at different rates.

"Wait!"

Frantic, fast footfalls reached his ears and he turned to see all of his comrades from the wilderness—his friends and family—moving toward him, some of them panting hard. Deidara led the way, her fringe blowing in the wind, revealing flashes of her clouded left eye. She looked disheveled, wearing the clothes which she had been dressed in since yesterday, a cloak draped over her shoulders haphazardly to ward away the cold. Even as he felt the ANBU around him growing annoyed, Sasori didn't have his horse move forward, simply letting Deidara walk toward him with purpose, admiring the view behind her as he did so.

So many people.

All for *him*.

Itachi's solemn face was barely visible in the crowd, but Sasori spotted him anyway, the Uchiha giving him a knowing glance. He was carrying Izuna in his arms, the baby blearily glancing up at the sky and the people around him.

The ANBU tensed as Sasori slid off his horse, the chakra-suppressing manacles on his wrists more feeling more constricting than ever.

She didn't speak, merely embracing him tightly. He returned the gesture with equal force, his hand dipping into the inside of his cloak and fumbling around in his pocket for a moment. *How could I have forgotten?* Sasori fished out the device that Chiyo had given him during his last visit, a souvenir from his days as the Royal Assassin of Suna; he briefly wondered how she had gotten her
hands on it.

It wasn’t something he didn’t need, but...

As Deidara reluctantly pulled away, Sasori brushed her hair to the side, lifting the eye-scope between them. She glanced at it curiously.

"For you," he said, gently fixing the eye-scope to the left side of her face. "Keep working on your art... Deidara." His lips curled into a smile as he observed the awed, shocked expression on her face, leaning forward slightly to kiss her.

"Of course," she uttered, her voice barely above a whisper. "Of course I will, Danna."

"Good." Another kiss. "I was beginning to think that you had forgotten about who you truly are."

She hugged him again, squeezing his frame gratefully, unwilling to be without him for too long before he left Konoha—possibly for good.

"You'll come back, yeah?" You said you would.

Regretfully, Sasori tore himself from her, missing her warmth. "Always."

Seconds later, he was mounting his horse, snapping the reins to get it to move forward, his ANBU guard moving along with him.

As he reached the end of the tunnel, he turned back for the last time. Then he went on, on the path that led him toward the sunrise. Until next time, Deidara.

He had disappeared from view when Deidara felt a hand, knotted with age, land upon her shoulder. "Come," murmured Chiyo. "Let us go, Deidara." Deidara hesitated, staring at the gate in front of her one last time before letting Chiyo lead her away, surrounded by friends and family.

Slowly, the sun rose.

Kakuzu glanced upward as the bag of coins—gold coins—landed on the table in front of him. Seconds later, the bag had disappeared into his cloak.

"I'm curious, Uchiha..." Kakuzu stared intently at the man in front of him. "What exactly possessed you to bribe a member of the Council?" He spoke lowly, but clearly, so that nobody but he would ever hear. The men around them were all too drunk to be paying any attention to them anyway.

Itachi blinked slowly at Kakuzu, unaffected. "Because they deserve a chance to be happy."

"Hmph. Fool of you, but I can't exactly complain." Kakuzu's chair screeched against the wooden floor as he stood. "I hope I never see your face again, Uchiha, for both our sakes."

Itachi let him leave. He was about to leave as well when a woman that entered right after Kakuzu's exit made him freeze, her face morphing into Izumi's for a second. Then she disappeared into the crowd, and Itachi moved toward the door.

They deserve a chance to be happy.

His boots landing on the dirt, Itachi glanced up at the clouds, which threatened to rain.

Izumi...
"Hey." Itachi turned around at the sound of Sasuke's voice, a smile ghosting his lips. Sasuke frowned at that.

"You followed me," Itachi said simply. "I had a feeling..."

"I had the same feeling when you dropped off my nephew with Rin." Sasuke leaned against the side of the building. "You said you were going to get dango."

"Apparently, they don't serve dango at this establishment," replied Itachi, mildly. Sasuke unstuck himself from the wall to walk side by side with Itachi. "Come, otouto—let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Part IV was always going to be short—this chapter marks the end of Part IV. It took a while to get out, but it's here now. I probably won't be able to post another chapter for a while. School starts next week, and I have things to prepare for. Don't even get me started on when it ACTUALLY starts. I'll likely be busy very often. So this is the last update for this month, definitely, except for maybe an interlude.
Interlude: Shikamaru

Chapter Summary

Shikamaru meets Ai Wei and devotes his life to shogi.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"I expected as much." Shikamaru was glancing up at the nondescript building in front of him, old men and women moving around his still form to enter through the front door.

"Young man, are you lost?" one little old lady said, throwing him a concerned look.

"No, I'm fine. But thank you for the concern..."

Eventually, the stream of elderly citizens stopped, and Shikamaru sighed. Let's get this over with. Bracing himself subconsciously, Shikamaru pushed the double doors open, revealing a large hall filled with tables and seat cushions. Almost all of them were occupied by a hunched old man or a toothless old lady.

The Nara possessed the only dark head of hair in the whole room, and he was very much aware of it.

Cursing up a storm in his head, Shikamaru managed a strained smile as the club organizer approached him and shook his hand, the action surprisingly hearty for a man who was clearly over the age of seventy.

"You must be here for the tournament, Nara-san!"

"How did you—?"

The old man chuckled, his eyes seemingly opening a little bit wider. "I would recognize a Nara from a mile away. Before the Great Migration, the entirety of this club was practically run by the clan. Why, when I was a boy..."

Shikamaru listened. He listened to the stories of his ancestors, all of them shogi champions, and the stories of the few non-Nara players that had ended up marrying into the Nara family because of their shared love for the board game.

"My name is Shigeru Tomoya, but you may call me Shigeru-oji! Let it be known that times have changed since your forefathers' reign of power. While most of us play only for leisure, there are also many here who stake their money on their games." Shigeru barked out an exuberant laugh. "For retired old geezers, we rake in a pretty good income!"

"Income?" Shikamaru felt himself smile. "From... shogi?"

Memories of his mother telling him that he could never sustain himself from playing shogi filled his brain, and he wasn't sure how to feel about proving her wrong.
"So what say you?" prompted Shigeru, placing a wrinkly hand on Shikamaru's back and leading him to an empty table. "Are you up for a game?" His eyes gleamed craftily. "Or perhaps five? Six?"

"Seven," Shikamaru decided, sitting down in front of the shogi board. "Who's my opponent?"

Shigeru grinned. "I have the perfect opponent for you..." He turned his head to the front of the room, where there was a single unopened door. "AI WEI!" he bellowed, cupping his hands around his mouth. "FRESH MEAT!"

*Fresh meat?* A bead of sweat trickled down his neck, and Shikamaru closed his eyes, a muscle on his cheek twitching.

The door opened, and a little girl with mussed red hair trotted out, looking disgruntled. "Another victim?"

"Not only that," Shigeru said, patting her head as she went over to them, the scowl on her face never changing. "A *Nara* victim."

Shikamaru wanted to tell them both to please refrain from further referring to me as a victim, but Ai Wei had already sat down and was staring intently at him, her fingers steepled.

*Confident brat.*

"Well then, Nara-san..." Ai Wei showed her clenched fist to him, then opened it to reveal furigoma resting in her palm. "Let's play."

An hour and a half later, Shikamaru was the victor, if only barely. Despite her young age, Ai Wei was good; her confidence was not baseless. But in the end... Shikamaru was still better, his experience coming through. "You know, you're not half-bad... for a xiangqi player."

Her eyes lit up, no longer looking displeased at losing. "You can tell?" she said eagerly, leaning across the table.

"Your name was the first indication," Shikamaru told her. "'Ai Wei' is Chinese. The language of the old Uzushiogakure people, before their country was absorbed into Konohagakure. And on top of that, the way you play is reminiscent of the styles of old players my... father used to look up to. Xiangqi players."

"You're pretty bright, Nara-san. Can we play again? I haven't even used half the stuff I learned... And I'm going to get back the ryo that I owe you!" She pointed at him in challenge, and Shikamaru yawned, the gesture not entirely fake.

"I almost forgot that you're a troublesome kid... But bring it on."

_Fatso,_

*That Nara kid of yours is probably going to be living in the shogi hall by the time Ai Wei is done with him. He told me himself he's probably going to give up that job offer from you just to play shogi full-time.*

*Sorry about that, but you know those Naras.*

Akimichi Fatso looked up from the letter he had received from his good friend Shigeru. "Choji?"
His nephew glanced up from the table he was working at. "Yeah, oji-san?"

"Shikamaru just quit." The fat man scratched his head. "Who am I going to replace him with...?"

Choji chuckled. "Technically, he hadn't even started working here yet, so there wasn't any quitting involved. He told me that he wasn't interested in working at the gazette anyway, but... he also said that someone else would probably appreciate the job more than him."

"And who would that be?"

So Choji told him.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Last update for a while, for real.
Deidara stared at the bowl of steaming hot herbal medicine in front of her, blinking slowly. Then she glanced up at Rin, who was sitting opposite her with a knowing look on her face, resting her chin in her palm.

Around them, the environment was bustling, people hurrying about the refugee centre's only cafeteria to get the best pickings of breakfast. The overworked serving lady gave the refugees bleary looks, her eyes sunken into her sockets.

"What is this, hm?" Deidara asked, picking up the bowl and sniffing it. The scent of herbs filled her nostrils, and she suspected that it would be a bitter concoction. The bowl warmed her hands, and she had to keep adjusting her hold on it so she would not be burned.

"Well," said Rin, smiling. "It's just something to calm your nerves, but it's also something to make sure that no unexpected surprises happen, if you catch my drift."

"Ah...!" A deep flush spread over Deidara's cheeks, and she closed her eyes, trying to remain a serene countenance. "Thanks." After blowing on the liquid a few times to chase away the heat, she started to take little sips of it. Her cheeks grew rosy as she drank, no longer from embarrassment but from the hot substance she was consuming. As she drank, Daichi, holding Hikari's hand, led them both over to their mother's table, sitting down on her either side.

It'd been a full day since Sasori had left Konoha... possibly for good. But life went on, as it always would. Rin had been afraid that Deidara would close herself off from the her and the others completely, and was thankful that this did not seem to be the case.

In a way, the blonde was more distant and aloof than before, but that was inevitable.

Rin let out a heavy sigh, wrapping her arm around Hikari's small body as the girl buried into her side, eyes half-closed in content. "How are you doing, Deidara?"

Deidara paused in her drinking. "As well as I can be, I guess." She put the bowl down, meeting Rin's gaze uncertainly. "I... I just don't know where to go from here. What's going to happen to us next, hm?"

The brown-haired widow pondered the question for a bit. "I don't know," she confessed, reaching
over the table and entwining her fingers with Deidara's. "All I can say for certain is that it's up to us
to decide what we do from here. Mebuki-san has given us almost limitless opportunities—we are in
charge of our futures. We'll find jobs, proper homes... We'll make a new life. A new future."

*Future, huh?* Deidara squeezed Rin's hands, glancing up at the white ceiling for a brief moment.
Then she met Rin's stare. "I guess I'll start by..." she trailed off. *What will I start with? What did
she have on her agenda anyway, asides from repaying Asuma for the leg?* Rin nodded
encouragingly as Deidara deliberated. "Clay," she decided in the end. "I'll start doing my art again
—my explosions!" Her voice rose a little from excitement at that. "And then..." She shook her
head. "I'll just see where it takes me from there, hm. You?"

"I'm a little unsure myself. For now, I'm just... going to take some time off. To mourn," she
elaborated, her smile dimming a little. Then she added, "Did you know they added a grave marker
for Obito? I... I think Kakashi-kun had something to do with it."

Daichi, who had been eating an apple, paused. Then he continued eating, his gaze focused on the
table.

They ate their breakfast in mostly silence, only talking when others joined them. Laughs were
shared, but they were few and far between.

"Why don't we go?" Deidara suggested when Daichi crunched his apple to the core. "Visit Obito,
that is. Otherwise he'll get lonely, knowing how clingy he was, hm..." She smiled weakly, and Rin
managed one back.

"You're right. Daichi, Hikari, let's go visit daddy, okay?"

"Oh, we're going to see otou-san?" Hikari perked up, eyes widening. "Aniki, did you hear that?"

"Yeah," Daichi said, a little hesitant. "I heard."

"Going to see Obito, huh?" commented Kisame, holding a hot bowl of congee in his hands as he
descended upon his seat. "I might go visit the memorial park later, to say hi to Anko." He ruffled
Chihiro's hair. The girl was seated next to him, a small smile curling the corner of her lips. "What
do you say, kid?"

"Sure, Kisame-sensei!" she chirped. "And then we can go practice some cool sword moves, right?"
She snapped her fingers, as if remembering something. "Oh! We should go see Itsuki-kun and
Mikoko-san as well..." The orphan grew more subdued and Kisame's brow lowered. "We should
get flowers." She blinked her tears back. "Something that they would like."

*That's not a bad idea.* Deidara turned to Rin, and they both nodded.

"We should go get cleaned up first," Rin pointed out. "Come, kids, to the baths..." The remaining
members of the Uchiha-Nohara family exited the room, likely heading for the family bathing
room. If Deidara wanted to clean herself, she'd have to head for the ladies' showers.

As the blonde woman left, Chihiro stopped pushing the peas on her plate around and glanced up at
Kisame. "Are we going to be okay?"

"Kid," Kisame let out a heavy sigh, "you always ask the hard questions, don't cha? But to answer
it..." Discreetly, he looked around the table, where all of their survivor group was sitting. Well,
most of them, anyway. Itachi was the only one to glance up from his plate and return the shark-
man's gaze. "Yeah," Kisame said eventually, though he could not be certain, "I think we will."
There was a loud squeal of metal as Deidara twisted the shower taps, adjusting the output of cold and hot water. The shower head spat a few drops of water before a steady flow emerged, making the hair on Deidara's head damp and heavy. The water was the perfect temperature, and Deidara sighed in bliss, running her fingers through her blonde locks to remove twists and tangles.

*What am I really going to do?* she asked herself, the answer stretched out in front of her like the cold, intimidating road to hell. Biting the inside of her cheek, she pushed her hair out of her face, slicking it back to reveal a small, barely noticeable widow's peak. What was there to do here? What the hell was everyone else going to do?

Inherently, she knew the answer.

*Live.*

That was what they had been fighting for out there. The opportunity to live, to not have their final moments being mauled to death by eldritch creatures. She jerked on her hair so hard that she almost winced. Somehow, it felt like she was slowly dying instead, even when others were starting to move on. Starting to live again. She'd seen Konohamaru on her way back from the detainment centre; the boy had been with his best friends, Moegi and Udon, as well as an adult chaperone that Deidara chalked up to being their new schoolteacher. They'd gone to lunch, she had learned the same day, to celebrate their success in winning over the Three Councils. She'd merely watched from a distance, disbelieving and numb.

She couldn't have even brought herself to be enraged that day. In a way, they *had* won, but...

In washing her hair, Deidara's hand grazed over the black, blocky numbers inked onto the nape of her neck. She froze, watching water drip from her nose for what seemed like an eon. Then she continued, tilting her face toward the oncoming spray of water.

*What did I do before him?* she inquired then, thinking that it would be an easier question to answer. But perhaps the explosion had addled her brain a little more than she had thought; she could not conjure a plausible answer that left her satisfied. All those things she had back in Akatsuki were gone. Scattered in the wind. Shisui was gone, Obito was gone, the dozens and dozens of civilians that she had been acquainted with were gone. Sasori was gone, too, the Yamanaka Clan were all but extinct, and Uchiha and Hyuuga without heirs—

She didn't want to think about it anymore.

Deidara quickly cleaned herself up, turning off the water and grabbing the towel that hung outside, wrapping it around her body.

It was when an uneven footfall reached his ears that Daichi, leaning against a bare maple tree trunk, turned to see Deidara and his mother heading toward him. His little sister was a slight distance away from him, entertaining herself with the snow around them. She packed the ice into snowballs, a small, satisfied smile on her face as she did so.

"Hey, kiddo." Deidara ruffled his hair, and warmth and affection for her instantly came over him. A small flush reached his cheeks, and he closed his eyes in embarrassment. Noticing, Deidara smiled lopsidedly, pulling him into a hug. "Ready to go, hm?"

"Ready..." Daichi mumbled into her torso, vaguely registering that she was wearing a winter coat over her usual white blouse and green skirt. "Okaa-san, are we bringing him flowers and incense?"

"Yes," Rin murmured, palming his head gently. "Of course we will."
The walk to the memorial park wasn't long. Hikari ran ahead of them most of the way, enjoying the crunch of snow beneath her boots without a care in the world. And why would she care, anyway? The monsters were gone. They were safe now. Everything was right again.

Little florets fell into the snow as the bouquet of flowers in Deidara's arms shifted from side to side. They'd stopped by the florist on the way. *Everything was supposed to be right again. Why does this feel like a dream, then? Like some nightmare disguised as a happy world?* She watched Hikari throw snow into the air and twirl around the falling flakes of ice, her cheeks flushed with excitement and the cold.

"Hey," Daichi scolded, catching up to her, "stop playing around, imouto! We're gonna go see otou-san, so you can't look so messy. Geez." He proceeded to brush the snow off from the front of her coat and adjusted her scarf. Rin shot Deidara an amused look, one which the blonde returned easily.

"Kids bounce back easily, don't they?" Rin remarked offhandedly, lifting her finger to her lips thoughtfully. "Sometimes, I envy them. But then I remember... that they're going to grow up without a father..." She leaned into Deidara. "But in the end, at least they'll get to grow up. I feel like that's the only think I have to offer them anymore." The memorial park came into view, and Rin chewed on her lip as Daichi and Hikari slowed down, seeming hesitant. "I really wish... that I could do more for them, Deidara."

"I..." Deidara lowered her gaze as they approached the children, who were still staring at the gates of the memorial park. "Yeah." Inwardly, she smacked herself at her lack of tact, but Rin didn't seem to pay any heed to her verbal stumble.

They walked past the gates, Daichi glancing up warily at the metal above their heads momentarily.

"Over there," Rin said, pointing at two people standing over a grave marker. From the color of their hair, it wasn't hard to tell who they were. Deidara was glad that they were there to act as their beacons of light; she wasn't sure if she could stand searching for Obito's marker.

Naruto and Kakashi turned their heads as Deidara and Nohara-Uchiha family approached them. Naruto immediately grinned, his eyes curving. He lifted an arm up in greeting. Deidara was not blind to the tired lines beneath his eyes. He was grieving, too, she reminded herself, even if he didn't show it. The Uzumaki boy was strong. Stronger than her, she felt.

"Hi, Rin-san," Naruto said quietly, a little unsure about addressing his former boss. "You're here to see boss, too, huh?"

"Hello, Naruto-kun." She dipped her chin at Kakashi, who nodded back. "Kakashi-kun."

"Oh, Deidara's here, too." The blonde in question lifted her arm up in greeting before letting it fall to her side again.

Kakashi, who hadn't said anything yet, moved a little out of the way to allow room for Rin, Deidara, and the kids. Naruto was altogether pushed out of the picture, but he didn't seem to mind, tucking his hands into the pockets of his winter coat as he solemnly observed the quiet grieving.

"Hi, otou-san," whispered Hikari, putting her hands together in a prayer position and closing her eyes. Daichi followed her example, only he didn't say anything beforehand. Every so often, his brow would twitch, and he would mutter something unintelligible under his breath.

Deidara evened out her breathing, vaguely aware of Rin next to her doing the same thing. Then she
knelt, the flowers in her arms jostling. She was about to put them down when Hikari pulled on her sleeve, a little sheepish.

"Yes, Hikari-chan?"

"Can... Can I give the flowers to otou-san?"

For a second, Deidara almost choked up. Then she smiled, nodding. "Of course, yeah. Here." She passed the flowers to Hikari, who started to beam.

Daichi made room for his sister. "Put 'em here."

Hikari did. "Do you think otou-san will like it?"

Rin was about to answer when Kakashi beat her to it. "Of course he will," Kakashi affirmed, speaking for the first time since they had arrived. "He'll love it, actually. Obito loved flowers." A chuckle rumbled in his chest. "He was probably the only other man besides Gai that I knew who really appreciated them. And he would deny it every time we brought it up, but we all knew better.

Deidara seemed to share the same thought, her eyes lighting up a little as she remembered Obito's bluster.

"Kakashi-kun's right," Rin added encouragingly. "Go on, my little light."

Hikari hesitated one last time before nodded resolutely, placing the flowers beside his grave marker. "I miss you, otou-san."

We all do, Deidara put in silently. Wherever you are now, you idiot... I hope you're doing well.

"Now," Kakashi broke the silence, "why don't I treat you guys to a snack?"

Kushina slurped up her third bowl of noodles, Karin gaping at her in a mixture of horror and fascination.

"Phew!" Kushina sighed after finishing the broth. "That really hit the spot, ne, Karin-chan?" Karin continued to stare, so much so that Kushina blushed slightly. "Now don't go looking at me like that, 'ttebane!" She wagged her finger in front of Karin's face, the younger female's eyes following the movement. "You didn't even finish your soup!"

"I... wasn't hungry," Karin said lamely. Wow, how can she pack away so much?! For such a small woman, she could give Naruto and Choji a run for their money! Kushina was pretty cool, but Karin was a little embarrassed to admit that.

"Ah, I get you." Kushina let out another sigh, this one heavier. "Everything's been really gloomy lately, hasn't it?" She glanced around the restaurant, where people were talking in mostly subdued voices. The last time she had come to this restaurant, it had been a lot more vibrant. Konoha's wilting, and there's no rain to be seen. Just endless snow. "Especially after the trial. I don't know the whole story, but that heartbroken look on that woman's face made my gut lurch, 'ttebane."

"Maybe that was just the ramen you ate before," Karin joked.

Kushina snorted. "Maybe. But I never get full on ramen, so that wasn't it. In fact, when I saw her face fall..." She rested her head on her palm. "It made me wonder: was that what I looked like when I heard the news about Minato? And if it wasn't... I'm willing to bet it was pretty damn close,
ttebane. I've heard just as many bad things about Akasuna no Sasori as your average Konoha citizen, but from everything that you and Naruto have told me, and everything that came out at the trial..." She shook her head sadly. "Have you ever been in love, Karin?"

She couldn't help it. Karin blurted, "Yes! I-I mean..."

A sly smile. Karin inwardly cursed. "Ohh~! My cute little niece has a crush? Tell me, who is it, 'ttebane?"

"I-I—"

"Hey, kaa-san!" Naruto suddenly appeared at their table, making Karin squeak. From all the chakra signatures in the restaurant, she had completely overlooked Naruto's approaching one. But now that she was tuned in, she noticed that Kakashi, Deidara, and Rin and her children were coming toward them as well.

"You idiot!" barked Karin, shaking her fist at her yellow-haired cousin. "Don't just pop out like that out of nowhere! Geez! You almost gave me a heart attack!" Secretly, though, she was glad for Naruto's interruption.

"Aw, sorry, Karin-chan." Naruto chuckled, rubbing the back of his head. "I thought you would've seen me comin', though. Aren't you a sensor, 'ttebayo? Were you talking about something really secret? Is that why?"

"Sh-shut up, Naruto-boke!" Karin harrumphed and turned away from her cousin as Kushina laughed heartily.

"I don't get it," Naruto was saying as he was joined by the rest of his party. "What did I do wrong?"

"Oh, my son," Kushina chuckled, wiping a tear from her eye. "You have a lot to learn about women, 'ttebane!" She put her arm around Naruto's neck, yanking him toward her. "C'mere, you!"

"Waaahahaha!" Naruto laughed as he was noogied. "Kaa-saaaaan!"

"Oi, Naruto, how old are you?" Kakashi teased.

"Not too old for ramen, that's for sure!" the blond retorted, trying to pry himself from his mother's vice-like grip.

Soon, all of them were seated, Naruto squashing a pouting Karin against the wall as he made room for Deidara and Kakashi. Rin, Daichi, and Hikari occupied the opposite seat along with Kushina.

"Oh, boy, I'm starving," Naruto said.

Deidara chuckled. "Seriously? Breakfast was two hours ago, hm." She flagged down a brown-haired waitress. "Sumimasen!" She glanced around the table. "Who's paying, hm?" Her eyes landed on Kakashi, who quickly whipped out an edition of Icha Icha and buried his nose into it.

"Me, of course," said Kushina, sounding almost offended. "It's my treat, guys," she winked, "I'm the one with the moolah here. Eat as much as you want, 'ttebane!"

From how frazzled and tired the waitress looked, Deidara almost felt bad for making her take another order, especially one as large as the one they were currently giving her. Naruto, naturally, was ordering five large bowls of ramen, and the rest of them weren't exactly eating small either.

The amount of sweat cutting through some of the heavy make-up on her face also gave her a dirty,
hassled appearance.

Had Deidara flared her nostrils, she might have picked up on the underlying scent of dog on the woman.

Lunch passed by similarly to breakfast. They made some small talk, Kushina and Naruto contributing most of it. Karin interjected rudely or sourly sometimes, and Kakashi politely responded to everything in a way that made him seem more irritating than ever.

Everything was...

As Deidara drank her tea, she noticed Daichi scowling as Rin lifted more noodles into his bowl with her chopsticks, the boy telling her that she needed to eat more than him.

... Surprisingly normal.

So normal that it almost physically hurt her. But she kept her cool, closing her eyes and smiling into the brim of her cup, even when her fingers were clutched so tightly around the glass that the joints in her digits were starting to ache. She willed herself to speak to them, alternating between amused and haughty, as she'd once been.

Wasn't this what I wanted? Wasn't it?

"Deidara." Kakashi's low voice broke her from her thoughts. "You alright?"

It was such a meaningless question.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's kinda hot in here, though. I think I'll go out and take a walk around." Deidara stretched in her seat, starting to stand. "Thanks for lunch, Kushina-san."

Kushina smiled warmly at her. "It's no problem. But you're leaving so soon?"

She nodded tightly. "You guys go enjoy yourselves, hm. I just need some air."

As Deidara exited the ramen shop, she missed the way that her friends stared at her retreating back, their brows creased in a mixture of worry and sympathy.

"Sir, I didn't—"

"You did! I know you did, you damn, dirty whore!" the drunk slurred, bringing back his fist. "Give it back, thief!"

There was the sound of a loud, painful slap.

As she lay in a heap on the ground, dazed, the man spat at her.

"That'll teach you—ARGGHH!" he screamed in agony as he was suddenly bowled over by a large, growling shape. The drunk's eyes widened as he realized that he was suddenly face to face with fierce, angry dog, drool dripping from its jowls.

"Genmaru!" the woman shouted, pushing herself up and wincing. "Genmaru, don't!" The dog snarled at the assailant's face one more time before whining, jumping off the man's body.

The drunk, experiencing coherency for the first time, shot a terrified glance at the woman and her dog before dashing off.
The woman lowered her gaze. *I bet he's going to tell my manager. I'll be fired again.* She'd only lasted two days. Letting out a deep sigh, she palmed the head of her dog, practically feeling guilt tangled in his fur. "It's okay, Genmaru, it's not your fault. You were just protecting me." The dog yipped. "Why did I let him hit me?" She smiled wryly. "I guess... I felt like I deserved it."

Rubbing the red slap mark on her cheek, the woman undid her apron just as the drunk came around the building with the manager in tow. She didn't even listen to them as she walked over to her outraged manager, holding out the apron to him. He snatched it from her, yelling obscenities that she didn't really care for. As she turned her back on them, she covered her ears, a strained smile on her face. Even with her hands over her ears, she could still hear them. Feel their hatred.

Genmaru nudged her, whining again.

"You're right," the woman said, nodding. "Do you wanna go to the park?"

Genmaru led the way, his owner trailing not far behind. But then the dog stopped hearing his mistress's footsteps behind him, and the twisted his head around to see her with her face buried in her oil-stained hands. His wagging tail drooped sadly, padding over to his master to comfort her.

"I'm sorry, Genmaru," she wept. "Just give me a moment..." By the time she finished crying, all of her makeup had been washed off her face, revealing two red, fang-shaped tattoos marked on either of her cheeks. Anxiously, she spun, bumping into a girl and knocking her on her ass. "Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry—"

"Hey!" A smaller version of the girl she had knocked over yelled at her, and the woman almost flinched. "Watch where you're going!" Hyuuga Hanabi turned her back on her as she helped her sister up. "Are you okay, Hinata-nee?"

"F-fine, Hanabi-chan." Hinata smiled, brushing dust off her baggy jumper. "It was my fault as well, nee-san," she said, referring to the woman, who was taken aback by the elder sister's polite, forgiving demeanor. A rare thing to see in these times. "We were in a hurry to see our cousin. I'm very sorry for the inconvenience."

"I..." Inuzuka Hana had to keep her mouth from gaping open like an idiot. "I'm sorry, too. Er, I'm Hana." *Damn! Why did I tell her my name?*

"Oh! You are of the Inuzuka Clan, correct?" Hinata asked, smiling again. "My name is Hyuuga Hinata, and this is my sister, Hanabi-chan."

*Is she happy to meet another member of a clan?* Hana had immediately pinned the girls as *Hyuuga* based on their eyes and silky hair. She smiled wretchedly back. "You must be new around here." *Of course she is. She must have escaped Ame and come to Konoha recently.* "The Inuzuka Clan... there are so few of us now, that we are no longer considered a noble clan."

"What?" Hanabi raised a shocked eyebrow. "How come? They can do that to clans here? Strip them of their noble status?"

"Yes, when it calls for it." Hana reached up to touch the clan markings on her face. "There are only... three... of us now, so hardly a clan, let alone a noble one. The dogs don't count, you see." *Otherwise there’d be five of us, not three.* "I doubt that your clan is going to be recognized as a noble clan either."

"That doesn't matter to us, Hana-san," Hinata assured. "All we want is for our family to be together again." Her gaze darkened surprisingly at that, and Hana wondered if this had anything to do with
Hanabi nodded in agreement. "Right. We should go now, nee-chan. We have an appointment with the doctor later, remember? If we want to see Neji, we should go now!"

"Oh! You're right!" Hinata flustered. "It's good to m-meet you, Hana-san, but I'm afraid we must get going now."

"Ah..." Hana watched them go, looking a little lost. "Goodbye!"

"Dammit!" Shikamaru inched back as Ai Wei slammed her fist on the board, sending the pieces flying everywhere. She glared intensely at the Nara, seething. "How are you so good at this?! I've only won against you twice!"

Shikamaru couldn't help but smile. "All those tactics you've used... I've seen my father use them before. I've gotten over thirty-thousand ryo from you now. Are you ever going to pay up, you troublesome brat?"

The Nara and the red-haired girl were sitting under a tree, dressed in their winter coats with scarves, though Ai Wei was pulling hers off now as had grown warm from fuming.

"I want lunch," the girl said. "Since you have all the money, you're paying."

"Excuse me? You haven't paid me a single ryo of the amount that you owe me. Do you even have any money?"

"Argghh! Don't argue with me!" She pointed at him, grinning obnoxiously. "You may be my senior in age, but you're still an immigrant! Therefore, I exercise seniority."

Shikamaru yawned, stretching in his seat. "Go ahead, then. Seniors are the ones who are supposed to pay for their junior's food anyway..." A familiar chakra signature had him stirring and looking to the left, ignoring Ai Wei's ranting. "Hm? Deidara?"

The blonde woman was leaning against a tree a few metres away, seemingly lost in thought. Her chin was tilted toward the sky, and her eyes had this faraway expression.

Ai Wei's round face obscured his view. "Hello?" She turned to where Deidara was standing. "You know her or something?"

"Don't you?" Shikamaru retorted halfheartedly.

"I..." Ai Wei squinted before she cringed slightly. "Yes. Yes, I do. Wasn't she that killer's mistress? The one that got executed? How can she show her face in public like that, huh?! We should teach her a lesson!"

A muscle in Shikamaru's cheek twitched. "Oh yeah? Like what? Are you going to beat her up? Because I can bet all thirty thousand of those ryo you owe me that she'll kick your sorry ass, kid."

"What?!"

"Don't be annoying, Ai Wei." Shikamaru scowled.

"Eh?! Why are you suddenly so mad, huh?!"

"I'm mad," Shikamaru said lowly, "because for someone so smart, you can't seem to get your facts..."
right." He spun around, his countenance darkening. "Let me get you started by telling you that no one was executed on that day. If you read the paper, then you would know. If you even took the time to get your head out of your ass and listen for once instead of talking, then maybe you would know better."

"... You're being really mean today, y'know." Ai Wei muttered out her response, her fire gone. Upon looking closely, he could see it in her eyes how uneasy and upset she was about his reaction.

"... Sorry." The Nara let out a small sigh. "Lunch is on me." He started packing up the shogi board and the pieces. "C'mon, let's go."

"Um...!" Ai Wei lowered her gaze as she fiddled with a piece before flicking it to Shikamaru's waiting palm. "I'm sorry, too. But... did you really mean what you said?"

He didn't hesitate, answering as he popped the shogi board and pieces into a scroll. "Yeah. I did. Now what do you want—noodles or rice?"

"Uh, rice today! At Tomoko-oba's, of course. No one does fried rice better than her."

"'Kay. You go on ahead, I'll just be a moment." Tomoko's was just around the corner, anyway, so it would be fine.

"Mm! But don't take too long!"

As Ai Wei scurried away, Shikamaru approached Deidara, who didn't seem to have noticed him, his grip on the scroll tightening as he neared her. When he got within a five metre radius from her, she finally turned to his direction, her blue eyes gleaming.


"Hey yourself. What are you doing here?"

Deidara had seen Shikamaru coming from a mile away. Had known he was there with that little girl since she had arrived. It was almost unavoidable, from how heightened her senses had become after crawling out from a living nightmare. She'd learned to recognize their familiar, warm chakra signatures, identifying them from a sea of strangers.

"Hell if I know. I just needed to get away, hm."

Shikamaru glanced up at the sky, where the sun was just barely visible behind the clouds. It was getting close to mid-afternoon already. "If you have nothing to do right now, you should head over to the Gazette."

She perked up in interest. "Gazette?"

"Aa. The Leaf Gazette, where Fatso works. I was supposed to attend a job interview today to officially start working there, but I can't be bothered to go."

"Tch! Typical Nara, hm?" She tossed him a slight grin. "But why exactly do you want me to go there?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Shikamaru." Deidara's playfulness was gone, as well as Shikamaru's honorific. "I'm not a mind reader, so stop beating around the bush. And make it quick—isn't that kid waiting for you?"
"Today, three o'clock. Go to the interview in my place." Deidara's eyes widened slightly in surprise at how quickly he changed from musing to straightforward. "I'm not one to say please, so... Let me just say this bluntly. You're not in a good place right now. Everyone seems to be adjusting as best as they can, but you're the one that's most out of place. You know this, too." She stared blankly at him, but he knew she was paying close attention, even if she didn't want to. "I don't know what happened down there in the caves. I don't want to know, frankly. I'm not telling you to forget what happened, because I know you can't, but if you want to move forward, this is the first step." In the distance, they could hear Ai Wei call for Shikamaru. The younger teen started to backpedal. "Think about it."

It was only when he was gone that Deidara got her lips to move. "You..." What the hell, Nara? Should I thank you or bury you alive for that? She narrowed her eyes, glaring at the sky stretching out in front of her, taunting her with the illusion of endless possibilities. Then she relaxed her shoulders, pushing herself off the tree and walking off, her legs moving on autopilot. The Gazette, hm?

Sometimes, Deidara wondered why things turned out the way they did. Why good people died ("Why do the good people like otou-san die, okaa-san?" "When you're in a garden, which flowers do you pick?" "The prettiest ones."), why life was so fragile, so fleeting ("And when you pick them, what happens?" "They wilt faster."), and why bad things happened ("Why did you pick the flowers, musume-chan?" "Because they looked nice. I don't know. Is that bad?" "No. But sometimes bad things happen for no reason.")

She didn't like how these thoughts consumed her, as they had been doing lately. Before, she hadn't had enough time to do everything she wanted, so she spent the time she did have more on producing results rather than thinking about these pointless things.

Recently, time seemed to stretch like an endless, meandering road in front of her. There was suddenly so much of it, and she had nothing to occupy the space with. There was... simply nothing to do.

Which was why she found herself in a cluttered office, sitting in-between two other people. All three of them were facing none other than Akimichi Fatso, the atmosphere tense.

"Sir?" the girl on her left said hesitantly.

Deidara hadn't been expecting to be hired on the spot, but now that she thought about it, Shikamaru had probably planned this with that irritatingly big brain of his. She was thankful for the opportunity, but being shoved into a situation like this had her feeling off-kilter.

How had she ended up here anyway?

"You three... Pass!"

"What?" Deidara blurted as the girl beside her cheered, and the other candidate smiled. She ignored the girl, turning to the only person she was truly familiar with. "Choji?"

The chubby boy smiled sheepishly. "Ah, you see..."

"I'm so excited!" the girl next to Deidara babbled, her eyes like stars. "T-This is my dream job! Thank you so much, sir!"

Deidara sighed into her palm. "This was planned, wasn't it?"
"Well..." Choji hesitated. "Yeah, it kinda was."

Knew it. Everything went too well. Fatso hardly interviewed me, and he acted like he already knew the outcome before we even started. She wasn't sure how to feel about this. For her, things weren't supposed to come to her like this on a silver platter. Everything she had had up to this point, she had worked for it. Earned it. Having a job so easily handed to her... it left a bad taste in her mouth. But the job offered new opportunities—things that she definitely wouldn't have been able to secure without outside interference. Stability. An income. Reintegration into society. A future.

Deidara took a deep breath. "Thank you, Choji. Fatso-san," she acknowledged, "when do I start?"

"Today, of course! Your training, that is. We can't have you three wandering around the block without a clue of what to do or how to do it." With a great heave, Fatso placed a typewriter on his desk, papers scattering all over the place. "This here is what we use to write. It might look simple, but you have to learn how to use it with maximum efficiency." With a wave, he allowed them to admire it and touch it.

Intrigued, Deidara put her face close to the keys, noting the different kanji, hiragana, and katakana notations, each key numbered. Underneath the pale sunlight flitting through Fatso's blinds, the typewriter gleamed a proud, warm bronze.

"Amazing," Deidara's new female colleague said. "Are you going to teach us, sir?"

"No, no, I'm afraid not. I'll have to leave it to my assistants and others to help you. Speaking of, they should be coming very soon, so sit tight."

For the first time since she had arrived, Deidara allowed her mind to be filled with wonder and awe as she was guided through the use of the Leaf Gazette's gleaming typewriters. It was like the time she had watched and listened to Asuma tinker with the mechanics of his metalwork, the sight relaxing her and the sounds of tiny gears—or, in this case, tapping keys—soothing her being. Fatso had described them as simple, but Deidara found out that it wasn't so simple, and was astounded that she managed to grasp the general mechanics of it before her new colleagues. Prior to this, Choji had only been helping out his uncle with mere paperwork, and was completely inexperienced. The girl was learning faster than him, but tended to mix up her characters and made a lot of typos.

Deidara inched ahead, but by the end of the afternoon, the other two had almost caught up, their fingers trembling and their wrists aching. But it was a pleasant pain, they found, one that came from hard work.

"Good work, everyone!" Deidara glanced up from the tome she had been reading and translating its contents to its kanji variant as a practice exercise. They'd been placed in a room full of books and tables immediately after Fatso had dismissed them from his office hours ago. Now the broad Akimichi had appeared again, and looked quite pleased with the progress they had made. "Why don't I treat you all to dinner? My treat!"

"Ohh!" Deidara's new girl colleague—she had learned her name was Fumiko—beamed, completely erasing the tired, overworked expression she had had moments ago. "Thanks so much, sir! Come on, guys, let's go eat!"

"Sure, I'm down for it," Choji said agreeably. "Yakiniku Q again, Fatso-oji?"

Fatso let out a hearty laugh. "Of course! They serve the best barbecued meat in Konoha City! And you, Deidara? Would you like to come?"
"I…” Deidara glanced back at the translations she had been doing, sheets of typed up characters scattered all over the place. "Thank you, but I'll have to skip out, hm. I already made dinner plans, and I should clean this up." *Bring it home, more like. It'll give me something to work on.*

"Would you like a scroll?" Fatso produced one from his pants pocket. "You can use this to store up your typewriter." She blinked at him as he shoved the scroll into her hands. "Don't look so surprised, it's yours now, Deidara-san. Take care of it, won't you? Those things don't come cheap. And turn off the lights when you're done."

With that, they were gone. Only Choji had glanced backward once before leaving with the rest. As she organized her translations, Deidara could hear more voices joining Fumiko's and Fatso's. Humming quietly, she popped the now organized papers into the scroll, followed by the typewriter. Before she did, she admired it one last time under the yellow artificial light, tracing the pattern on the side of the machine that resembled leaves and flowers blooming in the spring. Then, with a small puff of smoke, she sealed it into the scroll with the papers.

Holding onto the scroll, she switched off the lights before exiting the building, which was gradually darkening as more and more people left their offices. There were some people still there, of course, working overtime; Deidara could see the lights of their working rooms left on. They'd likely be there past midnight.

As soon as she left the building, she was greeted by a strong gust of wind that whipped her hair back and chilled her cheeks. It had her throwing her coat on, buttoning it up expertly while somehow keeping hold of the scroll.

The moon was visible tonight; winter was going to be spring in a few weeks. Deidara tilted her chin skyward, gazing up at the white circle behind wispy clouds. From how large it hung in the sky, she felt as if she could almost reach up and snatch it from the air.

It was so close, yet so far away.

Her shoes tapped on concrete stairs as made her way back to the refugee centre, taking the rarely used route by the river to avoid the crowd.

*I wonder what you're doing now… Danna.* It'd only been a day since they had parted, yet it felt like it'd been so much longer, especially when she added up the week she had spent without him before the trial. She didn't like tempting fate, but Deidara had to silently ask, *When am I going to see you again, hm?*

She paused then, noticing the moon's reflection on the river, its waters flowing gently, lazily lapping at the bank. Then Deidara looked around, finding no one else present except her. She turned back to the water.

*What an underappreciated view.* Maybe it was old habit, maybe it was something else, but it had her reaching for her clay pouches, abruptly freezing when she realized that they weren't there. Deidara forced herself to relax, to calm her racing heart and loosen her grip on the scroll a little. *Nothing's wrong,* she told herself. There was no one here to kill her, no monsters here to tear out her viscera. Everything was fine.

Deidara took a step back, nearly biting her tongue when she walked straight into someone. A yelp sounded, and a female shout. She whipped around, meeting dark brown eyes that were widened in surprise. As if time had slowed down, Deidara reached out to grab her and make her upright again. She missed by inches, and the woman she had bumped into fell onto the path.
Before either of them could even say anything, the air was suddenly filled with barking, and a large
dog with a grey pelt and creamy white underbelly stood protectively in front of the brown-haired
woman. Deidara grimaced.

"Genmaru, down! Down!" The dog stared threateningly at Deidara for a few moments longer
before backing away, whining.

"Sorry," Deidara reached out an arm, "I didn't see you there, hm."

Inuzuka Hana stared at the hand she was offered. Then, hesitantly, she took it, Genmaru watching
their every move to make sure that the blonde wouldn't hurt his master. "Thank you," she said
hoarsely.

Deidara tilted her head. "I remember you. You were the waitress at the ramen place."

Hana chuckled dryly as she patted down the front of her worn shirt and pants. "Not anymore. I was
fired," she elaborated when Deidara looked at her confusedly.

"Your face is bruised, too," Deidara said bluntly, examining the hand-shaped mark on her
cheek. *And are those tattoos a clan sign?* They seemed like such, and she wondered why a
noblewoman would have been working such a dirty, common job. She'd been abused as well,
clearly.

"Ah…!" Embarrassed, the Inuzuka woman waved her hand dismissively. "It's nothing, I was just
clumsy. I should go now, if I want to have a place to sleep. Goodnight, Deidara." She started to
walk off, her dog loyally padding after her.

_How—? "Wait! How did you—?"

"I heard someone say it in the restaurant," Hana said over her shoulder.

"Then what's *your* name, hm?"

Deidara couldn't see it whatever expression the woman's face wore, but she could see the lines of
her body tense up underneath the moonlight. She narrowed her eyes, crossing her arms. In the cold,
her leg began to ache, but she was barely aware of it.

"Hana." The name was nearly lost in the wind. "Just Hana."

Deidara watched her leave, watched her disappear around the corner. Then she frowned and
exhaled, a wispy white cloud escaping from her lips. _It's getting late. I should go home._

The dirt crunched beneath her boots.

_Hey, Danna. I got a job today, you know. Shikamaru and Choji pulled some strings. When I have
money, I should buy them a present for helping me._

She glanced up at the moon one last time.

_What did you do today, hm?_

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Gee willikers, it's been a while. As you can see, we see defeated! Hana in this chapter...
Part V: Thyme

Chapter Summary

Sasori arrives in Rootbell Town. Deidara leaves Konoha City.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They arrived in Rootbell Town at sunrise. As the entered the guarded village, Sasori found that there was a relatively high population of civilians as well as military men and women.

"Okaa-chan, look! The ANBU are back!" a little boy on one of the low-level houses cried, pointing at them. His mother, who looked worse for wear, was hanging laundry on a metal wire. She gave them a wary look before returning to her duties as a homemaker.

*Look at this place.* Sasori frowned as the horses took them underneath some dirty, ragged flags. *Run-down and worn by time, and...* He eyed two soldiers that had just come out of a bar, laughing heartily. They were the *only* ones making any sort of remotely happy noise in these streets. *...Perhaps something else, too.* He could imagine that this had once been a prosperous town; despite how run-down it was, the architecture was firm and sturdy, and the town was built cleverly, backed by mountains and forests to protect them from natural disasters and enemies from the north and south. However, if an enemy were to break through the western frontier, this town would be in the immediate line of fire, their mountains and trees only serving to trap them. It was a double-edged sword, the very sort of thing Sasori was used to working with.

The lead ANBU, Cat, signaled something that had the rest of them—including Sasori, who was flanked on all sides by the four-man guard—turning left. Sasori had already committed some of their hand signals to memory, and did not need to be nudged in the correct direction by the ANBU behind him.

They passed by more flags, all of them half-down and flapping listlessly in the morning breeze, as if their ascension to the top of the poles in celebration had been abruptly halted.

A horrible smell reached his nose then, and Sasori narrowed his eyes in distaste at an old mill to their left, where two horses were slowly walking in a continuous circle in order to generate spin for the mill. When they got too sluggish, a rough-looking man with a hunched back whipped them viciously. The animals did not kick or whinny, they merely picked up the pace, as if they were used to such treatment.

"Poor creatures," Cat suddenly said, and Sasori raised an eyebrow when she—yes, she; the curves were hard to hide even with the ANBU cloak and armor—turned her head to stare at him through the black eye-holes of her feline mask. "They're old war horses. You can tell by the scars."

Yes, he had noticed. Sasori spared them one last glance before they disappeared from view, obscured by a protruding house. *They were once proud and strong creatures...* He had no trouble envisioning them in their prime, galloping off to war with their tough, sinewy bodies. *Reduced to such a state...* He clicked his tongue in disappointment.
The civilians in this town didn't seem to be any better, Sasori thought. They were skinny and wide-eyed, and their body language told many tales. These people were terrified, grieving, angry... *It's as if something's been taken away from them. Tch. If the high density of ANBU soldiers don't have anything to do with it, I'll eat all of my storage scrolls.*

The bell-tower in the middle of the city began to toll as Sasori and his ANBU guards approached a large military compound, an important-looking building sitting smack dab in the middle of the surrounding walls. The gates opened for them with a metallic squeal, and Sasori was immediately on guard. There were multiple soldiers within the vicinity, all of them raring to kill at any given moment if the killing intent they were giving off was any indication.

"Keep your head down, Akasuna no Sasori," Cat instructed without turning around. "In your current state, it would not be difficult for them to kill you."

They got off their horses when they reached a set of stairs leading up to the main building, their boots clicking on the concrete. The ANBU guard quickly reformed around Sasori. It felt strange to walk. Having his chakra flow cut off from important tenketsu points was an experience he hated.

Like the hand signals, Sasori committed the winding hallways of the house to memory as well, or at least the sections where they passed by. When they arrived in front of double paper doors with Konoha's symbol printed on the fabric, they paused. Then Cat threw open the doors and the ANBU marched him in.

The room smelled heavy of incense. Whoever owned this place was religious. Sasori could detect the faint scent of tea as well; it reminded him of his grandmother's tea.

"Danzo-sama," all of the ANBU intoned as they saluted to the man seated at the front of the room, kneeling upon one knee while they were at it. They had dispersed from formation as soon as they had entered the room.

Perhaps they felt like they were safer from him here, what, with all the guards in the room.

He felt Cat nudged his ribs roughly. Impressive, as he hadn't even seen her twitch. Roughly, he adopted the same form as them. "Danzo-sama," he addressed, grudgingly. *Shimura Danzo of the Konoha Council. He was the one who suggested execution.* Something told him that this man was used to getting what he wanted. When Tsunade had denied him of Sasori's death, the old conniver had likely found another way to get to him.

"Akasuna no Sasori." Danzo only acknowledged him, his single eye gleaming with interest. "Cat, Rabbit, Owl, Raccoon—dismissed."

"Hai, Danzo-sama."

Cat was the last to leave the room, shooting Sasori a quick glance before closing the double-doors behind her with nary a sound.

"You need not worry about prying ears," Danzo said, leaning comfortably in his chair. "The only ones privy to this know not to speak." Sasori side-eyed the masked warriors on all sides of the room. Unlike his ANBU guards, who all bore masks representing an animal, all of their masks were wholly nondescript.

"It's hard not to worry," Sasori said, slowly. "Nothing short of physically restraining them will keep their tongues in place."

"My assurances are still the same."
Boldly, Sasori walked right up to the table between them and took a seat opposite the old war-hawk. Danzo's guards tensed, but made no move to attack. "Hmph, don't keep me waiting then. Let's talk business, shall we?"

Danzo chuckled. Sasori wished he wouldn't do that. Such a sound wasn't meant to come out from a man like him. "Eager, I see... Very well, then. We must not waste time, so I'll keep this clear and concise. You are to be assimilated into my special forces," Danzo gestured at the still soldiers around them, "and carry out orders only from me. You will fight for me. Die for me. Your will will be mine." Danzo eyed the bands around Sasori's wrists, one of them larger than the other to accommodate his Zetsu arm. "We'll get rid of those and replace them with something better, not to suppress your charka, but your monster blood. Do I make myself clear?"

As he waited for Sasori's answer, Danzo poured himself and his guest a cup of tea. Sasori looked him straight in the eye as he held the cup to his mouth, covering his lower face with it.

"And if I refuse?"

"There are other methods. All have the same result."

Sasori's fingers tightened around the cup. His mouth was dry—he dared only to wet his lips with the tea, even if he had seen Danzo pour the tea into his own cup.

"It was worth a try. What do you need me to do?"

Danzo snapped his fingers, and a guard dropped from the ceiling with a box. If Sasori was surprised, he didn't show it, his eyes following Danzo's hand as he removed a small object from the ornate box.

Danzo took out a sealing brush and paint. "Open wide, Sasori-san."

"What is this?"

"The first seal. The second will be on your grey arm."

Sasori clenched his jaw. Then, reluctantly, he obeyed, even when the already present sense of wrongness pervaded his being even more. By the end of the sealing, his tongue was numb, and his Zetsu arm felt heavy, which was worrying in itself as it was normally light as air.

He could understand the arm seal, but he only had an assumption for his marked tongue. And assumptions were unacceptable, especially working under a man like Danzo.

"What the hell did you do to me?" he demanded, the question coming out as a growl from his throat.

"Merely a precaution. No one outside of ROOT will ever know about it."

Sasori froze. 'My assurances are still the same'. Of course... You sneaky bastard!

"Now that we have that sorted, I'd like for you to meet your partner. You will take missions together, sleep in the same quarters, and put your lives in each other's hands. Teamwork is something we like to emphasize in Konoha, even within ROOT."

"And who, pray tell, is that?" Sasori said dryly, crossing his arms. Beneath his sarcastic facade, he was a ball of simmering rage. As soon as Tsunade had sentenced him, his will had not been his own. In a way, it never had been, but cage was now smaller than ever. It infuriated him, especially
knowing that he had willingly acquiesced to it. *Not like there was ever another choice*...

"You can come in now... Sai."

The doors opened up and a pale boy with ink-black hair strolled into the room, immediately saluting to Danzo. It was in a different fashion than the ANBU guards had done, and Sasori instantly knew that he would be saluting like that from now on.

"Introduce yourself," Danzo instructed. He smirked. "And take him around town. Our new member needs to know the stronghold like the back of his hand."

"Hai, Danzo-sama." The boy turned to Sasori, smiling so falsely that Sasori had to deadpan. "It is nice to meet you. I am Sai."

Sai led Sasori out of the room, smiling all the way. Before they left, Sasori halted, glowering at Danzo. "I won't forget this, old man."

The doors shut, and Danzo smiled woodenly. "I don't expect you to, Akasuna no Sasori... Slaves should never forget their master."

Nobody stopped them on their way out, or even glanced in their direction. Sasori wondered if the seals he had received somehow connected them with the other ROOT members.

"Where would you like to go first?" Sai asked robotically.

"Aren't you supposed to be the tour guide here?" the red-haired man retorted cuttingly. "I can't believe some brat like you is supposed to be my partner."

"Oh. Would you prefer a different one?"


"Then that is a shame. I cannot change Danzo-sama's decision, Prickly."

"... What did you just call me?" Sasori whipped around, glaring daggers at Sai's mechanically smiling face.

"Prickly, of course. Short for Prickly Bastard, long for Prick. Why don't we go to the stables?"

Sasori followed Sai, fuming all the way. He had not bathed or eaten or even slept in over twenty-four hours and now this boy was testing his patience. "I'm not a bastard, you pale-faced freak." He would have said more, but the lack of sleep was doing him no favors.

"Really? Because from what I've been told, you are thirty years old and hail from Sunagakure. Of all the Great Nations, Suna has only just caught up to the other countries in terms of development. Reliable birth control was introduced in the last twenty-five years. You were born five to six years before then, so there is a very likely chance that you are, in fact, a bastard." Sai tilted his head to the side when Sasori hurled a discarded horseshoe at him. The horseshoe crashed into a wooden shack.

"Not. Another. Word."

Sai shrugged. He swept past Sasori to reach out to one of the bleary-eyed horses in the stables. He held up a gloved hand, and the animal buried its nose gently into his palm. Then he used his free hand to unhook a blank drawing scroll on his belt and a calligraphy brush. There was a tiny seal
inked on the side of the brush that piqued Sasori's curiosity—which was quickly sated when ink began to seep from the brush and onto the paper. He did not recognize the seal—it must have been a Konoha creation.

"What are you doing?" Sasori inquired shortly when Sai began to mess around with the brush and paper.

"My art," Sai said simply.

Art? Sasori walked forward until he was peering over Sai's shoulder, watching him paint a strange humanoid shape near the top end of the scroll. "Tsk. That looks absolutely ridiculous." He snatched the paper from Sai, who did not protest, merely watching with those coal-black eyes of his. "This is not true art." He tore the paper in two. "Art is something that lasts forever—not something that can be so easily destroyed like this." Spitefully, he dropped the paper on the ground, crossing his arms as he waited for Sai to react. To get angry. To defend his art.

But he didn't. He merely picked up the pieces and smiled that annoyingly plastic smile. "You are strange, Prickly." Then he started to walk away to the nearest disposal bin.

"That's it?" Sasori went after him. "You're not going to defend your work? Hmph. And here I thought that you might just be worth my time. Pretender." Come on, brat. Get angry. What are you waiting for?

Sai merely kept on smiling, never faltering once. Sasori didn't follow him when he returned to the horse, petting the beast.

Some tour guide he turned out to be. Sasori looked up at the sky, checking for the time. It was still very early. So Sasori left Sai to enjoy himself with the horses, stalking off to tour the town by himself. He'd seen it when he'd crossed the mountains—it was not big, and he would probably be finished by noon. After that, he wasn't sure he would do, but he trusted that Danzo would call for him if he was needed. But if this backwater town had a store which sold quality wood and tools, he'd make sure that he knew where it was.

The township felt oddly deserted, even though there were plenty of people going about their day. Nobody spoke to one another unless they needed something; all of them kept their heads low, and the only voices that he could here were the gruff brogues of the soldiers and the high-pitched squeals of children who didn't know how to read the mood.

There were a few street stands set up, all sorts of trinkets on sale and shining under the pale sunlight. Most of the vendors were elderly members of the community, but there were a few young men and women working as well, dark circles under their eyes as shoppers attempted to haggle with them. Sometimes, voices raised, but one look from an ANBU soldier would shut them up.

"Excuse me, young man." Sasori turned to see an elderly woman with a large wart on her nose waving him over, inviting him to take a look at what she was selling. She looked remarkably witch-like, Sasori thought, but there was an underlying gentleness in her countenance, so he decided to appease her. If he even got paid for his conscription (he doubted it), he hadn't received a single ryo of it yet, so there was nothing he would be able to buy. He glanced over at the stall next to the witch-woman's; a young lady was selling shrunken vegetables for dirt-cheap. The woman gestured dramatically at her wares with her knotted hands. "I'm a sure a man like you has a woman waiting for you back home—why don't you take one of my jewels for her?"

Jewels, huh? Sasori picked an emerald brooch up and inspected it. He was no expert on jewelry, but they didn't seem as badly crafted as he had first thought. Did Deidara even like jewelry? he
wondered. There was so much he had yet to find out about her, and it only served to remind him that if he wasn't careful, his time on this earth would be cut short. He wasn't just living for himself anymore—he was living for her as well. The red-haired man placed the jewel back to its original place, another one catching his eye.

It was a blue brooch; the same shade of blue as her eyes. When he held it toward the sun, it glimmered ethereally.

There was a heavy feeling in his heart when he was forced to return it to the vendor. "I have no money," he admitted, prepared for the woman to shoo him away.

"Money?" The woman blinked in surprise. "You're part of the ANBU Corps, aren't you? I can see their symbol on your cloak. Why would you need money?"

What? Sasori's silent question was answered when an soldier sauntered up to the vegetable stall the young lady was running. She did nothing as he snatched a radish from the display and walked off, merely looked down at her feet sadly. Nobody offered her any sympathy, so she squared her shoulders as best as she could and called out invitingly to customers when an all-civilian crowd walked by.

Before Sasori could reply, a brown-haired, plain-faced teenager came hobbling up to the stall with a wooden crutch. "Baba! Baba!" He puffed in exertion as he finally reached them. "What are you doing? Stop giving away our goods to soldiers!"

"Aiyah!" the witch-woman scoffed, shaking a fist at her grandson. "This is my store, not yours, you naughty boy! If I want to give things away, then don't stop me!"

The boy pointed accusingly at Sasori, who merely stared back blankly. "He's one of them!" the boy hissed hatefully. "A soldier! Have you forgotten what they've done to this town?"

"Not so loud!" To Sasori, she said apologetically. "Sorry about my grandson, ANBU-san. He can be very unruly. "A soldier! Have you forgotten what they've done to this town?"

Sasori reached out a hand; from his periphery he could see the boy glowing helplessly at the situation. He was as skinny as a stick, and his complexion wasn't healthy for a boy his age. To their left, the young woman running the vegetable stall was looking away, her brow furrowed guiltily.

The teenage boy made a spluttering noise when Sasori gently closed the old woman's fingers around the jewels. "Keep it. I have no need for such trinkets." A little girl and her mother came up from behind, the mother trying hard to reel the girl in; the child was trying to take a closer look at the witch-woman's jewels. They might have only been trinkets to him, but to the witch-woman and her grandson, they were their source of income. Sasori stepped back to make room for the child and her mother, his monster arm accidentally jostling the stall. The blue brooch he had picked up early fell to the ground, gaining the attention of the little girl.

"Excuse me," she picked it up and held it to him shyly, "is this yours, ANBU-san?"

He stared at her wordlessly, then looked up to the witch-woman and her grandson. The teenage boy seemed to have calmed down significantly, and the old woman was nodding slightly.

So, sighing, Sasori took the brooch from her. "Yes. Thank you."

"Y-you're welcome!"
He didn't want to stay any longer, lest they do something foolish like invite him for tea or something. So he left them to barter; the last thing he heard from them was the small girl asking her mother if she could pretty please buy all of them.

"That was nice of you."

Sasori snapped his head upward, eyes focusing on the figure seated on a nearby rooftop. "Oh yeah?" Without even batting an eyelash, he used a stack of wooden boxes leaning against the side of the building to launch himself up on the rooftop. "I think you'll find that that's the furthest extent my niceties go."

Cat laughed, the sound oddly feminine. Perhaps he was just used to hearing more male soldiers. Then she did something unexpected—she took off her mask, revealing her pretty face. "I'm off-duty right now," she clarified. "So you can call me Uzuki-san, Akasuna no Sasori."

Uzuki Yugao and Akasuna no Sasori stood on the roof of an inn, staring down one another. Then—

"Just Sasori."

"Well then, Sasori-san..." Yugao smirked. "I hope you don't die too soon, even if you deserve it. That would be..." She stepped backward off the roof. "Disappointing."

When he looked downward a few seconds later, a draft of wind brushing against his cheeks and pushing some of his hair back, he could see her figure disappearing into the distance, her hips swaying seductively.

"Hmph." Sasori straightened his back and stretched, feeling some joints pop. "At the very least, she's an improvement from the porcelain-doll-brat..." He held the cornflower brooch up, examining it's shine. But she's not you.

It was a week into her new job when Deidara encountered Chiyo, who looked more excited than she had been in a long time. It was a rare sight to see Chiyo worked up about anything.

"Chiyo-baa?" Deidara said uncertainly, when the old woman grasped her shoulders. "What happened, yeah?"

"Girl! Pack your bags, because we're moving!"

"What?"

It turned out that Chiyo had been playing mahjong with a few other ladies every day for almost two weeks now. With money being staked. Old Rio's mahjong teachings turned out to be very useful for Chiyo, who had managed to earn a small apartment flat after winning against a landlady the other day. The papers had just been signed, and now Chiyo had full ownership of the little flat.

It was a basic place, Deidara soon found, but a definite improvement from the squashed environment at the refugee centre.

"Are you sure you want me here?" Deidara looked around skeptically.

"Bah! Of course! I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm very fond of you, Deidara." Smiling, Chiyo took her by the hands, looked her in the eye, and said, "I'm glad someone like you is in my
foolish grandson's life. You will make an excellent wife for him, and you're one of the few women I can actually tolerate and rely on."

"I... I don't know what to say——"

"Then don't. You don't need to say anything, girl." The old woman smiled craftily. "Our little family is almost complete. Why don't we just wait for the last member to come back? Oh, I also took a few liberties with the store room..." Chiyo led Deidara to the third room in the flat, and she almost choked when she saw what Chiyo had in store for her.

It was a studio. An art studio. There were already blocks of expensive clay just waiting for her on one side of the room. On the other side of the studio were tools clearly intended for woodworking.

"When he comes back, I want him to spend his days with you, not someone old and withered like me." Chiyo opened the curtains on Deidara's side of the room, letting sunlight trickle in. "And what better way is there? And forget about paying me back, girl—I won all of this from mahjong. At least that Rio was good for something. Now get to work!" she suddenly snapped at Deidara, whose eyes widened, partly from shock at the big reveal. "By the time I'm done with dinner, I want there to be dozens of those grotesque centipedes of yours crawling all over the ceiling."

Deidara couldn't hold it in. She laughed. Laughed, and maybe cried a little, but mostly laughed at the sheer absurdity of it all. Then she opened a pack of clay, reveling in the feel of it in her palms. It brought comfort to her, even when she could no longer use her right hand for her artistic pursuits. She set immediately to work, passing the time by creating all sorts of creatures, mostly ones with many legs or oddly shaped bodies. They were the kinds of creatures that fascinated her.

She lost herself in her art. She forgot about the number on her neck, the perpetual pain that came with her prosthetic. She forgot the pain in her heart, the burn scars on her body, and gouge beneath her eye. She forgot about the distance between her and Sasori; while she worked, he was looking over her shoulder and constructing more of his puppets.

The moon was high in the sky when Chiyo popped her head into the room, announcing, "It's time for dinner. Are those centipedes done yet? I don't see them on the ceiling."

In response, Deidara held out an arm, and a medium-sized centipede wrapped itself around her limb, its antennae vibrating and pincers clicking. "Yeah, but I don't think you'd be too happy having clay spots on the your ceiling. Danna might accuse me of encroaching on his territory, hm, if it gets on his side of the studio."

"I don't care," Chiyo told her, "as long as you don't forget about who you are."

"Funny," Deidara said as she closed the door behind them, the smell of meat and vegetables enticing her, "he told me the same thing."

"I can't stand it!" Fumiko declared one day, hands on her hips as she addressed Deidara and Choji in their shared workroom. "Look how depressing this place is. How can you guys work like that?"

"Like what, hm?" Deidara said absently, not looking up from the tome she was reading. There was a clay bird perched on her shoulder that resembled a miniature dragon than anything else. Occasionally, she would scratch its chin as if it were a real, breathing creature.

"You guys are so into your jobs," said Fumiko, crossing her arms. "I guess you're not affected by the work environment like me."
"That's not true," Choji protested mildly. "I get what you mean, Fumiko-san." He looked out the window, at the grey world beyond. "I guess that's just what war does, huh?"

At that, Deidara looked up from her book. "War. Tch." She sneered. "What good has that ever done us? War's the very reason why we're even here..."

Fumiko, who was sitting on a table with a typewriter in her lap, breathed out a sigh, swinging her legs. "War... it's something hard to avoid in the material world. People fight over things all the time, no matter how stupid. I just wish they could open their eyes and look around them!"

Deidara grumbled. "Tell me about it, yeah." She joined Choji by the window, watching people go about their day, absolutely spiritless. It wasn't as bad here, she had to guess, since Konoha City was where all the rich people lived, the capital city of the entire country. She couldn't imagine what it was like in the outer towns and cities.

There was a period of silence after that, Choji and Deidara returning to their work while Fumiko frowned at the wall.

"Deidara," Choji started. "I'm glad you're getting better."

"Huh?" She blinked at him, midway through flipping a page. "Oh... It's a work in progress, hm. You know, Choji... I'm not the only one suffering, yeah. Don't be too worried about me."

Choji smiled weakly. "It's hard not to. Out of all of us, you're the one who's changed the most."

She paused in her typing. "Do you really think that?"

"Well, yeah. We're all colder now, we've seen more and know more about the world we live in. But I stand by what I said—you've changed the most."

"I doubt it, hm. The others are just better at hiding it..."

"Yeah, maybe..."

Her art could only do so much. It was a window of escape for her, but she would always be dragged back into the jaws of reality. Her everyday life was mostly mundane. She spent most of her days with Rin, sometimes with Itachi and Kagami as well. Occasionally, Kakashi. And, of course, she would see Chiyo every day when she got home after a long day of writing reports, articles, and translating foreign papers.

And when she wasn't occupied with her own life, she thought of the life of another. Hana. After that night by the river, Deidara hadn't seen the brown-haired woman at all. Then again, the city was big, busy, and bustling, so it was no wonder what they hadn't seen each other. She wondered if Hana was still alive, and what she would do if they encountered one another again. For a noblewoman, she was too scrawny and dirty. Now that she was eating properly again, even Deidara had a healthier glow in her cheeks than what she had last seen of Hana.

Hana had suffered, too.

Maybe it was just her curiosity, but she wanted to know what kind of experiences she had gone through. Noblewomen weren't meant to experience hardships at all. But then she thought of Hinata, Hanabi, Ino, and... Hitomi.

"People do bad things because we don't know how to empathize with one another," Fumiko said out of the blue. When Deidara and Choji gave her quizzical looks, she held up the book she had
been flipping through. "That's what it says here. If we all knew how each other was suffering, then maybe we wouldn't do all the bad things that we do. Which means no wars being fought... Personally, in a city like this, I think a little awareness is what we all need. Konohagakure's been touched by war, but to people here, it doesn't seem as real." She flipped through the book. "We hide our feelings because we're scared that we'll be ridiculed by others; we're scared that they won't understand." It was clear that she was just reading from the text.

"What is that book?" Choji inquired.

Fumiko closed it. "The Diary of Sarutobi Sasuke. I think these were written when he was very young... In a way, I agree with him. We're all so unaware of each other, it's crazy."

"Crazy, hm?" Deidara typed the final sentence on her typewriter, the clay bird on her shoulder making a clicking noise to imitate the sound of the bronze keys. "Yeah, it is crazy, isn't it? But what can we do about it?"

Choji and Fumiko continued to talk, but their conversation faded into the background for Deidara.

Stopping wars... that's impossible. Deidara closed the tome. Isn't it?

She was just about to leave when she nearly walked into the boss himself.

"Deidara-san! Am I glad that I ran into you!" Fatso exclaimed. "Could I have a word with you?"

Choji and Fumiko, who she'd been walking with, exchanged a glance and waved to Deidara before leaving without her.

"What is it, Fatso-san?" He led her to his office, where he proceeded to sit her down.

"There was a question in the interview that I wanted to ask but didn't get to."

*You've already hired me, old man.* Deidara tensed in her seat. *Why didn't you ask this when you were supposed to, hm?* Outwardly, she kept her face neutral, looking Fatso right in the eye.

Fatso didn't waste anymore time.

"What do you want to go from here, Deidara-san?"

"I... What?" *How is this related to anything?* Deidara's brow lowered as she contemplated the question.

"Take your time," Fatso told her.

She thought, and thought, but couldn't find an answer that satisfied her. The answer she gave wasn't very satisfying either. "I don't know."

"Are you lost, then?"

*Lost on what? The road of life?* Deidara wanted badly to snort and roll her eyes at the notion, but the question was staring at her in the face, and she couldn't look away. So she settled for silence.

Fatso sighed, pulling out a sheet of paper from his desk drawer. "I'd suspected. You seem a lot brighter than when I first met you, but it's like you're trapped in a glass cage. So I can only do one thing for you, Deidara: set you free."
"You're firing me?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"No, no, you misunderstood." He pushed the paper across the desk, toward her. "But being stuck in this shabby old building all day isn't the place for you. Choji's doing well here, as is Fumiko-san, but you're not, no matter how much you pretend you are. You don't belong here, but I can find a place for you without laying you off." As she read the paper with confusion on her face, he went on, "The project I am assigning you will be something you will have to tackle by yourself. It'll encompass the whole year starting from now, and it'll require many hours of travelling. I've been planning to give this assignment to someone for a while now, but then you came along, and, well... I figured that you're the best person for the job. Not just for the readers, or the people I have on this list, but for yourself, too." Fatso took out a bottle of sake and poured himself a glass. "A fatal flaw we have in the big city is that we lack the ability to empathize. But you and Choji—especially you—are different from the rest of us fat cats. You've seen the world before finding yourselves in this big dome. You've lived the war, or a side of it at least. You and your friends got the opportunity to tell your stories at the trial, but there are those... who simply have no voices left."

Deidara regarded him warily. "... What exactly is my job, hm?"

"Go out to Konohagakure and tell the stories of those who cannot. The Gazette will pay for all of your lodgings and other necessities. You'll need to pack your clothes, and your typewriter as a minimum. The list of names I have here are people who I want you to approach and write for. It won't be easy—they won't trust you with their feelings, and who can blame them?—but I believe in you."

Deidara read the list again.

This wasn't just an assignment—it was an opportunity. She doubted that she'd be stopping wars anytime soon, but...

She exhaled. "When do I start?"

Deidara brought only a few things with her, which she carried in a brown case, those items contained in separate scrolls which made her case rattle.

A spare change of clothes, her typewriter, clay, and Sarutobi Sasuke's diary with the list of names that Fatso had given her tucked between the pages of the leather-bound book.

She wore her eyescope today, hiding it partly behind her hair.

"All aboard!" The boat made a low horn-like sound as Deidara stepped up the gangplank.

On the docks, Rin and Itachi were there, the former waving to her and telling her to write often. Itachi’s face was as impassive as usual; he was holding his child in his arms. Deidara wondered how he was coping with raising Izuna by himself. She knew that Rin would help him if nobody else would.

The woman next to Deidara started to cry, waving at her sisters who were also crying at the docks. "I promise I'll write!" the woman sobbed. "Goodbye, Ina, goodbye, Yuna!"

Slowly, the docks drifted further and further away.

Then they were gone.

And Deidara sighed through her nose before taking a deep breath, smelling the salt on the wind.
Then she looked at the first name on the list.

*Inuzuka Tsume.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: What do I even put here? Inspired by Violet Evergarden? Because it sure was.
Part V: Ivy

Chapter Summary

Why did you /leave/ me, Itachi?

Or: Itachi tries his best.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The clock had just struck midnight when a mournful crying echoed throughout the house, sending Itachi jolting up in his seat. His eyes were bleary from lack of sleep, his nightshirt hanging on his shoulders. He'd lost a lot of his muscle during the the occupation of Akatsuki, but was slowly rebuilding his physical conditioning (though it was slow; to the point where he thought he was losing weight instead). In front of him were scattered papers of contracts. He would know. He'd read all of the fine print, and had signed eighteen out of twenty-five of them.

Turning down his oil lantern to as low as it got, Itachi got out of his seat, tossing his pen on his worktable. As he wandered down the corridor, he couldn't help but notice how empty his new house seemed. It'd been sheer luck that his father had not removed his name as heir since the last time Fugaku had corresponded with Konoha, so all of their properties (and funds) went to him in his father's absence. He'd sold almost all of them, leaving just two for himself: the house he was occupying and a building in the marketplace.

Hesitantly, Itachi levitated his hand over the doorknob of his son's room. Izuna continued to cry inside, unaware of his father's stalling. Then Itachi turned the knob, pushing the door open and heading for the crib.

Gingerly, he lifted the baby from his bed, holding him close to his chest.

"Shh... don't cry, I'm here now." Initially, Izuna did not cease his wailing. But Itachi continued to hold him, more stiffly than before. Was he hungry? Had he soiled himself? Did he need to be burped? He was relieved when Izuna calmed down to the sound of Itachi's heartbeat. "Did you have a bad dream?" Itachi murmured, pressing his cheek gently against Izuna's.

Izuna squirmed, looking up at him confusedly. As if Itachi wasn't the person he'd been expecting.

Where's okaa-san? his eyes seemed to ask.

Itachi stared back, speechless.

Izuna's face reddened and scrunched up again, and he started to cry at the top of his longs. Panicking and frazzled, Itachi bobbed him up and down at what he hoped was a soothing pace.

"I'm sorry," Itachi apologized. "I can never give you want you want. I'm sorry, son." Izuna was fast approaching two months old. He'd spent almost a month without his mother to suckle from, without his mother to hold him. His child cried and cried, and Itachi slumped against the wall, sliding down.
He didn't know how long he sat there for, utterly defeated.

Eventually, Izuna cried himself to sleep. Itachi place him back in the crib, pulling the blankets over his tiny, breakable frame. He dried his son's tears with his sleeve, collecting his snot as well.

After observing his son for a few more moments, Itachi exited the room, holding up his clean sleeve to his mouth. He ran down the hall as he coughed, not wanting his son to hear the horrible noise. When it was over, Itachi examined his now soiled sleeve.

Specks of blood and phlegm greeted him.

Silently, Itachi returned to his worktable, trying to curb the feeling of dread that was sneaking up on him.

He had another seven more multi-paged documents to read through and sign.

A lot of the times, he had people over for dinner. He liked it—it added warmth and feeling to this hollow husk of a house. Tonight, Kakashi was making an eggplant curry dish with Rin while Deidara sat in the living room, entertaining Daichi and Hikari with her silly, amusing tricks.

"Kakashi-kun!" Rin exclaimed, fondly exasperated. "You didn't need to add that much chili inside!"

Itachi, setting the table, glanced toward the connected kitchen with faint amusement. Kakashi—he was without his mask today—eye-smiled at his brown-haired friend.

"Mou, it's more exciting that way, Rin-chan." He smeared curry sauce on her cheek, making her squawk. "We need a little more spice in our lives. Right, Itachi?"

"If you want," Itachi said noncommittally, earning a giggle from Rin. He let them banter between themselves, turning his raven gaze to where the living room was. Deidara had a several clay flying animals out—bats, birds, butterflies (or were they moths?)—fluttering them just out of reach from Hikari whenever the little girl tried to catch them. Daichi was lounging on the coach, trying to pretend such childish machinations didn't interest him. He lost eventually, trying to catch Deidara's clay monsters with a scowl on his face.

"Ne, you're getting too slow, Daichi-kun!" Deidara taunted, grinning haughtily. She'd moved in with Chiyo recently, and it warmed Itachi's heart to see her get some of her old spark back. Her art would never betray her, he knew, and he was glad that she was taking steps in the right direction. Not many knew, but she'd been afraid to work on her art again, convinced that it would never be the same. He didn't know what had pushed her into it again. Perhaps it was just a natural attraction that she couldn't fight. She had, of course, been doing her art ever since young.

"I'll teach you slow!" Daichi grumbled when he missed a butterfly (moth?) by inches.

Daichi never caught the clay bug. Rin announced dinner, and Deidara put her creatures away into her bag, shooing the children to the dining room.

Itachi's household was a more traditional one—they all sat at a low-standng table with mats as seats. Eggplant curry and gyoza for the kids were tonight's dinner; each of them had a bowl of rice in front of them.

"Itadakimasu!"
As expected, Daichi and Hikari went for the gyoza right away, Rin smacking Daichi's hand lightly when he tried to go for a second one without finishing the first. Kakashi was more languid in serving himself, slowly pouring curry sauce all over his rice before adding eggplant, egg, and meat—ground beef, it seemed like.

Barely an hour later, the curry bowl was scraped clean, and the gyoza had all been vacuumed up ravenous Uchiha children. Itachi wished that there was dessert, but he hadn't bought any.

"We'll do the dishes," Itachi said when the topic came up, volunteering himself and Deidara. "Since you cooked."

"You don't mind?" Rin asked. "You were the one who made the rice, Itachi."

Deidara waved her off. "It's fine, hm. We don't mind."

And so Kakashi and Rin settled themselves in the living room with the kids, while Deidara and Itachi got to work, rolling their sleeves up.

"I heard you were recently hired," Itachi started casually, passing a pair of chopsticks to Deidara.

"Yeah." She rubbed dish soap on the utensils before running it under the hot water. She didn't even react at the scalding liquid spraying across her hand and turning it an angry red. "It was just luck, really." Deidara placed the chopsticks in the drying rack, making a small, appreciative noise at how modern Itachi's new house was. It wasn't as big as the mansion had been, but it wasn't exactly small either. "Shikamaru and Choji pulled a few strings, and now I'm working as a translator and general assistant at the Leaf Gazette, hm."

"Translator?" His interest was piqued.

"Yep—old Iwaspeak to modern Japanese. Did you know a lot of old Iwa plays were written in Iwaspeak?"

"No, I didn't," Itachi replied honestly. "I didn't realize you're into theater, Deidara."

"Hmm..." She smiled with just a hint of nostalgia. "It was hard not to get into it. I spent a lot of my childhood days running around and learning taijutsu to beat up boys, but my mother took me to the theater a lot, yeah."

"And you liked it?"

"I loved it." The raw candor in her voice almost had Itachi dropping the bowl he was washing. He stared at her curiously, and she chuckled, a little abashed. "I wanted my mother to sign me up for classes immediately. Turned out, though, that I have absolutely no talent in acting, hm." Deidara paused. "Hey..."

"Yes?"

"I'm leaving the city tomorrow." He passed her a bowl. "It's a work thing, yeah. I don't know when I'll be back, so..." Deidara trailed off, looking away. "I just thought I should tell you."

"... Why?"

She shot him an annoyed glance. "Because we're friends, Itachi."

Yes, they were, weren't they? "Sorry." He turned off the tap. "Do you want me to see you
off?" Like you did with Sasori?

Deidara shrugged, wiping the last bowl she had in her hands. "I don't mind, hm, but I'd like that. It won't be where Sasori-no-Danna left—I'll be taking a boat to another town on the eastern side of the continent. It's still in the country, but the walls don't reach the docks. Say—where's Izuna, hm? I haven't seen him all night."

"Asleep—"

A crying started.

Itachi sighed. "Or, at least, he was until just then. Excuse me..." He tore off his apron and hung it on a random drawer-knob, racing for Izuna's room. When he got there, Rin and Kakashi were already there, the latter handing the former a cloth diaper.

"He's soiled himself, the little one," Rin informed Itachi, expertly wiping Izuna clean and then putting on the fresh diaper. Kakashi looked pale as he carried the old one out of the room, making a straight beeline for the nearest bin. "It looks like he's been sitting in in there for a while now. You'll have to wash him after."

"I..." Itachi faltered. "I didn't realize..." I'm sorry, Izuna. How could I have not known?

"It's hard to tell when Izuna doesn't cry all that much." Itachi didn't like how Rin was excusing his mistakes, but let it slide. "Just be a little more observant next time, and you'll be fine." Rin lifted a finger. "Oh, and don't leave him unattended for long periods of time. I'm not sure about Izuna, but when Hikari was his age, she would get into trouble all the time."

"I'll keep that in mind," Itachi appeased, strained. "Thank you, Rin."

She lifted the baby and placed him in his arms. Izuna blinked up at his father, wide-eyed. Itachi nearly fell onto his knees then. Everybody kept saying how much Izuna looked like him, but in that moment, all he could see was...

"It's getting late," Rin declared. "Deidara's told you that she's going tomorrow right? We should sleep early if we want to see her off. Goodnight, Itachi."

When everybody was gone, the house felt unimaginably empty again.

Disappointment settled like a stone in his stomach.

Content in his arms, Izuna cooed.

Sighing, Itachi tickled his cheek. "Come on, little one—bath time."

Why didn't you save me?

Itachi...

Why did you leave me?

Itachi awoke with a gasp, sitting up in his bed with his arm outstretched. His chest heaved, and sweat beaded at his temple. "Izumi..." Trembling, he let his arm fall unceremoniously to his side, trying hard to get his breathing back under control. Her name echoed throughout the house.
Frantically, Itachi tossed his blankets aside and ran to where Izuna should have been sleeping.

*Please—*

*He's all that's left of her—*

He could not even begin to describe how relieving it was to discover Izuna in his crib, sleeping soundly. Itachi closed the door before slumping against it, his face buried in his knees.

*Izumi...*

*Come back to me.*

"I'll miss you," Rin said as she hugged Deidara tightly. "You'd better write, you hear?"

"Of course, yeah," Deidara promised, squeezing Rin as she returned the embrace. "I'll write as soon as I get there. Assuming that there's a post office, hm."

Itachi, with Izuna in his arms (he'd taken Rin's advice to heart), stood a little behind the ladies, watching them as they came closer to the verge of tears. He wasn't quite sure what he was feeling.

But that feeling amplified when Deidara hugged him sincerely before disappearing into the gathered crowd and then reappearing up on the gangplank. She looked back at them once, waved, and then headed up to the deck with her briefcase in tow. She looked so professional, even with that eyescope on her face. It was like... she had grown up, in a way.

His mouth grew dry.

He knew what it was now, as he and Rin watched the boat disappear into the horizon, becoming a black dot until there was nothing left except the line separating the sea from the sky. It was as if he were watching another loved one exit from his life.

"She'll be back, you know," Rin said when she noticed the disquieted expression on his face.

"Aa. I know. Let's go—have you eaten breakfast yet?"

She shook her head as they left the docks, the scent of the sea leaving his nostrils. "No, it was too early for that. But I'm famished now, and I only have about an hour to eat before I have to head down to the Leaf Junior Academy."

Itachi blinked in surprise. "You're enrolling them?"

"Yes." Rin shot him a side smile. "I've taken up two jobs, recently, to pay for their school fees. It's why I haven't been coming around too often. Tsunade-sama was kind enough to hire me as a hospital receptionist, and I also got a job at the florist by the refugee centre."

"You could always come live with me. Money won't be a problem."

"Thank you, Itachi, but..." Rin glanced up at the morning sky. "I want to stand on my own two feet. It wouldn't feel right if I were to live off the Uchiha trust fund. I might have married in, but..." She smiled a little sadly. "I'm still a Nohara at heart."

"That is admirable," Itachi admitted. "I hope everything goes well for you, Rin."

"I hope so, too."
Itachi couldn't help but feel out of place when Shimizu Asagi came over with her son on the same day that he was looking after Daichi and Hikari while their mother went to her weekend job as a florist's assistant. The kids were no trouble—Daichi and Hikari were more concerned about looking good in their uniforms and buying school supplies than making a fuss. Shogo joined in with them, stating that he wished to go to school as well. But...

"Ah, there he is!" Asagi smiled sweetly as she picked up Izuna with no hesitation at all, as if she were the one who had given birth to him and not... Izumi. Itachi wasn't sure if it was for better or worse that Izuna reacted positively to Asagi, cooing in delight and pulling at her lovely brown locks. She wore her hair in a similar style to which Izumi had—a low bun with some strands of hair framing her narrow face. "Hello, darling." She looked at him the same way that she looked at her biological son, Itachi noticed.

She might not have given birth to him, but Asagi truly loved Izuna with all of her heart.

Again, Itachi was conflicted that Asagi did not have a lot of time to give to Izuna. Her mother had entered hospice care a few weeks ago, and Asagi had been staying with her almost every day.

"How have you been?" Itachi asked as Asagi cuddled Izuna, both of them sitting on the couch. The kids were sitting on the floor, messing about with their uniforms and worn textbooks (which had been donated by the school).

Asagi smiled at him serenely. "As well as I can be. I've been seeing one of the doctors they have at the centre for my nightmares. I think it's getting better—I haven't had a bad dream for a while now." She paused, tapping her chin. "I believe that the Hyuuga sisters see the same doctor, actually."

Oh? This was news to him. It did not surprise him that some of them would seek professional help after what they had all been through, but...

"I think you should go, too," Asagi told him, her smile turning a little apologetic. "I don't mean anything by it—but it's good to have someone to guide you through it."

"I..."

*Why did you leave me, Itachi?*

"I'll think about it."

The next time Itachi saw the Hyuuga sisters, the school semester had already begun, with Daichi and Hikari setting off to school. In fact, it was exactly two days after that that he saw Hinata and Hanabi at the school gates when he went to pick up Daichi and Hikari from school. Students were allowed to leave with a guardian during lunchtimes and return to school before their next class.

Hanabi, surprisingly, was wearing a school uniform. And she looked extremely cross about it, too, while Hinata was covering her mouth as she laughed. He didn't know why, but Naruto and Sasuke were with them, too.

"Aw, you look cute, Hanabi-chan!" Naruto said cheerfully. "Don't be too mad—I'm sure you'll make lots of friends."

"I don't care about *friends*!" Hanabi hissed at him, smacking his hand away when he tried to pat her head. "How come you guys don't have to go to school?"
The older teens all exchanged a look.

Then Sasuke said tactlessly, "Because we've already been educated. Well, except for the idiot here —"

"Oi!"

"You're still a kid, so I bet your family tutors haven't taught you everything yet." Sasuke spoke over Naruto like he hadn't even said anything, talking only to Hanabi.

It made Itachi smirk. He knew that Sasuke had to be at least a little impressed by the girl's prowess, especially considering her young age, and their similarities were almost endless. He did not acknowledge Hinata the same way as he did Hanabi, and Naruto was just out of the question entirely.

"Otouto." Sasuke jerked when Itachi planted his hand on his little brother's head, effectively announcing his presence. "What are you up to today?" He greeted everyone else while Sasuke grumbled about Itachi treating him like a child.

"Where's Izuna-chan?" Hinata inquired politely.

"Asagi-san is looking after him today," Itachi informed. "I should get going now—oh, and Hanabi?"

The smaller Hyuuga blinked confusedly. "Huh?"

"You should go to school. You might like it."

That night, Itachi was exhausted. It wasn't unusual—he was usually more tired than ever these days, but his coughing had been getting worse and worse lately. When he hacked up more phlegm and blood while babysitting Daichi and Hikari, the former looked at him concernedly.

"H-Hey, Itachi-nii?" He'd taken to calling him that now. "You should go to the hospital, y'know...

Aa. Maybe I should.

"Ha-na-bi!" Moegi huffed as she caught up to the girl. "You walk so fast."

Hanabi huffed right back. "I have somewhere to be, okay? Hinata-nee is going to come soon and then we're going to see Neji. Don't bother me, Moegi-chan..."

Moegi rolled her eyes, exasperated and amused (but mostly the former). "You should stop acting high and mighty at the academy, you know. You're doing yourself any favors."

"I don't care about these dumb kids. You shouldn't either, Moegi-chan."

"That's senpai to you," Moegi said just as Hinata arrived at the front gates, calm and composed. "Oh, hi, Hinata-san!"

"H-hello, Moegi-chan." Hinata smiled at the younger girl. "R-ready to go, Hanabi-chan?"

"Hai."
Shizune froze.

"What do you mean he's gone?!"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Bit of interlude, but not really. Pretty much the side of life from mostly Itachi's perspective. I swear this has to be the last upload, I cannot afford to waste anymore time on studying ooFT
Part V: Rhododendron

Chapter Summary

Itachi and Asagi help each other out. Neji's gone with the wind. And Deidara?

She's trying.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Itachi-san!" Itachi, carrying Izuna in a cloth sling strapped around his body, stepped out of the house to be greeted by his new neighbor. Yoshida-oba lived next door, and her round, chubby face beamed with cheer as she watered her Japanese Quince flowers. They were red as blood, and Itachi's gaze lingered on the florets before moving up to Yoshida's visage. "Good morning," Yoshida waved to him, "Are you headed for the market today?"

Itachi dipped his head. "Good morning, Yoshida-oba-san. I am, as a matter of fact..."

It was warmer than usual this morning—a sure sign that spring was fast approaching.

"Oh!" Yoshida suddenly gasped. "I should tell you that the eggs are on half-price today at Toshiro's grocer!"

"Oh, are they?" Itachi smiled politely. "Thank you for telling me, oba-san."

"Aiyah! No need for all that formal business." She giggled. "You can just call me Yoshida." As he walked off, she waved and called after him, unaware that she was over-watering her flowers. "If you need any other hot tips or help with Izuna-bo, just ask!"

As Itachi took the meandering path down to the market, most of Konoha had already started their day. The middle-class wives of merchants threw futons over balcony railings, smacking the dust and dirt out of it with various tools while their husbands and sons set up stands. There was a little stall that sold barbecued meat that Itachi passed by every morning. Children too poor to afford to attend school ran down the streets, grinning gap-toothed smiles as they chased after hula-hoops and stray dogs, occasionally shooed away by the cranky old man sweeping the front of his grocery store.

"Ah!" The man, Toshiro, stopped sweeping when he spotted Itachi heading his way. "Good morning, Uchiha-san. Got the little one with you today, eh? I was just about to open up shop—your timing is impeccable."

"Impeccable?!" roared a rotund lady dressed in a kimono, her face painted white. "I've been waiting for half an hour out here for some of your two-bit eggs!"

"My two-bit eggs feed those two demons you call children, whore!" Toshiro spat back.

"You're crazy, old man!" The fat woman huffed and turned to Itachi, her face softening. "I've seen you around—you always look so lonely." She slipped a card out from between her bosom. "Here, if you need any sweet release, this is where you'll find me."
It was not the first time he had been propositioned, so he went with it, politely thanking her for the card. It smelled heavily of perfume.

"Stop doing your business in front of my business!" Toshiro shook one aging fist at her. "Get your damn eggs and go already!" As the woman went into his store with a disdainful sniff, loudly complaining about the poor condition of the store, the old man shook his head in exasperation. "My family didn't come to the city all those years ago to be treated like dirt...! Hmph! Not you though," he added when he remembered Itachi was still there, "You're okay."

With a nod, Itachi left Toshiro outside to continuing sweeping, entering the store and instantly gaining the attention of all the female shoppers who had come before him. They all gave him friendly smiles, gathering around him as he collected eggs to fill his shopping bag.

"Hi-ho, Uchiha-san!" One brawny, red-armed woman smacked him on the back. To his credit, he didn't even flinch, instead murmuring a polite greeting in return. "I see you have your kid with you today! The wife's busy, I take it?"

Someone elbowed her in the gut, hissing, "Shut up, Misa! She's no longer here, you know."

"Oh!" Misa blushed. "Terribly sorry, Uchiha-san..."

The women continued to gossip around him as he continued to shop, his patience holding. Eventually, the women left him alone, but not before one last attempt at roping him into a conversation.

"Do you intend on remarrying?" a woman with straw-like brown hair inquired, trying not to sound prying despite the subject at hand.

"Oh, I must know!" another gushed. "I've seen you walking around with plenty of lovely blossoms, all of them brown-haired. Is that your type, Uchiha-san?"

Itachi frowned uncomfortably, his eyes darkening slightly. "I..." Izumi had had brown hair. She had had the longest, most loveliest brown hair he had ever laid eyes on. Something inside him twisted painfully, and he tightened his grip on the egg he was holding, a small fracture appearing in the shell.

"You should consider dating again, Uchiha-san," someone talked over him, "I think I actually know one of the women you're close with—Shimizu-san, was it? She's young and pretty—the right kind of woman for a man like yourself."

It was one of the few times that Itachi was simply dumbfounded to the point of speechlessness. They had no idea of his obvious discomfort, did they? They simply knew how to talk, and did not know a single thing about listening. They were not at all like the women back in Akatsuki, who could be loud and boisterous, but were also open-minded and gentle. They were nothing like Izumi. He was grateful when Izuna woke up, gurgling in a manner that had all of the ladies dropping their intrusive inquiries to coo over the boy.

And then they dispersed.

Itachi breathed a sigh of relief, softly poking the forehead of his baby. "I hope they didn't scare you, musuko-chan." I should go home soon. Asagi-san is coming over shortly for breakfast. Since she was busy looking after her mother and son, he had started Izuna on formula, which seemed to be working out well. Today's breakfast was something he thought she deserved for her efforts, and she was good company.
He could never look her in the eye, though.

She looked too much like her.

Itachi paid for the eggs.

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*Where's Hinata-nee?*

Confusedly, Hanabi stood at the bottom of the stairs that led up to her school, turning her head left and right. Her older sister was nowhere to be seen, despite promising earlier that she would treat her to lunch. Chewing her lip nervously, Hanabi leaned against a nearby wall, her bag pressing against her back uncomfortably. She was too young to consider wearing makeup; there were dark circles visible under her eyes. The teachers constantly worried about her aloof attitude, which annoyed her to no end. Hinata had been called to the principal multiple times to talk about *your little sister's health* and Hanabi was sick of it. The problem wasn't her *health*, it was the fact that she was being lumped in with a group of snot-nosed brats who did nothing but whine! Not to mention that she was so far ahead of the class it wasn't even funny—

"Yo, Hanabi-chan!" Konohamaru stood at the bottom of the stone staircase with his best friends, Udon and Moegi, by his side. "You waiting for your sis?"

"Mm, yeah..." Her gaze met with Moegi's, and their faces both hardened. They might have traveled together out there, but they were certainly not friends.

"She's not usually so late," Udon observed, sniffling. "Do you wanna come with us, maybe? We're going to buy barbecued pork on a stick for lunch."

"Oh...!" There was a side of her that wanted to go, but the other was unsure. Plus, Moegi was staring at her with uplifted eyebrows. Hanabi grimaced. "Thanks, but I'm good. You guys go without me..."

"Probably hoping she sees Sasuke," Moegi murmured as the three went off, Hanabi showing no sign of hearing her.

Konohamaru looked at her, bewildered. "Huh, Sasuke-teme?" He had picked up the nickname from Naruto's constant bellowing. "What's he got to do with her?"

Moegi let out an exasperated sigh, whacking her friend across the back of the head with her notebook. "Dummy! She obviously likes him, duh!"

"You're not gonna tell him, are you?" Udon asked nervously. "I can tell you're not exactly fond of her..."

Moegi pursed her lips, ignoring Konohamaru's whining. "Nah. I'm not that mean, y'know. I'm not fond of her because she's a pretentious know-it-all. Her attitude's gonna bite her in the ass one day—I'll just let karma do its work."

None of them noticed Hanabi staring after them longingly before an approaching person made her start. She relaxed when she realized who it was. Her nose was slightly crooked and there was a scar crossing her upper lip, but Tenten still looked mostly the same.

"Tenten!" Hanabi raised an eyebrow. "Why are you here? Did Hinata-nee send you to pick me up?"
Tenten's countenance was grim. "Hanabi... Hinata's with Shizune right now." She hesitated. "Neji... Neji's escaped."

Shogo was running into the house as Asagi took off her shoes, stepping gingerly on the floorboards.

"Good morning, Itachi-san!" Shogo greeted, Asagi echoing his greetings. The whole house smelled of freshly cooked eggs, and the mother and son duo were pleasantly surprised when they entered the dining room to see a fluffy omelette sitting on each of their plates. There were tomatoes, cucumbers, and some ham mixed into the egg.

Breakfast was a mostly quiet affair. Shogo and Izuna were placed close to one another, the older boy entertaining the baby while their parents spoke in low voices.

As Itachi sipped his steaming hot tea, he glanced briefly at Asagi over the brim of his teacup. She wore her hair down today, straight brown locks spilling over her shoulder and back.

"How is your mother doing?" Itachi asked when Asagi finished her meal, letting out a small, satisfied sigh.

She sighed again, this time heavier. "Not so well," she confessed, lowering her gaze. She closed her eyes briefly. "They say she has about a month, but even that's a stretch. I pleaded with Tsunade-sama, but not even she is able to reverse the effects of time."

Shogo spoke then, glum, "Obaa-chan didn't wanna have surgery."

Itachi downed more of his tea. "Ah. She is old, Sho-kun—because of that, surgery won't prolong her life for very long." He said it with remorse in his voice, one that Shogo easily accepted, but it felt as if he were far away from his guests.

"He gives her kisses every day." Asagi smiled sadly. "Says they'll make her better. And in a way, it does."

Shogo finished breakfast in the next five minutes, and asked, "Can I go play with otouto?"

It took a moment for Itachi to realize that the boy was referring to Izuna. Shogo already saw Izuna as his little brother, something that Itachi was ambivalent about. Honoring Izumi's wish, Asagi was Izuna's godmother, and would be until she died. Wasn't it good, then, if Shogo was already accepting Izuna as his family?

It wasn't... as if Itachi was replacing her with Asagi.

Asagi gave Itachi a questioning glance, and he remembered that Shogo was still waiting for an answer. The back of his throat tickled, the sign of an oncoming coughing fit, and he swiftly answered before that could happen, "Of course. Make sure he doesn't fall off the couch." He nodded to the living room, and Shogo lifted the child from his mat, holding him with immense care. Shogo was a small boy, being only just two months shy of six, but he didn't let his diminutive size get in the way of keeping Izuna unharmed. Itachi knew, from the way Shogo was holding Izuna, that if he dropped Izuna for whatever reason, he would try to cushion him from the wall.

He hadn't been able to save Itsuki from the monsters, but he would not fail Izuna.

"Itachi!" Asagi's voice sounded so far away as Itachi suddenly ran to the bathroom, coughing wretchedly into the crook of his elbow.
His chest ached with every cough, and his lungs were burning.

Itachi was burning. Burning faster than Sasori had ever been.

And he knew it.

The bathroom sink's whiteness became stained with red and sickly yellow-brown as he coughed into it, the tap running.

He became aware of a presence behind him, rubbing circles on his back and muttering concerns that he couldn't quite make out.

"I'm here," Asagi murmured. "Itachi..."

How long had he been like this, she wondered. She knew that he'd fallen sick during the journey, but she hadn't known it was this bad. Hadn't Sakura and Shizune nipped his cough in the bud? Had Itachi somehow been... overlooked?

The blood in her veins chilled as she considered the possibility. There had been others who were sick, others who had been less fit than him. The attention of their medics would have mostly been on them. Asagi would know—she'd seen how much attention Shizune had paid to her mother, constantly monitoring her until she was better.

"How long?" Asagi's voice trembled when Itachi finally stopped, gripping the sides of the sink and panting raggedly.

He did not answer right away.

She handed him a towel after he splashed his face with water, which he took.

"Too long," was all he would say.

Asagi looked him dead in the eye, and she could have sworn he stiffened. "Have you at least seen a doctor?"

"I—"

"Okaa-chan? Itachi-san?"

They both turned to see Shogo at the bathroom door, gripping the doorframe tightly. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, dear." Asagi smiled at bent down to kiss her son's forehead. "Itachi-san just drank his tea a little too fast. Why don't you go play with Izuna again?"

"Oh, okay..."

When Shogo's back was turned, Asagi frowned worriedly, wisps of hair falling around her face.

Itachi gave her a look. "Thank you."

They sat back down at the table, watching Izuna and Shogo play in the living room.

"What's on your mind?" Itachi inquired.

"My little boy..." Asagi bit her lip. "He's no longer the child he used to be." She blew a piece of
hair from her face in aggravation. "If I could turn back time, I would have never let Mikoko and Masami look after him that day. Then my Sho-kun... maybe he wouldn't be like this." A few tears dripped from her eyes, but she kept a painfully straight face through it all. "And now you're suffering, too, Itachi. I wish you wouldn't cough; I wish you were healthy. I wish that my little boy didn't have to tell me to walk faster whenever there's a shadow in the dark."

Itachi's heart further twisted, if that were even possible. "Aa," he said, barely avoiding having a tremor lace his tone. I wish the same, Asagi. You have absolutely... no idea. He thought of what Tsunade had told him on the day he had visited the hospital, where the local physician had sent him after being unable to properly diagnose his symptoms.

Then he stood, holding out a hand together. She stared up at it in surprise before slipping her delicate hand into his.

"Itachi?"

"Let's go for a walk," he told her. He glanced to where Shogo was teasing Izuna by making faces at him, causing the baby to warble with glee. "All of us."

The doors burst open, and Hinata turned around with worry in her eyes as Tenten and Hanabi ran inside, the latter's schoolbag practically flying through the air after her.

"Nee-chan!" cried Hanabi, throwing her arms around her big sister. She quickly broke the embrace though. "What happened?! Did they find him?!"

Tenten caught up to them, her cheeks flushed red as she regarded the uniformed men practically surrounding the scientific facility. The military police... of course they're involved. She could see Shizune urgently relaying information to an important-looking officer, her coal gaze darting to where they were standing every once in a while.

It was only the passes around their necks that allowed them entry into the facility. Tenten's one was green, while Hanabi's was yellow. Hinata's, too, was yellow, indicating that they had higher visitation rights than Tenten when it came to Neji.

Hinata looked around skittishly. "I'm not s-sure what's e-exactly going on, b-but I've been called over because N-Neji-nii's escaped." She paused. "Allegedly, t-that is. I haven't had the c-chance to talk to Shizune-senpai." She'd met Tenten on the way to the facility, and had asked her to pick up Hanabi and bring her here.

"This doesn't make any sense," Tenten muttered, rubbing her chin in thought. "Why now of all times? And how?" Her sharp mind immediately considered inside help, but that couldn't be easily proven, even with the countless security cameras in the place. There were plenty of scientists coming in and out every day to take a prod at him, and surely he couldn't have waltzed out the front door, right?

It was then that Shizune had finished her talk with the police officer, and hurried over to where they were standing. "They've pretty much barricaded the entire downstairs basement for investigation," she informed them. "At first, we thought that he'd escaped, but right now... that could easily be proven wrong." Her eyes flashed with uncertainty. "Why don't you come down to my office? It's one of the only places where we can access."

Hinata nodded. "R-Right!"
The four women headed down to Shizune's office, passing through a side corridor with pictures hanging on the sides. From the way they were dressed to the haughty looks on their painted faces... Tenten instinctively knew that they were portraits of the distinguished scientists of old. Men and women who had contributed revolutionary theories and evidence to the field of science, and—

"We're here." Shizune unlocked the door to her office just as Tenten's eyes widened at the final portrait that hung at the end of the hallway.

"N-No way..."

Hanabi and Hinata, who were halfway through entering Shizune's quarters, paused in confusion.

"Shizune," Tenten said slowly, gaining the attention of the older woman. She shakily lifted up a hand to point at the picture. "Care to explain why Orochimaru's hanging on the wall?"

Shizune seemed to deflate. "Now that... is a story for another time."

"He's a murderer!" Tenten snapped, remembering his menacing form leering over her. "He would have killed us all if Deidara and Sasori didn't save our asses!" She turned frantically to Shizune. "How much time do we have? I doubt those guys are leaving anytime soon," she jerked her thumb toward the lobby, where dozens of military police were milling about, "so please... Tell us why."

At first, Shizune seemed to be unmoved. Then she sighed, opening the door even wider. "All of you, inside. Now. If you really want to hear this, Tenten, then be my guest. I don't know what he did to you, but you wouldn't be the first person to hear about the fall of Sennin Orochimaru, or the last, so let's get this over and done with."

The door closed behind them with a click, locking automatically.

There was a lukewarm cup of coffee on Shizune's desk, which she took a sip out of as she pushed important-looking papers to the side. Tenten noticed a photo on her desk, one that was angled so that all of them could see who was in it. A younger Orochimaru, Tsunade, and Jiraiya smiled back at her (though the snake-man seemed a little shier than his fellow Sannin).

It was almost eerie.

Shizune noticed her attention. "Oh, this?" She chuckled. "Tsunade-sama threw it away one day, and I picked it up when her back was turned." A pause. "I guess... I couldn't let it go to waste. It doesn't mean anything to me, but its Tsunade-sama's memory. One that I couldn't let her throw away like that." She took another drink of her coffee.

Hanabi tapped her fingers impatiently on her thigh, while Hinata squirmed in her seat. Both desperately wanted to hear about Neji, but were equally curious about Orochimaru. They'd heard of the deeds he'd done in Akatsuki—hell, he'd even left their father in a defeated heap on the floor. Orochimaru had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, and nobody had ever bothered to question it.

What had driven a supposedly revered scientist to pursue martial arts? And why had he become so corrupt?

*Or had he always been like that?* Tenten wondered with a grimace.

"The story of Orochimaru is... not a happy one, so to speak."

Not many stories were happy, they figured. Not *real* ones anyway. An unhappy story was not uncommon in this world, they'd come to find.
"Little is known about his parents—he was simply found one day by a farmer who was hunting snakes in the tall grass by his farm. But the farmer was very old, and couldn't take care of him, so he traveled to the city and dropped the child off at the orphanage. I don't know what Orochimaru did, but he managed to get the then-Hokage to notice him: Sarutobi Hiruzen." Shizune looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "I wasn't even born yet at that time, but he ended up growing up with Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama—both were children of influential families. They became friends, and eventually launched themselves martial arts under Sarutobi's tutelage, and then into fields that they ended up becoming masters at. Jiraiya-sama with sealing, Tsunade-sama with the medical arts, and Orochimaru... he was a mad genius. He chose the field of science, though many say," she chuckled dryly, "that it was science who chose him. He became obsessed with... improving the quality of life of the people around him.

"I think it started around the time my uncle Dan died. Tsunade-sama loved him very much, and she fell into a depression and developed a fear of blood. She stopped coming to the hospital, stopped helping people... it was around the time of the Suna-Konoha trade war as well, so death tolls became immensely high. And Orochimaru... I think he got sick of it all. The death. The pain. The hunger. He threw himself into his experiments, and was eventually stripped of his role as a head scientist in the facility when..." Shizune exhaled. "It was discovered that he had kidnapped children and experimented on them. His then-assistant, Yakushi Kabuto, was involved as well, but charges were dropped against him. I don't know where he is now—I don't even know if he's still in Konohagakure, actually. He disappeared in the southern frontier on day, and never returned."

The southern frontier... that was where they had entered Konoha—Amegakure was located south of Konohagakure.

By now, Tenten was trembling in righteous anger, and Hinata was pale. Even Hanabi looked disgusted. "How did he get away with it?" the youngest Hyuuga asked the question that nobody else wanted to.

"Simple." Shizune finished her coffee. "He had connections, namely to one Sarutobi Hiruzen. He couldn't bear to punish his favorite student, so he sent him away, telling him to remember their martial arts lessons, and the principle of benevolence and understanding behind them. If you thought Sasori's trial was bad, you should have seen Orochimaru's!" She slammed the cup down on the table, the only indication that she was equally angry as Tenten in this matter. Her brow furrowed. "The backlash the Hokage got was so bad that he was forced to step down. Tsunade-sama became the Fifth Hokage, and, well, you were there when Orochimaru went to Akatsuki City. We all were."

"So that's it, huh...?" Tenten, Hinata, and Hanabi all exchanged a glance. It was Hinata who asked, "T-Then wh-what about Neji-nii-san? Did... did he really escape?"

"Honestly?" Shizune leaned forward. "I only had a look at the crime scene once, but..."

They inched forward, too.

"I think he was taken."

"Oh~! What a lovely couple. And their children are so beautiful!"

"My, my, they have another one on the way, it seems. Ah, young love!"

Asagi's heart sank with each comment, even if none of them were degrading. She glanced sideways at Itachi, who showed no indication of being uncomfortable or offended about the obvious
whispers being passed around in the small community park. Shogo was utterly oblivious, dashing toward the playground equipment as soon as it came into sight.

She called after him to be careful, and he held up an arm in acknowledgement before claiming a swing for his own.

"Do you really not mind?" Asagi blurted when Shogo was out of earshot, keeping on eye on him as he played by himself. None of the neighborhood kids knew him, so that was to be expected. "They have the wrong idea about us..."

Itachi turned to her, and she couldn't help but think he looked adorable carrying Izuna in a sling that was wrapped around his body. He smiled at her, the gesture a little forlorn. A little bitter. "It doesn't matter to me. It would only matter if she would ever hear it."

They meandered around the playground, making small talk.

Then Asagi said, "It was hard when my husband died, too. I couldn't stop crying for ages. Then my brother passed as well, and now my mother is... I understand loss, Itachi. If you ever need anyone, I'll be here." They sat down on a park bench, and Asagi folded her slim hands over her protruding belly. A few more months, and her baby would be born.

They sat in silence.

Then—

"Thank you," Itachi said honestly. "I'm glad you are."

She hummed under her breath. "I just wanted you to know that I am. Have you heard the saying that 'it takes a village to raise a child'?"

He looked at her inquisitively, wondering where she was going with this. "I believe so."

"I may not be a village, but I'll be glad to look after Izuna as well. I think I can speak for all of our friends," she smiled a little shyly, "we'll be there for you. When you think you can't handle it, don't stress it. We'll be here for you."

How could you say such a thing to me? Itachi thought, his hands starting to feel numb. Why would you ever say something like that? It just felt like he owed her now, owed all of them. In a way he did, but he felt like he would never be able to pay back their kindness—pay back Asagi's kindness. He wasn't the only one suffering in the world, but she... cared. She cared that he was hurting, even when his story wasn't particularly uncommon. Sad stories tended to be prevalent in real life.

No one should have really cared.

But she did.

Unless she was an expert and masking her true feelings, she did.

At that moment, another woman sat down next to Asagi, beaming. "Is that you, Shimizu-san? I haven't seen you in weeks!"

"Oh! Rifuta-san, hello!" Asagi turned her attention to the newcomer.

Rifuta noticed Itachi immediately. "Oh...! Is this your...?"

"Oh, no," Asagi laughed a little nervously, "It's not like that, Rifuta-san. He is a good friend of
"Ah, I see! Forgive me for assuming," Rifuta apologized to both of them; Itachi nodded—he was glad that there was at least one polite Konoha-born woman in this city, if her city accent was anything to go by. She was a refreshing change from the ladies at the market. She talked mostly to Asagi, and Itachi kept an eye on Shogo while they talked, Izuna sleeping soundly in the sling. It was time for his afternoon nap, and the park's atmosphere was calm today.

He listened with one ear to them until Rifuta brought up something that piqued his interest.

"Say, Shimizu-san, do you ever plan on enrolling Shogo-kun to school? He's nearly six, isn't he? The perfect age to start kindergarten."

"Oh, er..." Asagi smiled, trying to deflect the question. She looked down at her hands instead of Rifuta's piercing stare. "I do want to—and he wants to as well—but I'm afraid I don't have the money to enroll him. My only income right now is the refugee's stipend, which I'm currently saving. Once my baby is born, I'll get a job, and hopefully be able to raise enough for him to stay at least a term at the local schoolhouse."

_She's tight on money. Of course._ Itachi didn't show any sign of hearing them talk about the delicate subject. Asagi was solely responsible for Shogo, who wasn't even six yet, and in a few months time, she would be blessed with a baby son or daughter. She would have two mouths to feed, and she would have to take up a job to make sure they got an education when her body would still be recovering after a birth...

When Rifuta was gone, Asagi let out a deep, drawn-out sigh before lifting her arms up and stretching.

"Asagi-san?"

"Oh? O-Oh, sorry, was I ignoring you? I'm sorry, Itachi, but she wouldn't let up."

He shook her head. He didn't care about that. "The school semester's only recently started. Shog- kun's smart—he'll be able to catch up even with the others getting a head start."

Asagi stared at him confusedly before going wide-eyed with horror and... a glimmer of hope. "I- Itachi... You can't possibly...!"

"It takes a village to raise a child," he quoted. "I may not be a village, but I'll do everything I can to make sure that Sho-kun has a good life."

She held his gaze. Then she crumbled, burying her face in her hands and weeping. "Thank you," she choked, "thank you, Itachi."

A seagull flew overhead as the sun rose over the horizon, turning the sky pink and purple. It squawked as it was joined by more gulls, and then dived toward the ocean before pulling up again in a peculiar display.

Leaning against the deck railing, Deidara yawned, feeling the brush of the sea wind against her face. For now, there was nothing but ocean, but in a few hours, land would be visible.

She took another look at the list that Fatso had given her.

_Inuzuka Tsume, hm?_ Deidara read the rest of the names, even though she had done so many times
already. The name Inuzuka Tsume meant nothing to her, but she had no doubt it would soon. She turned her back against the railing, blowing her hair out of the way, a ball of nerves twisting in her belly.

She hoped that this Inuzuka Tsume wouldn't judge the dark bags under her eyes.

She hadn't slept well last night.

Over and over, she found herself back in the cell. Only Suigetsu and Juugo hadn't rescued her—had merely walked past and left her to rot—left her to become nothing but a puppet of that bastard Kabuto.

He'd healed all her wounds only to cut more into her skin, until she was nothing but an unrecognizable patchwork of flesh and limbs.

Shivering, Deidara squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her arms, assuring herself that it was only the wind that sent goosebumps up her bicep. From the sleeve of her new shirt—she'd gotten baggier clothes with her new income—a clay centipede crawled out and wrapped itself comfortably around her arm like a sleeve with many legs.

Briefly, she envisioned tossing a C3—or even a C4—into the waters and watching it detonate, sending an explosive geyser spraying up into the air before a great, gushing whirlpool formed, so vast that even the ferry would be sucked into the vortex and left to rot on the seabed. Danna would call her crazy, and he wouldn't be the only one.

She supposed she was a little crazy, though that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

A part of her wanted to see the world go to hell for all the hell it had put her through.

*I think Fatso might have been a little too hasty in picking me for the job, hm. If she were to be honest with herself, Deidara was probably the last person she would have picked if she were in Fatso's position. Empathy was something required a great deal in this assignment, and she wasn't sure if she could produce that—especially when she knew that their suffering and her own might not necessarily click. What had she even cared for anyway, before all this? Her art, her taijutsu, her friends... She'd lived a self-centered life. Her heart had already had no place for strangers before the torturous journey to Konoha—who was to say that it had any room for more now, especially how much it had hardened overtime?*  

She must have been standing there longer than expected, for the first sign of land appeared as people started to trickle out of their cabins, rubbing sleep from their eyes.

"Good morning," a woman murmured to Deidara.

Deidara gave a two-fingered salute in return. "Yo."

The boat docked half-an-hour later, and the crew members directed the passengers off in a neat and orderly fashion. All around her, Deidara was jostled by luggage and limbs, but she was too tired to care. After three hours of light sleep, she found that there was little she could care about at the moment.

*I must look like a damn mess. Scowling, Deidara tightened her ponytail. Let's just get this over and done with.*

So Deidara took her hardened heart and stalked into town with a sour mood and a sour expression that morphed into bored, languid indifference when she left the docks for the small town. What
was it called? Ah, yes—Sickleleaf Town, named for their peculiar trees, which bore fang-shaped leaves. At least the food was good, as far as she could tell, but she had never been too picky. Strangely, though, it reminded her a little of Iwa-style food—warm, hearty, and meaty with plenty of sauces and soups.

The citizens of Sickleleaf Town were just starting their day, and merchants called out to her—an obvious foreigner—when they caught sight of her. She ignored all of them—all she wanted to do was interview Tsume and leave this cursed town (the town that reminded her too much of home) as soon as possible.

She didn't know what she was thinking when she stopped for a puppet show.

They weren't even real puppets—puppets like Danna's killing machines, which could cut a man in several pieces using several extendable blades. No, these were hand puppets, and a small crowd of village children were gathered around the entertainment box, watching a male puppet comically beat another male puppet with a club.

She hated to admit it but...

*It almost reminds me of Iwa's theater... Hmph. I should go.* Deidara forced her feet to keep moving, but not before she realized the belt she wore around her waist—the one which her clay pouches and other things hung upon—suddenly felt lighter. "Son of a bitch!" she hissed as she checked all of her pouches. Her clay was still there, but...

Somehow, her money purse had been snatched off of the belt without her noticing. She glared at the back of the heads of the children, wondering if one of those brats had done it. But they were still engrossed in their puppet show, laughing and pointing with glee at the appropriate times.

That was all the money she had borrowed from Fatso—it was worth a whole two weeks' worth of lodging. Ignoring the shocked gasps around her, Deidara jumped onto the roof of a low-standing building, scanning for any suspicious figures.

She found one.

"GET BACK HERE!" Deidara bellowed as she spotted a lithe figure—clearly male, despite the narrow build—running down the cobblestone path. She ran along the rooftops, unwilling to let the thief escape.

*When I catch you, she vowed hatefully, I'll skin you alive, you brat! That's a promise, yeah!*

Then the so-called brat had the audacity to turn around, pull down his furry hood, and show her his face, sticking out his tongue in a taunting manner—

And Deidara almost stumbled when she found herself looking at a male version of Hana.

Chapter End Notes

**A/N: GUESS WHO AYY?**

I'm sure you can. I mean, it's practically a give away question.
Part V: Snapdragon

Chapter Summary

Deidara kidnaps a dog and the weather is wild.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Death.

She swallowed, her tongue feeling dry and heavy in her mouth. The entire area smelled of ashes and fire, and she fought to keep awake, her vision blurring and clearing up in random intervals. Disoriented, she weakly crawled forward, her cheek dragging across the dirt and forming a gash in the ground.

She couldn’t feel her legs.

She wanted to scream, but only a low moan of agony left her lips.

"Must," she panted, her words catching in her throat. "Must... my children..."

"I see something...! She's over here!"

Her eyes slowly drooped shut, her form stilling as the last ragged breath left her. "My son... my daughter... Ha..."

"Hana?"

The name left her lips like a whisper on the wind, and Deidara nearly tripped over a stray tile as she processed the boy's face in her mind over and over again. He was young, probably around Naruto's age, and he shared the same facial tattoos as Hana. But how could this be? Were they perhaps part of the same clan?

But questions would come later, preferably once she had retrieved her money pouch and strung the thief on a tree by the balls. Assuming he would have any left once she was done with him.

She ran so fast that the spicy aromas in the air had no time to be appreciated by her nose, her heeled boots tapping against the tiled rooftops of Sickleleaf Town.

I haven't even been here for twenty minutes and I've already been robbed. This better be good... Disgruntled, she did not apologize when she had to use the shade-cloth over a street vendor's stall to bounce herself to the next roof, which was further away. A quick glance over her shoulder as she flew through the air told her that the cloth was starting to tear apart.

Frustratingly, Deidara had to slow down when she lost sight of the creep. Her belt felt painfully light, a reminder that if she couldn't find the thief, she wouldn't have anything to buy lodgings, food, or even the boat back home with.
It was not the worst situation she had been in, but it was a thorn in her side that she wanted removed immediately.

Like a jungle cat leaping from the rainforest trees, Deidara jumped from the roof and back onto the cobblestone path, where people spared her curious, wary glances.

An old male vendor clicked his tongue in sympathy. "He got you, too, huh?"

She whipped her head around. "Excuse me?" So the thief's well known, hm? Then someone might know something. She stepped underneath the umbrella set up over the man's stand, tightening her grip on her briefcase. At least that was still heavy with her typewriter and clothes. But if she got robbed on the first day in this tiny port town, then there was no way she was going to trust anyone here. If she listened to this old man, it was only going to be because she had no one else to give her any clues.

The old man stirred a pot full of porridge, barely glancing up at her as he cooked his wares. "That kid's been troubling everyone here for the past few months. None of us have been able to catch him, nor do we know where he runs off to every time..."

"Then I'll catch him, yeah," Deidara declared, crossing her arms. But how awfully convenient that supposedly nobody knew his whereabouts even though the streets were flooded by people... "Did you see which way he went?"

The old man lifted an arm, pointing upwind of the village. "Maybe that way. It used to be safer around here, and I'm not talking about the kid. Hmm..."

Deidara would have liked to hear the story behind his words, but she had no more time left to waste. She needed to get moving or Hana's male clone would never be seen again.

Dodging the crowd, she ran. Even in long pants and low-heeled boots, she was fast—faster than any civilian meandering in the village, but the little snot was nowhere to be seen. Frustration was building up inside her and ready to explode when she caught sight of a familiar fuzzy hood—there!

And look who it was—

"Shit!" Deidara snarled when it turned out to be a wooden dummy in front of a clothing shop. She gave the owner an apologetic glance before moving on, her fists clenched by her sides. In this crowd, there was no way she would be able to find him by chakra signature, so that was out. She wasn't a sensor like Karin, even if her weeks in the wilderness had heightened her vigilance (not nearly enough, clearly, if she was still able to be pick-pocketed). I only have his face and his clothing. And those strange markings on his cheeks...

Deidara sat down on a nearby bench, propping her briefcase next to her (it took a great effort not to slam it down). Then she pulled out a sheet of paper, using one of the many pens she had brought to sketch out the general shape of the thief's face-markings. It was simple; even a six-year-old could have put it down on paper. When she was done, she was looking at twin fang shapes. For extra measure, she used a red pen to color the lines in.

Where have I seen this before? Deidara tapped her pen against her jaw. On Hana, obviously, but it ran deeper than that. Somehow... she couldn't help but feel like it meant something important. She was certain that it was a clan symbol, but she couldn't be entirely sure. Her own heritage was clanless, and she wasn't equipped with the kind of knowledge to figure out this kind of thing. The major clans like the Uchiha and Hyuuga were known to all, but the countless number of smaller clans... Deidara's background wasn't exactly spiffing, and she couldn't account for them.
A little hesitantly, she drew back to her memories of childhood in Iwa, where her schoolteacher—*pinched mouth, sagging cheeks, but ever-sharp eyes*—had lectured them for hours on end on Iwagakure's colorful history. The violent history behind the founding of their country, the multiple treaties, the few *clans* involved in their politics... Their country had been one of great innovation and invention—they'd had to be, in order to keep up with the other Great Nations, which possessed clans with dangerous *kekkei genkai*s.

She herself lacked a clan background, but she did belong to a very small group of people who had descended from the once great *Bakuhatsu Tribe*. Different from a clan, but somewhat similar. Like the name suggested, they had specialized in explosions—the mouths she had inherited from her mother were autosomal recessive traits that had been around since long ago.

Exhaling, Deidara leaned back against the bench, the back of the seating digging uncomfortably against her spine. She was vaguely ware of her leg cramping (a consequence of her unplanned sprinting session), but the little movement she was doing now had the throbbing slowly fading away.

She didn't forget that it would always be there.

Her fingers twitched, tapping against the bench.

Then she stood, clutching the drawing she had done tightly and glaring at it. "Now where are you, you little bastard? Hm?"

She was going to get that money back whether he liked it or not. She'd had too many other things happen to her to stand for this—if this ended up besting her when other things could not, then she'd be damned.

Her leg hurt, but she ignored it.

The first person she asked was a young woman running a sweets shop. "Excuse me, have you seen anyone with this marking? Clothes, face, doesn't matter, hm." Deidara showed her the paper, and the woman looked contemplative, her brows knitting together in thought.

"From what I can tell, this looks like the symbol of the Inuzuka Clan."

"Inuzuka Clan?" Deidara's eyes gleamed in interest. *I've never heard of them. Must be a small Konoha clan...* "Tell me more about them." She paused, before tacking on, "Please, yeah."

The woman held up a lollipop. "Are you going to buy anything?"

Deidara frowned. "Afraid not, hm." She could have told her that she had been robbed, but she didn't want any pity from a candy-shop clerk of all people.

She put the lollipop aside. "Oh well. No harm in telling you, anyway. The Inuzuka Clan used to be based in this town. They're famous for having incorporated their *ninken* in their fighting styles, and their amazing sense of smell." She spoke of them as if they were no longer around, and Deidara soon found out why. "Since the clan was predominantly made up of males of age, and females who couldn't stand to leave their husbands behind, they were sent off to war. The post they were stationed at..." The woman hesitated, wringing her hands.

"Yeah?" Deidara prompted, inching forward. She hadn't come here for a history lesson, but at least this was somewhat relevant.

"There was an ambush. Everybody... died."
"Well, almost," the woman hurried on swiftly. "The clan's matriarch and leader survived, and her son was too young to be conscripted at that time, so he was never sent off."

The door to the store's back room swung open then, and Deidara's gaze slid over to the broad-cheated man that was approaching.

"Were you eavesdropping, Yamada?" the woman admonished. They both had golden bands around their ring fingers. Husband and wife then, Deidara concluded.

"Maybe," her husband said teasingly before turning to Deidara. "Tourist, huh? Welcome to Sickleleaf, the name's Akaashi Yamada, and this is my wife, Tsukasa." He shook her hand heartily, a little surprised by the force behind her grip.

"Deidara. The pleasure's mine, yeah," Deidara answered diplomatically.

"I couldn't help but overhear you two talking about the Inuzuka Massacre—"

An exasperated snort from Tsukasa.

"—real tragedy, that." Yamada shook his head sadly. "We were all so indebted to them, too. With the sheer amount that practically volunteered to be conscripted, the rest of us able-bodied men didn't have to throw ourselves into the line of fire. But anyway, what're you here for, Deidara?"

No point not telling them anymore, Deidara reckoned, seeing as they had already gotten each other's names. She lifted her chin, looking Yamada straight in the eye. "I—"

The back door slammed open once again and everybody stared at the wide-eyed girl who was quite obviously hiding something behind her back. Her face went red when she noticed the attention on her. She had mousy brown hair that fell a little below her shoulders.

"Tamaki," Yamada said, "Where are you off to?"

"I'm gonna hang out with Chibisuke!" Tamaki declared, shuffling around the huddled group of adults. She was a teenager, some years younger than Deidara herself. At the blonde's unnerving stare, she started to sweat. "L-Later..."

Then she was gone, the bell above the door jingling.

"Chibisuke?" echoed Deidara. The lingering scent of delicious home-cooking wafted up her nose.

"Oh, probably one of her animal friends," said Yamada. "Our Tamaki loves animals, especially cats. But about the Inuzuka..."

"No," Deidara interrupted. "Don't bother, yeah, but thanks." She backpedaled out of the store. Now where did you go... Tamaki? Luckily, she hadn't gone far, almost lost in the crowds, and Deidara followed her from a safe distance. Whatever she had been holding behind her back was gone—she was now clutching it against her front and hiding it in her jacket.

Unfortunately, Tamaki was not as sneaky or as subtle as she thought herself to be. It was only when she turned a corner into a narrow alleyway that Deidara picked up her pace, intrigued.

It was when the girl started climbing on top of roofs to get to her destination that Deidara's
curiosity practically exploded. Her pace quickened even more as she padded after Tamaki, moving fluidly and soundlessly behind her like one of the girl's feline friends. Tamaki nearly lost balance a few items, but managed to brave it in the end without any injuries.

They emerged into a side street with Tamaki none the wiser of Deidara's presence, the latter crouched on top of a brick wall while the former looped around and trotted down so that Deidara was essentially walking next to her but on a higher level. There wasn't much traffic in this streets. In fact...

Deidara glanced around her surroundings, eyes sharp. *This place is totally deserted.* Further down the street, there was a man smoking in front of his house, but he didn't seem to be aware of his surroundings, too fixated on the billowing cloud of smoke dispersing in front of his face.

Tamaki turned more corners before her shoulders finally relaxed, and she let out a relieved sigh. Looking around (but not up), Tamaki took a seat, patting down the front of her skirt and the back of her hair. "Kiba, you'd better come out soon... I've been so worried..." She unbuttoned her cardigan, revealing a small sack of bread loaves that she'd been holding against her stomach. They were obviously freshly baked, too, Deidara discovered when she flared her nostrils. She had yet to eat breakfast, and it was an effort in itself not to snatch the bread right from the girl's hands.

Not because it smells just like food from Iwa, she reminded herself firmly, *Only because I'm starved.*

The blonde made herself comfortable on the wall, squatting and folding her arms across her bent knees as she observed the seemingly mundane scene below her.

To their left was an abandoned building, the exterior's paint peeling away listlessly.

Tamaki continued to wait, her fingers tapping on her knee nervously.

Then—

"Yo, Tamaki-chan!"

The abandoned building's wooden door opened up and a teenage boy with a dirt-stained face poked his head out, grinning. "The old lady told us you were out here! Why didn't you knock?"

Tamaki flushed. "I-I forgot the code, okay?!" As he emerged fully from the building, the girl shoved the sack of bread into his chest, making him blink in surprise. "Here. I was worried about you..."

"You forgot?" The boy was baffled. "You just tap to the tune of o' lady o' lady o! Remember?"

"Well I do now." Tamaki rolled her eyes. "Have you been stealing again? There was a stranger asking questions at my parents' store, and she looked pretty mad. You know," she said pointedly, "like *someone* had just nicked her savings off her!"

The look on his face was decidedly smug as he chomped on some bread. "So?" he said through a mouthful, crumbs flying toward Tamaki's face. Spitting like an angry cat, the girl cringed away from him and flicked a wet bread crumb from her cheek.

"So?" Tamaki echoed in disbelief, planting her hands on her hips. "You're gonna get in trouble! The locals only let you get away with it because you don't steal their wares unless things get really bad, and your mom was—"
Tamaki.

The girl clamped up, stiffening.

Meanwhile, the boy was turning away harshly, his eyes half-lidded as he stared at the old building in front of him. "If you came just to scold me, just get outta here."

Tamaki lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. Or come here to scold you." She grabbed his arm. "Kiba! I'm your friend, I'm not just going to leave you—" She cut herself off, sighing. "Sorry. Rambling."

Kiba wiped his nose. "S'fine. Sorry for snapping," he added gruffly. "Wanna come in? Baa-chan been wondering where you were."

"Has she?" The brunette girl sounded bewildered. "But Baa-chan never wonders."

"Beats me. She just said that something's happening soon, and that you probably wanna be here for it."

"Huh." The two started toward the entrance of the abandoned building. "What could she mean—"

"Oh, I'll tell you what this means." They couldn't even gasp before Deidara landed in front of them, glaring down at them as though they were the cause of her shitty mood. Which they did happen to be. Before Kiba could run, she grabbed him by the furry hood of his jacket, yanking him toward her. "What this means is that you're going to be giving back all of my money and fucking off to Suna, yeah."

Kiba winced. "Ah, shit."

The morning had begun not long ago, but the streets were already filling with locals and foreigners alike. The smell of rich Iwa-inspired food wafted through the air and dissipated into the atmosphere.

As the sun rose higher and higher into the air, Tamaki, Kiba, and Deidara stood tensely in front of the old abandoned building in a side street somewhere. Deidara's grip was firm on Kiba's, and Tamaki was frozen, unsure of how to deal with the sudden intruder.

She settled for shouting, "H-hey! Let him go!"

Deidara ignored her, pulling the hood down and Kiba with it. The clothing article was surprisingly sturdy, the seams not even coming apart with the force she used. Kiba winced when he landed on his rump, tilting his head backward and eyeing his attacker defiantly.

"Money?" Kiba chuckled, as if she weren't responsible for knocking him on his ass. "Sorry, lady, but the money's all spent!"

"What?!"

"Yep." Faking a yawn, Kiba dug through his ear with his pinkie flippantly. "Thanks for the food, though. Hope you come again."

"Kiba!" a horrified Tamaki cried. "Don't goad her!"

"Maybe you should listen to your friend, hm," Deidara advised, her tone caustic. "You'd better cough up that money, kid." she yanked his hood again, making the front of his zipped-up jacket
press against his soft throat. He choked, his fang-like pupils darting back and forth. "That was half a month's worth of lodgings and meals that you stole from me. Well?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Kiba rasped. "Easy there, okay?! I don't know what you're talking about."

Playing dumb? Deidara frowned. At this point? It almost seems... It almost seems as if he's stalling for someth—

"ARF!" Out of nowhere, a pair of powerful jaws clamped down on her leg, and Deidara whipped her head to the side to see a medium-sized dog with brown markings on his floppy ears growl as it tried to pierce her leg.

Unfortunately, the dog had bitten her prosthetic, which was made out of too hard a metal for a mere dog's teeth to even dent. Not to mention all Deidara felt was a slight twinge in division between her flesh and the suction cup of the prosthetic leg as her chakra channels were briefly disrupted.

It did leave some holes in her pant leg though, which was an annoyance in itself.

"Yeah!" In the commotion, Kiba had managed to wriggle out of his jacket. "Get her, Akamaru!"

Unimpressed, Deidara grabbed the dog by its scruff and tore it from her leg. "Yours?" she inquired dryly, a part of her unashamedly relishing in Kiba's slack-jawed expression. "Listen, Kiba," she stepped forward, Akamaru still dangling from her hand. The dog was yipping in distress, trying to bite her hand but failing due to how she held it. "Just give me back my money and I'll let your dog go, hm."

"And... what if I don't?" Kiba started to sweat. She won't hurt him, will she?! If she did, he didn't care how strong she was, but he was taking her down in a fight to the death.

Deidara glanced at the squirming dog. "Then I'm afraid he'll be staying with me, yeah." She jumped backwards back onto the wall, then to a nearby roof, tucking the dog between her side and the crook of her elbow. Poor Akamaru looked more bewildered than anything else, too confused to even bark.

"WAIT!" Kiba shouted, stepping on the bench Tamaki had been sitting on just minutes ago and climbing up the wall. While he could move swiftly and deftly on the ground, it was clear that he didn't have Deidara's balance—or even Tamaki's for that matter—to efficiently traverse the rooftops of Sickleleaf Town. He glared ferociously at her, baring his teeth. "I wasn't lying!" he bit out. "I really did spend all the money..."

Tamaki's throat bobbed as she observed the scene from the ground. Kiba... Just tell her what you did with the money... Maybe then she'll understand... The bread loaves she had so painstakingly made and brought to Kiba were now lying on the ground, abandoned and collecting dust.

"Oh, really?" Deidara stepped backward, further up the rooftop. "Don't worry then, I'll be sure to treat him well, hm. When you have the money, come find me."

"AKAMARU!" Kiba screamed as Deidara disappeared. The last thing he saw of her was her suitcase, which she had somehow managed to hold on to the whole time. He slammed his closed fist on the top of the wall. "DAMMIT! That stupid cow...!"

"Kiba," Tamaki lifted her hands to her mouth in shock, "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize she followed me... I'm sorry, Kiba!"

"No..." Kiba wanted badly to blame her, but he knew it wasn't her fault. That woman was clearly
operating at a higher level than himself or Tamaki. Tamaki was purely civilian with no fighting expertise—there was no way she could have detected Deidara following her. As for Kiba, his former clan had been renowned trackers due to their abnormally powerful sense of smell—it was merely bad luck that the wind had been blowing Deidara's scent in the wrong direction, and that Kiba had been too focused on calming his rumbling belly with Tamaki's delicious-smelling home-cooked bread. "S'not your fault, Tamaki-chan."

She was still ashamed, and Kiba sighed, hopping off the wall and punching her awkwardly in the shoulder.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"For being stupid," Kiba said. "I already said it wasn't your fault! It was just bad luck, okay? Don't beat yourself up over it." He bit his lip. "I'm going to get the money back. She wasn't the only tourist to step off those boats."

More stealing? Tamaki's heart felt heavy, but she knew it was necessary. "Okay. Just be careful, okay?"

Kiba nodded, grabbing his jacket, which Deidara had thankfully left behind.

He was about to set off when the door of the old building opened.

"Now," said a wizened woman with tan, weather-beaten skin, smiling, "Don't be too hasty. I have a better idea."

"Baa-chan?" both kids said at the same time, blinking in surprise.

"Geez..."

Below her, the streets were somehow even busier than they had been before. Vendors were crying out their wares, while children skipping school were running amok the streets. As if her depth perception weren't screwed up enough, even with the eye-scope, she was also holding up Kiba's dog in front of her, blocking most of the view.

The dog had tried to bite her multiple times during her escape, but he seemed to have calmed down for now. The dog seemed wary of her, but seemed to instinctively know that she wasn't a danger to him.

"I really don't think," Deidara leaned back when Akamaru tried to nip her nose, sweatdropping. "I thought this through enough..."

By taking the dog, she had leverage over Kiba and a moderate chance of getting her money back, but—

How the hell am I going to look after a dog?!

She glared at Akamaru as if he were the problem, and her true problems weren't an unfortunate combination of bratty street rats, strange townspeople, food and smells that reminded her too much of Iwa, and her own rash thinking and temper.

Akamaru yipped.

"Ugh."
The way the dog was looking at her...

Frankly, Akamaru was simply adorable.

She forced herself to think of the pants that he had ruined.

Then Akamaru licked her nose, and she felt a part of her simply melt.

Shit.

Grumbling, she set the dog down and hugged it toward her side to make sure he wouldn't escape.

Then she made a mental checklist of what she needed to do in this town.

Number one was getting her money back and checking in at an inn with decent food. Number two was finding Inuzuka Tsume—if what the Akaashi couple had said was true, it meant that Kiba was very likely the matriarch's son, which meant he was her best chance of tracking down the elusive Tsume. Surely, being a scion, he would have to know most, if not all, of his clan members, right?

Wait.

She sat up straighter, Akamaru yelping at the abrupt movement.

_Tsukasa said that all the clan members were dead except the matriarch and her son. And if Kiba is who I think he is, then that means..._

Deidara swore so loudly that Akamaru actually whimpered. "I can't believe I didn't see it before!"

Tsume was the _goddamn matriarch_ of the Inuzuka Clan.

The same matriarch who was also in a coma. Chances of getting to interview her were about zero. This entire trip had just been a massive waste of time. All she needed to do right now was get her money back and just leave, because unless Tsume decided to wake up, she wasn't going to be able to do anything for the paper.

But if all of them except Tsume and Kiba were supposed to be dead... This raised another question: _Who was Hana?_

She groaned in frustration. Every time she felt like she had figured out something, the answer just raised more questions.

Akamaru let out a low whimper, pawing at her thigh.

"What?" Deidara ground out.

Wordlessly, the dog set his chin on her leg and curled his fluffy tail around her. Akamaru had sensed her distress and was... cuddling.

"I thought you would hate me, hm," the blonde said, absently patting Akamaru's head. "I did take you away from your master, after all." It'd been necessary, and she'd do it again if she had to, but Akamaru was just unfortunate and had gotten caught in the crossfire.

"There you are!"

Deidara whirled around to see an out of breath Tamaki standing a little behind her. With Akamaru's animal therapy, she hadn't noticed the young girl sneaking up on her. Then again, Tamaki's chakra signature was pretty insignificant in the first place.
"Tamaki-chan, right?" Deidara said drolly. "To what do I owe you the pleasure, hm?" Did they get the money already? That was quick. Or... Tamaki could have foolishly come up here on her own to try and convince her to return Akamaru without getting anything in return. From the way her knees were wobbling, the latter seemed more likely at this point.

"No," Tamaki admitted. "But hear me out! You need a place to stay for two weeks, right? And food? We can provide all that, free of charge."

"Can you?" Deidara stood, lifting Akamaru up with her. "That's a pretty shit alternative, yeah. I'm not going to stay at your parents' for two weeks." In fact, since she was going to take the next boat home, all she needed was the money she had been robbed of, or else the Leaf Gazette would suffer an unnecessary blow. Not to mention she wasn't going to let some dog-brat get away with stealing from her.

She was going to turn around and walk off to another rooftop when Tamaki took a deep breath. "It's not at my parents'. You... work for a newspaper, right? We'll let you talk to whoever you need to!"

How did she—? Deidara shook her head. Never mind that. "Unless you can get the comatose to start talking, we're both out of luck. I'm keeping Akamaru," she patted him on the head for the sole purpose of mocking her, and definitely not because she enjoyed the sensation of his soft fur beneath her calloused hands, "until you can get the money."

And then she was going to get the hell out of here—

Thunder boomed and suddenly the winds picked up, nearly knocking both of the girls down.

In the horizon, they could see lightning striking the ocean, waves kicking up, and sickleleaf trees by the dock swaying dangerously.

What.

It'd just been sunny an hour ago! Deidara glanced at Tamaki, who seemed just as surprised as she was at the sudden change in weather. Below, people were shouting as they frantically tried to find shelter, street vendors hastily taking apart their stalls and hiding their wares. Fishermen and boatmen quickly grabbed whatever they needed and ran toward town.

Ping.

"Attention," an announcement boomed over the town when it began to rain, especially loud where the speakers were attached to, "we are currently experiencing a sudden level-three hurricane. Do not be alarmed; everybody head to shelter. All boats are grounded until further notice. The Sickleleaf Town Council apologizes for the inconvenience."

Ping.

The rain started to pour heavily then, plastering their hair to their heads and faces. Scowling, Deidara pushed her hair from her face. "Who sent you?"

Tamaki managed a weary smile.

Blub. Blub.

"Meeooooowww," a fat white cat yawned as he curled up on the table against Kiba's arm, yellow eyes closing contentedly. The boy was clutching a hot tea, the cup three-quarters full of the
"Baa-chan," Kiba said lowly, "Are you sure Tamaki-chan will be okay?" The thunder boomed outside and he cringed. "It's suddenly storming... and what if something happens to her, huh?"

"Be calm, Kiba," the old woman sitting opposite him smiled, a teapot with an intricate pattern sitting in front of her. She lifted the pot to fill Kiba's cup to the brim again. Blub. Blub. "She will arrive soon."

Thunder crackled again, making Kiba's spine stiffen.

"Ah," the old woman said, "here they are."

And then the door swung open loudly, slamming against the wall and making the wood above the brick foundation crumble. Two sopping wet figures stepped in, the taller one throwing the door shut behind her. Then Deidara proceeded to grab her ponytail, twist it, and squeeze out the water, forming a puddle on the floor. Tamaki merely shook her head to rid of the water, her hair much shorter than the blonde's.

"Kazebaba-san!" Tamaki greeted, lifting an arm. "I'm back, and look who I brought!"

"ARF ARF!"

Deidara didn't even have the energy or shits to give to pull Akamaru back from pouncing on his owner, who absolutely laughed with joy and relief, hugging the dog tightly. Even if she wasn't dripping wet or exhausted, she suspected that she might have just let it be anyway. She'd just make Kiba make up for her loss in another way.

"Welcome, welcome," Kazebaba said warmly, standing up and holding out a towel and blanket for Tamaki. She did the same for Deidara, who warily took the items from her. "My name is Kazebaba, Deidara-san."

Deidara regarded her even more cautiously than before. "And it looks like you already know my name, hm..." Who are you? The woman didn't feel dangerous, even when her chakra signature was a bit unusual, but it was best to be wary. Still, she took a seat at the only table in the downstairs area, where a fire was burning nearby. Strange. She hadn't seen any smoke coming out of the chimney when she'd been outside with Tamaki.

"Your name's Deidara?" Kiba said, cocking his head to one side. "Ain't that an Iwa name?"

"And so what if it is, hm?" Deidara said gruffly, side-eyeing him as Kazebaba poured her a cup of tea.

"Nothing. Yo, Tamaki-chan," he turned to the girl, "How did you get her to come?"

"Oh! There was a storm, you see, and, well, it was just convenient for both of us."

Kazebaba chuckled.

And Deidara's countenance darkened.

"You still owe me a debt," Deidara reminded him frostily. "Make sure you don't forget me, dog-boy."

Kiba's expression soured. "Yeah, yeah... What do you want me to do, huh? Beg and grovel for
forgiveness?" he tacked on sarcastically.

At that, Deidara lifted her suitcase on the table and clicked it open, taking out her bronze typewriter. She closed it and put it back on the floor before Kiba could catch sight of her undergarments or her copy of Sarutobi Sasuke's diary. The boy stared at it curiously, eyes widening at all of the complicated keys.

"Why don't you start," Deidara said mock-professionally, emphasizing every word out of spite, "by telling me about your mother?"

Bang!

Tamaki gasped when the tea that spilled from Kiba's cup nearly scalded her hand, flinching away. Kiba didn't even notice her surprise, pushing his chair back with a screech and storming up the stairs.

The fat white cat meowed in annoyance, Akamaru whined before following his master upstairs, and Kazebaba's gaze grew sad.

Deidara's fingers twitched, feeling a little bad for purposefully provoking the kid. It wasn't a good thing she had done, and she knew it, but did Kazebaba really have to keep looking at her like that? Deidara stared back at her distrustfully. The woman was nothing but a stranger.

"You know," Kazebaba mused, "You need to be less hard than the bronze machinery you carry around. He'll come down when he's ready, Tamaki-chan," she nodded at the cat-loving girl, whose lap was now the new resting place of Kazebaba's fat white tom, "As for you," she turned her strange, sharp gaze onto Deidara, who immediately felt the scrutiny as she packed her typewriter away, "There's a room waiting for you upstairs. Stay as long as you need to, Deidara-san."

Dear Rin,

Sorry that you didn't get this sooner. The post office is closed due to a level-three hurricane that's ravaging the town, but I promised to write to you and keep you posted, so here it is.

The boat trip was uneventful, but everything after that was just a circus. It turns out that my first client, Inuzuka Tsune, is currently in a coma and not waking up anytime soon. I can't go back home because the boats are grounded, so I'm staying with an old woman called Kazebaba. Hopefully, the storm clears up soon so I don't have to stay here for too long. There's something about her that I don't trust. What's her motive behind all this?

If I'm dead, then you know what happened.

There are other occupants in this household. One is Inuzuka Kiba, the son of Tsune who is also the reason why I'm not staying at an inn. Long story short, he stole from me, and I kidnapped his dog for leverage in return. It amounted to nothing in the end, but at least I'm not wet and starving. The other guest is Tamaki, whose parents own a shop here in Sickleleaf, but it's too dangerous now for her to go home now that the hurricane is so strong. Her only defining trait seems to be an abnormal love for cats.

Tamaki's okay, but Kiba seems to be prone to bursts of anger. My best guess is his mom, but there seems to be something more to it.

I spoke to some of the townspeople as well. They seem nice enough, but a little... skittish? Not exactly, but there's something going on that I don't know about.
I'll see you soon, hopefully. Tell the others I said hi.

Yours,

Deidara

"Kiba," Kazebaba murmured to herself as she closed the door of Deidara's room. The girl had left it open, too tired from today's events to care about closing it. "You are not the only one who has lost a mother."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Finally. It's been a while, but exams are over and I'm finally posting again.
"Something's botherin' you," Ai Wei said abruptly as Shikamaru thought of his next move. Once again, they were seated on opposite sides of each other, a shogi board between them. They were in the shogi hall this time, today too chilly to be outside. There was a storm blowing down in the east, sending cold winds their way.

"Perceptive," Shikamaru muttered as he shifted a piece to the left.

"Tell me."

"... It's nothing. Just something my dad said a long time ago."

"Oh yeah? What?"

There was no harm in telling her. "He told me that Sasori wasn't a well-known martial artist outside of Akatsuki." Click. "He couldn't have not known about his reputation as Akasuna no Sasori. He lied to me. But why?"

Ai Wei's subsequent silence was surprisingly thoughtful. "Maybe he knew."

"Knew?" Shikamaru echoed, the gears in his own mind turning.

"Yeah. All that stuff you told me about him. How he's not evil anymore. Maybe your dad already knew and accepted that he was already different at that point. It wasn't anyone else's business, so he didn't make a fuss out of it." Ai Wei twirled a general in her hand. "If anything you said about him is true, your dad was a smart guy, Shika. He gave Sasori a chance by keeping his yap shut."

Click.

Click.

"I win," Ai Wei smugly declared.

"Gladly."

Sasori had learned to stop trusting people a long time ago. There were exceptions, of course, like Deidara, but everyone else he held at arm's length. He sometimes wondered what could have brought him to open his heart to her like he had, but he realized eventually that it was because she didn't play the game like he was used to. She did not play to extend her own lifespan at the expense of everything else, she played only to live and enjoy her life to the fullest.

To her, life was transient.

In the several months that he had known her, she had made herself more trustworthy to him than anyone else had ever been. He remembered the way Chiyo had fed him with lies, teaching him how to kill, how to slaughter—how to exist. The lives he had crushed in his palm, all the blood he
had spilled... In the end, it had amounted to nothing. His victims had been nothing but a means to an end.

_To what end?_

It was something he asked himself every now and again.

There was none. He'd learned that years ago, yet he still pondered, still searched for a different answer that might soothe his bitter soul. While he might have enjoyed the occasional power trip that came with his former position, at the end of the day, it had boiled down to the most primal instinct of self-preservation and survival. He had killed and murdered his way to living another day. And then he'd use that day to ensure the next, and the cycle would repeat itself.

_That isn't living_, Deidara's harsh voice echoed in his ear, _Living isn't the same as existing_.

But who was he to know the difference, when he hadn't started to really live until he'd met her? For almost thirty years of his life, he had done nothing but exist. His life had been devoid of the inherent human need joy and fulfillment, and the meaningless, yet significant eccentricities that came with living. Thirty years gone—filled with only blood, agendas that were not truly his own, and an endless stream of deceit and delusions.

_You're wrong_, he whispered back, _A brat like you wouldn't know anything about planning ahead. And even then, I was lucky to live to see another day._

Why was it, then, that someone so young like her had lived more than he had?

He'd need an eternity to make up for all the moments he had missed.

It was his vision of withstanding time that had led him this far. He would have been dead by his own poison-coated blade years ago had he not deluded himself into the possibility of there being something to look forward to after life had ended. After his controllers were gone, and his strings had been cut, and he would be free to roam the earth.

But in the end, he was mortal. Would never be anything but.

_It's so simple_, Deidara murmured, _There's no thinking involved, no plans, or agendas, or webs of lies you have to spin. Just live._

When Sasori's eyes opened, she was gone and he was staring into nothing but darkness.

He released a quiet breath into the night.

Working with Sai was an... experience. It was also one that Sasori did not care for in the slightest. His new partner had proven to be nothing but an annoyance, always buzzing around him like a fruit fly around the ripest watermelon. He wasn't the type to fill gaps with meaningless conversation, which Sasori was glad for, but the ink-haired boy sometimes attempted to 'bond' with him through 'acceptable social means'.

Sai, Sasori had concluded a long time ago, was an absolute idiot when it came to functioning as a human being.

Not that he had much room to talk, but the point still stood.

Danzo had made it clear that Sasori and Sai were to work as a unit, but the younger male was
making it awfully hard to do so. Sasori didn't trust Sai in the least, especially not with his life. The fact that Sai was an eerily excellent eccedentesiast just made him all the more wary of him.

"What do you think?"

Sasori turned to Yugao, who was looking at him with a smirk, hands on her hips. Wind blowing through their hair, Sasori leaned back against the wooden post, vaguely aware of the purple-haired woman beside him turning her hip so that she, too, faced the horizon.

The sun rose every day, from east to west.

"For me," Yugao continued as the sun rose higher over the hills. "It's a reminder that there's something to look forward to, even in our darkest times."

Yugao made for good company. It was too bad that they would be parting ways to do their own things now. Sasori straightened. "You don't strike me as the sentimental type," he commented offhandedly as they made their way back downtown.

"I'm not." He wasn't deaf, nor was he blind—he heard the terseness in her voice, and could see the string around her neck, one that undoubtedly had a pendant attached to it, tucked beneath her clothing. "At least, I try not to be anymore."

Sai was at the town gates, waiting for them. Or, rather, waiting for Sasori. Normally, the red-haired man abhorred to keep others waiting, but he found that the black-haired soldier was an exception.

"You're late," Sai said in a clipped tone as Yugao slunk away, leaving Sasori to eye his partner rather impassively.

"My apologies," he replied bitingly, before adding with no little amount of sarcasm, "I got lost on the road of life."

Sai narrowed his eyes, for once not smiling. "Danzo-sama wishes for you to cease your amorous meetings with Taro Hair."

_Danzo can go shove it._ He and Yugao were nothing more than acquaintances, certainly not lovers in any sort of way. He only met with her each day to see the dawn simply to pass the time; it'd become a tradition of sorts, in the few weeks he had spent here.

"My 'amorous meetings', as you've put it, have done nothing to affect my performance."

Their backs stiff, the two males garnered minimal attention as they walked through the streets. "Regardless," Sai told him, no inflection in his voice, "You will cease the meetings, or risk earning Danzo-sama's further ire."

"I was wondering when the old man was going to make a move. Sasori made no reply to Sai's demand, choosing instead to glower at the dirt path ahead of him. Someone like Danzo... He was the type to utterly crush a human being and rebuild them in order to suit his own interests. Absolute control—Sasori had been waiting to become a victim of this treatment. And now the war hawk was finally closing in on him.

It made his skin prickle in alarm.

Sai removed a scroll from his sleeve, unrolling it and passing one half of it to Sasori to they could read it together. "We've spent the last two weeks training. Tomorrow, we will begin to undertake missions, ranking from B to S."
If there was one thing universal in the world, it was mission rankings. And assuming things hadn't changed since he'd last undertaken missions in Suna, Sasori knew that D and C ranks still existed. It didn't seem, however, they were viable ranks during wartime. It was to be expected, he supposed. In fact, this was a vaguely familiar thing—he wasn't young enough to have not fought in the tail end of the Suna-Konoha trade war, when Suna's economy had been at its lowest. His first ever mission had been a B rank, his late uncle, Ebizo, leading the squad.

The training that Sai had brought up had been nothing more than a refresher course. They trained within secured grounds, striking always to kill, and nothing more. If you couldn't defend a fatal blow, then it was simply too bad. Danzo made sure to handpick those who he thought were to be on par with Sasori without his monster arm. Good thing, too, or they would have all been dead, and Danzo would have been a very, very angry man.

Most times, they trained in the dark, conducting assassinations on those who were unable to cough up their taxes.

Sasori's lip curled in disgust as he thought of the countless people he and Sai had murdered over something so meager as that. It was almost an insult to his pride and skills—his latest victims had been untrained and unimportant; merely cannon fodder of the crudest kind.

The deep sense of guilt and regret that came with taking human lives was more difficult to shake off this time around, clinging to him like a spider to a fly.

"And today?" Sasori prompted.

Sai snapped the scroll shut and bared his teeth at his partner in a faux smile. "We'll be seeing Danzo-sama at five o'clock to receive our mission briefing. For now, get some rest."

He disappeared into the trees, and Sasori couldn't help but roll his eyes.

But the annoyance (and spy) was gone, so until five, time was all he had. Almost effortlessly, he jumped onto a nearby rooftop, travelling through town and faking indifference when he couldn't help but wonder what Sai was doing at the orphanage when he neared it and felt his chakra signature there. He'd followed Sai once (the boy was still none the wiser—fool), but had found nothing that would compromise him or perhaps the townspeople. He didn't give a rat's ass about Danzo's safety, and most of the ROOT and ANBU soldiers were questionable as a general.

The brat's business was his own. Deidara might have had more patience, but—unlike her—Sasori knew when to keep his nose out of someone else's business, especially when that someone was an enemy he didn't want to have. Sai might have been young, but it was clear he would not hesitate to put him down if things went south. If Sasori let down his guard for even a minute, Sai would have his head. Besides, it was pretty clear that whatever business Sai had with the orphanage matron, it was personal. And, in his experience, he found that people who had personal things to protect bit harder than average rabbit.

He landed on a rooftop overlooking Rootbell Town's little market district, watching the skittish citizens go about their day. The brooch he now always carried in his pants pocket felt a little heavier than usual, and he ghosted his hand over it without thinking.

Rootbell Town... He swept his gaze across the township unflinchingly. How disgusting. This place couldn't even be called a town, from the way Danzo had run it down. Sighing through his nose, he moved on.

"Oi!"
Sasori's eyes shifted to where the voice had come from. It was that boy again—the crippled one with the crutch that had almost caused a scene the day he had arrived. His sickly, freckled face was turned upward at him.

"Yes, you!" the boy yelled, even though Sasori hadn't said anything.

The red-haired man let out an irritated sigh. "What is it you want, brat?"

The brat grinned at him foxily, a bead of sweat that trickled down his temple the only thing betraying his nervousness. He was in the presence of a notorious killer and he knew it. Or, at the very least, he knew how dangerous Sasori was. "D-don't you know it's rude to talk like this when you're so high up and I'm so far down?"

"I don't care for your country bumpkin etiquette."

"Hey! We're not bumpkins!"

"Don't try to deny it. You risk looking more foolish than you already do." Indulging in vindictive amusement, he sat down on the edge of the roof, letting one leg dangle over the ledge. "I'll ask again—what do you want?" A chilly wind blew through the street, accompanying Sasori's steely inquiry.

"I..." The boy looked down, as if couldn't bear to even say the words. "I just wanted to thank you. For not being like the rest of them, I mean... I really misjudged you..."

"You wouldn't be saying those words if you knew who I really am..." Sasori heaved another sigh. "Really? Is that all?" You're playing in my court now, kid. "If you really are so thankful, then I suppose you wouldn't be opposed to doing me a favor?"

"Huh?" The crippled bumpkin blinked. "What kind of favor...?" His eyes gleamed with a newfound wariness, one that Sasori approved of. Finally, he was beginning to understand.

Apologies for not being as benign as you assumed, Sasori thought, that virulent humor bubbling up inside him again. "It's simple. What I want from you is information."

"Information?"

"What are you, a parrot?"

"Hey! My name's Ryu, and I'm definitely not a parrot!"

"Then answer properly!" Sasori scowled. "Do not test my patience."

Ryu grumbled. "What kind of information?"

It was here Sasori finally jumped down to face Ryu. It irked him slightly that the teenage boy had a few inches over him, but he pushed that thought aside. As the clouds overshadowed the rising sun briefly, a vengeful glimmer entered his brown eyes, sending a shiver down Ryu's spine.

"Information about this town, about Danzo... About the ANBU." Everything I could have gotten from Sai if he weren't such a brainwashed doll. And Yugao is guilty of being almost obsessively loyal to the ANBU commander. She wouldn't divulge anything helpful. He paused. "And perhaps the location of a wood merchant while you're at it."

The boy deliberated his demands. Then he said, "I think we'll have to talk to my grandmother. She knows a lot more than me about everything, especially the town and Danzo. But there's a lumber
yard up north of town, almost at the base of the White Fang."

_The... White Fang?_ Sasori schooled his face into a mask of indifference, though inwardly he was reeling. Did... Hatake leave a legacy here or something? The clouds drifted over the sun, and its rays hit Sasori's eyes for a brief moment, turning his world into a slash of blood red. Then he blinked, and the familiar scene of the grey morning was once again upon him.

"You okay? You blanked out for a sec." Ryu's face obscured his view all of a sudden.

Sasori nudged him away impatiently. "I'm fine. Don't touch me."

"Geez, sorry... jerk..." Ryu pointed at a tall mountain in the distance, one that was significant as it towered the surrounding mountain range. "Anyway, there's a lumberyard up around there somewhere. Just keep White Fang Mountain in sight and you can't miss it." He stroked his chin in thought. "I don't go up there a lot—it's too cold for me, even in the spring and summer—so I don't know if they're still in business. Especially with the state of this town..." He scuffed his worn boot on the dirt pathways. "I can take you to see Baba now, if you want."

There were still hours before the mission briefing.

Sasori nodded shortly. "Tell me about the town as we go."

"Well, okay." They walked side by side, Sasori keeping the pace slow so that Ryu wouldn't have to hobble after him. "Our town wasn't always like this. When I was a kid, it prospered. But then Danzo came, and our money and resources started to dwindle. And then the war started, and... everything's just going downhill faster than it was."

"And the government allowed such a thing to happen?" _No wonder things are so shit here. Danzo's obviously been in charge for a long time._

Ryu chuckled resentfully. "Yep. We don't mean shit to them. Ever since we lost our last sheep to that damn epidemic, we haven't had anything to export into the city. Out here, we rely on wool trade and game to keep us going, but this mysterious disease suddenly broke out one day... So many animals were killed. Or had to be in order to stop contamination."

The sun spread its light across the forests and the mountains as a freckle-faced boy continued to wind a tale of corruption and tragedy to a red-haired assassin.

The sky rumbled as the clouds darkened, a gust of wind blowing through Konoha City, sending Rin's unbound hair everywhere. One hand on a broom, she used the other to push strands of hair back from her face, making a note to cut her hair soon. She had always liked it short.

_Ding-a-ling!_

"Rin-san!" The florist owner and Rin's employer, Yuzuko, poked her head out of the store, one side of her lovely black hair immediately pushed comically upward. She blinked, then beamed, "You should come inside! The gale will do the sweeping for you, hehe."

"Are you sure, Yuzuko-kachoo?"

"Yep, yep! It's fine—come in already!" Under her breath, Yuzuko muttered as she looked up at the sky, "What a depressing sight..."

Inside the store, there was a coloring book and color pencils sitting on the corner of the counter,
the book's spine pressed against the cash register. Yuzuko placed a stray yellow pencil into the tin container where all the other pencils were before, letting out a small sigh. With the storm that had been raging back and forth since yesterday, business had been slow. Not many people wanted to go outside on a windy day like this, much less for something as frivolous as flowers.

"We don't normally see storms like this during spring," Yuzuko remarked to Rin as the latter woman closed the door, locking it. "Come through the back—I'll get you something hot to drink, Rin-san!"

"O-oh, that's really too much—"

"Nonsense!" The black-haired woman wagged a finger, smiling slyly. "Don't make me pull the boss card on you..."

Rin caved, laughing. "Alright, alright. What do you have in store?"

"Loads! I have tea, hot chocolate, coffee, even cigarettes if you want." She took an imaginary drag, grinning. "They're good for stress relief, my dear!"

"I'll pass on the cigarettes, but coffee does sound nice," Rin opined (because Obito had tried them once, and swore never to touch them again after complaining about how they smelled so terrible). As she followed her new boss to the back room, she took one last glance out of the window, where pieces of paper and other assortments of trash were being swept up and away by the wind, drops of rain starting to fall heavily as well. I hope the weather clears up soon. I don't want to pick up Daichi and Hikari in this weather, but I don't want them to make them wait either. And wasn't Deidara staying in a port town? What if the storm was even wilder near the ocean compared to the city, which was further inland?

Her promised letter had yet to arrive, but Rin blamed the unexpected wild weather, not her friend. Assuming that the post office over there was even open, the movement of boats ferrying the mail back and forth from the mainland to the eastern archipelagos would undoubtedly be halted for the safety of the seamen.

In her mind, she liked to think that Deidara had already written a letter to her, and was just waiting for the right time to send it off.

As Yuzuko smoked her cigarette and Rin drank her hot coffee in the back room of the florist shop, others in Konoha were hiding out inside, too, unwilling to be caught up in the blowy storm.

In the local school, Hanabi was looking out the window, her brows furrowed as the rain poured, hitting the land harshly. Droplets of water ran down the window pane, Hanabi's eyes following their paths. They split off into intricate branches before disappearing past the windowsill. Despite her seeming calmness, her grip on her pencil was tight and terse.

"Hyuuga-chan," her teacher simpered from the front, her snake-like eyes shining spitefully behind her glasses. "I would advise you to keep your eyes on your paper, and perhaps you might land yourself in the top range."

Ah, right. It was her first exam—Koizumi-sensei had no idea of Hanabi's intellect, considering she didn't bother putting much effort into entering class discussions and frequently skipped out on doing homework.

"I'm already done."

"Don't show off, Hyuuga-chan. There's no way you can be done—the exam started fifteen minutes
Hanabi harrumphed, blowing a strand of hair out of her face. "Like I said, I'm done, sensei."

The teacher's condescending smile twitched. "If you insist, then waste your time."

As her classmates used the remaining forty-five minutes to try and do as much of their exam as possible, Hanabi thought of her cousin, Neji. Once again, he had been spirited away somewhere. Except, this time, it wasn't of his own free will. That fact made her bite her lip, uneasy. Shizune said that Neji had been taken. Kidnapped. But who would do such a thing? The general public didn't even know of Neji's existence, meaning that the person responsible had to wield some substantial power in Konoha City to get their hands on the Zetsu boy. But who?

*Why do I even care?*

The question she asked herself sucked all the warmth from her cheeks, her ears suddenly feeling hot with an emotion she didn't want to face. She could hear her heart pounding between her ears, as if the organ had switched places with her brain.

She recalled the terrible way she had treated him—she'd been younger then, and had followed the example from members of the Main Family. But Neji had been strong, surpassing the low expectations that her father had placed on all Branch Family members. And that had further ostracized him from the clan...

But what could she do now?

For now, she simply double-checked her answers, the wind beating against the window as her heart sunk in uncertainty.

In a similarly structured classroom, Moegi's pen flew across her exam paper, fully immersed in her own work. If she looked out the window, she would be able to see a series of restaurants across the wide streets, where people were loitering around in an effort to escape the downpour.

It was there that Chihiro stood with her mentor, Kisame, underneath the overhanging tarp of a noodle shop, both of them wrapped up in winter clothing. It was a chilly start to spring, and the storm wasn't exactly helping with that.

"Mou, I haven't seen rain like this ages," Chihiro murmured.

Kisame grunted in agreement. "We used to get rain like this all the time in Kirigakure, though. It was cold, wet, and all around pretty miserable."

Chihiro offered a weak smile. "I'll bet. Thanks for taking me to lunch today, Kisame-sensei."

"Che! Don't sweat it, kid." Kisame rubbed the back of his neck, huffing. "Even I'm sick of the bland and boring lunches they serve at the centre..."

"Your order, sir!" the ramen chef called from across the counter, handing them their meals. They thanked him, and settled down in a cozy corner of the small restaurant. Above their table, a watercolor painting of a fearsome samurai warrior watched over them, his blade half-drawn from his sheathe and ready to face even the most fiercest of opponents. Chihiro glanced at it more than once, feeling the warrior's fiery eyes boring holes into the back of her neck.

"Isn't it cool?" It seemed that since Kisame and Chihiro were his only customers for the afternoon, the chef was up to having a chat. A cleaning rag in one hand, he gestured to the painting. "It's only
a reproduction, though—the real painting is in some fancy museum somewhere, I bet."

"Who is it?" Kisame asked casually.

The chef shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "But I like to believe that he wards away evil spirits. Konoha has a rich samurai culture, y'know. I'm not sure about Kiri—" Kisame snorted. "—but samurai have always been part of our history." The ramen chef sighed, digging in his apron pocket and producing a clipped out newspaper article. "They disappeared one day, just after the death of the Fourth Hokage, Namikaze Minato."

"Disappeared?" Chihiro grew wide-eyed. "Like, all of them?"

"Yep. Every single last one of 'em—even the ones in training." He handed the newspaper clipping to Kisame, who took it with eyes gleaming of interest. "Enjoy your meal. Oh, and please return that to me after you finish reading."

"I'll leave it with the bowls," Kisame promised with a sharp-toothed grin.

"Ulp. Right." The chef wisely backed away, leaving them to eat in peace.

"What does it say, Kisame-sensei?" Chihiro asked, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin after a particularly messy mouthful of soup and noodles.

"Nothing much," the shark-man replied honestly as he turned the clipping over to inspect the other side. "Whoever wrote this seems to think that they left out of spite, though. Couldn't take the nation's dishonorable nature, and hid away. It was a great blow to Konoha—it seems the higher-ups tried to cover it up, but to no avail, heh. Not exactly what the people needed after their precious Hokage kicked the bucket." He was willing to bet that if Konohagakure hadn't been still recovering from recent wars with Iwa and Suna, another one would have likely started between Iwa and Konoha.

Wars were fickle like that.

"That's not very nice to say about Naruto's dad, sensei."

Kisame shrugged. "The dead are the dead."

A cold wind blew through the restaurant, subduing the both of them.

"Do you think the samurai will ever come back?" There was a click as Chihiro set her chopsticks down over her empty bowl. She looked up Kisame imploringly, and the man sighed.

"Honestly? They have no reason to. But I will tell you this: I've heard stories of them—they'll never abandon their own. If one of them comes calling, the others will always answer." Kisame picked his teeth, his belly full. "They have a motto—those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum."

"Finally, the storm's cleared up!" Konohamaru grinned up at the sky, which had indeed stopped weeping. "We can go home!"

"Yeah." Udon rubbed at his nose. "If you can even call it that."

"Oh, chin up." Moegi shifted her backpack straps. "In my opinion, I'd take the refugee centre over Tsuki-Akatsuki any day."
"And the wilderness, too," the Sarutobi boy piped.

"Yeah, that. Come on, guys, let's go home." Moegi had her umbrella out, prepared to put it up again if the rain decided to start pouring once more.

They splashed in rain puddles as they took the road home, Konohamaru cackling as Moegi shrieked when he nearly drenched her. She started to whack him with her umbrella, and Udon sighed in fond exasperation. Then he noticed something strange.

Namely, Kakashi standing at a street food stand dressed as if he were about to go travelling somewhere.

"Is that Kakashi-san?" It seemed that Moegi had noticed, too, pausing in her abuse of Konohamaru. "Should we go say hi?"

"Why not?" Konohamaru nodded. "We haven't talked to that old pervert in a while, kore!"

"He's not old," Moegi pointed out as the trio approached the last Hatake. "Hi, Kakashi-san!"

The two boys echoed her greetings.

"Yo, Kakashi-san!"

"Hello, Kakashi-san."

"Hm?" Kakashi eye-smiled when he noticed their presence. "If it isn't the three amigos."

"Amigos?" Konohamaru scrunched up his nose in confusion.

"What can I say? I'm well-read." The masked man shrugged languidly. "Maa... You kids just passing by or do you need something?"

"Well, actually, we just came to say hello," Moegi admitted. "But it's always nice to see you. Are you... going somewhere?"

"Ah, you noticed." Kakashi patted her head, making her glance up at him quizzically. "Not much gets past you, ne, Moegi-chan?"

"Hey! We noticed, too, y'know!" Konohamaru protested.

Udon shot him a side glance. "Did you really?"

"W-well, I notice now, so..."

Moegi frowned up at Kakashi, who had turned his back on them to collect his order. It was steamed buns. "Don't dodge the question, Kakashi-san!" To her annoyance, Kakashi ignored her and started down the street. The kids followed him, though he didn't look the slightest bit irked at them.

"I was right," Kakashi mused. "Nothing really does get past you..." They must have seemed quite like an odd sight, judging by the curious passing looks that strangers gave them. They were standing right in the middle of the pathway, Kakashi sticking out like a sore thumb with his travel gear and a group of preteens surrounding him.

"Well?" prompted Udon when Kakashi didn't say anything else. "Are you really going somewhere?"
Kakashi passed his hand through his hair. "Normally, I'd tell you to mind your own business, but where I'm going may or may not affect all of us, so... I guess I'll ask you not to involve yourselves in current politics and hope for the best. If the city is raided, then you'll know that I failed." He said all of this while eye-smiling at the children.

"What?!" Three jaws dropped simultaneously like a cash register dinging out.

Moegi was the most flabbergasted out of all of them. "How can you just say something like that and expect us to go away?! This is do or die now!"

"I know." Kakashi was mild with them. "But did you know that someday the sun will expand and engulf this world? Sometimes, we can't control things. And right now, staying put and safe is the best option for you guys. Unless you have no other choice... don't get involved."

"Involved in what, exactly?" Udon pressed.

"You don't have to know until you do," replied Kakashi, breezily, striding away. "Take care! And tell Rin that I'm going to miss her cooking."

He didn't even tell Rin-san? Moegi exchanged a glance with her friends as the silver-haired man became a dot in the distance. That's so weird. Aren't they really close? This must be really important. If he didn't tell Rin-san, I don't think anyone except us has any idea of what he's up to, and that's only because he met us by chance!

"Anyone else get this really bad feeling?" Konohamaru blurted.

"Definitely," Udon and Moegi replied in unison.

Kakashi kept up his smiling facade for a solid minute before he finally relaxed his facial features, his expression becoming dull. He removed something from his jacket pocket. A detailed map of Konohagakure greeted him after unfolding the paper.

I guess it's time for our first rendezvous... Uchiha Kagami-chan.

By morning, the storm had cleared up, but not by much. It had stopped pouring, but the winds were still strong, sending waves slamming onto the docks. Trying not to feel too miserable, Deidara was sitting at the worktable in her room, messing with the mechanics of her prosthetic leg. There were two very, very tiny dents from where Akamaru had bit down on it, but that could be fixed with a little applied heat.

But when she had gotten up earlier than morning, sweating from nightmares, her prosthetic had cramped up somehow. Asuma had given her basic care instructions for the leg, so now she had it set down in front of her, a toolbox within reach.

Using a tiny screwdriver, she fiddled with some screws and cogs, enjoying the lilting, whimsical sound of gears clicking and clacking.

It reminded of the sound that the stage back at Iwa would make when the red curtains unfolded, and the lead songstress made a magnificent entrance complete with lights, music, and artificial fog billowing out toward the audience.

There was a satisfying click that made her smile. That ought to do it. A little more clumsily than she would have liked, she leaned back in her chair, fitting the leg's socket back to the stump of her
leg. Then she stood, testing her balance and the leg's endurance. After walking a lap and then two more around her room, she stood at her study table again, staring out the window. *Storm’s still not letting up, huh...?*

In the window, Deidara noticed her own reflection. She blinked in surprise. Her cheeks had filled out once again, and she gingerly graced her finger over the scar beneath her left eye, one half of it hidden by her hair. *I almost look... the same as before.*

Knuckles rapped upon her door. "Breakfast~!" Tamaki declared on the opposite side. "Come on, Deidara-san, or it'll get cold! Kazebaba-san has made tea for us as well!"

Deidara snorted. "I'm coming, I'm coming, yeah. Stop knocking already, Tamaki-san."

When she opened the door, Tamaki was already gone, and she heard fast-paced footsteps climbing down the stairs.

The downstairs room was as cozy as it had been last night, Deidara enjoying the warmth that her night clothes had trapped between the fabric and her skin. Kiba was already eating, devouring pancake by pancake in a famished frenzy. Tamaki was tucking in her chair and reaching for the teapot, making idle chatter with the wizened Kazebaba and her fat white tomcat.

The teapot made an interesting sound that reminded Deidara of bubbles. It was almost music to her ears, but she said nothing of it, only giving them a sincere "morning" before taking a seat next to Tamaki (and opposite Kiba, to the latter's annoyance).

"Good morning, Deidara-san," Kazebaba returned her greeting earnestly as she buttered her toast. "I hope you had a nice sleep."

She could still feel the claws ripping through her flesh sometimes. "Yeah." Deidara took a slice of toast from the basket in the middle of the table, buttering it with the same condiment that Kazebaba was eating hers with. *It's still warm,* she realized with a start. *Really, really warm... Do they even have a toaster, though?* Discreetly, she glanced around the room. There was no sign that the building even had electricity. And even if it did, the storm outside was wild enough to cut it off. She chalked it up to it just being an unusual morning, and dug in.

The marmalade was delicious, and the bread actually came apart very easily yet somehow retained the crunch. Amazed, she looked at Kazebaba. Her eyes were twinkling knowingly.

Suddenly, she felt naked, and she self-consciously ducked her head a little, her brow lowered in a slight frown as she pretended to absorb herself in examining the crumbs on her plate.

"So," Tamaki tried to start a proper conversation, "Does anyone have any plans for today...?"

A noncommittal grunt from both Deidara and Kiba.

"So that's how it is," the brown-haired girl muttered. "Okay then..." *Tough crowd...*

"Whatever I'm gonna do," Kiba declared. "I hope I get left alone long enough to do it." His barbed words were obviously directed at Deidara, who rolled her eyes and scoffed.

"Subtle," she said dryly. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm not exactly weeping over your soon-to-be absence, hm."

Akamaru whined, feeling the tension.
Kazebaba smiled, her eyes closing. "Now, now, let's not fight this early in the morning. I do hope you children sort this out soon. Hmm..." She hummed, taking a second slice of toast.

Sort this out? Deidara and Kiba eyed each other from across the table, neither of them hiding their mutual dislike. Yeah, right! The only way I'll ever get some sense into that thick skull of his is if I beat it in, hm!

Kiba pushed his chair back. "Can I be excused? Thanks. Come on, Akamaru, we're going out."

"In this weather?" Tamaki went wide-eyed. "Kiba, you can't!"

"S'fine, Tamaki-chan!" Kiba waved her off. "I won't go far, and I'll be careful. Plus, I have my pal with me." His gaze slid over to Deidara, who looked positively indifferent about the whole exchange. "No thanks to a certain someone."

Deidara bared her teeth in a sneer, making her scorn for him more evident than ever.

"Kazebaba, do something!" pleaded Tamaki.

The old lady was sipping her tea calmly. "Let him go, Tamaki-chan. He'll be back."

"I always am," Kiba added. "See, Tamaki? Even the old lady approves. There's nothing to worry about. Be back soon!"

Tamaki slumped in her chair as the wooden front door opened before slamming shut. "Great..."

Deidara had an eyebrow raised at Kazebaba. "Is it really okay for him to out like that, hm?"

Kazebaba laughed. "Ohohoho... Why, dear, are you worried?"

"Tch! Don't misinterpret my doubt for worry, hm!" Deidara shimmied the hair-tie she had around her wrist to her fingers. Then she tied her hair up into her usual ponytail, leaving the bottom layer of hair down. "I don't have time to be worried about that kid, anyway. I'm going to take things off my schedule." The final alteration to her appearance was pinning her bangs back with two clips she kept in her pajama pants pocket, revealing a cloudy eye with a hideous scar beneath it. With that, she left the table. "Excuse me..."

It was just Tamaki and Kazebaba now.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Tamaki asked the old woman.

Kazebaba smiled into her teacup. "I don't know. It all depends on the results it produces, doesn't it?"
Chapter Summary

This chapter gets a yes for kidnapping and rain.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sometimes, when everything was mundane and boring and peaceful, Deidara would seek Sasori out for a fight. He would gladly accept, and they'd both willingly partake in a dance of danger and, quite possibly, death. No one who didn't have a taijutsu master's understanding of the art of battle thrumming through their veins would understand—they relished in their weekly rituals, blades of chakra and metal flying toward her; the ever dangerous clay soaring for him. Sometimes, they liked to be tricky with each other—their tricks normally ended in them both being barely walking human bruises.

And afterward?

They'd make their peace, and help each other up. They'd review the progress they'd made; Deidara was always especially eager about this part, while Sasori was less enthused. But their hearts thrummed together in exhilaration and adrenaline, and they would both struggle not to smile wickedly.

Obito's house was always within walking distance as they always fought in his training grounds. They would pass by Sasuke instructing Daichi on how to properly use a katana. Shisui would be there, too, sometimes, twirling his tanto in his hand and ready to jump in at any time to take over Sasuke's teaching. On the days that they weren't busy, Rin and Obito would sit back and observe in the shade. At nights, he would whisk Daichi back to the courtyard without his mother's knowledge and train him on the ways of Uchiha taijutsu. He'd never known (or maybe he had), but occasionally, Sasori would be exploring the city under the cover of the dark, and he'd stop by Obito's rooftop to watch him train his oldest whelp, his brown eyes almost glowing amber under the star-sequined clouds.

Deidara had never known back then, not until she had told her after they had given themselves to one another, in that hopelessly void detention cell. She'd been putting on her shoes when she expressed her desire to join him one day, envisioning their shadows flitting through the night, guided by the stars and the moon. The imagery would haunt her in her dreams following that.

Even now, as she stirred her tea in her room in Kazebaba's home (how kind of Tamaki to bring a cup up for her), she thought of climbing out the single window and onto the roof, where Sasori would be standing and holding out a hand to her, even when he knew she didn't need it. It would serve more as an invitation than anything else.

But speaking of Tamaki, the girl knocked on Deidara's door.

"Come in," Deidara allowed, almost absently as she typed meticulously on her typewriter. She was in a better mood than this morning, having showered and was now clothed in clean and comfortable clothes—a green yukata, not unlike the one she had owned back in Akatsuki. When
Tamaki did, Deidara turned around in her chair, smirking a little. "This isn't about your boyfriend, is it?"

Tamaki frowned, a little blush forming across her cheeks. "Kiba isn't my boyfriend. And let's please not talk about him—not when I know that our feelings about him are so different."

"You're right—I have no interest in scrawny mutts, hm."

A deeper frown this time. "Well then, just what are you interested in? Hm?" she tacked on at the end.

Deidara stared at her. Then her lips curled upward in an amused smile. She brought out her arm toward her, and Tamaki shrieked when a giant centipede emerged from her yukata sleeve, finding its footing on the fabric before scuttling up her arm and settling comfortably on her shoulder.

"Relax," Deidara laughed wickedly as the centipede clicked its largest set of pincers. "It won't attack unless I want it to, yeah."

"I..." Tamaki was quite pale by now. "I see..." How did it even fit in there?!

"Don't believe me?"

Tamaki shot the centipede a wary glance.

Deidara shrugged. "That's not unusual. People normally have little appreciation for my art."

"Art?"

"Well, sure. Having art means having vision." A ghost of a smile. "I almost lost it one day." I almost lost everything that day. "But someone helped me find it again." Her countenance grew more solemn. "Do you know what art is, Tamaki-chan? It's an explosion. There's nothing more beautiful that something that's here today, but gone tomorrow. There is no better representation of the lives we all live—nothing lasts forever; everything will disappear one day. And what better way is there than to go out with a bang, hm?"

"I... I get it. I understand what you mean. But I guess the war just doesn't feel real here."

The war? Of all the things she had expected Tamaki to say, this definitely wasn't one of them. Deidara leaned back in her chair, her typewriter and her correspondence with a certain someone forgotten for now. She supposed she must have let her bemusement show, as Tamaki elaborated her thought process.

"You're a war orphan, aren't you? When... When Tsuki attacked Ame, you lost everything. And now you're here, just like the other refugees." Tamaki flushed again. "I'm sorry, was that insensitive?"

Deidara let out an exasperated sigh. You're full of assumptions, aren't you kid? You remind me of another little girl I once knew, only you're so much older than her. She liked to make assumptions, too. And those assumptions had gotten her killed. Not all of them. Most of it was me. "Close, but no biscuit. You're right—I am an orphan of war, but you're thinking of the wrong one, Tamaki-chan. And I didn't lose everything in Akatsuki," she added. I lost a lot of things, but it wasn't everything. I don't know how I would have lived if everybody had died. The thought sent a chill down her spine, and she tried to push it away.

"Oh. I'm sorry."
The words were so hollow, so meaningless, that Deidara was almost repulsed. "The nightmare's over now," she said, and she wasn't sure if she was talking to herself or Tamaki. "It's time to let sleeping dogs lie for good."

But could she really do that, when Sasori was out there fighting a war or possibly worse, when children had died and monsters had been born? When Shisui had been crushed by a literal boulder so Kakashi could live, when Izumi had received no mercy from a madman? When Ino had been used and thrown away like a toy, and when Obito had been murdered in cold blood? After everything, the war was still happening out there, and rumors were prominent—that Sunagakure was gathering its forces and possibly allies to fight alongside Tsukigakure, that Iwagakure could possibly get involved as well. Their deaths had changed nothing—the suffering of thousands upon thousands of people—collateral damage—had changed absolutely nothing. It was as if they had been so small, so insignificant—it made Deidara's blood boil: at her own weakness and how the continent's leaders had used their power to cause nothing but pain and destruction for what she was sure was a selfish gambit.

Deidara squashed her indignation down, even when she longed to cry out to the world in a heedless protest of her own suffering. There was no point. This was hardly the first war that she had happened in the duration of her life—she'd just happen to lose more than she had bargained for this time around. She would be long dead before the world ever changed—and even then, she doubted that it would.

Her hair had fallen from their clips now, slightly covering the left side of her face. "Why did you come here, Tamaki-chan?" she asked quietly. The centipede on her shoulder, previously light and airless, now felt as heavy as the world pressing down on her. It slid off her shoulder and curled around her waist like a belt from hell.

"Oh! Um, Kazebaba and I both agreed that I should head home so my parents don't become so worried. And I was wondering..."

"If I could walk you home?"

"Well, essentially, yeah. Kazebaba says you probably need a break anyway. It's not good to stay inside for too long."

"You should work in sales," Deidara snarked, stretching. Her bones popped satisfyingly.

Tamaki gave a tiny smile. "That would make my parents happy."

"I'll bet..."

Kazebaba was blowing bubbles of all things when Deidara and Tamaki climbed down the stairs, her white tomcat caterwauling and baring all of his fangs. The feline tried to pop the bubbles, but they seemed to be resistant to his claws.

"We're leaving!" Tamaki announced. "Please send Karasu over when Kiba comes back so I know he's safe."

Karasu? Deidara removed an umbrella from the stand, opening the door. She expected a chilly wind but none came. A pet crow, maybe? Kazebaba seemed like the type to have one, though she had yet to see hide nor hair of it. But why on earth would she willingly send it out in a literal storm?

"Alright, dear," Kazebaba agreed. "Travel safe." As she said the words, she tapped her bubble-
blower a few times on the teapot, making it shake as if it were alive. Deidara blinked. How odd.

The door closed behind the girls just as the cat got caught in a particularly large bubble, meowing in annoyance (but not fear) as he floated up into the air. Then the bubble popped, and he landed back on the table on all fours.

Kazebaba ran her withered hand down his back, making him purr. "Sharp as ever, Shirogane."

The storm had calmed significantly, much to Deidara's surprise. It was now pouring lightly, no different than the airy summer rains in Akatsuki. Her umbrella was still up though—she’d rather not be soaked. The umbrella was big enough for two, and so Tamaki walked close to her, twirling a four-leafed clover that she had found on the way in her fingers.

Very few people had decided to come out, even with the storm at a pause. She could see worried and wary faces occasionally peaking out of windows. On the other hand, the storm had brought out a lot of frogs that definitely weren't averse to being outside. Her centipede, which had reverted back to its original spot in her sleeve, occasionally poked out to make agitated clicking noises at the wet environment.

Tamaki eyed it. "Is it real?"

The centipede crawled down her arm a little more so she could scratch its head. "Sure, why not? Clay golems can be as real as anything people normally consider real, hm." Grinning, she brought up her arm, the centipede dangling precariously off her forearm. "Wanna pet it?"

"Ehehe, no thanks, I'm good..." Tamaki glanced to the side at a mossy stone wall with a puddle at the base, two frogs loitering in said puddle. Then she turned back to the front, a nervous little smile on her face. "I'm not really good with bugs and the like."

They walked in silence for a bit before Tamaki broke the quiet once more.

"Are you really from Iwa?"

Deidara almost dropped the umbrella. "Yeah, why?"

"What do you think of our town then?" Tamaki sounded almost eager. "It was founded under two Iwa pioneers, both fishermen who couldn't get good business due to Iwa being so far from the ocean. The then leader of Konoha, the First Hokage—Uchiha Izanami—allowed them to live on the eastern archipelago as part of Konohagakure as long as they provided good trade. And they did. They were soon joined by Iwa immigrants, and people from Konoha—including Kiba's ancestors! —who were sick of living on the mainland. And, well, here we are today. That's why this place looks like an Iwa town, like your home."

"Iwa, huh..." Deidara normally avoided all thoughts of Iwa. But then the time she had spent in Kabuto's dungeon had unlocked memories of her mother she hadn't even realized she still kept, and now the ties that she had tried so hard to sever were now strengthened and calling her back. "It hasn't been my home for a long time, hm. Too many memories there."

"Bad ones?"

A bitter smirk had the corners of her mouth twitching in almost morbid sort of amusement. "Not all of them were bad. But I try not to look back at it."

Tamaki quietened. Then she said, "It was the Civil War, wasn't it?"
The centipede climbed back up Deidara's sleeve. "My, you're a clever one, aren't you? How did you figure that one out, hm?"

She didn't sound mad, so the younger girl took it as a good sign.

"Just a bit of deduction, I guess," Tamaki explained gingerly. She fiddled with the clover she held. "When I mentioned the war, you said it was a different one. And I know you're from Iwa. I guessed you were pretty young when you lost your parents, and you're about my age—a bit older—so I just thought of the only war that makes sense—the Iwa Civil War."

Deidara chuckled humorlessly, and the hairs on the back of Tamaki's neck raised in alarm. "Your logic could get you in trouble one day, yeah."

"So... What happened?"

"Ever heard of curiosity killed the cat?"

"Satisfaction brought it back."

"And then curiosity killed it again in a fit of jealousy. There is no satisfaction on the part of the cat to bring it back."

Tamaki wrinkled her nose.

The rain poured a little harder.

In the end, Deidara caved. Slightly. "Iwa betrayed my mother. There's really nothing else to it. The day they killed her was the day I left and never looked back. That's all, yeah. I could smell nothing but fire and burning bodies that day."

"... Thank you for telling me," whispered Tamaki.

"Think nothing of it, kid."

"I'm fifteen going on sixteen."

"And I'm nineteen going on twenty. Point?"

They arrived at the front of the sweets shop then, and Tamaki paused as she stepped out of the umbrella and underneath the overhanging cloth above her parents' doorstep. "Thanks for walking me."

"Forget it." Deidara lifted a hand. "See you around, Tamaki-chan."

"Goodbye, Deidara-san. We'll see each other again soon, don't worry."

I wasn't worrying, but thanks for the thought. The door opened, then closed, and Deidara could hear Tamaki's parents shrieking with worry and relief from the inside. She didn't know exactly why, but she kept standing there, the umbrella the only thing keeping her from becoming soaked. It was as if her feet had been rooted to the ground. The shouting quickly turned into crying, and Deidara felt a pang of jealousy and regret in her heart. She knew what it was now.

I think I always have. I just didn't want to admit it. The crying grew softer—the family had moved to a different room.

Deidara stood in the rain a little while longer before turning on her heel.
She had almost forgotten—there was nobody for her here.

"The bird sings at midnight, the bird sings at midnight, stuck in its roost, incapable of flight..."

The singing of the old lady Hirahara was instantly recognizable to Kiba's ears. She had the voice of what Kiba could only describe as of a gnarled tree's. It was creaky, stiff, and carried across as merely a whisper in the wind. But it was not entirely unpleasant.

"Good morning, Hirahara-baa-chan," Kiba greeted with a wave, even though he knew she couldn't see him.

"Oh, good morning, Kiba. Here to visit your mother?"

"Mmhm. I'll see you later, baa-chan. Come on, Akamaru."

They left Hirahara on the bench, humming to herself. The old lady was in hospice care, and caused much grief to the nurses whenever she magically disappeared from her hospital bed and reappeared on the garden bench outside. Magic, they said, it was surely magic.

There was a strict no dogs allowed rule, but Kiba managed to sneak Akamaru past without much trouble. It was strange, but lately the hospital workers had been giving him a wider berth.

This is it. Kiba stood in front of room 1408. Beside him, Akamaru whined, as if sensing his turbulent emotions. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he opened the door. This wasn't the first time he had visited his mother, and maybe he was crazy but it was more difficult each time, standing outside and wondering how much she had deteriorated.

"She will wake up," Kiba said aloud as he stepped inside. "She will, Akamaru. She has to."

The door closed behind him as he made for the single bed in the room. It was there Inuzuka Tsume lay, completely cut off from the world. Kiba pulled a chair to the bed and sat, placing his arms on the side of the bed, where his mother's narrow body didn't obstruct. The morning turned into afternoon outside as Kiba stayed there for hours, Akamaru sleeping at his feet. He nodded off a few times, too, but never managed to sleep for more than ten minutes.

She will wake up, he kept telling himself.

But then that voice whispered tantalizingly in the back of his head, suggesting an idea that Kiba tried not to entertain. But what if she doesn't? What will you do then? You've been abandoned by everyone. Your sister. All of your relatives are dead. You have no one.

Tears started to form in the corners of his eyes, soaking the sleeve of his shirt. Then he growled, wiping them away. He hated tears. Tears solved nothing, they didn't, he swore they didn't...

You're all alone, Kiba.

Kiba glanced out the window to check where the sun was, his insides feeling hollow. Tamaki won't abandon me. She's still here. I just have to drop by at the sweets shop and she's there. With her parents, her cats... A jealousy he didn't know he harbored surged through him, almost knocking him out of his seat. Akamaru snapped awake, completely in tune with his master's feelings. He nudged Kiba's legs, and Kiba looked down.

"Sorry, pal. Did I scare you?"

The sun was hidden behind the clouds again when Kiba sat up, popping his back. It was going to
start raining again soon—he could hear the wind howling outside, beating against the window and demanding entry.

Akamaru loyally padded after him as he bid his mother goodbye.

Before exiting the lobby, he went up to the receptionist, who was not much older than him. Kiba didn't particularly like her. She always had a sly look about her, from her pursed lips, arched brows, and narrow wide-set eyes. She was too much of a cat—not the innocent, fluffy kind like Tamaki, but the spiteful, manipulative type. He was willing to bet good money that if the woman ever met Kazebaba's annoying white tomcat, they would get along tremendously.

"Aika-san, can I get the billing history?" he requested, not really bothering with a polite tone. He didn't have time for niceties.

A shadow of a smirk was on the woman's face as she obliged. "Why, of course. See for yourself. You're lucky that it's all paid for for this month, otherwise your mother would be sleeping with the fishes." Akamaru growled at that, and Aika eyed the dog distastefully from over the counter.

"Fuck off." Kiba snatched the receipt from her, scanning it. Everything really was accounted for. It was a miracle—so much so that he actually sighed in relief. Numbers had never been quite his strong suit, and with his new lifestyle—stray on the streets (he couldn't stand living in the abandoned compound; he'd tried to sell it but there were no buyers), no money of his own because it had all already been spent on war efforts and Tsume's recovery (mostly the former, Kiba recalled in disgust), little access to important information about the hospital's billing... He was never sure just how much he owed to them each month. And he certainly wasn't going to ask the shrew Aika. As long as he kept paying what he normally did, it would be fine.

"This coming from a scrawny mutt..." Aika muttered. "I could get you kicked out for good."

"I'll still keep sneaking in."

Aika rolled her eyes. "Not that I care, but be more careful, mutt. There are sharks around the quay now."

Kiba was not deaf. He had heard the rumors—rumors of a gang forming in the town. But no gang members had ever been outed, and they remained mostly silent. But people were starting to fear for their safety—it was not just the storm that had them huddled up at home. "Tch. Whatever. I'm outta here." He shoved the receipt in his pocket. *I'm lucky that the hospital bill is so cheap, otherwise I wouldn't be able to pay for it.*

If she were here it would have been so much easier—

*But it isn't!* Kiba walked out into the rain, sullen and without a care of becoming soaked. *It isn't easier because she isn't here! She up and left! And for what? Her dreams? Medical school? Ha! That stupid, selfish, bitch... I hate you, Hana. I hope you're rotting in hell over there.*

Fuming, Kiba wandered around town aimlessly, unwilling to return to Kazebaba just yet. He didn't want to be cooped up inside—he'd explode if he were. Not to mention that damn blonde cow was still there. He turned into an empty street. *What was her name again? Deidara?* It was Akamaru's alarmed bark that snapped him out of his funk, just in time to duck and not get his face chopped in half by a flying axe.

"What the hell?!

"Inuzuka..."
He had a pretty face, that was for sure. Kiba grimaced, stepping backward when the speaker—a handsome man with darker hair and even darker eyes emerged from the shadows, a small smile on his face. His hair was kept in a low ponytail, black bangs falling over his face.

Kiba stepped backward, his heart pounding. Akamaru was growling at the man, his tail raised in alarm.

The man's smile grew a little wider, holding out one bandaged hand toward him. "I've been looking for you."

"Okaa-san, why do you fight, huh?" Kiba, seven years old, glared up at his mother. "You're always away at council meetings and stuff. S'not fair..."

Tsume chuckled. It was low and rumbling and came from the depths of her chest. It soothed him. "It's just a skirmish this time around. It's those damn Iwa supremacists acting up again. The Axe Gang. Don't worry—they're as weak as the basis of their ideals. We'll squash them like insects, pup."

His mother turned to leave, but Kiba sat up from his bed, calling after her, "W-wait! What about my question?"

Tsume paused. "Question?" she echoed.

"Yeah! My question! Why do you fight so hard?"

"Why...?" Tsume's lips curled up in a smirk as she turned, Kiba looking at her in awe as she said, "For the town, of course. I'll defend this town to my last breath. And one day, I expect you to do the same, understand? Sickleleaf Town is our home, and its people need to be protected. The Axe Gang are outsiders who seek to take advantage of this town's history to fuel their own agenda. I can't let them do that, or I'll be a traitor to the very place I swore to protect. Our loved ones and friends are here. If we don't fight, they'll get hurt."

"Wow..." Kiba took a deep breath. "You're really cool, okaa-san!"

The woman barked a laugh. "Should have known all that flew over your head. But what the heck—you're still a kid. You have plenty of time. At your age, you have all the time in the world..." She ruffled his hair one last time for goodnight, kissing his forehead after that. "Night, pup."

"Goodnight, okaa-san," whispered the boy, hugging his dog plush toy close to his chest.

But he didn't fall asleep that night. Not immediately. Tsume was wrong about one thing—everything she had said, not all of it had gone in one ear and out the other.

"That mutt still not back yet?" Deidara casually said as she brushed her hair, looking at Kazebaba through the mirror she faced.

"I'm afraiđ he isn't." The old woman closed her eyes.

"You're calm." Deidara narrowed her eyes. "Too calm, yeah, for someone who claims to care so much about it."

Kazebaba smiled. "Did I ever say such a thing?"
"You don't need to tell me anything. Your body language already gave that away, hm. How many more days are you giving him?"

It was only then that Kazebaba paused, the storm rumbling dangerously outside. "The question should be," she amended, "how many more days is he giving you?"

What? What the hell is she talking about? Deidara continued to eye the ancient woman through the mirror, more wary than before. "Don't mistake my questions for anything but mild concern about his safety," she growled accusingly. "I owe him nothing more than that." She ducked her head to tie her hair into its usual style.

"I wonder if you'll still say the same thing," mused Kazebaba, "When push comes to shove."

When Deidara looked up again, she was gone.

The first day without Kiba passed by quietly. Deidara went about doing her own things, planning her routes to her next clients as well as fitting downtime back in the city into her schedule. She'd go mad if she had to be by her lonesome for too long again, just like when the Tsuki soldiers had taken over Akatsuki. At least then she had had Hitomi—

Her pen cracked in her hand.

Letting out a shaky breath, she tossed it in the wastebasket and got out another one from her single case. She had only brought two pens, and she needed to be more careful with them.

It was then she remembered what else she had brought along aside from her work things. Almost hesitantly, she reached into her case again, pulling out the copy of Sarutobi Sasuke's diary that Fumiko had given her.

Then she began to read.

Kazebaba never once bothered her, except to offer her tea in the evening.

Kiba didn't come back. Neither did Tamaki. Deidara fell asleep in the wee hours of the morning, a small part of her expecting the dog-boy and his mutt to be back the next day.

The second day of Kiba's absence, Deidara spent it by pushing her work aside and reading Sarutobi's diary on her comfortable bed. His words—hastily written but packed full of emotions so raw and real that it was utterly indescribable—stayed in her mind, and she was vaguely aware of the sun peaking and setting behind the clouds outside.

Sarutobi Sasuke had been an orphan of war. That was not unusual. She was, too, as well as many others. He had existed in the time of the Warring Clans, the youngest brother from a family of five boys and a girl. It was an era where bloodshed and violence were even more prevalent than today, and Sarutobi had fought tooth and nail just to survive. Three of his four brothers had been murdered on the battlefield, the last brother living out his days wheelchair bound. He had committed suicide before Sarutobi had even turned twenty. And Mirai—she nearly choked when she saw that name—his only sister, had died from giving birth. The way he mourned her on the pages made her a little sick in the stomach, a reminder of her own grief, but she went on, unwilling to drop the book for such a simple, pathetic reason.

The man had wished for nothing but peace. What he had gotten instead was endless war that only ended when Uchiha Izanami and Senju Riku—two of the biggest instigators of the bloody skirmishes of that region during that time—declared peace and founded Konohagakure, the first
nation. But even then, nothing was as it seemed. It appeared that Konoha had a long history of corruption, starting from when Senju Riku—stabbed quite literally in the back—was assassinated and Uchiha Izanami—*curse her name!* the diary spat—became the First Hokage. Sarutobi made it no secret in his diary that he strongly suspected that Izanami had been the perpetrator.

She read until the early hours of the morning once again.

On the third day without the Inuzuka boy, Deidara was sure that Kazebaba was going to approach her once and for all about this Kiba matter (whatever it was). Instead of letting the woman come up to her, Deidara went downstairs for the first time in two days that wasn't for food or water.

And what she saw—

Deidara cleared her throat. "Care to explain why exactly your cat is flying on a bubble?" The bubble itself was sustaining from a constant stream of tea that flowed upward and into said bubble. The fat white cat that usually sat on the table next to Kazebaba was looking quite flustered, trying to hold on to its ride with its claws.

Kazebaba didn't even look at her. "Shirogane enjoys playing. Come here, Deidara." She held out a note. "This is from my wind spirit, Karasu. The news... is quite dire. Oh, yes, quite dire indeed... This is turning out to be quite the gamble..."

Deidara took the note (the paper was as light as air, she noticed, and the words seemed to glow a faint, pulsing blue), skimming over it. "You cannot be serious."

"Deadly."

Deidara snarled, scrunching the paper in her hand. "What's this game of yours, old hag?!"

"My only intention is to help Kiba. If I must do so in this roundabout manner, than so be it. He will never let go if I don't take this chance."

"And where do you get off roping me into this?" Deidara said, her voice low and dangerous. "*Hm? I didn't come all the way here for you to mess around with my life as if I'm some puppet! Well?! Answer me!*"

"I'm not playing games, Deidara. You and I—we will both benefit from the outcome. Witch's honor. But if you don't help him, he will die. Surely, Deidara, you would not allow his string to be cut?"

Deidara glowered at her with all the hatred she could summon, Kazebaba meeting her gaze evenly. "Honor?" she said in the end. "Don't make me laugh, yeah." She turned on her heel. "I'll save your precious dog-boy," she added, her tone venomous. "But not for you, hm. Only because nobody needs to die from this. You knew everything that was happening from the start, didn't you? *Witch.*"

Kazebaba watched her disappear upstairs and not come back down. When she went up, she saw that the belt with her clay and weapons pouch had been taken from their usual place on the end of her bed, the rest of her belongings still where they were the last time she came up here. The woman glanced out the window, which was opened, and saw her dark figure jumping across rooftops, nimble as a cat. Her cloak's hood was pulled over her head. Kazebaba shut the window, even when her magic prevented rain and wind from coming inside.

Shirogane meowed. He had followed her up.

Her old knees bending, Kazebaba squatted to pet her beloved cat. "Good luck, Deidara-san. His life
depends on you now, Karasu." Her wind companion appeared beside her. "Send a message to Tamaki. She deserves to know what I truly intended. Sometimes, drastic measures must be taken. Perhaps she might never forgive me..."

Far away from the house, Deidara flitted through the rain like a bird in the wind, words of Sarutobi burned into her brain. In the thunderstorm, she steered toward the direction of one place far away from the town—the place where Kiba's troubles had started.

In the distance, the Inuzuka Clan compound cast a shadow on the hill it sat upon.

Dear Rin,

The boy, Kiba, he disappeared today. He left in the morning and hasn't been back since. It's almost midnight when I'm writing this. That old woman—Kazebaba—she's planning something. I can feel it in my bones.

Nothing else to report back to you. Hope Daichi and Hikari are doing good.

Yours,

Deidara

Hey Rin,

Kiba's still not back. I don't like him very much, but I think this should be a cause for concern. I'm also more than halfway through Sarutobi Sasuke's diary. It's... just as I expected it to be. Better, even. I think you should read it sometime—there's bound to be some copies in the city library.

Kazebaba is suspicious. She knows what's happened to Kiba, but she's waiting for something. I don't know what.

The storm should clear up soon, hopefully.

Yours,

Deidara

Kazebaba-sama,

Inuzuka-kun is currently being held in his clan compound, north-west from our base. They are hurting him. Why? Because they want to be Inuzuka Tsume's inheritors. Once she passes away, it will fall to Kiba regardless of his age. They want him to officially give up his position as heir to the leader of the Axe Gang, contract and all.

Karasu

Blood dripped onto the floor, forming a pool. Kiba looked up, his entire face feeling like it was on fire.

His tormentor stood before him, looking bored.

"Still haven't caved?" The handsome man pushed his chin up with one rough thumb. "Tough one,
aren't you?"

Despite the pain in his face, Kiba spat a glob of blood and mucus at the man. It landed on his cheek. "Fuck you, you bastard. I'll never give you the clan... the Inuzuka... we're protectors of this city!" Okaa-san... I've been a traitor, stealing from the people we loved so much... "I'll NEVER LET IT FALL INTO RUINS!"

"Keep spouting your utter tripe." The man wiped his face. "Nobody's coming for you, Kiba. You've been abandoned."

No... Tears sprung up in his eyes, even when blood dripped from his mouth. No, that's not true...

"Kid." He whispered in Kiba's ear. "I'm going to ask you nicely one last time—"

And then there was an explosion, and Kiba's world tilted and darkened.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Alright, update!

The Axe Gang are to my knowledge a real gang formed in 1921, but they are often used as cinematic characters in Hong Kong.

A little bit of a shorter chapter than usual, so I hope that's okay. If I can write it properly, there WILL be a battle scene next chapter: Deidara vs. Mysterious Hot Guy.

Please comment! They're all appreciated, thanks ^_^
Part V: Orange Lily

Chapter Summary

Kiba: Why would you kill your own brother?

Deidara: _.

Sasuke: *nervous sweating*

Ai Wei: 我是唯一的孩子 lmao hAHA

Chapter Notes

A/N: Bit of a heavy chapter. Maybe. Hm. Like seeing people getting lynched?

Now I have only the memory of what I was, which tortures me when I consider what I've become.

— Excerpt from The Diary of Sarutobi Sasuke

Sasori blinked slowly as Deidara burst into a fit of giggles, her eyes closed as her giggles turned into a full-on roar of laughter that couldn't be calmed. The single bottle of sake they had shared—empty cups were clutched in their hands—trembled as her thigh accidentally pushed it forward. The bottle rolled off the roof and shattered on the concrete ground below before Sasori could even comprehend what was happening.

"When," she wheezed, "When did you get so funny, hm?!"

"I've always been hilarious," he deadpanned, checking the contents of his own cup to see if there was anything in there that could have caused her laughing fit. Their faces were both warm from alcohol—the blush across her cheeks redder than his—as they enjoyed each other's company, the moon looking down on them from its cradle of stars. He poured himself more of the sake, feeling a smile tugging at his lips despite himself. "It's your turn," he reminded her, "Tell me something about your past."

He had managed to avoid letting anything... sensitive slip so far, letting her drink most of the beverage so that his tongue would not loosen too quickly. Maybe someday, he would tell her, but that was a slim chance.

"Okay, okay!" Deidara exhaled deeply, preparing herself. "There was this boy my old best friend used to like before..." Sasori raised an eyebrow at the sudden coherent gleam in her eyes before it was replaced by the filmy glaze of intoxication. "He ended up dividing us, and it was the stupidest love triangle ever, yeah! Could it even be called that?! In the end, it wasn't like... like..." She shook
her head, her amusement turning into frustration. "It would have never worked out. Honestly, now that I think about it, Kurotsuchi-teme was really gross to like him."

"And you weren't?"

"Hey! I didn't like him, hm! I just got dragged into things! Besides, he was a year younger than everyone else, and people picked on him all the time," she was rambling now, "so we only got close because I beat up the kids who wouldn't leave him alone. Hmph."

Perhaps this wasn't the best idea, Sasori suspected as Deidara took the entire bottle of sake and drained it to its last drop.

She let out a happy sigh. "It's a nice night. Let's not ruin it with the past, hm. We should play something else."

"This wasn't a game to begin with," Sasori pointed out, though he was inwardly glad that they had dropped the subject of the past. Clearly, her own past had its dark marks, though he doubted it was as blood-soaked as his. Until the time was right—if it ever came—their secrets would stay locked away. "What's your favorite color?" Not the smoothest change of subject, but it would do.

"Green. Forest green, yeah. You?"

Forest green... the trees only grew in the south in Iwa, didn't they? He tucked that bit of information he had gleaned from her away. He didn't have to think about his answer. "Anything except red."

Deidara's eyes moved up to his crimson locks, and she cocked a brow.

It was Sasori's turn to drink, taking a long, slow sip from the precious remnants in his cup. "It's the truth, brat. Who do you believe—me or my hair?"

"Red is a good color on you though," she slurred, smiling. "Don't know why you don't like it, hm."

It was fairly simple in Sasori's opinion. It was because red was the color of blood, which was what normally preceded death.

"A lot of cultures consider it a lucky color," she added when he didn't seem convinced.

But he wouldn't budge, not on this. "In my culture, it was the color of war flags."

"Oh. Ours was brown. Tan-ish. The war flags, that is." She spoke lightly of the topic, and Sasori wondered if she had ever known war. There was still so much he had yet to discover about her, and though he told himself that he didn't care—she was just a sparring partner, a casual acquaintance (but would they really be here now if they were really just that)?—but he felt his desire to know more about her stir deep within him.

But for now, either she was a really good actress or it was genuine. Considering her inebriated state, he chose to believe the latter.

She was quite the sheltered brat, wasn't she?

"Do you even know what it's like?" Sasori said, a small amount of bitterness seeping into his voice.

No answer.

"Brat?"
A light snore.

Her chakra was calm.

Sasori let out a long-suffering sigh. Of course.

"Then I hope you never find out," he muttered, drinking the last drops of his sake. Then he got comfortable, tracing paths in the stars above. He would wake her soon—it wouldn't do to have her sliding off the roof in the middle of the night and breaking her neck—but for now, he would enjoy what comforts the night had to offer.

He never got to see her open her eyes as soon as he turned away, her gaze solemn and sad and knowing despite the alcohol in her system—the eyes of someone who had been forced to grow up too quickly. Then she closed them, lulled into sleep by the sound of his steady breathing and the liquid fire burning in her blood.

The two guards in front of the compound gates instantly stiffened as Deidara marched up the hill, her cloak floating around her figure ethereally. They squinted, almost as if they were unsure if she were real or a trick of the mind.

"Oi," one of them growled, stepping forward. He brandished an axe that glinted in the moonlight. Rain continued to pour, and Deidara continued to stand a few paces away from them, unmoving. "Get out of here. You're not welcome."

"Kai… Kaido…!"

The guard who was antagonizing her whipped his head back. "Wha—!" His exclamation turned into a choked scream as his partner writhed against the gates, some kind of thick, ropey monster had its body coiled tightly around the other man, crushing him in a slow, agonizing death. An eerie chitter from the creature struck fear into the man, and he fumbled with his axe, arm trembling. "Ichirou!"

Then blood bubbled from his lips, and he collapsed face first into his axe, which drove half-way into his skull. The hilt of a knife stuck out from his back.

Deidara sighed as her centipede crawled over the wall. "Do unto others before they do unto you," she recited aloud, resigned. These men would not hesitate to kill her—she would adopt the same mindset, the same one she had adopted when she and Sasori had fought Orochimaru. Hardening her resolve, she threw open the gates, the action sending an ominous boom throughout the compound.

She reached one hand into her clay pouch—the left, which still had its mouth intact.

An axe nearly took her head, but she moved her head to the side just in time, her gaze never wavering. Then she flicked her wrist, and a clay bomb—C2—flew toward the darkness.

"Katsu."

The explosion was deafening, and the smell of ashes and charred corpses flooded up her nostrils. She hated the smell, but walked on through. She glanced at the bodies, briefly checking. Two dead men, just as she had expected. There seemed to be some sort of organization around here—one which required for Axe Gang members to work in pairs.

The door of a side entrance into the main hall came crashing down, and Deidara didn't have to turn
to know that her clay centipede was doing its job, strangling a guard to death. Its pale hide was splattered with red.

When she entered the hall—it seemed to be one once used for entertainment, if stage at the front of the room was any indication; Kiba was the main attraction tonight—she found that it was filled to the brim with gang members of all shapes and sizes, all of them wielding an axe for a weapon.

There was a dark-clothed man standing on the stage with Kiba, his back facing Deidara. Then he lifted his hand to his face and turned, a white mask obscuring his eyes.

"A girl?" one burly man blurted. "Is… is that all?! But we heard an explosion!"

"Who cares?" a reedy man sneered. "She's killed our own… I can smell the blood… And we can't forgive that." He looked up at the man on the stage. "Right, Hayate?"

Hayate dipped his chin. "No need to wait for an invitation." His voice was smooth, and he had a baritone—lower than even Sasori's—that didn't entirely suit his slender, bird-like frame, which was still visible despite the dim lighting and the black trench coat he wore.

"Kiba!" Deidara suddenly bellowed, paying no heed to the conversation between Hayate and the reedy man. The boy's head was drooped, but he stirred a little in recognition of his own name. She rested her gaze on Hayate. "I'll be taking him back now, hm. Step aside, trash." Boldly, she took a step forward. The men didn't budge. One lifted an axe.

"Do unto others before they do unto you, said Sarutobi Sasuke. In the end, even the peace-lover had had no choice but to resign himself to the mantra in order to survive. She lifted her hands.

Immediately, the Axe Gang took this as some kind of declaration and charged for her, waving their axes all over the place as they went for the offensive.

"Katsu."

Shrieks of pain and terror accompanied the first wave of attackers falling down, bleeding out from their legs, which had been blown into pieces.

"What?" Deidara said as she was met with horrified gazes. "Did you really think I was just standing there, waiting for you to finish talking? Hm?" she added mockingly, showing her hands. As soon as she said the words, clay shot down her sleeves and wrapped around her hands, forming dangerous tips at the fingers. In seconds flat, she had made a bigger, more armored version of Sasori's chakra neko-tes.

Then she walked.

Fodder didn't learn, did they? Cries of desperation rising up their throat, she cut a path through all of them like stalks of grass—ruthlessly, relentlessly—blood and other bodily matter splattering everywhere.

But then a man got too close, his knife thrusting for between her eyes. A split-second later, her hand—free of her clay armor—grabbed his knife-wielding hand and twisted, bending his arm at a seemingly impossible angle. He screamed in pain, collapsing on his knees and then falling to his side. She stepped over him, the heel of her boot crunching on his nose.

Nobody saw, but she grimaced. If she was ashamed or vilified at her own cruelty, no one would ever know.

Someone took the opportunity to try to gut her from behind, but her centipede saved her, throwing
itself between the axe and her spine. It split the centipede in two, but the upper half hissed and tore at his face, its fearsome pincers gouging out his eyes, then piercing through the socket and into the skull. Brain matter splashed about, dousing the clay creature in a fountain of reds and pinks. The centipede writhed in the ground for a moment before connecting itself back together and scuttling off somewhere.

The sound of somebody throwing up at the sight, followed by screaming, could be heard.

"My..." Hayate looked up, his eyes gleaming behind his mask as Deidara leaped through the air, landing on the elevated stage. Gang members followed, but were stopped in their tracks when a second and third centipede emerged from her garb, crawling across the floor and hissing at them dangerously. "You're one of a kind, aren't you?"

"Are you going to stop me?" she asked coolly, stepping toward Kiba.

"No." Hayate's lips curled into a smirk. "But he will."

Deidara turned just in time to see a giant fist headed her way; she rolled across the floor and back onto her feet, warily watching the hulk who had nearly killed her. He was two heads taller than her and built like a tank—but what made her most cautious was not his size, but the fact that he stood like a trained martial artist. Realizing that their attacker had been spooked for the first time, Axe Gang members began to gather closer like flies to rotten flesh.

"I never thought..." Hayate trailed off, his gaze fixed on Deidara behind the mask. "Ookami. Kill her."

The big, burly man nodded. "Hai."

"The second-in-command," the lowly henchmen chattered, "We're going to see him fight...!"

Deidara took a step backward, frowning. "Hey, big guy." She lifted her fingers. "Katsu."

Lightning fast, her three centipedes wrapped around Ookami's large form, exploding on impact.

Hayate glanced up at the ceiling, smiling. "That should do it."

Moments after his spoken words, water sprayed from the roof, the hall's emergency sprinklers activated due to the amount of smoke that had amassed from Deidara's explosions. There were cries of surprise from everyone as they were rained upon, the water washing the blood toward the doors; the compound was not completely level.

The smoke cleared, revealing Deidara standing over the fallen form of Ookami. Without her centipedes, she was almost completely exposed as she was drenched, the clay around her hands melting away with the water. Or perhaps she thought it was safe enough for her to do so. She moved for Kiba—

And Ookami snatched her ankle and slammed her into the floor.

Hayate smiled, reaching for Kiba and tilting his chin up to force him to look at what had just transpired. His eyes were at a casual half-mast, showing little reaction to the sight of Ookami throwing her to the ground. "I know you're awake, kid. Take a look—I was wrong. Somebody did come for you? It's too bad that she's going to die now, isn't she? Ookami is a legend in his own right when it comes to taijutsu. She won't win." Peering closer, he could see tears beneath Kiba's lashes. "You didn't cry until I broke your foot earlier. Why now, then?" Hayate tilted his head, pretending to be pensive. "Ah! Is it because she came for you when nobody else did?" The boy
"Ahaha... I'm a pretty good guesser, aren't I?" Closing his eyes, Hayate ducked his head, bangs falling over his eyes, and whispered in Kiba's ear, "Why don't you go help her then? I'll let you go. Just for a little bit. If you try to run, I'll catch you. I'll always catch you."

"TEME!" Ookami fell backward as Deidara wrenched herself free and kicked him upside the jaw. Her chest was heaving, genuine distress visible in her blue eyes as she bled from a wound on her head, blood streaking down her face. Her cloak had been discarded, leaving her clad in only her yukata and tan pants. The sleeves of her garb were rolled up, revealing red marks on her forearms which would eventually fade into bruises. A deep, almost primal growl rose in her throat, and she shot toward Ookami, clay rapidly forming around her arms as she struck Ookami again while he was on the floor, dazed. The first punch broke his nose, and then Ookami rolled out of the way and back into a standing position.

"I am bigger than you," Ookami suddenly stated calmly, "And stronger, too. You cannot defeat me."

"Oh, please," her voice was dripping with acid, "I've faced worse odds, you pale asshole." Inwardly, though, she took Ookami quite seriously. He had been able to withstand three combined C2 explosions, which was nothing to sniff at. What is up with this freak? He's a heavy-hitter, and his durability is off the charts, but still... Is he some kind of monster?!

"You're wondering, aren't you?" Ookami hardly blinked. "How I survived." He lifted up his arm, and his bones began to protrude from skin, but he did not flinch. "Allow me to demonstrate." With a squelching sound, the bones in his forearm shot out from the skin and formed a deadly, curved and almost axe-like blade.

What?!

Deidara stiffened, pupils briefly narrowing into slits. I... I didn't even see it happen! It was... almost instant. She lifted her hand to cover the exposed half of her face, her lips trembling as she struggled to reign the sudden rush of something that had enveloped her. "Ha...

Haha! Hahahaha!" She couldn't see it, but even Ookami looked a little startled at her reaction before steering his face into its usual bland mask. "And here I thought I could get away with charging head-on, hm." Her fingers parted a little, her single eye practically boring holes into Ookami. "I never even considered... that this measly piece of shit gang in this measly piece of shit town could have someone like you... The irony! Bahaha! You know, you really get my blood boiling," her countenance turned into one of undisguised hatred, "Ōtsutsuki-san."

The composure she had fought to hard to maintain as she killed and maimed those men, convincing herself that it was for the greater good... It was all falling apart now, and she was starting to relish in it, especially with the appearance of this man before her. Sometimes things like this are necessary.

"South side?" Ookami ventured.

"Forever and always, yeah." Without warning, Ookami shot toward her like a dart. She dodged, clay running down her arms and forming into her clawed gauntlets again; her lips were curled back in a snarl, and she fought with an almost renewed strength. They clashed, hardened clay meeting reinforced bone. Ookami attempted to stab her in the chest by extending the reach of his ivory blade, but she changed the texture of her clay at the last second and engulfed it.

"Tch!" Deidara spat when the blade ended up nicking her face anyway, causing a line of blood to form from the bridge of her nose to her cheekbones. She wrenched herself from their stalemate, but he closed the distance too quickly, smashed her across the platform with the blunt edge of his blade. Her flying body tore the stage curtains, the fabric twisting around her battered body.
Shit! She barely rolled out of the way in time to avoid being gutted by Ookami's blade—she had barely gotten back the wind in her lungs when he had launched himself at her, killing intent leaking from his body. She was faster than him, but that didn't matter if he was good enough to get a hit in—and that he was. Her ribs were feeling like they had cracked into a million pieces and the rest of her was no better. Narrowing her eyes, her arm lashed out, and the shredded, tangled mess of a curtain flew toward Ookami, momentarily blinding him, his mouth open in a roar.

They had all the space to themselves now—most of the gang members had evacuated from fear or were dead. Hayate was murmuring something to Kiba that Deidara didn't have time to decipher—what she needed to do now was gain some sufficient distance from Ookami. She coiled her leg muscles and jumped up into the catwalk above the stage, her arms just long enough to grab the bottom railing and swing herself up. All the while, her left hand chewed ferociously, her right hand jerking as if practicing a throwing motion.

Just one more second! Her breathing was ragged, her ribs aching, but she kept going until, finally, her remaining hand-mouth spat out a small, kunai-shaped clay structure. It was not molded after any particular shape or animal, unlike her normal creations. She pushed her hair back with a smirk that betrayed vindictive desperation, revealing her eyescope, and, using her right hand, threw the kunai. It was a gamble where lives were at stake—

It spun through the air just as Ookami lifted the curtain from his face.

Hayate grimaced, pulling Kiba out of the way as well.

"KATSU!"

The explosion roared and billowed outward, shaking the building. The catwalk swayed, but Deidara's footing was firm, her teeth blood-stained as she grinned, adrenaline pumping through her veins.

That's one thing you'll never understand in the north side, she told him silently, innovation was never meant to be placed above true art.

Her yukata floating around her frame as she leaped off the catwalk to face Hayate, the man raised an eyebrow, not even fazed by the fact that Ookami had been reduced to a charred lump of flesh.

"You knew," he mused.

Deidara sneered, her expression the epitome of scorn. "Of course I knew. I knew the moment he took out his so-called trump card, hm. If there's one way to defeat an Ōtsutsuki clan member, you go for the face, never the arms or the legs. Just make sure your intentions are invisible." Other fighters would have tried to disable his main weapons first before going for the head, but that strategy would never work. One never won in a fair fight with an Ōtsutsuki fighter—sometimes you just needed to play dirty. Her clay formed into clawed gauntlets around her hands again as she stepped toward Hayate. "I'll be taking him and going."

"Hmm..." Hayate smiled, and maybe Deidara was hallucinating things, but he seemed so utterly familiar in a twisted sort of way. "No," he decided, "I don't think I will. If you want him..." He lowered his chin, a smile slashing across his face he spread his bandaged hands toward her in an almost welcoming gesture. "Come and get him."

"What's your favorite color?"

The boat rocking beneath his feet, Sasori didn't glance backward, simply continuing to work on the
little wooden sculpture—a scorpion with its tail poised to sting—he was carving with a small
dagger. He's doing that thing again. Taking everything that book says to heart like the socially
inept idiot he is. Sai was a strange boy who seemed to be living as two different people at times.
Sometimes, he would be the emotionless boy, only capable of processing commands and cared not
for other things except top performance and mission completion, and other times, he would attempt
to 'bond' with Sasori without much avail. It was as if he were struggling to decide whether to be a
robot or a human. Today, his more empathetic side—if one could even call it that—was rearing its
ugly head.

"None of your business," Sasori responded shortly, continuing his work. While it seemed as if he
were completely engaged in carving the wooden scorpion, his senses were alert as always. Not
even the captain of the ship below deck could move from his wine cabinet to his hammock without
alerting Sasori.

If he had a little less control, the scorpion would have cracked beneath his grip as he recalled
Danzo's mission briefing those few days ago. He'd been on edge ever since, expecting shadows
melting from the nooks and crannies of the valley to devour him as they took vengeance for their
untimely deaths—ghosts of the lives he had taken in the past.

Sai flipped through his book, seemingly oblivious. But Sasori knew better—Sai could be a good
actor; he just didn't know how to act human. Then he snapped it shut, and Sasori looked up,
sensing that he was about get to business—or, in other words, go through the mission briefing
again. He made sure to do it once every day. When, Sasori wondered with no small amount of
irritation, would he get it in his thick skull that he need not repeat himself every time the sun came
up?

By now, Sasori could recite it word for word. It wasn't a difficult task as Sai never paraphrased or
omitted during his readers.

"Our mission is to travel to Sunlight Inn Town," Sai repeated, Sasori silently speaking along,
"Where we will spend the remaining duration of our mission tracking down and killing the
Tsukigakure spy, Yaobami-san. Description: Approximately 169 centimetres, female, slim build,
and, according to information passed on from our recently deceased agent, fond of flowers."

Flowers. Of course. It seemed to be every womanly staple. Personally, Sasori wasn't the fondest of
flowers. Unless they were a cactus or desert plant of some sort, most were fragile and died too
quickly, their lifespan insignificant and fleeting. One trod of a foot and they would bend and snap
with nary a whimper.

The information given about the spy wasn't the most useful either. She had a common height, a
common body shape, and a common interest. Not much to work with here—she could be any
woman in the town.

He didn't mind though.

He had worked with less before.

"Don't forget our training," Sai finished. That was new. Sasori stirred, giving him an unimpressed
stare.

"Hmph. Speak for yourself," he said sharply. "I've been doing this before you were even born."
And he wasn't sure if he was proud, per se, but—"I've come out of this more alive than you are.

Sai's feathers weren't ruffled at the reminder just who was the senior killer between the two of
them. They hardly ever were. Instead, he sat across from Sasori, taking out a blank scroll and a brush. One short, small burst of chaka and the tips blackened from the sudden influx of ink. He shook it over the railing for a few seconds before starting to draw.

Sasori would be lying if he said that he didn't look at Sai curiously for the rest of the trip. Here was a fellow artist sitting mere feet away from him and the possessed little to no understanding of one another at all. Even with Deidara—someone whose art completely contradicted his—he shared some sort of camaraderie or fellow feeling with. The feeling soon passed, however, and the pair fell into silence.

The old witch-woman was polite, but not to the point of bending over backwards for him, which was something Sasori could appreciate. She seemed like the person to be clear, concise, and even cutting when need be—his kind of person.

"Sit," she said. Ryu was already seated, but he shifted aside to let his grandmother sit on the couch as well, directly opposite Sasori. The woman had two couches, funnily enough, and both of them had a faded flower pattern and smelled like mildew. Sasori sat on the edge of the seat cushion, well aware of this.

Two steaming cups of tea were placed on the table between them, untouched.

"What kind of information are you after?" she inquired after a mini staring contest, reaching for her tea. She was wary of him—his kind of person.

"Sit," she said. Ryu was already seated, but he shifted aside to let his grandmother sit on the couch as well, directly opposite Sasori. The woman had two couches, funnily enough, and both of them had a faded flower pattern and smelled like mildew. Sasori sat on the edge of the seat cushion, well aware of this.

Two steaming cups of tea were placed on the table between them, untouched.

"What kind of information are you after?" she inquired after a mini staring contest, reaching for her tea. She was wary of him—that was good. She'd ought to be. He just hoped that it would encourage her to give up information freely and easily, rather than have the opposite effect.

He told her of his intentions—or some of it, anyway—and she took it in with a contemplative pause.

Her brow was creased as she said, "It all circles back to one man: Shimura Danzo. He legally bought this town, so some call him Mayor, if you will. But ever since his arrival, there's been nothing but trouble. Our animals and the few crops we have started to die, and we had to work twice as hard to meet the government quota. Taxes and all, as I'm sure you understand." Her countenance darkened. "In the end, our effort was for nothing, anyway. The only thing keeping this town afloat is the man who brought it to his knees. We have nepotism or whatever to thank for that.

"I don't know too much about Danzo. Nobody who's still alive does," she added with a morbid chuckle, making Ryu cringe away. When Sasori remained stoic, she continued, "What I do know is that the ANBU weren't always stationed here. They only started appearing when Pein declared war on Kaguya."

"You mean the other way round," Sasori interrupted for the first time.

The witch-woman blinked slowly. "No. I may be old, but I'm quite certain. Emperor Pein is the instigator of this war."

What? How can that be? Surely, she's mistaken. He tried not to seem too shocked. Everyone in Akatsuki had been told that it was Empress Kaguya who had declared this war.

The old lady sipped her tea. "It's quite odd, actually," she reflected, "Almost out of the blue. I'm assuming you are aware of Amegakure's bloody history?"

Sasori forced himself to answer neutrally, "To an extent, yes." Under the care of his grandmother, he had grown up studying the history of Suna and its closest neighbors, Konoha and Kusa, and his
knowledge of the wetlands and mountains—Kiri, Iwa, Ame and more—were limited.

"Mm, yes." She put her cup down. "Before Pein came into power, the country was ruled by a vicious tyrant—Hanzo. Even the Sannin could not take him down. But one day, he fell to the hands of three: Pein, Yahiko, and the Angel. Pein became Emperor, but Yahiko and the Angel had near equal standing with him. Interestingly, Kaguya and Hanzo had a tentative alliance during his reign. When Yahiko died just weeks before the war started, Kaguya made it no secret that it was she who had murdered him... in revenge for Hanzo, I'm guessing."

"That makes zero sense," deadpanned Sasori, crossing his arms. His tea had cooled by now. "Pein had already assumed power by the time I migrated there from Suna. I've lived in Ame for thirteen years. Why would Kaguya take so long to take revenge for an alliance she didn't care for?"

"I wouldn't know," the woman replied curtly, "Seeing as I'm not a power-hungry megalomaniac. But you raise a good point. It's something that I also wonder at times."

"Wars make no sense in general," complained Ryu, flopping back into the couch. "Why bother trying to understand it?"

No, Sasori inwardly disagreed. They do make sense. I've been living and breathing it since childhood. But this… Eyes cold, he steepled his fingers. Is the strangest war I've ever had the displeasure of knowing.

He couldn't shake the feeling that there was something bigger going on that he was in the dark about.

Then he abruptly stood up. "I've overstayed my welcome. Good day."

He could feel Ryu and the woman's eyes following his figure as he left, closing the rickety wooden door behind him.

Sasori still had four hours before the briefing, judging by the sun.

Without warning, he took to the roofs again, heading toward the base of White Fang Mountain.

The sprinklers continued to rain down on them, drenching them as droplets dripped down their noses and brushed past their chins. Then, without warning, Deidara shot forward, the wind whistling behind her, slashing at Hayate.

Her claws crashed through an ice barrier, the man on the other disappearing. As she tore her arms out of the freshly formed wall, the sprinklers abruptly stopped raining, and she let out a shout of surprise when an icicle nearly pierced her foot. Her head snapping upward, her eyes widened at the sight of more deadly icicles falling toward her.

What? Her heart was speared by a sudden familiarity, but she had no time to dwell on it as Hayate came shooting out of nowhere, slashing at her face with twin ice blades.

"You're slow, Deidara! Ookami really did a number on you, didn't he?"

Before she knew it, he had cut her arm open, blood splattering across the ice floor. Warily, Deidara spared a second to glance at her newest wound, Hayate landing a few steps away from her, holding out his twin blades.

"Before we keep fighting," Hayate began, "Why don't we see if we have any common interest?" He
took a small, mocking bow, and Deidara's lip curled at the fact that he was able to do that in the mist of a battle. She was battered and bruised, but still very capable of blowing him up into bits.

"Forget it," she cut him off, "I'm not interested in your villain monologue, hm." But she said it with little conviction, and he took the bait, while she scanned the ceiling briefly to take a look at the state of the sprinklers. Iced. Just like everywhere else. The room temperature was gradually approaching zero, and she was feeling it, too.

_His kekkei genkai come from the cold_, her mind spat out, _He grew even paler than he already was when he iced the room—his powers have a limit. Of course. But he doesn't seem any stronger... just... faster. That's it!

She fought to keep her facial muscles relaxed. "Make it quick, then," she invited.

Hayate beamed. "Of course. Best keep on your toes."

A bead of sweat dripped down her temple as he darted toward her, disappearing halfway across a patch of ice. "Tch!" _Too bad he's not a total dumbass!_ Deidara dodged his attack just in time, a few strands of her hair falling to the ground and she regained her footing after nearly slipping during her landing. When he launched himself at her a second time, then a third, she was ready.

"My reasons," Hayate explained as they fought, "Are quite simple. To use the boy's authority into the town that it was meant to be."

"And what the hell do you mean by that?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"You should know, Deidara. You know how beautiful Iwa is."

_They were marching down the hills, white demons from the north—_

Ice blades and clay claws clashed, and Deidara swore she could feel the coldness seeping through her armor. But she kept a hold on him, pushing him toward the edges of the room, where there wasn't as much ice. Hayate narrowed his eyes.

"You catch on quick," he remarked frostily, his composure starting to slip.

"Doesn't take a genius," she growled back, and his eyes widened when she cut his shoulder, her leg swinging up and whipping him against the side. He banged against the wall, scowling, and then pushed himself back again to greet her in another round of ice and earth.

As they fought fiercely, Kiba's eyes opened, completely coherent and aching, and no longer bothering to pretend. "Ow... fuck..." A deep, almost unearthly growl emerged from his throat, his sharp nails scratching against the thick rope that bound his hands behind the chair. _Come on...! Come on, fucking damn it!_ It was an effort not to scream in frustration as he tried to failed to saw through his bindings. He scanned his surroundings, nervously kissing his teeth. His legs were bound to the chair legs as well, and he really needed to piss.

_Come on, Akamaru... I know you escaped... Where are you, pal? Hurry up!_

When Hayate screamed, Deidara's clay suddenly melting off her arms and onto his body, Kiba's attention fully turned to them.

_Deidara... Why did she come?_ There was an uncomfortable feeling at the back of his brain which made everything sound like a white buzz. _Did Kazebaba send her? That must be it, but... Why did she come?_ His first instinct was to assume that Deidara's reasons for this mess of a rescue was to
interview him about his mother, but what kind of journalist fought gang leaders for a godforsaken interview?

There was a bark in the distance, and Kiba's ears pricked, pupils narrowing into slits. Yes! Come on!

As Kiba silently cheered her and Akamaru on, Deidara's arms were covered with welts. They stung and throbbed but there was a bigger issue in front of her. Hayate—he was too fast for her to hit most of the time, and he was the type to slowly injure his opponent and wear them out before going in for the kill.

And unfortunately for her, it seemed to be working.

But he was injured, too—she was definitely no slowpoke in battle, and if she stopped him from using ice as a medium to travel at speeds approaching light, then she could get the better of him. She had to.

"Oi!" she suddenly shouted, her voice piercing the air. "Hayate!" Her throat bobbed. "Who... who exactly are you, hm?" It can't be him, she thought almost hysterically, But this is too much of a coincidence. Is he really Hayate? His face, the ice, the goddamn smile. He looks exactly like—

His smiling facade broke, contorting into a snarl of pure hatred. "Do you really have to ask?!" He dodged her swipe, sliding under her and zipping through the ice until he was hanging onto the upper tier seating of the hall.

Dread was creeping into her heart now and squeezing it until she felt as if it would detonate and send her scattered ashes through the wind.

"I never thought I'd see you again," he told her as he pulled the bandages off his hands with his teeth. "Especially here. Why couldn't you just stay hidden?"

Maybe it was the blood loss—they were both adorned with cuts and bruises and even broken bones—but—

Deidara swallowed painfully. K... Ko—

"Do you remember?!" Hayate suddenly barked as he held onto the upper balcony, and his emotions were running wild enough for her to feel it; it made her world stop and start again abruptly. "Do you remember the day that the Ōtsutsuki came to kill us all?! Yes?! No?!"

He became ice once more—

"Kkhhh!" Blood sprayed from her mouth.

Pinned to the ground, Deidara spat out a wad of blood and phlegm to the side, her hands trembling as she clutched the ice spear protruding through her gut, her teeth stained red. Howling, Hayate slammed his forehead against hers, causing her world to spin as stars exploded behind her eyelids. Her hair was fanned around her head like a halo, having come completely undone during the battle.

"You left me to die!"

"SHUT UP!" she screamed hoarsely, biting down on his nose, bone crunching beneath her jaws and blood spurting everywhere. She was a mess, her face bloodied, bruised, and streaked with sweat and tears.
He pushed the ice spear further into her belly, using his free arm to tear his collar aside, revealing a
deep, ugly scar on his neck.

There was fire, and ashes, and everything was burning—it was so hot, she was going to die, her
brother had stopped screaming, a plank of wood sticking out from his neck—where was her
mother? Where was she? Where was she? Dig—she had to dig, dig, and dig, and run away and
never return. Iwa betrayed them—betrayed her—and—

Her bottom lip trembling, she began to cry, breathing heavily through her mouth as she let go of his
now disfigured nose. "I thought you were dead! I thought you were dead, you stupid son of a
bitch!"

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN TRY TO SAVE ME!" he roared, punching her across the face. "I SAW
YOU LEAVE! YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT ANYONE EXCEPT YOURSELF, YOU
ARROGANT—!"

With the last ounce of strength she had, she slammed her head against his bleeding nose, making
him shriek. As his hands moved up to his nose, she wrapped her hands around the ice spear, unable
to resist screaming at the sensation of it ripping out of her body as she yanked it out. It was cold to
the touch, but she persevered, dragging it behind her as she limped toward Hayate's fallen form. He
was still clutching his face, the wounds he had sustained bleeding out slowly on the floor.
Scrambling, he tried to attack her, but she felled him with one kick.

"What are you gonna do?" His mouth trembled, unable to decide between smiling or frowning at it
all. "Kill me? Kill your last remaining family? Haha... hah... hahahaha!" His hair fell over his face
as he laughed and laughed and laughed, tears spilling out of his eyes.

The world felt numb.

I... I can't kill you... Kou...

"Kou," she spoke his name, but her own voice sounded so far away, even to her. "Kou, stop it,
yeah." It was the same tone she had used when they were children, when she wanted him to stop
stringing girls along for the sake of his own gigantic ego. He had stopped then. But he didn't stop
now, continuing to laugh manically like there was no tomorrow. "KOU!" His name sounded like an
explosion sucking all the air out of the room.

The laughter abruptly cut off, and Deidara felt the the rock in her stomach turn into a ball of ice.

"I'll only stop," he said lowly, "When I'm dead. Are you going to kill me now? You were ready to
do it when we were trapped in that godforsaken building."

Her arm shook, the other wrapped around the hole in her body to prevent herself from bleeding out
too soon. She hoped he didn't notice her hesitance. But knowing him, he probably did. "Kou, listen
to me," she pleaded. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't save you back then."

The theatre—it was burning and burning and going up in flames, Deidara screaming as the
infrastructure fell around them and she was being crushed, being suffocated—

"You're sorry? Don't make me laugh, Dei-da-ra." Kou pushed himself to his feet, swaying. The
rain had been extinguished, but Deidara kept her eye out on the remaining patches of ice on the
floor, her wounded body nearly folding over itself as she tensed up. She was too aware of the
room’s cold temperature—he was still at an advantage. "It's too late now. You can't turn back the
time, no matter how much you want to."
Before she could react, he had turned into a blip in the ice, reappearing in her blind spot and sending a kick flying into her side.

"What happened to all your bravado?" he goaded, chuckling. He pushed his hair out of his eyes with one bloody hand, then spread both hands out in a twisted taunt, the tongues he had gotten from their father wagging in morbid amusement. "Taking out my strongest member was no small feat, you know—you should have more confidence in yourself!"

Then he was moving once again, going in for the kill as she struggled to get up, her wounds wearing her down quicker than ever.

"FANG OVER FANG!"

Kiba tore into him just as he reappeared, and ice sword clutched in his hand to behead Deidara. He was launched into the air, grunting in surprise. His injured knee collapsed beneath his weight, and he hissed in pain as Kiba and Akamaru stood over him, their fangs bared.

The man smiled. "I'm impressed."

Kiba growled. "Akamaru knows all the secret escapes. You're in our territory, punk." Before Kou could even summon his chakra to ice-travel, the Inuzuka heir launched a punch into his gut, saliva flying out of his mouth.

"Kkkhhh! You brat—"

Another punch, this time across the face. Akamaru joined in, too, tearing at the already injured leg of the man and ripping flesh apart with his canines. Kou screamed, kicking the dog off and hurling a hastily formed ice dagger at Kiba's face. It nicked his cheek, the boy wincing.

"I may be down," Kou rasped, "But I am still leagues beyond you! HAH!" With the flick of both hands, ice was sent flying their way, and only luck and some attempt at dodging saved them from being struck fatally, their fragile skin opening up, blood blooming from their fresh injuries. "Now —"

"KOU!" He looked up just in time to see Deidara swing at him with the blunt end of the ice spear, his and her own blood streaming through the air. The butt end of the weapon struck his temple, stunning him, and Deidara followed up her attack by gathering up his fallen daggers and using them to pin him against the wall by his joints.

Kiba gulped. "Oi, Deidara—"

"Shut up. Your town won't be safe with him here."

His eyes widened, and he took a step forward. "You're... going to kill him?"

"I've killed everyone else, haven't I? Hm?" The ice spear dragged across the floor as she advanced towards Kou's slumped form, her eyes dull and glazed over.

"I heard everything. Isn't he your brother? You don't just kill your family!" Akamaru barked in agreement at Kiba's declaration, and Deidara paused.

Then she continued on like she hadn't even heard him.

The spear struck—
Kiba closed his eyes.

And Kou barely flinched as the blunt end of it slammed into the wall beside his head, his gaze clouded with agony in his quasi-crucifixion. He was starting to gain more coherency again, but he couldn't budge. Ice chipped away from the spear.

Deidara uttered a single word into his ear: "Leave."

"Only if you kill me."

Silence.

Kiba's throat bobbed in anticipation.

"Or can't you?" Kou kept speaking like his potential killer was mere inches away from him.

Her gaze lowered, she stepped back, her hair hanging haggardly over her face.

"I said leave, Kou. Leave and never come back."

"I knew it," he whispered. "I fucking knew it!"

"KOU!" she bellowed, her lips peeling back into a snarl.

"YOU CAN'T EVEN KILL ME!" Kou roared like it was the funniest thing in the world, the shine in his eyes telling whoever looked carefully enough otherwise. "YOU CAN'T EVEN KILL ME AND I'M A FUCKING TERRORIST! For someone so selfish, so arrogant, you're so weak! Always running away from the past because you're too goddamn weak to fucking face it! Spare me the dramatics, Deidara, and just kill me! Oh, wait! You can't, can you?!" His eyes curved until they were closed as he continued to howl, sliding down the wall—the ice blades had melted as the room grew warmer again—and leaving a trailing patch of blood behind. His joints were dislocated, and he slumped like a puppet with its strings cut.

He didn't see Deidara moving until she was already in front of him, blowing a white cloud in his face as she panted heavily, her shoulders trembling. Kiba was looking away.

Kou's gaze moved down at the spear embedded in his chest. His heart.

Then he looked up at her with dull eyes, trailing the tears that dripped down her face, some of them half-frozen and thawing. He could feel his own tears pooling at his chin, mixing with the blood at his feet as he continued to bleed out, his lungs filling with his own blood, slowly drowning him. Kou gave her one last smile for their halcyon days.

"I chose the wrong sister to love, didn't I? I should have been kinder to Kurotsuchi."

He enjoyed hearing her breath shudder, her entire body wracking with anguish.

"I gave you a choice," she whispered harshly.

"Don't worry, Deidara." Weakly, he reached up and pushed her hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear, still smiling in the face of death. "I'll tell okaa-san you said hello."

Two bodies fell, thudding against the floor, and Kiba's frantic yelling was the last thing they both heard.

One never woke again.
“HELP!” Deidara screamed as she climbed onto the burning rooftop of what was once her town’s proud theatre. Flames licked at her heels, and coughed and choked on smoke. She could see the town square from here, only a few buildings between the theatre and the square. "HELP! OKAA-SAAAAAN!"

Her brother was dead, and her mother... She’d been taken by those pale-faced, monstrous men and women. The ones who had marched down from the north on the opposing side of the war.

There was a blonde woman stepping up onto the stage. Deidara's breath quickened. Her mother! Her mother was still alive, and surrounded by those hunters! The ones who were burning her village to the ground! "OKAA-SAN!" she called, the roar of fire making her squeal and fall back. It wasn't safe here—but wait, what were they doing? What was she doing?

There was a rope dangling in front of her mother's face. A noose.

And... their leader was there, too. Onoki-san. The Tsuchikage. Why was he there, lifting his arm up and shouting orders? And why were they listening to him? She started to hyperventilate, occasionally bursting into coughing fits from the smoke.

They slipped the noose around her slender neck, her blonde hair falling around her shoulders. She lifted her head, and Deidara's keen eyesight burned the memory of her defiant expression into her mind forever.

The rope tightened around her, but tears never fell from her eyes.

Her mother was so brave.

But...

Deidara's hands lifted over her mouth, tears welling up in her eyes as she realized what was happening.

"OKAA-SAN!" she screamed, but she couldn't be heard. "OKAA-SAAAAAAAN!"

Onoki gave the signal.

And Iwa betrayed the last of the Bakuhatsu Tribe.

The rope snapped her neck and Deidara shrieked, turning away and stumbling over the burning shingle. The roof collapsed then, and she was nearly sucked into the raging inferno below. But she grabbed onto the tiles, heaving herself upward with a desperate gasp and rolling off the building. Her shoulder dislocated under the force of the landing, and her tailbone ached, but she had to run, run, run—

The building exploded behind her and she finally cried freely, her mother's prophecy of a fleeting life fulfilled in that instant.

(bonus)

"What's this, hm?" Deidara sat cross-legged, leaning across her lap to stare at the little snowflake sitting on Kou's bandaged palm, a look of childish wonder on her face. "But it's the middle of spring!"
"It's my talent," he whispered conspiratorially to her, as if it were some sort of secret. "My kekkei genkai."

"Is that why you always feel cold, even during summer?"

"I mean, probably. Don't tell anyone, not even Kurotsuchi, okay?"

"Eh? But she's your sister!"

He shook his head stubbornly. "No, you are."

She gave him a funny look. Then she shrugged. "Un. Okay." Yawning, Deidara lay back in the tall-grass meadow, eyes blinking sleepily. Under the afternoon sun, it was the perfect temperature to nap. Iwa's springs were always wonderful. "Let's stay like this for a while, yeah?"

Kou smiled, beaming at her as the snowflake melted in his palm. "Sure."

They fell asleep side by side, lulled to dreamland by the afternoon breeze, comforted by the thought that they had all the time in the world.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Quote an alteration of a quote from Shakespeare's Richard III.
Part V: Fern

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, we just need to talk it out, y'know?

Will it ever be enough?

Probably not.

But it'll get you started.

Chapter Notes

Everything winds down for a bit, but the arc isn't over yet.

"KIBAAAA!"

Akamaru yipped as Tamaki crashed against Kiba, squeezing him tight in a hug of a choke-hold.

"Ow, ow, ow! Get off, Tamaki-chan!"

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" Tamaki peeled herself off him, looking stricken. "Oh my god, you're hurt so bad! I'm sorry! Come in already, come in…"

Kazebaba's home was warm and whimsical as always. The old woman was sitting by the fire, stroking her tomcat, Shirogane, a solemn expression fixed on her weather-beaten face.

Tamaki and Kiba exchanged a glance.

Was this really the mighty storm witch of the east? The one of legends?

Kiba was almost covered head to toe in bandages, but even he looked livelier than her. The hospital had discharged him hours ago. Most of his wounds weren't too terrible—the worst of the damage was a broken nose and bruised ribs; his nose had been set and pills had been given to him for his ribs. The few doctors they had on the island had been more focused on getting Deidara into surgery, and had sent him home early.

There was still no word of her condition.

"I didn't see you at the hospital," Tamaki was saying, leading him away from where Kazebaba was seated and to his room. She raised a hand to swat away a stray bubble. It exploded into hundreds of tinier bubbles. "By the time I got there, you were already gone… I didn't see you on the way here either."

"Oh. I took the long way around, that's all."
"Oh… okay."

Kiba flopped onto his bed, wincing when he agitated his wounds. "Bad move," he muttered to himself, only relaxing when Akamaru curled up against him. Tamaki sighed in fond exasperation, tucking her skirt in as she sat on the edge of his bed.

"I hope you're okay," she murmured. "I'm so sorry about everything, Kiba-kun."

His eyes closed, and he longed to curl his pillow over his ears so that he could fall into a deep sleep. But that would be unfair to Tamaki—she would have had to fight her parents long and hard to even go out and see him at the hospital. Then she had come here in hopes of finding him...

"Why did she save me?" Kiba blurted, his hands clutching his bed sheets tightly. "I don't get it. I thought she hated me."

"I..." Tamaki swallowed. "If she did, she wouldn't have even considered it." She looked out the window. The storm had cleared up—Kazebaba no longer needed to create a reason for Deidara to stay.

Speaking of, Tamaki wasn't on speaking terms with her anymore. Not right now, anyway. When the old lady had revealed that she had predicted the events that led to Deidara being hospitalized and Kiba being beaten, Tamaki's anger was almost not her own.

Grumbling, Kiba flopped a hand over his eyes. "What time is it?"

Tamaki glanced at the clock on the wall. "Seven. In the morning, that is."

"Huh. Couldn't tell from all the clouds."

"Have you slept at all? Kiba, please tell me you have—"

"Relax! I got plenty of sleep at the hospital." Or I was unconscious, but same thing, right? The boy let out a gaping yawn. "I sure am tired, though. Tamaki, sorry, but could you...?"

"Oh!" Blushing, Tamaki jumped off his bed. "No, I get it. You've had a rough night, Kiba-kun. Rest well, okay? I'll wake you up when lunch is ready."

He managed a weary smile. "Yeah. Thanks, Tamaki-chan." I don't deserve a friend like you. Especially after all I've done. As the door clicked closed, his forced smile drooped. I'm sorry. I let everyone down. Okaa-san, Tamaki-chan, Kazebaba, and even Deidara-san. Even after I treated them like crap, his lip began to tremble, and he forced tears back (he wouldn't cry; no, not now, he couldn't), They didn't leave me behind.

Too late.

He buried his face in Akamaru's fur, the only person—or animal, but Akamaru was more than just a beast—that he would ever willingly cry in front of. Willing show weakness like this.

Everything had spiraled out of control before he knew it. Innocent people had been dragged into it and mortally wounded. Who had he been kidding? A kid like him handling a situation as big as this? But I didn't have anyone else. Kazebaba doesn't have money; only magic. And her magic can't heal people like okaa-san. Tamaki-chan's a kid like me, and her parents aren't rich enough to pay for okaa-san's treatment. And Hana...

Where there was once anger lay only hollowness.
But his mind wouldn't listen, and he was forced back in time to the last day they had spent together on the island. The months after their clan's massacre on the battlefield had been announced and their mother had been sent back virtually a vegetable, Hana had been so distant that he would wonder if she had died with the clan.

It was pure luck that she was not conscripted; Tsume had groomed her for the political side of ruling, hoping that she and Kiba would one day co-rule the clan.

Then two out of three of the Haimaru brothers, Hana's dogs and partners for life, had been kidnapped by some heartless freaks—traffickers, most likely. He had chased the wagon containing them himself—chased it with her—but in the end, the vehicle outpaced them. It took a ferry for the other islands, and then possibly the mainland, and the kidnappers had disappeared long after they had sent out a telegraph to neighboring towns and cities.

It had broken them.

Hana began to disappear. She would either be at the hospital, visiting Tsume and demanding answers from the team of doctors and nurses caring for her, or... he didn't even know.

Then one day, he had returned home to find a note on the dinner table. All of Hana's medical textbooks and some of her clothes and other things had disappeared, too.

Dear little brother, she had written, and Kiba knew—he knew that note was meant to spite him and he was still reeling from it. I'm going to Konoha City to pursue a career as a medic. Don't think about coming after me—look after okaa-san instead.

And that had been all. Cold, concise, and reeking of entitlement.

Back then, he had thought it was just a cruel, ill-timed joke.

It hadn't been.

Kiba's tears dried up, that emptiness swallowing him whole as he finally fell asleep.

Kazebaba was out in the back courtyard, smoking her pipe.

Frowning, Tamaki observed her from the inside as she prepared lunch—just noodles and meat in soup. You knew everything would happen. You said it was for Kiba's sake. She had known that she was planning something, but not the extent of it. That he would never get over his mother if you didn't let this take course. But isn't this a bit extreme? She chewed her lip contemplatively before realize that the noodles were getting too soft in the pot. "Arrgh! Dammit!"

Smoked venison—Kiba and Kazebaba's favorite—sat on the chopping board, already sliced and ready to be put in the bowl. Now if only she could get these noodles right.

She served herself the spoiled, too-soft noodles. No point in letting it go to waste. As she started up a new batch for Kiba (and Kazebaba, too, begrudgingly), footsteps thumped and Kiba stumbled down the stairs, hair mussed up on one side of his head.

He wasn't looking too good, in Tamaki's opinion, but at least the dark circles under his eyes seemed to be a little lighter.
"Morning," he mumbled.

She chuckled, chiding, "It's afternoon, silly." Tamaki stirred the noodles for a little longer, placed them in a hole-filled bowl for the water to drain out, and then placed it in a bowl. Then she added meat and ladled soup into it, steaming arising from the freshly prepared meal. "For you," she said, and Kiba was already salivating.

"Alright! I'm starved. Could I have some more meat for Akamaru?"

"Sure." She gladly passed him some. "Just don't feed him too quickly, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. He's my dog, not yours."

"Geez, sor-ry."

As Kiba sat down, Tamaki smiled to herself, putting more noodles in the small pot. At least now, things were starting to settle down a bit. The storm was over, Kiba was safe and mostly unharmed, and Kazebaba was... simply being Kazebaba. The town would recover from the damage—hurricanes weren't uncommon around here, though the citizens had had little warning thanks to Kazebaba messing around with the weather.

"Kazebaba-san, lunch is ready!" she called to the old woman. She didn't move. Well, that was okay. Tamaki didn't particularly feel like eating with her anyway.

She sat down, and they began without her.

"Itadakimasu!"

Kiba was the type to scoop soup, noodles, and meat into his spoon and try to gobble it all up at the same time. Tamaki, on the other hand, nibbled her meat first, then her noodles, and then drank the soup. Akamaru, with no noodles or soup to eat, was content with gnawing on his venison slices, savoring them.

Even while they slurped their meals, they normally spoke and bantered.

But today, there was none of that.

A bead of sweat dripped down Tamaki’s temple despite the perfectly temperate environment. "Hey, Kiba-kun?"

"Mmph?"

"Do you wanna go visit Deidara-san in the hospital after we're done? It'll be a nice surprise for her." I hope so, at any rate.

"Oh." His gaze grew dull, and Tamaki instantly regretted her words, knowing she had said the wrong thing.

"I-I'm sorry I assumed—"

"No, it's not that." Kiba lowered his eyes, absently stirring the soup. "It can't be any later than two right now. She's still in surgery."

Oh no. "S-still?"

"You didn't see how bad it was, Tamaki-chan." His grip tightened on his chopsticks, and his lips
peeled back a little to reveal gritted teeth. "They messed each other up so, so bad. There was so much blood, and then she killed her own brother and—and she was crying so much." Now that Tamaki looked closer, he was actually trembling. "She had to. He was already dying the other option was to let him run loose and kill her and me and she was already so hurt—"

She lifted her hands to her mouth. "Oh, Kiba..."

"—fuck, this is just so messed up. I... I—arggh! Dammit!"

Tamaki's throat bobbed, feeling the back of her eyes start to burn.

"If only I were stronger than him. Then I could have killed him, and she didn't have to do it for me—I wanted to kill him for what he did, I—"

"No!" Her chair went toppling backwards as she abruptly stood, slamming her hands on the tables. She wasn't hiding her tears—they flowed freely down her cheeks. "Don't ever say that, Inuzuka Kiba! I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy! It was a horrible choice, but killing someone... killing your own family... God, Kiba, that leaves the kind of stain on your soul that you can never rub out! Maybe it's selfish of me, but I... I'd rather her have that kind of burden than you! Please," she sobbed, lifting her arm to hide her face, "Don't ever talk like that ever again... I don't want to hear a word of that bullshit because you shouldn't have to want to make that kind of choice. Promise me, Kiba!"

"Ta-Tamaki-chan—!"

"Promise you'll never kill anyone unless you really have to! That you'll care for yourself a little more! You were born to be a leader, born to love your townspeople... But don't forget that you're a human, too! I mean it! Killing someone... that should always be a last resort. You're already plenty strong, Kiba, and I know you'll get even stronger. You don't need to kill someone to prove that. Please."

For a brief moment, Kiba saw the moment from an observer's point of view. The heir to a nearly extinct clan and a common civilian girl, the latter pleading desperately. She was so sheltered. That made him happy. It made him happy that not everyone had to face the worst of the world, no matter how unfair that was. He expected the jealousy he felt toward her to multiply by ten-fold, but instead, it diminished as if it had never existed.

She had her own world and he had his.

But they were also part of each other's world, and...

She wouldn't abandon him.

"I promise, Tamaki-chan. I'm sorry."

She cried even harder—he panicked, but she held up a hand, giving him a wobbly smile. "I'm happy," she said truthfully. "Sorry, I just—sorry."

"We can stay at the hospital," Kiba suggested, following up on her original idea. "So that we'll be there when the surgery is over, and when she wakes up."

A nod. "Yeah. Should we bring flowers?"

He considered it. Is Deidara really the type to like flowers? Okaa-san would know... He felt that gaping emptiness that Tsume and Hana had left him consuming the fulfillment that Tamaki had
given him just moments ago. I... I really need you right now. I miss you. Both of you, actually. Ugh. Kiba shook his head. "Nah. I don't think she's that type of girl. Now let's eat up, the soup's getting cold!"

And just like that, Tamaki saw him get back to his usual, rambunctious self.

But both of them knew that it was just a temporary facade.

Kazebaba continued smoking her pipe outside.

"What's going on? Okaa-san? Okaa-san!"

"Deidara?"

"Kou? Wait—Kou, okaa-san—!"

"No time. We must go, it's not safe here, children." The urgency in her tone scared them both, but they complied. They could smell burning coming from outside, and smoke was visible outside the window.

The door clicked open and three hurried figures rushed out.

But—

"Hey! There's more of those scum!"

"It's Bakuhatsu no—"

"Deidara, Kou, go! Run!"

"Where?!" Kou was sickly pale, and Deidara took him by the hand to the only place where they knew where to go. They rushed down the burning streets of the village, not even pausing when they ran past bodies.

"Okaa-san..." She was on the verge of tears, but Kou took importance. "Come on, otouto—to the theatre, okay? We'll wait for her there!"

She only called him 'otouto' when one of them was upset. Or both.

"A-are you sure?"

"Un!"

The theatre wasn't locked. There were no criminals in this town, and everybody trusted one another. Or, at least, they had.

Deidara pushed the vast double-doors open and sneaked inside with Kou, not even realizing she was holding her breath. After a moment of hesitation, she locked it.

"What if okaa-san comes?" whispered Kou.

"I'll know if she does, hm. Trust me," her teeth chattered involuntarily, "I-I know, okay?"

Minutes passed.

Nobody came.
Then there was a loud banging on the door that nearly thrust it open in one go. The children squealed, running for the stage and hiding behind the curtains, behind the stairs that led up to a catwalk, which led up to an open skylight.

The hideous knocking stopped.

Kou released an icy-cold breath.

Then the fire started.

The doors were destroyed by a flaming object flying through it, and everything was set on fire and up in flames in a matter of seconds. The exit was enveloped by smoke, and they screamed.

Another cannon.

"Bring down the building!" she heard a male voice scream over the roar of the flames.

"DEIDARA!" Kou was crying now. "Deidara, I'm scared! AHH!" The roof caved in then—they were being attacked from the top as well.

"Up the stairs!" Deidara pushed him. "Go, otouto!"

"DEIDARA—!"

"NO!"

Dust and smoke billowed out from the stage as they were crushed by infrastructure, their performance ending with a whimper.

The scene was awfully familiar. Blank white, clinical room. Hospital it was, then. Groaning, Deidara tried to move her shoulders, unable to feel most of her body. Unaware of how her face was sticky with fresh tears, she sniffed. Antiseptic and medicine filled her nose. The numbness of her body she chalked up to painkilling drugs, and...

Kou.

Okaa-san.

Kou.

Her fingers curled, touching the closed lips of her mouth-hands.

This is a nightmare. Someone, please, this has to be a nightmare. It can't—

A stone-faced nurse walked in without knocking. Unlike the last time this had happened, she did not startle or proceed to fuss over her when she saw that she was awake. Instead, her face remained impassive as their gazes met.

Deidara's eyes, hazy from drugs but still coherent, narrowed.

Then the nurse walked out of the room, saying, "Someone get the Head Doctor. The girl with the hands is awake."

'Girl with the hands'? I haven't heard anything like that since primary school. Pfft. The nurse's vaguely amusing comment gave her a brief respite, and she settled into her pillow.
"She's awake?!" someone shouted from the hallway. "I'm going in."

"Get your stupid mutt out of here!" The nurse.

"Hey, my family is the reason why your husband is still going down on your stinky ass every night —"

"KIBA!"

Deidara blinked as Kiba, Tamaki, and Kiba's dog—Akamaru? Her brain wasn't functioning very well right now—stumbled into the room like characters from a comedy puppet show. It was as if they suddenly realized their own awkwardness then, and they all stilled, coughing nervously and moving apart from one another so that they looked slightly professional.

The blonde's mouth opened but no words came out. "Um."

"Deidara-san!" Tamaki's voice was pure relief. "Oh, god, you're awake. I'm so glad." She beamed at her, and Deidara almost startled, wondering what she had done to earn the girl's affection.

Oh, right, I saved dog-boy's ass. Speaking of dog-boy, he doesn't look so... gung-ho today. Deidara frowned. Three guesses why, huh? She sighed through her nose, feeling unsure about this new development.

Tamaki elbowed Kiba then, and the mutt cleared his throat.

"Uh."

"Eloquent," Tamaki huffed, and even Akamaru put a paw over his eyes and whined.

And maybe Deidara would have spared a short chuckle, but didn't have the strength to muster one up. This felt worse than last time, and the last time she had been confined to a hospital bed, she had been caught in a literal explosion.

"I'll cut it to you straight, yeah," she said to spare Kiba's fluffing about, her voice hoarse from hours of no speaking. Her throat felt raw, too—if only that damn nurse had given her some water.

"Why did you come here, Kiba?"

Kiba, not 'dog-boy' or 'mutt'. He seemed to have picked up on the change in relationship between them. The boy palmed the back of his head, glowering at the floor. "I just wanted to say thanks, that's all. I... You didn't have to do that."

"Yes I did."

He was taken aback. "What?"

"You're slow, aren't you?" Deidara drawled. "If I hadn't interfered, you'd surely be dead. That man," my brother, she thought as her heart twisted, "was insane. He was going to break you, make you sign the contract, and then kill you and dump your body in the ocean." She closed her eyes, sinking back into her pillow even more. "I'm tired, hm. Can you leave?"

"Oh," Tamaki said, "Of course. We'll come back later—"

"No. Don't. I... need some time to think, yeah. Alone. When I'm better, I'll meet you back at Kazebaba's shack."

The two teenagers exchanged a look.
Tamaki started, "But—"

"We get it," Kiba interrupted. "See you in a few days, I guess." He paused. "Or... weeks."

"Don't underestimate the hospital staff," a new voice said. The Head Doctor walked in, his hands behind his back. "Run along now, kids. She's had a rough night."

"Hai!"

The noise around Deidara as the doctor checked over her and explained her condition to her was a white, incoherent buzz. All she wanted to do was sleep, and she had just woken up. Sighing through her nose in relief when the doctor left, she shifted her body to a comfortable position and closed her eyes.

She hoped she would not dream of them again.

Tamaki placed a cup of tea in front of Kazebaba as the clock struck midnight. She was sitting by the fire again, looking contemplative.

The younger female cleared her throat. "Why?"

Kazebaba's eyes shifted to her, and Tamaki gulped, never realizing how slanted and witch-like they were. But she held her stare, and her ground, and eventually Kazebaba looked away, staring deep into the burning embers.

"You know why, dear."

"There could have been better ways. Loads of better ways, Kazebaba-san!"

The old woman closed her eyes, frowning. "You don't understand, Tamaki. If this were only for Kiba's sake, then of course I would have been gentler. But it isn't. In a way, it's almost not about Kiba at all."

"Then who?" Tamaki's voice was disbelieving. "Don't tell me you mean Deidara-san! You didn't even know her until a few days ago!" She shot the woman a pointed look. "Or, at least, we didn't anyway. But either way, why would you let this happen to her?"

Kazebaba took the tea from the table, eyes at half-mast as she gazed at the rippling brown liquid. She stirred it, causing more ripples to form, like a hurricane tearing through an ocean. "Because she'll never be able to move forward if I didn't let things run its course. Sometimes, we have to look at the bigger picture."

"I don't understand. I don't understand what this has to do that that."

"You don't need to." She set her tea down. "But in a few years, you'll know. Stopping this... would have stunted her character for life."

"I..." Tamaki sighed. "Fine. I'm going to bed."

"Goodnight, dear."

She didn't respond, heading up the stairs without so much a word.

It had been a week since Kiba's kidnapping, and the sun had nearly set on a Tuesday when Deidara
showed up on Kazebaba's doorstep looking worse for wear. The clothes that she had been wearing when she had fought had been singed, shredded, and torn beyond repair, but because she hadn't anything else to wear, she returned in the same clothes, a blanket the hospital had provided draped over form to preserve her modesty.

Tamaki gasped out loud when she opened the door. "You're okay!"

Deidara gave a wry smile. "Hardly," she returned, alluding to her bandaged hands, forearms, and the other bandages wrapped around her torso, legs, and upper arms that Tamaki couldn't see. "Don't worry," she added when Tamaki moved to help her inside. "I was given the all-clear. I even stopped by the post office to check if it was open, hm."

It had been, actually.

At last, she could finally send those letters to Rin. They had been piling up on her worktable.

Tamaki was warm to her, in a good mood ever since her parents had given her permission to stay with Kiba for the night. Without the forceful abolishing of the Axe Gang and the clearing out of the storm, they were no longer so worried about her safety. "We were just starting to make dinner," she babbled. "Kiba's making his famous beef stew, and I'm doing a vegetable soup."

She turned up an oil lamp on a shelf. There was no electricity in the house, merely lamps and the fire in the hearth lighting up the place.

Coming in through the door, Deidara had immediate view of the small kitchen, and also immediate view of Kiba wielding a knife clumsily.

"Kiba-kun!" shrieked Tamaki. "I told you that I would cut up the vegetables! I hope you at least washed your hands after finishing the meat!"

"What are you, my mom?" the boy complained, turning around and revealing that he was wearing a hot pink apron that was splattered with sauce. "Huh?! D-Deidara-san?!" Hastily, he threw the knife on the counter hazardously and try to pull off the embarrassing garment, Tamaki and Deidara both unable to resist a smirk.

"Kiba," Deidara acknowledged with a sly grin. "It suits you, hm."

"Aw, shut it." Grumbling, Kiba gave up on removing the thing and turned back around to hide his blush. "You better hope that I don't poison you or anything."

"I'll keep that in mind." She sat down at the dinner table gingerly, her healing lacerations aching. The welts on her arms—chakra burns caused by using extreme heat to melt off her clay arm guards and onto Kou's delicate skin—were no better, but she grimaced through it. She had survived worse.

As she watched Kiba and Tamaki work in tandem, having a surprisingly strong rapport in their dinner preparations, she almost startled when she realized how much they reminded her of herself and Sasori, when they spent their days in Tsuki-occupied Akatsuki making dinner and lunch with the meager rations they had.

Sasori.

It'd been a while since she had last thought of him, she had to admit, thanks to the recent drama. But that didn't make her miss him any less—in fact, the gaping hole his absence had left in her heart seemed to be more painful than ever. Deidara slouched on the table, resting her chin on her palm and observing the place around her. Danna will be fine. He always is.
"Mrroww..." A soft purr caught her attention, and she turned her gaze to the left of the table to see Kazebaba's cat padding toward her. Shirogane wriggled himself into her arms, the underside of her chin now resting on his fluffy back.

You're unusually affectionate today, cat, she thought. Deidara smiled and let out a sigh. Might as well enjoy it, I guess. While it lasts.

What she needed most right now was a distraction from her mind, which was tearing her apart silently. There were so many things she had never wanted to think about again which were not at the forefront of her mind. Sasori was one of them, but the rest were reminders that she had locked away so many years ago—Kou, her mother, the Civil War, Iwa's betrayal, the purge.

But it extended further than that.

Her father's unfaithfulness, Kurotsuchi and Akatsuchi's friendship, the tears she had shed over Kurotsuchi when she had denounced her as a best friend and moved to the capital to live with her grandfather, the Tsuchikage. All the plays and songs and operas she had attended and loved, the days she had spent in her mother's art studio learning her craft.

It was suddenly difficult to breathe.

And it was then that Deidara realized she was getting choked up. Letting out a shaky breath, she slid her fingers into her hair. Over what? The past? Is that really worth getting so worked up about? She had asked herself this question many times in the hospital, but had never been able to give herself a proper answer. I thought I moved on. Now it feels like I'm on a one way road back home.

Home.

Home.

"Deidara-san?"

She hadn't even realized Tamaki and Kiba were giving her concerned looks. The vegetables Kiba had butchered were now boiling in a pot of hearty lamb stock.

Deidara shook her head. "It's nothing, yeah."

"I chose the wrong sister to love, didn't I?"

"Don't worry, Deidara."

"I'll tell okaa-san you said hello."

Kou.

"... Absolutely nothing."

It's not nothing.

Kiba didn't talk much to Tamaki as they washed up the dishes, Akamaru chewing on a bone by the door that led to the courtyard (Kazebaba hadn't come in all day; was she okay? Of course she was). He was too caught up in his own thoughts, and Tamaki didn't bother to try and make conversation, knowing what that pensive look on his face meant.

"Kiba-kun?" He glanced to Tamaki, who was smiling understandingly, and a little sadly, too.

"Huh?"

"I'll finish up the rest. You go up and talk to her."

"What?" His voice dropped to a whisper, as if he were afraid that Deidara had super-hearing. "Are you sure? What do I even say?"

Tamaki turned off the tap briefly to let the water drain out properly. "You know I can't answer that. Between the two of us, only you can. Kiba-kun, I don't even understand her. But you... I bet you'll find some common ground to work with."

"Well..." Kiba rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. "I'm sure if you tried, you could find something," he offered lamely.

She gave him a knowing smirk. "Don't give me that. You think I don't know why I can't? It's because I haven't truly seen the world, and you two have. I'm sheltered, Kiba—we both know it, so let's not deny it, okay?" Smiling, she patted his shoulder, neither of them caring that the action dampened his sleeve. "I know you can do it. So what are you waiting for?" With that, she turned back to dish duty.

"Well, if you say so..." Reluctantly, Kiba turned for the stairs, Akamaru getting up as well. "No, stay, boy." Akamaru cocked his head, and Kiba knelt down to pat his companion. "Sorry, pal, but you're gonna have to sit out for this one."

Akamaru backed down, and Kiba was finally free to go.

But when he arrived at Deidara's door, which was ajar, she was lying on her side on the bed, her hair splayed across her pillow. Asleep.

Kiba hesitated. I'll... come back later.

It was what he told himself.

His ribs were hurting, anyway—it was time to take his medicine—and he was feeling rather sapped of energy.

But in reality, he cursed his own cowardice.

The next day, Kiba volunteered to bring her breakfast. Tamaki had left earlier in the morning to return to her parents, and he found himself missing her sorely. When his clan had died (and Hana with them as far as he was concerned) and Tsume had fallen into a coma, she had been the only light in his life. In a way, she still was. He didn't like to think he was that kind of person, but he might have ended his own life without her and Kazebaba around.

The witch wasn't talking to him at all now. He could smell the guilt but heavy acceptance that surrounded her ancient crone form. There were no more bubbles, no more grabbing Shirogane by the tail and spontaneously turning him into a frog or something. Good for Shirogane, at least—Kiba didn't have to be a cat whisperer like Tamaki to know that the tom hated being teased.

The tray of food he carried—an apple, some bread, and leftover vegetable soup that was still
steaming from being reheated moments ago—rattled ever so slightly in his hands. Then he tapped his foot across the door in an awkward knock, blinking when the door swung open languidly.

"Deidara-san?" Kiba poked his head in. *Huh? Where did she go?* He sniffed, placing the tray down at a nearby table and walking over to where her scent was strongest. The window. It was slightly ajar as well. Before he knew what he was really doing, he pushed it open, feeling the wind on his face. It carried the scent of spices, smoke, and hearty foods from the street markets, which brought a smile to his face. He had always loved the mornings—it was too bad that he stopped enjoying them for a while, when his mother's condition and his sister's betrayal was fresh in his mind.

When he thought of them, it still stung.

And he wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing... but he was starting to get used to it.

"Hup!" He climbed out the window and onto the roof, where her scent was most powerful. Kiba grimaced at the distance between the roof and the ground before shimmying around the chimney, where there appeared to be no smoke coming out (but with a nose like his, he could smell it anyway, and he felt it warming up his face as he clung onto the brick).

Deidara was sitting on the edge of the roof on the other side, facing the ocean. Legs trembling, Kiba tried his best to maintain his balance and slowly walk over to her. *Gah! How do they make it look so easy?!* he wondered incredulously, thinking of Deidara's natural prowess and Tamaki's feline steadiness.

When he finally managed to sit down next to her, his mouth was dry, and he couldn't think of a word to say to her. So they stayed there in silence together, watching sea foam lap at the shore. From his peripheral vision, he studied her side profile, his heart thudding nervously. She was misty-eyed—her thoughts were clearly somewhere else.

But then she snapped to attention, her blue eyes sliding over to him. There was no surprise in them. "Did you need something, hm?"

"I..." He smacked his lips, and blurted out the only thing he could think of. "I lost my mom in January."

Deidara raised both eyebrows, her lips parting slightly. Then she pressed them into a thin line, but nevertheless held his gaze. "Why are you telling me this? We're not suddenly friends because I saved your ass, you know."

*Harsh.* But Kiba was determined to keep going. Might as well keep digging this hole, if nothing else. Honestly, it would be more awkward of him if he were to leave it here and turn tail just because her tongue seemed to be constantly barbed. "You're a journalist, aren't you?" he said gruffly, uncrossing his legs and swinging them over the edge of the roof, where they dangled lazily.

"You could say that. Okay, then, Kiba—keep talking, hm. I'm all ears."

He didn't bother asking if she needed that typewriter out with her. A story for the paper... that wasn't really what this was about, was it? He knew that, and he suspected that she did, too.

When he didn't continue immediately, she didn't press him, waiting patiently for him to find his voice and get his words together. Eventually, he started again with: "The Inuzuka Clan have always been the unofficial protectors of Sickleleaf Town. That's why we don't have police here. Although," he chuckled bitterly, "that will probably change soon. Anyway." A breeze swept
through their hair, carrying with it aromas of the city. "Konoha joined the war as allies of Ame. Every able-bodied man from every small town or city like Sickleleaf was conscripted into the army. To spare the men of Sickleleaf, my clan," his throat bobbed, his heart starting to hurt, "men and women both... they... volunteered instead. There were enough of them to fill out the town's quota. Only my... my sister and I stayed behind."

Deidara had heard as much from Tamaki, but said nothing.

"There..." Kiba lowered his gaze, his mouth turned downward as he fought back tears. Had he even properly grieved for his clan? He had been so caught up with his mother, and Hana, and now Deidara and Kou and the Axe Gang. "There was an ambush at their outpost. The entire thing was razed to the ground... along with my clan. My mom survived, but the doctors say that she'll probably never wake up." *That she's as good as dead.*

They lapped into silence once more, Kiba silently grieving and Deidara silently processing his words.

Then—

"I lost my mom, too."

His head snapped up. "What?"

"It was in war as well. Although..." Deidara's countenance darkened. "Not in the way you probably think, yeah." At his questioning gaze, she elaborated, "My mother was a civilian. An artist through and through—she brought the stage to life." Her lips quirked upward slightly. "We were living in a little village south of the capital—smack-bang in the middle of the border between the north and the south side. During Iwa's civil war—it was innovation against art, north against south—our town was allied with the south side, hm. There was a raid, and..." She shifted uncomfortably. "I'm sure some people got away, at least. But she wasn't one of them. She was quite famous, you know," she added. "So instead of just killing her straight away, they went through all of the trouble of hanging her in the town square. Why?" Her voice was resentful. "Because they wanted to make a point."

Kiba's head was bowed. "Oh." *When Tamaki talked about common ground... I really don't think she knew how morbid she was being.* He looked up again to meet her stare. "What..." He swallowed. "What was her name?"

Deidara startled then, which in turn surprised Kiba. "Her name?" *Nobody... Nobody's asked for her name in a long time.* "Uri," she said finally. "Her name was Uri."

"Oh. Well, you know my mom's name. Her name's Tsume." Deidara could hear a little pride in his tone as he added, "Her name means 'claw'. Or 'talon'."

She hummed contemplatively. "My mom's name is plainer. It means 'gourd'. Or 'melon'." Deidara wrinkled her nose. "Huh. I never realized how weird that is, hm, naming your children after a melon."

"There are weirder names in existence. Did you know Tamaki's grandmother's name was *Maneki*? After the *Maneki Neko*."

"That is weird." Deidara chuckled, and Kiba blinked once before smiling, then following her suit.

But their laughter soon died down, and Kiba said slowly, "So, Hayat—*Kou* was your brother, huh?"
"Half-brother," Deidara corrected soberly. "He was my father's son, hm. My best friend's mother was his mother. When their family went back to the capital, Kou was left behind. My mom took him in. That's why..." That's why he called her 'oka-san'.

*I'll tell oka-san you said hello.*

She let out a breath that almost stuttered. "I never thought I'd have to kill my own family."

Now this... Kiba looked out to the horizon. This was something he couldn't understand. But he could try to reason it out, at least. "He would have killed us both," he reminded her. "You said so yourself."

"So?" she said sharply. "That doesn't make it any easier. Family... Kiba, it's—"

"Pack," he finished, and she gave him a look that was half-anguished-half-questioning. Kiba smiled sadly. "It's the most important thing in the world. My mom thought of this whole town as part of the pack. But sometimes there are exceptions. When pack tries to kill you, then there's nothing you can do but defend yourself. Even if it means..." His mouth was dry again. "Killing them first." Kiba licked his lips. "I don't know a lot, Deidara-san, but I do know that in this world, it's eat or be eaten. It sucks, especially when it's your family."

"You..." Deidara's brow lowered. "You don't know anything."

"Wrong. I do know. Maybe I've never taken a life before, but I know what it's like to lose a loved one. Deidara—" he dropped the honorific "—I've already lost my entire family."

Silence fell upon them once more.

"Sorry."

Kiba nearly did a double-take. "Huh?"

"For treating you like shit in your own home." Technically, it was Kazebaba's home, but semantics. Deidara looked him straight in the eye. "Sometimes, I forget myself, hm. I forget that I'm not the only one who's suffering in this world." In a way, Kou was right. I am selfish. I am arrogant. But at least I'm not him.

"I... Okay. Well, I'm sorry for robbing you. Y'know, *that*. I only did it to pay oka-san's hospital bills," he added a little roughly.

"Hm. I don't care about that anymore." She closed her eyes and leaned back on the roof, Kiba's gaze following her face. She opened the eye that wasn't covered by her hair—the one she could actually still see properly out of. "You can't expect stealing to keep your head afloat forever, though. What about your inheritance, hm?"

"Spent on war efforts and oka-san's medical bills."

She didn't respond immediately, frowning. "Oi, Kiba. How much do you steal exactly?"

"Huh? Oh, not much. Mostly pocket change, wallets kept in the back pocket, shiny things that I can pawn off, or money pouches like yours. Those are really easy to nick, by the way, so you should keep that in mind."

"It's also convenient for carrying," she muttered before getting back on track. "But doesn't it strike you as a little odd, hm? Nobody carries that much money on them. They have banks and stuff for
that. Me being an exception, yeah. How much are Tsume-san's medical bills?" As she spoke, she pulled out some of her clay—just a small amount—and began to mold it in a round shape.

"I..." Kiba's eyes widened. "I don't know. I never bothered to check. Aika-san—the receptionist—is the one who tells me whether I've paid enough for the month or not."

"Hmm..." Deidara sat up. "Check next time, okay? Hospitals are expensive, yeah. You paying the monthly bill with spare change? Something's not right."

"I... I got it."

Just when he thought he had cleared his head and his heart, new, unanswered questions were popping up and stacking up the weight again.

"Come on, dog-boy. Breakfast's already cold, hm." Her tone was decidedly playful as she got up and walked easily across the roof, sliding off the edge and back into her window.

"Ugh!" Grimacing, Kiba got up on unsteady legs, hunched forward as he tried to gain balance. "Are you shitting me right now? Dammit! Deidaraaaa!

She was beautiful, blonde, and had the loveliest cornflower blue eyes he had ever seen. There was a watercolor-painted drawing of her he kept on his person at all times, hidden in a plain, unassuming scroll. It wasn't finished yet; he was very delicate and careful about painting it.

He had captured a side profile of her, her lips pursed and her brows drawn in a sad, mournful expression, her yukata stained with red from a gaping chest wound hidden beneath her clothing. He had other drawings of her where she was whole and smiled, but her somber, pained countenance in this one stirred something deep within him.

One might even call it an obsession.

But to survive, he had to thrive on obsession, on passion.

She was his art.

Even if they only knew one another in his dreams.

Sasori was kind enough to kick him awake, face impassive as always. "We're here," he droned, looking at the village as the boat neared the shore.

Sai didn't offer him any greetings for this misty morning.

"Don't go spouting off our objective again," Sasori ground out as they docked. "Or I might just kill you myself."

"If you do, Danzo-sama will know immediately. We are all connected."

"Hmph."

Before the boat had even fully docked, the red-haired assassin had jumped onto the wharf.

Sai briefly frisked his own body before following with a grace little possessed, reassured that the girl from his dreams was still tucked away on the plain scroll strapped around his thigh.
Part V: Oak

Chapter Summary

Slowly, they moved on.

The old man looked up from his counter as the bell above the door jingled, holding a packet in his hands. "Hello, and welcome to the post office." He put down the packet, his brush-like mustache wiggling as he sniffed. "How may I be of service today, young lady?"

Deidara gave him her best smile, holding up a pile of letters. "Some envelopes and stamps would be nice, hm."

"Right away."

The man reminded her of an ancient broom, languidly swishing about as he performed his duties as best he could. The door jingled a second time, but he didn't hear.

Kiba glanced over Deidara's shoulder. "The old lady told me you'd be here. Who are those for?"

"My friend back home," she answered, casually shoving him away. He grumbled. "I didn't realize you were on speaking terms with Kazebaba-san again."

"We were never not on speaking terms," he corrected, picking up an empty brown box the size of his palm and fiddling with it. To his credit, he didn't pocket it (though it would have been quite worthless at the pawn shop anyway). Kiba let out a deep sigh, tossing the box up and down. "She won't tell me what's up. Just that she's sorry. Man, I know Tamaki's been pissy at her lately, but I'm not a mind reader."

"I have doubts you can even read your own mind at times," Deidara snarked, and Kiba spluttered. "Relax, dog-boy, I'm pulling your tail, yeah." She paid upfront for the stamps and envelopes. "Don't worry, oji-san," she reassured the clerk, "I'll sort these out myself, hm."

"Thanks for coming." The old man picked up the packet she had first seen him with, putting it on a nearby shelf. "See you next time." He paused then, noticing Kiba for the first time. "Inuzuka... sama."

Kiba gave a noncommittal grunt. "See you."

"Hmm..."

Deidara shot him a glance as they walked to a small corner of the post office, where she could seal her letters and then send them off the mailbox outside. "I take it you're not the most popular guy around town anymore?"

"Ever since I started robbing 'em blind... nah." Kiba shoved his hands in his pockets. "But you reap what you sow. Honestly, I don't mind." Deidara nodded slightly as she stuck stamps on each envelope, using her remaining tongue-hand to lick the back of said stamps. "As long as it means that she hangs on for a bit longer."
Brave. She sealed the last envelope, then stacked them in chronological order, even though they would probably be scattered during the transfer. He's got his own admirable traits... A lot of kids his age would have broken down and given up ages ago.

"I'm going to the hospital," Kiba said as they walked out of the post office and to the mailbox outside, Deidara lifting the flap and pushing her letters inside. "Gonna get info from Aika-san." He grimaced. "It's going to be like pulling teeth." When Deidara didn't respond, he gave her a sideways glance. "Deidara? What about you?"

"Hm? Oh, sorry." Deidara pushed her hair out of the way, frowning a little. "I was just thinking, hm."

"Of... that night?" Kiba tread carefully.

"What? No." Her frown grew deeper and she exhaled. "I try not to think about Kou. Or okaa-san. Or anything bad that happened, hm. It's what keeps me going—knowing that things are going to get better in the future." At least... that's what I used to tell myself. In a way, she still did—life, while ever so fleeting, was filled with endless possibilities—but with everything that had happened recently she was beginning to doubt that.

Mirai. It's just leading back to the beginning. It's like my life's coming full circle or something. She brushed her fringe back again, a little annoyed by it on this windy day.

Kiba gazed at her thoughtfully. "Why don't you get a haircut?"

She stared at him. "What?"

He made a cutting motion at the spikes of his hair. "Y'know, the thing that people do when their hair gets too long—"

"I know what a haircut is, Kiba."

A cheeky grin. "If you want to focus on the future, then change your appearance. I used to have long hair when I was younger, but then one of the girls I used to play with at the market said I looked like her mom."

Deidara groused, picking at strands of her hair, wincing when the back of her hand accidentally hit a bandage on her cheek. "If I did, I wouldn't want it to be too drastic, hm..."

"At least trim your bangs. Those are getting really long."

A seagull cawed as it flew overhead.

"I'll think about it, yeah."

Deidara deadpanned as Kiba held out a skewer to her.

"What?" he said defensively, biting into the other skewer. "He won't miss a few."

"Ah, whatever." She took the kebab from Kiba and bit into it. Huh... It tastes like home. Of course it does. And it was delicious.

They took a seat on a nearby bench, and Deidara recognized it as the bench she had sat on when Kiba had taken her money on her first day here.
"Y'know," Kiba waved his skewer around as he spoke, "I thought for sure you weren't gonna take it. You're not as morally correct as I thought."

"I genuinely wonder what I did to give you that impression," she said dryly, ripping particularly viciously into a capsicum, which was the next layer of the kebab. "Or are you just off-kilter, hm?"

"Off-kilter?!"

"Weird," she clarified.

"I know what that means, dammit! You're so full of shit."

She gave him a sharp-toothed grin. "Yeah, I know. But aren't you supposed to be heading to the hospital? Hm?"

"Yeah, about that..." Mumbling, Kiba leaned back against the bench, throwing his hands behind his head. "I dunno what I want to hear from them. What if it's something bad?"

"How bad could it be?" Deidara was picking her teeth with the pointy end of the skewer now. "Trust me, it's even worse not knowing, hm. Plus," she added pointedly, "I don't want you following me around all day either, yeah. So go."

Kiba nodded tersely. "I know... I wish I hadn't let Tamaki play with Akamaru today. Then he could come with me." Stretching, he stood. "See ya around, Deidara."

"Hmm.." Deidara glanced after him, a niggling sort of feeling in her heart. *It's almost as if I'm watching him grow up, somehow.* Yawning, she stood as well and headed back to town, scanning her surroundings for the nearest barbershop. *Good for you, kid. I think I might try to do a little growing up of my own. I've been meaning to cut it, anyway.*

Chatter came from all sides as she walked down the streets at a comfortable pace, twirling the kebab stick in her fingers. There was the sound of rapid footfalls, and a small group of children came charging past her.

"Haha!"

"Can't catch me, Ichinose!"

"Takeo, you run too fast!"

"Oof!"

Deidara barely budged when one of the boys slammed right into her metal leg, grunting and falling on his backside, but she did stiffen when he looked up at her, his face eerily similar to Kou's. Then she relaxed, and offered him a small smile, her hair falling over her face a little. "Don't sweat it. But mind telling me where the barbershop is, hm?"

"O-oh." The boy stood up and pointed down the street. "Just keep going straight and there's one on the left. You can't miss it, nee-san."

"Thanks, kid."

With that, she was off, the boy's friends gathering around him and pestering him with questions about how it felt like to 'talk to a mature girl'. He basked in the attention, rubbing his nose bashfully.
Deidara pushed the door of the barbershop open.

*Ding-a-ling!*

A woman doing the hair of an elderly woman looked over. "Oh! Excuse me, Nanako-san, give me a moment." Putting her scissors away, she went over to her newest customer. "Hi! My name is Makoto. What can I do for you, ojou-san?"

The blonde undid her hair, letting the top layer fall out of its ponytail. Then she smiled. "Just a trim on the front will do, yeah."

It was a strange thing to get used to. Her head felt considerably lighter, but she couldn't help but feel people were paying more attention to her left side—the ugly scar beneath her clouded eye. It was much shorter than she had bargained for, but she could get used to it.

In a few days, she would be going home as well. The wind on her face calmed Deidara as she walked back toward Kazebaba's home, ready to get working on Tsume's—no, *Kiba's*—story.

"Etto..." Aika examined her nails. "I'm not really obligated to tell you anything, stray... But I'm surprised that you picked up on it."

Kiba smiled at her, but it was more like he was baring his teeth. "You are, are ya? Any chance of you telling me anything useful?"

Muttering, Aika leaned back a little, a bead of sweat dripping down her cheek. "Calm down, mutt. I can't tell you anyway. The one who pays, like, eighty percent of your mother's bills is listed as anonymous."

His heart fell. "... Oh."

"Yeah." Seeing him deflate made her feel a little braver, and she smirked. "So what are you still here for then? Go see your precious okaa-chan or scram."

"Who the fuck put you in a healthcare institution? Bitch." Kiba growled at her as he stomped away, up to Tsume's room.

Seeing her lying on that bed made his heart hurt every time. This time was no different, the anger and frustration he had toward Aika utterly disappearing when he opened the door to her room, a ball of ice forming in his belly.

Gently, he closed the door behind him and drew up a seat next to her bed. "Hi, okaa-san."

*It doesn't matter, anyway. Whoever's paying for us... As long as they keep doing it, I don't care. Heck, I'm grateful. I won't even be mad if I ever meet them one day.*

"Caw."

Kiba looked up to see a crow with a white spot on its eye perched on the windowsill.

"Caw," said Karasu.

"Um, hey." Kiba warily lifted up a hand. The first time he had encountered Kazebaba's wind spirit, he had nearly had his eyes pecked out. "You gonna say something or keep pretending like you're
actually a crow?" Karasu flapped his wings, landing on Kiba's shoulder. He was as light as air.

"Kazebaba-sama wants to apologize." Karasu spoke like a true gentlemen with a baritone that would make ladies swoon until they saw his appearance. Unfortunately, being a shape-shifter did not come in the job description. "For deceiving you."

"Oh. She could have come here herself." He waved a dismissive hand at the crow, who flapped his wings in annoyance.

"Stop that, boy. You know she cannot leave the house." Karasu pecked at his ear, and Kiba squawked in surprise. "She knew everything, and she had to let it happen. It was the best outcome."

"Was it really?" Kiba bit out. "I was beaten within an inch of my life and Deidara's even worse off."

"You do not have the burden of knowledge upon you. Had she intervened, there would have been every possibility of things changing for the worst. Why do you think she invited Deidara into her home on that fateful day? She had to take the same actions as her counterpart premonitions foreshadowed."

He let out a heavy sigh. "Just... Get out of here, Karasu."

"Very well."

There was a noise like the air had been sucked away, and then the wind spirit was gone. Kiba pressed his hands into his brow, longing for Tamaki and Akamaru's comforting presences and even Deidara's prickly remarks. Maybe, he even thought, that he shouldn't have sent Karasu away so quickly.

It was too empty in here.

They looked surprisingly normal. Clearly travelers, but harmless. Using the limited amount of money that they had been given for this mission, Sasori paid for an apple from a vendor, rubbing it with his sleeve before taking a bite.

Sai gave him a short glance before referring to the scroll he had been reading since they had arrived.

"We should arrange lodgings for the sake of normality and convenience," the boy told his partner. "Somewhere moderately busy, but not overflowing. We'll attract less attention that way."

"Hmph. Sounds good." Beneath hooded lids, Sasori eyed him. "I suggest we split up to cover more ground. Not to mention it'll be less suspicious."

"Yes, that will work." Sai snapped his scroll shut, lifting a hand to his face to block out the sun so that he could see further. "There's a tavern over there. I have little doubt that it doubles as an inn."

"Hn." Maybe it sounded like he was turning into an Uchiha now, but Sasori's noncommittal grunt drew Sai's attention away from him. The sleeve of his plain black travelling cloak swept past the window of a popular florist shop; then the fabric was gone, and in its place was a scorpion sculpture with $E4$ carved into its hide sitting on the windowsill.

The tavern that Sai chose was noisy with the shouts and bellows of inebriated men, and the
barkeep was far too hassled to be of any service to them at the moment. So they waited near the
back, postures seemingly relaxed but in actuality poised to strike.

It was during their wait that Sai turned to him and smiled. "We are partners now, Sasori, though I
hold more authority than you do. Let's not keep secrets."

Sasori met his unnerving stare without a flinch. "Of course. The mission is everything."

"The mission is everything," Sai echoed, and Sasori inwardly sneered at how genuinely earnest he
sounded when reciting the maxim (one that Danzo was fond of saying—*drilling into*—to his
subordinates).

When the bar was finally relatively clear, Sasori exchanged words with the barkeep, and he gave
them the key to one of the rooms upstairs before Sai even forked over the cash.

They had little to leave behind in their shared room (two single beds, thankfully); they'd not
brought many belongings that would serve no purpose in their missions, and only bags of clean
changes of clothes were tucked away, and miscellaneous weapons that would be inconvenient to
lug around, which they carefully hid in spaces no one would ever look.

After deciding where they would go, they split up, though it seemed to Sasori that Sai was actually
quite reluctant on parting from him. Probably because it meant that he could keep less of an eye on
him.

And, Sasori knew, that Sai wouldn't *dare* follow him. Not in an uncontrolled environment like this,
where Danzo's ROOT puppets weren't readily available and able to be alerted by a burst of chakra
in their seal tattoos.

His gait was relaxed as he crossed a stone bridge that looked like it came out of some sort of
fantasy land. Now that it was warmer, children wore looser and lighter clothing as they entertained
themselves with the outdoors. Two boys and a girl were leaning across the stone bridge, throwing
rocks into the water and laughing.

"Tomoko-chan, you try! I bet you'll throw the furthest," one of the boys encouraged.

The other boy snorted, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, right. She's a girl, s'not like she can throw hard."

"Harrumph!" Tomoko snatched the pebble from the naysayer. "Just watch, Tadashi!" Muttering,
she climbed onto the edge of the bridge and drew her arm back. Just then, a breeze came sweeping
in, and the boys' faces went red when her skirt flew up.

"Tomoko-chan!" both of them cried, covering their faces.

"Arggh!" In the effort of trying to protect her modesty, Tomoko's foot slipped over the edge, and
she shrieked as she went tumbling forward.

Her friends covered their eyes, waiting for the inevitable splash.

When they removed their hands from their faces, they were met with a black sleeve blocking their
immediate view. Tomoko was seemingly suspended in the air, but in actuality, a hand was
clutching her frail wrist.

Another blink, and he had disappeared in the eyes of the children, as if he had never existed. The
only thing remaining of his presence was the *E3* scorpion he had left behind beneath the bridge.
More than a decade ago, there was a red-haired boy and a mirror.

_I can't keep doing this._

The world was fuzzy as Sasori stared into his reflection, into his hollow gaze and the deep, dark trenches beneath his eyes. His fingers trembled as he gripped the porcelain sink, his breathing labored and heavy.

His shirt was off; a red slash that ran from his left shoulder to his right hipbone was bubbling with blood around the edges. A roll of faded white medical tape was right in front of his nose, on the vanity shelf, but he did not reach for it.

When is it going to end? The emperor was still young and healthy—it would be decades before he was free of all this. _Is this all I’m supposed to be?_ A killer before he’d even hit double digits, the emperor's favorite killing machine, the one who stained the sands red.

He was nothing but a puppet.

Ever since Chiyo had taken him away during the night, he had been reduced to nothing but a _puppet_ and a _plaything_. Panting, Sasori glanced down at his hands, tears of anger and years of pent-up frustration and anxiety filling his brown eyes. _When is it going to be my turn, Rasa? Haven't you used me long enough?_

As short-term relief, he longed for comfort, and for the presence of his mother and father, and maybe even Chiyo-baa-sama. But for the long run, he yearned for _control_. Control over his own life, his own decisions.

His lips twisted into a bitter smirk, his reflection doing the same. _I’ll be dust and ashes before that day ever comes._

Vilified and then forgotten by civilization, lost to the sands of time.

_I wish I were dead._

But the niggling feeling in his brain always screamed for him to _survive, survive, survive_. Survive long enough to finally _live_. Wasn’t that what everyone wanted? To live forever? It was an inbuilt human desire, one that stemmed from the innate instinct of self-preservation.

_I need more time._ Right in front of his eyes, his brain played a cruel trick on him, as his eyes were glued to the mirror as reflection wrinkled and aged before him, time reducing him to nothing more than a pile of dust. The ugly fear tightened its grip around his heart, and finally looked down at his torso to address the immediate problem.

His breathing growing more ragged than ever, he cursed and fumbled around the cabinet for a cotton swab and disinfectant. Five minutes later, the wound was wrapped up, bandages covering the majority of his upper body.

Sasori gave his reflection one more glance before calculating the amount of medical tape he still had left.

Then he slammed his head into the glass.

Eight hours later, he took his next victim—a businessman who had been giving away his money to the homeless—with a stretch bandage wrapped around his head and an indifferent gaze.
All of the dead man's money was returned to the Emperor and the country to help its dying economy.

I've done my part. A cold fury burned in his brown eyes as he bowed low to the Emperor before leaving the room, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. Despite the poverty Suna had sunken into, the leader was still as well-fed and strong as ever. As he passed an open window, he looked down upon the haggard people of his country. So why won't you do yours, Rasa?

The blood he had spilled for his country—all down the drain and staining the dunes of the desert.

I despise you.

Now, more than ten years later, Sasori's body was stiff as he watched the sun set from his hidden position on a rooftop. He had done his job—now it was time to wait. Hours later, he returned to his shared room with Sai when he felt a pulse of foreign chakra down his normal arm.

"Anything?" Sasori asked smoothly as he slipped in through the window.

"I have four suspects." If Sasori was impressed, he didn't show it as Sai showed him the individual drawings he had done of each woman's profile. "Assuming you have gathered nothing—"

He's not wrong. Sasori almost smiled. But what Sai did not know was that Sasori's hands were free of the wooden carvings he had done on the boat.

"—we will follow them around tomorrow." He allocated two of the women to his red-headed partner—both unlikely to be Yaobami if he's giving them to me, Sasori deduced immediately.

"Right." The man stretched, needing it after a long day of running around the town. "Then if you don't mind, I'm taking a shower and going to sleep."

Sai frowned. "You're not taking this mission seriously."

"Aren't I?" Sasori nudged past him. "You should learn to be more patient... Sai." The irony of such a thing coming from his own mouth was not lost on him, and he could feel Sai's glower boring into the back of his neck as he closed the bathroom door.

The first thing he saw was his own reflection in the mirror.

He paused.

Then he turned away from it, throwing his cloak off.

Tap-tap-tap.

Deidara's fingers moved deftly but carefully over the circular keys of the bronze typewriter. The afternoon sunlight was filtering through the window, warming her face. A hot cup of tea sat on the side, steam rising from the center.

Her eye-scope was on her face, and she occasionally adjusted it to fit her left eye's poor, fluctuating vision.

Periodically, she would glance to her left to read the handwritten notes she had made. Writing was always a slow process. She had to choose her words carefully, or she'd have to start all over again. She had been at this for almost two hours now, and she had only completed her introductory paragraph and half of the first body paragraph.
Stretching her arms up, she yawned, feeling her bones pop pleasantly.

What she did next she regretted immediately.

She took the damn paper out and, upon noticing a bug land on her table, swatted at it and knocked her tea over, spilling it all over the table.

And all over her work.

"Fuck!" Grimacing, Deidara grabbed the dry end of the paper (which was unfortunately not the end which contained her work). This couldn't be recovered, but she didn't want to lose all the writing or she'd have to start from scratch once again. She looked around the room for a towel or a tissue, but there was none.

Pushing her chair back, she took the paper and practically flew downstairs in search of a paper towel of some sort.

What she found instead was Kazebaba enjoying a cup of tea at the dining table.

Deidara slowed down, her brow lowering in distaste slightly. Then she walked past her and rummaged through the cupboards, her frustration growing when she found nothing. She was about to resort to taking off her blouse and using it to dab the paper dry when Kazebaba's creaky old voice piped up.

"Need help?"

"Hm." Deidara grunted. "Got any paper towels? Tissues?"

"Well, no." Kazebaba's tone was mild. "But I believe I can help with a trick my sister taught me long ago." Deidara took her head out of the cupboards, staring at Kazebaba.

"Enlighten me, then." She took a seat at the table, watching Kazebaba slowly lift her teapot toward the ruined paper. Is she going to pour more tea on it. How's that going to help, hm? But then it happened, and Deidara's eyes widened as the teapot began to suck the water from the paper in long, languid blobs of water.

Seconds later, it was done. The paper was fresh and pristine, not even crinkled from the abuse it had suffered.

"Th..." Deidara let loose a breath. "Right. Magic, yeah?" She snatched up the paper. "Thanks, I guess." Did I really just see that, though? She was about to leave when a thought struck her. "You said you had a sister?"

"Yes." Kazebaba laced her fingers together, her mouth turning downward a little. "I had many. But they have long passed. The sister who I loved most—the one who I owe my little parlor tricks—was the eldest out of us four. She was the water witch of the west, and also the most powerful witch of her time."

"Interesting," the blonde mused, "That there were three more of you. Hah..." She passed a hand through her hair. "Magic's not supposed to be real, you know."

"Don't be close-minded." Kazebaba refilled her own cup, and Deidara was mildly surprised when the tea didn't come out inky as she had expected it to. "Magic is just another form of chakra expression and manipulation. We witches simply don't use it the way most people do. It's a thousand-year old art, Deidara-san, one that existed before modern ways, such as chakra-enhanced
Even more modern are guns and bombs and Zetsu. Would you believe that, old woman? Deidara leaned back in her chair, thinking back to something Kiba had said. "Say, Kazebaba-san, does Kiba have a sister as well?" And if he doesn’t, who the hell is Hana?

"Oho! Very perceptive." Kazebaba beamed at her. "And I suppose you already have an inkling of who she might be. Best not to mention it to Kiba-shonen, though. He's still sore over her... betrayal."

Betrayal? Deidara's gaze sharpened a little. "Is that so?"

"That's for you to find out in the future, my dear. But you will get no answers from me, and I doubt Kiba will be much better."

"Feh! This is what I despise about you, hm. You act like you have all the answers, but you don't really know anything, do you? And if you do, there's no point in it, because you'll never tell."

Deidara pushed her chair back, glowering at the old lady. "What is it—stubbornness?" She shook her head. "I don't even care, hm..." She left with the paper, and Kazebaba was alone once again.

Ah. The old witch blew on her tea. It's more of the fact... that I'm more powerless than I appear to be.

A few days later, it was time for Deidara to leave. She had already done what she needed to do—there was no point in staying here any longer, and the island was actually giving her a mild case of cabin fever. Her story on Kiba was almost finished—it just needed to be refined—she would complete it back in Konoha City.

It was Tamaki and Kiba that came to see her off, and it was oddly reminiscent of the time that Rin and Itachi had waved her off at the docks just two weeks ago.

"Come back soon!" Tamaki cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled to the boat. Deidara was already on board, leaning across the railing and waving halfheartedly at her.

"Have a safe trip!" Kiba yelled, and Akamaru affirmed by barking as loud as he could. "If you drown after what happened last week, I'll be disappointed in you!"

Deidara snorted. "Not a chance, dog-boy!"

Kazebaba didn't come, but Deidara didn't mind. She wasn't particularly fond of the witch anyway. A low horn sounded and then the boat was off. Tamaki, Kiba, and the quay became dots and a stretch of lines in the distance before disappearing completely. When she could see nothing more than ocean, she turned around to look at what she had ahead of her.

She exhaled, relaxing and leaning comfortably against the railing as the wind blew against her freshly cut hair. Finally.

Asuma wasn't entirely sure what compelled Shikamaru to drop by every so often and help around, but he wasn't complaining. Hitoshi was getting better and better at his job every day, but Shikamaru had the logic, common sense, and all-around smarts to make up for his lack of experience.

Today, Shikamaru had a simple sweeping job while Hitoshi was slowly sharpening a sword.
"Hey, Nara," Hitoshi said from across the room. "You might as well work here, y'know."

"Nah." The boy actually had the audacity to yawn. "I just come here to think. Doing mundane tasks actually does wonders for my brain." Whenever he was playing shogi with Ai Wei, his mind worked a little differently—he thought at an extremely fast pace, and strategies filled his head until it felt like it was about to burst. But then his skull seemingly expanded to fit everything in. But when he was doing effortless tasks that required no brainpower, a different switch was flipped. One that allowed him to ponder other kinds of questions that weren't restricted to game theory.

Today's question was: **What do I really want to be doing?**

Wasting the days away playing shogi had once sounded like a fine idea to him, but he couldn't help but imagine that he had let people down by not going further. His mother came to mind, and then his father. Shikamaru frowned.

"What's on your mind?" Asuma paused in his hammering when he noticed Shikamaru's pensive expression.

"... What can I do to help?"

"Huh?" The man scratched his head. "Well, what you're doing for me now is fine, kid—"

"No," he cut him off, "I mean what can I do to help with the war?"

It went so quiet they could have heard a pin drop.

"Whoa, wait a minute! Hold it for one darn second!" Hitoshi pointed at him, jaw slack in disbelief. "You're telling me that—that even after all we fucking went through out there, you still want to get involved?! This war is out of our hands, kid—we can't do nothin', y'hear?!"

"That's not what I meant!" Shikamaru glared at him. "I'm not a fighter. So what if I can put up hands when it comes to it? But there has to be some other way to influence things. To stop this all from happening."

"... You keep up with the times?" Asuma put his hammer down and grabbed his lighter and pack of smokes. A second later, he had a lit cigarette between his lips. "They say that Suna's siding with Tsuki. Iwa and Kumo... things are still uncertain with them, and Kiri are busy dealing with their own internal affairs, as always. Assuming that the rumors are true," he blew a ring into the air, "If you want to exercise any sort of influence, I'd go for Suna first. Cut off their allies."

"Hmm..." Shikamaru leaned against a wooden post, contemplative. "Hey, Asuma-san. Do you think it's possible for me to get some kind of job in diplomacy?"

Asuma smiled. "No."

"Thought so."

"But," the older male continued, "Those fancy diplomats are always looking for aides. They go through them a lot. With your background, I'd wager you'd probably be able to work something out with the higher ups."

The quiet settled over them again, the only sound permeating the pensive silence Hitoshi's sharpening of the sword.

There was an odd little smile on Shikamaru's face. "Is that so?"
Two days later, Shikamaru handed in his application form.

"Look, okaa-chan!"

Kurenai smiled lovingly and knelt as her daughter, Mirai, shoved a poster in her face.

"Today, Kawahara-sensei made us fill in stuff about ourselves in here!" Proudly, she pointed one chubby finger at the triangular thing in the centre. "This is me! I drew it all by myself, okaa-chan!"

"That's wonderful." Kurenai planted a kiss on Mirai's forehead, and the little girl giggled. "You're quite the artist, musume-chan. What else did you have to fill in?"

"Umm, my hobbies, goals, and what I want to be in the future! Look, see!"

Kurenai took the poster from Mirai, a tugging sensation in her chest as she read Mirai's answers to the prompts.

**Hobbies:**

- baking with Ami-onee-san
- picking flowers
- playing in the garden

**Goals:**

To go on a picnic with okaa-chan and otou-chan in the mountains

What I want to be when I grow up:

Myself

"Well?" Mirai prompted.

"Oh, Mirai," Kurenai sighed happily, "Never change, will you?"

"Huh? What is okaa-chan talking about? Anyway, is otou-chan back yet? He didn't even come back for my birthday," Mirai pouted. "Why did he miss my birthday, huh?"

Kurenai almost choked. "I..." She blinked the tears that had formed in her eyes away, unable to look her child in the eye as she held her by the shoulders. "I'm sorry," she had repeated this so many times that she wouldn't even blame Mirai if she got upset, "But he's not back yet. I... It's not safe here for him here, Mirai. Please wait a little longer."

Her child's eyes were filled with pain. "But why?! Does... Does it have to do with why Ohara-oji from next door is gone? And why his wife always keeps crying?"

That's exactly right, my beautiful daughter. Kurenai tried to hug her, but Mirai pulled away, running into her room and sniffling.

Every day, when she got back from school, she would always ask her about when Asuma was coming back. Kurenai hugged her arms, feeling hollow. *Oh, Asuma... I wish you were here. I wish this godforsaken war would end so you'll finally be able to come back.*
Feeling a breeze chill her skin, she glanced over to an open window. Sighing, she got off her knees to close it, pausing when she noticed the world moving on outside.

Women stopping to talk.

Women on the verge of tears.

Women walking slouched, as if all their energy had been drained from their being.

And yet no man in sight.

No husbands.

No sons.

No grandsons.

She looked over to the huge structure in the middle of the town. A bell tower.

Kurenai swallowed a lump in her throat as she closed the window, but not before leaning outside to check if her laundry—it hung on a wire between her and the side of the building opposite hers—was still swaying in the wind. It was.

*Come back safely. All of you.*
Chapter Summary

Sakura's birthday hotpot comes around, and Itachi and Deidara talk about brothers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Can... Can I let you in on a secret?"

Deidara blinked once at her best friend before beaming. "Sure, you can tell me anything, yeah."

Kurotsuchi sighed before slumping against the training post that they had been mock-spaarring against just some minutes ago, sliding down it. Both girls were covered in sweat, and their muscles were sore, but all in all, they were feeling rather good about the work out that had just had.

"I don't wanna become Tsuchikage."

"What?"

"When the year is over, I'll be going back to the city." Yes, Deidara had heard already, and she dreaded the thought of parting from her. "I'm finally old enough to start training under my grandfather." The black-haired girl drew her knees to her chest, eyes dull. "But I don't want to lead Iwa. I just want to hang out with you." She flashed her a remorseful smile. "When I first came here, I looked down on everything because I thought you were all just a bunch of hicks."

Deidara pouted. "Oi!"

"But I was wrong," Kurotsuchi appeased, grinning slightly now. "And, well... I don't wanna leave. I like it here. I like your mom's cooking and her music. She's great, y'know? Everything here is great. Oh! And they cute boy, Kou! I think I've finally figured out where he lives."

"Ugh." Deidara rolled her eyes. "Can we not talk about him? He's not that cute. And don't have to be Tsuchikage if you don't have to, hm."

Kurotsuchi gave her a funny look. "Uh, yes he is. And yes I do. Iwa is lucky enough not to be led by a monarchy like Suna, Tsuki, and Ame, but there are still traditions and stuff. It's just less severe. I'm perfectly capable of being a leader, but I just don't wanna, okay?" She sighed. "I wish summer could last forever. Then I'll never have to leave."

"But even if you do...!" The blonde girl stood on achy legs, holding her hand out for her friend. "I won't let them make you into something you're not, hm!" Surprised, Kurotsuchi took her hand. "You know what? I'll become Tsuchikage instead!"

"Haaahh? You?" Kurotsuchi guffawed, and Deidara stuck out all three of her visible tongues out at her. "No offence, Deidara-chan, but you're not the elegant leader type."

"So? Neither is your pops."
But the crux of the matter was that they were both girls, and if either of them were to take up a leadership position like Tsuchikage, they would be under immense pressure to maintain their appearances.

"I'll follow you to the city," Deidara promised as they started to do some rudimentary stretches. "And I'll march right up to old Onoki's face and poke him in his big, pimply nose!"

"Oh my gosh!" Kurostuchi's arms dropped to her sides as she shrieked in laughter. "Deidara!" Her friend had met her grandfather only once, and they had merely been a curt exchange of words.

"Poof! I'm Tsuchikage! Piece of cake, yeah." She smirked at the other girl. "Don't underestimate my powers of persuasion~!"

"Oh, you'll persuade him alright. Persuade him to let you spend a night in a jail cell!"

"Only a night? Too easy, hm." She shifted into a stance, one that her father had taught her long ago, and one that she had expanded on to make it more personal. "Now come at me!"

"No need to tell me twice, blondie."

Deidara lifted her hand from her face and blinked blearily against the sunlight flooding in through the windows. Kurotsuchi? Why? It's been so long. Whatever, I'll still take it over what I normally get. Yawning, she rolled out of bed and straight into the bathroom she shared with Chiyo. She could smell breakfast being cooked in the kitchen, courtesy of the old lady.

After freshening up, she meandered into the kitchen, which shared the same space as the dining room, wearing only a loose shirt that went down to the lower half of her thighs. It was something she had bought on impulse before she had left for Sickleleaf Town, mostly for the amusing caption on the front which said Explosive Temper.

"Morning, Chiyo-baa-sama." She had grabbed her work stuff from her room, and laid out sheets and sheets of paper in front of her. They had to be reordered, having been scattered in the scroll she kept it in. Some of it was crinkled, but that didn't matter—when she submitted it to Fatso, he would send it off to someone else to edit it and print it properly. When her portfolio was finished, it would all be published in the paper.

"Morning to you, too, girl. Sunny side up?"

"As per usual." Deidara smiled at her, but Chiyo wasn't unaware of the dark circles beneath her eyes and her overall rather haggard appearance.

"What happened?" the old woman asked smoothly as she turned down the stove and opened the cupboard for two plates. Deidara caught a glimpse of a third plate tucked inside before she closed the door.

"That... I'm not sure if I can even say, hm." She lowered her gaze, staring blankly at her papers as she checked over and over again if she had it in the right order. Then she used the stapler she had brought with her to the dining table to attach them. I don't want you to know, Chiyo-baa-sama. This is something I have to deal with myself.

Chiyo leveled her with a serious stare. "Deidara, I will never force you to open up to me. But don't keep this to yourself—it'll pull you apart at the seams. I've seen it happen to others before you."

"... Was Sasori one of them?"
"He was one of many." She closed her eyes. "No more talk for now, dear. Let's eat."

Deidara let out a relieved sigh. "That's the best thing I've heard all morning, un."

They had finished and were cleaning up when there was a knock on the door that could only be described as exuberant. Chiyo raised an eyebrow in clear confusion, while Deidara, instantly recognizing just who was at the door, perked up a little.

"Gai?" She threw open the door, and Maito Gai beamed at her.

"Deidara! It's been far too long!" Deidara let out a muffled grunt when Gai practically scooped her into him and proceeded to almost crack all of her bones in the tight chokehold he called a hug.

"Goddammit, get off me, yeah!"

Smile turning a little more sheepish, he let her go. She narrowed her eyes at him, huffing.

"Looks like some things never change, hm," she remarked frostily, but there was no real ice or malice behind it. "Wanna come in?"

"I would be honored! Is that alright with you, too, Chiyo-baa-sama?" Gai nodded respectfully at the woman, tilting so far forward in the action that Deidara thought he was about to kowtow at her aged feet.

The old woman let out a belly-deep laugh that sounded more like a cackle than anything else. "Certainly! Have you eaten yet, Maito-san?"

"Please, call me Gai! And yes I have, but thank you for the offer. In all honesty," he scratched his cheek, "I've come to invite Deidara for some laps around the neighborhood."

"Depends," she hummed. "I'd rather not do more than a hundred. You know, because I'm not insane like you, yeah."

Gai took the jab in stride, giving her a good-natured slap on the back. She didn't flail or fall, and was inwardly quite pleased at the fact. Slowly, but surely, she was building back the strong body and muscle she had had during her time in Akatsuki.

"I'll get dressed, then."

"Yosh!"

Fifteen minutes later, they were completing their first lap around the neighborhood. They took it slow as to not disturb the other residents, who were already up and about. They did garner a lot of attention, though, as the shorts that they both wore exposed their legs—which, for Deidara, meant displaying her prosthetic for all to see. She cared little, however, and on their fiftieth lap, they took a break. Deidara was mildly out of breath, while Gai didn't even appear chuffed.

"How?" Gai grinned with all of his teeth as Deidara shot him a sour look with the question, unscrewing her drink bottle and taking a few gulps. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, still glowering at Gai. "It's like you're inhuman, honestly."

Maito Gai let loose a boisterous laugh. "I'm blossoming in the springtime of youth, more like!" He gestured dramatically to the trees around them, some of which were starting to flower. "Springtime in Konoha is a marvelous sight—even more so, I dare say, than in Ame!" He began to stretch then.
"Ame, huh?" Deidara joined him in his stretches. "So, Gai, how's everything for you, hm? What are you up to?"

"I have recently signed a contract with a wealthy landlord! I am to be the master of my own dojo, and Lee and Tenten are working to get the word out!" He stroked his chin, a little contemplative. "Speaking of Lee, he has made a decision that even I did not foresee."

A dojo, hm? Once he starts it up, I'll put in a word with Fatso to try and get it advertised in the paper. "Oh? And that is?"

At that point, manly tears started to pour down from his eyes, and Deidara scooted away a little, eyebrow twitching.

"Telecommunications!" blubbered Gai. "The dear boy wishes to enter the world of telecommunications and have a hand in the making of the mobile phone!"

"Mobile phone?" They started jogging again, Deidara silently offering her water bottle to Gai when he began to get more and more choked up. He didn't take it. "Never heard of it."

"I'm no expert either, Deidara. You'll have to ask Lee about it if you want to know more. Yosh! Let's pick up the pace!"

"Guh... Gai, hold on—dammit, Gai!"

They ended up sprinting another fifty laps around the entire goddamn neighborhood before Deidara got to collapse on her back in a grassy park, chest heaving as she tried to speed up her air intake. Much to her annoyance, Gai appeared to be only a little tired from their hellish exercise session.

"Never again," she vowed as she panted. "Ever."

"Just one more lap, perhaps—"

Deidara nailed Gai in the face with her drink bottle just as Sakura, Hinata, and Tenten, all of them with sticks of dango in their hands, walked past.

"Um," Tenten managed, blinking. "Should we...?"

In the end, they didn't even need to intervene, Deidara chasing Gai off on her own. He promised to do one hundred more laps, with Deidara glaring intently after his retreating form. Then she groaned, flopping back onto the grass and staring up at the clouds.

At least he's a nice distraction if anything, she thought cynically, moving her right hand into view. Deidara frowned at the sight—thick black threads stitched her hand-mouth firmly shut. She could tell by the feeling that all the teeth had been removed from that hand. It was probably for the better, though, as most of the teeth had been smashed and broken when Kabuto laid her out on that table and—

She nearly choked when three faces obscured her field of vision. Hyuuga Hinata, Tenten, and Haruno Sakura all stared down at her before Sakura grinned.

"Morning, Deidara!" she greeted cheerfully, and Deidara had to raise an eyebrow at that.

"Okay, what day is it, hm?"
"Sakura-chan's birthday," Hinata informed with a small smile on her face.

Tenten helped Deidara to her feet, and the blonde dusted off her backside.

"Oh, is it? Happy birthday, Sakura."

"Thanks. Oh—that reminds me." The pinkette snapped her fingers as she recalled that had escaped her. "We're having hotpot to celebrate at Tomoko's tonight! You should come."

'We' probably meant everyone else who had come with them to Konoha. Deidara fiddled with the cap of her drink bottle. "Yeah, I don't see why not. Count me in. Is... everyone really coming?"

"Everyone," Sakura confirmed seriously. Then she paused. "Well, we're missing a few of course. Sasori—"

 Obviously. Deidara's cheek twinged in blatant annoyance.

"—Neji, Kakashi, and Kagami-san. Not everyone has gotten back to me either, and I didn't invite the kids."

Kakashi and Kagami? Her brow lowered. I know that Neji's gone missing, but what happened to them, hm? "So, tonight. Tomoko's. See you around, guys."

"Ah...!"

Before they could invite her out, Deidara was gone, leaving the trio of girls to exchange glances.

"Well," Tenten said bluntly. "That was a bust."

Sakura shook her head. "No, no, it went better than I expected, honestly." The city passed in noise and colors around them as they walked down the streets.

Hinata finished her dango. "What do you mean, Sakura-chan?"

"We've never been close to her," ventured the pinkette. "Yeah, we were comrades. But... all the people that she really, absolutely cared about are, well, gone. We've all been through a lot—we're not the right people for her to find comfort in, but it was worth a shot."

Hinata lowered her gaze. "Yes... I understand. I'm lucky to have you girls with me, and Hanabi-chan. And Neji-nii-san... I hope you're safe. Undoubtedly, the Hokage had been alerted of this development by now and was pulling strings to try and get him back."

"Here."

Fatso looked up from his desk to see Deidara standing in front of it, arms crossed and a smile that bordered on cocky and impatient at the same time. Wordlessly, he took the stapled papers she had dumped on his worktable, flipping through it. As he skimmed her writing, his eyebrows rose to his hairline and a smile bloomed on his wide face.

"Excellent!" Fatso complimented. "I'll send this off to one of my most trusted editors—he'll fix it up so that it's just right. You've done well for your first assignment, Deidara-san."

"Thanks. Say," Deidara took a seat opposite him, "You told me the project will take the whole year, un. But you never gave me any deadlines for each assignment. The Gazette will continue to fund my travels if I leave tomorrow, right?"
"Tomorrow? Well, yes, but why on earth would you want to do that?"

She shrugged listlessly. "Just a thought." She didn't say anymore, merely tapped her finger on her bicep.

"Hmm... In any case, the answer is yes, though I do recommend that you stay for a bit longer before departing again. Don't you have friends to see and catch up with? It has been three weeks." He carefully avoided any mention of family.

"I... Yeah, of course. Like I said, it was just a thought, hm." Deidara stood. "Can I go now, kachou?"

He waved her off. "Yes, go ahead." As the door closed behind her, he sighed, scratching his head. *I thought that this would help, but she seems to have gotten even more closed off. Well, there are still plenty of clients left to go.* A bird flapped its wings outside his window, and he turned his head, mustache twitching. *She's got a year.*

Haruno Sakura was inviting everyone to her birthday hotpot tonight, but Itachi wasn't entirely sure if he could make it, or even entirely sure that he actually wanted to go.

As he gently pushed the baby swing, Izuna gurgled in delight, making the corners of Itachi's lips curl upward. His son—their son—was the only thing that made him want to continue living now. He spent most of his days either entertaining him or signing papers and making sure that their life could continue peacefully, especially since that he was living off his own fortune, which he had managed to access from Konoha.

There was a knock on the door. *Deidara,* Itachi immediately knew, judging by the familiarity of the chakra presence outside his house. When he opened it, his assumption was correct.

Deidara tilted her head to the side a little, offering him a crooked smile. "Can I come in?"

The door opened for her a little wider.

"I'll make tea," he told her, and there was merely a thankful silence on her end. As he was boiling water, he could hear Izuna glee when Deidara peered over the baby swing, eyes wide.

"Oh gods," she muttered, squeezing the baby's pudgy cheek between her fingers. He was so soft and delicate. "Are all babies this... jello-like? Hm?" She sat back against the couch when Itachi brought in a tray and placed it on the coffee table. He poured them both some green tea, watching in slight amusement as Deidara poked her finger against Izuna's belly, making him giggle.

"Someone's enjoying herself," Itachi commented, bringing his cup to his lips. "You can pick him up if you want."

She laughed but did so anyway. "Are you sure?" Izuna snuggled against her chest, calmed by her freshly-showered scent—after her impromptu torture session with Gai and her encounter with the girls, she had immediately gone home to wash off the sweat and grime. Deidara stilled, her face blank as she imagined Izumi in her place—the woman who should have been holding the child. There was an underlying sense of wrongness permeating the scene, but she tried to chase it away.

"Itachi," Deidara started once Izuna had dozed off in her hold and she had put him back into the baby swing. "Where's Sasuke, hm? Doesn't he live with you? I never see him around." Truth be told, she wasn't particularly interested in Sasuke anymore—any anger she had held toward him for his betrayal had long simmered away. There were other things that had suddenly popped up—other
things that required more time and energy than she could provide. *But they're brothers, aren't they? And that's why I—*

"Aa, he does. But he's normally busy with the military police."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Military police? I can't say I'm surprised, yeah, but..."

"I know."

A silence—not uncomfortable, but far from comfortable, too—followed, the only sound being the noise of Itachi pouring more tea into his cup. Deidara was holding hers in both hands, the glass warming her fingers. It was half-full—or half-empty, as she would have called it if asked.

"What would you do?" Deidara abruptly broke the silence. "What would you do if you had to kill Sasuke, hm?"

Itachi frowned. "Elaborate on the circumstances."

"Let's say someone was holding Izuna hostage," he stiffened at the notion, "And... hypothetically, it was Sasuke, yeah." *He would never do such a thing. He loves Izuna.* "And," Deidara continued, never hearing his thoughts, "If you didn't kill Sasuke, he would kill Izuna."

"This is getting morbid," Itachi remarked, and Deidara tensed, knowing that he was severely disapproving of this conversation.

"Just hear me out," she said quietly. "Please." He made no motion to stop her, so she went on, "If you had to make a choice like that, what would you do?"

"I..." His mouth suddenly felt dry, even with all the tea he had drank.

"Alright, it's not Izuna," she swiftly amended. "But it's someone innocent. Someone," her voice hitched a little, "someone you know who doesn't deserve to die—someone who has their whole life ahead of them. And if you don't kill your brother, that someone is going to die, yeah, and so will others." A beat. "And Sasuke won't hesitate to kill you if you spare him, hm."

"Deidara..." Itachi sighed.

"I killed him two weeks ago."

Her grip tightened around her cup. "Just answer the question, Itachi."

He deliberated his answer, and the one he gave solidified her guilt.

"I would rather let myself and others die than Sasuke."

It was a purely selfish, emotionally-driven response, but—

"You're crying." His voice was a mixture of awe, confusion, and understanding all at once.

"What?" Growling, she wiped at her face aggressively. "No, I'm not—" Deidara choked on her words when Itachi closed the distance between them, pulling her into a hug. Her face fell then, her mouth opening and closing as she fumbled for words. In the end, she just buried her face in his shoulder, crying soundlessly into his shirt. She didn't know how long they stayed like that before she told him, "His name was Kou."

He was paying attention, she knew, even when he didn't say a thing.

"I killed him two weeks ago."
Her tongue felt numb but she kept going.

"I didn't even recognize him at first. I thought he died before I left Iwa, hm. You should have seen him," she whispered harshly, "You would have seen the madness in his eyes. In a way, I killed him twice. The first time when I abandoned him in a burning building. The second when I shoved that spear through his chest." And I'd do it all over again if I had to. "Itachi... maybe I'm not like Rin, or Izumi. But I'm not," she struggled for the word, "I'm not Kabuto either."

"Of course not," he agreed, his voice sounding right next to her ear. "You did what you thought was necessary."

Not right, but necessary.

"What would have been the right choice then, hm?"

Itachi drew away from her, looking her in the eye. "Sometimes, there's no such thing as a right choice in this world. There aren't always obvious and clear choices." He unfurled both of her hands, her breath shuddering when his fingers traced over the closed lips of her mouth. "Sometimes, you must ask yourself—where should I go? To the left, where nothing is right?" He clutched her left hand as he eyes moved to her right. "Or to the right, where nothing is left?"

Something gripped her heart and refused to let go then, her brain coming to a shuttering halt as she recalled how Kabuto had mutilated her right hand, merciless with her body from start to finish.

"You'll find that in the paths you walk, there are terrible consequences for both actions."

Izuna began to stir then, whining for attention. Both adults almost didn't hear him for a moment before his father was moved into action, lifting him from the swing to burp him.

"Why?" Itachi exhaled sharply when Izuna was calm. "Because it is simply the reality of it."

Deidara didn't like to look at her hands, but sometimes it was unavoidable. Such a time was like now, where she stood in her studio alone, sculpting a bird perched on a branch. The creature's wings were spread out as it prepared to take flight, the moment frozen in time. A frustrated growl rose in her throat when she had to shake out her right hand for the umpteenth time, her fingers aching from the cool temperature of the room. They always got stiff and sore when the room was below twenty degrees Celsius—which it currently was.

Silently cursing Kabuto to the depths of hell in her head, she flexed her fingers—they still couldn't straighten properly—before continuing her art. The inherent pleasure she took from her work eased her mind, but she couldn't help but feel a little lonely in the art studio. More than once, her eyes drifted across the room, where Sasori's section was collecting dust, his worktable drenched in the late afternoon sunlight.

She perked up when she heard the front door open. "Chiyo-baa-sama?" she called.

The door of the art studio was pushed open, and Chiyo stood at the doorway. "I just came to get my good wok—I'm heading over to Kana-san's for mahjong and dinner."

"You're not going to Sakura's hotpot?"

Chiyo shook her head. "An old woman like me has no place for a gathering of youngsters like that. Sakura-chan was kind enough to invite me, but I turned down her offer."
"Hm, okay then." Deidara examined her work with narrowed eyes. *This can be taken to the kiln today.* Connected to their apartment block was a brick kiln and an incinerator; she used the former to harden the clay. All of the clay she used for her art was the non-explosive kind, the truly dangerous material she used for her explosions tucked away in her bedroom.

Chiyo gave her a once over, looking vaguely pleased. "You don't seem as stressed as this morning. Good for you, Deidara-shonen. Now! I'm off—don't burn down the place while I'm gone."

Deidara snorted. "Keep saying that, yeah, and I might just do it out of spite."

"Oh yeah? Where will you go then?"

"I'll crash at Itachi's."

"Then I will, too, and then the cycle will repeat itself. Hmph—that poor man."

For the first time since she had arrived, she let out a genuine laugh that wasn't bogged down by any anxieties. "Don't lose too much money, hm."

"Brat," Chiyo addressed affectionately before she left the apartment.

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**Wow! I'm impressed** Tomoko-oba has a table this big, thought Karin as she arrived with Naruto. When Naruto heard that Sakura's birthday dinner was tonight, he had bought the next boat ticket to Konoha City and dragged her with him to attend. Kushina stayed behind in their home, Uzushio, and was expecting them back in a few days.

She looked around for Sasuke, but the black-haired male hadn't showed up yet. Sighing in mild disappointment, she simply seated herself next to Tenten, offering a quick smile as greeting.

Before long, everyone who had confirmed their attendance had come, the only ones missing being Deidara, Sasuke, Shikamaru, and Hinata.

Kisame was sitting with Gai, the spandex-wearing man being the closest to his age, and from the look on his face, he was already regretting the decision as Gai chattered on about something youth-related.

Pitying him, Sakura ordered the alcohol early, and before long, most of them were halfway to getting buzzed when they started putting the food in the huge pot in the middle of the table. Some didn't touch the drinks, however, such as Lee and Masami; the former was warded away from the alcohol by Tenten and the latter stated that she didn't like the taste of sake or other alcoholic drinks.

"Shikamaru! You made it!" Tenten waved to him as he made his way toward their noisy table, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"The drinks better be worth it," he said. "Coming here all the way from work was such a drag."

"You work?" Sakura sounded shocked.

Kisame laughed in the background at Shikamaru's annoyed face.

"Don't sound so surprised," Shikamaru sat down next to Choji, "I'm only doing it because I want something."

Nobody questioned what it was, and the night went on. Hinata and Hanabi arrived next, making the younger Hyuuga the youngest person present at their table.
"I thought this was a no kids allowed thing," Karin commented as the Hyuuga sisters sat down.

Hinata gave an apologetic shrug, while Hanabi rolled her eyes and looked the other direction. She wasn't particularly fond of Karin, having been given a bad impression during their journey. The red-haired girl freaked out at the sight of everything.

The final two members of their party to come were Deidara and Sasuke, both of whom didn't look very pleased at the fact that they had had to walk ten feet into the restaurant side by side.

Sasuke took the seat between Hanabi and Naruto (and getting a noogie from the latter), missing the longing glances Karin was sending him. There was only one remaining seat left for Deidara—the one between Masami and Kisame.

_Ah._ Deadpanning at the pot bubbling away in front of her, Deidara could feel the tension in the air. _This wasn't what I imagined._ Still, she made the best of it, joining in the celebration with zeal and laughter.

"Itachi didn't come?" Kisame asked somewhere along the night, when both he and the blonde had alcohol in their systems. Deidara, her face red, turned to him.

"Nope, he had to look after Izuna, hm, and this isn't really his scene anyway. Why?" She grinned at him. "Do you miss him?"

A shrug. "He's a quiet guy, but his company is more preferable than... this man's." He sent a pointed glance at Gai, who was shouting to Lee from across the table. "I didn't realize anyone could be so loud."

Deidara, still facing Kisame, nodded understandingly and reached out to grab her glass. She was about to reply when her words turned into a pained hiss, and her eyes widened at the steaming hot beef tongue that had landed on the back of her hand.

"Terribly sorry." Masami didn't look at Deidara as she hastily grabbed the beef tongue with her chopsticks and put it on a napkin, unwilling to eat it.

Glowering at the woman, Deidara dabbed at her hand with a tissue, grimacing at the redness. "It's fine," she said shortly.

Kisame scratched at his cheek, the alcohol loosening his tongue a little. "Sometimes I forget that you two have history," he said to both of them, making them startle. "I didn't realize you two were still mad at each other, heh."

"I'm not mad at anyone, hm," Deidara said coolly.

"Nor am I." Masami's tone was clipped. "Don't insinuate such a thing, Hoshigaki-san."

Kisame was decidedly unimpressed. "Is this a woman thing I don't know about?"

"Hardly," the blonde scoffed, eyeing Masami warily. "But now that you mention it, walking on eggshells like this sucks ass, hm." Maybe it was just the alcohol, but Deidara placed a hand on Masami's shoulder and almost glared her into submission.

Masami twitched. "What?"

"I'm sorry."
"... What?"

"For punching you." Deidara tapped at her cheek. "Knocked out a tooth, didn't I?"

"Well... yes, you did." Masami sighed. "Although, I suppose I did deserve it at least a little."

"You were scared," Kisame pointed out as he took a swig. In the background, Sakura was tensing up, as if she were preparing to do something. "We all were, Kobayashi-san."

"Oh, is that your family name?" Deidara slurried a little. "I never knew."

"Still," sighed Masami. "An outburst like that was sure to get me backlash. I didn't realize how strongly you felt about Sasori-san, Deidara-san."

"Yeah, well..." She grew more somber. "The heart works in funny ways, hm. For a long time, I thought my art would suffice forever, but then he butted into my life." Deidara paused. "Or maybe I butted into his, yeah."

"Perhaps," the older woman mused, and the conversation was over when Sakura suddenly stood on her chair and tapped her spoon against her glass. By now, things were starting to wind down, all the food having been devoured, and several empty bottles littering the table.

"Everyone! Can I get your attention!" she announced, obviously well on her way to getting drunk.

"What are you doing?" Tenten whispered, but was ignored. Hinata placed a hand on hers, giving her a reassuring smile.

"I just want to say," Sakura began when their table fell quiet, giving the birthday girl their utmost attention. A few of the tables around them stopped talking to pay attention, too. "I'm so proud of us." To most of their shock and horror, fat tears started rolling down her cheeks, her bottom lip quivering. "I'm so proud that we made it here, that we continuing to live. It's hard, moving on. We lost so many, and..." She almost choked on her words. "But in the end, here we are. We're alive, we're breathing, and we're making the best of things. Even to those who couldn't make it tonight, I'm still damn fucking proud." By now, there were less dry eyes in the crowd, even the most stone-hearted of the lot moved to tears with the alcohol in their system. "SO LET'S DRINK! Not that we haven't already," she added, gaining some raucous laughs, "But let's drink to our lives! TO US!"

"TO US!" They couldn't help but echo at the top of their lungs, even Sasuke, Shikamaru, and Deidara getting caught up in the heat.

_That's right_, Deidara thought giddily as all of them—even Lee and Masami took some sips (the former watched over very carefully by Tenten)—drank enough to make Tsunade jealous. _We survived. We beat the Zetsu!_

_Ah, but then..._

The faces of the dead—Hitomi, Ino, Izumi, Shisui, Obito—flashed in front of her eyes, merging with the bright ceiling lights.

_Why does it feel like that we were the ones who lost?_

Sai knew who he was. He was Sai, and he was Shin's younger brother. Some would argue that they weren't _really_ brothers, but to Sai, they were brothers in all the ways that mattered. Shin saw Sai's talent when nobody else did, when the orphanage matron told him that art had no place in his life.
He wished that Sasori would obey properly. His insolence was growing unbearably irritating, and had Sai not abandoned his emotions for ROOT, he would have surely snapped by now.

Shin's life was hanging by a thread, and Sasori was holding the scissors—

*Thump.*

It was the second night of their search for Yaobami.

*Thump.*

Sai sat up in his bed, ready to kill. He slept with his trusted tanto strapped to his body, and it was this that he drew from its sheathe, the metal glinting in the moonlight-drenched room. Which was strange, because he had definitely closed—

The balcony doors were fully open. Narrowing his eyes, he rolled out of bed deftly cautiously approached the oddity. Where was Sasori, anyway? Surely, such a master assassin would have been alerted by the noise as well.

A backward glance had him glimpsing Sasori's trademark red hair partly covered by the sheets in the other bed.

*How disappointing.*

Never mind—he would handle this himself.

But when he exited the room and went out to the balcony, there was nothing. Even when he looked beneath the overhang and above to the roof, there was no sign of life.

His next thought—

*What has Sasori done?*

Feeling ill at ease, Sai turned and looked up once more—

"Apologies."

And his world went black.

"Apologies."

Sasori was not apologizing to Sai, but rather the woman standing on the balcony railing, having come out of her hiding place on the roof, where Sai couldn't have possibly spotted her from his position.

"He's troublesome," he added. "But he'll need to come with us."

She stepped off the railing, orange eyes boring into him. "I understand. Though I must say, Akasuna no Sasori—based off the rumors, I didn't take you as the sort of man to take gambles. Especially one as deadly as this." Her hand disappeared into her cloak and reappeared holding the E3 scorpion.

"It wasn't that big of a risk." He inspected the room one last time, packing all of Sai's stuff haphazardly into a single storage scroll. All of his stuff was already gone. The woman raised an eyebrow when he pulled off the blanket off the puppet he had left behind—a crudely made
imitation of himself. He hadn't had enough time to perfect it. "Had you been truly my enemy, you wouldn't have been able to find me using those."

She laughed airily. "Yes, I suppose. I'm impressed you're so well-versed with Ame's unique code and map coordinates." Yaobami twirled the scorpion carving in her hand. "And dramatic enough to add some of your personal flair..." No doubt a nudge to his identity. She tucked it away.

"I'm an artist," he deadpanned, as if that explained everything. After wrapping up Sai in his own cloak so that only part of his face showed and securing him on his back, he gave a final nod to the room. "We can leave now."

"Good. And tonight," Yaobami stepped into the moonlight-drenched balcony, and then the railing, "You'll find out why they call me the Angel of Ame."

Sasori's eyes widened a little. "Wait—"

In a flurry of paper, they disappeared into the night within the blink of an eye.

"You are surprisingly light, Akasuna no Sasori, even with that boy saddled on your back."

"I haven't exactly been dining on the Emperor's table," Sasori bit back, perhaps more than a little agitated at the fact that Yaobami was literally carrying him through the air, her kekkei genkai allowing her to manipulate paper to great extents. "Not all of us can be devourers, Yaobami-san."

The woman laughed. "Konan. Yaobami-san is too fearsome for me."

A pettier side of him wanted to refer to her as Yaobami just to spite her, but the logical side remembered that she was the only thing stopping him from plummeting to his death.

Konan dropped him off in front of an inconspicuous building before landing beside him herself, her paper wings seemingly falling back into her body with a near-silent rustle. "We're here."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: About the devourer comment, it's because the suffix -bami means "devouring" in Japanese. Totally got this from Kakegurui :p
Part V: Eustoma

Chapter Summary

Things happen, you know?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The library was warm, and though drinks were prohibited, Karin had managed to sneak in a thermos full of hot chocolate anyway, contentedly drinking from it as she idly flipped through a fantasy tale.

It was a good thing she hadn't drank so much at last night's party, or else she wouldn't have been able to get up at the crack of dawn for moments like these. From the vertical windows, she could see the sun rising over the horizon, spreading its light across the city.

Karin smiled to herself. In Uzushio City, where she now lived with Naruto and Kushina, the sun rose a little differently, and she often woke up to the sights of golden rays over the ocean. The change in scenery was doing wonders for her peace of mind.

Everything was good. The monsters were no longer of any of her concern, and she was admittedly quite fond of Naruto and Kushina now. It was almost like having roommates, except those roommates loved you unconditionally and took the effort not to leave the toilet seat up after use (or Kushina did, at least. Naruto was a wild beast when it came to hygiene and sensibilities, and both Uzumaki women were still working on taming him).

A footfall reached her ears, and Karin looked up from her book to see another woman come around a tall bookshelf, looking haggard. They made eye contact for a moment before the strange woman stalked across to the other side of the open area and plopped down into a beanbag. Behind her glasses, Karin's eyes gleamed when she noticed the tome spread out across the woman's lap—a medical textbook, and a thick one at that.

Normally, Karin didn't consider herself a very social creature, but her interest had been piqued. "Are you a medical student?" she asked, head tilting curiously when the brown-haired woman's head snapped up, eyes wide.

"I..." The brunette's throat bobbed. "I want to be, yes."

"Ah." Karin gave a nod. "Konoha's medical programs are top notch, but only if you know where to study." People often said that the Hokage was a ruthless mentor in the medical arts, but an efficient one. Highly trained medics such as Sakura and Shizune were churned out at a slow but steady flow thanks to Tsunade's teachings.

"Mm." The haggard woman smiled a little sadly. "That's good to hear. Maybe then my dreams had some merit."

Karin frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Oh... Sorry, it's a long story."
"I've got time." The red-haired girl looked at the window, where the sun was climbing in the sky. "We're strangers. I could be dangerous."

"No." She shook her head. "If you were dangerous, I'd know. I'm a sensor."

The brown-haired woman's chakra didn't feel dangerous at all. In fact, it was almost harmless, feeling too flat and defeated to be of any danger.

"... I'm Hana. Just Hana."

"Uzumaki Karin. I'm pretty interested in medical arts myself, heh." It was too bad Sasuke didn't seem to appreciate her talents.

"Oh! From Uzushio City?" A nod from Karin had Hana's eyes widening a little. "I've always wanted to go there. Ever since I heard the stories of the old Uzushiogakure Island, I..." She lowered her gaze. "Sorry, that was insensitive."

Karin snorted. "Don't be, seriously. Everything happened before I was even born anyway."

The majority of the original Uzushio population had been wiped out due to a mysterious disease that had rampaged their island. The small handful of Uzushio descendants that had survived were either already living on the mainland or had vacated there before they caught the pathogen. New Uzushio hadn't been able to be promoted to nationhood, and had instead been swallowed and integrated by Konohagakure. Uzushio City was the last remnant of Uzushiogakure's culture, a sprawling city in Konohagakure's north-east ruled by Old Uzushio's descendants.

"If you're sure." Hana cleared her throat.

Then she began to speak.

---

Sasori had never been good with alcohol. Sake, beer, whiskey—he wasn't a lightweight, but it was best for him to drink with moderation. But when the first sip of sake hit the back of his throat, he was suddenly transported to a time that he had almost forgotten—the night he had drank with Deidara on the rooftops of Akatsuki, talking about nonsense like war flags and colors—

He remembered, with a blink, that her favorite color was forest green.

Konan tossed more paper into the fire, which was contained in a metal barrel. Their shelter was a nondescript warehouse on the outskirts of town. A bad reputation for being haunted had the townspeople keeping away from it.

If someone had bothered to look inside tonight, they would have seen a most peculiar sight—Konan and Sasori sitting around the squat barrel, warming their hands; Sai was gagged and bound, abandoned to the cold in the corner. He had not yet woken up, judging by the steady flow of his chakra.

"What did you find?" Sasori sounded uninterested as he focused on the flickering flame, holding his hands close to it.

Konan threw a scroll, a notebook, and a calligraphy brush that had been used very often at his feet. "Aside from your usual weapons, these. It's..." Frowning, she pursed her lips. "Unusual. Especially for a ROOT member."
The alcohol had warmed him up enough, so he neglected the rest in his metal cup. Intrigued, Sasori unrolled the scroll, feeling his stomach lurch at the sight of Sai’s impeccable artwork. *What the hell is this supposed to be?* He angled it back and forth, as if disbelieving the sight. Then he glanced over at Sai, who was still unconscious.

Konan inched forward. "Is something wrong?"

"... Nothing important." At her skeptical look, he added pointedly, "Nothing that would be detrimental to your mission anyway. Or mine. You still have some explaining to do, Konan-san."

"Patience," she soothed. "I will when the others arrive. They should be here soon."

For the meantime, Sasori busied himself with the unnervingly accurate depiction of Yamanaka Ino that Sai had been carrying around on his person all this time. At first glance, he had thought it to be Deidara, but a closer examination had him thinking otherwise. The woman's face was sharper, and her bangs were drawn to partially cover the right side of her face, not the left.

But still, Sasori felt a chill settle around him. Had Sai met Ino before? What was the meaning of this? He snapped the scroll shut and checked Sai's notebook instead. There were various drawings and sketches of all sorts of things, but Ino seemed to be a popular subject. Sai had drawn her from all sorts of angles, as if to capture every delicate detail about her.

Konan was shoving the cork back in the sake bottle when the metal doors slid open with little sound. Konan had taken the time to oil it prior to this. Moonlight spilled into the room like silver water, and two unfamiliar figures entered the room. One was tall and bulky, the other lither with less muscle definition.

"Juugo. Suigetsu." She beckoned them over with a friendly wave, and it was then Sasori got a good look at their faces.

Where have I seen them before?

He turned away.

"Welcome back," Konan was saying as they Juugo and Suigetsu sat down around the barrel fire. "This is Sasori-san. He'll be working with me for the meantime."

"Whatever you say." One of them—the smaller man with white hair—leaned forward, giving Sasori a crooked smile that revealed his filed teeth. His interest piqued a little, Sasori side-eyed him, deducing that he must have been Kiri-born. No other country churned out men with sharp teeth like his. Unless he had them modified somehow, which was unlikely. "The name's Suigetsu. You must be pretty good if Konan-san decided to pick you up."

Sasori ignored the compliment, asking, "Are you her subordinates?"

"Subordinates?" Suigetsu scoffed. "Hardly. We're just helping a lady out, y'know?"

"I see. Subordinates it is."

Suigetsu frowned, though he just ended up exhaling a halfhearted sigh when he saw the barely noticeable smirk on Sasori's otherwise inexpressive face.

Juugo, who hadn't said a word thus far, merely smiled at the interaction.

"Hey, Konan-san, is that sake?"
Konan cocked a brow. "Don't even bother. You're still a minor."

"We're in war; I doubt that people will even care—"

She smacked his reaching hand away. "Child. Don't test me."

"Since we're all here," Sasori ignored Suigetsu's displeased muttering. "Why don't we start discussing what we're going to do from here?" He shot a scrutinizing gaze at the younger pair. "Unless they're going to be liabilities."

It happened in the blink of an eye, like a recurring nightmare coming back to haunt him from the umpteenth time. A surprised hiss escaped between Sasori's teeth as vines burst forth and spiral toward him, water that looked like it could cut spinning along with the hellish tendrils.

There were three seals on Sasori—two from Danzo and one from the ANBU Commander. The Commander obviously had ins with Danzo; Sasori's ANBU tattoo, which was inked on his upper arm, was a variation of the standard ANBU seal that allowed for a distinct chakra connection between all members of the force. Unlike the norm, however, his seal also allowed for a connection between his fellow ROOT members. The seal on his Zetsu arm was meant to suppress his instinct to disassemble it and use it as a weapon; if he wanted to use it, he'd have to channel a substantial amount of chakra into it.

The last seal was certainly a bother... though not enough to limit his options.

Anyway, there was something missing from the sudden assault.

So Sasori merely stood still, as if his hairs weren't standing on end.

The vines stopped right in front of his face, and the water splashed onto the floor, only wetting his shoes.

There'd been no killing intent.

"Is that enough for you?" Suigetsu smirked. Juugo's vines retracted back to his body, twirling until it was an arm again.

"Look down," Sasori instructed, keeping his gaze fixed on them. "Eyes only, or you'll cut your jugular."

Suigetsu did, eyes widening. "What the fuck—?!"

A poisoned-covered blade was held at their throats, an unseen puppet having sneaked up behind them during their demonstration.

"Kkhh..." Sasori let out a breath, a smile—most certainly not a kind one—growing on his face. "You should make sure not to abuse such a crutch. You think you're hot shit or something? You're not the only monsters around. But unlike you," his cloak rippled as he revealed his artificial appendage to them, "I'm not a one trick pony."

"Bullshit!" the white-haired boy blurted out. "We would have killed you before you even—"

"You're wearing out my patience. Are you sure you want to test me again?"

"Who even are you?!

Akasuna no Sasori. But he had abandoned that moniker long ago; that man had long died. "Me?
I'm just a man from Ame."

Konan sighed, though there was the ghost of a smile on her lips. "Stand down, Suigetsu-san. You won't win against him. Besides—we're all allies here."

Huffing and crossing his arms, Suigetsu glared at Sasori. "He sure doesn't act like it."

"If I weren't your ally, you'd be dead by now."

"Is that a threat? And don't you dare say it's a promise."

Sasori shrugged, his puppet backing away with its blade. "It's neither. Rather, it's an uncomfortable truth." He looked to Konan. "Enough of this. Tell me what's going on."

"It's a long story." Konan frowned. "I'll give you the abridged version of things. I am not a spy for Tsuki. Rather, it's the opposite—I'm Nagato's second-in-command." She paused, realizing something. "It's the Ame Emperor's real name. 'Pein' is used to strike fear into the hearts of enemies."

"Before you continue," Sasori interrupted. "Who instigated this war?"

She blinked. "Kaguya, of course. How could you not know that?"

Just as I thought the first time. Not hearing her disbelief, Sasori thought about the conversation he had had with the old witch-woman in Rootbell Town. So why does she so insistent that it's the opposite? Senility? That's too convenient... Not to mention, her grandson seems to be under the same impression that it was 'Nagato' who declared war on Kaguya.

"Moving on," Konan continued when she never received an answer from him. "You're going to have to take my word for this, because it will sound impossible."

In this world, nothing is impossible, he silently argued, glancing down at his arm.

"We are in war with Tsuki... because their leader, Empress Kaguya, intends on taking over the world."

Sasori blinked once. Twice. A bit cliche, but it made sense; she would have to work hard on that, though. Once the other nations caught wind of this, they wouldn't be happy. Unless...

"She's already reaching out for allies, promising them power. The last report I received—from another spy, who is now dead—was that Tsuki diplomats are already on their way to Sunagakure." Konan let out a frustrated breath. "That's not the most concerning part, however. She does not intend on sharing her rule with the other nations; an alliance with her will only ever be considered if they remain in the dark about her methods."

At that, Suigetsu and Juugo tensed. They had heard this story before.

"Some weeks before the war started," Konan lowered her gaze, a shroud of sadness enveloping her slight body, "Yahiko—a... friend of Nagato and I—traveled to Tsukigakure to propose a treaty. He never sought anything but peace with the other nations... At that point, we'd already gone everywhere else, and our negotiations with the other nations were going well. But then..." She blinked, her eyes cloudy as if she were looking at something far away. "He never came back from his diplomacy mission. His last report to us was an SOS as well as a report on Kaguya's background, ancestry, and intentions, acquired from a member of the Kaguya's branch family."
"I was sent for recon as Yaobami-san. But someone ratted me out," she frowned at Sai, "Someone with the same affiliation as that boy."

Sasori's brow lowered. "You spoke with ROOT members?"

"Konoha and Ame are allies in this war. Or did you forget that as well?"

"You fool!"

It was as if thunder had cracked in the room, leaving every individual shocked with their hackles raised.

To her credit, Konan did not spare him a reaction, her face unreadable. Obviously, she had come to the same conclusion as him long ago; and she had learned it the hard way—ROOT were not to be trusted, even if they were Konoha.

He supposed he couldn't entirely blame her—she really couldn't have known the treachery of that organization.

Sasori didn't need to berate her for this—that would be a waste of time. "Who did you speak to?"

"Their leader, Danzo-san. I made the mistake of not realizing how deeply their corruption ran. But surely..." She looked out the one of the high windows where moonlight spilled in, pensive. "That doesn't mean Konoha has turned on us, does it? I refuse to believe it."

That's probably not the case, no. The Hokage is too soft for that; Konoha is always preaching righteousness from their asses. Gears turned in Sasori's head. Then is it just Danzo? What the hell is his game in this? Is he working for Kaguya? But Danzo was one of Konoha's most trusted councilmen. He already had substantial power. It is the nature of men to hunger for more.

Konan shook her head. "My mission was to infiltrate Tsukigakure. But now that my cover's been blown, I'll be killed on sight if I even attempt to enter. I have no doubt Kaguya's already begun exacting her final moves against Konoha."

"Ko... Konoha? What about Tsuki?"

"Us?" A bitter smirk was twisted on her features. "We're nothing. Just a distraction. A thorn in her side by pure chance; only because Yahiko poked his nose where it didn't belong. For an island nation, Tsukigakure is very powerful. Their forces are overwhelming ours—it is only thanks to Konoha that we're even resisting at this point. But no. We're not the prize. The real prize... is Konohagakure. Once Kaguya has swayed at least two of the other nations to her side, she will gather her remaining forces alongside them to invade Konohagakure. I am certain of that much."

"Iwa and Suna," Sasori hypothesized. "Out of the Great Nations, they have the most reason to attack Konoha."

"Indeed. Also, Kumo are generally neutral, but they've had at least one major incident with Konoha from many years ago. If Kaguya plays her cards right, she'll have those three nations in her palm. And if that happens..." She grimaced. "All hope is lost."

"But why Konoha?" Suigetsu spoke for the first time for a while. It was evident that Konan had not divulged this part to them yet. Juugo nodded with him, also wanting to know. "Do Tsuki have history with Konoha, too?"

"I... No, I don't think so. Not that I can recall. They've mostly stayed clear of one another, despite
the island being just an ocean away. All I know is this: *Konoha's lands are the most fertile."

It was a vague metaphor at best.

"Huh..." Suigetsu hummed thoughtfully. "Wonder what the hell that means..."

"So what are you going to do now?" Sasori questioned. "What's your backup plan?"

"I have others on my side," she informed him. "People in Suna and Iwa to stall the negotiations with Tsuki. But for myself... I'm relying on rumors and legends. But who's to say they aren't true? The last known man with ties to the samurai—"

Sasori stiffened. *Don't tell me...*

"—was Hatake Sakumo." Konan's stare pierced into his soul. "He murdered your parents and committed suicide after to regain his honor."

"Honor?" Sasori scoffed, venom dripping from his voice. "Don't make me laugh. Though I assume you have a reason for bringing this up."

"It is laughable, isn't it? Especially to those who do not understand the ways of the samurai. According to Bushido, a way that a samurai can regain his honor is by committing seppuku. Before the samurai isolated themselves entirely from Konoha and disappeared, a new code was added. Anyone of good character wronged by a samurai means that every other samurai in existence are obliged to repay their debt. They are like a family, you see. The family is always more important than the individual."

At first he considered the notion. Then, at last, Sasori said plainly, "I am not an honorable man. They would never accept me, even if I begged." And if it ever came to that... would I ever allow myself to do such a thing? Even now...

"You speak of your past. And it is true—they will not. Not at first, at least. But that's only because they are not aware of your present. I am not so closed off from the world. I've heard news of your trial, and you've been practically acquitted by the Hokage. That has to mean something. Sasori-san—I'm asking for your help."

"Enough." Sasori's gaze slid to the corner of the room. "He's awake."

Even though it was dark—the moon and the barrel fire being their only source of light which didn't stretch too far—and he had a cloth stuffed inside his mouth to prevent him from biting his tongue off in a suicide move, Sasori could have sworn that Sai was smiling at them in that horrible, plastic way of his.

Deidara awoke to a pounding headache and a desert in her mouth. *Hangover. Shit.* Groaning, she rolled out of bed, grumbling when the blankets got tangled around her leg. Her prosthetic leg was propped up against the closet, and she reached for it before realizing it was too far away.

There was a thump as she knocked her elbow on the floor, and then a gentle footfall. The door opened, revealing Chiyo.

"Finally awake, I see," the old lady said, putting her hands on her hips. "There's water in the kitchen, if you're able."

"Yeah, yeah," she muttered. "Thanks."
Chiyo smirked. "Have fun, Deidara-shonen."

"You're more evil than you look, baa-san."

Drinking away your sorrows was never good, Deidara had learned. You always ended up remembering the next morning. But she couldn't help but do it anyway, for that temporary relief.

When she threw up in the toilet, panting, she silently cursed Kisame for pouring her glass after glass. *Never again, you stupid shark-man.* Once she had rinsed out her mouth, she chugged down multiple glasses of water in the kitchen. Breakfast was waiting for her on the table, and she sent Chiyo a thankful look.

One bowl of porridge and a hot shower later, Deidara was dressed in casual wear—a short sleeved shirt and long pants—and her headache had dulled to a barely noticeable ache.

"Where are you going today?" Chiyo asked.

"Asuma's," she answered, tapping her thigh. "Got to get this checked out, it's been creaky."

She snorted. "With all the running about you do, I'm not surprised. Be sure to visit others, too. I'm sure Rin misses you especially. You haven't seen her since you left for your first client."

"Will do, yeah," Deidara saluted her, a small smile on her face. "Later, baa-san."

Deidara took it slow on the walk to Asuma's, not wanting to agitate her leg contraption any further, lest it break down and she'd have to suffer the humiliation of hopping the rest of the way to his workshop. Hitoshi would never let her live it down.

She caught a few stares in the Market District, which wasn't too surprising. After Sasori's trial, her face had been plastered all over gossip tabloids. They were all regurgitation of the same old narrative—how she had been seduced, how she was his immoral lover, how they had fostered a demon child together. It was ridiculous, and she couldn't help but let out an exasperated sigh as she passed two gossipy old women.

"That's her," one loudly whispered.

"Poor thing," said the other. "She'll be eating for two now."

They scuttled away when she sent them a frosty glare, her lip curling.

*Seriously, do these people really have nothing better to do?* she thought, her temper flaring up faster than ever. *And I thought Akatsuki's grapevine was impressive."

"Ehh? Deidara-nee-chan?" She turned at the sound of her name to the sight of Konohamaru holding plastic bags. Asuma had sent him out on a grocery run again, it seemed. "It is you! Long time no see, huh?"

"Konohamaru-kun, right?" Deidara smiled at him, amused at the sight of the boy with multiple bags hanging off his arms. From the look of it, snacks made up most of the purchase.

"Yep! I'm surprised you remembered."

She chuckled. "I'm not that forgetful, kid. Do you want me to help you with those? From here, it looks like there's more bags than boy, hm."

Konohamaru grinned sheepishly. "Could you, kore? Thanks!"
She took the majority, leaving Konohamaru with only two bags as they walked to Asuma's together.

"So what have you been up to?" she asked.

"Eh, not much. School, mostly. I'll never get used to it, but it's actually kinda fun, kore." He scrunched up his nose. "It'd be better if Moegi and Udon were in the same class as me. What about you, Deidara-nee-chan? I heard you went somewhere."

Deidara hummed. "You heard right, hm. It was just a job thing in the islands. Nothing special." Or it wasn't supposed to be anyway. "The weather over there is warmer."

When they arrived, it was only to the sight of Hitoshi sitting hunched over one of the workbenches and working on something fiddly. He looked up. "Yo. Asuma's gone out to the side for a smoke."

"Again?!" Konohamaru huffed. "I told him to stop doing that, kore!"

"Did you really expect him to listen?" Hitoshi rolled his eyes. "Hey, explosion-bitch."

"Yes, meat-head?"

"Take a seat or something; he'll be back soon."

She did, dropping the bags off to the side. Konohamaru followed suit before hopping over to Hitoshi. "What'cha doin'?"

"None of ya business, kid, that's what I'm doing!"

"Come on," Deidara called as she got comfortable on the single patient bed, rolling up her left pant leg. Hitoshi gave her an annoyed stare, but she was unfazed. "No need to be a an uptight asshole about everything, hm. He was just asking a question."

At that moment, the door opened once more, and a wind blasted through the workshop. Hitoshi shouted as his clumsy hands jostled the glass which he had so carefully rearranged, sending it spraying across the floor.

A photo frame? Deidara blinked at the peculiar sight, spotting the wooden frame when Hitoshi bent over to retrieve the glass. The oaf must have shattered it. Typical.

"A-A-Asuma-shishou!" Hitoshi began to sweat, trying to cover the sight with his large bulk. "Already done?"


Konohamaru decided to play the brat. "This big lug broke your picture, kore!"

"You brat! I was trying to fix it before you interrupted me!"

Thankfully for Hitoshi, Asuma didn't seem too bothered about the wanton destruction ("It was an accident, not deliberate!") of his property. He nudged Hitoshi aside and picked up the photograph that had been left undamaged. "Throw this in the trash," he instructed Hitoshi. "Don't hurt yourself, pal."

"Y-yeah..."

As Hitoshi ambled off into the back room, Konohamaru grabbing one of his newly bought snacks,
Asuma tucked the photo into his shirt pocket. He washed his hands before putting on gloves and grabbing his tools. "What seems to be the problem?"

"Nothing huge," Deidara reassured him, stretching out her leg toward him. She made a thoughtful sound. "I've just been straining it a little too much, hm. Do you think you could do something about it?"

"I can certainly try." Asuma cocked an eyebrow. "But do I even want to ask what you were up to with this?"

She snorted derisively. "It's a long story."

Asuma knelt to remove her prosthetic; the photo slid out of his pocket, but he didn't notice, too engrossed on examining the outer damage—there were small dents where Akamaru had bit down on.

When his back was turned, she picked it up, staring at it curiously. Holy shit. She's beautiful. A black-haired woman with eyes that reminded Deidara of Itachi's Sharingan was smiling at her, the smile reminding her of a gentle ray of sunshine. There was a little girl in a puffy dress that stood close to the woman, the top of her head barely reaching her hips. The child was beaming at the camera as she hugged her mother's leg. This must be his family.

Deidara snuck a glance at Asuma, who was opening his toolbox. She never would have suspected that he had had a family of his own. He just seemed so much like one of those life-long bachelors.

Asuma made a few tweaks before deciding that it was good enough. "It should be good to go now—ah."

"Ah," Deidara echoed, returning the photo to him. "Your wife and kid?"

He grinned. "Absolutely. Haven't seen 'em in a while, though."

"Why not?" Divorce, maybe?

In the backdrop, she was vaguely aware of Konohamaru throwing a biscuit at the back of Hitoshi's head, but she was more focused on how Asuma's countenance seemed to dim a little.

"When I married Kurenai," Deidara sat up straighter at the name, "we decided to raise Mirai outside of the city. We bought a house in a small town to the east, where she was born. It was going fine until..." Asuma sighed heavily as he fixed the prosthetic to the stump of her leg. "The war started. Those living in smaller country towns aren't as lucky as those in big cities like this. The men are conscripted into war; if they refused, they would face capital punishment. It's an outdated law, but it hasn't been rewritten yet."

Mirai? Mirai. Her name is Mirai... "I see. How did you escape, hm?"

"Pure luck on my side. The Third Hokage is my father, you see, so when I heard the news, I came back to the city and this shop, which my father left for me. So long as I'm residing here and paying my taxes, it'd be fine. But I couldn't take them with me. My shop is the only thing I have here. I have no house. No other land. Just the shop. At this point, I'm just waiting for the war to stop or until I make enough money to buy a place to live."

Deidara considered him, meeting his gaze evenly. "You could start by not wasting money on your cigarette habit, hm."

He laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. "You sound just like her. I stopped when
Mirai was born, but old habits die hard. The stress started getting to me when I came back to this shithole, and I'm pushing through a pack a day now."

It was a struggle not to let a knowing smile slide across her lips as she thought about the list that Fatso had given her. It hadn't been a very long list; he'd been aiming for quality rather than quantity. And if Kurenai was the same one who was scrawled beneath Inuzuka Tsume's name—

"If I ever see her," Deidara started. "Do you want me to pass on a message?"

Asuma paused. Then— "Tell her that even if it takes a long time, I'll come back to her. Even if Mirai is already grown up by then, even if she doesn't recognize me anymore, I'll be happy with them. Because they're my family."

"You..." Deidara let out a small laugh, one that wasn't meant to deride. It almost sounded bitter, but she went on swiftly, "I'll make sure she knows if we meet, hm."

*Family.*

Deidara left the store with a cheery wave back, even if the wind bit into her skin.

*Okaa-san.*

*Kou.*

*Otou-san.*

... *Kurotsuchi.*

*My family...*

Asuma was a lucky man, she decided.

In the library, Karin and Hana had talked until the afternoon after finding out that they actually did have quite a lot in common. After Hana had shared her story, the atmosphere had become heavier before lightening once more, like a rainbow coming out after a storm.

"It's that intense?" Hana's jaw practically dropped when Karin told her of Konoha's medical program.

"When you're competing for an opportunity to study under the Hokage, it has to be." Karin grimaced. "At least, that's what I've heard. *There'll be many...*"

A girl with dull purple hair huffed as she heaved dough onto the flour-covered bench, her hair unevenly cut—one side was short, the other long. "Otou-saaaan! I have another batch ready!"

"... who have dropped out with nobody else to blame but themselves."

She grumbled, brushing her hair out of her face. "Otou-san! Hurry up!"

When her father still didn't come, she could have screamed in frustration. Leaving the dough on the table, she marched over to the window, and slammed them open. Chest heaving, she breathed in the fresh air that chilled her skin.

Her rage disappeared, as if the wind had carried it away as she looked out upon the town without
men, where only downtrodden women roamed now. When her anger was gone, there was nothing left, merely hollow disappointment in her chest.

"When," Ami asked aloud, her eyes at half-mast, "Did everything become like this?"

The Town Without Men would have been a fitting nickname.

But Ami thought it was more like the Town Without Color.

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The refugee center was just as Deidara remembered it. It was a plain building with a single entrance blocked by double-doors. The florist next door was bright with pinks and greens, and it was there she found Rin. She was watering the plants on display, a content expression on her face.

"Oi!" Deidara lifted an arm. "Rin!"

She looked up. "Deidara!"

The two women embraced tightly, Deidara chuckling into her shoulder. "Did you get my letters?"

"I received them yesterday." Rin swatted her arm, letting out an exasperated sigh. "It sounded really dangerous over there! That old woman didn't try anything, did she? Is Kiba safe?"

"She didn't, and he's fine, yeah." The blonde woman glanced at the florist, admiring the sight. "Ne, I'm not interrupting you, am I?"

Rin looked around. "My boss is out for lunch. Why don't we just sit and talk for a while? I'll bring some juice."

Five minutes later, they were sitting on the front step of the florist, a cucumber sandwich sitting on a plate set between them. It was cut into two triangles—one for each of them.

"How are you?" Rin asked as Deidara bit into her sandwich, chewing slowly. "You seem a little down." Her gaze grew concerned. "Deidara?"

She swallowed. "It's a long story," she said for the second time that day. "I have time to listen."

Deidara held her cup of juice up to her mouth, hesitating. Then she took a sip, put it down, and reluctantly she said, "I'll tell you. But first," she stared blankly at the ground, "I need to ask you something, hm." At Rin's nod, she continued, sounding calmer than she had expected, "Could you ever forgive yourself for killing your own family?"

"I... Where is this coming from?"

There was no point in beating around the bush. "During my stay in Sickleleaf Town, I was reunited with my brother. He was a misunderstood madman at best, hm. When we were younger, I abandoned him to die so I could save myself. And then... I killed him again to save a boy I barely knew, hm. Objectively, it was probably the best choice, but..." Deidara exhaled sharply, tearing another chunk out of her sandwich. "He was family. The only one I had left at that point."

A heavy silence stretched between them.

"What happened in the past?" Rin inquired eventually.
It wasn't quite the response Deidara had been expecting. She blinked, looking like a deer caught in headlights. "Nothing that important. There was a fire, and we were trapped. The building collapsed, and as soon as he disappeared from my sight, I ran for it, hm."

"Did you ever mourn?"

What?

"Did you ever mourn?" the brown-haired woman repeated.

"I got over it," Deidara answered, her voice tight. *I'm already mourning. There's not a day that goes by that I'm not thinking about the people that didn't make it to Konoha.*

"That wasn't what I was asking." Solemnly, Rin turned her head to the side to meet her gaze. "When Obito died," Deidara stiffened at the mention of her late friend, "It was not a convenient time for grief. I was forced to bottle it up for the sake of not hindering survival. But when we finally arrived in Konoha, everything caught up to me. Most of the time, I felt like I was going to die from the crushing weight in my heart." Her voice broke a little, and she cleared her throat. "If I didn't have my children... if I didn't have you, Itachi-san, Kakashi-kun, and everyone else... I think I would have. Even now, I find myself not knowing where to go or what to do anymore, even after mourning."

Deidara swallowed a lump in her throat, an uncomfortable weight settling in her stomach.

"So I can't imagine," Rin uttered, "What it would be like to hold it in for so many years. Deidara—did you mourn for your brother when you thought he died? What about your mother? Your father?"

"They have nothing to do with this!" she abruptly burst out, feeling as if hands were wrapped around her throat and choking her. Suddenly needing something to do, she picked up her glass and drained the rest of her juice.

Rin stared at her. Then she closed her eyes, a defeated smile on her face. "Then that's fine. Just know this: The situation with the boy and your brother... You did the right thing, for him and yourself. It feels terrible, but it would feel even worse if you let that boy die. I'm certain of that." Rin glanced up at the grey clouds that were slowly giving way to blue sky. "In a way, you've become a soldier."

A soldier? "What makes you say that, hm?" She tried to sound lighthearted, as if the notion weren't tearing her up on the inside. "I'm just a glorified civilian." If anyone was a soldier, it would have to be Sasori no Danna.

"Because a true soldier doesn't kill what's in front of them because they want to." Rin dipped her chin. "They do it to protect what's behind them."

Deidara said nothing.

"What are you doing?"

"Maa, how could I ignore a lost puppy?"

"Next you'll be naming him."

"I'm thinking 'Pakkun'."
"You are an odd fellow, Kakashi."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The Bushido I made slight alterations for my own purposes. This is a transition chapter, but I made sure to drop important plot devices everywhere. We'll be getting back to the meat and fat of the story soon...

Before anyone asks, YES, Ami is the Sakura's bully in canon. The kid with the purple asymmetrical hair that only showed up for one filler episode.
Part V: Adonis

Chapter Summary

Introducing: Guitar Man

There was once a boy who was almost a man.

His father didn't normally have time for him, choosing to hole himself in his study for most of the day. And when he wasn't, he was off fulfilling his duties as a Lord of Iwagakure. He didn't really mind, because his personal servant, Hisaichi, spent his time with him.

One day, his father's business swept him to a small town south of the capital. While the Lord worked, his son got to relax.

"Young Master," Hisaichi called as he hurried after Lord Daishin's son. "Please slow down—I'm not as young as I used to be. Pole!"

The teenage boy, who couldn't have been older than seventeen, stopped abruptly, holding up his hand to touch the wooden post in front of him. His eyes were obscured by black shades. "Thank you, Hisaichi-san," he said. "That would have been painful."

The servant breathed an exasperated sigh. "Really, you shouldn't run off like that, especially in an unfamiliar town. What's gotten you so excited today? You're usually much calmer."

"Today is a good day," the boy announced, turning his head as if he were seeing his surroundings for the first time. "I can feel the joy in the air."

Hisaichi tilted his head in confusion. "What makes you say that?"

"Listen," he commanded, and Hisaichi quietened, obeying the instruction, "to the music. Is it not the sweetest melody you've ever heard? And yet, there is an underlying note of tragedy beneath it all."

Perhaps he was too old, or the boy's hearing was just too good, because Hisaichi heard nothing. Before he could say anything, the teenager was walking off again, this time straight into oncoming traffic.

"Young Master!" he bellowed, feeling his heart jump with fright.

The boy stopped short, and a horse and cart trotted past him.

"Please," Hisaichi pleaded with him, "We'll find the source, but just let me hold on to your shoulder. Otherwise you'll be six feet underground before you even get there."

The boy conceded. "That is wise of you."

"Thank goodness...! Now—wheeze—let me catch my breath as well as my poor heart..."

"Ah. I'm sorry, Hisaichi-san. I always cause you trouble, don't I?"
"It's really nothing, Young Master..."

Together, an ageing servant and his blind master walked through the streets, both of them guiding one another. Eventually, they arrived at a grand building of a concert hall, the afternoon sun partially hidden behind the tallest tower. Hisaichi glanced at his master once before leading him inside.

The boy began to hum to the music as they ventured further in. Surprisingly, there were no guards of any sort. Even if there had been, though, Hisaichi was sure that his master's status would have been able to allow them through without much trouble. It was never wise to try to hinder a Lord, foreign or not.

They found two empty seats—the theatre wasn't too full today, at least for this session.

"Who's down there?" the boy asked as the young singer on the stage crooned, emotion and passion oozing out of her voice.

Hisaichi adjusted his spectacles, squinting. "Why, I believe... it's a young girl. She cannot be older than twelve."

The boy startled. "So young? Surely, your eyes fail you."

"No, no, I'm quite certain, actually," Hisaichi reassured, watching the child preach her message through song.

"What does she look like?"

The servant grimaced. "I can't make out her features from her. But I've never seen such yellow hair before. It looks like sunflower petals."

His master had not been blind since birth. It was only some years ago that his eyesight had started failing from an incurable disease. Yellow was completely within the range of his inner eye.

"Young Master?" Hisaichi prodded his shoulder. "Young Master? Shinichi-sama!"

Shinichi turned to him, unseeing. Then, to Hisaichi's utter shock, he removed his glasses, clouded eyes filled with unshed tears boring into his soul. "It's beautiful."

"Did you mourn?"

Rin's question was seared into her brain like a brand of fire. Sometimes it felt like fire, but most of the time, it was simply a dull, throbbing ache that eventually turned numb. But, Deidara had to ask herself, what was the point of looking back? Wasn't what was most important looking forward? Because it was simply nature for one's life to be fleeting—if you kept looking back, you'd never be able to live it. So what does it matter if I did or didn't, hm? For so long, she hadn't even thought about how her life in Iwa had been life. She had fit almost seamlessly into Akatsuki like a piece of a puzzle—there'd been no need to ever confront her losses when more people had trickled into her life.

But she was not in Akatsuki now.

Deidara glanced out the window of the carriage.

In fact, I'm not even in Konoha City anymore.
"Last stop," the driver bellowed from his position outside, the horses slowing to a stop. No taxis came all the way out here—the only options were horse-drawn vehicles.

Adjusting her work clothes—the typical white blouse and long green skirt combination—she grabbed her case and got off, her slightly heeled boots hitting a dirt path. Not too far away, in the distance, she could see the town. In the today's unusual spring heat, the image was slightly blurred, and she almost thought it a mirage at first. She began to walk. *Not much color in it, is there?* she thought wryly. *Even Sickleleaf Town looked livelier in a storm.*

With a name like Mapleflame Town, she had been expecting a lot more orange and brown. The town sat on a large plateau surrounded by mixture of forestry, rocky outcrops, or even a combination of both if the green growing on some of the cliffs were any indication. The tableland was elevated, a heavy fog lurking around the bottom. Occasionally, it would part just enough for Deidara to catch glimpses of a river as gray as the town.

Eventually, after some fifteen minutes of walking, she reached a stone bridge that connected the lonely plateau to the surrounding land. As she crossed, her mouth tugging downward a little at the thought of the last long bridge she had crossed, she felt at her skirt pocket, where she had shoved a package away.

It'd been some two weeks ago, when she had finally told Asuma about her next client. His eyes had lit up, and he had asked her to wait while he fetched something from the back room. The scruffy man had returned with a colorful striped package tied with brown string and a blue ribbon, sheepishly requesting that she give this to Kurenai when they met.

Deidara pulled it out of her pocket now, reading what he had written on the wrapping paper.

*To my little girl, Mirai.*

She tucked it away after giving the present a quick squeeze. It was something soft—clothing or something similar. *Mirai. That's right,* Deidara lifted her head, a small smirk of a smile spreading across her face as she tried to defy that constricting feeling in her chest. *The future is what's important. I'm not dead yet. I'm alive, and it's the best thing that could have happened to me.* As she completed the crossing, taking her first steps onto the cobblestone road of Mapleflame, her grin faltered before completely fading. *So what am I waiting for? Why am I hesitating?*

A pair of footsteps sounded behind her, and she turned slightly. An old woman staggered past, her eyes faraway and her lips mouthing a name that Deidara had never heard of before. *Shinji.* Was that her husband, perhaps?

She disappeared around the corner, still silently muttering that name.

As Deidara delved deeper into the town, she found herself looking up at times to the bell tower that loomed over the rest of the city, the silver bell visible through the metal skeleton. It was motionless, though the clock face on the side of the building ticked closer and closer to two o'clock. Just as she arrived in front of her accommodation—the only inn in the town; a place called *The Orange Bluebell*—the clock struck two. Deidara glanced up one more time, waiting for the bell to chime twice.

*Nothing happened.*

It was hardly anything significant, but it added to the solemn mood she had been feeling ever since she had entered this town without color. *Low morale,* she concluded as she paid upfront for a room. *It's because of the war. Tch. I'll eat my leg if it isn't.* The innkeeper, who introduced herself
as Umeko, led her to her room, Deidara pausing at the stairs to take a look outside the window wearily.

"Ne, Umeko-san," Deidara said abruptly when they were inside, Umeko in the midst of fluffing up the former's pillow. The blonde put her briefcase—which had her scrolls as well as clothing she didn't want crumpled in the scroll-dimension—down, opening up the curtains. "Is there even a single man in this town, hm?"

She would have had to been blind to miss it. Asuma had already filled her in on the details, but surely... surely there had to be at least one man.

"Ah..." Umeko hesitated, her brows knitting together. "The war and Konoha's conscription laws have taken all able-bodied men away to the battlefield. There are still men, but they are either too sick, too old, or too young to fight. The rest... are gone."

"I guessed as much." She watched a lonely woman in her twenties—in a period of mourning if her clothes were any indication—purchase groceries from a vegetable stall before drawing the curtains together again. Deidara let out a sigh. "You can go now, Umeko-san. Thanks for the room, yeah."

"Call me if you need anything." The door closed behind the innkeeper.

When she was gone, Deidara kicked her shoes off and flopped onto the bed, feeling drained from the twenty hours she had spent in the horse-drawn carriage. It'd been a long journey.

Strangely, even if it was hot today, the town felt cold.

One shower later, she had one towel draped over her head and the other across her shoulders, the back of the baggy shirt she now already soaked through. She sat cross-legged on the cushioned window pad as she waited for her hair to dry, the fingers on her left hand moving deftly yet delicately as she molded a shape with her clay—the non-explosive kind. Her right hand, fingers scarred and crooked from Kabuto's treatment, rested on her thigh, occasionally twitching as it instinctively searched for clay to sculpt.

She poked two dents into the owl that her clay became for eyes. Once it was complete, she opened the window, a warm breeze caressing her cheeks and accelerating the drying rate of her hair. Deidara pulled the towel off her head, holding the owl outside. Find Kurenai's house, she silently willed, adding the address in her command. The owl obeyed, hooting once before flying away.

The wind was refreshing, so she kept the windows opened, her eyes drawn once again to the noiseless bell tower in the middle of town. Her right hand dipped into her clay pouch, and she drew out more of her artistic medium.

Even though the town was too gray for her liking, even when the most wilted flowers stood out because of it—

There was only one word Deidara had for this.

_Peace._

Peace, but not quite. There was still something in the air.

The war wasn't over yet.

But for now, she could pretend that it was. She exhaled a breath of relief as she made another clay creation—this time a sculpture of a bird-like dragon. She examined it from all angles, trying to spot
any defects. There were none.

Deidara allowed herself a smile, less forced than the one she had worn when she entered Mapleflame.

With a small burst of chakra, the dragon flew into the air. Deidara stretched across the windowsill couch, tucking her arms behind her head as she observed the dragon make rounds in her inn room.

It was so quiet.

_Is peace normally like this?_ Deidara asked herself. _I always thought it was louder. Like in Akatsuki. Everybody was loud, but it was in the best way. If this is the sort of peace I have to live in, then I'm not sure if I want to. Where did all the excitement go? Hmph._ Her hair was dryer now, and she brushed her bangs from her eyes. They were shorter, but still covered most of the left side of her face.

When her hair wasn't covering her face, she either had an eye-patch like Kakashi's over her nigh-blind eye or her eye-scope on—the one Sasori had given her.

_Danna._ She lifted an arm, and the dragon swooped down to perch on her wrist. _You disappeared with it. How artless is that, huh? You're so impatient all the time, so why are you keeping me waiting?_ Why was the war keeping her waiting? How long would she have to wait before everything returned to normal?

Would that ever happen anyway?

There was a hoot as her owl announced its presence, resting on the windowsill. Deidara sat up once more as she received the message, the location of Kurenai's house burned into her memory now. "You did well," she hummed, brushing her thumb across its face. It closed its eyes as Deidara smudged its features away; its face, wings, tail—until it was nothing but shapeless clay again. Then she did the same with her dragon, pulling her shirt over her head as she did so.

Five minutes later, she was changed into her work clothes once more and hastily making her way down the stairs, each wooden step creaking when her boots touched them.

"We're serving lunch!" Umeko called after her.

"I'll come back for dinner, hm!"

Then she was gone, leaving a startled Umeko behind the counter.

Deidara was passing by town square when a strum of a string instrument reached her ears. She turned her head to the side to see a man with long hair pulled back into a low ponytail seated beside a lamppost, making adjustments to his acoustic guitar. His eyes were impossible to see behind his dark glasses.

A fountain bubbled and babbled in the square, a moderate amount of people trickling in and out, most—if not all—of them women and girls.

In the middle of the clearing was the towering bell tower, still as silent as the voices of those suffering in the war. Was it broken? A reflection of the town's dreary state?

The man's guitar case was open, a scattering of coins spread across the interior. Deidara tilted her head curiously, approaching him.
He shifted, glancing up at her intrigued face. "Hello," he greeted. "Would you like to hear a song?"

"A song, huh? "Will you play for me?" she asked.

"Any particular request?"

There was an answer on the tip of her tongue. Mirai. "No." Play me something that my mother used to sing to, dance to, play to. Play me Kou's favorite nursery rhyme, Izumi's favorite opera, and a song that would drive Sasori-no-Danna up the wall but make Obito want to sing along to. "No," Deidara repeated. "There's nothing in particular, hm." His head lifted a little more at her speech pattern.

"Oho. Is that so?"

"Play anything you want... oji-san."

"Most people around here just call me Guitar Man."

Deidara's lips quirked upward. "Most people here aren't that creative, are they? Hm?"

Guitar Man laughed. "I suppose not."

The soft buzz of noise around them seemed to stop for a moment as the man's fingers caressed the strings of his guitar, his mouth opening as he sang:

"There is nothing quite like spring,
Not autumn, or summer, or wintry wind,
Chance a stroll in the morning,
It'll be sure to delight,
Towering trees and harmless birds taking flight,
Take away from the war,
Head instead 'round a beech-wood grove,
There are creatures of spring—creatures of peace—who you will never impose,
Creatures of kindness, not darkness or spite,
'Tis the nature of spring,
Unlike autumn, or summer, or wintry wind!"

His left hand stopped moving across the fingerboard, his right stilling above the sound hole.

Cling!

Deidara had flipped ten ryo into his guitar case. "I don't have much to spare on me, yeah," she said a little ruefully. "Your song... Is that how you really see spring, or is it just how the song goes?"

"All songs are from the heart," replied Guitar Man, calmly. "The same can be said for poetry and other forms of literature, my dear."
"Just like my art. Deidara nodded slowly, understanding. Like Danna's puppets and his poetry, too. "It is, isn't it?"

"Yes. And that's what makes it beautiful. What makes it... art."

Her breath almost caught in her throat, eyes lighting up a little. "Have we ever met?"

He chuckled. "I don't believe so. How old are you?"

"Nineteen. Almost twenty. Why, hm?"

"I haven't left this place in the past twenty-five years."

"Ah." Deidara raised an eyebrow. "Then why do you seem so familiar to me, hm?"

"Perhaps it's just coincidence."

"Probably." She inched forward a little, narrowing her eyes ever so slightly as she studied his guileless expression. "I think I'd remember more clearly... if I'd ever met a blind man, hm. Especially one so obviously from Iwa." The accent was barely noticeable, but it undoubtedly was there.

At that, Guitar Man tilted his head back and started laughing heartily. "You're sharper than I gave you credit for! It seems we've both realized each other's heritage."

"Hm, I guess..."

"You don't sound too happy."

"I'm going to be late," she dodged his remark swiftly, "I'll see you around, Guitar Man, hm."

His head followed the sound of her footsteps.

Guitar Man was a little odd, Deidara thought. What was most odd, however, was the way his blind, unseeing eyes seemed to bore right into her very soul.

Deidara followed the road to Kurenai's house, almost bumping into a girl with purple hair standing in front of the bell tower with eyes closed and her hands clasped in prayer position.

Kurenai lived on the third floor of an apartment block with four floors. Laundry lines hung between her building and the building opposite it, the following buildings continuing this trend.

Kurenai also wasn't home.

Seriously? Deidara scowled. Am I destined to have absent clients all the time? Is this going to be some pattern or something?! Hm?! At least she had gotten the opportunity to write on Kiba's behalf. Relax. Maybe she's just gone shopping. I can wait.

Twenty minutes later, Deidara was still standing outside Kurenai's flat, her annoyance having grown to peak levels. "One more knock," she decided, letting out an exasperated sigh. "Just one more knock."

Just as she was about to raise her fist, the door opened.

The door behind her, that was.
She turned to see a hunched little woman in her mid-fifties staring at her.

Deidara stared back, almost defiantly.

"She won't be home for a while," the woman said eventually, her voice drawn out and slow as her legs surely were. "Kurenai-san has gone to the neighboring town for medicinal supplies. Is there something you need?"

"I..." Telling her that she was technically here on behalf of one of Konoha's major newspaper companies was probably not the wisest idea. People tended to avoid the media unless they liked the wide-spread attention. Reporters and journalists being anything but scoop-hungry vultures was a hard to break stereotype. So Deidara straightened. "I have something for her daughter." She pulled out the package. "It's from Kurenai's husband, Asuma-san, yeah. I promised him I'd give it to Mirai-chan." Good. The last statement had just wiped away any possibility of the woman suggesting that she give it to her or leave it at Kurenai's doorstep.

The woman's eyes widened before she beamed. "From Asuma-san? Oh, joyous occasion! Mirai-chan's birthday is coming up, soon." She smiled, the action a little sad. "If only she got what she really wanted..." She shook her head. "But never mind. I'm Furude Aina, and you are...?"

"Deidara, yeah." The blonde placed Mirai's present back into her pocket. "Do you have any idea when they'll be back?"

"I'm not sure about Kurenai-san, but I'm the one tending to Mirai-chan right now. Do you want to come in?"

The old woman ducked inside, Deidara slipping her shoes off. "Wait, tending to?"

"Yes. Mirai-chan is sick right now, and only medicine from outside of town can help her." Furude sighed. "For her sake, I hope Kurenai-san comes back soon. Mirai-chan..."

Furude led Deidara to Mirai's bedside. The little girl—five years old as of today—was frowning in her sleep, beads of sweat trailing down her temple as fever ran rampant. There was a freshly wet towel on her forehead, and the blankets were pulled over her frail body.

"She's so tiny," Deidara whispered, as if speaking too loud would shatter the child. "How old is she, hm?"

"Only five. Too young to be fighting such a terrible illness." Furude gave Deidara a scrutinizing look. "Before you come any closer, I ask that you wash your hands."

"Of course."

When Deidara returned, she found that Furude had been thoughtful enough to pull up another chair next to the bed. In the time that it had taken her to wash her hands, Furude had poured hot water into two cups. She passed one to Deidara.

"How do you know Asuma-san, Deidara-san?"

"He's my..." Deidara paused. What is he exactly? I was going to say doctor, but he's not quite one... "He's the one who made me a new leg, yeah." At Furude's uncomprehending expression, she pulled up her skirt just high enough to reveal her prosthetic. "Every time I need repairs or something of that sort, I go to him."

"Goodness... what happened to you, if you don't mind me asking?"
"What happened to me?" *I feel like it'd be easier if you asked what didn't happen to me.* "How do I even start...?"

"You don't have to tell me," Furude hastily amended. "If it's too hard, I—"

"No. It's not a secret, or anything. It's just... it's fucking nuts, alright? I already told a whole courtroom and the goddamn media about what happened." Deidara laughed lowly. *That was as good as telling the whole continent, but it was worth it.* For Danna. "You're not troubling me at all, hm."

Furude didn't scold her on her language, which was a relief. Instead, she merely folded her hands in her lap, almost submissively. "Then go at your own pace."

Deidara contemplated for a few more seconds before stating, "The city where I lived in—Akatsuki in Amegakure—became occupied by Tsuki soldiers. It wasn't safe to live there anymore, so I left the city along with my friends and some strangers. We crossed the wilderness to make it to Konoha City. Things... happened out there. Many of us died. I managed to get away with most of my body intact, though. Explosions can be fickle in that way. Furude-san," she turned to the woman, "I might not seem it, but I'm one of the lucky ones, hm. *So why can't I just get over it and move on already?* She swallowed the frustrated growl that threatened to escape from her throat.

A understanding silence stretched between them, both women occasionally taking sips of warm water from their cups. "Thank you," Furude answered in the end. "I understand we've just met, but... thank you. Are you sure this is okay?"

"It doesn't bother me if people know. I think, in a way, I actually do want people to know, hm."

"And why is that?"

"So they can look at me," Deidara stared at the Mirai's sleeping form, clutching her up even tighter as a burst of bitterness and frustration overwhelmed her for one brief moment, "And know that it was war that was ultimately responsible for what happened."

"Then what is it you hope for? That war will stop?"

Her lip curled. "Tch. I'm not that idealistic, hm. War is the enemy of the people created by the people. As long as humans exist, it will never stop. But I want it to be known," her countenance darkened, "what the consequences are." *And I think that's why I even agreed to doing Fatso's assignment.* Deidara leaned back in her chair, spinning the cup in her hand. "I think I can be content with war never happening again in my lifetime, hm. Whatever happens after I'm gone isn't my problem anymore, yeah. But even that's a stretch at this rate." The Ame-Tsuki war showed no signs of halting, and she had already lived through one war in Iwa.

War had *destroyed* her.

She didn't want to be ripped down again, not when she felt like she was still gradually building herself back up.

And the *paranoia*. It was always at the back of her mind. Her mother's death because of war had haunted her for years; it'd driven her to take every opportunity to live her best life, because she had seen how her mother's life had been cut short. For a while, it'd wholly disappeared, but after Kabuto had done those unspeakable things to her, it had made a reappearance. Doubly so when Hokage snatched Sasori away from her and planted him on the battlefield.

*Sasori.*
He had been living and breathing blood and ashes before she'd even been born.

"I must disgust you," Furude commented suddenly.

"Hm? What makes you say that?"

"You are much younger than I, yet I have never even known war. I've lived in this town ever since I was born, and the fighting has never reached Mapleflame. For many of us... it isn't even real."

The front door opened before Deidara could answer. "Tadaima!" a female voice called; it was followed by the sound of shuffling shoes.

Furude stood, shuffling away. "My granddaughter," she said to Deidara before calling, "Okaeri!"

"How is Mirai-chan? Any improvements?" the granddaughter demanded, still out of sight.

"Her fever's gone down slightly. Come—we have a guest."

"Eh? Seriously?"

Finally, Furude's granddaughter came around, allowing Deidara to see her just as she lifted her glass to her mouth. It was the purple-haired girl from the town square, the girl who had stood in front of the tower, praying.

Furude Ami met Deidara's gaze.

Then—

"When was the last time you brushed your hair?"

Deidara choked on her water.

"Geez!" Hitomi scoffed at her. "When was the last time you brushed your hair?"

Deidara flicked her forehead, rolling her eyes. "Shut up. I don't want to hear this from you, hm. Having your bangs long on one side like your sister and short on the other is fucking weird. Did you cut it yourself or something?"

"So what if I did?! At least I don't have lice!"

"Haahh?! Who says I have lice?! You'd better watch your mouth, you little brat!"

Deidara tilted her head ever so slightly, the motion languid. Her throat burned a little from when water had went down the wrong pipe, but she withstood any further coughing and hacking. "What about you, hm?" she drawled, feeling a knife slowly burying in her chest as the memory faded into the depths of her mind. "I've seen a six-year-old cut herself a better hairstyle than yours. What were you even trying to do—give someone OCD or something with your asymmetrical bullshit?"

It was the early hours of the morning when they got moving again. Sasori and Konan led the way, their steps quick and careful. Juugo and Suigetsu followed closely behind, the former carrying an unconscious Sai on the flower attached on his back, making it look like the ROOT boy was a sleeping bee.
The last two weeks had been uneventful, mostly comprised of travelling through the mountains. Konan had decided to take the mountain route instead of the river route from Sunlight Inn Town; it was better this way—less messy if they were to come to blows with the enemy. On water, only Suigetsu had an advantage.

"Let's stop here," Konan decided after hours of trekking. The sun had already risen over the mountains, gradually climbing up into the sky. "Suigetsu, Juugo. There's just a few more hours before we reach the parting point. Are you ready?"

Suigetsu grimaced. "As ready as we'll ever be. What about you, puppet-tightass?"

Sasori chose not to deign the white-haired teenager with a response, pointedly ignoring him and instead looking out across the horizon, where the wide-spread Naka River ran through the valleys, reflecting the sun's light.

They had pinpointed the two likeliest locations of the lost samurai based on their last known location as well as vague hints, but they were located on different sides of White Fang Mountain. It was dangerous enough that this meant skirting around Danzo's territory; the high, icy mountain environment would be extremely harsh. Suigetsu and Juugo would be travelling to the closest side of the mountain, while Konan and Sasori would venture further to get to the other side.

Sai would have to be passed on to Sasori later. They had gotten nothing from the boy—he had promised almost passionately not to commit suicide via his tongue seal for some strange reason that Sasori thought had something to do with the orphanage back in Rootbell Town—even if he no longer had the gag (most of the time), he refused to reveal anything of importance.

There are other ways besides empty threats, Sasori thought as he turned, watching Sai sleep on Juugo's flower back, the petals hugging his body. But those other methods would be inconvenient on the road with five bodies in total. Once the net count was reduced to two, he would begin a proper information extraction. I trust Konan will have no objections to that.

He hadn't tortured in a while.

It almost excited him.

"Why are you smiling?" Suigetsu asked.

Sasori's shadow of a smile never left his face. "Nothing of importance. I suppose I just can't wait for you to leave."

Konan gave him a brief glance at the dangerous undertone.

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Ami wiped sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand, cringing at how her bangs stuck to her skin. "Thanks for coming!" she called after the last customer before she got the satisfaction of flipping the 'open' sign to 'closed'.

The sun was setting by now, and her work day was over.

It'd been especially hard today. Her father had fallen sick with a cold, and it'd been up to her to keep the business running for the day. Sighing in exhaustion, Ami hung up her apron, locked up, and pulled on her outside boots.

Ami liked sunsets. It made the town square more colorful than usually was, the fountain glittering beneath the sun. The tower stood tall in front of her, and she closed her eyes, clasping her hands to
her chest. Please. Let the bell ring again. Let Mirai-chan get better. Let everyone's husband, son, and brother return safely. Let the people be happy again.

She paused.

... Let me be accepted into the Hokage's medical program again. I won't fail this time. I'll study hard. I promise. I promise.

Nothing came of her wish.

The bell tower remained a soundless shell.

Mirai was probably still sleeping her fever away.

No husbands, sons, or brothers suddenly marched into the square to be greeted by tearful relatives.

Nobody was smiling.

Feeling her spirits dip lower than ever, Ami started up the road back to her home—not her grandmother's flat, but the small cottage she shared with her father.

The strum of a guitar caught her attention. She turned to the side. There was still some light left; Ami stopped and changed directions, not halting until she was right in front of him. "Good evening, Guitar Man."

"Good evening, Furude-chan. It's going to be warmer tonight."

"It is," Ami agreed.

"Now, what seems to be bothering you?"

She sighed for the umpteenth time that day. "Otou-san's sick. It's a cold. I have to take care of the bakery myself until he gets better—I'm exhausted."

"That is a shame," said Guitar Man, nodding sympathetically.

Ami hugged her arms. "I feel like I'm tired all the time. I feel like there's nothing to look forward to anymore."

"Everyone else must be feeling the same way."

She nodded absently. "Yeah, I guess... It's almost like my own misery has poisoned the town. Well, goodnight, Guitar Man."

"Wait—don't you want to hear a song before you go?"

The girl smiled tiredly. "Thanks, but not tonight. I just want to go bed, honestly."

"I understand. I'll see you tomorrow, Furude-chan."

Ami wondered what kind of eyes were behind those glasses.

Shinichi looked up pleadingly at his father. "You don't understand, otou-sama."

"Music has opened my eyes."
"Music has blinded you!"

"I was already blind—yet, now, I see more clearly than ever. I'm sorry I cannot ever be the heir you have always yearned for. I knew long ago about your plot to send me away on my eighteenth birthday. It's nearly that time, so why don't I save you the trouble?"

Lord Daishin didn't seem to be listening. "That wretched child will pay for this... Uri... Bakuhatu no Uri...!"

"Please. Do not harm her. Not when she has enlightened me so."

The Lord stared at his son with pure disdain in his eyes. "Fine. I will not personally harm the girl. Now go. Go and never return. If your worthless face is still here tomorrow, I'll have the guards strike you down."

"As you wish, otou-sama. There is only one person I want to say goodbye to, anyway."

He closed the door behind him. Hisaichi was already standing outside. Even though he was blind, Shinichi could imagine him clearly in front of him. Hisaichi almost jumped when his master bowed low to him.

"Young Master?" he uttered. "Please rise."

He didn't. "Hisaichi-san. Thank you for everything. I will never forget your patience or your kindness."

Hisaichi closed his eyes. "It was an honor serving you... Shinichi-kun."

"Heh." Shinichi rose. "We'll meet again one day, in this life or the next. If it's in the latter, I'll finally get to see how wonderfully or terribly you have aged."

The old servant laughed. "I'll look forward to our reunion. Until next time."

Shinichi nodded firmly. "Until next time."

The only things that Shinichi took with him were money, some clothes, and an acoustic guitar.
"She's awake!" Deidara called over her shoulder to where Furude was making boiled water in the kitchen. Ami, who was also in the house, rushed over, eyes wide.

"Mirai-chan!" she gasped.

Deidara stood back, letting Ami through. The purple-haired girl touched the back of her hand to Mirai's cheek, a scowl of concern on her face.

Mirai blinked sleepily. "Ami... Ami-onee-san? Why... are you making that face?"

It'd been two days since Deidara had arrived in Mapleflame Town. The bell tower hadn't sounded once since she had first seen it, but Guitar Man was always in town square, humming softly as he strummed his guitar. Occasionally, he sang, even when nobody asked him to. Nobody ever seemed bothered by it, though. In fact, he frequently got small crowds of children and women surrounding him. Sometimes, there'd be men, too, all of them too old or sickly to be drafted, just as Umeko the innkeeper had said.

Mirai's condition had improved little. Her fever was currently under control, but she slept for long periods of time and would cough until she was too tired to even heave her small chest properly.

Ami huffed as she squeezed Mirai's hand. "I'm making this face because I'm worried, you know."

From the corner of her eye, Deidara caught how Ami's bottom lip trembled.

Kurenai's daughter tried to smile. "I'll be better soon," she croaked. "Okaa-chan will make me better..." She broke into a coughing fit, sending Ami into a silent panic.

Deidara placed a hand on her shoulder. "Calm down, yeah." Without waiting for a reply, she grabbed a spare pillow sitting at the foot of the bed and placed it under Mirai's pillow to elevate her. Something in Ami's eyes sparked—recognition?—before her usual dour look returned to her face.

To Deidara, Furude Ami was kind of a pain in the neck. But at the same time, she was tolerable to some extent. Or maybe it was because—

"I'm going to the bakery! My break is over!" Ami announced as she hurriedly slipped her shoes on and ran out of the front door. "Please take care of Mirai-chan!"

"Of course," Furude replied as the door shut. She shook her head. "Ah, that girl..."

—she reminded her so much of Hitomi. Except, of course, Ami was still alive and breathing. There were no metal shards and shrapnel lodged in her heart, no haunted gleam in her eyes as she watched a Tsuki soldier blow a bloody hole through her big sister, annihilating and melting her organs and part of her spine.
Pushing the image out of her head, Deidara tried to pay attention to Mirai instead. The young girl had ceased her coughing but looked quite miserable. Then Mirai turned to Deidara, a small sparkle of curiosity in her red eyes. "Ne, onee-san, who are you?" It occurred to her that Mirai could not have been conscious enough for the past two days to register her properly.

"I'm Deidara," her lips quirked upward in a smile, "I'm a friend of your father, hm."

Mirai's eyes widened and she tried to sit up, but to no avail. She settled down, still a little agitated. "Is otou-chan coming back?" As her voice rose, her coughing took control of her again, and she slumped into her pillow.

"Stop talking," Deidara instructed, exasperated but not unkind. "You're going to cough your lungs out, yeah." When Mirai showed no sign of attempting to speak again, she continued, "Your dad won't be coming back in a while." Mirai's face fell. "But he got you something." Deidara presented her the colorful package, placing it on her blanket. The girl's eyes followed the present incredulously, mouth opening and closing as she remembered that she would cough until she was exhausted if she tried to talk. "For your birthday, hm. It's soon, isn't it?"

"Yes," Mirai whispered. "Yes."

"I'm sure it won't matter if you open it now, hm. Or you can wait until your birthday."

At that moment, Furude came back with warm water for Mirai. Carefully, she fed the sick child, making sure that she wouldn't get dehydrated too often.

"Ah, Mirai-chan's present," the old woman commented when she saw the bright paper wrapping. "I'm sure it's something wonderful, ne?" She patted Mirai's hand.

Mirai nodded, a little more subdued than before. She yawned, rolling on her side to get some better rest. Asuma's present was hugged against her chest.

"Deidara-san," Furude addressed her. "Mirai-chan's going to be sleeping now. Are you sure you want to stay?"

"I don't really have anything to do without Kurenai-san here," the blonde admitted, folding her arms.

"Hmm..." Furude stroked her chin, contemplative. "Oh! You could always help out my dear granddaughter in her bakery. My son—her father—has caught a terrible cold and won't be able to run the store for a while. Normally, I would help her, but I must tend to Mirai-chan."

*A bakery, hm? "... I'll see what I can do."

Ami had been taught the art of baking when she was a child, her grandmother and father taking the reigns. It became something she enjoyed, but the thought of doing it day and night for the rest of the night had her stomach curdling in distaste.

Once, she had thought she'd be destined for greatness.

She still remembered standing in front of the mirror at age thirteen, her chest puffed out proudly and her hair cut perfectly even. Her father had placed his hand on her shoulder, nodding firmly, while her (late) mother had beamed with pride.

She'd been accepted into Tsunade's medical program—three years of studying and she would
become a medic.

But then—

The door opened.

"Welcome," Ami started before stiffening. The door closed and Deidara walked up to the counter, glancing around the small shop. "Oh. It's you. Did you need something?"

"Not really." Deidara rolled her shoulders, getting a nice crack. "But I have time, yeah, and your grandma told me you needed some help."

Ami frowned, drawing back from her. "I... I don't need help."

"Oh? So is someone else baking the bread while you're out here?" The blonde tilted her head to the side, trying to spot any bakers. Ami blocked her view.

"Stop," the purple-haired girl commanded. "There's no one here, okay? This is a family owned business—only me and my dad work here. Besides," she turned her nose up haughtily, scrutinizing the blonde's appearance, "with hair that long and messy, I'd never let you step foot in the kitchen." Her own hair was twisted into a high bun, the long side of her side bangs pinned back. It was rather unsightly, if she did say so herself, but hygiene was important. In the kitchen and in the hospital.

Deidara made a noncommittal noise, removing her hair tie then retrying her hair so that it was a bun. She pulled some clips out of her skirt pocket to pin her bangs back, effectively mirror Ami's appearance. The younger girl blinked, gears turning in her head. "Really?" Deidara sighed, exasperated. "You're gonna continue to nitpick, aren't you? Don't be so stubborn, hm."

"Do you even know how to make bread?" Ami spluttered, pointing a finger at her.

"Nope. Which is why you'll be doing that while I serve customers, idiot."

"Hey! The real idiot is you— barging in here like you own the place! Only an idiot wouldn't understand that they're not wanted around here!"

"Not wanted, maybe, but definitely needed. Your shelves are bare."

"Tsk!" Ami glanced back over her shoulder. "Fine," she said grudgingly. "Just don't... don't mess up."

"By the looks of things, I should be telling you that, yeah," Deidara pointed out dryly.

Grumbling under her breath, Ami ducked into the kitchen, grabbing an apron on her way in and tossing it at Deidara. The blonde caught it, looping the top part over her head and swiftly tying it around her waist.

The door opened, a tiny bell signifying someone's entrance. A young woman in her twenties, expression stoic, strode in. She took one glance at the shelves and racks behind Deidara. "Do you have any sourdough today?" she inquired, obviously not expecting an affirmative answer.

Before Deidara could answer, Ami came running out, flour on her face. "Yes, there is! It's right here!"

When the woman left, Deidara deadpanned at a heavily panting Ami, who looked a combination of stressed and pleased with herself. "You know," she drawled. "The point of this was so that
"You wouldn't have to be running around and pulling stunts like that, hm."

"How am I supposed to trust you?! You're just some strange girl who has weird hair!" Ami's face twisted into a hideous glare. "I'd rather have Forehead Girl operate on me than let you mess up!"

"You'd rather have surgery than let me serve customers? HAHA!" Deidara cackled, slamming her hand on the counter. "Man, I've met pretentious little shits, but never one quite like you, hm!"

"What... What's so funny?"

"You." Deidara's blunt tone hammered down on her head. "You're making a big fuss out of nothing, yeah."

Ami made an angry noise. "Then why are you still here?! Why are you helping me? What's your reason?! I mean, come on," the girl scoffed, "who would help someone like me?"

There was a beat.

"Well, why does a bird fly?" Deidara eventually answered, tilting her head slightly, her eyes at half-mast.

"... Huh?"

"Why does a bird fly? Because it's a bird. Duh. Also, do you have any gloves?" Deidara lifted her left hand, letting her mouth-palm beam. At Ami's disgusted expression, she smirked. "Wouldn't want me to dirty your precious bread, now, would you?"

"You freak," Ami whispered as she tossed a pair of gloves to her. "Nobody has hands on their mouths. Not naturally, anyway. That's impossible."

"Let me ask you a question," Deidara said as she put the plastic gloves on. "Have you ever left this town before?"

"I..." Yes. For the medical program. "Just Konoha City." And it's nothing like the boonies. Nothing like here.

"Then who are you to tell me what's impossible?" Her countenance darkened ever so slightly. "There are things out there, yeah, that you could never even begin to dream of. And I pray that you don't, you sheltered brat, because it'll be a nightmare, hm." Deidara hummed. "But if you really must know, it's something I inherited from my mother and father. I'm from Iwa, not Konoha. Considering you've only been to the city, you'll find that lots of things over there are stranger than fiction, yeah."

"Huh. I see." More subdued than before, Ami turned on her heel, marching back to the kitchen. Some moments after her departure, the sound of dough being thrown on the table was heard.

Only a few more customers came in that morning, and before they knew it, it was time for their afternoon break, which lasted approximately forty minutes. Ami and Deidara both sat on the edge of the fountain. Their lunch was bread, unsurprisingly. What was surprising, though, was how Ami let Deidara have some for free.

"What sorts of things?" Ami asked abruptly.

"Hm?" Deidara's mouth was full. She swallowed. "Oh, you mean from before? Hmm..." She took another bite out of her bread roll, chewing contemplatively. "Is there anyone you hate?"
"Eh?"

"Like," Deidara waved her hand in the air, "some bitch or something, yeah."

"Uh, yeah." Ami's nose scrunched up. "Totally. That stupid Forehead Girl for one—her name's Sakura."

Haruno? Wow, small world. "Okay, imagine Sakura. But now she's eighteen times more ugly than she actually is, has fangs as long as your arms, eats people, and squirts plant juice when she dies."

Ami almost choked on her bread. "What's so different?"

Deidara laughed wickedly, feeling just a tad guilty. "She can't be that bad, can she?"

"Some people just don't deserve what they have in this world," Ami growled. "And she's one of them."

"Oh? And what makes you say that?"

"Because... because..." Ami trailed off, shaking her head. "She just is, okay? With her arrogant, snotty attitude and her dumb, wide forehead—thinking that someone like her could ever hope to be a medic of Tsunade-sama's caliber!"

"But it happened anyway, didn't it?"

"... Yes. And that's what I hate most about her."

"Arrogant... snotty..." Deidara gave her a look that she couldn't quite discern. "I don't know her the best, but I doubt she's that kind of person, yeah. Sakura... she risked her own life trying to gather medical supplies. She taught my friend how to take care of his newborn and saved someone I love from being turned into a monster. Maybe we're not talking about the same Sakura, but she does have a pretty big forehead, hm. Also, she has a pink hair, which should be a dead giveaway in whether she's your Sakura or not."

"... It is."

Deidara took another bite out of her bread roll. "So," she asked through a mouthful of bread, "how do you even know her anyway?"

"We were enrolled in the same medical school. She made it and I didn't. I deserved that spot, you know! But she stole it from me!"

"Ah."

"That fucking bitch!"

"Mhm."

"I was supposed to be Tsunade-sama's apprentice. I was supposed to be out there saving lives! I was supposed to be the one getting recognition for my work!"

"About that."

"So why?! Where did I go wrong?!"

Deidara wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, eyebrows raised. "Why are you asking me
questions you already know the answer to, hm? Or are you just really bad at conversations?" She laughed at Ami's incredulous expression. "Yeah?"

"How... Why are you like this?"

"Because you're wasting your life away pretending."

"Pretending?"

"It's pretty obvious isn't it? You won't admit that you're wrong. You probably never have. You probably never will."

Ami stared at her, offended. But Deidara wasn't done.

"It's okay to indulge in self-pity," she continued swiftly, a tinge of knowing in her voice. "But you're drowning in it, yeah, and you don't even realize. At least I'm..." Deidara sucked in a breath. "Trying to keep my head up. So that I don't end up like you, hm." She returned Ami's gaze evenly.

"So why don't you try to face the answers to your questions?"

Ami stood. "Our break's over," she said curtly, a raspy quality to her voice. "If you still want to help, then..." Without finishing her sentence, the purple-haired girl stalked off, fumbling with the keys attached to her belt.

Like a silent ghost, Deidara followed, not unaware of how emotionally distressed Ami had become. She tossed the bell tower one last look before departing the square.

On the opposite side of the square, Guitar Man hummed as he strummed his guitar.

Hanabi wasn't oblivious. She had noticed how Moegi, Konohamaru, and Udon seemed to be huddling and whispering more often, disappearing to unknown places after school had ended.

"Hanabi-chan!" trilled the parasite that had decided to attach herself to the Hyuuga. Enomoto Madoka never seemed to catch on to Hanabi's active dislike of her.

"Go away," Hanabi ordered.

"Let's go eat ramen!"

Is she deaf or stupid?

"Not now," the Hyuuga girl said irritably. "I have something to do." Namely where those three keep sneaking off to.

"Maybe next time then!"

Hanabi deadpanned. "Yeah, sure."

Enomoto beamed at her before running off, her backpack bouncing merrily along with her.

"... Weirdo."

She shook her head. No time for that. I saw those three heading down a side street. Moving deftly, she followed their trail until they came into sight, talking with an old woman on her porch. Narrowing her eyes, Hanabi snuck closer, pressing herself against the wall.
"So your house isn't fortified?" Udon sounded horrified.

"It's the same for every other house in this neighborhood," the old woman answered, a tinge of annoyance in her voice. "Who are you children anyway?"

Moegi was pulling her friends away. "Never mind that," she said hurriedly. "Let's go, guys."

*Why would they want to know that?* Hanabi blinked, bewildered. The old woman shut her door, grumbling about nosy children disturbing her peace. She followed them for another hour; they approached multiple people from all sorts of neighborhoods, asking eerily similar questions with concerned expressions on their places.

Eventually, they stopped to have lunch in the late afternoon at a small shop that sold dumplings. After the waitress left, having taken their order, Hanabi slipped into a free seat on their table. Ignoring that stunned visages, she got straight to the point. "What are you guys doing?" she demanded, crossing her arms. "Is there a reason behind your harassment of multiple people today?"

"You!" Konohamaru burst out. "You were following us?"

"Obviously," Moegi and Hanabi said at the same time, sharing a brief glance.

Hanabi huffed. "Well?"

"What we're doing is none of your business," Moegi said coolly, returning Hanabi's steely stare.

"It is when you're asking civilians questions that make me think that you three know more than you're letting on." They thanked the waitress when she came back with a plate of gyoza. Hanabi went on, "Asking if their houses are fortified? If they know where their relatives are? If they know how to get out of the city? It makes me think..." Hanabi laced her fingers together, eyes narrowed into slits. "That the city's going to be under attack."

By now, Udon was sweating, though he tried to maintain his composure. "Under attack?" He tried to sound snarky. "That's silly."

"But not implausible," Hanabi shot back. "What's going on?"

The three older kids exchanged glances.

Then Moegi sighed. "We don't know for sure. But Kakashi-san left us a pretty daunting message."

Hanabi inched forward, picking up a gyoza with her chopsticks as she gave them a pretty smile. "Tell me everything."

Tenten stretched, reaching for the sky. The rain had let up not long ago, and she had decided to leave the refugee centre for some air. With all the bombshells that had been dropped in the past months, she really needed a break. Neji's kidnapping still sat at the back of her mind though, like a squat toad in the middle of a flower garden.

As she walked through town, she passed by some familiar faces. Karin waved at her as she walked past with an unfamiliar brown-haired girl, and when she turned the next corner, she saw Kisame strolling down the street with his shadow, Chihiro, by his side. Grinning, she caught up to them, catching Chihiro by surprise when she clapped her shoulders with her hands.

"Hey guys," she said. "Where are you two headed off to?"
"Gai's dojo!" Chihiro answered, barely able to contain his excitement. "It opened two days ago, but we haven't checked it out yet."

Kisame nodded in affirmation, baring his filed teeth in a shark-like grin. "Honestly, I'm looking forward to seeing his teaching style more than anything else."

Tenten took Chihiro's hand just as Kisame took hold of her other one. Pleased from the attention, Chihiro dragged them both along as if they were her worn out parents.

"That's right," Tenten remembered, eyes widening a little, "You used to be a dojo master back in Akatsuki. How did that work out for you anyway?"

The shark-man shrugged, nonchalant. "Now, it means little to me. But..." Kisame trailed off. "Back then, it was everything. My disciples were my pride and joy. I took great care of my reputation... When it was destroyed, I became blinded with rage." He laughed. "It seems all so silly now. How strange, huh?"

Tenten thought back to her own time in Akatsuki—back then, it'd been her and the orphans, with her in charge when Iruka and the other senior workers weren't around. It had been a gloomy life, but she'd been content with it. And when the war came to their city, it had been nothing but misery.

Now Naruto had gone to Uzushio City to live with his mother and cousin, Konohamaru had discovered that he had an uncle, and Gai had taken custody of Lee. But Moegi and Udon lived at the refugee centre with her, and she still saw Chihiro often, too, though she liked to spend time with Kisame. The man was almost like a father to her.

"Yeah," she agreed as a colorful building that could only be Gai's dojo appeared in her line of sight, "It is strange, isn't it?"

What was even stranger, however, was what they saw next.

Walking into the courtyard—

They caught the attention of all forty of Gai's students, ages ranging from as young as twelve to as old as sixty.

And all of them were male, had bowl cuts, and were wearing green spandex with orange leg warmers.

Kisame's jaw slackened. "Holy shit."

"That's a bad word," Chihiro chided, excited by this odd, out of the ordinary sight. "We're going to have to add another swear jar."

"Holy shit," Tenten echoed, stunned.

"GREETINGS!" all forty of Gai's students screamed enthusiastically. "WELCOME TO MAITO GAI'S DOJO OF YOUTH!"

"Ah. It's raining today."

Itachi glanced up at the weeping clouds, indifferent. Then he opened a black umbrella and walked out. Izuna was in his baby sling, squashed comfortably against Itachi's chest. The baby cooed occasionally, making Itachi smile a little.
They arrived at the hospital sometime later, Itachi shaking rain off his umbrella before entering the waiting room.

Half an hour later, a woman walked out in tears, and a nurse approached him. "Tsunade-sama will see you now," she informed him.

"Hai." He stood, Izuna gurgling at the movement; the infant reached for Itachi's side bangs, yanking at them painfully. "Itai," Itachi expressed rather tonelessly. But he made no move to stop him, even tilting his neck to allow Izuna easier access to his hair.

But the tomfoolery stopped as soon as he stepped into the Hokage's doctor's office. Even Izuna seemed to sense the change in atmosphere, withdrawing back into the baby sling and shifting.

The blinds had been pulled up, allowing Itachi to see the gray clouds outside, rain trickling down the window. "Take a seat," the Hokage commanded, spinning in her chair to sign some prescriptions. Itachi waited for her to finish patiently, passing time by squishing Izuna's chubby cheek with his pointer finger, a small blush arising on his cheeks. So cute.

Finally, Tsunade put her pen down and met Itachi's gaze.

"I'm afraid I don't have good news," she stated bluntly.

"I suspected," he replied, keeping his tone neutral. Momentarily, he glanced at Izuna. "Tsunade-sama..."

The rain drowned out any possibility of people outside listening on their conversation.

Day four in Mapleflame Town and Kurenai still hadn't returned.

"What's the holdup, hm?" Deidara asked Ami as the younger girl fed Mirai some cough medicine. She was seated next to Mirai's bedside today. The girl spent most of her time resting or coughing, but Deidara was patient enough to read her a story or two.

"We received a telegram from her last night," Ami informed her shortly, her eyes growing a little softer when Mirai blinked sleepily up at her. "There was a delay with the antitoxin—she won't be back until next week."

"Damn. I'm going to run out of books to read to you, Mirai-chan."

Mirai tried to muster a smile. "That's okay," she whispered hoarsely, barely able to speak.

Half an hour later, Deidara had almost finished a fairy tale when Mirai nodded off.

It was a Saturday today, so the bakery was closed; Ami watched her close her eyes with a troubled gaze.

"What's wrong with her, anyway?" Deidara asked after some silence, closing the book shut.

"Diphtheria."

"Hm."

Ami sighed. "The closest town which supplies the antitoxin is where Kurenai-san is at right now. I just hope it gets here soon. Before..."
"Yeah." Deidara's gaze lingered on the present which Mirai was still hugging. She hadn't opened it yet—was saving it for her birthday, which was Friday next week. "I hope so, too."

"She has to survive." Ami glared at Deidara, as if it were her fault that Mirai was sick. "She's not like Sakura. She deserves the world."

"Still hung up on Sakura, huh?"

"Tch. Not really. But that doesn't mean I have to like her."

"In any case," Deidara waved her barbed words off, "The world isn't ready for anyone to be deserving of it yet, yeah."

"What makes you say that?"

"Pfft. Have you been living under a rock, hm?" She jabbed her thumb toward the window for emphasis. "In case it's escaped your notice, there's a war going on."

Ami blinked slowly. Then she relaxed. "It won't reach here," she said, sounding sure of it. "Mirai can grow up without worrying about the fighting."

Deidara frowned. "What a naive mentality."

"What?"

"Do you really think that war will never touch these shores?" Deidara said sharply. "Because if things escalate—if Konoha starts being pushed back by Tsuki—then it will."

"You don't know that."

Her voice was steel. "I know enough," Deidara answered levelly. "I was just like you once. Living in safety without even thinking of what the hell was going on around me. But at this point, I've been displaced from my home twice without any sort of buildup, hm. When war comes to earth, nowhere is truly safe. So until this one ends, Mirai doesn't deserve the world."

"Wait!" Ami snapped. "Maybe you've seen more than me—maybe you've heard more, experienced more...! But that doesn't mean," her voice broke a little, "That doesn't mean that we haven't felt the effects of war. Yes, you're right. For me, it's never felt real. My father has always had a weak constitution, so he wasn't drafted. But everyone else is feeling it!"

"And there it is," Deidara mused aloud. "You've always been a miserable person, haven't you? Hm?"

Ami flinched, as if she had been struck. She thought back to the conversation she'd had with Deidara on the fountain, Guitar Man's music in the backdrop. "What do you want from me?" she demanded weakly. "What do you want me to do about this? I can't stop war. I'm not a god."

"I don't want anything from you," Deidara answered honestly. "I just want you to know, hm."

"Know?"

"Know what you have. Because what you have is something many can only dream of." The blonde paused, thinking. "Your mother isn't around, isn't she?"
"No," replied Ami, feeling numb. Her mother had died not long after she had been accepted into medical school. Ironically, it had been from illness. "She died three years ago."

"Are you... grieving?"

"No," she repeated, genuine. "I finished grieving a long time ago. I miss her a lot sometimes, but... It doesn't hurt as much anymore."

"Oh." If Ami didn't know any better, she would have thought that Deidara sounded more subdued. When she looked over, Deidara's eyes were faraway, obviously thinking of something else. Then she blinked, and the clouded look in her eyes was gone. "Anyway," Deidara said, her voice a little tighter. "That's all I want. Because you just seemed so blind to what you have."

There was an unspoken part that hung in the air.

Just like how I used to be.

For Deidara, it was almost like looking in a mirror. A mirror that showed her a twisted reality—of what she could have become if the circumstances were a little different. A version of herself that she almost actually wanted to be, solely because Ami was living a life of relative peace and safety. Hitomi-like, certainly.

But when she thought about it, Ami's life was actually quite empty. And undoubtedly, her current unhappiness had been caused mostly because of herself. Her inadequacy that led to her being dropped out of Konoha's most prestigious medical program, her jealousy toward Sakura, the self-loathing which ran deep in her marrow.

But Deidara was Deidara. And she was glad of that.

"I know I'm selfish," Ami said finally. "But is that really a bad thing?"

Deidara shrugged. "I don't think so. At least, to me, it isn't. I'm pretty selfish, too, yeah."

And where would I be, if I wasn't? Trapped in a burning building trying to dig Kou out. Dead. Many times over. His death still stung her like a fresh wound. An image flashed in her inner eye—Ami standing in front of the bell tower, praying. "Ne, Furude-san? Why doesn't the bell tower ring? The clock works just fine, hm."

"Oh." The Furude girl was visibly relieved at the change of subject. "That's because the man who used to ring the bell was drafted and died. And, well, it doesn't seem right for anyone else to do it. So it's just been sitting there. Every day I hope that someone goes up there. But no one will."

"Why don't you do it?"

"Because... I don't deserve it."

Deidara said nothing, letting her words sink in.

"Did you know?" Ami continued softly. "Every time it struck twelve, three, six, or nine, he would put in a song, so the tower would chime. He was friends with Guitar Man—he's the blind man who's always in the square."

"Yeah, we've met," Deidara hurried her along, "But what's this about a song?"

"Ah. I don't really know the details, but the bell tower is built really interestingly. The towerkeeper
would make the insides of the tower toll out a song." Her eyes glazed over wistfully. "It was amazing."

"Hmm..." Deidara sat back in her chair, pensive. "You said he knew Guitar Man?"

It's so cold in here. Shin? Where are you? Where did you go?

Sai opened his eyes to darkness. Ah. I'm blindfolded. Before he could further process his thoughts, there was a yank on his feet, and his body slipped upward. There was the sound of someone's shoes scuffling in the dirt before his blindfold was removed.

"Ah, you're finally awake." Sasori's deceptively youthful face appeared upside-down in Sai's view. There was a higher amount of malice than usual in his brown eyes—Sasori must have been getting impatient. "It's such a bother, you know, knocking you out all the time." He paused, cocking his head. "Then again, you'd probably be even more bothersome awake."

"Prickly," Sai greeted. "Or should I call you Traitor?"

Sasori scoffed, twirling a kunai in his hand. "Can't be a traitor if I never stood by Danzo to begin with. Old shitbag." He sat down on a raised tree root, watching Sai—arms bound behind him and his feet tied together—dangle from a branch with no small amount of amusement. "Will you ever talk? Or will I have to pry it out of you?"

Sai smiled. "Do your worst," he invited, no inflection in his voice.

"Let's start slow, then." His arm shot out, and Sai flinched when both of his kneecaps were suddenly dislocated. Sasori wasn't smiling anymore. It made Sai wonder. So he doesn't enjoy torture? How strange. "That's all for now. Have a nice couple of hours."

At first glance, Sasori had barely done anything. But the pain. The pain was excruciating, and would be even more so as the hours passed by—as gravity pulled his body toward the earth, stretching his body. As the blood rushed to his head. But still, Sai kept his mouth shut, resolve hardening.

Sasori hadn't sliced him open either, Sai realized. The blood would probably attract wild animals, which would be detrimental. Then there was the added possibility of him bleeding to death, even if the red-haired man was careful about his cuts.

Two hours passed by. The afternoon sun was burning his pale skin, and he had to shut his eyes. His legs felt like they were on fire, but at the same time numb in icy water.

Sasori was still sitting on the tree root, in a shady spot no less. He was using his kunai to carve another one of his wooden figures—this time, it seemed to be more human-shaped than insect-like.

Despite Danzo's training, Sai's curiosity was piqued. But it was mere interest, he reasoned, not emotion.

The assassin's eyes lifted, meeting Sai's gaze. "How's it hanging?" he drawled, smirking.

Sai blinked. Was that supposed to be a joke? I need my book to—ah. Right.

"You could save yourself the pain, you know," Sasori continued, totally unruffled and unfazed. "If you just answer some questions I have. They're not hard—even an emotionally compromised simpleton like you could understand."
He couldn't bring himself to smile this time. He felt too dizzy—his facial muscles weren't listening to him anymore.

"Are you wondering where Konan is?"

He had been wondering that, yes.

Sasori answered his own question. "I am, too."

"You should be a comedian," Sai said tonelessly.

"Is that some bite in your tone that I detect?" Sasori raised an eyebrow. How intriguing. *He's losing it—slowly, but surely.*

"No," Sai instantly denied, inwardly wincing at how quickly he had done so.

"Hmph. If you say so."

In actuality, Konan was tracking a deer that had ghosted them some hours ago. Apparently, she hadn't eaten meat in some months, and was eager for venison. Just as thoughts of her entered Sasori's eyes, Konan returned with a furry deer corpse, her paper wings flapping before rearranging to form part of her body again.

"What took you so long?" Sasori demanded.

Konan gave him a disapproving look. "You lack patience. Almost detrimentally so."

"I was patient enough to give him a chance." Sasori nodded toward Sai, who was still hanging.

She made an exasperated noise. "You might as well have crucified him, honestly."

"Too messy."

"I suppose."

A fire was started, drool collecting at the corner of Sai's mouth when they started cooking the venison, which Sasori had skinned and prepared with deadly efficiency. He left just the right amount of fat on the meat, too. He hadn't eaten a proper meal in weeks.

"Hungry?" Sasori turned to him. "We'll feed you if you talk."

"I can talk," Sai responded. "Just don't ask me what I can't say." There was a beat before he added, "Traitor."

"Stubborn one, isn't he?" commented Konan, stabbing deer meat through a long kunai.

"He was also technically my superior." If he were a cat, Sai was sure that he would be purring in delight at how the tables had turned.

The sun was setting when Sai was finally cut down. He had fainted by then, but awoke when his body hit the ground. He was sore all over and—

He hissed when Sasori reset his knees like he had done so many times before. Before he could gather his bearings, Sasori grasped his hair and pulled his head up.

Flinty brown eyes bore into Sai's inky black ones.
"Out here," Sasori told him, "There's no Danzo to report to. Seals don't work effectively when you're out of range, which I'm sure you already know. You are not my superior any longer. I control whether you live or die. You're just lucky you're more useful to me alive than dead, brat. Do you understand?"

Sai didn't respond.

Konan didn't even blink when Sasori punched him across the face, Sai hitting the ground painfully.

"Good," said Sasori, even though Sai was sure he hadn't even let emotion flicker across his face, "I'm glad we've reached an understanding."

Night was coming.

When Sai opened his eyes again, the moon was high, and Konan was standing above him, her orange eyes glowing faintly in the dark. Then she knelt, taking something out of her travel bag.

"Don't move," she ordered quietly, pulling his pants down. "I won't hurt you."

Confused, Sai watched her as she spread some kind of paste across where the swelling on his leg was. It was cold and wet, but it appeared to be some kind of woodland medicine. She produced a clean cloth out of the same bag, carefully wriggling it underneath the crook of his knee. Then she wrapped it around the herb paste.

A poultice, Sai realized, eyes widening ever so slightly. "Why?" he asked cautiously when Konan was working on his other leg.

Konan paused in her work, deliberating an answer. Eventually, she settled for, "Why not? Some kindness in this miserable world never hurt anyone. Sasori-san seems to forget that, though I do not condemn him for undertaking his methods. In fact, I see the point in them."

Sai was silent.

"We are enemies," Konan continued. "But that doesn't mean I'll leave you here to suffer. Not when you haven't really done anything to wrong me." She finished tying the cloth, pulling his pants up again and over the poultices. "Rest. Assuming that you will continue to withhold information from us, your days will undoubtedly be long and tiring."

Then she disappeared from his field of vision, leaving only the moon in the sky.

"Some kindness in this miserable world never hurt anyone."

Sai's stomach churned.
"What's that you're drawing?" Shin's voice was hoarse as his gaze flitted over to where Sai was sitting by his bedside, sketching something on his notepad.

"My dream girl," Sai answered honestly, just a bit of embarrassment seeping into his otherwise bland tone. Shin cackled at his expense, and Sai shyly hid his face behind the notepad. "She's a girl that keeps appearing in my dreams."

Shin smirked. "I believe, otouto, that you're going through a little something called puberty. About time. How recent is this development, hm?" He was half-expecting not to get an answer. Since young, Sai had always been introverted and withdrawn.

"Not long ago," Sai said quietly. "About the time you started getting sick."

The older boy's face dimmed a little before a smile returned. "That long?"

"But I'll get the cure," proclaimed Sai, eyes wider than usual. Desperation laced his voice. "I've almost finished training with Danzo-sama."

Danzo-sama. The name and honorific Sai had attached to it made Shin frown. "I don't trust him," he told Sai.

"I know. But there's no other choice."

"There is a choice. You could choose not to do this for me and live your own life."

"And leave you alone?" Sai sounded incredulous. As if I could ever do that."

Despite his protests, Sai's words brought a soothing feeling to his heart. Shin settled down, shifting his head on his pillow slightly. "I love you, Sai. Even if you decide to leave, you'll always be my brother. But anyway," he smoothly changed the subject, "Show me your dream girl."

Subdued, Sai did, letting Shin take the notepad from him. The latter blinked, mouth gaping a little. "I wasn't expecting for her to be so detailed."

"I see her a lot."

"Clearly." Shin handed him back his sketch pad. "You know, she probably exists out there. Somewhere. No face someone could think up of is ever too unique to be real."

Sai agreed. "Probably."

"Perhaps you'll even meet her someday."

"Mm."
"Someday..." Shin stared up at the ceiling, tucking his arms under his pillow. "I'm sure you'll find her."

It was Konan's turn to carry Sai today. What a shame, Sasori thought, that scrolls were not designed to contain humans. But Konan was no pushover, and for that, he was glad.

After hours of walking, they took a break, finding a clearing and starting a fire with some sticks, small logs, and dried grass. Last night's leftovers were removed from a scroll (with a seal specifically designed to preserve perishable goods) and cooked over the flames.

Konan crouched, setting a still tied up Sai on the ground. "The next time we stop," she addressed Sasori, "We'll be closer to Danzo's territory. It would be unwise to set a fire than."

"Noted," Sasori answered, the flames coming dangerously close to licking his skin as he held one end of a long kunai, venison speared on the sharp end of it. He tossed Sai a glance. "We should probably have that one unconscious while we pass, too."

"Oh. You mean Sai?"

Sasori cocked an eyebrow. "Who else?"

Konan gave him an infuriating smile. "Just making sure, Sasori-san."

Narrowing his eyes, Sasori's gaze followed Konan as she loosened the ropes around arms. "What are you doing?" he demanded, starting to stand.

"Back off."

Sai watched the two, gaze flicking back and forth between them, as electricity seemed to crackle in the air. Sasori continued to glare, but Konan was unrelenting, simply staring coldly back at him.

"Don't tell me you feel pity for him?" Sasori said abruptly, still crouched by the fire. His lip curled. "Pathetic. The moment you turn your back on him, he'll stab it. His loyalties lie with the man who betrayed you to the enemy and no one else."

"What can he do?" Konan retorted, winding up the rope as Sai looked at his now free hands, a little baffled by her decision. "There are two of us and one of him—even just one of us could kill him easily now that he's alone. Not to mention," she glanced at his bound legs, "not completely mobile."

Sasori hissed in displeasure. "Fine. But when you end up dying in a ditch, don't cry to me. And the binds are back on after we eat."

Konan seated herself next to Sai as if to guard him, while Sasori was sitting opposite both of them on the other side of the campfire, watching them both intently.

"I have salt tablets," she said when the meat finished cooking. "We can dissolve them and use it to preserve what we have left." Konan stood. "I can do that."

"Fine," Sasori replied agreeably. She went off somewhere sunnier to prepare the brine, leaving Sasori and Sai in each other's company. With his legs still tied, Sai didn't try anything, merely flexing his wrists and elbows to get back some feeling into them. "Oi," the red-haired man called, Sai's head snapping up to attention.
"Yes?"

"I'm going to ask you some questions. You will answer."

Sai didn't smile this time. "I cannot answer that you want to hear."

"Let me guess, anything about Danzo?"

"Yes."

"Hmph. Who would've have thought, huh?" he said wryly. "Are you actually physically incapable of divulging information?"

"Yes."

"Liar."

Sai stuck out his tongue momentarily, the black seal clear as day. "Have you forgotten about this, Traitor?"

"And?" A growl rose from his throat as he stood and marched over to Sai, grabbing his jaw, examining his protruding tongue. "You know," he said lowly, his aggression ebbing away, replaced by morbid fascination as he scrutinized Danzo's seal. He had an eye for seals, but was inexperienced with seals with Konoha origin. It was to be expected, seeing as he had spent the majority of his life in Suna and Ame. "Danzo never quite explained to me how this worked. I've put some pieces together, but I want you to confirm some things for me. First question: What happens if you divulge information about ROOT and your leader to me?"

"... I'm not sure. Technically, you're part of ROOT. But at the same time..." Sai hummed. "Normally, we would be paralyzed and unable to speak. If we try to resist, the seal releases a poison that guarantees death." The boy paused. If I was able to answer that, then perhaps there are larger constraints than I first anticipated. Or maybe because the seal recognizes Sasori as an ally...

Sasori loosened his grip around his jaw. "So it doubles as a suicide seal. And this can also be triggered at will, right?"

"Yes. I have had no reason to try it though."

The assassin's eyes gleamed. "And why is that?"

"Is that outside of the norm?"

"Not particularly." Sasori tilted his head slightly. "But most people in our profession would consider death sweet relief. So what makes you so different? Your conditioning to repel all emotion? I highly doubt that. Emotion cannot be killed, only suppressed. And that, in itself, is immensely difficult. How long have you been with Danzo?"

"One year."

"One year... one year..." he muttered. "Not long at all, then. That isn't long at all. So how did you end up like this, brat?" Sasori circled him, noticing that Sai seemed to tense up whenever he exited his field of vision. Ignoring his discomfort, he went on, musing, "You're not a big talker, are you? I'm even willing to bet that you were the type who kept their head down before you started tangling with Danzo. How did you spend your days? Drawing? Painting?" He let the words sink in
before adding the final blow, "With someone else?"

Sai, whose head had been turning slightly side to side ever since Sasori started pacing around him like a vulture circling a carcass—the movement was barely noticeable—stilled. "There is no one," he said, forcing as much honesty into his voice as possible.

But—

He was still lying.

Like a spider spotting a fly, Sasori stopped his pacing and crouched in front of him, murky brown eyes boring into inky black ones. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"How did you even survive then?"

"You're not making sense."

When Sasori had still been an active killer, a personal tool to the Emperor—and occasionally, with the man's permission, some of his lords—he hadn't been alone, no matter how it seemed. When he was off duty, he was training—training with his grandmother, mostly, who had started teaching him the art of puppeteering since young. He'd trained with another boy, too, who was close to his age. A boy named Komushi, who had a personality adaptable to Sasori's distrustful, icy one. He'd been full of apprehension back then, but now that he thought about it, he and Komushi had actually been quite close despite that.

Maybe he had spent much of his time alone, blood staining his form, but the small reprieves he got were also reminders that there was something to protect behind him—his family, perhaps even Komushi—that compelled him to slice men in half without hesitation, or watch coldly as they frothed at the mouth, convulsing, overcome by poison.

"If you really have no one," Sasori stated brusquely, growing a tad impatient with his constant lies. "Then why are you here? What do you fight for? Your home? Your country? You don't seem like that kind of person."

The boy didn't answer, merely continuing to stare at him.

Eventually, Sasori stood. "I can always find out myself," he reminded him. "It would only take one trip to the orphanage."

Sai's face darkened ever so slightly. "As soon as you step into town without, you will alert Danzo. He will kill you for your betrayal."

"What is Danzo besides one more man I have to kill?"

Sai smiled hollowly, confidently. "You will not kill him."

"I have to," he replied simply, as if Sai were an idiot who couldn't comprehend the situation. "He could cut off all of my limbs, and I'd still bite his throat open with my mouth."

"Why?"

"Because I have my duties, as you have yours. But soon, yours won't matter. And you'll be better off."
Konan returned then, and the conversation was dropped. Sai avoided her the gaze she shot him—thinly veiled concern. Sasori stepped back from Sai, putting out the fire—all the meat had already been cooked, and Konan was already starting to brine them—by unceremoniously dumping a pile of dirt and dust on it. It went out without so much as a hiss, utterly suffocated—much like how Sai had felt as Sasori’s killing intent wrapped around them like an insulating shroud during their quasi-interrogation.

"Let's go," Konan announced curtly when the meat had been soaked in brine and sealed into a preservation scroll for extra protection. The seal wasn't infallible—eventually, with time, it would rot—but with the added layer of salt, it would last longer. By now, Sai’s arms were bound once more, and he could have sworn Sasori actually tightened the hold.

"We've wasted enough time," Sasori said offhandedly, which Sai had picked up as his own way of agreeing with her. It seemed that Konan and Sasori didn't mesh as well as they would have liked. Or maybe he was wrong. Sai didn't know. He had never known much about human emotions. Sasori had been right—he'd been withdrawn and quiet as a child; the only person capable that had been of bringing him out of his shell was Shin. And now his brother was sick, and it was up to him—up to Sai—to—

"Yes," Sai said, not unaware of the mild surprise on their faces as he spoke up, "We'd better get there soon."

*Or Danzo-sama will come knocking on the door.*

It was surreal. Kisame's tea went cold as he watched Gai's students launch a flying kick into the air, shouting kiais willy-nilly. He didn't know what had compelled him to come back after seeing such an eccentric display yesterday—it was probably disbelief and masochism on his part. Chihiro had accompanied him, stating that she had already finished homework for tomorrow, and the young girl, who was turning ten soon, was chatting amicably with Tenten.

"I can't even tell which one is Lee from here," Tenten remarked, throwing the taijutsu students a glance. Gai was only differentiable because he stood at the front, instructing them. Occasionally, he would run around and correct some forms, too.

"I think he's the one at the front, third from the right." Chihiro squinted, sweatdropping. "Or he could be the one in the third row, second from the left... Umm..."

"Isn't that him in the row furthest from the front?" Kisame chipped in.

The three of them were currently seated at a round table with an umbrella sticking out in the middle. It covered all of them from the sun. Gai had been polite enough to provide them with tea and biscuits.

Unfortunately—

"They're so bland," Tenten muttered under her breath as she examined the cookie in her hand. "Even the rations we ate had more flavor than this." But her days in the factory and out in the wilderness had taught her to appreciate food more, and she chucked it in her mouth anyway, not even flinching when it took her three bites to break just one chunk of the biscuit.

"The entertainment makes up for it," opined Kisame, having given up on *Spot Lee.*

Once taijutsu practice was over, some of them headed inside while others chose to remain in the courtyard. Gai, with Lee by his side, sauntered over to them with a huge grin on his face.
"Hello, Tenten!" Lee greeted cheerfully. "I've advanced quite far with my training! Did you see?"

Beads of sweat began to trail down the brunette's face, having been unable to pinpoint which student had been Lee. "Uhh," she warbled.

Luckily for her, Chihiro came to her rescue. "It was awesome!" she crowed, much to Lee's delight. "You're amazing, Lee-senpai! Can you teach me sometime? Kisame-sensei has been lazy, lately."

"Oi, kid."

"SENPAI?!" Lee practically bawled, talking over Kisame. "Chihiro-chan!"

"Lee-senpai?!"

"CHIHIRO-CHAN!"

"LEE-SENPAI!"

The biscuit Tenten was holding broke under her grip. Beside her, Kisame eyed her clenched fist nervously. Finally, with a mighty yell, she slammed her fist over Lee's head. "That's enough from you, dammit!"

Gai let out a hearty laugh. "Ah, youth! It surrounds us all this spring! Wouldn't you say, Kisame-san?"

Kisame grunted. "Yeah, sure." Above him, cherry blossom trees were in full bloom already. After a long, hard winter, the sakura trees had decided to give them an early show. But, Kisame thought uneasily, for how long will this peace last? We can't forget that we're still in war. Even if it doesn't seem like it... What if Konoha suffers the same fate as Akatsuki?

"Something on your mind?" Tenten inquired as Gai enabled Chihiro and Lee to get into a competition of who could shout the loudest.

"Hm? Ah." Kisame chuckled. "Nothing in particular. I'm just thinking is all."

She smiled wryly. "Then it's not really nothing in particular, is it?"

"Hah! You got me on that one, kid. Why would you spare any thought to an old man's concerns, though?"

"You're not that old. I know for a fact that you're not fifty yet, so don't be dramatic, Kisame-san. And why wouldn't I give you any thought? I'm interested."

Kisame threw a biscuit in his mouth, crunching easily through it with his sharp teeth. "If you say so." He swallowed. "I just can't help but wonder what we're going to do when the world ends again."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Well, think about it. According to the latest news bulletin, we're currently at a stalemate with Tsuki. Our forces, combined with Ame's are almost equal. The next thing that we're both doing is sending out diplomats to other nations to beg for help. It was a crude way to put it, but it was, in essence, the truth. It's all a bit hush-hush at the moment, but I've heard that we'll be deploying some more ambassadors to Suna. The first batch we sent are still there, but they haven't managed to convince the Emperor of Suna of anything yet."
"Diplomats..." Tenten's eyes widened a little. "Hang on—Shikamaru mentioned something about being an aide to one of them. Does that mean he's going to...?"

They lapsed into a fraught silence.

Then Kisame glanced at Gai, Lee, and Chihiro, who were all smiles and laughs. Unconcerned. Free. Untroubled. He... wanted to protect that. He knew they were strong, but their grins were weaker—able to be wiped away easily. "Then I hope," Kisame said finally, drawing Tenten's attention once more. "He knows what he's doing."

"I don't know what the hell we're doing," Shikamaru deadpanned as Choji spread meat across the grill in Yakiniku Q. "Did you order beef tongue?"

"Yep. Itadakimasu!"

"Good." Shikamaru slumped in his seat, sighing. "This could make or break the war for us. Konohagakure already has a troublesome history with Sunagakure. The last thing we need is Suna against us, too. If the first batch—who were chosen because they're better—couldn't get things done, our chances of success are staggeringly low. Not to mention that Suna's not going to like so many Konoha envoys in one place."

Choji gobbled down his rice and meat at an amazing rate, but it was clear he was listening to Shikamaru's worries, too. When his mouth wasn't full, he asked, "You're not going to be speaking for them, are you?"

Shikamaru shook his head. "Nah, or that'd be really troublesome. I'm just an aide to Ito-san. Think an adviser, but not as important."

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Shika," Choji reassured, reaching across the table to pat Shikamaru's shoulder. "Ouch!" he cried when oil from the sizzling meat jumped onto his arm, pulling back. "Bad idea..."

But the Nara laughed, his expression no longer so tight and troubled. "You're all good. I should start eating before you finish everything. Itadakimasu!"

"How did you come here?" Deidara asked as she took a bite out of her bread. It had been almost a week since she had arrived, and when she wasn't with Mirai or Ami, she was with Guitar Man. Now, she sat on the edge of the fountain with Guitar Man, who had abandoned his tiny chair nearby to eat with her. He was holding a bowl of hot soup to his lips, ignoring the spoon, which he only used for scooping up carrots and potatoes.

"It was a long time ago," he answered after letting out a satisfied sigh. "I wasn't born blind, you see, and my father had great hopes for me. But then my eyesight began to deteriorate, and he was at a loss. In the end, I left. He never stopped me."

Deidara swallowed, the bread leaving a dry feeling in her mouth. "So this is his story, hm? "Where did you go?"

"Many places. Until I finally arrived here and settled. I never married."

"Oh yeah?" Pigeons flew down, pecking at bread crumbs that Deidara had dropped. Absently, she tore some of her bread roll into tiny bits and threw it across the floor. Wings flapped and feathers flew as they pushed one another aside for the most meager of pieces. "Back home, most of the
snobs said I would never get married, hm. Honestly, I used think I was better off like that. But marriage... I'll only ever consider it if it's with him. "It could be a beautiful thing."

"I don't doubt that." Guitar Man gave her a side smile. "But marriage will never be a chapter in my life. My feelings lie outside of romantic boundaries."

"Are you looking for something? You give me that impression, yeah."

Guitar Man hummed, pensive. "I'm not sure if I'll ever find it. Sometimes I feel as if I'm nearly there. That it's only an arm's reach away. What about you, Deidara-san? What are you looking for?"

What am I looking for? Well, for one, Sarutobi Kurenai. Technically, she already knew where she was, though—she was simply waiting for her return, which would be soon if there were no other delays. "I'm not sure," she grunted in the end, taking another bite out of her bread. "Maybe I'm not looking for anything, hm."

"Everybody's looking for something. Think about it for a while."

So she did, letting it sit.

When she returned to The Orange Bluebell, it was late afternoon, and Umeko offered her an early dinner.

"It's potatoes, peas, and a lamb cutlet tonight," the innkeeper announced with a proud smile. "Meat's scarce these days; this is the best meal we've whipped up in weeks!"

It sounded delicious. Her stomatch rumbled, and Deidara flushed slightly. "That would be great," she said, nodding. "Got any drinks?"

"Sure thing, but we don't have anything that strong here. Some sake, perhaps?"

Deidara seated herself at the bar, allowing Umeko to pour some of the aforementioned rice wine into her glass. The tavern was almost empty today, the only other customer a gentleman at the back. He was a traveler like her—he'd probably be gone by tomorrow morning if the snide looks he kept shooting at his cheap meal had anything to do with it.

"Man," Umeko sighed as Deidara drank, taking it slow. "Business sure has been slow."

"Clearly." The blonde glanced around. "It's not normally this quiet?"

"No. Before my husband went to war, this place was always busy." She sighed wistfully. "I miss those days... But enough about me. You're my guest, Deidara-san. So what about you?"

"Hm? What about me?"

"Well, you know." Umeko cleaned a glass with a rag. "Do you have anyone back home waiting for you? You're young and pretty—I'm sure you have men lining up for you."

A snort. "You'd be surprised then, yeah."

"Aw, don't be like that." The innkeeper was young. Not as young as Deidara, but certainly not an old maid. She was in her early thirties, most likely, just like Rin. Umeko normally kept her jet black hair curled into a low bun, much like how Izumi had wore hers. But her body was voluptuous and plump; soft and pampered—much unlike Izumi's lithe, supple body and calloused
hands. The world had been kinder to Umeko than Izumi. Again, it was merely circumstance that set them apart. "But since you didn't absolutely deny it, that means I'm at least a little right, right? Who's the lucky man? Or men."

"Man," Deidara answered, a smile pulling at her lips.

"Ah! Young love! How did you meet? Did you fall over? And then he caught you? Helped you up?"

At that, Deidara burst out laughing, and Umeko thought her teeth looked particularly sharp in the light. "If only," she wheezed. She wasn't drunk yet; just a little buzzed, but it was a slow and gradual process. "If only," she repeated, "it was that simple."

"It never really is. So what really happened? Was it love at first sight?"

"Nope. Quite the opposite, in fact." Deidara chuckled, recalling their first meeting. It had been less an ideal for a pair of lovers. But if I could do it all over again... I wouldn't change a thing. "Our first meeting was a taijutsu battle, hm."

"Wow. No kidding?"

"No kidding. Our views on art are practically polar opposites, yeah. So it was more a way of forcefully trying to get each other to agree. We became rivals of sorts after that. There was a lot of fighting—physical and verbal—but..." Deidara lifted her glass to her mouth. She put it back down. "There was respect, too. And then it grew from there."

"Our city was invaded, and we became little more than prisoners in our own home. When we fought together again, it was alongside each other. He had my back, and I had his." There was a certain peace in the inn that coaxed her feelings from her mouth. Umeko was listening carefully, and the gentleman at the back was occupying himself with a newspaper—the economics section. "I think I realized it then, yeah. That..." Her cheeks reddened slightly, and it wasn't from the alcohol. "I was in love with him."

"That's..." Umeko put the glass she had been cleaning down, a wistful smile on her face. "That is your treasure. Keep it safe, Deidara-san."

"I will," she vowed.

The innkeeper leaned across the bar, resting her chin on her palm. "Thank you for sharing that with me. I'm afraid my own love story isn't as suspenseful as yours. I came from a poor family," Deidara blinked in surprise, "with pretty terrible parents. They were constantly worried about money, and often hurt each other because of it."

Deidara's throat bobbed, feeling an odd shame burning her ears. Once, again she had misjudged someone; unintentionally tossed aside their experiences. She wondered briefly if she had done the same with Ami, but the purple-haired girl seemed pretty transparent. "Did it ever get physical?" she asked cautiously.

The light in Umeko's eyes dimmed. "Many times. Most of the time, though, I wasn't caught up in it. But it terrified me back then—the walls were so thin. I could hear every scream and every slap. Eventually, I escaped when I met my husband. It was love at first sight—we married quickly. By then, my father was already dead, and my mother was extremely sick. And my dear husband... He took money out of his own pocket to pay for medicine. But she died anyway. And, well, here we are." Umeko gestured around them. "I get pretty lonely without him, but I just have to push on. I
have faith, you know," she added after a long pause, "That he will come back to me. And even if he doesn't..."

Deidara inched forward.

"Then I'll still remember him. Even when I'm old and grey. Memories—of the good and the bad—they are important."

The good—

—and the bad?

For a while, Deidara simply stared at her drinks, the words floating around the forefront of her mind.

Kurenai returned the next day, late in the morning when Deidara undoing her hair bun as she stepped outside of the bakery, the sleeves of her green yukata falling down her arms as she lifted them. Ami pushed past her when she spotted the woman in question—long, untamed black hair that cascaded down her back, slender figure, and carrying with her a small wooden box that surely held delicate contents. She wore a red garb over a dark gray undershirt and lavender pants.

"Kurenai-san!" Ami yelled as she chased after the woman. "You're back!"

Asuma's wife turned slowly, eyes widening in surprise. "Ami-chan? Oh—be careful, please!"

"Of course!"

Together, the three women made haste to Kurenai's apartment block, where Furude was taking care of Mirai. Ami and Kurenai exchanged a few terse words, leaving Deidara to listen some distance away, ignored.

Once they were by Mirai's side, it was what Deidara considered an organized panic.

"Careful!" Kurenai reminded sharply, glaring up at Ami when she bumped into her, nearly knocking the box out of her hands. "They couldn't spare much of the antitoxin—I only have two bottles."

Ami met her stare evenly, a side of her that Deidara had only caught a glimpse of one time coming out. "I know," she replied, voice steady. "I'll make good use of it. I'm the only one here with actual training with vaccinations anyway." Determined, Ami drew out some of the liquid with a sterilized syringe she had procured from the medical kit on the bedside table. Mirai was asleep, her breathing ragged as Ami closely checked the amount of medicine she had drawn.

"Mmrgh..." Mirai stirred, eyes opening slowly just as Ami nodded, satisfied she had drawn the correct amount of serum. "What's," she rasped, "going on? Okaa-chan? Is that you...?"

Kurenai's face crumpled a little as she took in the sight of her daughter, who she hadn't seen for weeks. "Oh," she lifted a hand to her mouth, "Oh, it is, musume-chan. I'm here now."

"Mirai-chan." Ami's voice was firm, but not unkind. "I'm going to give you the medicine now. You might feel a prick, like an ant biting you. But you'll feel better very soon."

"Mmkay... I like... ants... anyway..."

As if it were second nature to her, Ami swabbed a cotton soaked with disinfectant over a spot on
her pale arm. She checked the contents one last time before inserting the needle, pushing her thumb against the plunger flange.

Beside Deidara, Furude exhaled a sigh of relief. "Finally. That girl has been suffering for too long. Now she can finally rest and recover."

Silently, Deidara agreed. "It's her birthday today, isn't it?"

"Yesterday, actually."

"Then..." Her eyes landed on the light package twisted in the blankets—Asuma's present to his daughter. "Why hasn't she opened it yet, hm? What is she waiting for?"

Furude's answer was two words in total. "Her father."

Guitar Man stopped playing when he heard her approach. "Ah. You're back again." He heard her sit on the floor without a care of dirtying her clothing. "Something on your mind, Deidara-san?"

"Your company calms me," Deidara admitted, passing one hand through her hair. "You know what kind of effect you have, right? When everyone hears you play, the atmosphere isn't as suffocating, hm. But I guess that I do want to know a few things."

"Ask away then. I have time."

"What was Iwa like when you were there?"

"Iwa? It was lovely, it's beauty wholly unmatched; unlike any other. Even when my world went dark, I could still hear its sounds and smell its scents. Taste the rich and warm foods it had to offer, feel the chilly autumns and the warm springs."

She looked at him doubtfully. "But you still left anyway."

"Yes. I left because I was chasing something greater. But if it were not for that... I have no doubt that I would be living in a small village on the border where everyone knows each other. Far away from my father, but close enough to home."

"Maybe when you were there it was like that," Deidara said, hugging her knees to her chest. "But it's not that great now. I prefer Konoha, yeah. By a very small margin. At least nobody's died yet. At least the Hokage isn't orchestrating any deaths. Or maybe she is, and I'm just better off not knowing."

Guitar Man's fingers stilled. "Do you, now? I suppose I can't blame you. After all," his head turned to her, and she could have sworn he was staring straight into her soul, "you would have been very young when the Iwa Civil War came about."

_I was young. So, so young._

"I know little of the details, but I know enough about war to know that it was, undeniably, an unnecessary tragedy."

"Yeah," Deidara agreed quietly, "It was."

_He kept coming back with his loyal servant Hisaichi. Every time he stepped foot in that grand hall—even if he was cursed to never lay eyes on its magnificent beauty—what he heard was a_
humbling experience. The girl always sang in the afternoon, when there were the least amount of people. Her talent hadn't been discovered and cultivated yet, it seemed. Though, to Shinichi, her skill needed little cultivation. Her voice was low and pure and she sang of the most wonderful and tragic things.

Today, however, was his last day here before his father would return home, finished with his business.

Hisaichi snuck a glance at him. "Young Master, are you okay?"

"Fine, Hisaichi-san. But before we leave, I must speak to her at least once."

"I'm sure that can be arranged. We can catch her as she's leaving. After all, she does no encores."

Yes, because nobody ever requested one. How strange!

The girl sang and sang—pleading her last song even as the curtains closed. It was if the ocean had washed over him, and nothing could be heard except the sway of water, her voice echoing through the seas.

After the show, they got out of their seats and round to the back of the grand theatre. Shinichi was wiping tears from his eyes when Hisaichi sighed. It was not an exasperated one. In fact, it was almost as if it were an inquiry.

"Yes?" Shinichi prompted, calm.

"I've never seen you so moved before," Hisaichi told him. "Remarkable. Simply remarkable."

"That's the power of music, isn't it? Isn't it curious, how mere arrangements and adjustments of pitch and tune could celebrate the human soul so perfectly. In the physical sense, it is unattainable. Untouchable."

"Why is that?"

"You can't touch music, Hisaichi-san," he pointed out.

"I know that! But what do you mean by that?"

Shinichi chuckled. "Music is the soul. We cannot touch the soul. But we all have it in us anyway. It's constantly touching us, but we can never return its touch."

A gentle footfall reached his ears and both men turned around. The wind picked up then, and Hisaichi blinked once at the sight of the short blonde girl in front of them, dressed in the same fancy robes that the performer had worn. It was then everything pieced together for Hisaichi, poor eyesight and all.

"You're right." Her speaking voice was higher than her singing one, unaware of Hisaichi's mind tossing and turning. "We can't touch music, but music can touch us. The same can be said to all forms of art."

"Oh!" the old man gasped. "You must be...!" He racked his head for the name the emcee had announced. "Bakuhashu..."

"Bakuhashu no Uri," Shinichi finished for him. Behind his glasses, the corners of his eyes creased as he smiled. "My name is Maekawa Shinichi."
"Please," she returned his smile, "call me Uri, yes. Did you want to see me?"

"Ah. Even if I wished to—and I do—I wouldn't be able."

Uri, noticing his dark shades for the first time, flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't notice, yes." Her cheeks had already been red when she had arrived; the exhilaration she had felt on the stage had yet to leave her. "Forgive me, yes, I—"

"No, it's quite alright. But I did have a question for you."

Hisaichi stood back, allowing his master to take the lead.

"The son of one of Iwa's most distinguished lords has a question for someone like me?" mused Uri, eyebrows raising into her hairline. Indeed, she was a mixture of insightful maturity and childish immaturity.

"Impressive for a country girl," muttered Hisaichi as Shinichi laughed. "She managed to identify him so quickly..."

"Distinguished lord my sire may be, but I am still on the cusp of adulthood. A mere boy, if you so please. So please deign me an answer to my question, will you?"

Uri giggled. "If you so wish. I have a friend who's looking for me, so you must hurry, yes."

"Looking for you?"

"Yes. I ran away from him because he threw mud in my hair the other day. He's trying to apologize, but I've been giving him the slip, yes~"

"How unladylike," Hisaichi opined, frowning. But Uri simply shrugged his disapproval aside, looking only at Shinichi.

"Very well. Here is my question then: What is art?"

At first, Uri stared at him, eyes wide. Then she closed them, peace washing over her features. "Art is many things for many people. I can only answer that question with regards to myself, yes."

Shinichi nodded. "I understand."

Though he could not see, Uri was actually inspecting him quite closely now, eyes narrowed slightly. She stalled, deliberating her answer. A voice called her name in the distance.

Straightening, she spoke, "I'm sorry, Lord Maekawa, but I cannot tell you my answer."

"Oh?" Shinichi tilted his head. "And why is that?"

"Because..." She knew he couldn't see her, but she beamed at him anyway. "You have to find it for yourself. 'What is art,' you asked. I can only ever tell you what I think of art, but that would be wrong of me to do so, yes." Bewildered, Shinichi blinked. "It would be such a waste," she added, "If I were to direct to you a path that is not necessarily meant for you to walk. So forgive me, Lord Maekawa."

Before Shinichi could even fathom responding, more footsteps reached his ears and Hisaichi made another disapproving noise when a boy with brown hair and blue eyes appeared. He was the same age as Uri, and undoubtedly the friend she had been running from.

"There you are!" the boy exclaimed as he lowered himself to her. "I'm so sorry!" Then he got up
and grabbed her by the wrist—not too tight; he didn't want to hurt her. "Come on, Uri-chan!" Like a whirlwind, he was gone, taking Uri with him. The girl shot the pair one last grin, one tinged by a strange hint of sadness, before she disappeared into the horizon.

"What rude children," Hisaichi huffed, feathers ruffled like an irritated penguin.

Shinichi chuckled. "Let them be, Hisaichi-san."

"She never even gave a proper answer to your question."

"No. But she gave me something even more precious." Shinichi turned back, and Hisaichi felt a chill run down his spine; sometimes he swore that his master could see every little thought that floated through his head. "One day... I hope I get to hear her songs again. Especially... the one she called Mirai."

At the end of the day, Deidara got up and left.

Mirai—hope for the future.

Guitar Man remembered the inscription he had asked the old towerkeeper—who had only been ten years his senior—to engrave onto the floors of the final level. When the job had been done, the towerkeeper had left a parting gift somewhere. Guitar Man wasn't sure where exactly—but he knew it was there. His old bones creaked as he stood after hours of playing, moving his stiff fingers around. What a shame, Guitar Man thought sadly, that he is now dead.

His body had never been recovered. All they had was a KIA stamped over his file and his name in the obituaries.

Inwardly, Guitar Man knew what had likely happened. Dismemberment. Beheading. Anything that left the body in more than one piece. Sighing heavily, he finished his stretches and sat down once more on the dinky little seat that he carried into the square from his humble one-storey home every day.

His body swaying side to side, his fingers flicked at the strings as he imagined the song he had heard so long ago. It had stuck with him for many a decade, and though he was old, he would not be forgetting it anytime soon.

The words were blurrier, but they were there.

But, Guitar Man found, he could not bring himself to sing them.

More people crowded around him today, their faces lighting up as they got closer. He played them song after song until they had all dispersed. It was his gift to them, he considered; one that would make them forget about their losses for one brief moment.

Once the people were gone, Guitar Man was alone again. But he had been alone for many long years, travelling by himself, and the solitude was nothing but an old friend he greeted quietly.

His ears perked when he heard footsteps. The walker favored the right leg slightly.

Guitar Man raised his head. "Hello, Deidara-san."

He heard her halt in front of him.
Deidara's shoulders tensed slightly before drooping. Ami was looking after Mirai today, and Deidara had wandered outside for reprieve. Her feet had taken her to the square, where the bell tower loomed and Guitar Man sat. Why did I even come here again? she asked herself for the umpteenth time as she considered the blind man in front of her. Even with his full height, Deidara guessed, she would still be taller than him. He was starting to grow stooped with age. She exhaled softly. "Hey. Do you think you could play me a song, hm?"

"Of course. What kind of song would you like to hear?"

"Hmm..." Deidara hummed. "What's your favorite song?"

"I have many favorites."

"Yeah, but you have to have one that you love the most."

Her voice...

Guitar Man glanced up at her, unseeing. "There is one," he began slowly. "But I will not sing the words to it."

He could sense her confusion.

Deidara raised an eyebrow, curious. "Oh? And why is that, hm? Don't tell me—there are swear words in it."

Guitar Man laughed. "If only it were so simple."

A low chuckle escaped her lips, and Deidara couldn't help but smile, a hint of sorrow in the action. "I don't care if it has words or not," she decided. "Your taste in music more than makes up for it, yeah." It had a timeless feeling to it—the sort of music that her mother would have played. Her smile dimmed a little.

Taking a deep breath, Guitar Man acquiesced, long, lissome fingers hovering above the still bronze strings. But then he halted. "Before I begin, may I ask you a question?"

"The son of one of Iwa's most distinguished lords has a question for someone like me?"

"A man like you has a question for someone like me?" Deidara smirked, unaware of how his heart twisted at the familiarity of her words. He was certain now. Deidara—she was—

"Ahem. Yes, I do, actually." Guitar Man let patience seep into his heart and into his tone. "Do you resent your background, Deidara-san?"

Any laughter that might have been held in her throat evaporated. Her face was suddenly like stone, and though Guitar Man could not see her expression, he could tell she was not pleased. "Why would I resent it?" she said calmly. "My ethnicity has nothing to do with who I am now, hm."

"Your background is more than your ethnicity," Guitar Man soothed her. "I mean your country, your people, and your culture."

"Iwa is not my country. It's people are not my people. And I have long forgotten the culture." Her voice was as cold as winter wind, and he had to wonder about her stance on this.

"And why do you reject it so? It is clear, even to a blind man like me, that you are mistaken. It has shaped you into the person you are today. I am not entirely sure that we would be having
this conversation if it were not so."

"I—look, Guitar Man. I didn't come here for bad memories, yeah."

"Bad memories? But surely there are good ones also?" Guitar Man set his guitar by his side, folding his hands on his lap.

"There... there are. But they're not worth remembering, un."

Deidara's voice sounded strained, and he noticed that her accent had changed just a little.

He took a leap of faith. "What about your mother?"

Her breath got caught in her throat. "What?"

"What about your mother?"

"What about her? Did—did you know her?"

"Aa. I only met her once, but once was enough for me to leave my old life for her at the drop of a hat." Guitar Man yawned, stretching. It had to be late afternoon now. Perhaps four or five o'clock. The sun would be setting in one or two hours, and he, Guitar Man, would play until the sun set before heading home. "Even now, her words constantly haunt the back of my mind. The words and the question I asked, the answer she gave me. She was almost ten years my junior, but she was the one who opened my eyes to the world." Guitar Man paused, realizing something. His heart pounded like a machine gun under his weary chest. "Your mother is Bakuhashi no Uri, isn't she?"

For a moment, all he could hear was the splashing and babbling of the mountain somewhere nearby.

Then—

"Yes," she uttered, her voice barely above a whisper. "Yes, she is." Deidara swallowed a lump in her throat, a numbness settling over her body like a heavy cloak. "Was."

Guitar Man's heart broke, and he rubbed his cheeks roughly, disbelieving. "Oh, Uri..."

"You didn't know?" Deidara narrowed her eyes into slits, pretending that the back of her eyeballs weren't burning with a sensation she loathed, and the insides of her eyelids didn't have the image of her beautiful, brave, dead mother etched into them.

"No." He shook his head sadly. "I have not left his town in many, many years. The last time I ever spoke with her was our first meeting behind the theatre. I would have never thought..."

"Yeah, well. It happened."

"And now you're all alone."

Deidara hugged her arms, clenching fistfuls of her sleeves. "I'm not," she told him firmly.

"But you were. For a long, long time." Guitar Man looked up at her. "Your wounds still bleed."

"Stop it," she ordered sharply, scowling. "They've long closed up, un."

"They will never close. Not unless you allow it to. You must face the past, Deidara-san, if you want to look toward the future."
It was then that—

The rubber band keeping her heart and head afloat snapped into two.

"How can I?!!" she finally burst out, feeling as if a great weight had jumped off her chest, only to cause her even greater pain when it fell back down. Gritting her teeth, Deidara went on, "How can I when she is dead?! Dead at the hands of her own countrymen!" Her outburst was like an explosion of sound—it sucked all the air out of the atmosphere before expelling it outward in a great blast.

For a moment, all she could hear was white noise, her shoulders wracked by a tremble.

"Deidara-san..." For once, Guitar Man was at a loss for words.

"Do you know what I did?" Deidara asked, voice low as she let out a shuddering breath. Her entire body had begun to shake, and she squeezed her forearms tightly, arms still crossed over her chest. "I watched and I did nothing to stop them. I froze. They were too far away, but the least I could have done was try. But I didn't.

"She wasn't the only one, you know, who I left for dead that day." Her voice was like splintering ice. "It's almost like a spit in my mother's face when I wonder: How can I ever live with myself? For a while, I had all my shit together, un. I thought I was finally was moving on and making something out of my life, yeah. But then..."

Akatsuki.

The war.

*Hitomi, Ino, Obito—*

Zetsu and blood and gore and Sawako's fragile body torn into two messy halves and sleepless nights—

*Shisui and Izumi, oh Izumi—*

The dungeon. The fucking dungeon; even now, Kabuto would enter her dreams—her nightmares—he turned them into nightmares that almost had her sobbing with relief when she finally woke up again—

The explosion, her leg, her art, the goddamn courtroom—

*Danna.*

Suddenly, the longing hit her full force, slamming into her chest like a high speed projectile.

Deidara swallowed, rushing to keep her composure and barely keeping it together. "Now it constantly feels," she muttered, almost choking on her words, "like I'm about to break in half." Break in half and shatter apart like ice sliding off a cliff. She said no more after that. If she tried to speak again, she was certain that she would fall to her knees, devoured by the hopelessness that had haunted her ever since the journey to Konoha.

To her horror, the back of her eyes began to burn once more, and before she could process that was happening, she was—

*Tears.*
"So many of them.

But—

"Don't," Guitar Man said gently, placing a warm hand on her back. "Allow yourself this much, and do not be ashamed. Forgive me, Deidara-san, but I don't believe you. I don't believe that you ever moved forward when you thought you were. Maybe you felt like you were walking many miles, but you never left where you started. Your tears are not weakness. Even the most immovable mountain will someday be weathered away by rain and ice."

It was as if she had been plunged in cold water.

When was the last time she had cried? To Itachi. It had been horrible for both of them, as his words unintentionally caused her guilt to intensify. But then Rin had come, saying the opposite. That she did the right thing. Kiba and Tamaki had said similar things, too. But Guitar Man—he was doing neither.

So she listened.

And she wept freely.

For everyone she had ever lost. For anyone she had ever killed, even Orochimaru and especially Kou.

"Did you ever mourn?"

'I'm already mourning.'

*I think... I almost believed my own lie.*

She wasn't how sure she stayed there like that. By the time she lifted her head again, the sky was nearly dark, and someone had turned the street lamps on. Mute, Deidara stood, brushing down her skirt. Her face was devoid of the grief she had so thoroughly expressed when it had still been light.

"What did she say to you?" was the first thing Deidara finally said, her voice raw. She cleared her throat as Guitar Man gave his answer.

"I asked her what art was. She told me to find my own answer if I wanted to know. That her answer was not mine. And I do want to know. I still do. I've almost come to a conclusion, after so many years. If only she would show up again to congratulate me. Then I would really know."

There was a beat, and then they both said in unison, *"Tis an old man's fantasy."*

Deidara's eyes widened. "You—"

"Practically devoured every play she performed when she was still starting out. *The Golden Lighting Flower* was my personal favorite. It had the sort of charm which lured adults and children alike into a world of wonders." Guitar Man's lips quirked upward. "And you?"

"Almost every time a performance was on and she was in it, I always went, yeah," Deidara admitted, a little shyly. "At some point in my life, I could recite almost all of her plays word for word." She blinked, nostalgia entering her blue eyes. "I... I completely forgot I could do that. I don't think I can do it now, un."

"Oho?" Guitar Man hummed happily. "Is that so? That means you do have pleasant memories of
"They are few and in between," Deidara told him, brow lowering in thought. "But yes, I do. Sometimes... I think I might miss it, un. But never mind. You said I had to look at the past before looking to the future, right?"

"That is correct."

For her, the past was like a broken mirror. But slowly, with Guitar Man's help, she was rearranging the pieces where they belonged. Reluctantly, Deidara asked, "Can we talk more? About my mother, that is. And... maybe other things?"

Warmth bloomed in his heart. "Of course. You're her daughter. And that alone is a wonderful thing to me."

They talked into the night. Even when the sky had gone almost completely dark, they continued to talk. They talked of Uri's songs; her plays and performances—her operas and instrumental music. Deidara informed him about everything he had missed out on in his absence—the other, later performances that had come about, born from her mother's imagination or collaborations with other creative minds.

Some questions were more difficult to answer.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did she die? You mentioned... that she was murdered by her own people."

"Ah." Deidara hummed in contemplation. "It happened in the night. She rushed my brother and I into the theatre while she distracted Ōtsutsuki guards. But then set the building on fire with their bombs, and..."

She pushed onward, speaking as freely as she could.

"Bakuhatsu no Deidara," Guitar Man addressed her abruptly at the end of her story. "You have my thanks."

"For what?"

"For entertaining an old man like me for so long."

"Oh, no, I—" Deidara exhaled sharply, closing her eyes. "I should be thanking you, un. For stopping me. And letting me."

He picked up his guitar. "Maybe so. But the last thing I can do for you is play you the song. Do you know which one it is?"

"Hmm..." Deidara gave him a lopsided grin. "Considering your admiration for my mother, is it one of hers?"

"Right you are. In fact," he strummed the guitar, testing the sound, "you'll probably recognize it right away. It's the very last song she sang in *The Golden Lighting Flower*."

*No. You're joking.* Deidara's legs almost gave out beneath her, chills crawling down her spine and down her limbs, including the lost one. *It can't be... This is too much of a coincidence...! But then the first chords of *Mirai* began to play, and she buried her face in her arms, unabashedly sobbing once more as a gate was opened in her heart, raw emotion rushing out and washing over her like a
flood. Joy. Love. Sadness—the sorrow that she had almost drowned herself in.

There were no words sung by either of them, but it was enough.

Then it was over, and disappointment lingered in her heart. "It's so short, un. A lot shorter than I remember it."

"Perhaps she continued it," Guitar Man ventured. "After all, the version I listened could very well have been incomplete."

"Maybe... Heh, it wasn't so overwhelming the last time either, yeah."

"They say music can touch you. That it is the soul."

Deidara gave him a questioning glance. "And? Do you believe that?"

"Hmm... Yes. Yes, I think, in a way, it can and it is." Guitar Man stood, listening to his surroundings. "I wish that everyone did. This town... has no music anymore. It lacks a soul."

Deidara looked up at the bell tower for a long moment. Music is the soul? "It's getting late, un," she declared. "Where do you live? I'll walk you home, yeah." He was an old man, after all—it was never completely safe, even if he had walked the same route many times.

"Just down this street, you see..."

Minutes later, the town square was deserted, only laughter and tears lingering in the air. When she passed through the square again, heading for The Orange Bluebell, she could feel it, too.

Umeko looked surprised when Deidara hurried down the stares, wearing the white blouse and long green skirt she had worn when she had first arrived. They were her work clothes, she was beginning to suspect. Or something she wore for a casual-formal occasion. "You look much better," she commented when she passed the bar. "Did something happen? Nothing's wrong, right?"

"No," Deidara answered, honestly. She gave Umeko a wide grin. "Nothing's wrong, un!"

For she had not dreamed a single unpleasant thing last night.
Part V: Allium

Chapter Summary

onions tho

The house was quiet. The house wasn't usually so quiet. So why now? She wriggled out of her futon, her entire body trembling as she took a few meager steps toward the sliding bamboo door. She hurt so much. Her arms, her legs—they hurt so much.

She sniffled.

The house was quiet.

The house was cold.

Keeping her footsteps as silent as possible, she padded around the house, searching for her mother. Finally, she found herself standing in front of her mother's room. There was a strange smell coming from it.

She recognized the smell.

Blood.

A hiccup rising in her throat, she threw the door open, a silent scream rising from her throat when she saw the grisly sight. Her mother lay sprawled on the bed, wrists slit and eyes rolled to the back of her head.

"Musume-chan."

His voice was like splintering ice.

Feeling her legs about to give way, she slowly turned around, eyes wide with fear. "Otou-san. Why is okaa-chan like that?"

Her father, face shadowed, gave her a genteel smile. "Because she's dead, honey."

It was as if her brain had been plunged into ice and stopped working right there. "Huh?" Vaguely, she knew the concept of death. Some point in time, someone had told her about it.

"She's dead and she's never coming back." Her gaze followed his figure as he walked up to the bed and caressed the corpse of her mother. Purring, he kissed cheeks. "Oh, my beautiful Yuki..."

She couldn't help it. She burst into tears, wailing at the top of her lungs.

Her father's countenance darkened. "Shut up."

She continued to cry, lifting her hands to her eyes to try and wipe away the tears.

"I said shut UP!"
"Why is she dead?!" she screamed at him, completely forgetting the wounds that had been inflicted on her. "WHY?!

He snapped. "It's because of you!" In a flash, he had her wrist in a vice grip and pulled her onto the bloody bedsheets. Then he grabbed his wife's wrists and shoved them in her face, staining her forehead and cheeks with blood. "She killed herself because she hates you!"

Her head lolled before snapping up to meet her father's eyes. "She... hates... me?"

"Yes," he sneered. "She hated you so fucking much that she killed herself. You worthless brat!" He barely reacted when he slapped her across the face, sending her flying onto the floor. It was the rough landing that snapped her out of her grief, fear entering her eyes. Slowly, her father grabbed a pair of blood-stained scissors from the table. "You need to be punished for killing her. Let's do that now."

"NO!" she shrieked, scrambling back. "NO, OTOU-SAN, NOT AGAIN! DON'T HURT ME, OTOU-SAN!, DON'T HURT ME! AHHHHHHH!"

Her scream pitched to even greater heights when he stabbed her in the shoulder, grinning all the while. Then he did it again. And again. And again.

"OTOU-SAN!" she sobbed. "OTOU-SAN, NO!

"OTOU-SAN, DON'T HURT ME!"

It was a bleak morning.

Yawning, Ami got out of bed, prepared to greet the day as per usual—with a scowl on her face and her hair sticking out in all directions. But ever since Kurenai returned, it had been like good thing after another—her father was now well enough to finally come back to work. As such, she could take it a bit easier today.

"Good morning," she said as she sat down opposite her father, who was reading the daily paper. "Is there anymore coffee?"

"In the pot, dear." He smiled warmly at her, and she couldn't help but smile back. "Thanks for holding up the fort while I was gone."

"No problem." Ami buttered some bread. "I had help anyway."

"Oho? From who?"

"Well..." Gee, how do I even explain? "A woman called Deidara. She's here on business, but she needed Kurenai to actually be here. Since she had time to kill, she helped out in the bakery."

"How nice of her."

Ami snorted. "Yeah. Nice. See you, otou-san, I'm going to see Mirai-chan."

"Be at the bakery by eight!"

**Once upon a time, there was a pitiful girl,** she self-narrated as she made her way down to Kurenai's apartment, combing her hair with her fingers, trying to fix up her purple mane a little more. **She came from a decent background and got everything she wanted until. She knew she was spoiled, but**
She kept demanding the best from everyone except herself. And when she ran into failure, she tried to blame others for it. But I think, deep, deep down...

She paused in front of a florist, frowning at her reflection. Then she pushed her bangs a little to the side.

She knew that she had caused her own misery.

The reason she had dropped out from Tsunade's program—

I spent too much time shitting around instead of actually studying, while people like Forehead had their noses stuck in books every hour of the day and still only managed to scrape through in some sections.

I can't get those opportunities back.

So—

"I'm here!" Ami called and she knocked on the door.

What am I supposed to do?

Kurenai answered, her painted red lips pulled into a smile. "Oh, you're here, Ami-chan. Please, come in." Toeing her shoes off, Ami followed Kurenai inside. "Mirai-chan is already awake and reading."

"Oho?" Ami grinned before she peered around the corner, surprising Mirai, who was still in bed. "Boo!"

"Geh! Ami-onee-san?! You came!"

Instantly, Mirai had put down her book and opened up her arms for Ami to hug her. The contact was brief, however, as Mirai quickly complained that she was about to enter into a coughing fit, feeling that tell-tale tickle in her throat. Ami held a tissue to her mouth for her as the girl hacked. She was pleased to hear that it seemed to have gotten better, at least.

"Here, drink." Ami passed her the glass of water at her bedside table. It was still warm. "Sit up for me." Mirai wriggled into sitting position, gratefully accepting the glass of water.

She let out a satisfied sigh once she had drained the cup. "What are we gonna do today?" she asked the older girl. "Can we go picnic?"

"Picnic?" The purple-haired girl laughed. "No way! Not until you're better. And if you don't rest up, you're going to be here for a while. But tell you what," she added when Mirai pouted, "as soon as you do get better, we'll have a feast! Sound good?"

Mirai beamed. "Yes! Maybe even otou-chan can make it! He didn't come back in time for my birthday but..." She tapped her chin, thinking. "Maybe otou-chan can make it back for Recovery Day!"

"Recovery Day?"

"Yeah! When I get better. That's Recovery Day."

"Ah, I see." Ami continued to smile, unable to bring herself to tell the girl that her father probably wasn't going to be back anytime soon. The war seemed to be far from over, meaning that Asuma
wouldn't be able to return for a while. She wasn't sure if Asuma even knew that Mirai had been so sick these past few days. Had Kurenai gotten time to write to him? It was unlikely, considering she had been scrambling about the neighboring towns trying to get her hands on the antitoxin.

"Speaking of your birthday, Happy Belated! I have a present for you that's back at home. I'll bring it here this afternoon, sound good?"

"Mhm! Thanks, onee-san."

Her eyes drifted to Asuma's unopened present. "You still haven't...?"

"Nuh-uh." Mirai shook her head, staring at the blankets. "I don't want to yet. I want him to be here when I open it."

"Mirai-chan..."

"He has to be here. Every year, otou-chan and okaa-chan are always with me when I open their presents. Since okaa-chan is here, I already opened hers." It had been souvenirs from the neighboring town Kurenai had been in and some new books. "But if I wanna open this one, otou-chan has to be here!"

"Whatever you say, Mirai-chan. I've got to get going soon—I have work."

At that moment, Kurenai popped her head around the wall, looking slightly guilty. "I have groceries to buy," she informed them. "Ami-chan, could you please tell your grandmother over from next door to look after Mirai-chan? I have to hurry before all the good produce is gone."

"Oh, sure. No problem."

Swiftly, Kurenai planted a kiss on her daughter's cheek. "I'll be back soon," she promised. "Be good for Furude-obaa-chan, okay?"

Mirai grinned cheekily. "Okay! Cross my heart."

When Kurenai was gone, Mirai picked up her book and continued reading, paying special attention to the pastel pictures. After five minutes, she put it back down again, wondering where her babysitter was. Furude was never the type to be tardy to anything. I guess I'll wait a bit longer, she thought, feeling nervousness coil at her belly. She didn't like being alone for long—she was aware that she wasn't really that big or strong yet, and it was best if she had an adult or a friend with her at all times.

Fifteen minutes had gone by before Mirai's paranoia finally won out, and she crawled out of bed, the wooden floor feeling cold against the balls of her feet. Trembling, she inspected the whole apartment before opening the front door. Furude lived right across, so—

She gasped. "Furude-obaa-chan!" The woman was collapsed on the ground, her expression pinched in pain. Worried, Mirai knelt beside her, shaking her still form. "Wake up, obaa-chan! Wake up!" Oh no! I have to find okaa-chan or Ami! They'll know what to do! It never occurred to her once to ask for help from a neighbor, too convinced that only her mother or her purple-haired friend could be of any use in this situation.

Summoning up her courage, she puffed out her cheeks to expel her fear as she ran downstairs and outside. She looked both ways before crossing the road, heading for Ami's bakery.

_Gotta get help fast! Please, please, please be around the corner waiting for me —
"Oof!" Mirai fell back onto her rear end when she ran into something solid. It felt metal, actually. "Oww..." Glaring up at whatever she had bumped into, she was prepared to give it a good tongue lashing. But the words never escaped her mouth, her eyes widening instead. "You're..."

"Hm?" Deidara glanced down at her before squatting down. "Mirai-chan? What are you doing out here?" She helped her up, and Mirai couldn't help but stare quite rudely at her appearance. "You shouldn't be outside—what? What're you looking at, un?"

"... Are you a genie, onee-san?"

"What."

"Your hair makes you look like a genie." Mirai shook her head. Now wasn't the time for genies! Furude needed her help, stat! "Do you know where Ami-onee-san is?! It's an emergency!"

"She should be at her bakery. What kind of emergency—" Mirai dashed off. "Oi! Don't just run off like that, un!" Her voice was irritable now, and Mirai thought that she was a little scarier than she initially appeared to be. Deidara caught up to her in just a few strides, scooping her up into her arms and sprinting toward the bakery. "Tell me what happened."

"Erm... uhh..."

"Seriously?" Deidara looked down at her exasperatedly as she passed through town square. From her periphery, she could spot Guitar Man minding his usual business. "Don't get tongue-tied now of all times, kid."

Mirai managed to get her act together just as they barged into the bakery, startling Ami, who was working at the front counter today. "Furude-obaa-chan fell down!"

There was a collective shout from Deidara (who nearly dropped the child in surprise), Ami, and Ami's father, who poked his head around the movable shelves that separated the counter from the back. "What?!!"

"Yeah! We have to hurry!"

"You heard the little lady!" Ami's dad all but ripped his daughter's hat and apron off before shoving her over the counter. "I'll take care of things around here!"

"Okay!" Looking a little out of sorts, Ami straightened her shirt before joining Deidara and Mirai in the dash back to the apartment. "Deidara-san! Where is she?!"

"Hell if I know!"

"But I do!" piped Mirai. "She fell down on her doorstep!"

"Oi, Ami-san." Deidara cast her a side glance before awkwardly opening up her right arm. Mirai was tucked snugly in the crook of her left arm. "You're too slow, un."

"Well excuse me for not being some freak like you—!"

"So please don't complain to me about this later, okay?" Without warning, Deidara snatched Ami up and made a great jump, leaping into the skies. Ami shrieked in terror, not even stopping when Deidara's shoes—she was wearing simple taijutsu sandals today along with her green yukata and tan, comfortable pants—hit the roof, sending a tremor up her body that all three of them felt. "I take it this is your first time, un."
"Don't say it like that!" Ami hissed, momentarily forgetting about her gut-flipping experience. "In case you haven't noticed, there's a literal five-year-old here!"

Deidara snorted. "It's not my fault you have your mind in the gutter, yeah. And you'll be thanking me for this later—Furude-san doesn't have the luxury of waiting for your arrival, o'great medic."

At that, Ami fell silent, a solemn expression on her face.

"We're here!" Mirai announced when Deidara climbed in through the second-floor window and into the corridor. Sure enough, Furude was still on the ground. Immediately, Ami wrenched herself from Deidara's grip and made haste toward her fallen grandmother. At first, she seemed to panic, but got grounded soon enough.

Pleadingly, Mirai looked up at Deidara, who almost did a double take at the sudden attention the little girl was given her. "Onee-san, will Furude-obaa-chan be okay?"

"Hmm..." Hard to tell, honestly. She's old, after all. But Ami's been trained as a medic... Oh, what the heck. "You know what? I can't imagine a scenario where she isn't, un."

Mirai let out a sigh of relief.

Mapleflame Town had no hospital, but it did have a clinic. Furude was taken there—thankfully, she had only suffered a sprained ankle and a bruised right side. She had been knocked unconscious from the shock of the impact. No head injuries were registered.

While Ami explained everything to the doctor, Mirai and Deidara sat in the waiting room, silence stretching between them. Deidara sat without a care for any social etiquette, one leg crossed over the other, seemingly lost in her thoughts. On the other hand, Mirai (who had gotten a check up earlier and deemed fine to be outside for a little while) had already devoured all the picture books, and was sneaking glances at Deidara, wondering how to talk to her.

"Umm..." Mirai hesitated. "Who are you?"

"Hm? You don't remember me?" Deidara leaned back in her chair. "Makes sense. You only met me once or twice when you were really sick, un."

"Oh! Wait, I kind of remember! You read me a lot of books. But I thought you were an angel."

At that, Deidara almost choked on her spit. "Angel?" Hardly! I've been called many things in my life, from 'artless brat' to 'explosion-bitch', but 'angel'? This was definitely a new one.

"Yeah! I thought I was dreaming... 'Cause angels only appear in dreams, and I know I slept a lot." Only appear in dreams? This girl... does she not know what death is? If she didn't, Deidara didn't want to be the one to tell her.

"Do you really know my otou-chan?"

"Yep."

"... You're not his new wife, are you?"

Deidara deadpanned. "Are you really sure you know what you're talking about?"

"Are you?"
"No, I'm not! Geez, kid!"

"That's good." Mirai swung her legs, her limbs too short to reach the ground now that she was sitting. "I really miss otou-chan, but I would be really mad if he got a new wife."

"I'll bet," Deidara murmured, remembering how much she had idolized her father, only to be let down when his secret had been let out of the bag postmortem. She wondered, briefly, how things would have turned out if Kou had never existed.

"I can't wait until he comes back," Mirai babbled on, unable to suppress an excited smile. "He's been gone for so long, so he has to come back soon!"

"Oh yeah? Are you going to throw him a surprise party?"

Mirai's jaw dropped. "Oh my gosh! I totally didn't think of that! You're so smart, Deidara-onee-san!"

"Haha, you think so?" She grinned at her, displaying her canines. "What—are you going to make him a present?"

"Yes! Okaa-chan taught me how to arrange flowers, and I'm sure Ami-nee can help me make something yummy for him. Maybe—maybe—! Maybe the bell tower will finally ring again, too!"

There it is again. Deidara lend half an ear to Mirai's chatter, her brow lowering slightly. The bell tower... What's so special about it anyway? She resolved to ask Guitar Man about it later, giving attention to Mirai once more. She was about to say something when Mirai suddenly tugged on her sleeve, looking a little shy. "Yeah?" Deidara prompted when the girl ducked her head nervously.

"Um... I... Can you come pray with me?"

"Pray with you...?"

"I want otou-chan to come back home before the year ends." Mirai's eyes went wide, pleading. "If we pray to the bell tower, maybe he'll come back sooner than ever."

Now that she thought about it, hadn't she seen Ami praying at that very same bell tower? She was itching to find out more about it, but for now, she simply nodded. "Sure. Do you want to go now?"

"Yes please."

Deidara ducked down to tell Ami where they were going before taking Mirai by the hand and leading her out of the clinic. It was colder than usual today, and the air bit into their skin. Deidara wished that the sun would come out, but alas, it wasn't to be. It was as cloudy as Akatsuki in the winter, the afternoon sun barely visible in the sky.

They walked in silence, their shoes crunching upon gravel.

The sound of a babbling stream of water reached their ears as they entered the town square. Immediately after seeing the tower's base, Mirai pulled her hand from Deidara's and tottered off to get closer. "Be careful!" Deidara shouted after her when she nearly tripped over her own feet.

"You seem well."

Deidara turned at the voice, a smile pulling at her lips when she saw Guitar Man just a few feet away from her, holding a bottle of water in one hand. He was sitting down on the stool he brought
with him every day, his guitar resting against his side.

"I am," she told him, honestly. "Thank you."

"I see. So who is it you are with today, Deidara-san?"

She glanced over to Mirai for a second. "The daughter of a friend of mine. Mirai-chan, un."

"Oho, Mirai-chan?" Guitar Man nodded along. "Does that mean this friend you speak of is Kurenai-san?"

"Not exactly. I meant her husband, Sarutobi Asuma-san. She and I don't know each other very well, un." Yet. An interview with her was unavoidable. She would make sure of it.

"Hurry up, hurry up!" Mirai yelled at Deidara from across the clearing. "Deidara-onee-san!"

"Alright, alright! Sorry, Guitar Man. Maybe later—there are some things I need to ask you, yeah."

"By all means." Guitar Man chuckled. "I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."

Mirai stomped her foot and frowned when Deidara finally appeared next to her. "What took you so long?"

"Calm down," Deidara placated. "I'm here now, aren't I?"

"Yeah, but you took too long."

"Whatever."

"Meanie!"

Deidara clasped her hands together, craning her neck to see the full profile of the tall tower. She could not recall if she had ever prayed to anything before, be it deity or inanimate object like this. Perhaps she had. When she had been full of fear, choking on screams or drowning in grief, she might have prayed, or she might have cursed whoever or whatever was responsible for the way the world ran.

Closing her eyes, Mirai murmured a prayer under her breath, her fingers intertwined.

They stayed like that for a few minutes before Mirai finally dropped out of prayer position, breathing out.

"Who are you praying to anyway?" Deidara questioned, giving her a look. "Some god?"

Mirai shook her head. "Nope. I don't really believe in gods," she confessed. "But my prayer... if the bell rings again, then maybe people will hear it one day."

"I—I see." The words stuck to her as she took Mirai by the hand once more and walked her home. Kurenai was surely back by now, and she was certain that Mirai's mother had not heard about the Furude's accident. She was probably beside herself in worry by now.

Deidara was about to open the door to the lobby when Kurenai came tearing out, almost bumping into them.

"Okaa-chan!"
"Mirai!"

Giving them room, Deidara stepped back, watching as Kurenai scooped Mirai into her arms and held her tight.

"Oh, thank goodness you're alright! Igarashi-san told me about what happened." Mirai's ears burned red in embarrassment when Kurenai scolded her. But in the end, the older woman sighed. "I suppose that your heart was in the right place. But don't ever go off on your own like that again! You should have told one of the neighbors before trying to find me or Ami-chan. Nagano-san from just down the hall was a nurse in her younger days. Do you understand?"

"Yes, okaa-chan. I'm sorry."

Kurenai squeezed her. "I just don't want you to get hurt. You're just starting to recover."

"I know, I know... But I wasn't alone, you know."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Deidara-onee-san helped me."

Kid, Deidara thought exasperatedly as Kurenai fixed her piercing red gaze on her. *Did you really have to drag me into this when everything was almost resolved?*

"Oh, you're..." Recognition lit up her ruby eyes. "You must be the one who... You're Asuma's friend? We were never properly introduced. My name is Sarutobi Kurenai."

---

*She stepped out of the carriage, eyes wide and holding the brim of her straw hat so that it wouldn't be blown away by the fierce autumn zephyrs. "Finally~! That was a long journey, wasn't it, yes?"

Uri turned around to beam at her friend, Kamizuru Manaka, who was breathing heavily as she hauled a huge suitcase out of the horse-drawn cart. On the other hand, all Uri was carrying was a simple bag that she slung across her shoulder. She was wearing a flowing sundress, while Manaka wore a more traditional kimono.

"Are you," she puffed, "serious? How can you still be so full of energy, Uri-teme?! Please tell me we're hitting the hot springs first, or at least going to our hotel!"

"Mou, I'm not that cruel, yes~! We'll drop our bags off before we explore!"

Today was Uri's twentieth birthday. Manaka was a bit older than her, having turned twenty-three earlier this year. Together, the two women—one blonde, the other raven-haired—walked down the streets of the acclaimed Mapleflame Town. There was only one inn in the small town, which was their first stop.

"Welcome to The Orange Bluebell!" the owner, a tall, bulky man greeted them enthusiastically. The downstairs tavern was full of life, people of all backgrounds, shapes, and sizes enjoying hot and cold drinks. There were many children, too, who stuck to all sorts of delicious looking juices while their mothers chattered like starlings. "My name is Itagaki Goichi, and I run the place! Are you here to stay?"

"That's correct." Uri grinned at him. "A room for two, please."

"Right this way..."
After collecting their room key and putting their luggage down, Manaka and Uri flopped onto their beds and sighed in sweet bliss.

"What are we going to do first?" Manaka asked, fanning herself with one hand.

"Well..."

Truth be told, Uri hadn't exactly planned out an itinerary. The only reason she had come here was to celebrate her birthday—she had chosen the place thanks to its fine reputation and famed flower viewing sessions. It was sheer coincidence and luck that her birthday happened to coincide with the blooming of the Mapleflame Flower.

"Did you know," Uri said absently, lifting her hand up and examining her nails, which she had painted a deep red. "That it is said that the flower blooms when the people are at their happiest?"

"I'm sure it's just a myth," Manaka dismissed. "I don't think flowers can sense feelings."

Uri laughed. "Well, you never know, yes?" She sat up on the bed, thinking. "It's a small tourist town, so there's no theatre here..."

"How typical of you to think of a theatre. Really, how does Masanobu-san even keep up with you?"

"He doesn't," she answered honestly, her ring finger suddenly feeling a little heavier than before. "I will cherish him for the rest of my life... but nothing will get in the way between my art and I. We are married, yes, art and I! What about you, Manaka-chan? With all the shopping you do, I'm surprised Kitsuchi-san can still afford to eat three meals a day."

"Oi, you!" Uri dodged the hat that Manaka threw at her.

They spent the rest of the day together, only parting when Manaka decided that she would prefer to look at a pair of shoes for forty-five minutes while Uri was itching to hit the book store for some inspiration for her plays.

"Oh, go off, you!" Manaka shooed her away as the sun was beginning to set, engrossed with the ruby red shoes. "We'll meet up back at the inn for dinner."

"Sounds like a plan," Uri replied agreeably before she exited the shoe store. As she walked through the streets, night markets were beginning to gain traction. She hugged herself, wishing she had brought her cardigan along. Being clad in the same sundress that she had arrived in was definitely not a good idea for such a chilly evening. Finally, she made it back to the book store she had seen in passing an hour ago. There seemed to be no one inside, and from how it was dimly lit, she was sure that it was closed. She sighed. It seemed that she would have to come back tomorrow at an earlier time.

As she was about to turn away, the front door opened and a bearded man with droopy eyes emerged, looking a little surprised. "Oh? Did you come here to shop?"

"Yes, but it can wait." She peered around his slightly stooped figure. "I'll come back tomorrow, yes—"

"No, no. It's okay. I insist." Fumbling with his keys, the older man—he seemed to be in his late thirties—eventually managed to unlock the door. He pushed it open for her, welcoming her inside. "I'm a bit low on candles; you don't mind the dark, do you? There's one on my table you can take and use it to guide your way."
"Not at all, sir."

She spent the next half an hour thumbing through stories, and only realized the time when night had already took hold of the world. Gasping, she closed the book she was flipping through and bowed hastily to the man. "I made you wait for so long! I'm sorry..."

"It's fine, it's fine. It's a nice evening tonight. Would you like me to walk with you?"

He seemed friendly enough.

"What's your name?" he inquired as they walked down the streets of Mapleflame Town.

"Uri. No family name. You?"

"I'm Kuboki Yasuji." He gave her a glance. "You must be a tourist. I've never seen you around before."

"Ah, that I am, yes."

"I see. Are you here for the flower viewing?"

"Mhm. They're supposed to bloom tomorrow."

"So I've heard. I suppose I'll have to put on a special song then."

At that, Uri tilted her head, confused. "What do you mean by that?"

Kuboki rubbed his chin. "How do I explain this...?"

"Take your time."

"I work two jobs—one at the book store, which I own with a friend, and another more... volunteer-like kind of job."

"Oho? And what is that job?"

He pointed up at the shadowy figure of the bell tower. "It's the best job in the world."

The moon was out tonight.

Sai liked the moon.

It was like a large, distracting splotch of white paint on a black canvas. It soothed every frayed nerve in his body and brought him better sleep.

A leaf crunched under a boot, and he glanced to the side, seeing Konan heading toward him. She and Sasori swapped for night duty every night—her turn would last until the dawn.

"Sasori-san told me about you," she said without preamble, kneeling beside him and loosening his bonds. Blinking in surprise, Sai flexed his wrists and ankles.

"Why?" He held out his hands, almost as if he were prompting her to tighten the ropes once more.

"I'm not heartless," Konan explained, her voice sounding almost gentle. "I thought we had this conversation before. Besides, even if you tried to escape, you wouldn't make it far."
She had a point. "What did he say about me?"

Konan scrutinized him carefully. "Who is it?" she asked in return. "Who do you fight for?"

"For Konoha," he answered immediately. "For Danzo-sama."

"Is that really true?"

"Yes."

"Fair enough. Let me rephrase it. Who are you protecting?"

A chill shot up his spine, but his expression remained immaculately unflinching. The delay in his answer was all Konan needed.

"Family?" she guessed, tapping her chin contemplatively.

"My family is dead."

"So is mine. At least," Konan gave him a strange look, "my blood family is."

Sai stared straight ahead, no longer looking at the moon.

"It was a massacre," she went on, hugging her legs to her chest. "My entire village was flattened. Unfortunately, my story is not uncommon. In fact, it's a frequent narrative you hear these days. But not everybody will take the time to listen to it. If they did," she exhaled, "then perhaps things would be different. But it isn't. In fact, it's almost the same. Even if the combatants are different, the nature of war will never change. What about you, Sai-san? Was it war? Or was it something else?"

He didn't answer.

Konan did not begrudge him.

But then—

"I never met them."

He blinked. Why did I...?

"Perhaps it was better that way," she said simply.

They watched the moon together.

"Your kindness is misplaced," Sai stated eventually, tone as clinical as it could get. "My loyalty will always lie with ROOT."

"I guess we'll have to see."

Sai narrowed his eyes a fraction.

Konan met his stare evenly before shifting her gaze downward and tightening the ropes once more. She stood, brushing her cloak off. "I guess we'll have to see," she repeated. "If you'll prove me wrong or right."

Sasori steadied his breathing when he heard nigh silent footsteps approach the sleeping bags.
What do you see in him? he wondered as the sun slowly rose. In the end... he's nothing but a puppet.

"Weren't you the same?" he heard her whisper, tensing. But then he realized that she was simply muttering to herself as she rolled up her sleeping bag, referring to him in her mumbling. He could feel her gaze boring holes into his back. "And yet you despise him so..."

He did not deign her an answer.

They say familiarity breeds contempt. Pretending that he had just woken up, Sasori stirred, sitting up and reaching for his canteen.

"Good morning," Konan greeted politely.

"Hmph. Morning."

"The prisoner is still secure, in case you were wondering."

He screwed the cap of his canteen back on. "Good."

But then—

Where would I be if nobody ever gave me a chance?

After packing up, they prepared to move on, Sasori hauling Sai on his back with relative ease. Then he paused, letting Sai slide down onto the ground.

"What are you doing?" He ignored Konan, settling for staring at Sai for a good minute.

Then he scoffed, undoing the ropes around Sai's feet. "You can walk," Sasori said curtly. "Or are your legs too fucked up now? In any case, try to run and I'll skin you alive."

Sai smiled, the action as plastic as Sasori had ever known it to be. "I understand."

Konan's voice was level as they walked. "I'm surprised."

Sasori glared at the path in front of him, refusing to look at her. "Tch. Don't be. The moment he betrays us, I'll hunt him down without mercy."

"I don't doubt that." She let him pull ahead a little. "Not even for a second."

Kakashi gave his companion a sideways glance as he fed Pakkun. They had all stopped in a grassy meadow for a break. "Is something wrong?" he asked, only able to see Kagami's back.

"I'm fine," she replied tersely, hugging her arms. "It's just chilly, that's all."

"Mm. No colder than the mountains we passed through in our journey, though. You're a strange one."

"And yet you agreed to work with me anyway."

"Only because you seem to have your head screwed on tight." Kakashi stood slowly, Pakkun yipping and nipping at his relaxed fingers. "Or am I wrong? It's hard to tell with that mask of yours."
Kagami finally turned, but Kakashi only saw that silly purple mask. "It's not falling off, is it?"

"No, I suppose not."

She yawned, stretching her arms up. "Then let's go already. We're losing daylight."

"Um, Uchiha-san?" Sasuke's head snapped up from his desk when he saw the Chief of Police looking rather nervous as he addressed him.

"Yes?" he said coolly.

Uchiha Sasuke had officially completed his 'training' in the Military Corps last week and was getting slowly used to being chained to a desk when he wasn't on the field.

But he had never seen the Chief of Police look so nervous before. Uchiha Fugaku, the head of Akatsuki's police force, would have never showed such weakness.

"There's someone here to see you."

"Can it wait?" Not that he wanted to do paperwork, but some things just had to be done.

"She... It's urgent. Judging by the look on her face, at least."

"Hn. Very well." Grabbing his uniform blazer off the back of his seat, he exited the cramped office he shared with the other common workers and to the front of the Military Police Headquarters. What could be so urgent? And who's 'she'? The answer presented itself.

Sasuke stilled as he saw her. "Sakura."

"Sasuke." Sakura tilted her chin up, her eyes gleaming defiantly. "Or am I speaking to a ghost? It's hard to tell these days."
He still remembered everything.

Everything that had led up to this, all of his regrets and frustrations all encompassed into one long, painful memory that never ceased to replay itself over and over in his cursed head.

There was little to save him from insanity. But they existed anyhow, little silver linings streaked across the darkness.

A bitter chuckle rumbled in his chest, cut off when a pang of pain rippled down his arms and legs. All four of his limbs were chained so that he was suspended in a starfish position. The room was completely dark, and having his chakra sealed off prevented him from using his Byakugan, leaving him almost completely deprived of sensation. *When did everything start anyway? Was it, perhaps, the day he died? Or was it before that?*

In his mind's eye, white feathers drifted through the air, and a pale, chubby hand reached out, trying and failing to grab them. He saw himself—a young boy who thought the world was his oyster, that he could do anything and everything he wanted if he tried hard enough.

There was a taller man beside him—his father, who was the spitting image of the Hyuuga Clan Head.

Hyuuga Hizashi had always worn a dark bandanna over his forehead. For a while, Neji hadn’t known why.

"I want to fly," he'd told his father back then, determination in his voice as he stretched his arms out in a stretch as if they were wings.

There'd been something in his father's eyes. Something undecipherable to the child he had been. "I'm sorry, Neji." And that had been it.

Those were not the words that Neji had wanted to hear.

He'd been yearning for something more like "You can do it." Or, maybe, "If you try hard enough, you'll fly one day."

But reality was not kind, and his father had been a perpetually tired, disillusioned man.

"A seal?" Neji had echoed as his father led him down a dim corridor, the two of them walking through a part of the compound that Neji had never been before. "A seal for what? Otou-san!"

His father had not given him a proper answer, but he had found out in the end.
I am destined for nothing but eternal servitude, he had told himself back then. Even with all my talents, I will always be chained by the fate that was chosen for me.

The only person that had ever treated him kindly after his father's death he had shunned. Her little sister had shunned him in return, slicing open his hand, and it was as if the entire clan, even the members of the Branch House, had turned their backs on him.

"Worthless!"

"Gouge out his eyes!"

"He doesn't deserve the name of Hyuuga!"

So before Tsuki came to Akatsuki, Neji had run.

At some point, he'd been attacked and bitten and changed. It was as if his coldness and resentment had finally manifested into physical form, and he'd worn it like a traveler would wear a heavy cloak in the winter.

For the gods knew how long, he was no longer Hyuuga Neji, but a mindless monster. Then came coherence in mild spurts and sputters, and he'd fought violently against the monster within in a wrestle for control.

When he'd finally come to once more, there'd been shouting.

"Don't kill him. Please." It'd been strange, hearing Hinata speak without stuttering over every single word. "I don't think he even k-knows what he did. I-I can see it..."

"Bullshit! Don't be an idiot, hm! He's not human, anymore, he's a demon!" She was blonde—her cheeks were flushed in anger—and she looked ready to explode at any moment.

"He isn't!" Hinata argued. "Karin-san didn't sense anything bad, did she? If anything happens, I-I'll take full responsibility for it."

"Oh? I don't see how you can, seeing as you'll be the one he kills first, hm. And even if that wasn't the case, that will just mean you'll be responsible for someone else's demise. Can your conscience handle that, Hinata-chan? Hm?"

For the first time in his life, someone fought for him. "Y-You really are a hypocrite, Deidara-san. How dare they kill him. That was what you were thinking w-when Sasori was on the verge of d-death, wasn't it?" The blonde woman's furious chakra was permeating the air, and Hinata struggled to continue, feeling choked, "How... is this any different? In the end, they're b-both human."

"Kid," someone began in warning, only to be talked over by the blonde embodiment of rage and fury.

"Is that what you really think? You must be delusional. This is entirely different situation—your nii-san lived as a monster. He still is. Sasori has never been a monster, hm." Her words seemed to breathe some life into Kakashi again, who stiffened. "You wouldn't be saying these things if he wasn't a Hyuuga!"

"You're right!" Hinata straightened like a ramrod after being berated, shocking all of them, who had only ever registered her as a weak-willed wallflower. And perhaps she was, but there was more to her than that. "But that's the c-case for you, too, isn't it, Deidara-san? I'm defending Neji
because he's my family—because I love him. I'm the same as you; you defended Sasori-san because he is someone you love and care about!"

Hinata loved him. Cherished him, thought of him as a brother even after the way he had despised her.

Neji was ashamed.

He still was.

"You thought I was running away?" Sasori chuckled darkly, raising his hand so that Neji's blood trickled down his Zetsu arm with agonizing slowness. "You are sorely mistaken, you insolent brat. But now that you're here, why don't I save them the trouble and kill you myself? Maybe I'll even take your arm." Neji got into a defensive stance, and Sasori's expression soured. "Why don't you fight as your true self? Stop hiding under that worthless skin, you worm!"

Hiding. Running away.

And wasn't that the truth? Convincing himself that the fates had it out for him, removing himself from the one person that had actually cared for him to wallow in his own misery.

I wish I could have made amends for it.

Maybe we could have started over.

Neji opened his eyes, seeing nothing but a black abyss.

Then light flooded in, blinding his vision for a few moments, and a tall figure stood at the entrance of the room.

"You must be Hyuuga Neji."

Monsters.

They were everywhere.

The sun beat down on their backs as they trudged through the desert. Shikamaru let out a disgruntled grunt, sweat dripping down his forehead and eyes squinted. He was wearing a straw hat with fringes but it did little to protect him from the heat.

"Are you sure we know where we're going?" he asked Ito Teppei, diplomat, tartly.

Ito huffed, his cheeks completely red. He was a squat little man who obviously wasn't used to much walking. They had driven up until a checkpoint, then they were forced to travel through the sandy desert by foot. Any military vehicles Konoha had were distributed to war efforts.

Shikamaru thought that was a little silly. After all, this was also a war effort, albeit a much more passive one.

"I'm sure of it," Ito replied eventually, breathing heavily.

They weren't the only two in the diplomacy party—others included diplomat Tanaka Eisen and his aide Aburame Shino. To their credit, they seemed to be doing better than Ito currently was. Then again, Shikamaru could have been a little wrong—the bottom half of Shino's face wasn't visible anyway, hidden away by a high collar.
Even in this heat, he seemed to be dedicated to his wardrobe. Shikamaru would have chucked that grey jacket aside hours ago and left it to burn to a crisp under the desert sun.

"Are you sure it's only spring?" Ito was muttering to himself as he dabbed at his temple with a soaked through handkerchief. "It seems more like the season of death to me."

"Death is not a season," Shikamaru told him, keeping his tone polite.

Ito snorted. "Hard to believe, Nara-san."

"I'm sure we'll get there soon," Tanaka reassured, a wobbly smile on his face. "If not, we'll encounter a border patrol."

Half an hour later, Ito inevitably called for a break and removed an umbrella and folding chair out of a scroll, flopping into the latter. Much to Shikamaru's annoyance, he was the one who had to hold the umbrella for him, the sand not compact enough for it to be kept upright.

It was then Shino spoke. "There's a wind now. It's blowing that direction. Why? I believe it might be leading us the way." He pointed toward the horizon, and Shikamaru stared at where he was pointing. There was nothing that Shikamaru could see but sand.

Tanaka frowned. "That sounds like superstition to me."

Shikamaru had to agree. But Shino... he didn't know why, but he trusted him on strange accounts like this. It was just the energy he gave off, Shikamaru supposed. Not to mention that it was logical, almost to the point of it being far-fetched.

So Shikamaru piped up, supporting Shino's claim, "Living in a country this hot can't be easy. If you want to build a city with a high concentration of people, the best place to do it is where the wind usually blows if you don't want to overheat."

Ito was impressed. "I see. Excellent! Let's keep moving then."

Once the umbrella and folding chair was put away, they kept going, their pace quickening slightly at the thought of the city—not the capital, but a neighboring city—being just a few miles more away.

Luck was on their side, it seemed, as almost immediately they were stopped by a patrol. A truck with the Suna insignia on its side roared as it rolled up to them, stopping short.

"Hello!" Ito greeted, fumbling for his travel papers and other official documents that declared their identity and intent.

Shikamaru and Shino stood back as their respective senpais took over, standing a good five feet apart from one another. Neither of them attempted to make any conversation, and Shikamaru was just fine with that.

However, it didn't stop him from occasionally eyeing the other teenager. The Aburame are a noble clan, aren't they? He wracked his brain for more, but found that he came up shorter than he would have liked. All I know about them is that they have an affiliation with bugs, were part of Konoha's founding clans, and have substantial political power because of that. I don't even know who the clan heir is... Could it be him? But that would make little sense for the Clan Head to send the heir to what almost qualified as a warzone due to the ongoing political unrest between Suna and Konoha.
Shino sneezed.
"Bless you," Shikamaru offered halfheartedly.

Finally, the diplomat party were approved, and the Suna patrol begrudgingly offered them a ride to *Sunaarashi Toshi*—or the not so creatively named Sandstorm City.

For the entire ride, Shino and Shikamaru were squashed together like tuna in a can thanks to Ito taking up most of the space in the back seat.

Stifling a miserable sigh, Shikamaru closed his eyes and attempted to nod off even with sweat uncomfortably sticking his back to his shirt. As he did, he could hear some of the whispers being hissed back and forth between the driver and the two guards in the front.

"I can't believe this is Konoha's backup party."

"I know. Two of 'em are still kids by the look of it."

" Fucking disrespectful is what I say."

*Great.* Shikamaru scowled. *We've barely done anything and we've already made a bad impression. This must be some kind of record, huh? How troublesome...*

He wasn't sure how much time had passed before the city finally came into sight and they passed through the gates practically unhindered. The buildings and architecture here were much different to Konoha's and Ame's—the houses and shops were much plainer and obviously designed to repel the heat during the day but keep it in during the cold desert nights. The clothing was different, too—everyone wore loose and light garments; some women wore headscarves to protect themselves from being baked alive, while some men wore wide hats for the same reason.

He wasn't at all sorry that the cultural clash had snagged his attention.

As they passed through the city, they got many wary glances from the citizens, but nothing more than that. Either the people were naturally suspicious of the army (as they should be) or they had some sixth sense that told them that some undesirable foreigners were stinking up the vehicle. Shikamaru guessed that it was probably the former.

When they arrived at a large, nondescript building, the Suna officials hopped out. "We're here," the driver said shortly. "Now get out."

Quietly, they obeyed.

The guards were kind enough to lead them inside.

"Representatives from the capital will be here soon," one of them informed the Konoha party with a shallow dip of the head. "Please wait here in the lobby. If you need anything, the receptionist is over there."

"Is there any water?" Ito couldn't help but ask, thinking of his empty canteen.

"I said ask the receptionist. Good day."

"How uncouth," Ito muttered when they were gone, slumping into a couch.

"There's a water dispenser over there," Tanaka pointed out kindly. "I'll get you some, Ito-san."
"Thank you."

Not even five minutes later, the double doors that they were facing (which led further inside) opened up dramatically, and a group of seven people stalked into the lobby, all of them looking dignified. Shikamaru stood and straightened, following the example of Ito, Tanaka, and Shino. Maybe if he had more energy he would have stretched a polite smile across his face, but a sullen stare with glazed over eyes would have to do for now.

The man leading Suna's supposed diplomatic party was thin-faced, lean, and had a rather large nose that made it look like he was constantly looking down at everyone. Which, to be fair, he probably was. The other members of the party were quite normal looking and unremarkable by comparison. Still, Shikamaru observed each and every one of them closely, his gaze lingering for a few moments longer on a blonde woman with a serious expression on her face. She had her hair tied into an unusual but not unheard of hairstyle—four spiky pigtails that reminded Shikamaru of shuriken.

There was a stiff handshake and some polite words exchanged between Ito and the thin man before the latter suggested that they make themselves comfortable in accommodation that Suna had provided for them.

It was less of a suggestion and more of an order, but they were all too tired and sweaty to care at this moment.

Honestly, Shikamaru could have killed for a shower and a nap at this point and he knew it. Or at least some time to clean out the sand from my clothes.

"Temari!" the thin-faced man abruptly said. "Please escort our guests to the hotel."

The blonde woman that Shikamaru had been staring at before stepped forward, bowing shallowly. "Of course, Chancellor Ono," she appeased, voice smooth and low. She acknowledged Ito and Tanaka briefly with a nod before walking off, expecting them to follow. Without wasting any more time, they scurried after her.

Temari was older than him, Shikamaru could tell that much, but it didn't seem like such a significant age difference. And yet she was on the diplomatic party of Suna. How interesting.

Then again, mused Shikamaru, she may be just like Shino and I. Mere aides in the grand scheme of things.

But the way she held herself... No, he decided in the end, this was a woman who wielded power, knew it, and wasn't afraid to exercise it.

"How was your journey?" she inquired.

It was Ito who answered. "Fine, fine. Quite tiresome, though."

She chuckled, and the Shikamaru felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end a little. "I'm sure. I apologize for that. In a few years from now, hopefully we'll have a better, easier to travel route."

"I'd like to see that happen," Tanaka opined, smiling.

"As would I," added Shikamaru, and Temari blinked in surprise as she turned, their gazes meeting. Yes, he said silently, his face schooled into neutrality, I exist, too. He knew that she had almost entirely written him off based on first impressions (looked like that sullen glare didn't work
out too well after all, but Shikamaru blamed the sun and the unbearable heat), and he needed to correct that mistake if he wanted to have any sort of influence on the outcome of these tense relations.

"Is that so?" Temari hummed. "I'm glad we're on the same page then."

She wants peace, he quickly realized. Or at least she's giving us that impression.

Save for what bits and pieces she offered to them, it was almost impossible to deduce her true intentions. Could Shikamaru really take what she said and implied at face value?

For now, he decided to just try and pick up on any tells she had. He didn't have much faith though. Right now, he couldn't spot any chink in her armor.

The rest of the journey was filled with (seemingly) meaningless conversation that Shikamaru repeated in his head over and over again to try and pick up any hidden meaning. There were almost none. Perhaps she was simply playing the polite host and nothing more.

But no, there was a weight to her words.

Temari spoke her mind. She was blunt. She was not a liar unless she needed to be.

But does she need to be one right now? Shikamaru asked himself, mulling over the question.

The hotel that Suna provided them was quaint on the outside but lovely on the inside. Temari checked them in and escorted them to their rooms. Any conversation they might have been having had died down by now.

Ito and Tanaka got their own rooms, while Shikamaru had to share with Shino. He didn't mind it, truly, but it was a bit of an inconvenience. If he'd gotten a room with Ito, he would have an easier time prying information out of the man.

At least Shino was nice.

"You two must be assistants," Temari commented as she pushed open the door to their room, Ito and Tanaka already parted from them and settling into their own room.

"Aides," amended Shino.

"Glorified assistants then." She smirked. "Don't look so down," Shino's expression behind his dark glasses hadn't changed but Shikamaru wasn't about to put himself on her bad side (he was sure she had one; women like her always had one and it would be very troublesome if he found himself on it) by calling her out, "You guys are barely adults yet. You can't expect to be any more important than that. Will you be coming to the meetings?"

You have only a few years on us. What could possibly make you say that? Arrogance? Nepotism at play, maybe? "Yeah," Shikamaru answered for Shino, though he was well aware that there might be more secretive meetings that took place without them. "Will you?"

"Of course. The Chancellor may be in charge of foreign affairs, but I'm not exactly a bug on the political scale."

"Oh? How interesting. How so?"

That damned smirk of hers made a reappearance. "Where's the fun in telling you now? You seem
like a smart guy. I'm sure you'll figure it out soon."

With that, she wished them a good day and left, disappearing down the hallway.

Ignoring Shino's penetrating stare, Shikamaru let out a frustrated sigh and turned away, closing the door and heading straight for the shower. When Shino continued to stare, he whirled back around, sighing and feeling that, somehow, he owed his fellow aide some sort of explanation. "It's the heat."

"Yes," said Shino, vaguely, obviously thinking of something else. "I could tell."

Everybody had their own stories to tell, no matter how unremarkable they were.

Kisame knew that.

As he bit into his watermelon, ignoring how the cold juices made his teeth ache, his trousers rolled up and his feet and calves submerged in a babbling brook, he took a moment to appreciate the blue skies that had emerged after the bloody storms of November and December.

If he had been born a little more normal, then his story would not have been interesting, but maybe it would have been easier to bear with. He remembered spending a good two hours crying in the middle of the woods, where he had ended up after escaping from the circus master his parents had sold him to, disgust and relief on their faces.

"It's the water," his mother had kept muttering to herself as she accepted the pouch of gold coins, practically throwing her five-year-old son into the waiting arms of the ringmaster. "The water made him like this."

After that, Kisame had dried his tears, picked himself up, and wandered off in a random direction, not caring where he ended up as long as it was far away from his parents and the man they had tried to sell him to.

"Kisame-sensei," Chihiro said tentatively, looking up at him. "What are you thinking about?"

Even as he grew up, tall and big and strong—taller and bigger and stronger than most people were—there were words that he could never escape.

Words like "monster", or "freak", or "unnatural". Over time, they became nothing more than what they were—a certain arrangement of sounds and characters. The derision that had stung so badly as a child turned into little more than mosquito bites.

But even then—

_I think all I ever wanted was acceptance._

He'd finally gotten it after building a name for himself, even going so far as to start a dojo in Akatsuki, Ame's martial arts hub. It had been immensely popular, although it's popularity did lose traction when Uzumaki Naruto spread rather vicious rumors about his loss to Uchiha Itachi.

"Hoshigaki-sama." Itachi stood before removing his Akatsuki cloak and placing it on the chair he had been sitting on. "Shall we?"

_Kisame took one last sip of his tea before straightening, his eyes gleaming at the prospect of a challenge. "Yes, let's."_
He could not deny it, though.

Itachi was a good man.

And while Naruto was a cheeky little bastard, he had his good points, too, keeping the morale up with honest words and heart.

Then Chihiro had come unexpectedly, and Kisame's interest had been piqued enough for him to take her under his wing.

She never shirked from him. Never feared him.

Acceptance.

He had finally found it.

And she wasn't the only one who gave it to him.

But no matter what, he was glad for it.

"Heh." Chihiro blinked up at him when his hand landed gently on her head, ruffling her hair. Despite her status as a child, her muscles were firm now, and her hands calloused from handling weapons. The results of training with Kisame—training that she herself had requested. "Nothing for you to worry about, kid. Say, want to get some dango? I'm meeting Itachi later this afternoon, and he loves the stuff."

Chihiro beamed. "Of course, sensei!"

"You don't seem like the kind to believe in myths and legends, much less put your faith in them," Sasori remarked as they trekked through the forest. The trees were getting thinner and thinner, and they were starting to see more rocks and ice in the environment.

"Yes, well." Konan glanced skyward before focusing back on the path in front of her. "I wouldn't have made this decision without more substantial evidence. I'll admit, there was a lot of piecing together seemingly obscure and unrelated things, but..."

"It's a gamble."

"One I'm willing to take." Her voice was firm. "The moment I spoke with Danzo, my wings were clipped. If I go back to Ame, Nagato will be reluctant to let me on the field again. I'm effectively useless in this war now—the only thing I have to offer now is this."

Sasori nodded tersely, giving no verbal reply. Instead, he shirked in his travel cloak a little bit, feeling cold wind bite at his exposed skin. He'd have to put a glove on his flesh arm soon or risk frostbite; even circling chakra through his fingers would not totally save him from that. He couldn't quite place his finger on it, but there was a certain wrongness permeating the air. The hairs on the back of his neck raised, he came to a halt.

Konan stilled, too, as did Sai.

Doubt overcame them at that moment, and any differences they all might have had were set aside as they assumed a formation that protected their backs, their weapons raised (in the case of Sai, he merely raised his arms, prepared to engage in taijutsu).

A snow hare raced out, and a split second later, Konan's kunai had flown through it.
"Dinner," she said dully as they waited for something else to happen.

Sasori let out a noncommittal grunt. "It's small, but it'll do."

Tense silence stretched between them as they stood still, prepared to attack. They did not ease up even once, the instincts that had been drilled into them since young coming into play.

Everything happened in a blur.

"Duck!" Konan shouted when a log came flying out of the trees, moldy ropes suspending them in the air. Her eyes widened briefly when Sasori chose to jump instead, cursing under her breath as she rolled out of the way, feeling Sai whisk past her. *He's... running?! Now of all times?!

There. Sasori's eyes narrowed as he honed in on Sai's retreating figure, a kunai flying out of his sleeve and through the air. It penetrated through the boy's hand, pinning him to a nearby tree. In mid-air, he twisted his hips, landing on his feet on the suspended log, which was swinging back and forth like a pendulum. Without warning, he cut the ropes, and gravity took hold of the contraption. Konan rolled out of the way, paper wings quickly forming at her back as she withdrew two black and white war fans—representing yin and yang—and cut the log into three pieces.

Before they could catch their breaths, arrows came flying out of the canopy, and, both of them swearing, they were forced to take action, Konan shielding herself with her chakra-laced wings and Sasori doing his best to dodge them as he summoned one of his sturdier puppets to cover him.

"Left," he heard Konan breathe, and shuriken nearly cut his jugular, the red-haired man leaning to the right enough just to avoid a death blow.

Panting a little more heavily than he would have liked—the air was thinner up in the mountains—Sasori felt his bones rattle as he regathered his bearings, all of his muscles coiled as he prepared for a hostile encounter with the men who were responsible for the traps.

Wincing, Konan unfurled her wings, looking a little worse for wear as their attackers finally revealed themselves.

Twelve samurai, if the heavy, segmented plate armor covering their shoulders, chest, stomach, and lower back were any indication.

Sasori's hand reached for a sheathed tanto strapped around his thigh.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," one of them stated before he could do anything. He was an odd-looking fellow, Sasori decided, with his long grey hair and bandages wrapped around his head.

Sneering, Sasori reluctantly let his hand fall to the side. "Tch! I thought you people were supposed to be *honorable.* It was difficult keeping any bite out of his tone, so he didn't bother. "And here you are, avoiding direct confrontation by throwing weapons like *cowards.*"

"That's enough," Konan said sharply, leading Sasori to glare at her. She met his gaze evenly. "We didn't come all the way here to antagonize them."

"Mifune-sama," one of the samurai turned to one who had spoken first, "What should we do with them?"

Sai tilted his head, unflinching as one samurai broke formation, stalked over to him, and removed him carefully from the tree. "If only you had died," he said, ignoring the samurai. "It would be much easier, Prickly and Angel."
Sasori stood his ground, even when Mifune's dark, piercing gaze seemed to bore right into his very soul, sweat beading at his temple. Then Mifune turned away. "The dark-haired one is injured, as is the woman. We'll take them back to camp first before deciding anything." He glanced at Konan, whose wings were hanging awkwardly in the air, broken and torn with weapons still embedded in them. "I cannot sense ill intent—merely desperation. The least we can do is hear them out."

There was no moon tonight.

In the house he shared with Itachi, Sasuke, wearing his pajamas, pored over the paperwork he had brought home with him.

The floor creaked, and Sasuke looked up from his desk to see Itachi lingering at the doorway to his room.

It was then Sakura's words came back to him.

"Sasuke. Or am I speaking to a ghost? It's hard to tell these days."

"Hn. I don't know what you mean." Sasuke frowned. "If you've come here to waste my time, then—"

"I didn't come here for any of the sort," she said coolly. Then she sighed. "Even back then you were a workaholic. I guess that's something we have in common, but you're stuck in there even more than I am at the hospital."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Where is Uchiha Sasuke?" she asked him, and he thought it was an idiotic question before mulling over her words. "Because I haven't seen him for ages, and neither has anyone else. Even your brother, I'm willing to bet."

"Sakura." He turned away. "You're annoying."

"Sasuke. Don't hole yourself away like this. Don't forget that you have a life, too, and that you're important to other people." If she said anything after that, he didn't hear it.

"Yes?" Sasuke said wearily, pinching the bridge of his nose as he felt a headache creeping up on him.

"Otouto. You should sleep now."

"Can't. I have work."

"Then I'll do it for you."

Sasuke's brow lowered. "Don't. This is my redemption, Itachi."

Itachi raised his eyebrows at the notion.

"I've been a coward. I know that." A muscle in Sasuke's jaw twitched. "I have sullied the name of justice while trying to make it my own. So let me make amends."

"Sasuke..." There was a sadness in Itachi's eyes that Sasuke hated. "Whatever redemption you need, overworking yourself isn't the way to do it. Take a break."

"I'm fine," Sasuke snapped, a tad more irritable than he usually was. "You go to bed. Looking after
Izuna must be exhausting."

"It is. But I wouldn't mind swapping roles with you. You love Izuna as much as I do, Sasuke. You should go spend more time with him. It'll make you less tired."

At first, Sasuke merely stared. Then he grunted, giving way. "Fine. Tomorrow, I'll take him out. It's been too long anyway." Sasuke picked up the candle on his desk and walked toward Itachi, startling. "Are... You're not usually this pale. Are you sick?"

"It's just a cold," Itachi reassured him.

"In that case, then rest already!" Sasuke let out an exasperated sigh, and Itachi couldn't help but smile at how quickly their roles had reversed. "I'll take care of Izuna—I'll get Asagi-san to help, too. Now will you please go to bed?"

"Yes, yes." Itachi chuckled. "Goodnight Sasuke."

Then he was gone, and Sasuke stared at the empty doorway. Itachi... if there was really something wrong, you would tell me, wouldn't you? Doubt crept into his mind and whispered sweet nothings into his ear, but he shook it away, crawling into bed and falling asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

It was a cloudy morning today, though patches of blue sky could be seen occasionally.

In a cafe near town square, Kurenai and Deidara sat, talking amicably. Mirai was at school today, finally well enough to return to her kindergarten. Deidara lifted her cup of hot milk tea to her mouth as Kurenai stirred sugar into her coffee, looking contemplative.

Deidara cleared her throat. "I'm glad we finally have a chance to talk," she began diplomatically. Kurenai's gaze shifted up to her face, eyes as red as the Sharingan looking troubled.

"Yes," Kurenai replied evenly. "Thank you for looking after my daughter during your stay. And for the present."

The blonde waved it off. "It's fine, yeah." It was from Asuma anyway, not me. I just happened to be there.

"I—oh!" Kurenai lifted her hand to her painted mouth when an owl swooped in suddenly and landed on Deidara's shoulder, the blonde unflinching at its arrival. "You...?"

"Ah, right!" Smirking, Deidara outstretched one arm, and the owl hopped from her shoulder onto her forearm, its clay talons wrinkling the white sleeve of her blouse. "You haven't been acquainted with my art now, have you? Don't worry," she added when Kurenai gave it a wary look, "it's harmless, un."

"It's well-trained."

"Of course. After all, it's essentially a part of me, un." She sighed, almost wistful. "It's fussy about the weather though. It'll melt if its too cold, too hot, or too rainy." Hence why she hadn't been able
to use it much in the mountains, where the climate had crippled her abilities. To demonstrate, Deidara moved her chakra around her body, and before long, and owl had been reverted into a lump of clay.

Kurenai's eyes were wide. "Amazing. Is this your kekkei genkai?"

"Mm. Though I prefer to call it my art, un. The beauty lies in its transience—a reflection of the nature of everything to ever exist." Deidara cleared her throat, a small flush appearing on her cheeks. "We're getting off track."

"I don't mind going off on tangents—I'm still trying to gather my thoughts together... If you don't mind me asking, why exactly did you have it out to begin with?"

"Oh." Deidara's voice was almost flippant in its nonchalance. "An extra pair of eyes would never hurt, un. Especially in times like these."

"Yes." Kurenai sounded a little stunned despite her agreement. "Yes, of course..."

They left it there, and for the next hour, Kurenai told her story.

Patient and hanging onto every word, Deidara was almost perfectly quiet as she tapped away expertly on the typewriter, Kurenai occasionally glancing down at how deftly her fingers moved across the keys.

"I didn't get a single ryo from my father," she told Deidara at some point. "Asuma had his inheritance, but it wasn't much since he's the second son. The spare to the Sarutobi Clan. The Third was a firm believer in fairness of all things, and, aside from a few favors, he treated my husband no differently than the average Konoha citizen. I suppose I should be grateful, though, or Asuma might be fighting in a war. Or even... dead."

"There's a fine line between the two," Deidara commented, speaking for the first time since Kurenai had began her tale.

"Aa. But we're lucky that way." Kurenai's eyes closed as peace washed over her features. "When Mirai was born, we were so happy. We got to watch her grow up for four years... then the war started, and Asuma had to leave. I won't lie to you—sometimes, his absence is almost crippling. Especially..." Her throat bobbed, and she shielded her face with one hand, exhaling sharply. "Mirai. She asks for him every day. And every day, I'm forced to disappoint her. I just want this war to be over already. It sounds selfish of me, but... Why should we have to suffer because of the whims of others? Why do I have to tell my daughter every single day that her daddy isn't back yet? Sometimes, the war doesn't feel real to me. But then I get reminded of who's still here and who isn't, and I..."

Deidara paused in her typing, looking up from the paper.

"I know it's out there," Kurenai finally finished. "And maybe I'm not out there fighting. Maybe nobody I love is facing death at every corner—"

Deidara's breath hitched in her throat, feeling her heart twist from his absence and the sore reminder.

"—but it's out there, and it's affected my life more than I would like." The black-haired woman's hands fidgeted nervously. "Deidara-san—can this be off the record from now on?"

The younger woman dropped her hands. "Sure. You've already given me plenty, un."
"I just need to know... How old are you?"

"Nineteen," Deidara answered promptly. "I'll be twenty this May, un. Why?"

"Nineteen..." She muttered the number under her breath as if it were of utmost importance, Deidara giving her a quizzical stare. When Kurenai finally stopped staring at her hands, she murmured, "You're much younger than I expected. You're barely an adult. And yet," her voice grew sad, "why do I get the feeling that you've seen much more than you should have? When I look at you, I don't see what I want to see."

She was almost afraid to ask. "Then," Deidara said cautiously. "What *do* you see, hm?"

"A girl who has been forced to grow up far too quickly." When Deidara didn't answer right away, Kurenai tacked on hurriedly, "I'm sorry if this is presumptuous of me—"

"Don't be," Deidara interrupted. "You're... not wrong, yeah."

"I wish I was."

"Maybe in another world." Deidara stretched, stifling a yawn. "Thanks for giving me your time, Kurenai-san."

"It's really no problem." Kurenai downed the last drop of her coffee before standing. "I'll treat you today."

"Oh, you don't have to—"

"No. Just let me do this for you, please. It's not every day I encounter someone like you."

Deidara raised an eyebrow, but didn't question it in the end. Kurenai meant no ill will toward her, and what laced her tone wasn't the sort of saccharine pity that she hated. "Thanks," she said eventually, packing up her things and draining the remainder of her milk tea, which was now lukewarm and bordering on cold.

They parted ways then, and Deidara went off to the next person she was going to see.

Ami was working behind the counter of the bakery and handing bread to a customer when Deidara walked in.

"Oh, hey." Ami's greeting was unenthusiastic. By now, Deidara's face was something she was used to seeing often. "Did you need something?"

"You said you wanted to hear the bell ring, didn't you?" Deidara crossed her arms. "If the bell rings again, maybe the prayers of the people will finally be heard, right?"

The purple-haired girl blinked, surprised. "How did you...?"

"Mirai-chan."

"Ah. Did you come all the way here to tell me that?" Ami scoffed. "In any case, you're wasting your time. That bell tower carried the town's hopes and dreams in its music. And now... I doubt it'll ever ring again."

"Awfully pessimistic, aren't you?" Deidara observed, voice wry. "Kindergarten should be letting out soon—if we hurry, we can meet Kurenai and Mirai there."
"What? What are you talking about? Hey! Don't just leave!"

Deidara, standing at the doorway, smirked. "Then get your ass into gear. I don't have all day, you know!"

Muttering curses, Ami shouted something to her father before throwing off her apron and tossing it across the counter. She ran after Deidara, who was walking at a fast pace. "You know," she said as she finally caught up. "You could have waited just a little longer for me."

"Kindergarten waits for no one," Deidara told her, and Ami couldn't help but think how odd the sentence was coming out of her mouth. But sure enough, when they arrived at Mirai's school, Kurenai was already standing at the gates, a stream of young students walking around her as they chattered and looked for their parents.

"Deidara!" Kurenai exclaimed when she saw them. "And Ami, too. What brings you two here?"

"Beats me." Ami gave Deidara a sharp glance. "She wouldn't tell me what's going on."

Deidara merely shrugged. "You'll find out soon enough, un."

"Okaa-chan!" Before Ami or Kurenai could reply, Mirai came running full speed out of the gates and launched herself at Kurenai, sending the woman stumbling backward a little.

"Musume-chan," Kurenai cooed, effectively distracted. "How was school, dear?"

"It was great!"

"Was it now?"

Mirai chirped on and on before Deidara finally cleared her throat, gaining all of their attention.

"Deidara-nee-san!" Mirai had finally noticed her. "Ami-nee, you're here, too?! Wow!"

Ami affectionately pinched the girl's cheek. "Yep. Although I don't really know why? Care to explain, Deidara-san?"

"I was about to, yeah." The blonde tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's about the bell tower. This town needs it back, or it'll be destined to be hopeless forever. I... spoke to a friend the other day. I think I know what to do."

"Tell me," Guitar Man said as they sat together by the fountain, holding warm mugs of creamy soup. It was a cold, crisp spring morning, one that would have been unusual anywhere else in the world. But in the lonely little town that sat atop a high plateau surrounded by forest-capped mountains, it was merely the norm. "What was your father like?"

"My father?" Deidara halted her drinking, giving the question some thought. "He was... childish, un. Petty and childish and hot-tempered. She pushed some of her hair out of the way, huffing. "I think," she added dryly, "I probably take after him more than I like, yeah."

Guitar Man hummed. "How odd. Do you despise your father?"

She let out a noncommittal grunt. "No. He wasn't the most virtuous man in the world, but who am I to judge? I've done worse things than him, un. Honestly, I'm more surprised that my mother married him than anything else. Although," she hesitated, "it wasn't like he was a bad father to me. I took after him more than my mother, and I considered him my best friend at some point. Anyway,"
Deidara shook her head, "Why are you asking, hm?"

"No particular reason. I just remembered, is all, that your mother had many a suitor in her youth."

"I'm not surprised. She was beautiful, un."

"Not only that," Guitar Man told her. "But there was a certain magnetism she possessed—a certain something, a certain quality, that drew many toward her, including me. My affections toward her are nothing more than deep admiration, but I had a friend who was quite romantically interested in her."

At that, Deidara's brow lifted. "Yeah?"

"His name was Kuboki Yasuji," Guitar Man pointed up at the tower, "and before he died, he was responsible for the bell tower's music."

"What? Seriously? Wasn't he old? As in much older than her?"

"Indeed. Almost twenty years her senior, I do believe."

"Hm..." Well, it's not like I have room to judge, she reminded herself with a wry smile. After all, the wide age gap between her and Sasori was nothing to sniff at, and that wasn't exactly stopping them.

"She was already married by then, Kuboki-san told me. He accepted that she would never return his feelings, but he never stopped loving her. He told me, before he died, that it was she who encouraged him to pursue his art, even when his parents relied on him to make money at the book store." Guitar Man drank the rest of his soup. "She only came here once for a few days. But it was enough for him. Before she left, she sang for him. She sang to him Mirai. Gave him hope for the future."

Deidara was silent, staring into the lukewarm contents of her cup. Then she looked up, eyes fixed on the tip of the bell tower, which twisted around itself as each vine of silver metal wrestled for the sky. "What are you not telling me?" she asked in the end.

"He never saw her again. But his love for her was undying and genuine. It took him months, but he finally managed to recompose Mirai for the tower. But he never played it. Told me he would only play it when the world was ending. Because from despair, hope is born." He stood, feeling his bones crack. "To make sure nobody ever got their hands on it, he hid it away in the tower. I've never been able to find it. The music I play helps people forget their despair. But it is not enough."

Though he could not see, he managed to follow her gaze anyway, tilting his chin heavenward so that, if circumstances were different, he would have been able to see the bell tower standing tall, proud, and alone. "She gave us hope."

"Why don't we see... if she can give them hope, too?"

It was a long way up to the control room. Ami was panting by the time they got up there, wiping sweat off her forehead and without any energy left to grumble and groan about her situation.

Mirai had gotten too tired to walk halfway up, and had to be carried by Kurenai. She was still in her mother's arms, although demanding to be put down so that she could help look.

"Kuboki-san left the track here somewhere, un," Deidara, wholly unfazed by the long walk up, insisted as she went through old bookshelves and scoured the metal walls for any clue or trace
"Are you sure?" Kurenai sounded skeptical, and rightly so. She pulled out a book from one of the shelves, thumbing through it with a thoughtful frown on her face.

"What is it, okaa-chan?" Mirai pulled at Kurenai's dress.

"A diary?" Ami was peering over Kurenai's shoulder, having gotten her breath back. "Is it Kuboki-san's?"

"Tell me if you find anything!" Deidara called over her shoulder as she continued to examine the wall art.

It was nearing two o'clock in the afternoon when Kurenai—who was sitting in a circle with Ami and Mirai—finally found something. "Deidara?"

"Hm? What is it? Find anything?" Blonde hair obscured Kurenai's vision for a second as Deidara squatted behind her.

"What does the 'Golden Lighting Flower' look like?" Kurenai passed the book to Deidara, whose eyes had widened slightly at the reference. The black-haired woman watched as Deidara skimmed through the contents of the page, mouth slightly parted.

"It was a lotus flower," she said in the end, slowly. "It looked like any ordinary one, except that it glowed golden in the dark, un."

It'd been the first play of her mother's that Deidara had ever attended. It told the story of a lost princess in a dystopian world, wandering the world until she was discovered by a knight who was eager to return her to her rightful place on the throne. It was quite a childish one compared to some of her other plays, but it was one that Deidara had never let herself forget, even after she buried all other memories of Iwa away. _Tis an old man's fantasy, hm?_ Looking up from the leather-bound book, she glanced around, taking in the wall art as a whole rather than in parts for the first time. "Of course."

Ami lifted an eyebrow. "Of course what?"

"How did I not see it before?!" Deidara laughed, the sound caught between mirthless, amused, and pained as she stood once more. If she'd heard Ami's inquiry, she chose to ignore it. "This entire room... it's just an old man's fantasy. Kurenai, what are the other books about?"

Bemused, Kurenai sifted through some of them. "Stories," she informed the blonde. "Most of them are stories. Adventure ones, fairy tales..."

"Kuboki-san was a dreamer," concluded Deidara, folding her arms as her gaze followed the snaking tree branches of metal. _No wonder he fell in love with her. Anyone anything like him would._ Walking forward, she gingerly placed one hand—the one with its mouth sewn shut—on a random branch, following its path. "Mirai!"

The girl in question skipped over to her. "Yes?"

"The Golden Lighting Flower was located in a tree-covered swamp. These are the trees," she motioned around the room, "and so the swamp must be on the floor, un. Can you help me find it?"

Mirai beamed. "Of course! Ami-nee-chan, come help!"

"Alright, alright!"
From despair, hope is born. For the first time in a long time, hope began to flutter in Deidara's chest. It was a dangerous thing, she knew, one that could certainly lead her to death if the situation was dire enough. But she took the leap, and kept the gift called hope beating alongside her heart as she searched the floor for the flower that was certainly there. Hope. Hope for the future, because there is one.

They swept books aside (Kurenai exasperately but also excitedly putting them back into their rightful places) and tossed the rug into a pile, uncovering the stone floor. Then, stepping back, they admired the view.

A lotus flower greeted them, its depicted glow repelling the vines and tree branches that reached for it, that wished to cause it harm. Even through the deepest, darkest mud, it bloomed, unrelenting and stubborn in its beauty.

Finally, Deidara walked up to the centre of the flower, crouching and tapping the stone with her knuckles. It was hollow. Mirai. Excitement sent shivers down her spine, and she wasted no time in digging her nails into gaps in the stone and pulling it aside—it slid open with some resistance.

Inside sat a smooth, heavy metal disc, an elaborate design streaking across it.

Ami breathed out, "Is that...?"

"Un." Deidara held it up toward the skylight. "It is. Kuboki-san... made this for my mother. For the town." Ami's eyes lit up in surprise, but Deidara went on, "Maybe Mirai only existed in a fantasy, but it was a symbol of hope. Just like this tower, before the war began."

Pensive, they all four of them marched up to the contraption in the front of the room, facing north. The shape of it reminded Deidara of her typewriter, only it had a recess in the centre that was clearly meant for the disc she held. Slowly, she brought the metal plate toward it, but before it could reach, Mirai tugged on her sleeve.

"Could I..." The little girl hesitated. "Can I put it in? Please?"

At first, Deidara said nothing, considering her. Then she nodded, giving the girl the disc. "It's heavy, yeah," she warned.

"Mhm." Mirai had to stand on her toes, but she managed to slide it in. It fit perfectly, a clicking sound echoing through the room.

"There's a book of instructions here," Kurenai, having gone back to the bookshelves, notified them. "After putting it in, you have to pull the lever."

"I got it." It was Ami who answered, walking over to the lever on the side of the machine and trying to push it down. When she continued to struggle, the contraption obviously stiff with age, Mirai and Kurenai went over to help, and the combined strength of all three of them finally did it in. The lever dropped, almost touching the ground, and Deidara's breath got caught in her throat when the cogs embedded in the skeletal metal walls around them began to move. At first, they merely creaked, a metallic whine piercing their ears, but then the movement grew more fluid, more natural.

The chime of a bell shattered the desolate silence of the town, echoing in their ears.

*Mirai.* Deidara was vaguely aware of Mirai shrieking in delight and Ami gasping and bringing her hands to her mouth, the latter trying to pretend that tears—of shame, of self-pity, of whatever—weren't welling up in her dark eyes. *Hope for the future. Is this what I'm finally seeing... okaa-
chan?

She turned around, where the sun shone brightly behind the clouds, which were slowly beginning to part, and was almost blinded. A wind blew through the gaps in the metal, vine-like walls, sending ripples throughout their loose, flowing clothing.

*From despair, Guitar Man had said, hope is born.*

The weight she hadn't known was still there started to rise from her shoulders.

They'd been through hell and back. All of them.

If she closed her eyes, she could see Sasori’s back as he left Konoha, the image etched on the back of her eyelids. *He'll return safely. He has to. But now—*

Shikamaru resisted the urge to steeple his fingers as he sat through the first meeting with Suna diplomats, staring anywhere but at Temari’s teal eyes.

Some two or three seats away, Shino was scribbling away on a scroll.

Putting his paperwork into a drawer, Sasuke tended to Izuna, listening closely as Asagi instructed him on how to burp a baby, Shogo occupying himself by playing with Daichi and Hikari, both of whom had come over while their mother worked.

In another room, Itachi prepared, hand moving fluidly across paper.

Sasori glared in the distant peak of White Fang Mountain as the samurai surrounded them in their escort, two of them helping Konan along and another keeping Sai from bleeding out too much.

A cold chill bit into his cheeks, but he kept going.

Gai’s voice rose into a roar as he encouraged his student—a fourteen-year-old boy— in his spar against Tenten, who wielded her bo staff with tenacity that most could only dream of. Not too far away, Lee had engaged another student in a fierce but friendly fight.

Sakura moved deftly in her rounds, while Shizune discussed with Tsunade about turning the former's many properties into makeshift hospitals if the war ever came to head.

Konohamaru, Moegi, and Udon exchanged barbed words with Hanabi as she dragged them and Hinata to one of the community meetings about how to bunker down during air raids, only shutting up when they arrived into a solemn room.

*We can't stop moving forward.*

Guitar Man looked up at the bell tower as his back was warmed by sunlight. Content, his shoulders sagged. "Look’s like the sun's finally out."
A/N: If anyone is curious as to why Konan is injured, it’s because her paper wings are part of her body, even in this AU.
Interlude: Carnation

Chapter Summary

yo waddup

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a solemn day today. Back ramrod straight and eyes facing forward, Senju Itama did his best to ignore the burning sensation at the back of his eyes as the child-sized coffin was lowered into the ground along with an adult-sized one. In the end, his efforts amounted to nothing, and he brought his arms to his face, trying to hide his weeping. Even the sensations of his older siblings—Tobirama and Hashirama—standing alongside him could not sate his tears.

When he hiccuped a particularly large sob, the a crisp, cold voice whipped him back into silence, "Enough of that. It's shameful."

Shocked, Itama flinched away from his white-haired brother, Tobirama, who had spoken.

"How could you say that?" another voice—Anjou Mariko, the girl who Itama had spent his childhood with—cut through the chilly air, disbelieving and filled with grief. "Tobirama-sama—"

"Don't fight." Hashirama flicked his gaze toward them. "This isn't the time." Without waiting for any replies, he stepped forward, and Itama couldn't help but feel overwhelmed when the mournful silence of the funeral was interrupted for the first time. The boy stood quietly as Hashirama made the speech that he had practiced many times when he thought others in the house couldn't hear (but paper walls for unfortunately very thin and not suited for privacy).

Tobirama's head bowed low at the end, as did Itama's and Mariko's.

When everything was finally over, the Senju brothers walked home in silence, Mariko trotting after them a little distance behind. Her family served the Senju—it was how she and Itama had come to be friends.

"Who could have done this?" Hashirama asked abruptly as the clouds thundered above them, threatening to rain. The guards at the gates of the clan compound merely nodded to them as they passed through.

"What do you mean?" Tobirama growled. "We already got the official report. Otou-sama and Kawarama were killed by Konoha." Still, though, he somehow sounded more unconvinced than his tone let on.

Hashirama fixed him with a stare. "Maybe. But why? And just within a week of the Ame spy gettingouted. He was put to death not even five days ago. It sounds all too convenient to me."

"It is common knowledge that many of Ame's inhabitants have Konoha origins," reasoned Tobirama, ignoring how Mariko had crept closer to them and was now holding Itama's hands, squeezing his hand in comfort as his tears dried. They toed off their shoes as they entered the house, Mariko conflicted as to whether to enter along with them or return to the servant's quarters.
In the end, she followed Itama in, and was not scolded. "It would only make sense if they were allied in some way, even if no official peace treaties have ever been signed between them."

"It all makes sense, doesn't it?" Hashirama hummed. "Inevitably, we will war with them. But..." His eyes became faraway. "That doesn't have to be."

"Enough. Clearly, your grief has gotten the better of you. Go rest in your room. You, too, Itama. It's been a long morning."

Neither brother contested Tobirama, knowing that it was probably for the better.

"If only she would write back nicely," Itama muttered under his breath, when Hashirama was gone.

Tobirama snorted. "Fat chance of that ever happening. Our brother is head-over-heels in love with her, but I doubt she'll be returning his boyish affections anytime soon."

"I don't think it's boyish," opined Mariko.

"In any case." Tobirama's gaze slid to her for a moment in acknowledgement. "Let's not hope for any miracles."

九月十八号，晴

今天我和妈妈在房子后面看她的花。我觉得妈妈的花很漂亮，有很多颜色。有蓝色，红色，黄色，和白色。

真的好玩！明天想要再和妈妈看她的花园。


五月三号，晴

今天是我的生日。今年我六岁。妈妈说明天我得要开始好好学习，但是我觉得学习很无聊，所以今天我一定会跟我得朋友玩很多东西，吃很多寿面和吃很大的生日蛋糕。


八月十号，下雨

我不要学习政治！为什么我得要读那么没用的科目？妈妈说我得要知道怎么做好好的公主，这样我们的城市才能繁荣。但是。。。我觉我不应该做我们的城市的公主。对我来说，我太喜欢跑来跑去，太喜欢在外面跟我的朋友打球了。我最好的朋友小兰跟我说她也要做公主。有时候，我觉得她是真的公主；我是假的公主。


六月七号，下雨

千手柱间想要跟我结婚。他给我发了一封情书。

我告诉他："不准"。
A/N: I stretched out the age gap between Itama and Hashirama and Tobirama. Hashirama is twenty-four, while Itama is merely twelve. Tobirama is twenty-two.

Yes, the second part is written all in Chinese. There is a reason for that. It's already been established that all current nations have Japanese as their "Universal Standard" but I've been putting in tidbits of Chinese culture everywhere, especially when it comes to the Uzumaki and their fallen nation. This will be the only time I will ever write in a different language, so please bear with me.

Additionally, Mandarin Chinese is my third language, and I only know how to write in simplified Chinese. If I make any grammatical errors, please tell me, and I'll correct them. The diary is meant to sound child-like to reflect the writer's status as, well, a child. Until the last diary entry anyway.
Part VI: Mayflower

Chapter Summary

Sasori and co. arrive at the samurai camp. Deidara departs from Mapleflame Town; Guitar Man gives her a parting gift.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He didn't like how he was looking nowadays. Sasori had never been an excessively vain man, but even he would grimace in disgust at his own haggard appearance every time he looked in the mirror. The Emperor had always been a merciless man—a quality that Sasori had come to see reflected in himself—and it was clear he didn't have a second thought or shred of remorse when it came to working him to the bone.

And the weight loss. That was the most concerning. His body had never stored much fat to begin with, meaning that most of his body mass was comprised of muscle. And if he were losing weight, then—

Sasori finished pinning the wrists and ankles of the gagged man onto his dinner table.

Then nothing, he reminded himself. Work on your health later. Right now, you have a job to do.

Tonight's victim was a man who had been embezzling funds from the government. The Emperor had specifically requested a special style of execution for this one. Sasori couldn't remember his name. Didn't want to remember it, actually, because if he did, it would probably stick to him for the rest of his life like an irritating bloodstain on his shirt.

Sasori unrolled a grey scroll, unsealing it and summoning a large blade that would have gleamed if there'd been a moon tonight. Carefully, he positioned the blade over the man's waist. Then, his heavy sigh muffled by the black bandanna wrapped around the lower half of his face, Sasori sank the blade into the man's flesh.

He screamed and screamed, and squirmed and squirmed, his back arching and twisting as metal sliced through his organs and pelvis like they were butter. Even after his body had been separated into two, his upper half continued to twitch. Somewhere in the process, the bisected man had ripped his wrist from the nail. With one bloodstained finger, he began to write on the floor, and Sasori did not stop him.

Three characters, he wrote with a shaky finger.

悲惨な。

Miserable.

Sasori looked away at the gruesome sight, only flicking his gaze back to the body when it was actually a corpse and not something cruelly in-between. Then, taking out his poisons, he burned his scorpion insignia into the man's broad back with an efficiency that could have only come from doing so many times before.
It was his call sign. One that the Emperor approved of and encouraged, knowing that it would instill fear and quiet obedience into the people. In a way, Sasori was like a wraith that brought the Emperor's wrath upon them.

Climbing onto the windowsill, Sasori disappeared into the night.

I am not a good man.

It was something that Sasori had figured out at an early age. Not quite when he had begun his training, or even when he had made his first kill (he remembered having pissed himself and Chiyo giving him a harsh lecture when they returned to base), but probably sometime before he started serving the Emperor of Sunagakure. He'd still been quite young, merely a teenager caught up in a world of adults and corruption.

Even if hadn't started out with the instincts of a killer, even if he never engaged willingly in senseless cruelty, it still changed nothing. In the end, he had made a monster of himself, and nearly killed the man curled within.

If Chiyo hadn't finally interfered and taken him out of Suna, then perhaps he would be dead now. Or worse.

So it made him wonder as he stared at the back of Mifune's head, the samurai force fanned out in a purely defensive formation. These men are men of honor, or so they say. They are the largest group of samurai to ever exist, and I am one criminal.

He hadn't felt this small in a long time, though it was hard to see from his utterly impassive expression. He was glad for it—the last thing he needed was any of them taking advantage of whatever weakness he bore for the world to see. Sasori breathed out, a white cloud expelling from his lips, which were beginning to feel numb.

"Are you okay?" he heard one of the samurai ask Konan when she stumbled. She was not visibly injured by any means, but Sasori knew better. Those wings of hers—they looked and acted like paper but were actually a part of her body. Clearly, the samurai had picked up on it as well, hence their accelerated pace.

Sasori was not meant for mountains. Even if he considered them a perfect example of nature's constancy, he had grown up in the desert, and this environment was definitely not one he would thrive in.

"I'm fine," Konan said through gritted teeth.

"No, you're not," the samurai replied kindly. "I'll carry you." She opened her mouth to protest, but he talked over her, "You'll only delay treatment for yourself and the boy. Please, let me carry you."

"... Alright. What's your name?"

There was a short stop to allow the samurai to squat and let Konan hook her legs around his torso in a piggyback. Shivering from the cold as she felt the mountain wind blow down her neck from a gap in her cloak that was now exposed, she closed her eyes, her brow occasionally twitching in pain. Her wings were awkwardly folded against her back.

"My name is Haibara Hiroshi," the samurai said. He was quite a great deal younger than some of the others—twenty-five at most. "And what is yours?"
"Just Konan, Haibara-san..."

Sasori tuned them out. At least someone was making friends. He hated to admit it, but the situation now rested almost entirely on Konan's shoulders. She would have to be the one to persuade the samurai to help them.

The next time they halted, it was in the face of a sheer mountain wall. Sasori craned his neck to look up, unable to see the top of it due to the sun's rays.

"Our camp is near," Mifune announced for the benefit of the newcomers. His gaze landed on Sasori. "How good at balancing are you?"

Maybe he could have said something scathing, but for the sake of it, Sasori nodded and replied curtly, "Good enough."

"Good. You'll need to be."

Haibara shifted Konan's weight. "Hold on tight."

Sai, who had his hand injured, was being similarly carried by another samurai.

Without another word, Mifune and the samurai drew their katanas from their holsters. Then, without warning, they all rushed forward with their swords drawn, somehow avoiding cutting each other as they ran. Then they leaped, using the chakra they had focused on their feet to launch themselves to greater heights. Sasori noted, with slight awe, how they had jumped in a linear fashion, each of them going higher than the previous one. They jammed their weapons—which they laced with chakra to protect the metal—into the rock face, creating a makeshift staircase of swords.

They landed almost silently in the snow.

Mifune glanced backward at Sasori, as if he were expecting a reaction. When he got none, he simply settled for beckoning his men forward to ascend the stairs. Without waiting to be called, Sasori followed; how some of the samurai lingered behind to let him go first—to surround him—did not escape him. Mifune led the way, and Haibara and the samurai that was carrying Sai were right behind him.

"The rock will eventually be too worn for this," Sasori remarked when the he reached the top, speaking to Mifune.

"Indeed," the old samurai agreed. "But the natural chakra energy surrounding these mountains make for durable stone. By the time that happens, we would have found a new, better way, or sought out a new location."

The last samurai in the line had the duty of collecting each sword as he went up. As they made toward camp, now considerably more relaxed since they were in very familiar territory, the swords were distributed back to their rightful owners. They were high up in the mountains now, and their vision was somewhat obscured by the wispy streaks of clouds hovering past.

Sasori wasn't entirely sure what he would expect when he arrived at their camp. He envisioned the samurai to be the kind of people who could thrive on the most minimal of necessities—perhaps a hoard of tents gathered in one place to preserve warmth, or an insulated cave system. In any case, he wasn't expecting anything fancy, which was fine.

And he was right. But it was still nothing like he had imagined—
"Ah! Mifune-sama is back!"

The samurai camp was more of a small village than a camp. They had erected houses of stone, wood, and straw, and Sasori could spot remnants of designated fire pits that had been burned only last night. The population was comprised of men, women, and children, and not all of them wore the same kind of traditional armor that the twelve escorting Sasori wore. Instead, they wore sewn clothing lined with all sorts of animal furs to protect them from the cold; he could guess that underneath the typical stitched fur-lined hoodie were more garments to keep them nice and warm up in this climate.

Sasori slowed to a stop as they were crowded by more samurai, most of them young teenagers who got excited more easily than adults. There weren't many very small children—the youngest he could see was probably around eight or nine.

A low rumble came from the depths of Mifune's chest as he broke formation and squatted in front of the shortest kid standing at the front of the crowd. "Hello, Nagaoka-shonen. Have you been keeping out of trouble?"

"Yes! Today, Okisuke-oji showed me how to use his katana! He even let me hold it, hehe."

"Welcome back, Mifune-sama." A woman with long black hair and droopy brown eyes smiled, nodding to the other samurai behind him in acknowledgement. "You returned earlier than expected."

"Indeed, Hojo-san." Mifune glanced back. "I'm afraid we'll have to converse another time. We have two newcomers who need urgent medical care, so we'll be heading to Sanada-san's home."

Hojo, eyes a little wider and more alert, peered around his shoulders, meeting Sasori's dull brown gaze. "I see. I won't stop you then—I'll inform Takahashi-san about your arrival. He'll be sure to prepare a warm meal for you all, including the injured."

"Thank you, Hojo-san."

Sasori stepped aside to let the samurai carrying Konan and Sai in, ending up standing next to Mifune. The rest of the samurai had dispersed.

"You're not going in?" asked Mifune.

"Why should I? I'm not injured."

The bearded warrior gave him a curious glance, a thinly veiled look of steel in his eyes. "But they are your comrades, are they not?"

Sasori dipped his chin. "And?"

"You don't care for them?"

"We're not exactly close. We're only together... because of less than desirable circumstances."

Mifune's expression became unreadable, almost a mirror of Sasori's own currently expressionless features. "I see. Would I be correct in assuming that it is because of these circumstances that you came to us?"

"Aa."
"Hmm... Then I hope, for your sake and theirs, that we can find in within ourselves to help you."

*What the hell is that supposed to mean?* A cold wind blew past as Sasori narrowed his eyes, glaring at the distant mountaintop. *It's not outright refusal at the very least... Tch. Is he being cryptic on purpose? What a waste of time...* He sighed. *If it really bothers you that much, I'll stay with them.*

"If that's the only reason you would choose to do so, then don't bother." Mifune gave him an appraising look. *"There's no point."* He went on, ending that conversation with some sort of finality, *"I'll have a room prepared for you. For now, feel free to explore the camp. If you cause trouble, my men will cut you down before you can even scream."*

Sasori smiled, but it was more like he was baring his teeth. *"I assure you, there won't be any."*

At least, he didn't intend to stir up any drama. It would be stupid of him, especially since he was smack dab in the middle of a potentially hostile territory full of people that he didn't have the best impression of.

"I'll hold your word for it. Now if you'll excuse me..." His long hair flowing behind him, Mifune swept away with his head held high.

Gossip about the three mysterious arrivals spread through camp like a wildfire. The kind that Nagoka had never seen before, because he'd only ever encountered contained fires in their camp's various fire pits, their locations—natural mountain walls protected them from the wind—ensuring that the flames wouldn't burn out too quickly. So, curious, he grunted as he tried to squeeze between two boys huddled in a circle with some others boys and girls. All of them were older than him by one, two, or even three years—he was the youngest in the camp, and as a result, the most untrained and therefore the weakest.

"Did you see them?"

"I think there were three of them."

"No way! Kazama-kun said that there were *four.*"

Four, three, or two, what did it matter? Nagaoka grunted impatiently. All he wanted to know was *who they were* and *what they were here for.*

"One of them had hair as red as *blood.*"

"Kazama-kun said one of them was our age."

"You really need to stop listening to Kazama-kun."

"I saw them," Nagaoka finally voiced, annoyed by how the gossip seemed to be going around in circles. *"There was a red-haired man, a blue-haired woman, and a kid with black hair."* To his dismay, he went either unnoticed or ignored. He was about to snap at them when a large presence suddenly loomed over them.

"Alright, now what do we have here?" Takahashi, the one-eyed bearded giant of a cook, growled, folding his meaty arms against his broad chest. *"If you brats have nothing better to do than to loiter around all day, I suggest you go make yourselves useful! Without,"* he added pointedly, "blocking any pathways."
"Erk! Sorry, Takahashi-san..."

"We'll be leaving..."

"I have katana practice this afternoon anyway..."

Muttering, the kids scuttled off, leaving Nagaoka as the lone boy standing in front of the cook. Takahashi looked down at him. "Something the matter, squirt?"

"No. It's nothing." Nagaoka scowled, and Takahashi's fierce expression softened in amusement. Clearly, it wasn't nothing. "I just wish they wouldn't ignore me like that. It's like I'm not even there."

At least Takahashi spoke to him. Nagaoka liked him, but it wasn't the same. After all, Takahashi was nowhere near his age or status—he was in his sixties, and a retired samurai to boot.

"Don't let 'em get to you," the older male advised. "They don't acknowledge you because you're not strong enough yet. You still have lots to learn, and kids your age are self-absorbed. Too interested in their own progress and getting one-ups on their peers to be bothered about a squirt like you."

Nagaoka grumbled, "Maybe I'd learn faster if Okisuke-oji weren't so busy all the time... I had to beg him for months about giving me a single lesson."

"Hah. You're lucky to only have to do it for months. Must be because of your family relations. Nepotism is worldwide, little man." Takahashi scratched his beard. "In any case, if you want to get stronger, you're better off asking some of the younger ones. They got big heads, you see, and it's hard to say no to a wide-eyed kid like you asking them to pass on all of their amazing skills."

"Huh..." Nagaoka grinned. "You do have a point. Thanks, Takahashi-san!"

As Nagaoka ran off, probably to look for the nearest young samurai, Takahashi muttered under his breath, "Fucking kid is gonna be terrifying when he grows up..."

The mountain wind blowing against his flushed cheeks, Nagaoka grinned as he dashed through camp, only slowing down when he discovered a small forming crowd. Wondering what was happening, he squeezed through the bodies and found himself at the front of the surrounding people; the numbers were growing by the second.

The red-haired man and a young samurai lady known as Saigo Konami. She wore the standard armor, and her long brown hair was pulled up into a high ponytail that lashed in the wind, held up by a red ribbon. As far as Nagaoka knew, she had become an official samurai just a year ago on her eighteenth birthday. Even for a samurai, she looked unusually fierce, a long scar running down her right eye and stopping next to her upper lip and a perpetual scowl on her face.

"You," Saigo spoke, voice chilly and grip tightening on her naginata. "You're Akasuna no Sasori, aren't you?"

"... Aren't I a bit before your time?" Sasori narrowed his eyes. "Then again, I can't be too surprised." Obviously wary, his gaze shifted left to right, but other than that, little else betrayed any nervousness he might have held.

Nagaoka held his breath, wondering what would happen next.

"Not even going to defend yourself?" Saigo's scowl deepened. "I guess it must be hard to defend all
the deeds you've done. So why bother trying, right? You'll only waste your breath."

His tone was decidedly annoyed. "Did you need something?"

"What I need is to know why Mifune-sama let a man like you in here without question. Your very presence," she growled, "is defiling the sanctity of this land!"

Murmurs rippled throughout the crowd, but nobody disagreed with her.

Nagaoka had to wonder what Sasori had done to incite Saigo's wrath. She was definitely someone he would never want to mess with.

Sasori raised an eyebrow. "Don't be so over-dramatic. If you have a problem with my being here, then you can take it up with your leader."

"And let a killer walk around freely? Not a chance. Akasuna no Sasori, let me speak to you in the language you speak best. Saigo's countenance darkened, her bangs falling slightly over her face. "A battle between you and I. The training fields aren't too far away."

"... No."

"Excuse me?"

"Look, brat," Sasori deadpanned, his impatience getting the better of him. "I already told your leader I wouldn't 'make any trouble'. You're getting on my last nerve, girl. I didn't trek all the way up this fucking mountain for you do undo all of my work." With that, he turned his back on her—as if she weren't even worth his time—and started to walk away.

"Don't you dare walk away from me!"

The crowd was beginning to part for him when Saigo suddenly roared, dashing toward him with her naginata pointed to kill or seriously injure. Nagaoka gasped when he heard the clash of the metal against something, unable to squeeze his eyes shut. He could only watch—

—as Sasori gripped the sharp blade with his right arm, completely unfazed by how the weapon was biting into his flesh.

Nagaoka's stomach coiled when he caught sight of just what his arm was made of.

Was it wood? No, no, it wasn't...

"You must be a demon," Saigo whispered harshly. "Only a demon... would possess such a thing!"

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*Then let me show you what a demon I can be.* The answer was on the tip of his tongue, but the woman had caused him enough grief for one day. Perhaps, if he were pettier and more spiteful, he would have taken the effort to actually snap the metal part of her naginata into two. "Are you scared?" Sasori asked her, tone bordering on mocking. "What do you think happens when you anger a demon?" Her pupils narrowed into slits, and Sasori knew he had gotten to her. He sighed, dropping the act. "In any case, you're nothing but an annoying gnat to me." *One of many, actually,* he added silently, thinking quite unkindly thoughts about Sai. "Haven't you figured it out by now? You are not my enemy—and for your own sake, you're better off that way, brat."

Sasori hated her kind.

The headstrong and stubborn kind that got riled up too easily, that had nothing else to offer but
sheer bullheadedness.

It was almost ironic, he knew, but not quite.

After all, Deidara was a different breed from the raging she-demon in front of him, the woman's face far too close to his than he would have liked.

"What is going on here?"

And the last person Sasori expected to see out here all but waltzed out of the crowd, shoulders slumped and hands in his pants pockets.

"Hatake?"

"H-Hatake-san!" exclaimed the samurai who still had her naginata stuck in his Zetsu arm. Giving her a withering glare, Sasori used his other hand to yank the blade from his arm. In return, she bared her teeth at him. "You're back early," she said coolly, addressing Kakashi. "That's unusual of you."

Kakashi ignored her small talk, getting straight into the meat of things. "So," he started. "What's going on here?"

Sasori scoffed. "Nothing for you to be concerned about. Though," he added pointedly, "I would appreciate it if someone set this brat straight." As he said so, he looked around, wondering irritably why no one had bothered to intervene.

When he pinned his glare on the first armor-clad man he saw, the samurai merely shrugged. "If a man like you could not defend yourself, then you would have deserved to die."

Sasori ignored him, turning his attention to Kakashi. "You just keep showing up everywhere, don't you?" His lips curled upward in dry amusement. "Are you stalking me, Hatake?"

Kakashi chuckled. "Don't flatter yourself. Ne, Saigo-chan. Sorry to keep you from exacting justice, but you'll have to spare him from your blade for now."

"You don't order me around, Hatake-san—"

"No, but I do." Saigo gritted her teeth when Mifune emerged from the crowd, lowering her head to him. "Make yourself busy elsewhere, Saigo. Though many of us would argue his presence, he is, for now, our guest. And I expect you to treat him as such."

"... Yes, Mifune-sama. I apologize for my misconduct."

The crowd broke apart when Saigo left, everybody going back to minding their own business and getting through the day.

"Good timing," Kakashi remarked, his posture slumping into something more lackadaisical.

Sasori wasted no time. "What is he doing here?" He gave Kakashi a sideways glance, not entirely hostile. "I thought you would be Rin back in Konoha."

"Maa... Rin is a good friend of mine, but there are more pressing matters."

"You can speak to Hatake-san later," Mifune interrupted. "Sasori, I wish to speak to you in my quarters. Come."
"Hmph." Tossing one backwards glance at Kakashi, Sasori followed after the old samurai.

"ARF ARF!"

Konan, her shirt lying in a heap next to her, turned her head to the side with weary eyes when a pug dog came barging into Sanada's home. The old homeowner was currently treating the wounds on her back.

"Why, if it isn't Pakkun," Sanada said as the pug sat on his haunches in front of them. There was a piece of parchment tied to his neck, and Sanada called for her assistant to retrieve the message.

"It seems that Uchiha-san was injured on one of the patrols," the assistant read out. "She and Hatake-san will likely be returning soon to get her injury treated."

Hatake? Konan lifted her head slightly. This could be trouble, especially if Sasori is involved.

But if any commotion had happened outside, she didn't hear it, stuck in Sanada's house and away from any drama. All she could do was hope that Sasori had kept his temper in check, and that Mifune wouldn't throw them out the moment she and Sai had recovered.

Sai.

That was another issue all on its own.

A part of her was vindictive—longing to rip into him for attempting to abandon them in a time of need, especially when she had put some of little faith she had left for this world into him. She'd seen something different in him—something that set him apart from the other mindless ROOT soldiers under Danzo's control.

The small glimmer of humanity.

The same she had seen in Sasori, and the same that she had found definitely not lacking in abundance in the eyes of Suigetsu and Juugo.

So why? she asked him silently. Maybe... I was wrong. But I don't think so. Not... about this. Her orange gaze shifted to his still form. His hand had already been bandaged, and she suspected he was only here because he had nowhere else to be. A successful escape was unlikely, considering how many people were in the confines of the camp.

Konan would wait then.

Her faith in him had been squashed.

But not completely.

Not yet.

She would wait.

And if he wouldn't change, then she'd have no qualms in putting him down herself.

The sound of footsteps reached her ears, and Konan turned her head to see another woman walk into Sanada's humble home. She had eyes as black as ink, and deep, dark hair. At first, she thought that she was a samurai warrior.

But *Uchiha* was not a samurai name.

Konan hissed when Sanada nudged a particularly deep gash in her back.

"Well, well," the Uchiha mused, sitting down in the corner. "I wasn't expecting any more visitors to the camp. Your leader must not be happy, having to put up with all of us here." Grunting, she removed her ponytail, letting out a sigh of relief when her hair fell around her like a wispy cloud. With her right arm, she swept her hair to one side before removing her shirt.

"He'll manage," Sanada said tartly. She ordered her assistant to help Uchiha remove her clothes before tending to Konan's back once more. "So," she continued, addressing Konan, "What's *your* name, hm?"

"Konan," the blue-haired woman replied quietly. She could hear Sanada rustling through one of the medical kits. From her peripheral vision, she caught the flash of white bandages.

"No family name?"

"No."

"I've finished disinfecting your wounds," the old woman informed her. "Now raise your arms."

She obeyed, staring at the wall as Sanada bandaged her up, her stomach heaving slightly at the discomfort of having her breasts bound as well.

"Tell me, Konan-san, what brings you here?"

Konan swallowed, her throat too dry for comfort. "War," she rasped, unashamed.

"Something tells me you're not here to seek refuge from it."

She made an affirmative noise. "This is something that needs to be dealt with, or else..."

"Everything will burn to ashes," Uchiha said from her corner, her upper half now exposed. Sanada's assistant was keeled over slightly as she treated the wounds on Uchiha's ribs, but over her head, Konan could see it—a hideous, horrible scar on her shoulder. It was fleshy and thick, as if it had been slashed open at different angles during different times. "Hey, Konan-san, who sent you?"

"My Emperor's will," Konan answered, cautious.

But Uchiha had no such reluctance. "Ah. It was the Hokage of Konoha that brought Kakashi and I here. Or rather, just Kakashi. I just chose to tag along. Name's Kagami, by the way. Uchiha Kagami."

Konan knew of the Uchiha Clan. Once residents of Konohagakure, the entire clan had migrated to Amegakure around one or two generations ago, along with some other major clans of Konoha. They had all settled in Akatsuki City, a hub for martial arts and trade.

She wondered, momentarily, if the Uchiha Clan had been uprooted once more.

"Just Konan," she said in the end, meeting Kagami's gaze evenly.

"Once I'm healed, we should go train sometime." A wicked grin slashed across the Uchiha's lips. "You *are* a warrior, right? You mentioned something about your Emperor. Are you like Sasori..."
then? Because I saw him on the way here. Saigo-san was pointing her blade at him."

"Oh, great." Konan sighed. "I was hoping he wouldn't stir up any trouble..."

"Saigo-san?" echoed Sanada. "Mou, if Saigo-san was involved, it was probably inevitable. That girl has a temper taller than her stature and is more stubborn than a mule. Not to mention her sense of righteousness. She'll try to cut you up first before asking questions."

Because of course there had to be someone like that in the camp.

As if everything else weighing down on her shoulders wasn't enough.

Kagami cackled. "If only I could have seen! But say..." Her voice dropped down a pitch, startling Konan when it suddenly became darker and rougher. "You and Sasori... you came here together?"

"Yes," Konan turned her head to Sai's seemingly asleep form. "We all did. What of it?"

"Oh, nothing. Just... curiosity, so to speak. The last I saw of him, he was on his way to fight in the war. Did you poach him, Konan-san?"

"Hardly. He came to me himself."

Kagami stood when her wounds had finished being treated. Her stance was now relaxed. "Ah, in any case, I don't really care. As long as he's not cheating."

"Cheating?" He... has someone waiting for him at home? She hadn't known that. Sasori had never told her. Konan couldn't blame him, of course, as they hardly knew each other, but that was an interesting tidbit of information. She schooled her face into neutrality, which wasn't difficult. "If he is, I wouldn't know."

"Yes... of course not..." Kagami cocked her head as she got dressed.

"What about you?" Konan grabbed her shirt when Sanada gave her affirmation. "Do you have anyone?"

There was beat.

"No," Kagami answered eventually. "I don't."

It's probably better off that way. Konan nodded. After all, when Yahiko died... Her chest twisted up, and she felt out of breath for a moment.

"Calm down, Konan-san," Sanada soothed. "No need to stand up so fast. You're still aching."

In more ways than one, she certainly was.

But then again—

Konan glanced at Kagami's retreating back as the other woman left the hut, Pakkun scrambling after her.

Who wasn't?

Ami tossed and turned that night, unable to get some sleep when she still felt her ears ringing from the song the bell tower had chimed. Normally, she would have been annoyed, but all she could feel
was exhilarated and lightheaded. She awoke at dawn, hastily rushing out the door after freshening up to meet with Kurenai and Mirai at the bridge that connected the town with the path back to Konoha City.

Today, Deidara was leaving.

When she arrived, Kurenai was already there, a sleepy Mirai in her arms.

"Kurenai-san!"

"Ah, Ami-chan!"

Ami halted next to her, giving her a smile. "Deidara-san isn't here yet?"

Kurenai shook her head. She was without makeup today, her face plainer than Ami remembered. "Not yet, but I'm sure she'll be here soon. The only taxi that comes around these parts anymore should almost be at the stop down the road by now."

True to Kurenai's words, Deidara soon appeared in the distance, accompanied by Guitar Man and the woman who owned The Orange Bluebell—Umeko.

"Are you sure you have everything packed?" the innkeeper was pestering her, wiping her hands down her skirt.

Deidara let out a sigh of long suffering. "Yes, Umeko-san. For the last time, stop mothering me, yeah!"

"Mothering you? Oh, no, you have it all wrong. I just don't want to be sued for theft or anything; my business can hardly afford it—"

Guitar Man laughed as Umeko tried to defend her actions as not motherly but self-serving in vain. He was carrying his guitar with him, as usual, though something rattled inside it when he walked.

Kurenai nudged Mirai awake, the little girl yawning and blinking blearily. She lit up, though, when she spotted Deidara. "Deidara-onee-san!" Mirai wriggled out of her mother's arms to hug Deidara's waist.

Deidara palmed her head, ruffling her curly black hair. "Look's like you're finally better."

"Yep!" Mirai beamed up at her. "I also opened otou-chan's present!"

"Oh? And what was it?"

"A nice dress for the summer and a necklace," Kurenai answered for her. Eagerly, Mirai pulled her shirt collar down to reveal a string that hung loosely around her neck, a gleaming, smooth metal flower pendant attached to it.

Ami awkwardly stood to the side as Deidara entertained Mirai for the last time, waiting for her turn to speak. Finally, Deidara's eyes met hers, and she cleared her throat. "So."

"So," Deidara echoed, crossing her arms.

"I... Thank you. I know I wasn't the best host, but... thanks. For helping me... and... helping the whole town. There's nothing I can do to repay you for that."

"Oh, I'm sure there's something," Deidara answered flippantly. "How 'bout you start calling me
Ami's face soured. "Not a chance."

Deidara smirked. "It was worth a try." She glanced at her watch. "It's almost time."

"Wait." Guitar Man ambled forward, his guitar no longer rattling strangely with every step. In one hand, he held something that couldn't be entirely discerned due to the way his fingers covered it. Curious, Deidara raised an eyebrow when Guitar Man held it out to her.

It was a headband.

The same kind of headband worn by the patriots of a nation—in Guitar Man's case, it was an Iwa headband. The metal part of it with Iwa's insignia had been sliced through.

Letting out a sharp breath, Deidara took it from him, eyes wide. "This..."

"Something to remember me by."

Nodding, Deidara accepted it. "Thank you. For everything."

Then she placed her case on the ground, freeing up both hands to tie the headband around her head. The symbol was partially covered by her hair. "Goodbye... Maekawa-san."

Guitar Man straightened. "Oho? You figured it out?"

"I did a bit of reading. You were once the scion of a noble Iwa family, un."

He smiled. "Once again, you've defied my expectations, Deidara-san. But you're wrong on one account."

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"This isn't goodbye," he told her, and Deidara swore that if he had his sight, he'd be staring at the headband she now wore. "It's merely a matter of 'see you again'."

Well then. Deidara lifted an arm in farewell. "See you again, then," she said. "All of you."

"See you, Deidara-san!" Mirai called after her.

"My doors will always be open for you!" added Umeko. "You're the best customer I've had in a long time!"

"She's one of the only customers you've had in a long time," Ami pointed out, the innkeeper pointedly ignoring her logic.

Deidara smiled to herself as the words faded with distance.

Mifune's home smelled of incense; something which made Sasori stiffened when he recalled how Danzo's compound has smelled the same. "Take a seat," the older man ordered as he got into seiza behind a low wooden desk.

Sasori obliged, also assuming the seiza position in front of Mifune.

There was already a teapot and some tea and animal jerky on the table—clearly, Mifune's wife or daughter had been here earlier. Or perhaps Mifune himself had been preparing for this meeting.
"Saigo-san is quite the hothead," Mifune remarked as he poured them both a cup of tea. At Sasori's questioning glance, he added, "There is a small village behind these mountains where we go to for supplies."

"She's an idiot," Sasori said gruffly. "Who needs to learn how to keep her temper in check."

If Mifune felt any offense on Saigo Konami's behalf, he didn't show it. "Regardless," his eyes gleamed, "you have broken your promise to me."

"It wasn't a promise. I don't make promises I can't keep."

"I see."

Sasori frowned. "Why did you bring me here?" he demanded, cutting straight to the chase.

"For generations, the samurai have considered themselves a family," Mifune informed him. "Of course, there are rōnin—wanders, rogue samurai—who have either lost their masters or cut themselves off from us." He smiled. "Technically, we are rōnin ourselves, but I digress. We are a largely egalitarian society—when we make important decisions, we consult all members of the clan except the children. However, the words of some weigh more than the words of others, whether it be because of reasoning or experience."

For the first time, Sasori picked up his cup, blowing gently on it before taking it a sip. The warmth that slid down his throat spread all over his body, but his shoulders remained tense. "And?" he prompted the samurai.

"It would be in your best interest to work things out with Saigo-san before I call for a war council."

At the mention of a war council, Sasori sat up straighter. Mifune picked up a piece of jerky between his fingers. "That is why you're here, isn't it? Contrary to popular belief, we samurai are not completely cut off from the world. We are well aware of the war that Tsukigakure and Amegakure wage. But even then...

"I'm not sure if you are worthy of our help. It is a sentiment that is widely shared in our clan. Criminals and murderers... have no place in asking for our help."

"If the people you defend are anything like you," Sasori narrowed his eyes at Mifune's insinuation, "then they are not worth saving."

Mifune stared him down, waiting for a response. An outburst, perhaps, or maybe even an attack. But Sasori merely lowered his chin, meeting his gaze evenly. His voice was level. "I am no longer that man."

The old samurai put down his cup. "Then prove it."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Let Part VI begin...

Also, to address the previous chapter's Chinese diary entries, I totally forgot that on some of the sites I post this on, it can't be copy and pasted and translated for the ease
So here's the translation:

[September 18th, sunny]

Today my mother and I were looking at her flowers behind the house. I think that mother's flowers are very pretty, they have lots of colors. Some are blue, red, yellow, and white.

It was really fun! Tomorrow I want to go with mother to look at her flowers again.

[May 3rd, sunny]

Today is my birthday. This year I'm six years old. Mother said that tomorrow I have to start studying, but I feel that studying is boring, so today I'll definitely play lots of things with my friends, and eat birthday noodles and cake.

[August 10th, rainy]

I don't want to study politics! Why do I have to study such useless subjects? Mother said I have to know how to be a good princess, this way our city can prosper. But... I don't think I should be the princess of our city. When it comes to me, I like running around and playing ball with my friends outside too much. My best friend Xiao Lan told me that she also wants to be a princess. Sometimes, I feel that she's the real princess; I'm just a fake princess.

[June 7th, rainy]

Senju Hashirama wants to marry me. He sent me a love letter.

I told him: "No way."

Hmph.]

Fun fact: The waist chop execution method shown in the first part of the chapter was a method once used in China. To quote Wikipedia, "The Education Administrator of Henan was sentenced to waist chop. After being cut in two at the waist, he stayed alive long enough to write the Chinese character 慘 (cǎn; "terrible/miserable") seven times with his own blood before dying. After hearing this, the Yongzheng Emperor abolished this form of execution."

Old torture methods are so interesting :0
Part VI: Wake Robin

Chapter Summary

Chiyo prepares, Ai Wei is an angry munchkin, Konan listens to a tale, and Hashirama risks it for the biscuit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the corner of Chiyo's apartment was a wooden training dummy that sat in the corner of the living room, collecting dust. Deidara had not been home for a while now, so the dummy remained unused for the meantime.

Chiyo barely glanced at it before she put up a poster detailing what to do in the case of an air raid on the wall, smoothing it out against the surface. It was mostly common sense, such as hunkering down in your local bunker, but the movement into the age of planes and other sorts of infernal war machines had led to Konoha moving a portion of their budget into producing these sorts of instructions.

There hadn't been any sort of thing in the past wars Chiyo had lived through.

Even for a veteran like her, she wasn't entirely sure what to expect in this most recent, deadlier war, and that left an unsettling feeling in her stomach.

The hallway outside her apartment smelled like stale cabbage, and she grimaced and pinched her nose as she adjusted her hat with her other hand, the handle of her purse tucked in the crook of her elbow. Feeling pretty today, she had a small flower tucked into the ribbon of her otherwise plain-looking head-wear.

When she arrived at her local community center, some familiar faces were already there. Morbid approval surged through her when she spotted Hanabi and Moegi sitting in seiza and talking quietly as they waited for the military police officer to arrive.

"Chiyo-baa-sama," Hanabi greeted politely, and Chiyo lifted a hand in greeting before sitting elsewhere with people who were more in her age range. Among them were the old man who ran a fried chicken shop and his wife and son (who had brought along his wife and son), Irihata Mina—a woman in her seventies who ran the tai chi club a few blocks away—and some of the ladies from her club (most of them middle-aged or as old as Irihata herself), and a lonely, childless widower who Chiyo did not know the name of. All of them were people she had just seen in passing. Most of her social circle (which largely consisted of the ladies from mahjong) did not concern themselves with the war-related activities on the home front, all of them quite content with the city's defenses and unconcerned with what was happening outside the walls.

The old widower motioned to the board as he spoke to Irihata, "I suspect we are getting an update on new air raid shelters today."

"Oh, wonderful," Chiyo muttered to herself. "So the poster they gave us last week is already outdated." I'm guessing Shizune must have something to do with this. She knew something had
went down between the Hyuuga sisters are Tsunade's black-haired student, and that said black-haired student had said something to the Hokage to convince her to put more effort into organization of the home front. The vaguely triumphant look on Hanabi's features told her all she needed to know. Despite her young age, Hyuuga Hanabi was not to be underestimated, and if she had recruited the help of Moegi, then neither was the older girl. Not to mention that both of them had survived the perilous journey to Konoha. They were kids, she thought absently, they bounced back quickly and weren't down as easily as the more world-weary adults.

The widower's hunch proved to be correct—when the military police officer arrived, accompanied by an ANBU soldier that was stationed in Konoha, they immediately went into discussing how new air raid shelters had been newly implemented.

As the hour wore on, Chiyo's apprehension grew when the leading officers of this meeting curtly announced new intelligence—that the enemy were in possession of chakra bombs that were designed to be more deadly and have wider range than their predecessors. How Deidara's eyes would widen in awe, Chiyo knew, if the blonde were here. She was scheduled to arrive today, but would not be back until later in the day.

When the meeting finally let out, Chiyo let out a sigh, lifting one hand to adjust her hat, which had become askew at some point.

As the old woman left to complete whatever business she had for the rest of the day, Hanabi and Moegi converged at a nearby food stall, both of them using their refugee stipend to purchase a stick of dango for each. Unlike Itachi, who had possessed his own fortune independent of the Uchiha family's back in Akatsuki was able to access it in Konoha, Hanabi and Hinata were not so lucky, having to slum it out like the rest of them.

"Well?" Moegi prompted after swallowing a pink dango.

Hanabi chewed on her lip. "This city is humongous. Even with one hundred air raid shelters, I'm not sure if they'll be accessible to everyone. Not to mention evacuation routes and drills. The Hokage is too focused defending what's outside instead of what's inside. I need to talk to Shizune-san again—"

"But what if they're doing the smart thing?" When Hanabi raised an eyebrow at the question, Moegi elaborated, "You saw what was out there. Maybe they're doing the smart thing by prioritizing the monsters and the enemy. We still don't know where those things came from. What if the enemy made them?"

"But they attacked Tsuki soldiers, too!"

Moegi shrugged. "It was just a thought. Geez."

Hanabi sighed. "Whatever. I'm going to meet my sister at the school. She's helping out with evacuation drills and procedures. At least one place is being productive."

"I'll go with you. I wanna see how Udon and Konohamaru are doing. Hopefully they're not messing around, though I can't really expect much from them, especially Konohamaru..."

A crow cawed as it lifted its wings and flew away, soaring overhead the two girls.

"You'll never catch me!" the thief screamed, the purse he had just snatched almost whacking him in the face as he dashed away from the middle-aged portly woman shrieking after him.
Too caught up in his escape, he failed to notice a taxi rolling up at a stand and letting out a female passenger.

"Thief!" the victim kept screeching. "Come back and—!"

"Whoops." Deidara let an impish grin draw the corner of her lips upward as she promptly tripped the fleeing man, said man skidding painfully across the pavement on his face.

"Everything alright out there?" the taxi driver asked in concern, not even fazed by the giant centipede that crawled out of his vehicle and proceeded to wrap itself around the fallen criminal.

"I've got it, yeah," Deidara reassured him, closing the door, and the driver shrugged and drove away.

"AHHHH! GET IT OFF ME! I SWEAR I WON'T DO IT AGAIN, JUST DON'T LET IT EAT ME!"

The grin the blonde wore turned devilish. "But what if he's hungry? You probably taste just like dango to him, un."

The man's eyes rolled back into his head until only the whites could be seen, Deidara shrugging and walking away, her briefcase thumping gently against the side of her thigh as she made her way down the street.

As the police officers the fat lady had summoned ran toward the thief, the centipede unfurled itself, scuttling up a building and out of sight before converging with Deidara around a corner. If she got any stares from the giant white centipede crawling into the small clay pouches she had on her belt in a manner that should have been impossible, she ignored them.

The first thing on her agenda today was to make a final version of Kurenai's story from the notes she had taken the the drafts she had composed on the way back to the city.

"Tadaima," she announced to an empty home, stepping into Chiyo's apartment. Oh? She's out? Secretly, she'd been hoping for a hot meal waiting for her when she got back, but she supposed that she shouldn't have expected much from the old woman. An excellent cook, Sasori's grandmother was, but not the type to go out of her way for someone when it came to little things like lunch. Toeing off her shoes, Deidara retreated into her bedroom, which doubled as a study room. Her worktable was positioned by the window, so that she could get a fresh breeze coming in during Konoha's hotter spring days.

Once she had cleaned up, she wore a comfortable green women's yukata as she typed away at her desk, papers which she had written on before her return strewn all over the table and floor.

More than once, Deidara would look up from her work at out the window, where she had an idyllic view of a playground.

By the time she had finished, it was almost night, and she yawned while reshuffling papers and stapling them together. It was the first day of May today, she absently noted, throwing on a loose-fitting haori and untying her hair. She brushed through it a few times before leaving the house, holding her papers against her chest so the evening wind would not blow them away.

Tonight, the market district was a curious sight—there were many food stalls open in the main street and lanterns hung about like glowing paper pumpkins; powerful smells of all sorts of foods wafted throughout the place, Deidara's stomach gurgling when she passed by a stand selling particularly delectable-smelling meat and vegetable kebabs.
"Deidara-san?" She heard a voice call her name, and when she turned, she could see Sakura making her way through the crowd to reach her. "Good evening!"

"Evening," Deidara echoed the greeting, giving her a half-smile. "Would you believe me if I told you that you're the first familiar face I've seen all day?"

"Really?" Sakura brought a hand near her face to wave away the smoke that came from the grill. "Tsunade-shishou let me off early today so I could celebrate the festival." She sighed, sweatdropping. "Though I have to pull an extra early shift tomorrow to make up for it. Not to mention more people than usual get injured during the festivities... Where are you off to tonight, huh? Please make my job a little easier and not get alcohol poisoning."

She said the last part so seriously that Deidara couldn't help but laugh. "What do you take me for, hm, Sakura-chan? Mou, you doubt me so much, maybe I should land myself in the hospital just to spite you, un."

"Just be warned that on the operating table, your life is in my hands."

"Sheesh. Scary. But don't worry about me, yeah, I'm just heading to Fatso's to drop off my work, and then I'll be turning it." Deidara yawned. "I'm exhausted, yeah. And I have a crick in my neck from the taxi, too."

After saying goodbye to Sakura, she continued on her way down to the Gazette. When she arrived, there was a steady trickle of workers streaming out from the lobby that she had to dodge in order to get inside.

"Choji-kun, look!" Fumiko was saying as Deidara opened the door to the office that they all shared. Their coworker had some ink on her face as she twirled around for Fatso's nephew in a brand new red hakama. "My aunt from out of town sewed this for me! Isn't it pretty?"

"That's the latest style," Choji identified, eyes widening. "It suits you, Fumiko-san."

"Thank you! Oh! Deidara, you're back! You were gone for a while. How was your trip?"

"It was better than the first one," Deidara said honestly, unable to suppress a slight grin.

"I can tell," Choji remarked, glancing curiously at her. "You... look a lot more lively. And is that...?" He lifted his hand to point at his forehead, and it was only then that Deidara realized she had donned the headband Guitar Man had given her on the way out.

"A gift," she said, as if it explained everything.

"That's so cool!" Fumiko gushed before growing worried. "But won't wearing that get you in trouble?"

"Relax." Deidara tapped the metal, where there was a gash crossing the symbol of Iwagakure. "It's only illegal if it shows the full thing. The line means that I don't actually have allegiance to an enemy country, un. Anyway," she looked around, "where's Fatso? It's almost seven o'clock—normally, he'd be here rounding us up for yakiniku."

At that, Choji suddenly balked, his gaze so faraway that Deidara had to wonder if he was having unpleasant flashbacks back to the time they spent wandering in a forest infested with bloodthirsty Zetsu monsters. "Ah... About that."

"He ate too much and is getting his stomach pumped at the hospital," Fumiko explained in one
breath, giving her a thumbs-up. "But don't worry, he'll be fine! You can hand in your work once he's discharged."

"So I came all the way out here for nothing?" Huffily, Deidara blew a strand of hair from her face.

"Aw, don't be like that." Fumiko slapped her back heartily. "Let's go eat at Tomoko-oba's! She serves the best fried rice! Right, Choji?"

"Yep. Deidara, we should celebrate your first night back. It's been weeks since we last saw you."

"I—" Deidara's protest morphed into a laugh as Fumiko linked arms with her and pulled her toward the door, Choji calmly ambling after them, occasionally nudging Deidara forward. "Fine, fine, you guys win, yeah." Fighting off a yawn, she added, "I've never eaten fried rice at Tomoko's before, un. It's an Uzushio thing, isn't it?" Growing up in Iwa, she was more accustomed to richly flavored foods with all sorts of hearty sauces and savory soups.

"That's right! But it's delish!"

Gleefully, Fumiko exited the building with her coworkers in tow, her new hakama draped over her other hand. The festival was in full swing, children running around everywhere with sparklers with their haggard mothers not far behind and old men getting drunk on sake or chewing on dried prunes. Tomoko's shop was tucked away on the corner of a less popular street, though there were still a moderate amount of people loitering about and enjoying themselves despite the war that waged outside.

Deidara's stomach started growling again when the delicious smell of what had to be the fried rice Choji and Fumiko seemed to fond of wafted past her nostrils. The windows of Tomoko's were open tonight, and the store itself was filled with the scent of the kitchen's best dishes.

"Table for three!" Fumiko cheered.

A harried waiter approached them. "Is it alright if you share a table with some other customers? We're running low on spaces tonight."

"That's fine," Choji said, and the waiter picked up three menus—they weren't anything fancy, merely a single, sticky laminated piece of paper—off the shelf and escorted them to their table.

As they all sat down, excusing themselves for intruding on the dinner of the customers they had to share a table with, the little red-haired girl next to Deidara ogled her in open surprise. "It's you."

Deidara glanced at her. Wearing a fine yellow and blue dress, she couldn't have been older than nine, and her face was vaguely familiar.

"Shikamaru's friend," continued the girl, uncertainly. "You're Shikamaru's friend."

"Oh." Deidara finally remembered her. "You're that kid who's always with him, right?"

"Ai Wei! My name's Ai Wei. We play shogi together. But he's not here right now, so..."

"Ai Wei," the woman sitting at their table started, curious. "Do you know this woman?"

"How do you not know her?" Ai Wei shot back, scowling. "I thought all of Konoha City knew who she was by now."

"Now, dear, you know your mother doesn't keep up with politics," the man who had to be her
father scolded lightly. He was pointedly avoiding looking at Deidara.

"Well, otou-sama, she should."

Deidara quietly ejected herself from the conversation by poring over the menu. Choji was full of recommendations tonight, and deftly pointed out the best dish suited to her palette ("How the hell do you even know what I like to eat?") after claiming that he had tried every dish here at least once. Fumiko was not as enthusiastic about food, nor as much of a connoisseur, but interjected once in a while to give her own opinions, her arm brushing chastely against Choji's every time she leaned across the table to point at a labelled dish on Deidara's menu.

While they waited for their food to arrive, the family they were sharing the table with were making their own conversation. The mother and the father seemed more interested in each other than their daughter, though, who was picking at the peas on her plate with a scowl on her face.

"Hey," Ai Wei suddenly said, looking at Deidara. Fumiko and Choji were too busy chatting to notice. "Why would you defend such a guy, huh?"

Sasori. She had to mean Sasori. There was no one else. Deidara frowned. "Because even if he's done bad things in the past, he's trying to move on from that and become a better person."

"And who are you to know that? What if he's just pretending?"

"Pretending? He must be a very good actor then, un. But no. I know what acting looks like—the best kind, even—and that's not it." Of course, that was always a possibility, especially with someone of his background. But... Deidara couldn't quite put it in words, but no acting skill in the world could ever replicate the kind or raw and genuine emotion they had brought out within each other. They had faced life and death and fighting together—dire situations where only the realest sentiments would be able to prevail.

Ai Wei grumbled, poking through a pea with her fork. It was an unusual sight—a fork in an eastern city like Konoha. Only the countries toward the west and north-west—like Iwa and Kumo respectively—used these kinds of eating utensils. From the way the fork shone, it was brand new—and from the way her parents—both yellow-haired—dressed and acted, Deidara could guess that they probably brought their own utensils with them. Slowly, with the arrival of the rich and the thriving upper-class, Konoha was becoming influenced by the west. Fatso's newspaper company and the clothes Deidara and her coworkers wore was just one thing that had heavy western influence.

"Deidara," Fumiko said. "Where are you heading off next?"

"Oh?" Deidara smirked, turning away from Ai Wei. "Excited to see me gone so soon?"

"Ack! Nothing like that, you meanie!"

"It's nothing too exciting, Fumiko. I'll be heading to the north-east coast, to Uzushio City. Interviewee's a palace worker."

At the mention of Uzushio, Ai Wei perked up immensely. If Deidara noticed her staring intently at her side profile, she didn't show it.

"Oh, Uzushio," hummed Fumiko. "I've always wanted to go there. I hope you have fun."

"Of course it'll be fun!" Ai Wei suddenly snapped, hackles raised. Her parents gasped and looked at her small, ornery form. "The Dragon Boat Festival is coming up, and some people," she glared at
her parents, "won't be attending!"

"Dear," Ai Wei's mother tried to placate her with a strained smile. "I'm afraid we'll be taking a business trip north-west during that time—"

"Your business trips can wait! This is my culture we're talking about, dammit—!"

"That's enough, Aiko!" her father roared, standing up. "We're leaving. It's already bad enough you've convinced to eat peasant Uzushio food. You're part of our family now, so you'll act like it, young lady!"

"Don't you dare call me that name!" Whatever obscenity Ai Wei screamed next when her parents dragged her out of the restaurant was in Chinese, and therefore completely unintelligible to the Japanese speakers in Konoha City.

At their table, Fumiko, Deidara, and Choji exchanged glances.

"Well, shit," Fumiko surmised, discomfort in her voice.

The guest quarters in the camp was a tent and not an actual solid structure, and had been spared for Kagami's use, Kakashi (as an honorary member of the family) staying in another hut not too far away.

Konan, along with her meager belongings, was sent there after she was treated. Sasori's things were already inside when she arrived, indicating that he had dropped by earlier. Choosing to ignore how Kagami was shamelessly rifling through his things, she dumped her pack to the side, removed her bedroll, and wriggled into it, wanting nothing more than to rest her weary bones.

"Security check," Kagami said when she felt Konan's tired gaze bore through the back of her head.

"I wouldn't recommend it," replied Konan. "He is a very private man."

"We're egalitarian here."

Konan shifted in her bedroll. "Real egalitarian societies do not exist."

"Of course not." Kagami looked at her. "I was just wondering if you would buy into that nonsense. Haha. It'd be nice to get along, you know, since we're going to be rooming together."

"That can wait."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure you're tired. Oh," Kagami lifted her head when she glimpsed a body standing at the entrance, where the flaps of the vast tent were peeled back, "You're Nagaoka, right? Sanada-san's nephew."

"Yes," Nagaoka said, a little meekly. Ducking his head, he held out to her what was undoubtedly medicine and warm wet towels on a bamboo plate. "These are from Sanada-oba-san. A welcome gift for the guests."

Konan made an effort to sit up. "You can leave them on the table," she instructed, not unkindly. "Thank you, Nagaoka-kun."

The boy gave them one stiff nod before bounding off somewhere.

"He's a troublesome one," remarked Kagami, folding her arms and staring at the gift he had left
them. Beside the bamboo plate of things was her purple mask, which had a long crack running through it. She would have to replace it soon, or simply live without it. "I caught him in a tree the other day, watching me spar with Kakashi. Had to rescue him when he fell off." She tapped her chin. "Perhaps he's just stupid." Without waiting for Konan's permission, she took one of the warm cloths and wiped her dusty face with it.

Slowly, Konan's brow arched. But she made no fuss out of it, and doubted Sasori would either when he returned to find that his warm towel had been stolen and used by the Uchiha woman. Closing her eyes, she tried to sleep.

When she awoke, it was night, and her throat was dry. Someone had left a lamp in the middle of the tent, and she used the light to fish out her canteen, which had been filled with the water from the tiny stream by Sanada's home.

On the peeled back flap of the tent, she could see orange flashing dimly, and the smell of a campfire reached her nostrils. It must have been around dinner time, judging by the rumble of her stomach and the scent of cooking meat mixed with smoke.

Once she hydrated herself, she stepped outside, looking both ways before spotting a small gathering of people sitting around a campfire. Rocky walls surrounded them, blocking out most of the mountain wind.

"Oh, you're awake, Konan-san."

Konan whipped her head to the side to see the sleepy-looking Hojo woman from this morning staring at her, the distant fire reflected in her inky black eyes. "Oh, you're..."

"Hojo Sonoko, pleased to meet you." She did a small bow, which Konan reciprocated. "I've been asked to look after you during your stay, so," she let out a short laugh, "here I am. Dinner started not long ago, so there should be plenty for you to eat. Would you prefer eating in the mess hall, or outside?" Sonoko gestured to the campfire, surrounded by both men and women. Most of them, the blue-haired woman noticed, were samurai based on their muscle mass, posture, or attire.

"Outside." Konan's answer was immediate. Though it was undoubtedly warmer inside, the raw and authentic way of eating meat cooked over a fire appealed to her in a strange way. Sonoko nodded, and the two women started toward the small gathering of folks. "Hojo-san, do you know where Sasori-san went?"

"Oh, your friend? The last I saw of him was in the afternoon, with Mifune-sama."

Greetings were exchanged as Konan and Hojo sat down among the others. They had begun to cut meat from the roast, and Hojo handed Konan a small bowl of rice and some freshly cooked meat before also taking some for herself.

"What stories are we sharing tonight?" asked Hojo to the crowd. "Since it's Konan-san's first night here, we should tell a memorable one."

"Let's ask old Storyteller," someone said, turning to a stooped, wizened man with brows almost as thick as his beard. They covered his eyes, in fact.


"Oh, I love that one!" Hojo said, clapping.

Storyteller began his tale, and Konan found herself so enraptured that she didn't even remember to
eat until Hojo nudged the arm she was using to hold her rice bowl.

He told the story of a wandering rōnin who had abandoned the Bushido after he was unable to defend his extended family from the comrades who turned on him, believing him to be a traitor. In a fit of rage and grief, he avenged his family by killing those who had wronged them, and with his heart hardened, he traveled far and wide for many years, lost in his own grief and anger.

"And then he met a woman," Storyteller said, his words echoed by many around him with great amusement. It was clearly a story that had been repeated many times before. Hojo beamed at this part. "And the family she loved."

By the time the story was ending, Konan had finished her food and her eyelids were growing heavy, despite having slept for most of the afternoon.

"Because you see," concluded Storyteller, holding out his arthritic hands toward the fire and sighing in mild relief. "A new family could not make up for the loss of his old family, or make him feel like he had never lost them. However, it was not replacement he sought; the sentiments he held toward his new family were not the same as the ones he held for the old. He moved on, and—slowly—his new family became irreplaceable. And that is the nature of our lives—of the connections between the individual and the community."

It was late into the night when dinner finished. Konan requested leftovers from Hojo, who happily obliged. Carrying a lukewarm bowl of rice with a few slices of meat on top, Konan turned to Storyteller. "Thank you," she said warmly. "For your tale. I enjoyed it."

The old man nodded.

"Hojo-san," Konan rejoined Hojo. "Do you know where my companion, Sai-san, is?"

"Ah." Hojo smiled weakly, fidgeting with the collar of her fur-lined jumper. "It was decided that, due to the... nature of your companion and under Sasori-san's insistence, he would be under watch in... the caverns close to Mifune-sama's quarters."

"So he's been taken prisoner."

"Yes." Hojo glanced around. "Why do you ask? Do you want to see him?"

"Yes, if I'm allowed. Hojo-san?"

"I suppose it's fine. There are guards, and I'll be with you."

The clouds were covering the moon tonight as Hojo led Konan through the camp and to Sai's temporary home. Hojo talked the guards into letting them pass easily, and Konan almost shivered when she stepped foot into the cave, feeling goosebumps rise on her skin despite the warm clothing Sanada had provided her.

Curl up against the cave wall, Sai was trembling from the cold as he pretended to sleep, arms folded across his chest. He was without any of his weapons or scrolls. He was also without any sort of provider of warmth—whether it be a blanket or a torch.

Loose rock and pebbles crunched behind her, but she ignored the curious, probing chakra that Sasori was emanating as he stood at the mouth of the cave, watching Konan like a hawk would gaze upon a mouse as she knelt next to Sai, placing the rice bowl by his thigh.

Sai's eyes opened like a cat's would.
"Eat," Konan said simply.

When he didn't reply, she stood and began to make her leave.

"Why?"

She stilled, and Sasori narrowed his eyes at Sai's question.

Yes, why? she could almost hear Sasori ask scathingly. After all, this boy has done nothing for you. He spat in your face by running off back to his master at the first sign of danger, his repayment for your kindness. So why?

Wordlessly, Konan left the cave and returned to her quarters.

Sasori glanced at Sai's stooped figure once before turning away, too.

The next morning, the bowl was empty.

Mariko hastily dusted Hashirama's shoes as the man himself was putting them on.

"I can't believe you, brother!" bellowed Tobirama, who was helping Hashirama with his official robes. He was already fully dressed in his own formal kimono. "A council meeting today, and you've just awoken?!!"

"Well, why didn't you wake me up then?!" Hashirama wailed, the stress of being potentially late making his voice pitch.

"What am I—your nurse?!" Tobirama snarled. "You are a grown man, yet all you seem to do is laze around writing obscene love letters!"

"They are not obscene!"

"Please!" begged Mariko. "Hashirama-dono, Tobirama-dono, I'm finished with his shoes, and his robes look fine!"

"Go, go, go, already!" Itama urged from his room—the walls were thin enough for him to be heard clearly. "Don't wanna embarrass the Senju, do you?!"

"That was directed at you," Tobirama muttered fervently as he all but dragged Hashirama out to the courtyard. They were escorted by four members of their personal army down the street and to the council room. Five kamon on the shoulders, back, and chest of their black silken kimonos, the two brothers looked the part of being scions of the most noble family in Tsukigakure.

When they arrived, their faces were schooled into neutrality.

"Forgive our tardiness," Hashirama said as he bowed low to the head of the council—none other than Empress Kaguya herself. With her long white hair, pale face, and horned headgear, she made for an imposing figure. On her forehead was an artificial third eye that glowed redder than the reddest ruby. "My Empress."

"The Senju," Kaguya mused, her voice echoing throughout the chamber like splintering ice. "Take a seat."

They obeyed, filling the two seats next to the heads of the Yamazaki Clan—a dark-haired young woman with an eye-patch and her father. Both had tattoos running down one side of their face.
This meeting was undoubtedly one for war. All gathered representatives of the twelve noble clans in their small (but powerful) island country wore their most solemn faces and grimmest expressions. Hashirama and his brother were no exception. As per usual, Tobirama did most of the talking. He always did when it came to battle and strategy—it was what he was best at.

"—if we cut them off at this impasse, we can raid their ships and down their numbers. Send in a small platoon first, and we can—"

Throughout it all, Hashirama paid close attention to his brother's words, though it was difficult at times.

At some point during the meeting, the Yamazaki Clan's female head spoke up crisply. "Your Majesty, I've received word that the negotiations with Suna appear to be going well. Chancellor Ono seems to be quite convinced that it is in their country's best interest to side with us. I've also received word that the Emperor of Suna's youngest son, Sabaku no Gaara, is to join the diplomatic delegation in Sunaarashi Toshi."

"Excellent." The faintest smile appeared on her crimson lips. "And what about Iwa and Kumo?"

"Both are currently firm in their stance of neutrality."

"No matter. Sooner or later, they'll come around." Kaguya narrowed her eyes. "Allies are imperative, however. I expect more good news on Suna's allegiance."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty, if I may." All eyes turned to Hashirama, who had spoken demurely. Tobirama's eyes widened ever so slightly, but he otherwise remained dutifully expressionless. "I might have solution to our lack of solid allies."

Kaguya leaned forward from her seat on the horse-shoe-shaped table. "Oh? Continue."

"Within the borders of Konohagakure," Hashirama started. "Lies a large city—big enough to rival, if not surpass, Konoha's capital city—known as Uzushio. They are the remnants of the once mighty Uzushiogakure, and despite being part of Konoha, there has been social and cultural tension for decades between the city's populace and the rest of the nation. They are determined to identify as an independent nation, but Konoha refuses this. With the right sort of persuasion, we could coax them into being our allies."

For a brief moment, the only sound that could be heard was the clicking of Kaguya's long nails on the armrest of her chair. Then she said, "And what sorts of persuasion do you have in mind, Senju Hashirama-san?"

"A political alliance through marriage, between myself and the reigning Princess Uzumaki Mito."

Murmurs erupted throughout the assembly, and even Tobirama couldn't hold down a surprised choke. He glared at his brother, hissing, "Are you mad?"

But Hashirama refused to answer, looking only at his ruler.

"This princess," Kaguya said slowly, "Is only a princess by name, is she not? She has no real power."

"Quite the contrary," Hashirama countered, "Your Majesty. She is in control of a substantial army, and her influence is nothing to sniff at. The only reason why they have yet to revolt and continue to
bow to the will of Konoha is a matter of Konoha's overall firepower being greater than theirs. Perhaps," he ventured, "if things go well enough, we could achieve even an alliance with Konoha themselves."

After all, their war was with Ame, not Konoha. Konoha just chose to interfere on behalf of the former.

Kaguya stared down her noble. Then she laughed, shrill and icy. "My dear Senju Hashirama, I am not ignorant to your desires, but I applaud you for your bravery and your cunning. I have known for quite some time that she has not once responded to your advances with anything but rejection and resentment." When his face fell slightly, she scoffed. "Do not fear. I have shown your family much favor throughout these years, and I don't intend to stop now. The Senju House is responsible for the way our great country has flourished for the past seventy years." Her nails tapped. "Send your beloved another letter informing her about potential allegiance and your wish to meet with her. If she will not come to you, you will go to her instead."

"Your Majesty, with all due respect, isn't this too much of a gamble?" Tobirama urged. "If my brother is to travel during wartime, it will surely be too dangerous to be worth the risk."

"What is life if not a gamble in itself? Though, Senju Hashirama," her gaze flicked back to the eldest Senju brother, "You will return with a bride and an alliance between our country and both Konoha and Uzushio. Fail, and your family's livelihood will be forfeit. Do you understand?"

Tobirama swelled like a bullfrog, furious, but Hashirama merely bowed his head. "Of course. Thank you, Your Majesty."

Kaguya smiled—
—and called for a ceasefire.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Alright. Big thing sorta happened at the end there, but things are all going to plan.

I didn't update for two months and we only get a ~6000 word chapter? Damn right. I had a lot of things to sort out for this final arc, the most troublesome things being where events fit into the timeline I've mentally constructed. Additionally, I've also found myself becoming more and more immersed into Haikyuu! (it's like a repeat of my 15-year-old phase HAHA), and my interest in Naruto has waned quite a bit. But I'm determined to see this into completion, and not even my volleyball boys are gonna stop me from doing this. One more thing: I finished my HSC and am waiting for more uni offers/sorting out my preferences (plus trying to find a job). So that has taken up a lot of my time, too.

Some notes I should put out now:

1. Depending on how this final part goes, we may or may not get to see Kiba again. I fully intend on writing his arc conclusion, but it might not make it into the actual story and instead be posted as a side story/gaiden at the end. The same can go for multiple side characters, such as the Hyuuga sisters (plus Neji), and Gai.
2. Tsukigakure is an island country, meaning it is separate from the mainland, where all the other nations are. The mainland 'standard' is Japanese, though each nation has its own dialect. Similar to how Mandarin is China's official language, but you'll find different provinces have their own dialects (e.g. Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, Cantonese etc.). Tsukigakure's language, however, is entirely it's own, and NOT a dialect, hence why nobody spoke Tsuki's language during Part I. This is also why native/more traditional Uzushio people, who once occupied Tsuki's island, speak Chinese and not Japanese. Two entirely different languages.

3. The map is quite different from the Elemental Nation's map in the actual Narutoverse. If you find that descriptions are not accurate, they are meant to be this way.

See ya'll next time.
Part VI: King Protea

Chapter Summary

FIRST UPDATE OF THE YEAR EEEE

Chapter Notes

A/N: You may notice a slight change in my writing here. I am no longer going to be using terms like 'okaa-san' or 'otou-san'. Basically, I'm toning down significantly on Japanese terms. The only words that I'll be keeping are words that have weird/lengthy translations (like 'Hokage' or 'Konohagakure') and suffixes like '-san', '-chan', '-sama', '-nee/-nee-san', '-nii/nii-san' etc., and speech-related things like Deidara's 'un/hm', Konohamaru's 'kore', and Naruto's 'dattebayo'. I flicked back through the previous chapters and found myself grimacing at my gratuitous use of Japanese words that have suitable English translations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a gray morning as Deidara sat in front of Sakura's desk. The pink-haired medic was smiling as she wrote down her observations on a notepad before looking up. "Everything seems to be in order," she informed the blonde happily, clicking her pen. "To be honest, I'm pretty amazed. Normally, when a person loses their sight in one eye, there are all sorts of problems with depth perception and whatnot. But you completed all my exercises without fail," Sakura checked off a box, "I've seen similar patterns before in others who practice taijutsu."

Deidara cracked a smile. "That's 'cause you were too busy catching up with the Hokage to notice me walking into poles and grabbing at nothing the first couple of days, un." It had taken a while for her to get adjusted—she was just grateful that it had become a norm before she was forced to fight her brother, else she might have been killed. "So, you doing anything this weekend? We could get the girls together for a spa day or something."

It wasn't often that Deidara got to unwind with her female friends—though she wasn't as close to some of them as she would like to be, feminine company from time to time was always nice.

"Actually, I am, for once." Sakura rolled her eyes, undoubtedly thinking of the many problems and hindrances that came with her job. "The new interns from last month are in the final stages of their training, and we have enough senior nurses around to guide them through it. I can ask Tsunade-shishou for the day off." She gasped suddenly, remembering something. "Oh, that's right!"

"Hm?"

"Karin and Naruto are coming down to visit with Kushina, too! They're arriving on Saturday. We can invite them along."
"Naruto'll have a field day."

"Obviously not him." Sakura arranged her papers, opening a drawer on the inside of her desk. "Hey, when are you leaving? I heard you have another work trip coming up."

"Oh, yeah." Deidara stood from her chair, stretching. "I'm going to Uzushio City on Monday, un. I probably won't be back for a while, so I wanted the weekend to be a bang, y'know?" A sly smirk. "Don't worry—I'll make sure we behave ourselves."

"Deidara, you're the one I worry most about."

Deidara waved a hand at her dismissively, making Sakura almost snap her pen into from the sheer force of her grip. "Yeah, yeah. Let's all meet in front of the onsen tomorrow. I'll tell Tenten, and you can tell Hinata and the hot-heads, un."

"Sure thing."

Stepping out of the hospital, Deidara took a deep breath, relishing in Konoha's fresh air. The hospital was always too suffocating and clinical for her taste—she preferred air which made her feel like she was alive and not a cadaver to be probed at.

The streets she now walked were slowly becoming the norm—she was starting to make land marks in her mind, such as Asuma's smithy, several government buildings, and a plum tree growing near the shores of the Naka River. It was quite a drastic change from the industrial sites and outer farms that Ame had boasted.

_How many months has it been since then? Since I drank tea with Obito and worked out deals with Kakashi? Since Shisui kicked my ass in tanto spars?_ she wondered as she crossed the bridge over to Konoha's colorful market district. All around her, vendors shouted their wares, and uniform-clad school children haggled in vain with experienced aunties. The ground was still wet from last night's rain, but most of the miserable winter mood had been replaced by a cheerier tone more suitable for spring. _Damn. Forget months—it's been almost a year._

Deidara halted when she spotted Itachi, carrying Izuna in his baby sling, crossing an intersection with Asagi and her son, Shogo. The boy was wearing, proudly, a brand new school uniform as he held their hands. He splashed in a puddle, only to duck his head sheepishly when he was scolded gently by Asagi. It hurt her a bit to watch—watch Itachi step into this strange role as Shogo's pseudo-guardian in addition to taking his role as an actual father to Izuna by the reins.

The crowd swarmed around her, and she knew they wouldn't be able to see her, so she didn't bother waving.

Shaking her head, she continued her stroll, eyeing the fruits on display. They weren't cheap—but she supposed she could treat herself. "Ne, oji-san," she addressed the vendor, picking up an apple, "I'll take one of these, un."

As Deidara polished the apple with the sleeve of her white yukata (and then with the creases of her forest green hakama), she heard childish giggling from somewhere to her left. Looking up, she saw that, a distance away, Daichi had his lips together in a grimace while some boys nudged him toward a girl their age buying sweets at one of the stalls. Behind his back, Daichi held a daisy. Almost astonished, Deidara looked on, the apple feeling heavy in her hand all of a sudden. Finally, Daichi worked up the courage to tap the girl on the shoulder awkwardly and held out the flower to her. Smiling sweetly, the girl accepted his present and offered him one of her candies in return, making Daichi flush so red that Deidara felt the need to ask if he needed Sakura's medical
"Ah, young love," the fruit vendor chuckled, making Deidara startle. She had almost forgotten the man was there.

Deidara could only nod woodenly, a small smile on her face.

She left shortly, not sticking around to see what would happen next with Daichi and the girl. Brow lowering, she bit into her apple with a loud, satisfying crunch. "Geez, she lamented silently, thinking of Itachi's shift into fatherhood and Daichi's boyhood. When did we get so old? Even though it had been less than a year since she had been entertaining the children of Akatsuki by exploding Tora the cat, it felt like she had aged greatly. I'm starting to feel like the old man Danna likes to act like.

Her first encounter of the day with Tenten occurred almost as soon as she stepped into the courtyard of Gai's dojo. The brown-haired girl was sweating as she practiced her bojutsu on an invisible opponent. The sight of Kisame sitting at a terrace table with a lacy umbrella sticking out of it to shelter him from the barely visible sun did not faze her in the least as she lifted a hand and said, "Yo."

"Deidara—oof!" Tenten exclaimed, saved from almost falling over from the butt of her staff jabbing her in the gut.

"When did your technique get so lazy?" Deidara taunted, throwing her brown bag aside. It landed on Kisame's terrace table.

"Watch it," the shark-man growled when it nearly knocked his tin of biscuits to the ground. "These are Kumo delicacies. Sesame, actually."

"Lazy?" Tenten echoed, affronted. She twirled the staff in her hand so that it was perpendicular to the ground.

"You heard me," Deidara nonchalantly strolled over to the corner of the yard to fetch a staff, "You've gotten sloppy, Tenten." She clicked her tongue. "That was an amateur's mistake." She smirked, twirling the wooden weapon in a similar fashion. "Oh, of course—do feel free to prove me wrong, yeah."

"Oh, you're on."

"Do you remember when we fought the first time?" Deidara made conversation to infuriate her, but Tenten managed to keep her head on tight. She dodged when Deidara's leg lashed out, and parried the blonde's blows. "You beat me then. Think you'll fluke again?"

They danced around each other, eyes narrowed and grinning wickedly. Kisame looked a bit more attentive than he did before, stock-still with only his mouth moving to chew his Kumo biscuits.

"Fluke?" Tenten chuckled as she swatted the end of Deidara's staff aside before going on the attack. Her motions were whip-like and precise, and Deidara scowled as she struggled to fend her off. "If I remember correctly," she panted as she rolled to the side to avoid Deidara's counterattack, "I didn't exactly scrape a win off you." She kicked off her right foot, knocking away Deidara's hastily formed defense and pointing the end of her staff at her face. "One."

To Tenten's surprise, Deidara burst into laughter. "So we're doing this again, huh?" Before Tenten could react, Deidara's leg struck upward with amazing flexibility, and she kicked the pole right out of Tenten's hands. Then, with her own, she prodded the soft underside of Tenten's jaw, pushing her chin up. "Well?" Deidara prompted, smirking. "What now?"
But to her credit, Tenten didn't seem spooked, her confidence rocked, but not shattered. Breathing out slowly, she shifted her stance and lifted her arms in a familiar position that knocked the wind out of Deidara.

The blonde's shoulders tensed. "You..."

"Gai has been teaching me a few things," the brunette said softly, lowering her gaze for a moment. "Out of all the styles that he could teach me... he said this was the one that suited me the most."

Tenten lifted her gaze, locking eyes with Deidara. For a moment, all Deidara could see was Shisui, body positioned the same way and without his weapons. But instead of a great stone wall and a rocky floor, the ground was firm soil and grass that would have tickled their legs if they hadn't been wearing long pants, and the backdrop was a soft blue sky and lush green trees reaching for the heavens. Birds burst out of the canopy, and Shisui struck.

Then she was back—returned to the reality in front of her. Tenten, trying her best to muster the confidence to face her in a taijutsu-only battle. From the amount of times that she had fought with Shisui, Deidara could see her faults and openings almost instantly. Not Shisui, but a pale imitation—a fledgling attempting to bear his image. Deidara half-expected herself to be enraged—but instead of anger, a strange sort of peace had washed over her. She exhaled, striding forward and poking Tenten's bicep, which was firm with muscle. "Your arms are too high," she said crisply. "Lower them a bit. And don't crouch so low, yeah. You're not jumping over the world's highest mountain."

"Ah," Tenten fidgeted, "Right." Hesitantly, she asked, "Deidara? Are you mad?"

Deidara shook her head, the shadow of a smile on her lips. "Nah. I think if I had to choose a successor for him, it'd be you. Look's like Gai thought the same thing, huh?"

"I just don't want to disrespect anyone—"

"Disrespect?" Deidara echoed, incredulous. "Hey, listen—you're not disrespecting anyone, okay? Tenten, if Shisui were still here, I guarantee you that he would have seen the same potential in you that Gai did. That I do." She exhaled sharply. "Shisui and Obito... they're dead. The Big 4 as we know it no longer exists, un. But that doesn't mean... a second coming can't be in order."

Tenten's throat bobbed as she listened, and for a second, Deidara was worried the girl would cry. But she merely let out a sigh, rubbing at her eyes before any tears could fall. When she looked up again, she was smiling. "Thank you."

Deidara stepped back. "Ha! Don't thank me yet. Since you're cocky enough to try and fight me without a weapon, I can only assume that you're somewhat good at the very least. And if you don't meet my standards, I'm going to beat your ass into the ground, un!"

As the two women fought, Deidara slowing down her usual movements to match Tenten's, Kisame sat back and enjoyed his tea and biscuits. Lately, he had been feeling more at peace than he ever had in his life. If he fell asleep right then and never woke up, he wouldn't even be unhappy about it. He closed his eyes, basking in the warmth of the sun that hit the back of his head—in the temporary peace that he was lucky enough to experience at this very moment. "Ah... I could get used to this."

A hawk circled the mountains as Sasori's eyes cracked open. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he sat up from his futon, scanning his surroundings to see Kagami and Konan still fast asleep. The
two of them were still recovering from sustained injuries, so he let them sleep, quietly changing into something warmer and more comfortable to move around in.

"Then prove it."

Taking a swig of water from his canteen, he let the old samurai's words circle around his head before the sound of barking outside chased them away.

"Oh, joy," Sasori intoned when the first thing he saw upon stepping out was Kakashi tossing a medium-sized stick into the distance, the pug that he had adopted scrambling after it.

Kakashi's eye curved up as he smiled underneath his mask. "Yo."

"Why are you even here?"

"Ah. You see, a little birdie flew by and sang the most wonderful song for me, about you and a certain samurai girl—"

Sasori held up a hand. "I'll stop you right there. Whatever you need to tell me, don't do it in your ridiculous anecdotes."

"Mou, you really are no fun, Sasori-san." Kakashi knelt to pat his dog's head when it came back with the stick. "Konoha has requested the aid of the samurai," he said abruptly without looking at his red-haired companion. Sasori's eyes narrowed, but let him continue. "Negotiations have been... somewhat stale. Your presence here will either make or break us. And it'd be in our best interest if you make nice with Saigo-san."

Sasori shifted his weight onto one foot as he gave Kakashi an appraising look. "You think I don't know that?" He shook his head. "Regardless, I'm more curious about why someone like you hasn't been able to sway them." His stare became a little more sharp and cutting. "Aren't the samurai supposed to be family?"

"Always so critical," Kakashi said lightly. "My father... lost standing in the eyes of these samurai. For the brutality he showed in his time in Suna."

"Brutality? Is that what they call it? Murder sounds more simple and clean-cut." The red-haired man scoffed. "Even if it was anything but clean."

The tension was palpable between them—years of grief and spite twisting and hissing in their guts. Kakashi finally faced him again. "Find Saigo-san."

"Don't tell me what to do." The words were empty—merely spoken out of reflex and the longing for getting the last word in because he couldn't bear the thought of Kakashi making the decision for him. "It's true we're allies. And we've proven we can maintain civility. If only barely. But never forget who you are to me, and who I am to you."

Kakashi's single eye flashed as he remembered how Sasori's Zetsu vines had strung him up like a puppet, holding him firmly in place and twisting around his neck with intent to kill. "Never."

"Sasori-san is so hot-headed!" A brown face, tanned by the sun, obscured Sasori's view for a moment. "What are you doing out here? Weren't you the one who told me never to come back?"

"Is it a crime for me to change my mind?" Sasori replied bitingly, unable to hide a growing smirk. He was too prideful—too prideful to admit that he had missed his company.
Komushi laughed. "I knew you would say that. Let's go fishing! I know a good oasis nearby."

Saigo was hot-headed, but she surprised Sasori when she discovered her sitting on the shores of a vast lake, contained within a recess in the behemoth mountain. He'd had to descend from the other side of which they had come, skidding down loose rock and pebbles.

Saigo was hasty and brash, he had concluded. But Saigo was also fishing, an activity that required an endless amount of patience that he did not have. There was already a half-filled woven basket of fish beside her, and he mused, briefly, upon how aquatic wildlife had somehow found their way up.

"I'll kill you," Saigo said as soon as Sasori stepped out of the trees, her grip tightening on her fishing rod. "If you come any closer."

You can try. Sasori smiled mirthlessly. "No need for hostility." Ignoring her strangled, offended gasp, he casually stalked closer, as if her threat meant nothing to him. And it did. "I didn't take you as the type to fish."

She bared her teeth at him, the scar on her face scrunching up hideously. "You know nothing, murderer." Even with her bold, fierce declaration, Sasori could still see her unrelenting gaze occasionally flick to his monster arm, bound by bandages and hidden by the sleeves of his black cloak. Her hair, worn in her usual high ponytail, lashed violently in the wind, and—for the slightest moment—Sasori thought that if he blinked a little too long, he would find her fishing hook pulling out one of his eyes the moment he opened them again.

"You can relax, you know," Sasori told her, keeping as much inflection out of his tone as possible. "You won't catch any fish if you're this tense."

"You dare act so nonchalant around me?" Saigo threw her rod to the side, standing up and extending her naginata. Snarling, she pointed the sharp end of the weapon at Sasori, who had yet to draw his own weapons. "You intrude in our land, whispering sweet nothings into the ear of our leader—for what? For many years, the samurai have lived in these mountains in peace, undisturbed. While the other nations try to justify their own wars, we are in the midst of relinquishing our earthly attachments. Our society is changing, but you're here to set it back to the way it was before!

"Akasuna no Sasori. A man like you has no business here. You have lived your life drenched in blood of innocents. Not once have you learned the principles of benevolence and goodwill throughout your miserable existence. Whatever acceptance you seek will never be found here. Return to the lower lands, where scum like you belong."

She spat before him, her eyes blazing as she dared him to challenge her words. For a long while, Sasori merely stared at the wad of spit near his shoes. Then he removed his cloak, folding it once and throwing it aside. It landed more heavily in the shingle than Saigo expected, and she grimaced, her shoulders tensing.

"On the first day I arrived," Sasori started. "You challenged me to a spar."

"Not a spar." Saigo sneered. "A duel."

"I'd ask for an escort to the training grounds," he replied, deceptively calm. "But I'm quickly losing my patience with you." With a puff of smoke, he released a single puppet out, chakra strings connecting his fingers to the puppet's seal anchors glinting in the light.

Saigo barked out a laugh. "Oh, I thought this day would never come. The killer shows his true
"It would only be fair, considering how the samurai showed me their true colors immediately upon my arrival." And years before that. Sasori smiled, a bitter sort of amusement behind it. "If I remember correctly, it was you who charged at me with your blade aimed at my back. Whatever earthly attachments your society is attempting to relinquish seems to be lost within your inherent sense of seeking violence."

"Ridiculous! Violence is not inherent!" With that, she bellowed a war cry, her naginata blade suddenly engulfed in chakra and extending. She swung at him, striking like a cobra.

There was a barely noticeable click as Sasori avoided her initial attack as well as her follow-up. Flexing his fingers, his puppet was sent forward, wood shifting as some of Konoha's finest blades spun out of its side, whirling toward her with malicious intent.

She parried a few back with her naginata before sticking the sharp end into the ground and launching herself to the side. She landed on the balls of her feet, using her momentum to restart her offence. Her features were contorted—wild, feral, unyielding—but her eyes were as sharp and as focused as his own.

"Why are you here anyway?" Sasori asked as they sat by the oasis. Komushi was humming a tune as he fished calmly, still waiting for the first bite of the day. Occasionally, Sasori would toss a stone into the still water out of boredom, gaze languidly following the ripples that formed.

"Because I like fish. Especially the grilled kind."


Sparks flew as chakra-laced weapons clashed, neither puppet master or samurai warrior willing to relent. He was quick on his feet—Sasori watched the woman's frustration grow whenever she tried and failed to land a hit on him. His style of fighting was almost completely defensive, relying on his puppet for any sort of offensive power. Her eyes widened—one eye could stretch more than the other, he noticed, likely due to whatever injury had scarred her—when smaller knives shot out from the gaping mouth of Sasori's puppet.

"This isn't the sort of environment you normally find people like you in," Sasori went on, chucking another stone into the pond. "You've been here almost as long as me. Why are you here?"

Komushi gave him look, curiosity aroused by his questioning. "Why else? I want to serve my country. And the Royal Puppet Corps—man, they're wild!"

Something in the water made the surface ripple. The first sign of life Sasori had seen all afternoon. Baffled, he echoed, "Wild?"

"So secretive, so mysterious. That's the kind of image I would like to have, you know? Respected and feared, but also loved."

"Loved?" He almost snorted. "Feared, yes. Respected, maybe. But loved? Komushi-san, I think you're mixing up the Corps with the Imperial Harem. Here, we do not love. We fight, we bleed, we slaughter, but we do not love."

Komushi fell into a thoughtful silence. He was only roused from it when something tugged on his line. Grinning, he reeled it in, his face falling in disappointment when he saw what was on the other end—a clump of water weed. Sighing, he picked the grass from his hook. "You know," he began, "I'll be honest with you, Sasori-san. You're right to wonder why I'm doing this. I don't agree
with killing, and I sure as heck don't like getting hurt. But fighting... fighting is like love!"

"Excuse me?"

Sasori gritted his teeth as Saigo suddenly broke through his defense in an astonishing display of tenacity, her weapon slicing his cheek, just beneath his eye. Blood welled up and dribbled down the side of his face.

"Why don't you use your arm?" Saigo panted. Her sleeve was soaked red, and he knew for a fact there was a growing, painful bruise on her torso—he wasn't the only one wounded by their battle. She licked her chapped lips, growling, "There's some sort of power to it, isn't there? What the hell are you waiting for?!"

At Sasori's sullen deadpan, Komushi backpedaled. "Okay, maybe not exactly like love! Sasori-san—what is love, first of all?"

"Passionate relations between a man and a woman. Marriage, sex, and children are usually the outcome."

"Y'know, sometimes, I can't tell if you're being sarcastic, cynical, both, or none of the above. But love can mean a lot of things. The most basic definition is what you just described." Komushi cast another line. "The love I'm talking about is an exchange of feelings—not romantic feelings, but understanding." He paused. "Wait, is there another word for that? Because I don't know any."

"An exchange... of feelings? Is understanding considered an emotion?"

"No, but it's a feeling, isn't it? You feel like you understand them, and they feel like they understand you. Right?"

Sasori glanced up, almost lazily, with half-lidded eyes and a bleeding cheek as Saigo's naginata soared through the air, its long figure darkened momentarily by the sun, which appeared to shine silver today.

"Are you talking about friendship, then?"

"No. It doesn't have to be friendship. It's just... a mutual exchange of understanding."

Opposite him, the heels of her boots digging into the shingle, Saigo clutched her freshly wounded hand (the cut would scar, he made sure of it) glaring at him with the same kind of hatred that Sasori had encompassed for almost the entirety of his life under the thumb of the Emperor of Suna, the one that he had thought long gone until he laid eyes on Kakashi's wretched visage, the spitting image of Sakumo in his youth.

Sasori caught the naginata as it fell, examining it briefly before walking to where Saigo was keeled over, breathing heavily.

He lifted the blade until it was aimed between her eyes. "Yield." When she merely made a guttural noise with her throat, he pressed the tip of the knife against her skin. A droplet of blood sprung up. "I said yield."

"Fine," she spat out. "I yield."

Sasori brought it up higher, and Saigo ducked her head instinctively, her eyes squeezed shut as she prepared for death.
Komushi smiled with all his teeth. "Watch the fire die in their eyes."

Then, without warning, he tossed it at her feet.

The flames sputtered. Saigo stared up at him, disbelieving. Then she snatched up her weapon, her eyes never leaving his face.

"I believe," Sasori said coolly, "that I have earned the right to talk without my words being ignored."

"What the fuck?" It was almost amusing watching every muscle in her face try to react at once. "What the hell are you talking about?!"

"You're going to heed the words of a killer." Before she could protest, Sasori added swiftly, "I've earned that right at least, haven't I?" When she didn't answer, he hummed, tracing his finger over the coarse wood of his puppet. A bloody trail followed it. "An idiot once told me that fighting was like love."

Saigo, standing now, choked. "What are you—"

"He's dead now." A beat. "I supposed it served him right for being an idiot. But for all his idealistic tendencies and his patriotic delusions, his understanding of humanity was greater than both of us could ever comprehend. Love is an exchange of feelings, in the same way that battle is. When nations war, it is the culmination of negative emotions and conflicting beliefs. Conversely, however, love encompasses the exchange of positive emotion. But the sort of love I am seeking right now with you is different. It is neither positive or negative—that I seek is an exchange of understandings.

"So I'll ask you this—Saigo Konami-san, why do you hate?"

"You..." Saigo trailed feebly before shaking her head. "You're insane. A madman. I'm not sticking around to hear another word of this nonsense—"

"Do I have to recite the Bushido to you?" Sasori asked dryly. "Because I can and I will."

"You damn—! You would use my own learnings—my own code of honor—against me?!"

"Yes. You will stay and you will listen, or you can denounce your status as a samurai to your general." Taking the initiative, Sasori lowered himself into a seiza. "I'd rather not talk standing."

Eyeing him warily, Saigo sighed, copying him promptly. "Fine. Let's see what a killer has to speak for."

Knowing his hands would search for something to do as he spoke, Sasori pulled out a small wooden block and a flat blade. If Saigo had any protests, she seemed to be saving them for later. Opening his mouth, he began to carve the block. "You seem to be under the impression that I am a heartless murderer. You're not completely wrong. I am a murderer."

"Oh," she drawled sarcastically, "A murderer with a heart. How nice. When people refer to hearts, they don't always mean the physical one, you know. Funny, because you were talking about love just moments ago."

A mountain bird screeched in the distance. Behind Saigo's head, Sasori spotted the raptor disappearing behind the sparse treeline across the lake before reappearing. Wings flapping, it landed on a dead tree branch that reached for the heavens before proceeding to clean the feathers.
on its wings, untamed and unrestrained. "It's not funny at all," Sasori said calmly, as he were explaining a simple concept to a child. "If I am capable of hate, then I am capable of love." He smiled mockingly at her. "That's something we have in common—the ability to hate and love."

"I don't appreciate any comparisons drawn between us."

"Tsk. And if you think I somehow care, you are sorely mistaken," he said tautly. A reminder that it was his turn to talk, not hers. She grunted, displeased. "I have a lover back home. She's like you, only she doesn't act like a wild animal."

"A lover?" Saigo couldn't help but blurt, brushing the insult aside. "Who in the seven divines would—" She bit her tongue, knowing her honor was on the line. "Fine," she said cautiously instead. "You have a lover. And?"

"I'll talk about her later. I just wanted to establish some similarities, first of all."

"I'm not a child."

"Did I say you were?"

Her jaw clenched ever so slightly.

Sasori continued to carve the wooden block, shaving away layers and layers of it. "I asked you why you hate. It's only fair if I tell you why I did."

Saigo raised a brow. Past tense?

"I was born to a carpenter and a seamstress in Sunagakure thirty years ago. When I was five, there was a national incident at the royal palace—a case of murder-suicide. In just one night, over half of the Empress' harem was decimated by a single teenager. Naturally, the demand for replacements and new trainees was high, and it was a certainty that I would have been picked had I not been enlisted into Suna's Royal Puppet Corps." He stopped picking at the wood for just a moment before he resumed, the artistic sense he had developed over his childhood and adolescence guiding his calloused hands. "I have my grandmother to thank for that."

"Although... it's hard to say which life would have been kinder."

Saigo said nothing, merely blinking.

"There was no place for benevolence or goodwill," he continued, clearly remember her earlier words, "Such things were almost unheard of. If there were any sort of those moments... they were fleeting. In between my training, my grandmother would teach me morals so I could cling onto humanity for longer. She helped me see through the corruption of my government, and it was then that I began to truly hate. It got even worse upon my promotion to the Emperor's personal hitman."

"I began to loathe almost unconditionally. The rulers of my country for their greed and their wrath. The illusion of greatness and order that our law enforcement perpetuated. My own grandmother for teaching me how to see through what Komushi-san never could, and for pushing me into a life where I could not possibly abide to the moral principles that she had taught me. Myself, for the life I led, my cowardice, and my inability to change my situation."

"And then what?" Saigo demanded gruffly, her hands curling into fists. Slowly, Sasori cocked a brow, surprised that she had bothered to prompt him at all. But she seemed to have at least some genuine investment in his tale, seeing as she had not yet made any crude remarks.

"I fed into it. I deluded myself, or," he scoffed, "tried to, into thinking that every single victim of
mine was a criminal who was deserving of death. Most of the time, they were, but there were —are—always exceptions." He put down his carving for a moment. Saigo peered down at the half-finished figuring between them before glancing back up at him again. "I suppose you've heard of Hatake Sakumo?"

"Of course. He was an example of what not to do as a samurai. I know how he ties in to your hatred."

"Do you?" Sasori challenged.

"Hatake Sakumo, aside from his then-teenage son, was the last of the Hatake line," Saigo began confidently, and Sasori had no doubt she had learned it as some sort of history lesson from her elders. Considering Sakumo's reputation, he wouldn't have been surprised if all the children of the community did. "One day, he..." She recited Sakumo's story as if he was some kind of anti-hero from an old tale or legend. The hard glint in her eyes—the same glint that had been beginning to soften in his own before Konoha whisked him back into the field—was ever present as she spoke.

"And so Hatake was disgraced, and sought the final solution—the one which would give him his honor back."

"Honor," Sasori echoed hollowly, clicking his tongue. "What an absurd concept that you lot have bound yourself to."

She glared daggers at him. "You wouldn't know a thing about it, so shut your damn mouth."

"I know enough to understand that its an idea born from righteousness that people continue to abuse and twist into their own narratives to this day. Hatake Sakumo saw the restoration of his honor as the outcome of suicide. What an utter load of shit. His death changed absolutely nothing in this world—it did not alleviate the suffering of the proletarians of Suna—the very people he had befriended in his short stay—nor did it suddenly reverse the deaths of the two innocent civilians that he killed in his blind vengeance. Death by his own hand was the very worst insult he could have ever inflicted upon me.

"He was the reason I became consumed by my hatred. My job turned into my outlet. My kill count racked up to over four-hundred men and women. I fully embraced the monster that you—and many others—believe me to be."

His knuckles were white by the time he finished. Saigo's gaze never left his face, the corners of her mouth occasionally twitching as she debated against herself. It seemed that she was capable of restraint, after all. Then Saigo stood, the rocks crunching beneath her shoes. "Enough. I don't care what you say anymore. I'm not like you, Akasuna no Sasori. What's the difference, between the you of then and the you of now? Nothing you do will ever be enough to make up for your deeds." The slightest sneer lifted her cheeks. "And the fact that you even think that you can suddenly change the path you walk on absolutely appalls me."

With that, she stood, picked up her naginata, and walked away, her face a mask of stone. She did not look back once, as if she were daring him to lash out in a fit of rage and cut her spine out from her flesh.

He had known from the beginning that this would never be easy. Near impossible, perhaps.

But for the sake of the things he now had—the things he needed to protect—he would need to win the trust of the samurai anyway, starting with the one who bared her fangs at him the most, her mindset narrow and unwavering.
When she was gone, Sasori got off his knees and gave his puppet—hastily crafted in the crudest image of Komushi—a single appraising look before returning it to storage.

“You would've been able to do it.

"Sakura-chaaaan!"

Karin let out an exasperated sigh, though she couldn't help but smile fondly as Naruto leaned dangerously across the railing of the ship, waving frantically to the pink-haired medic on the wharf. Ever in tune with the chakra of the surrounding people, Karin had picked her out of the crowd first, and had promptly told her cousin.

"Naruto!" Kushina whacked him upside the head with her free hand, the other holding an overstuffed suitcase full of their clothes, having just clambered up from below deck to see her son teetering on the railing. "What do you think you're doing, huh?!

"Geh!"

An anchor was released off the side of the ship with a splash as the sailors docked, shouting and hauling ropes and crates around. Waiting for the plank to connect the dock, the passengers gathered in one large crowd toward the front, looking for relatives or friends who had come to collect them.

"Now, children," Kushina said sweetly, and Naruto winced while Karin snickered. "I trust you know how to behave?"

"Of course," Karin answered, sounding confident. "Oh—I should introduce Hana to you, Kushina-oba-san, if we see her."

"And we definitely won't be peeking in the women's baths again, will we?" Naruto shirked into his traditional Uzushio garb—an ostentatious orange changshan that Karin frequently expressed disgust for—as his mother continued to press.

"That... was one time! And I wasn't the one peeking, it was that old guy on the Hokage's council who looks like a toad! I was trying to stop him—"

"And getting an eyeful while you were at it," snarked Karin, smirking.

Naruto glared at her. "You're a real piece of work, y'know that?"

"I've been told."

Kushina snorted before ruffling their hair. "Come on, you two," she said as the passenger started their descent, fondness seeping into her tone. "Sakura-chan's waiting for us."

Sakura welcomed them warmly, offering to relieve Kushina of their single suitcase. But Kushina politely declined, insisting that she was more than capable of carrying the weight, and the four headed down into the city. Rickshaws were more common in the outermost areas of the city, and they hopped into one, Sakura giving the man pulling them directions.

"It's so good to you again, Kushina-san," Sakura said warmly, beaming. "You too, Karin." She glanced at Naruto once. "Oh, and you, I guess."

"Sakura-chaaaaan!"
"I'm just kidding!" Sakura laughed. "Anyway, you guys will love the new dumpling place that just opened up—"

At the mention of dumplings, Naruto balked, Karin grimacing beside him.

"Ah, forgive us, Sakura-chan," Kushina spoke apologetically. "How do I say this...? We're kind of sick of dumplings, 'ttebane."

Undoubtedly, Sakura had chosen the restaurant not only based on its status as a new establishment, but also because of its reputation of serving traditional Uzushio food. After a few more words from Sakura to the rickshaw man, they ended up changing course to a ramen bar. The pink-haired girl threw a concerned look at Kushina, who had a large grin on her face. "Are you sure this is okay?"

"This is more than okay, Sakura-chan!" Kushina replied cheerily.

"Ichiraku Ramen," Naruto breathed, practically drooling.

"Still don't see what the big deal is," Karin muttered as they all sat down at the ramen bar. Ichiraku's was a small shop in a big city—and Naruto's favorite restaurant. "It's just noodles in broth, you two."

While Naruto and Karin browsed the menu, Kushina glanced around the little shop. "It looks almost exactly the same," she mused, nostalgia softening her features. From her right, Sakura smiled at the wistful cloud in her eyes. "Kind of comforting, 'ttebane. Ah! Teuchi-san!"

Emerging from the back with his brown-haired daughter was the owner. He gave them all a warm smile and welcomed them heartily into his humble establishment. "I'm sorry for the wait," Teuchi added apologetically, his daughter, Ayame, pulling out a palm-sized notepad and pencil from her apron pocket. "What can I get you folks?"

As soon as their orders were placed, Teuchi disappeared into the back while Ayame wiped down the counter. The customers were lulled into casual conversation.

"The girls are having a get-together at the onsen this afternoon," Sakura said, talking to Kushina and Karin. "You guys should come along, too. It's always nice to have a relaxing day off."

"My, that does sound good," admitted Kushina. "What d'ya think, Karin?"

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass. I want to see Hana again—she promised me some out of town medical textbooks. You guys have fun, though."

"And I'm sure Sasuke will be happy to you," Sakura added when Naruto pouted, seemingly upset that he wasn't included.

"That bastard? Yeah, right!"

"He may not show it much, but Sasuke does care. He's been feeling terrible about his actions in Akatsuki, and he's working as hard as he can to try and atone for it." She sighed. "Working too hard, if you ask me. I'm worried about his health."

Naruto grunted, keeping his gaze fixed forward. He fiddled with his chopsticks in one hand. "That bastard... he did a lot of bad things, didn't he?"

"Naruto—"
"So if he needs help trying to make up for the shit he did, I don't blame him. Where is he, anyway? Still living with Itachi?"

Sakura breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Naruto. And yeah, he is, but he's normally out all day at the police station. He gets home at about eight o'clock in the evening."

"Think the cops will mind if I bother 'em?"

Conversation gradually disappeared when the food arrived, Naruto and Kushina slurping up ramen at lightning speed. Sakura and Karin were much more restrained, the latter girl occasionally shooting exasperated looks at her cousin and aunt.

The afternoon rolled around fast; once the Uzumaki family dropped their luggage off at the house Kushina and Minato used to live in before the latter's death, they all went their separate ways. Naruto off to bother Sasuke, Karin to search for Hana, and Sakura and Kushina heading off to the hot springs in loose clothing.

"I feel like I haven't relaxed in a long time," Kushina groused on the way there, stretching her arms up in the air.

"Really?" Sakura bit her lip. "Tsunade-shishou's been a bit stressed out, too. Something about the politics with Uzushio City."

"Yeah, there's a bit of... unrest at the moment. Just a bit, not a lot. We're preparing for festival season, y'see, and it's generally pretty frazzling as it is, 'ttebane. But with the Ame-Tsuki war going on and Konoha's involvement, the Hokage is starting to put the pressure on Princess Mito to send aid. It's only increased ever since Kaguya withdrew her offensive forces. It's a volatile ceasefire at best, and we're all licking our wounds... What better time is there to secure more allies? Suna is practically a lost cause, and Princess Mito has substantial firepower in her hand."

They entered the ladies' section of the onsen to find Tenten and Deidara already changed inside. Interestingly enough, the blonde was wearing rather stylish sunglasses, talking to Tenten as she pulled the tie holding her hair up out, her locks falling over her scarred shoulders. She then bundled up all her hair in a single bun on the top of her head, her fringe escaping from the tie to curtain the left side of her face as per usual. Tenten kept her hair in its usual style; both of them were wearing only towels around their bodies.

"Hey, it's about time!" Deidara greeted, lifting an arm. Her sunglasses, too big for her face, slipped down her nose a little. "Hinata's already inside with Hanabi-chan, un." She smiled crookedly at Kushina. "It's been a while, Kushina-san."

"Please, just call me Kushina. No need for honorifics, 'ttebane." The red-haired woman began to strip, grabbing a clean towel. Sakura did the same, greeting Tenten as she did so. "How have you been?"

Deidara hummed. "Pretty good, actually. You?"

"I could be better," Kushina said honestly. "With the ceasefire and all—"

"Oh, yeah, I heard about that on the radio. And it was all Fatso would print for three days."

"—the tensions between Konoha and Uzushio are growing in Konoha's insistence for aid." Kushina sighed. "I'm afraid something bad will happen soon, 'ttebane."

"Really?" Deidara clicked her tongue, her brows knitting in a frown. She lowered her sunglasses to
give Kushina a questioning look. "Tsk. This ceasefire was supposed to be a good thing, un. What reason does Uzushio have to refuse anyway? Technically, they're part of Konoha. If we lose this war, so will they."

Kushina sighed once more as the girls all went out the back to the steaming onsen. "I wish. It's not quite as simple as that."

"Yeah, I know. But Tsuki is a common enemy, un. There's no time for the little details—they have to start looking at the big picture." Deidara's cheeks reddened as she sank down in the pleasant water, leaning against the warm rocks as the water reached her chin. "Ahh... I can feel the muscles loosening. I need to come here more often, un." A splash caught her attention for a brief moment, and Deidara grinned as she saw Hanabi vehemently refuted Hinata's claim of Moegi being a sweet little girl. "Anyway, can we not talk politics right now? I feel like I'll fall asleep and drown if we do."

"Of course. It's not every day we get to relax like this, after all."

"Geez, Hinata," Tenten said as she massaged the Hyuuga girl's back. "Are you always this tense? You've got a ton of knots in your back—how do you even stand properly?"

In response, Hanabi squirted water in the brown-haired girl's eye, making her splutter. "The Hyuuga are a noble clan—we can handle a few muscle cramps. Right, Hinata-nee?" She poked her tongue out at Tenten, who knew she was merely joking. "Or however the stuffy elders like to say it."

"I can't imagine having to grow up with 'stuffy elders'," said Tenten, amused. "My parents were pretty easy-going, and..." Her face fell a little. "Iruka-san didn't really care too much about formalities."

"Yeah, well," Hanabi lifted her legs, floating on her back, "It's... not ideal. Bearable, I guess. I didn't talk to him a lot, Iruka-san sounded like a great guy. He reminds me of one of my teachers, actually."

They had perhaps spent fifteen minutes in the hot springs when Deidara turned to Sakura and asked, "Do you still have those multivitamins in stock? I'm all out, and I'm leaving for Uzushio on Monday."

"The hospital is running pretty low this week due to an unexpected flu outbreak," Sakura told her. "But I should have a few in my medicine cabinet at home—we can swing by later, and I'll give you a bottle."

Kushina perked up at mention of her home, lifting an arm to adjust the towel on her head, which had somehow managed to encapsulate almost all of her hair, leaving only a few short, red strands on her hairline peaking from beneath the fabric. "Deidara! You didn't tell me you were planning a visit!" The red-head almost knocked the wind out of Deidara's lungs as she slapped her heartily on the back. "And you're leaving at the same time as us! Now I don't have time to plan a tour, 'ttebane," she bemoaned.

"Hey, it's just a work visit," Deidara appeased, wincing at her stinging back. The Uzumaki matriarch had a strong arm. "I probably won't even have time to go sightseeing, un."

"Don't be so negative! You're not working all the time, are you?"

"No, but—" Deidara huffed, grumbling and pushing her hair out of her face. "There's no winning
against you, is there? Are all Uzumaki this relentless and stubborn?"

"Like you can talk," Tenten joked from the side.

"Hmph. Yeah, well... Wait a second," her eyes widened as something dawned on her, "I'm... starting to sound like Sasori!"

"Oh my god, you are," Sakura agreed.

"Isn't there a saying?" Hinata chimed. "That lovers subconsciously become like one another? And then, in the next life, they're born as twins."

"Bleh," Hanabi wrinkled her nose, "That's so sappy."

"I think it's romantic, 'ttebane!"

As they giggled, Deidara glowered at the water, her cheeks flushing a deep crimson that the warm environment did not help in the least. Never before had she been teased like this from her female peers, having been robbed of the experience while on the cusp of adulthood. She had wandered for a while after her mother's death, begging for food and scraps and snatching whatever she could from food vendors. And when she had arrived in Akatasuki City, determined to make some sort of proper living for herself, her interaction circle had mostly been male, none of whom she had showed much romantic interest in.

It made her a little giddy, actually.

"Now, now," Tenten appeased, taking pity on the blonde. "If you tease her now, she'll pay you back tenfold when you all get boyfriends and husbands."

"Nah, not me." Kushina smiled, wistful. "Minato was the only one for me. I can't imagine ever loving anyone like I loved him. Besides, Naruto and Karin are enough of a handful as it is."

"They do say that adolescence is a second puberty," Sakura interjected wisely, as if she weren't a teenager herself.

"I get it," Deidara admitted, talking to Kushina. Tension started to build up in her shoulders again before she relaxed. She rested her head against a stone protruding from the edge of the hot spring, feeling the comfortable heat of it against the nape of her neck. "I can't see myself with anyone else except Sasori-no-Danna, un."

Sakura bit her lip, turning her gaze down to the bubbling water as the mood sobered up slightly. "Don't worry. He'll be back soon."

To everyone's surprise, Deidara laughed, pushing her sunglasses up so that they sat tilted on her head. "Who says I'm worried? It'll take more than a war to kill that man. Yeah, I miss him," she went on, "and I hate that he's not here, but... I know we're gonna see each other again. I'm done moping around—I'm gonna live this life to the fullest just to spite everything and everyone who ever wanted me dead. I mean," she chuckled, rubbing her scarred bicep, "I'm still here, aren't I?"

"Damn right you are," Hanabi said loudly, sitting up abruptly and crossing her arms. "We all are! We're survivors! And we're not ever gonna let anyone forget that, right, Hinata-nee?"

Hinata nodded, firm in her resolve. "Right."

Kushina blinked in pleasant surprise before her lips curled up in a smile. "I'm glad to hear! Some
celebration is needed in times like these!"

"You guys..." Sakura swallowed a lump in her throat and then smashed the water with one fist, making Tenten jump. "Dammit! It's too early in the day to be crying! As soon as we leave, we're all going back to my place to do our nails and braid our hair! Got it?!"

"Is this a threat?" Tenten uttered.

"Yes."

Deidara put her hand up mockingly. "Can we go eat first at least, Haruno-sensei?"

"I'll whip something up at home, since Kushina and I already ate."

"Eh. Good enough, I guess."

The rest of the day passed nicely, an almost idyllic fantasy that Deidara would have never imagined herself living, especially during a time like this. For a few hours, the war wasn't real—she wasn't running and fighting for her life, or dealing with the aftermath of her trauma. Instead, she merely sat on the floor of Sakura's bedroom until her butt went numb, blowing her nails dry (she had painted them black with nail polish, a recent invention that had appeared maybe two or three years back) and flipping through Sakura's magazines as Hanabi and Hinata fiddled with her hair, the Hyuuga sisters working in perfect tandem.

Even when they all parted ways when the moon had risen, the high of today still clung to her.

"Busy day?" Chiyo remarked when Deidara got home, sitting on her rocking chair and flipping through one of Fatso's newspapers. The blazing headline declaring the ceasefire was visible on the front page. Judging from how many pages she was into it, she was probably in the middle of absorbing whatever political details the government had decided the press was allowed to print.

"Mm." Deidara smirked as she toed her shoes off, amused at the sight. "Why—you gonna scold me for staying out too late?" she teased.

Chiyo barked a laugh. "What a strange notion. Do you take me for some overbearing nurse?"

"Of course not. What ever made you think that, hm?"

"Hah! Goodnight, Deidara. Go bathe and sleep before you screw up your body clock enough to miss your morning boat on Monday."

"Yeah, yeah." Deidara smiled. "Goodnight, Chiyo-baa."

"You've got to be kidding me, right?!" Kushina folded her arms across her chest and glared at the two teenagers, who were sitting in seiza before her.

Whether it was from bravery or stupidity, Naruto looked up first. "But, mom, Sasuke needs me—"

"Sasuke is almost a grown man, Naruto!" refuted Kushina. "He's not a little boy, 'ttebane."

"Yeah, well neither am I, 'ttebayo!"

The outburst seemed to suck all of the sound out of the room. Naruto paled, expecting some sort of fiery explosion, but then Karin spoke first. "Neither am I, Aunt Kushina. We've both thought long and hard about this."
"You, too, Karin?" Kushina said. Then she turned around, muttering to herself, "Teenage rebellion already?! Heck, if I'd known two kids were gonna show up in my life so suddenly, I would've read more of those parenting books Minato panic-bought back in the day..."

"We already have a house here," Karin continued in an attempt to convince her aunt. "And we know our way around the city, too. We'll be fine, Aunt Kushina, trust me. I'll keep an eye on Naruto."

Kushina frowned. "But... we're supposed to be a family. Karin, you may be a niece, but you're practically my daughter. And Naruto," her gaze softened, "You're my son. I've spent sixteen years by myself. Thinking that Minato was looking after you in heaven. No! I won't have it. I just got my family back—you're not getting rid of me that easily! If you're so adamant on staying, then you're gonna be stuck with me, 'ttebane! Got it?"

Karin and Naruto exchanged a glance before breaking out into grins. "Got it!" they chorused, then leaped from their kneeling positions to attack Kushina in a hug.

The Uzumaki woman sighed. "What am I gonna do with you two... I spoil you guys way too much..." She gasped suddenly, remembering something. "The tickets! I spent too much ryo on those bad boys!"

"Maybe we could give them away?" Karin suggested before Kushina could get the idea of returning to Uzushio with them in tow. "Like, to someone who needs a vacation?"

"I suppose we could..."

"Oh, I know just the people, 'ttebayo!" Naruto piped up, wriggling out of the group hug to snatch up the tickets on the table. "Just leave it to me!"

Rin arranged the flowers for the window display. Her hair was short once more, and tied into a small ponytail at the nape of her neck so she could work without the ends of her hair tickling her collarbone. In her head, she made her plans for the rest of the day—in the afternoon, she would pick up her children from school and eat lunch with them at the refugee centre, where they currently resided; later in the day, her family would join Itachi's for dinner.

The bell on the top of the door rang, signifying the entrance of a customer.

"Welcome," Rin said automatically, using her wrist to brush her side bangs aside, smiling. She pushed her half-finished arrangement aside on the counter, prepared to serve. How odd that it was only months ago that she had been the boss of many alongside her husband. "How may I help you today?"

"I'm here to get flowers for my mother," the little red-haired girl who had entered said, a sullen look on her face. Rin didn't probe. "The order's for Piccolo-Hiraoka Ruizu."

"Oh, yes," Rin nodded, "She came here the other day. Let me fetch the order for you." She disappeared into the back room, reappearing not a moment too soon with a large bouquet that obscured her view. Slowly—and a little clumsily—she lowered the flowers onto the table, peering around the colorful petals to hand the little girl a clipboard and pen. "Sign here, please."

She did, swiftly signing.

"Ai Wei? You're Uzushian? Oh—or do you prefer Chinese?"
The girl glared. "Why? Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all." Rin offered her a gentle smile. "I was surprised, is all. Your last name is distinctly Kumor."

"I'm adopted," Ai Wei said curtly. "My foster parents are Kumor. And my father has a Konoha citizenship, so don't get any ideas about reporting us to the military police."

"Believe me, I wasn't." Defensive, isn't she? Rin pursed her lips in thought. And she doesn't seem to be fond of her adoptive parents either.

"Defensive, isn't she? Rin pursed her lips in thought. And she doesn't seem to be fond of her adoptive parents either." Do you want to look around, er," Rin looked back down at the clipboard, remembering how the girl had only put her first name and omitted her official surname. "Ai Wei-chan? Your... mother isn't in a hurry to receive this, is she?"

"Yeah, I guess. And she kinda is, but I don't care about her."

How nonchalantly the girl declared such a thing sent a slight chill up her spine, but Rin smiled through it. "Take your time. Business is slow today, anyway."

"Mm."

Rin returned to her bouquet for the window display, keeping an eye on Ai Wei in her peripheral. But before she could get much done, the bell dinged again, and she glanced up to see none other than Naruto at the door. "Oh! Naruto-kun, it's nice to see you again. What brings you here?"

"Hi, err... Sorry, what do I call you now?" Naruto said as he walked up the counter, abashed. "I'm way too used to you being my boss, 'ttebayo..."

"Just Rin is fine, Naruto-kun."

"What? That's kinda super informal though! How 'bout... Uchiha-san?"

Her lips quirked upward, vaguely aware of Ai Wei eavesdropping on their conversation. Though, she supposed, Naruto wasn't exactly being discreet. It just wasn't in his nature. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but Uchiha-san is Itachi or Sasuke." And Obito, a little voice inside her added. "If it's too strange, you can just stick to Nohara-san."

"Oh, okay. Nohara-san it is then! Anyway, a lot of stuff happened, and now we have three boat tickets to Uzushio City." Naruto put them down on the table. The stub of one of them was starting to tear a little. "So, I was wondering... Do you wanna take 'em? You could," Naruto fumbled over his words, "take a break from work for a bit with Daichi and Hikari. Go sightseeing in Uzushio City. It's an awesome place, 'ttebayo, and I'm not just sayin' that 'cause I live there."

"Oh my..." Rin stared down at the gift that had practically dropped from the sky. A vacation would be nice... And the school term is almost over with just a week left. I'll have to ask Yuzuko-kacho. "Naruto-kun, are you sure about this?"

"Sure." Naruto shrugged. "We don't need 'em anymore, so it'll just got to waste if nobody takes 'em. Besides, Nohara-san, you deserve to have a great time! And you can even go with Deidara! She's leaving the same day and time as you, 'ttebayo!"

Ah, that's right. She has business in Uzushio City. Beaming, Rin took the tickets. "Thank you, Naruto-kun. I'm sure Daichi and Hikari will be very happy." I'm sure Yuzuko-kacho can spare me for some time. We have enough money for a return ticket, too. "Would you and your family like to join mine for lunch this afternoon? Daichi is always happy to see you."

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"Of course! I'll go tell my mom and Karin." He started to backpedal, a wide grin on his face. "How does Tomoko's sound?"

"Like a plan." The tickets disappeared into the pocket of her yukata. "I'll see you later, then, Naruto-kun."

Once Naruto was gone, Ai Wei appeared so quickly at the front of the counter that Rin almost jumped out of her skin. "Ne, Nohara-san," the girl said, a sly undertone in her voice, "What did he give you? Tickets, was it?"

"Yes." Rin fished a single ticket from her pocket, holding it out for the girl to see. What is she up to...? A moment later, the ticket was back in her pocket. "Would you like a ribbon with the flowers?"

Ai Wei shook her head, a tiny smirk on her face. "Oh, no need. I'm sure mother will be satisfied. The flowers are really pretty, by the way. See you next time, Nohara-san."

The sky was starting to grow pink as Daichi trudged down to the port, yawning. His suitcase—a little too big for him to handle efficiently—bumped against his shins as he walked, holding it in front of him. He was trailing after his mother, who had Hikari—the lucky girl—in her arms. His little sister was fast asleep, unaware of the tiresome chore her brother had been assigned to. Rin herself was carrying an even bigger suitcase that her boss, Yuzuko, had lent her.

"We're nearly there, Daichi," Rin assured him, craning her neck to look at the large, intimidating passenger ship. Black smoke puffed from its three chimney columns, lingering in the air like tar sticking to the clouds. "Once we're on board, we can rest until we arrive."

Daichi yawned again. "Okay. Where's Deidara-nee?"

"We'll see her on the ship, don't worry. She lives closer to the port, so she should have arrived before us."

Hauling their luggage awkwardly up the gangplank, the Uchiha-Nohara family got more awake with every step. Looking skyward, Daichi saw a flock of seagulls soar past, heading in a beeline toward the fish market, where vendor owners would battle them to keep their wares safe.

"Is this our room?" Daichi asked sleepily as they entered a compartment with a bunk bed and a single bed. It was cleaner than the rest of the ship—Kushina must have paid a lot for these first class tickets.

"It," Rin grunted as she sat Hikari down on the single bed, "is. Rest a while, you two. Breakfast won't be served until we get moving."

Hikari wasted no time in nodding off on her bed, smiling a little in her sleep. She was probably dreaming of snow, Daichi supposed. Hikari loved snow.

There was a knock on the door.

"That'll be Deidara." Rin hurried to answer it. "Dei—"

Daichi raised a brow when his mother stiffened. "Mom?"

Rin didn't seem to hear him. "You..."
And Ai Wei grinned impishly across from her, flashing her first class ticket which announced that her room was right next to theirs. "Why, hello there."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Lol, this is the first update of the year for this fic. Yeah, it took months, but here's an 11,000~ word chapter. Not the longest, but not the shortest either. I looked it up, and nail polish was invented in the 1920s, the same(ish) period this story takes place in. Not sure what you're gonna do with that info, but it's here anyway.

Sasori-Saigo time, but it doesn't go well. He needs to win the trust of her (and the samurai) but she's not very receptive so far. Why DOES Saigo hate?

Anyway, welcome back!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!